

Lived Experiences of Nurses with Postgraduate Studies: a Phenomenological Study

Reyma Rose D. Rodas¹, Dr. Joel John A. Dela Merced²

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1163-4354>¹, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1459-5274>²

St. Bernadette of Lourdes College^{1,2}

rrodas@sbic.edu.ph¹, jdelamerced@sbic.edu.ph²

ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of 30 nurses in La Union who completed postgraduate studies while balancing work and personal responsibilities. It found that nurses were motivated by career advancement, competence, leadership goals, and improved patient care. They faced challenges such as workload conflict, financial strain, fatigue, time pressure, and emotional stress. To cope, they used time management, spirituality, and social support. Despite difficulties, postgraduate education transformed them by strengthening confidence, critical thinking, leadership, and professional identity. The study concluded that institutional support was necessary to sustain nurses in advanced education.

Keywords: *Lived experiences, Nurses; Postgraduate education, Professional transformation*

INTRODUCTION

The study was framed by the increasing global and local demand for postgraduate nursing education driven by growing healthcare complexity and workforce needs. It noted that many nurses pursued advanced studies while working full-time, resulting in stress, workload imbalances, and financial difficulties. In regions like La Union, limited access to graduate programs and support systems further intensified these challenges. The study highlighted a gap in the literature on nurses' emotional experiences and transformations, underscoring the need to explore their lived experiences.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study sought to describe the essence of the lived experiences of nurses in La Union who completed postgraduate studies, focusing on their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, transformations, and needed support systems.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The study focused on 30 nurses in La Union who had completed a Master's in Nursing or a PhD in Nursing. It explored their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and transformations using in-depth interviews. It was limited to participants' subjective experiences and did not aim for generalization. External factors, such as institutional policies and program differences, were not controlled for.

REVIEW RELATED LITERATURE

The review of related literature and studies revealed that nurses pursued postgraduate education to advance professionally, develop leadership, pursue self-fulfillment, and commit

to improving patient care and healthcare systems. Lopez and Cruz (2021), Santos (2022), and David (2020) emphasized that postgraduate education enhanced nurses' competence, confidence, critical thinking, and professional identity while preparing them for leadership, research, and educational roles. However, nurses faced challenges including financial difficulties, heavy workloads, academic pressure, time constraints, burnout, and limited institutional support, particularly in regional settings such as La Union. Reyes and Mendoza (2022) and Garcia and Dela Cruz (2023) noted that balancing work, study, and family responsibilities created emotional stress and exhaustion among postgraduate nursing students. Despite challenges, nurses developed coping strategies such as time management, family support, peer collaboration, spirituality, self-discipline, and mentorship, which helped them succeed in their studies. Studies have shown that postgraduate education leads to significant personal and professional transformation by improving leadership, ethical awareness, clinical judgment, and patient advocacy skills, highlighting the need for stronger institutional support systems, flexible learning modalities, scholarships, and mentorship programs. Overall, gaps identified in previous studies, including those noted by Yalniz (2024), emphasized the need for qualitative exploration of nurses' lived experiences, which this study addressed to better understand their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and transformations in the context of postgraduate nursing education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was anchored on multiple theories that explain the motivations, adaptive experiences, coping behaviors, and transformational outcomes of nurses who completed postgraduate studies. The primary theories included Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (2020) and Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (2020), which explained that adult learners are self-directed, internally motivated, and driven by competence, autonomy, and professional growth. These were complemented by Roy's Adaptation Model (1976), Abdellah's 21 Nursing Problems (1960), and Henderson's 14 Basic Needs Theory (1966), which collectively explained how nurses adapt to stress, solve problems, and manage physical, emotional, and psychological needs while balancing work, study, and personal responsibilities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological methodology to examine the lived experiences of postgraduate nurses in La Union. It focused on capturing their motivations, challenges, coping mechanisms, and transformations through rich narrative accounts. Data were gathered and interpreted using systematic qualitative procedures to ensure depth and meaning in the findings.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to explore the essence of nurses' lived experiences. This design allowed us to focus on subjective meanings rather than numerical data. It was appropriate for understanding how nurses perceive and make sense of their postgraduate journey.

RESEARCH STEPS

The study followed a structured qualitative process beginning with ethical approval, participant recruitment, data gathering, transcription, thematic analysis, and validation of findings. Each step was carried out systematically to maintain consistency and rigor. The process ensured that participants' narratives were accurately represented.

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE SELECTION

Data were collected through in-depth, unstructured interviews with 30 purposively selected nurses who completed a Master's or PhD degree. Participants were selected based on eligibility criteria to ensure they had relevant lived experiences. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy with participant confirmation.

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method, which involved extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, and clustering themes. This process helped identify patterns across participants' experiences. The analysis ensured that findings reflected both shared and unique perspectives.

RESEARCH ASSUMPTIONS AND VALIDATION

The study assumed that participants provided honest and accurate accounts of their experiences. To strengthen validity, member checking was conducted, where participants reviewed their transcripts and findings. This ensured that interpretations accurately reflected their intended meanings.

STUDY LIMITATION AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study was limited to postgraduate nurses in La Union and may not be representative of all nurses in other regions. Ethical principles such as confidentiality, informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymity were strictly observed throughout the research. All data were securely stored to protect participants' identities and privacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ 1. What is the essence of the lived experiences of nurses in La Union who have completed postgraduate studies in terms of their motivations, challenges encountered, coping strategies, personal and professional transformations, and the support or developmental framework that may assist nurses in pursuing and completing postgraduate education?

The essence of the lived experiences of nurses in La Union who have completed postgraduate studies is a journey of purposeful growth, shaped by strong intrinsic motivation, in which career advancement, personal fulfillment, and a commitment to quality patient care drive their pursuit of higher education. Despite facing significant challenges such as financial constraints, workload pressure, and limited institutional support, the participants demonstrated resilience by utilizing coping strategies such as time management, social support, and personal determination to sustain their academic journey. These experiences led to profound transformations, including enhanced clinical competence, stronger leadership abilities, increased confidence, and a deeper sense of professional identity and fulfillment. Eventually,

their narratives reveal that postgraduate education is not only an academic achievement but also a transformative process that reshapes their roles as nurses, educators, and leaders in healthcare. The study highlights the need for institutional support systems, such as flexible scheduling, financial assistance, and mentoring programs, to sustain and empower nurses as they pursue advanced education.

SUMMARY

This study explored the lived experiences of nurses in La Union who completed postgraduate studies, focusing on their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and transformations. Findings showed that nurses were primarily driven by intrinsic motivation, career advancement, and personal growth. Despite facing financial difficulties, workload pressures, and limited institutional support, they persevered through resilience and strong support systems. Coping strategies such as time management, family support, and determination played a key role in their academic success. Overall, postgraduate education was found to be a demanding yet meaningful journey that shaped both professional and personal development.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that nurses pursued postgraduate education mainly for self-improvement and professional advancement despite facing significant challenges such as financial and workload-related stress, which they overcame through resilience and coping mechanisms. It also found that postgraduate education led to meaningful transformation in competence, leadership skills, and professional identity, highlighting the importance of strong institutional support for sustained academic and professional growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that nursing institutions strengthen flexible learning options, mentoring programs, and academic support systems for working nurses. Hospitals may consider providing study leave, flexible scheduling, and financial assistance to reduce the burden on postgraduate students. Policymakers are encouraged to develop programs that support continuing education as part of workforce development. Nursing organizations should promote mentorship and recognition programs for postgraduate nurses. Future researchers may explore broader populations or conduct longitudinal studies to assess long-term outcomes of postgraduate education. These actions may help improve both nurse well-being and healthcare quality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the individuals who contributed to the successful completion of this study. Deep appreciation is extended to my adviser, course facilitator, and Dean of the Graduate School for invaluable guidance, expertise, patience, and unwavering support throughout the research process. I am also grateful to my family for unconditional love, understanding, prayers, sacrifices, and encouragement that sustained me during the most challenging moments of this journey. Special thanks are given to my partner and children for their inspiration, motivation, and strength that pushed me to persevere and

complete this work. Above all, I give thanks to God Almighty for granting me wisdom, strength, perseverance, and good health to successfully accomplish this study.

AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

AI-supported tools helped with grammar and structure in creating this article. No AI tools were used to collect, analyze, or interpret data; all authors are credited for their academic contributions.

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