

# Stress and Coping Strategies among School-Going Teenage Fathers in Lundazi District, Zambia

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## ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical stage of human development marked by heightened vulnerability to stressors, with becoming a young father serving as a significant source of stress. For school-going teenage fathers, the demands of parenthood conflict with academic responsibilities, creating unique challenges. This study aimed to investigate the stress experienced by school-going teenage fathers in Lundazi District, Zambia, and to identify the coping strategies they employ to manage these difficulties. The objectives were to explore the challenges these young fathers face and to examine the types of coping mechanisms they use to navigate their circumstances. A qualitative research approach, using double hermeneutic phenomenology, was adopted. The study sample comprised fifteen (15) purposively selected participants: eleven school-going teenage fathers, two (2) guidance and counselling teachers, and two (2) head teachers. Data were collected through in-depth interviews.

The findings revealed diverse experiences among school-going teenage fathers. Some willingly accepted fatherhood, while others expressed shock and confusion, particularly as they had not planned for this responsibility. The teenage fathers reported stress related to limited financial resources, poor academic performance, fear of failing final exams, social stigmatization, and the demands of childcare. The study identified two key coping strategies employed by these fathers: problem-focused coping, which involved seeking practical solutions, and emotion-focused coping, aimed at managing emotional stress. Based on these findings, the study recommends that teenage pregnancy prevention programs also target teenage fathers, equipping them with the skills and support needed to transition successfully from adolescence to fatherhood.

**Keywords:** Stress, teenage fathers, school-going, rural communities, Zambia

## INTRODUCTION

Teenage fatherhood introduces a distinct set of challenges that significantly affect the educational paths and mental well-being of young men. Current research reveals that school-going teenage fathers frequently encounter substantial stressors, such as financial hardships, social stigma, and the competing responsibilities of parenting and education (Smith et al., 2020; Johnson & Lee, 2021). These stressors can lead to various negative outcomes, including poor academic performance and mental health issues like anxiety and depression (Miller, 2022). Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing effective support systems for young fathers, as their experiences often differ markedly from those of their peers without parental responsibilities.

Coping strategies are vital for these young fathers as they navigate their situations. Studies indicate that effective coping methods, such as leveraging support networks and participating in stress-relief activities, can alleviate the adverse effects of their challenges (Garcia et al., 2019; Thompson, 2023). Young fathers often benefit from connecting with mentors, peers, and community resources that provide emotional and practical support. Moreover, engaging in stress-relief activities, such as sports or creative outlets, can improve their mental health and academic focus, allowing them to balance their dual roles more effectively. Recent findings emphasize the significance of school-based interventions that offer targeted support, fostering resilience and improving academic achievement (Wilson & Carter, 2024). Programs designed specifically for teenage fathers can address their unique needs, helping them develop skills in time management and stress reduction. By

incorporating educational support alongside parenting resources, schools can create an environment that not only acknowledges the challenges these young men face but also empowers them to thrive in both their academic and parental roles.

## Objective

To explore the stressors experienced by school-going teenage fathers in Lundazi District, Zambia, and to identify the coping behaviors they employ to manage these challenges

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of teenage fatherhood presents unique challenges, particularly in the context of education and social expectations. Research indicates that teenage fathers encounter a range of stressors, including financial instability, social stigma, and the pressures of balancing parenting and academic responsibilities. A study by Mwansa et al. (2021) highlights that financial challenges often force teenage fathers to seek employment, which can interfere with their educational commitments. Additionally, social stigma associated with teenage parenthood can lead to feelings of isolation and anxiety, as noted by Chanda and Zulu (2023), who explored the impact of community perceptions on teenage fathers' mental health in rural Zambian settings. Teenage fathers employ various coping strategies to manage the pressures they face.

A qualitative study by Phiri et al. (2022) identified that many teenage fathers rely on social support from family and friends, which provides emotional relief and practical assistance. Moreover, time management skills emerged as a crucial coping mechanism, enabling these young men to balance their academic and parental responsibilities. The importance of these coping strategies is echoed in a study by Tembo and Nkhata (2024), which emphasizes the role of proactive coping in enhancing academic performance and overall well-being. Coping up with stress can also be solved when the people involved becomes flexible in the use of language for their communication. Nyimbili (2021) argues that learners had the power to socialize and build on their social and cultural knowledge which resulted in improved content assimilation and participation in the lesson.

He further argues that benefit was that learners had improved their reading proficiency in the target language and language of instruction respectively. Further, Tembo and Nyimbili (2021) argued that the Zambian sociolinguistics in the community has affected the classroom as well because regions and districts no longer have one language to sustain the community for communication and interaction. Therefore, the building of social knowledge brings about stress relief as the people become more relieved than ever. The involvement of educators plays a significant role in the coping strategies of teenage fathers. Guidance and counseling services in schools are critical for providing emotional support and practical advice. A report by Kachiza and Mwanza (2023) underscores the necessity of training teachers to understand the unique challenges faced by teenage fathers, advocating for supportive school environments that encourage these students to continue their education.

This aligns with findings from Mbewe et al. (2020), which suggest that effective communication between teachers and students can foster resilience and adaptive coping. The cultural context of Lundazi District significantly influences the experiences of teenage fathers. Research by Sikazwe (2021) indicates that traditional gender roles often place additional burdens on young fathers, as they may feel pressured to fulfill provider roles despite their young age. This cultural expectation can exacerbate stress, as noted in a comparative study by Banda (2024), which explored how cultural norms in rural Zambia shape the coping strategies of young parents.

## Research Design

The study employed a double hermeneutic phenomenology design to explore the lived experiences of school-going teenage fathers in Lundazi District, Zambia. This approach allowed for a deep understanding of how these individuals interpret their experiences related to stress and coping behaviors, while also considering the perspectives of guidance and counseling teachers and head teachers who interact with them.

## Sample Frame

Noting that the study was qualitative, the rule of thumb was used to determine the sample size for the study based on methodological considerations and past experience with similar studies; this approach is reflected in one journal's policy on sample size for grounded theory studies. Lincoln and Guba (2000) recommend between 12 and 20 participants in interview studies.

### The sample consisted 15 participants, including

1. 11 School-Going Teenage Fathers: These participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation based on age, socio-economic background, and academic performance.
2. 2 Guidance and Counseling Teachers: These educators provided insights into the support systems available to teenage fathers and their observations on the students' challenges.
3. 2 Head Teachers: The head teachers offer administrative perspectives on the issues faced by teenage fathers in the school context.

## Sampling techniques

Hapompwe et al. (2021) explain that the target population includes all individuals or items with specific characteristics relevant to the research. This group represents the complete set of individuals that the researcher is interested in studying. In this case, the target population consists of all school-going teenage fathers. Consequently, respondent-driven sampling required the researcher to first find someone who was acquainted with a school-going teenage father or mother.

Purposive sampling technique was used in this study where guidance and counsellor teachers or Head teachers acted as seeds or initial sources of identification. The teachers, who knew teenage fathers or mothers, or based on the school management information system made contact with them and requested on behalf of the researcher their participation in the study, and the teen fathers or mothers who participated in the initial sampling were asked to assist in linking the researcher to possible participants. The school head teacher and the administrator assisted in obtaining their contact details from the school's stored information.

## DATA COLLECTION METHODS

### 1. In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, allowing for open-ended responses that explore their experiences and coping strategies. Questions focused on their perceptions of stress, support systems, and coping mechanisms.

### 2. Focus Group Discussions

Separate focus group discussions were held with the teenage fathers and the educators. This facilitated a collective exploration of themes and promoted dialogue among participants, revealing shared experiences and differing perspectives.

## RESULTS

The stress that school-going teenage fathers experience was revealed by asking the respondents worries they had after realized that they had impregnated a girl as well as the challenges they were having. The findings revealed that school-going teenage fatherhood affected the respondents in several ways.

### Stress in a school-going teenage father

The interviews established three thematic areas that the respondent's stress was influenced by limited and/or lack of financial resources, stigmatization and lack of supportive relationships, and academic achievement. The viewpoints expressed are consistent with those of Siwale et al. (2021), who contend that challenges preventing

learners from learning effectively negatively impact their academic performance. Below are the presentations of stress under three aetiological thematic areas.

### **Theme 1: Limited and/or lack of financial resources**

The respondents in the study mentioned that limited and/or lack of financial resources was of the major stressful variables that was associated with being school-going teenage father. This finding was consistent with the narrations of the respondents as noted below, PR-9 narrated that, 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)...She was going to school and support was coming from me. Support like exam fees I paid in full and was only remaining with school fees by the time we stopped from attending school... I do paint and raise about K200 and save. During school days I used to work on weekends.

Despite the respondent being able to raise some money from piece-works, he further narrated that, it is the first time to have a baby, so preparation for the hospital is a challenge to organize what is needed such as chi tenge materials. The other problem is how to raise money that the parents for the girl are demanding. They need money for lobola and damage. PR-1 also revealed that the major stress he had was associated with lack of enough financial resource to support his wife; "...lack of food... lack of concentration at school and at times I have to abscond school to look for money." In addition, PR 7 reported that, it is very difficult madam but, on my family, we are very poor in terms of doing of finding money or resources of finding our needs... sometimes I ask any teacher who has a piece-work.

I usually lie to teachers that I want to buy something like food is finished at the dormitory when I actually want to buy soap for the baby. The interview with the guidance and counselling teacher also showed school-going teenage fatherhood to be associated with financial stress; Mostly we start with food; it's a challenge because equally them they are dependents... So, you find that they will have challenges like over food, clothes, financially and the like. So, you would find that this ka boy can impregnate somebody he doesn't even have a ngwee to sponsor that girl even the food is a challenge others they just go round to do tuma piece works so that they can have a little to sustain them.

### **Theme 2: Low academic performance and fear of failing grade 12 examination**

It was also established that one of the most stressful situations that the respondents encountered was the worry of not passing the examination which would result in them not having a successful future. One of the respondents, PR-4 elucidated; Have worries about school because when we were writing reports, we were told we needed to stop attending school just come and write grade 12 examination... Yes, might have learnt a bit and study but still my friends are learning and have missed other lessons and didn't write the practical for Geography. And am complaining because school determines the future so I don't get educated then my future is doomed. PR-4 was very frank about how he stopped going to school, "When I found that my girl was pregnant, I was afraid of going to school... I had this big problem to solve and there were friends and teachers to face..." PR 5 also reported that, "... worry about the future and my future plans are distorted because I was chased from school." Similarly, PR-7 explained; My performance is not quite okay comparing before this came. Apa the graph is going down because of the confusion I brought myself... The most difficult thing is in terms of studying and education. I may have the desire to come to class but you will find that I reach in class and maybe attempt one topic and then later on have that mind that maybe what I took there for the baby finished. Then instead that I write properly mind gets disturbed with other things. As a result, I just get out and leave for home.

### **Theme 3: Stigmatization and mockery by fellow pupils**

The study findings revealed that the respondents felt stressed as a result of being stigmatized and mocked by the other pupils. The findings further revealed that the comments from other learners lead to the feeling of shame among some of the school-going teenage fathers. PR-1 revealed that, "I face a lot of Stigmatization from my fellow pupils."

## Stress coping strategies among school-going teenage fathers

In this study, teenage fathers employed two types of coping mechanisms and these are: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping involved taking action and doing something proactive about the problem. Thus, one might gather resources, talk to others, or take some action to change the situation. Conversely, emotion-focused coping is involved a number of actions like if the situation is deemed uncontrollable, then it should be left alone, with more focus placed on managing one's emotions (which can be controlled). In these adolescents, stress and coping mechanisms seem to coincide with this developmental stage. For example, teenagers elicited stressors that were associated with identity development, a process involving failure to growing independence from parent figures while establishing stronger associations with peer groups for help or solace. The coping mechanisms are presented under two main themes, these are emotional focused coping, and problem focused coping.

### Theme1: Emotional focused coping

Emotion-focused coping, in contrast, consists of efforts to change or reduce the negative emotions associated with stress. These efforts included avoiding, minimizing, or distancing oneself from the problem, or positive comparisons with others one said, "I'm not as bad off as she is", or seeking something positive in a negative event "Now that I've been expelled, I can sleep in for a few days to think about all this". In some cases, emotion-focused coping strategies involved reappraisal, whereby the stressor is construed differently (and somewhat self-deceptively) without changing the objective level of threat. For example, a teenager said, "This pregnancy situation will give me a great chance to network with others," is using reappraisal. PR-8 adopted an emotion-focused approach to managing his deficiency stress, he opted to spend hours meditating to take his mind off the situation. In a certain sense, emotion-focused coping can be thought of as treating the symptoms rather than the actual cause

### Self-comfort

One of the methods that a respondent indicated as a strategy for coping with stress associated with being a school-going teenage father was self-comfort. Due to the stigma experienced with being a school-going teenage father, one of the respondents resorted to self-comfort by indicating that, "I tell myself that what I did is not bad because I didn't kill someone but I made a human being."

### Theme 2: Problem-focused coping

Problem-focused coping strategies that teenage fathers used are similar to strategies used in everyday problem-solving: they typically involved identifying the problem, considering possible solutions, weighing the costs and benefits of these solutions, and then selecting an alternative. A problem-focused approach to managing stress meant that the school-going teenage fathers actively tried to do other things to address the problem and two themes emerged; coping financially by means of piece works and family support system.

### Cope financially by means of piece works

The study findings revealed that most respondents financially cope by carrying out piece-works during their free time. PR-4 confidently testified that, "I do piece works to solve some of the problems... I do paint and raise about K200 and save. During school days I used to work on weekends." Similarly, PR-1 stated, "Sometimes am not able to attend school because I have to do piece works to find money. PR-7 also stated that, "...sometimes I ask any teacher who has a piece-work. I usually lie to teachers that I want to buy something like food is finished at the dormitory when I actually want to buy soap for the baby."

### GTR-1 elucidated;

what we do mostly we just call them if you've got some piece works to do or you have heard somebody having ma-works to do and you just say you come here tomorrow you go to that person and that person hey will give you something to do so that you can a earn a bit so that you can take care of yourself and the family.

## **Family support system**

On the contrary one respondent indicated that he relied on the mother to resolve the financial stress he encounters though he perceived it as being a burden on her.

## **DISCUSSION**

The lived experiences of school-going teenage fathers were established according to the description of 15 respondents of what they experienced after they discovered they were going to be a father and/or when they became teenage fathers. The experiences of school-going teenage fathers included in the study varied from being negative and positive for some. The findings recognized that upon realization that the school-going teenage fathers had impregnated a girl, majority of them had challenges accepting the responsibility over the pregnancy as well as being a father as they had not planned for it.

The findings further revealed that most of the respondents were compelled to accept responsibility of the pregnancy and marry the girl as the only option at their disposal despite not being ready to be teenage fathers. The study had anticipated that despite the teenagers impregnating a girl they were given an opportunity to continue pursuing school and consider marriage after completion of school. However, compelling these teenagers into early marriage is seemingly very stressful especially that almost all respondents did not expect that they would get their girlfriends pregnant, in fact, compelling them to marry deprives them of an opportunity to concentrate on academic affairs so as to make a possible better future for themselves as well as their expected child.

The findings of this study as similar to the findings by Smith and Wilson (2023) who investigated the unique challenges faced by urban teenage fathers as they navigate the demands of school significant and parenting. Their findings highlight financial instability and social stigma as stressors that affect these young men. In addition, teenage parents are possibly faced with lots of negative impacts including poor school performance, depression and generally exhibit more delinquent behaviors. This aligns with the findings of Kukano et al. (2020), who emphasize that school policies should focus on the holistic well-being of learners through assessment methods, curriculum content, and teaching processes. The connection between student learning and teacher effectiveness suggests that student well being adversely affects student achievement.

### **Stress associated with being a school-going teenage father**

The stress associated with being a school-going teenage father was determined by asking 15 respondents about the stress they experienced after they discovered they were going to be a father and when they became teenage fathers. The finding revealed that limited and/or lack of financial resources was one of the major stressful variables that was associated with being a school-going teenage father. Majority of the school-going teenage fathers included in the study and a guidance teachers confirmed that most of them came from families with high levels of poverty and pupil respondents had no source of income thereby causing them a lot of worries of how they were going to take care of the girls they impregnated as well as the cost of managing the pregnancy and the anticipated baby.

Thus, most of them resorted to carrying out piece-works in the neighboring communities and from teachers which at times caused them to abscond lessons. This finding was consistent with the finding of Lee and Kim (2022) who examine the coping strategies of teenage fathers in South Korea, revealing a blend of problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches. The current study findings further revealed that the respondents felt stressed as a result of being stigmatized and mocked by the other pupils. Evidently, the comments from other learners lead to the feeling of shame among some of the school-going teenage fathers. The study by Tolan and Grant (2009) noted that adolescents who are racial and/or ethnic minorities and are from a low socioeconomic status encounter daily stressors which are usually affected by other more severe and chronic stressors, such as neighborhood problems, racism and discrimination. These findings by Tolan and Grant (2009) are comparably consistent to this study as both found that discrimination was one of the stressors associated with school-going teenage fatherhood.

## Coping strategies that school-going teenage fathers use to cope with stress

The stress coping strategies among school-going teenage fathers was described by asking 15 respondents how they were managing the stress they were experiencing and the findings revealed that most respondents used piece-works (part time jobs) during their free time to manage financial stress. The use of piece-works as a strategy to cope with financial stress is apparently not appropriate because it affects the school-going teenage father's levels of concentration on academic affairs as they have to continuously think of ways of raising more money. The limited stress coping strategies among school-going teenage fathers is an indication that most respondents did not develop resilience over the stress experienced. In fact, lack of varying stress coping strategies evidenced that pupils only had to accept the outcomes of becoming a teenage father which meant that there is need for school management to come up with programmers and systems to help the school-going teenage fathers cope up with some of the many stressful variables especially when they are in school.

## CONCLUSION

The study examined stress and coping behaviour among school-going teenage fathers. Although fatherhood evoked negative experiences, like shock, stress, confusion, stigmatization and mockery from fellow pupils, this experience allowed them to cope using emotional focused coping, and problem focused coping. The teenage fathers were positively transformed by the experience of being fathers. The relationship with the child's mother and lack of financial means to support the child were barriers to involvement in school life. Their perceptions of a good father were limited to being a financial provider for the child with the exclusion of other social roles such as being involved in school life. 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.

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