Amplifying Voices, Empowering Change: Exploring Identity Formation Experiences of Adolescent Mothers in a Marginalised South African Community Through Transformative Arts-Based Research[6]

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Abstract

This qualitative study employed a community-based participatory action research approach to explore adolescent mothers' lived experiences and meaning-making processes in a marginalised South African community. Amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we adapted our study's methodology by leveraging my skills as an intern educational psychologist and art teacher. With my supervisor's guidance, I created a safe and empowering virtual environment for our co-researchers to share their experiences and emotions, which allowed us to navigate the pandemic's unique constraints while maintaining our research's integrity. Using innovative arts-based methods, including river of life, clay modelling, photo collage, and photovoice activities, provided a powerful means for the co-researchers to express their stories, identities, and aspirations in diverse and nuanced ways. These creative interventions served as catalysts for self-reflection, collective meaning-making, and facing the challenge of societal stigma—fostering a sense of solidarity and empowerment among the co-researchers. The transformative potential of arts-based methods was amplified by the research's participatory ethos, which prioritised the voices and experiences of the co-researchers and sought to generate insights that could inform community-driven solutions. The virtual space became a platform for authentic dialogue, relationship building, and the co-creation of knowledge, underscoring the adaptability and resilience of participatory research in the face of global challenges. This study highlights the power of arts-based data generation methods and participatory approaches in generating rich, meaningful data and fostering transformative experiences for marginalised communities. It calls for further research and interventions that prioritise the voices and needs of adolescent mothers, ultimately promoting their well-being, resilience, and social change.

Keywords: adolescent mothers, identity formation, arts-based research methods, community-based participatory action research, virtual qualitative research, agency

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[6] Ethical clearance number: 14497

Introduction

Adolescent pregnancy remains a significant global public health concern, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities in South Africa (United Nations Population Fund, 2015). Early motherhood often disrupts educational trajectories and affects identity formation during this critical developmental stage (Mangeli et al., 2017; Xavier et al., 2018). This study employed a community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) approach to investigate how narratives shared by adolescent mothers from a historically marginalised South African community shaped their identities. CBPAR emphasises empowering marginalised communities and promoting social change through collaboration and shared decision-making (Israel et al., 2010; Wallerstein et al., 2017).

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the study adapted its methodology using virtual environments and innovative arts-based methods including river of life, clay modelling, photo collage, and photovoice activities (Leavy, 2020). These approaches allowed the co-researchers to express their stories, identities, and aspirations in diverse ways. Through their narratives, we gained insight into the connections between individual agency, family dynamics, and societal structures in shaping identity. This study sheds light on the identity formation of marginalised women in South Africa, and provides a platform for their voices and experiences to inform social change and tailored support systems.

Literature Review

Adolescent motherhood presents a complex tapestry of challenges interweaving personal, social, and cultural dimensions. Recent research has unveiled numerous hurdles faced by young mothers ranging from increased responsibilities to emotional distress and role conflicts (Patrone et al., 2022). The socioeconomic landscape, particularly in South Africa, plays a pivotal role in shaping these experiences, with poverty and limited access to education exacerbating challenges (Jochim et al., 2023; Rabie, 2021).

Within this challenging landscape, identity formation takes on heightened significance. Adolescence, traditionally a period of identity exploration, becomes a crucible of accelerated maturity for young mothers. Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development highlighted how early motherhood can dramatically alter the trajectory of identity formation—often leading to complex self-navigation that both empowers and challenges young mothers (Bhana & Nkani, 2016; Chigona & Chetty, 2008).

The intersectionality of race, class, and gender creates a unique matrix of challenges and opportunities for each young mother, profoundly shaping how we structure support systems and design interventions (Bhana & Nkani, 2016; Rabie, 2021). Mental health emerges as a critical concern, with elevated risks of difficulties and suicide among teenage mothers underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions.

The ripple effects of adolescent motherhood extend beyond the individual, influencing family dynamics and perpetuating intergenerational patterns. However, amidst these challenges, a narrative of resilience emerges, with many adolescent mothers demonstrating remarkable adaptability (Aderibigbe et al., 2020; Pfeiffer et al., 2017).

The impact of early motherhood on education represents a critical juncture, with high school dropout rates having far-reaching consequences (Stoner et al., 2019). Access to healthcare and comprehensive reproductive education is crucial in addressing these challenges, as is the role of social support in fostering resilience and positive adaptation (Beksinska et al., 2021; Jonas et al., 2016). To effectively support adolescent mothers, interventions must recognise and respond to the complex interplay of factors shaping their experiences, addressing the intersectional challenges and gaps in current support services.

Methodology

Research Design and Paradigm

This qualitative study employed a CBPAR approach, positioning itself within a social constructivist paradigm while incorporating elements of interpretivist and transformative paradigms (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). CBPAR aligns with these paradigms, emphasising collaboration, community empowerment, and social change (Israel et al., 2010; Wallerstein et al., 2017). This involves equitable partnerships in research processes, combining knowledge and action to address community health disparities (Israel et al., 2010; Zuber-Skerritt, 2009, 2015).

My position as an intern educational psychologist and art teacher and my supervisor's expertise significantly influenced the research process and our co-researchers' engagement in arts-based methods. Our combined backgrounds provided a unique perspective that shaped our approach to the study. By leveraging therapeutic skills and artistic expertise guided by my supervisor's experience, we created a safe and empowering environment that encouraged the co-researchers to creatively express their experiences and emotions (Leavy, 2020). This approach aligned with the principles of CBPAR, prioritising the voices and agency of marginalised community members (Wood, 2017).

Co-Researcher Sampling and Recruitment

Six co-researchers were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria were women over 18 years of age, who had become pregnant during adolescence, had left the education system, and resided within the Ukomelela community. The Women and Community Development Initiative representative, acting as the key informant, was instrumental in fostering trust and conducting culturally sensitive research. Her deep understanding of the community's needs, strengths, and

challenges informed her recruitment process and ensured that the study was tailored to the specific context of the Ukomelela community (Rabie, 2021; Wood, 2017).

Data Generation Within a Virtual Space During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges for data generation in our qualitative research. As the primary researcher, I (first author) had to adapt my methods and navigate the virtual space to ensure the safety and well-being of our co-researchers. My supervisor (second author) provided guidance throughout this process, helping me refine our approach to virtual research methods and ethical considerations. Leveraging my internal educational psychologist and art teacher skills, I adopted a reflective and participatory approach to create a safe and empowering virtual environment for the co-researchers to share their experiences and emotions related to early motherhood and identity formation (Leavy, 2020). This approach facilitated the creation of an authentic space for the co-researchers to express their voices despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic.

The shift to virtual data generation necessitated careful consideration of communication dynamics, ethical responsibilities, and arts-based methods to elicit rich and meaningful data. I prioritised the health and safety of the co-researchers by utilising remote data collection methods, implementing strict health protocols, and maintaining open communication to ensure their well-being. Flexibility and support were essential in accommodating the co-researchers' specific needs and concerns related to the pandemic while upholding ethical standards of informed consent, confidentiality, and protecting participants' welfare (Keen et al., 2022; Rabie, 2021).

The role of the key informant, a representative of the marginalised community of women who experienced young motherhood and adversity, became even more crucial during the pandemic. Acting as a bridge between physical and virtual spaces, the key informant facilitated collaboration and ensured a comfortable environment for the co-researchers to share their experiences (Keen et al., 2022; Rabie, 2021). Through virtual engagement, the key informant provided valuable insights into the unique challenges and needs of the community during the crisis, informing the research process and shaping data collection strategies. I prioritised maintaining trust and rapport with the key informant, recognising the importance of these relationships in facilitating data collection and ensuring the validity of the research findings (Keen et al., 2022; Rabie, 2021).

I employed a transactional communication model to navigate the virtual space and ensure that the co-researchers felt heard and validated (Nursekey, 2017). This model described communication as a process and emphasised communication's dynamic and interactive nature whereby both parties contribute to meaning-making within social, relational, and cultural contexts (see Image 1). By creating relationships,

forming intercultural alliances, shaping self-concept, and engaging in dialogue, I adapted my therapeutic skills to connect with my co-researchers in the virtual realm (Keen et al., 2022; Nursekey, 2017; Rabie, 2021).

Image 1

Transactional Communication Model in CBPAR (Nursekey, 2017)
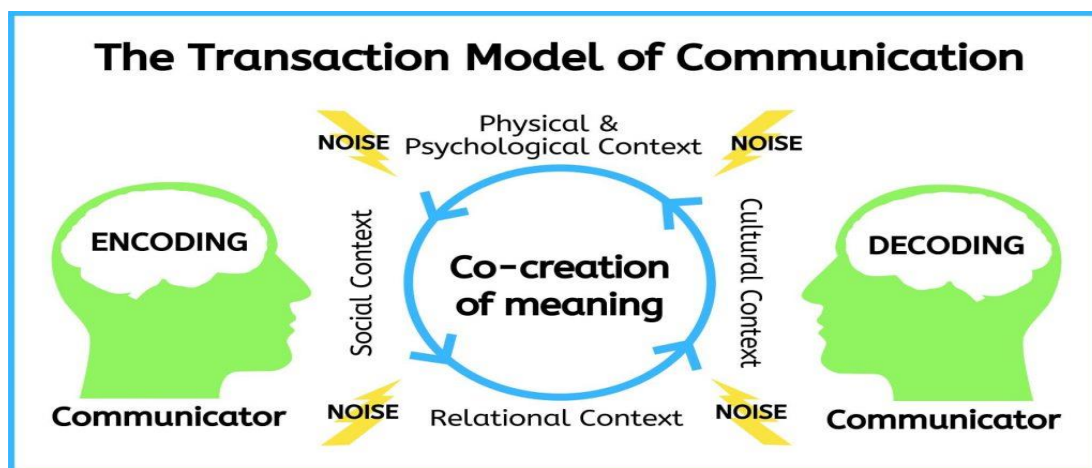
This model was underpinned and informed by the values and ethos of CBPAR, which emphasises collaborative interaction between researchers and community members. Adapted from the literature (Keen et al., 2022; Nursekey, 2017; Rabie, 2021), this study applied the following:

- Interactive communication: CBPAR integrated a transactional communication model to foster bidirectional exchanges. This model ensured active engagement whereby the parties shared insights and decision-making power.
- Participatory approach: This aligned with the ethos of CBPAR, promoting mutual respect and knowledge co-creation.
- Effective partnerships: CBPAR enhanced trust and transparency by leveraging transactional communication. This fostered community empowerment and sustainable outcomes.
- Challenges and solutions: This model's adaptive nature addressed challenges such as differing communication styles.
- Ethical framework: Reciprocity, integral to CBPAR, was maintained through continual dialogue and shared responsibilities.

Using the transactional model and arts-based methods enhanced the effectiveness of CBPAR by promoting inclusivity and shared decision-making. The photo collage, river of life, photovoice, and clay modelling activities provided powerful means for the co-researchers to express their experiences, emotions, and identities related to early motherhood (Israel et al., 2010; Laney et al., 2015; Leavy, 2020; Rabie, 2021).

These visual, tactile, and creative interventions allowed the participants to communicate their stories in diverse and nuanced ways, uncovering profound insights and narratives that might have been difficult to articulate verbally, particularly in a virtual setting. Arts-based techniques served as catalysts for self-reflection, meaning-making, and sharing experiences among the co-researchers, fostering a sense of solidarity and empowerment (Harley, 2012; Leavy, 2020; Rabie, 2021). Using verbal and nonverbal techniques opened avenues for communication within the group and played a vital role in increasing the co-researchers' self-awareness and autonomy. Shared ownership was encouraged by affording everyone space to express their views, thus encouraging each co-researcher's voice.

As part of the interview, the co-researchers were asked to engage in a river of life activity in which they used words, drawings, and colour to reflect on significant events and turning points in their lives guided by prompts such as "What were the major challenges you faced?" and "How did you overcome obstacles?" (Wallerstein et al., 2020; Rabie, 2021)

The clay modelling activities provided a tactile and expressive outlet for the co-researchers to explore their self-perceptions and identities. I invited the women to create clay models to introduce themselves and their stories to the group. According to scholars, clay engages with the body and can elicit memories, leading to powerful expressions of emotions (Ong et al., 2020). Clay is considered a powerful medium due to its malleable nature that engages all the senses (Sholt & Gavron, 2006). Adding to this, Sholt and Gavron (2006, p. 66) stated:

> Clay-work involves body expression through the physical work with clay, and mental processes through the act of modelling and through observing the product. Thus, it allows integration of emotions, memories, and fantasies from different levels of consciousness.

Similarly, the photo collage and photovoice activities enabled the co-researchers to reflect on their daily lives and how their experiences as young mothers intersected with their social and cultural contexts (Harley, 2012). Literature suggests that photovoice involves taking photographs and decoding the visual images to identify themes that can be reflected on. Harley (2012) found that this method worked particularly well with complex topics and when collaborating with marginalised communities. The researchers-researchers were given a choice between creating a collage and participating in a photovoice activity

The arts-based interventions in the virtual space created opportunities for collective meaning-making, reinforcing the transformative potential of CBPAR. These interventions contributed to the co-researchers' sense of agency, validation, and empowerment, aligning with findings from previous studies (Leavy, 2020; Wood, 2017; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). The specific findings and examples from this study provide concrete

evidence of how arts-based techniques facilitated self-expression, challenged societal stigma, and promoted personal and collective growth, even in the face of the challenges posed by the pandemic. These visual and tactile methods also encouraged personal expression and enriched the data collected, underscoring CBPAR's transformative potential in eliciting profound personal insights, and promoting societal change (Leavy, 2020).

Ethical Considerations and Ensuring Trustworthiness

Conducting participatory research with marginalised communities requires careful consideration of ethical issues such as power dynamics, informed consent, and protecting participants' welfare (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Given the sensitive nature of the inquiry and the vulnerability of the co-researchers, establishing trustworthiness and maintaining stringent ethical standards was paramount.

This study implemented multiple strategies to maintain reliability, such as triangulation, member checking, peer examination, and reflexive practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation involves collecting data from multiple sources, such as focus groups, interviews, and arts-based methods to corroborate the findings and enhance the study's credibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Member checking was conducted by sharing our interpretations with the co-researchers to ensure their experiences and perspectives were accurately represented (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Peer examination involves engaging with critical friends and the research supervisor to provide feedback, identify potential biases, and enhance the study's dependability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Reflective practices, such as maintaining a reflective journal and engaging in regular self-reflection, allow the researcher to critically examine their assumptions, experiences, and potential influences on the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical considerations were of the utmost importance and I remained transparent, acknowledging the absence of objective truth and the impact of knowledge, reason, and emotions on researcher-participant relationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Informed consent was obtained from all co-researchers, emphasising the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms and removing identifying information from the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I also provided the co-researchers with information about the available support services and resources to ensure their well-being throughout the research process.

Working with vulnerable communities requires additional ethical considerations to ensure that the research process is respectful, nonexploitative, and minimises potential harm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The researcher must be sensitive to power dynamics, cultural differences, and the potential for re-traumatisation (Mertens, 2017). Building trust and rapport with the community and the co-researchers is

essential to ensure the research process is collaborative and responsive to their needs and concerns (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study, I worked closely with a key informant who had established relationships within the community, which fostered trust and ensured culturally sensitive research (Wood, 2017). Using arts-based techniques also provided the co-researchers with alternative means of expression and helped minimise power imbalances between the co-researchers and me (Leavy, 2020).

Integrating the CBPAR principles further enhanced the study's focus on community engagement and empowerment (Zuber-Skerritt, 2009, 2015). By fostering equitable partnerships, co-learning, and community capacity building, I sought to create a research environment that valued the knowledge, experience, and strength of the Ukomelela community (Wood, 2017).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was guided by the principles of CBPAR, emphasising a collaborative and inductive approach. An inductive coding strategy was used to organise and summarise the data, allowing themes to emerge directly from the co-researchers' narratives and creative expressions (Saldana, 2021). The thematic analysis further facilitated the identification of patterns and interconnections across diverse forms of data, including the co-researchers' clay models, collages, photographs, and interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Visual data played a central role in the analysis, with a narrative-based approach used to explore the co-researchers lived experiences of motherhood and identity formation. This multimodal analysis, integrating textual and visual data, provided nuanced and contextual insights into how the co-researchers navigated the challenges and complexities of their transition to motherhood (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Rabie, 2021; Saldana, 2021).

Throughout the analysis, we remained attuned to the principles of qualitative research, upholding reflexivity, transparency, and co-creation of knowledge with the co-researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The analysis was further strengthened by the collaborative nature of the CBPAR approach, which ensured that the interpretations and findings were grounded in the experiences and perspectives of the Ukomelela community (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

Presentation of Findings

Views of Self as Adolescent Mothers

The findings of this study shed light on how the co-researchers' self-understanding and reflection on their experiences shaped their views of themselves as adolescent mothers. The co-researchers faced numerous challenges such as fear of disclosing their pregnancy, feelings of rejection, and limited psychosocial

support. Andrea's quote encapsulates these struggles (all participant quotes in this Presentation of Findings section are from Rabie, 2021):

> *As my ma meer betrokke gewees het in my lewe, dan sou, ek glo dan sou dinge anders gewees het vandag* [If my mother had been more involved in my life, then, I believe, things would have been different today]. (p. 3, line 9)

However, through the process of reflection and meaning making facilitated by arts-based methods, the co-researchers discovered that motherhood had provided them with a sense of purpose and facilitated their personal growth and maturity. Jeslyn's river of life drawing (see Image 2) depicted a winding path with obstacles as moments of joy and self-discovery. She reflected:

> *Die pad is lank en die klippe is hard maar ek het meer volwasse geraak* [The road is long and the rocks are hard, but I became more mature]. (p. 8, line 38)

Image 2

River of Life: Drawing and Engagement (Jeslyn in Rabie, 2021)
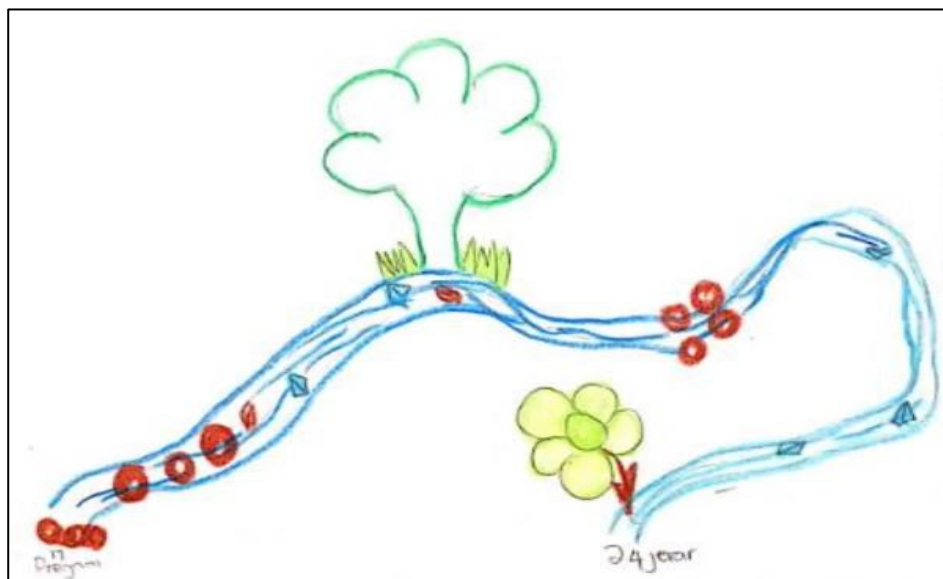
Influence of Early Motherhood on Identity Formation

Early motherhood impacted the co-researchers' identity formation (Laney et al., 2015). Initially, motherhood was perceived as a burden that led to identity struggles and mental health problems. Kiah's quotes powerfully illustrate this:

Ek het nie geweet wat dit is eerstens om 'n ouer te wees nie [I didn't know what it meant firstly to be a parent]. (p. 34, line 25)

En as jy so voel, dan kan jy nie vir jou kind liefde gee nie. Dis hoekom ek vir child abuse daar het. Want daai blessing is nou nie meer 'n blessing nie. Daai blessing is nou 'n curse. Daai kind het gekom en daai kind het jou lewe net omgedop en gekrap [And if you feel like that you can't give your child love. That is why I abused the child. Because that blessing is no longer a blessing. That blessing is now a curse. That child came and that child messed up your life]. (p. 35, line 12)

The clay modelling activity provided a tactile and expressive outlet for the co-researchers to explore their self-perceptions and identities. Many co-researchers created models that embodied the duality of their roles as mothers and individuals, often depicting figures with both nurturing and robust characteristics. Shandré moulded a figure with a baby cradled in one arm and a book in the other, explaining:

This represents me as a mother and a student. I am nurturing my child while also pursuing my education to create a better future for us both.

However, despite the initial struggles, the women expressed that becoming mothers had ultimately facilitated their maturity and instilled in them a desire to become better individuals for the sake of their children. As Jeslyn voiced:

Die pad is lank en die klippe is hard maar ek het meer volwasse geraak [The road is long and the rocks are hard, but I became more mature]. (p. 8, line 38)

This shift in perception highlights the transformative power of motherhood in their lives as they learned to navigate their complex identities and embrace the challenges of their dual roles.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Variables Influencing Meaning-Making and Resilience

Various intrinsic and extrinsic variables, such as traumatic childhood events, violence, unemployment, financial constraints, and lack of adequate housing, influence women's meaning-making experiences and resilience. Wanda's quote illustrates the prevalence of violence in the community, especially when drugs and alcohol are involved (see Image 3):

Hulle gaan na smokkelhuise en drink en dan het hulle 'n quarrel. Daar is baie geweld [They go to shebeens and drink, and then they get into a fight. There is much violence]. (p. 2, line 9)

Image 3

Clay Model Depicting Challenges in the Journey in the Community (Wanda in Rabie, 2021)

In addition, the study underscores how early motherhood often stems from a lack of parental love, support, and guidance—pushing young women to seek stability and affection elsewhere, which frequently results in unplanned pregnancies. Andrea, for instance, reflected on how her life might have been different had she received more support from her mother:

> *As my ma meer betrokke gewees het in my lewe, dan sou, ek glo dan sou dinge anders gewees het vandag* [If my mother had been more involved in my life, then, I believe, things would have been different today]. (p. 3, line 9)

Furthermore, the study highlights the critical role of religious awareness in providing the intrinsic strength necessary to navigate their daily lives as young mothers. This reliance on faith and their lived experiences enabled the women to cultivate resilience, find meaning in their adversities, and grow into the individuals they believed they were meant to be as Wanda, reflecting on her journey, illustrated the transformative impact of these intrinsic and extrinsic variables on their lives.

> *Ek het groot veranderinge in my lewe gemaak* [I made big changes in my life]. (p. 6, line 19)

Impact of Early Motherhood on Education and School Dropout

The impact of early motherhood on education and school dropout rates was significant, with many co-researchers having had to leave school because of pregnancy and the challenges of balancing motherhood with their studies. Rushay's quote illustrates these difficulties:

> I needed to quit school because, for me, it was like, what are the kids going to say at school and all this stuff? My friends, they are going to laugh at me. So, I just quit. (p. 3, line 9)

Similarly, other co-researchers shared the sentiment that pregnancy had forced them to abandon their education, which had long-term repercussions on their future opportunities and socioeconomic status. For instance, Andrea expressed her regret by stating:

> *Ek het nie geweet wat om te doen nie, want ek moes uit die skool uit en ek kon nie klaar maak nie* [I didn't know what to do because I had to leave school and couldn't finish]. (p. 4, line 15)

The co-researchers regretted not completing their education, recognising the long-term consequences for their future opportunities. This regret was often coupled with feelings of desperation and hopelessness during their journeys. The co-researchers voiced that pregnancy was often seen as a way to break the poverty cycle within their home environments. The reality of early motherhood and its impact on their education emphasised the broader socioeconomic challenges they faced, as Shandré lamented:

> *Ek het gedink dit gaan beter wees as ek 'n kind kry, maar dit het net moeiliker geraak* [I thought it would be better if I had a child, but it just got harder]. (p. 5, line 22)

When asked where they find hope, one of the co-researchers stated:

> *Die Here* [the Lord]. (Kiah, p. 4, line 34)

The rest of the group concurred that religion was instrumental in their journeys, leading to resilience, personal growth, and empowerment.

Discussion

The findings of this CBPAR study shed light on the complex and multifaceted experiences of adolescent mothers in the Ukomelela community, revealing the profound impact of early motherhood on their identity formation, meaning-making, and resilience. The research process fostered a rich, nuanced, contextual understanding of the co-researchers' lived realities by employing a participatory approach and integrating arts-based methods.

The co-researchers' accounts of the challenges they faced in their transition to motherhood, such as limited support and feelings of rejection, align with previous research highlighting the diverse hurdles that adolescent mothers encounter (Patrone et al., 2022). However, the research process also revealed the transformative potential of motherhood as the co-researchers discovered a newfound sense of purpose and experienced personal growth and maturity. The reflective nature of river of life activities combined visual representation with narrative storytelling to map their life journeys, highlighting both the obstacles and the moments of joy and self-discovery, exemplifying their resilience and ability to derive meaning from their experiences (Gyan et al., 2017; Mantovani & Thomas, 2014).

The findings further revealed that early motherhood had a profound impact on the co-researchers' identity formation, often leading to identity struggles and mental health issues, as evidenced by the existing literature on the consequences of teenage pregnancy (Chan et al., 2016; Xavier et al., 2018). The arts-based activities, such as clay modelling, allowed the co-researchers to explore their self-perceptions and the duality of their roles as mothers and individuals. Their creative expressions, such as Shandré's clay model depicting her identity as a mother and a student, highlighted their resilience and determination to integrate their new roles and responsibilities into their sense of self (Mangeli et al., 2017).

The study revealed that the co-researchers' meaning-making experiences and resilience were shaped by a complex interplay of intrinsic and extrinsic factors including community-level challenges such as violence and individual and familial factors. By creating a reflective and expressive space where co-researchers could explore and articulate their lived experiences, participatory methods, such as the photo collage and photovoice activities, enabled them to reflect on these intersecting influences and how they navigated them, revealing their ability to draw upon intrinsic resources, such as spirituality, to cope with adversity (Jonas et al., 2016; Kanku & Mash, 2010; Martins & Gall, 2021; Masuku et al., 2021). Through these methods, the co-researchers were encouraged to visually represent and narrate their personal stories and the challenges they faced. This process allowed them to externalise their thoughts and feelings, making abstract concepts like resilience and spirituality more tangible.

The study's findings underscore the significant impact of early motherhood on the co-researchers' educational trajectories, with many having had to leave school due to pregnancy and the challenges of balancing motherhood with their studies. The co-researchers' expressions of regret over not completing their education align with research identifying early motherhood as a significant contributor to persistent educational and economic disparities (Molobela & Magano, 2021; Stoner et al., 2019). The barriers that they face, including stigma, discrimination, and lack of support, further emphasise the urgent need for targeted interventions and policies to address the unique needs of adolescent mothers (Bhana & Mcambi, 2013; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2013).

The transformative aspects of the CBPAR approach and the integration of arts-based methods fostered empowerment, agency, and self-reflection among the co-researchers. The collective meaning making that emerged from the arts-based interventions reinforced the potential of these methods to facilitate self-expression, challenge societal stigma, and promote personal and collective growth, even in the face of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences of the co-researchers underscore the urgent need for interventions and support systems that centre the voices and perspectives of adolescent mothers in marginalised South African communities.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on adolescent motherhood, particularly in the South African context, by providing rich, contextual insights into the lived experiences of young mothers. The CBPAR approach ensured that the research process was collaborative, empowering, and responsive to the needs and concerns of the Ukomelela community, fostering equitable partnerships, co-learning, and community capacity-building (Wood, 2017; Zuber-Skerritt, 2009, 2015).

The study's insights have significant implications for interventions and support systems targeting the well-being and educational outcomes of adolescent mothers in marginalised communities. By centring on the voices and experiences of young mothers, policymakers, educators, and community-based organisations can develop more holistic, community-driven approaches that address the multifaceted challenges faced by this vulnerable population, including mental health support, comprehensive sexual education, affordable childcare, and targeted educational programmes.

Recommendations

Considering this study's findings, and guided by the principles of CBPAR, we propose a comprehensive set of recommendations to enhance the well-being, empowerment, and social inclusion of adolescent mothers in marginalised South African communities. Central to these recommendations is the development and implementation of tailored support programmes co-created with adolescent mothers and their communities. This collaborative approach would ensure that the voices and needs of these young women remain at the forefront of the process (Israel et al., 2010; Wallerstein et al., 2017). Such programmes should foster resilience, facilitate positive identity formation, and support educational attainment while integrating culturally responsive elements and arts-based methodologies to encourage self-expression and empowerment (Bermea et al., 2019; Leavy, 2017).

The insights gleaned from this research should serve as a catalyst for advocating policy changes that address the systemic inequalities and barriers confronting adolescent mothers in marginalised communities (Mutshaeni et al., 2015). Researchers, policymakers, and community organisations must collaborate to translate these findings into actionable, culturally responsive interventions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Leveraging CBPAR's collaborative nature, we advocate for establishing sustainable partnerships among researchers, community organisations, and adolescent mothers. These alliances are crucial for addressing the ongoing challenges and needs identified in this study, facilitating the co-creation and dissemination of knowledge, and developing evidence-based programmes and policies that prioritise the experiences of adolescent mothers (Israel et al., 2010; Wallerstein et al., 2017).

Furthermore, it is essential to promote open communication and dialogue regarding sexual and reproductive health within families and communities (Martins & Gall, 2021). Community-based

initiatives, such as parent support groups, can provide safe spaces for discussing sensitive topics, challenging cultural taboos and stigma, and fostering supportive environments for adolescent mothers (Chung et al., 2018). Tailor these initiatives to marginalised communities' specific cultural, social, and economic contexts to ensure their relevance and effectiveness (Kangaude et al., 2020; Kirchengast, 2016).

Another critical recommendation is the implementation of comprehensive sexual education programmes. These programmes should transcend the biological aspects of reproduction to address issues such as consent, healthy relationships, and contraception (Chung et al., 2018; Kangaude et al., 2020). They must also be age appropriate, culturally sensitive, and developed in collaboration with young people, parents, and community leaders to maximise their impact and relevance (Pfeiffer et al., 2017).

Lastly, we emphasise the importance of harnessing CBPAR's transformative potential to challenge the stigma and discrimination faced by adolescent mothers, and promote their social inclusion and empowerment (Gyan et al., 2017). The co-researchers from this study could play a pivotal role in disseminating findings and advocating for change within their communities and beyond, contributing to the broader discourse on reproductive justice and the rights of marginalised women (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Mertens, 2017).

By implementing these multifaceted recommendations, we could create a more equitable society that prioritised the needs and rights of adolescent mothers and their children. The insights gained from this study, firmly grounded in CBPAR principles, provide a robust foundation for future research and interventions that promote social justice, health equity, and the empowerment of marginalised women.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This CBPAR study offers several important strengths that can contribute to the literature on adolescent motherhood. First, the participatory approach empowered the co-researchers, positioning them as active collaborators rather than passive subjects. This allowed for the co-creation of knowledge grounded in the lived experiences and perspectives of the Ukomelela community.

As we engaged in artistic projects together, I noticed that the activities provided a space for the mothers to share the complexity of their experiences. Using techniques like river of life, clay modelling, photo collage, and photovoice allowed the young women to express themselves in ways that went beyond traditional interviews (Leavy, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). The visual and tactile nature of the activities helped them articulate sensitive topics more comfortably (Gubrium et al., 2015). I was particularly moved by how the river of life drawings revealed pivotal moments in their journeys, while the clay models gave

form to complex emotions they struggled to verbalise (Derr & Simons, 2019). For example, one participant used clay to create a small figure cradling a baby surrounded by a protective circle. As she shaped the clay, she explained how becoming a mother gave her a sense of purpose and strength despite her challenges. This tangible representation allowed her to express feelings of vulnerability and resilience that she had found difficult to put into words.

The photo collage activity proved equally revealing. One young mother created a collage juxtaposing images of traditional family structures with pictures representing her unconventional support system. This visual narrative sparked a rich discussion about the evolving nature of family and community in her life as an adolescent mother.

This collaborative approach aligned closely with CBPAR principles, fostering a more equitable research environment where young mothers actively shaped the research process (Israel et al., 2010). I intentionally positioned them as co-researchers, inviting their input on research questions, data collection methods, and interpretation of findings. For example, when designing the photovoice project, I asked them to identify critical themes they wanted to explore in their communities rather than impose predetermined topics. I observed how this participatory approach empowered the mothers, shifting the typical researcher-subject dynamic (Gubrium et al.., 2015). They began to view themselves as experts in their own experiences, confidently sharing insights and challenging my initial assumptions. During our group discussions of the visual data, I noticed how they took the lead in explaining the significance of specific images or symbols in their artwork, enriching our collective understanding of their lived experiences as young mothers in challenging circumstances (Kara, 2015).

The therapeutic potential of these creative activities became increasingly apparent as our research progressed. Many mothers expressed how the art-making process allowed them to reflect on their journeys in new ways, often leading to moments of personal insight and emotional release. For instance, one participant shared how creating her river of life drawing helped her recognise her resilience in adversity. These experiences aligned with our broader aims of promoting well-being and empowerment among the participants (Coemans & Hannes, 2017).

Furthermore, the study's emphasis on the co-researchers' strengths, resilience, and agency represents a significant shift away from the deficit-focused narratives that often characterise research on adolescent motherhood. By emphasising the co-researchers' capacity for growth, meaning-making, and navigating complex challenges, this study presents a more comprehensive and empowering perspective on this population.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The small sample size and specific geographical and cultural context of the Ukomelela community may limit the generalisability of the findings. Future research should explore the experiences of adolescent mothers in diverse settings within South Africa and beyond to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Additionally, the study focused primarily on the perspectives of the co-researchers whereas future research might benefit from incorporating the voices and experiences of other key stakeholders, such as family members, educators, and policymakers, to develop a more holistic understanding of the challenges and support systems surrounding adolescent motherhood.

Conclusion

As we conclude this CBPAR study, we reflect on the profound insights gained into the lived experiences of adolescent mothers in the Ukomelela community. Our research has illuminated the complex interplay between early motherhood, identity formation, and resilience among these young women. By amplifying their voices through arts-based methods, we empowered our co-researchers and challenged prevailing societal stigmas surrounding adolescent motherhood. Our findings underscore the critical need for holistic, community-based approaches that recognise the strengths and assets of young mothers while addressing systemic barriers. The resilience and agency demonstrated by our co-researchers call for a shift towards strengths-based interventions, moving away from deficit-focused perspectives.

Looking ahead, we see several promising avenues for future research. We need to delve deeper into the role of community-based support and peer networks in promoting adolescent mothers' well-being and educational attainment. The potential of intergenerational dialogue in fostering resilience and meaning-making among young mothers is another area ripe for exploration. Additionally, developing and evaluating tailored interventions that address the multifaceted needs of adolescent mothers in marginalised communities—from mental health support to comprehensive sexual education and affordable childcare—should be a priority.

Furthermore, the success of our arts-based approaches in facilitating self-expression and challenging stigma opens up exciting possibilities for innovative research methodologies with vulnerable populations. By building on these participatory and creative methods, we can continue to engage communities in ways that honour their experiences and promote collective growth.

As we conclude this study, we hope that this work will have a significant impact. By empowering marginalised communities and elevating their perspectives through transformative research, we contribute to developing more responsive and equitable support systems for adolescent mothers. We can create pathways for young mothers' educational and economic empowerment through collaborative,

context-driven approaches, fostering more inclusive and just societies in South Africa and beyond our borders.

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