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## Long Paper

# Unfolding of a New Beginning: The Meaningful Journey of Doctorally Prepared Nurse Educators

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of graduates (nurses) of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in nursing education. It also described participants' recommendations for supportive practices in pursuit of PhD. A descriptive phenomenological research design was used in the study. Data were gathered from 12 participants who graduated from universities offering the program. It was collected through individual, semi-structured interview with the main question "Tell me your experiences in pursuing PhD in nursing education?" It utilized phenomenological analysis method of Van Kaam (1966). Results revealed major themes which included: (1) Career jumpstart: unplanned opportunities; (2) Sharpening the Saw: Tales of the Learners; and, (3) Behind the Curtain: The unfolding of a new beginning, and minor themes of the 2nd, specifically: (a) Forming and Molding: The Learning cycle; (b) Role juggling: Harmonizing responsibilities; and, (c) The Silver Lining: Visible and ulterior push factors.

**Keywords** – Doctor of Philosophy, Lived Experience, Nursing Education, Phenomenology, Van Kaam

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## INTRODUCTION

Knowledge development in and positive image of a particular discipline are brought about by further education of its adherents. Almost all professionals from different disciplines seek to attain the topmost accomplishment possible. In nursing, an



existence of doctoral programs attests to this movement (Aziato, 2015). Despite the availability of doctoral programs, the number of PhD-prepared nurses remains inadequate for the needs of universities across the globe (Edwardson, 2004). It is estimated that there is less than one percent of nurses with doctoral degrees (Feeg & Nickitas, 2011). This underscores the critical need for doctorally prepared nurses who will educate future nurses. They will prepare the nursing workforce in generating evidence for practice that meets the complex health needs of patients.

While a doctoral preparation may open an array of opportunities for nurses, the challenges associated to earning it cannot be discounted. These challenges vary from day-to-day constraints in association with sustenance on a decreased profit to the rigorous assignment in establishing scholarly existence (Cotterall, 2013). Empirical evidence suggests that challenges related to PhD process include but not limited to psychological or sentimental repercussion (Wall, 2008), dexterity in composing scholastic paper (Gazza, Shellenbarger & Hunker, 2013), and insistence in supervision (Evans, 2007), while other demands include maintaining job at the same time schooling (Paliktzoglou & Suhonen, 2011), or deficiency of funds for research (Harman, 2003). The Council of Graduate Schools (2008) reported that the program attrition rate for doctoral is 40% to 50% on average and it varies in different disciplines as nurses attend in diverse doctoral initiatives or fields. Furthermore, there are institutional factors determined that prompt attrition rates among graduate school learners which comprise setting of the program, culture of the academy, and coaching quality.

On the other hand, there are number of nurses who have gained doctorate degrees which equipped them benefits such as self-esteem in performing daunting functions and sense of contentment (Heinrich, 2005), and it paved the way for favorable circumstances in school, leadership, and management (Conti & Visentin, 2015; Tarvid, 2014). With the current demand in work and competition in the field of nursing, Filipino nurses are increasingly expected to ascend the highest nursing educational preparation. However, only few literature reports about the experiences of students taking doctoral nursing degrees in the country. With inadequate literature, it is essential to document the phenomenon, as this can be an exemplar (Vasquez, 2013).

Given the above literature, the logical progression is to investigate the lived experience of nurses (PhD holders) in their pursuit of Doctor of Philosophy in nursing education. Although the endeavor in PhD is a distinctive event, it may present complementary occurrences or challenges for learners that may provide a guiding means for promising students and an advisory for existing PhD students. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of graduates (nurses) of PhD in nursing education, the central question of the study was: What are the lived experiences of (PhD) graduates in pursuing PhD in Nursing Education? The study also intended to describe participants' recommendations for supportive practices in pursuit of Doctor of Philosophy. Understanding the experiences these graduates faced in their endeavor and the reality of

the need for doctoral education will facilitate helping other students who choose to achieve their desire to pursue doctoral education.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Doctoral Program***

Doctoral preparation customarily entails two main tracks, either the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or the professional doctorate in nursing or a related discipline. The PhD program has been undertaken commonly by nurse academicians who aspire to improve their own professional identity while providing knowledge advancement through advance research. A PhD-prepared nurse is usually engaged in an academic setting with dual functions of a researcher and teacher (Hinshaw, 2001). The professional doctorate, on the other hand, was established for a specific target group-experienced licensed nurses probing to extend their professional and research abilities in their respective clinical field (Ellis, 2006; Robb, 2005). Pursuing doctorate degree can be viewed as a distinctive and exceptional educational undertaking. Golde (2006) elucidated the purpose of doctoral pedagogy which is to immerse in research works and promote agents in the field to advance or establish new information. Every phase of the endeavor may offer particular opportunities or tests for a PhD student.

### ***Students and the Need for Doctoral Graduates***

The exigency for supplementary nursing academicians with PhD backgrounds who instruct in baccalaureate programs in nursing (BSN) is constantly increasing; there is a call for nurses to further their educational level in a progressive aspect (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2011). The inadequacy of certified nursing instructors influences the amount of bachelor nurses getting in the field. Nursing instructors with master's degree should ponder in furthering education up to doctoral level, for number of grounds, one of which is to expand the graduates of nursing (Williamson, 2013).

### ***Challenges in pursuing Doctoral Program***

Postgraduate degree especially doctorate is attended by almost 100,000 students in United States and it can be deemed as the apex of education (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.). The selection procedure in doctoral program is extremely competitive and strict, for that reason, students attending the degree can be classified as the top and brightest learners for having conquered the process (Gilliam & Kitronis, 2006). Nevertheless, the road in obtaining it is never easy and among doctoral students enrolled, 50% of them will not cross the finish line (Walker et al., 2008). Numerous students quit the programs in their first year (Esping, 2010) and it is recorded to have 40,000 drop out every year (Ali & Kohun, 2007). Given the statistics, researchers have focused on the phenomenon at hand and concluded that the attrition rate of doctoral students can be associated with primary components, it is social isolation or the

feeling of limited social connections (Ali & Kohun, 2006) and stress in relation to doctoral (Lovitts, 2001).

### ***The 'Doctoral Experience'***

For many years, the documentation for nurses sharing their lived experiences in their pursuit of PhD or any doctoral degree is depleted. The experience can be described as a rollercoaster of confidence and emotions (Christie et al., 2008) and the distinct intellect acquired in PhD can be tagged as comprehensive, exceptional, and contemplative series that is highly refining (Baptista, 2014). It conveys that contemplation or reflection is integral in PhD and may present as a stage in order to recognize learning by means of experiences. Striving nurses for PhD must be cognizant that the road to PhD is great and integrated in the process is extensive learning. All the paths and experiences conclude to deliver a proficient, research-oriented, and skillful nurse in the field or nurse academician (Aziato, 2015).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study utilized qualitative technique, specifically descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the experiences of graduates in their pursuit of PhD in nursing education. It is the thrust of phenomenology to construe and discern a phenomenon as shared by the informants who have lived through them (Draucker, 1999; Wojnar & Swanson, 2004). Furthermore, descriptive (eidetic) phenomenology emphasizes descriptions of human experience as perceived by human consciousness (Polit & Beck, 2010). The acts of human are driven by what we identify as real or evident, therefore, subjective data is crucial in identifying one's motive. This approach was aligned with the current study as the purpose of phenomenology is to elucidate meaning, organization and significance of experiences of the participants around a specific phenomenon (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2010). Descriptive phenomenology brings to light the vital elements of the lived experiences in particular individuals (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The researcher attained transcendental subjectivity through bracketing that concerns withdrawal of pre-existing intellect and belief so that it may not alter the description of phenomenon under study.

The participants of the study were graduates of Doctor of Philosophy in nursing education duly selected via homogenous sampling. The inclusion criteria were: Degree holder (PhD in nursing education), full time student while attending PhD (with full credit units in every semester), and currently employed in school setting or as a nurse practitioner either full time or part time. These criteria provided gathered data as shared by the participants from their experiences more comprehensive and substantial (in line with the phenomenon). There were no particular locales in this study since qualitative inquiries held on natural setting of the participants.

Before the start of data collection, formal ethical approval was obtained from the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Research. Upon authorization, letter of consent was presented to the deans & coordinators of the graduate schools for the conduct of the study. Prior to each interview, participants were instructed to read and sign the informed consent if they agree, and they were also asked for their: pseudonym, educational background, and current employment, as this would provide identification and validate if the participant met the criteria set by the researcher. A process consent was stipulated (in the consent form) to inform the participants of the length of the interview. The researcher employed this interview question as a general guide: “Tell me about your experiences in pursuing your PhD in nursing education”. Ancillary questions were also used to encourage participants to expand on their experience such as: “Tell me more about your feelings and thoughts relating to this experience”. Through these questions, participants were encouraged to describe both positive and negative aspects of their doctoral experience.

The study was analyzed manually (hand coding) and utilized phenomenological analysis (descriptive) method of Van Kaam (1966) which provided specificity in interpreting verbal statements and feasibility for analyzing numerous information. In this method, common patterns shared by the participants were searched and it required that intersubjective agreement be reached with expert judges.

## RESULTS

The participants were 12 graduates of PhD in nursing education, full time student while attending their graduate school with complete units per trimester, and currently employed in school setting or as a nurse practitioner either full time or part time.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Civil Status	Current Job	Year Graduated (PhD)
(P)A	F	Married	Clinical Instructor	2019
B	F	Married	Univ. Research Consultant	2019
C	F	Married	Former Dean; Nurse practitioner	2018
D	F	Married	Administrator	2019
E	F	Married	Clinical Instructor	2019
F	M	Married	Assistant Professor	2013
G	M	Married	Clinical Instructor	2017
H	M	Single	Researcher for Academics	2015
I	M	Married	Clinical Instructor	2019
J	F	Married	Professor	2013
K	F	Married	Administrator	2015
L	M	Married	Clinical Instructor	2015

Data analysis process generated codes, grouped, and further reduced, until ten (10) initial codes surfaced (original). Further analysis led to the development of emerging themes, minor themes were identified, and finally three major themes have emerged. The meaningful journeys of doctorally prepared nurse educators were captured in three major themes, specifically: (1) Career jumpstart: unplanned opportunities; (2) Sharpening the Saw: Tales of the Learners; and, (3) Behind the Curtain: The unfolding of a new beginning is depicted in a thematic tree (Figure 1). The findings were presented according to these major themes and included textual data from actual participant responses to support each theme. Participants were represented by codes (<sup>A,B,C,D</sup>, etc. from the pseudonym mentioned above in superscript form) followed by the number of the thought units (i.e., <sup>A.1, B.23,121</sup>), and finally, their direct statements were in italicized form.

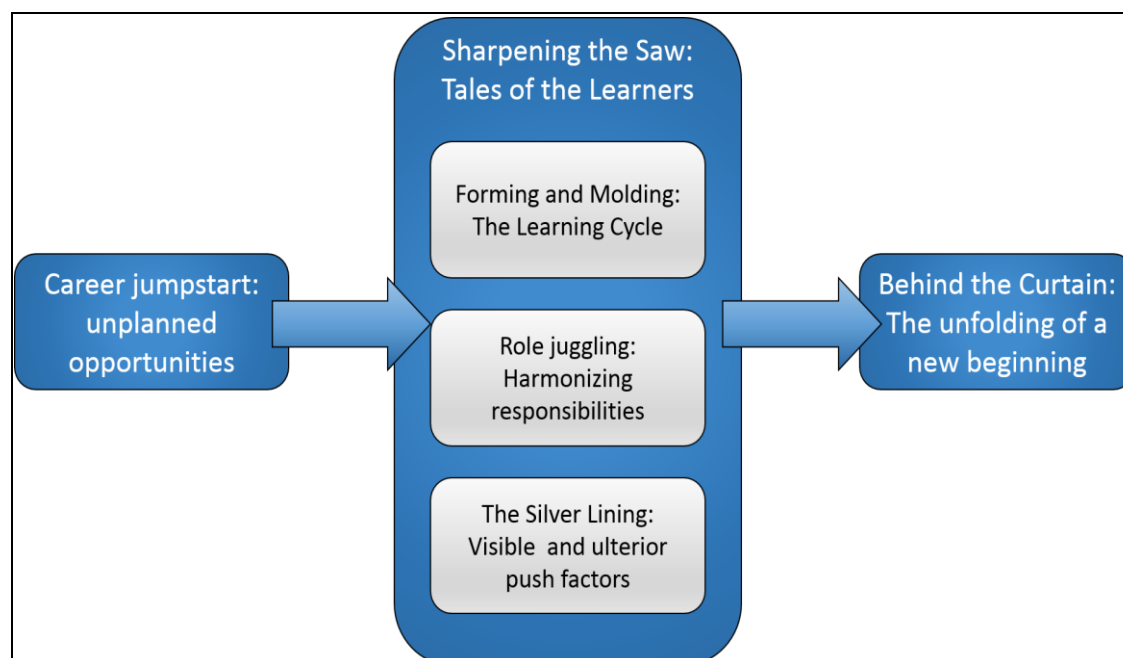


Figure 1. Unfolding of a new beginning: The meaningful journey of doctorally prepared nurse educators.

### Career jumpstart: unplanned opportunities

It referred to the experiences that most of the participants did not plan to enroll yet were (1) only encouraged, (2) influenced by their friends, or (3) dreamt for career progression. The start of the doctoral students then in PhD in nursing education is perceived as unplanned as described by these statements, <sup>E.1</sup> *I did not plan to study again;* <sup>K.7</sup> *Honestly, I don't want to take PhD, it is further demonstrated that* <sup>K.9,55</sup> *finishing masters was my goal, doctorate was not in my pipeline.* One reason for not engaging into doctoral program before is because it is perceived as unconventional, <sup>A.71, 437</sup> *kasidatiwalatalagang nag-PhD, ngayon lang namanna-usoyan (before we were not inclined with PhD, it has been a trend lately).* As PhD becomes a trend and necessity in this 21<sup>st</sup> century especially those

who are in the academe, college and university administrators encourage and require their faculty members to enroll and finish their PhD degree <sup>A.5</sup> our dean encouraged us, faculty, to take up PhD, and <sup>A.4, K.8</sup> it was the administrators who urged me. To brace their faculty members embarking on the said program, <sup>G.9, 14</sup>the dean of CON offered to us, there'll be like scholarship grant, 50% will be paid by the school, while others, <sup>B.58, D.15</sup>yung university ung nagbayad ng tuition (our university paid for the tuition). This setup is viewed as <sup>G.24, 6</sup> encouraging for the students and considered it as an opportunity; <sup>L.31, 37</sup>I'm just hesitant to say no to my dean who invited me, so I took it. The scholarship offered is considered as an opportunity and eventually, <sup>I.65</sup> we grabbed it because wala pa kasing aligned na PhD graduate in nursing education (none of the graduate is aligned with PhD), while others <sup>K.59</sup> was just being obedient to their administrators. These were the circumstances on how they entered the program.

### **Sharpening the Saw: Tales of the Learners**

Following the initial steps and beginnings of doctoral students in their PhD life are their experiences and feats all throughout journey. It is at this point of their endeavor that can be described as a <sup>D.2</sup> roller coaster experience because of the challenges and competing priorities, at the same time, <sup>G.3</sup> generally considered to be positive and <sup>H.80</sup> meaningful considering their learning and bonds with significant people in their journey. It can be further understood by three subthemes: (a) *Forming and Molding: The learning cycle*; (b) *Role juggling: Harmonizing responsibilities*; and, (c) *The Silver Lining: Visible and ulterior push factors*.

#### **Forming and Molding: The Learning Cycle**

It is further elucidated by the characteristics of the learners from all walks of life, adult-learning teaching strategies and complex requirements, and, actual application of what was learned in actual life.

*Myriad of Characteristics: Learners in the program.* Nursing educators come from all walks of life, hence, doctoral program is designed to all qualified individuals regardless of religious background or age. This is indicated in one religious belief <sup>B.108, 109, 111</sup>7th day is the Sabbath according to 10 commandments, so in honor of the Creator, we keep the Sabbath day Holy. We don't work, we don't study, on Sabbath day. Having this faith and background, <sup>E.61, 62</sup>the dean and the teachers (of the graduate school) understand us, they respected us; <sup>B.117, 118</sup> Talagang in-accommodate yung ganun namin (our background was accommodated), we were allowed to keep the Sabbath day holy. <sup>E.57, 64</sup> The school itself arranged for our schedule, and supported us until the end. The graduate school administrators and mentors made an adjustment for these students as mentioned to accommodate them in the program. Moreover, age is also not a hindrance to initiate another journey such as PhD. <sup>C.375</sup>At my age sabinila (pertaining to other seniors) pag senior na, ayaw ko na tinatamad na ako (they said if you're already senior, you quit or get tired), this in terms of studying or pursuing one's dream. <sup>C.378</sup> Sabi ko naman (and I said) with the



nursing education, there is no retirement. Therefore,<sup>C. 167</sup>aging process was never a hindrance for the teaching and the learning process in my career life. In fact pursuing PhD at a senior age,<sup>C. 168</sup>sabi nga nila (as they say) I am an inspiration (finished her PhD in nursing education at 65 years old). The statement demonstrates that PhD accommodates all deserving and passionate students.

*Andragogy: Sophisticated teaching-learning experience.* Doctor of Philosophy in nursing education is one of several doctoral programs offered to nurses intending to pursue their graduate studies upon completion of masteral degree. It is perceived as<sup>G.54</sup> as something really specialized in terms of education (nursing) and<sup>K.4</sup>it is something new, it is relevant (and aligned to my profession), and up to date. Therefore,<sup>G.49</sup> if it's PhD, it is considered to be the highest level. The requirements, delivery of instruction, professors, and the curriculum in general, is in different 'level' as captured by this statement,<sup>K.22</sup> oh, PhD napala to (this is PhD)?!. Primarily because<sup>B.9</sup> well designed kasiyung curriculum. With the teaching-learning experience,<sup>D.89, 91</sup> it was too conducive and very appealing to the learners, pagtungtong ko saklase, ang saya (once I entered the class, I'm happy), this is because<sup>D.102, G.70, J.64</sup>napaka-interactive nya (it's very interactive). For instance,<sup>G.57</sup> the professors would usually act as facilitators for learning,<sup>D.97</sup>hindimomapapansinna 8 to 9 hours nayungklase (you would not notice that the class has been for 8 to 9 hrs),<sup>D.100</sup> ang galingkasinung delivery ng instructions (because the delivery of instructions was great). Moreover,<sup>L.58</sup> we have alternative delivery instruction wherein we have classes online,<sup>G.282</sup> synchronous and asynchronous discussion,<sup>A.122</sup> maramikangmatututunan (you will learn a lot). Finally, other aspects,<sup>F.84, 85</sup> when it comes to facilities, they are well-equipped (the graduate school).

*Building capabilities: From contextual learning to application.* Pursuing and finishing PhD provides invaluable learning experience considering that it is worth the time, effort and money because of what they have all learned.<sup>E.25</sup> When it comes to learning, I am always in owe for the goodness of my graduate school.<sup>I.31</sup> Our knowledge was enhanced regarding nursing education, this is because<sup>E.94, G.37</sup> you're learning not only on the theories,<sup>G.62</sup> I'm also learning from their perspectives, and practices (pertaining to mentors and classmates). Every process involved in PhD provides learning experiences to students that are relevant in their field, either learning inside or outside the classroom, face to face or blended learning.<sup>D.20</sup> Specifically, whenever we were sharing our experiences<sup>A.122, J.171, K.19, D.21</sup> I learned a lot from them.<sup>I.17</sup> Na-apply ko madalas yung learning sa work ko (I can often apply what I'm learning in my work).<sup>D.25, J.270</sup> Mas lalo kong nagagawa ung role ko (I can perform my role better) as the dean of the college. Moreover,<sup>C.33</sup> the most memorable part of my student life is our practicum.<sup>J.194</sup> Nabigyan kami ng (We were given) opportunity to look into excellent university in other Asian countries,<sup>K.229</sup> really experiential.<sup>K.234</sup> And that's doctorate. These are the experiences that are considered to be<sup>J.212</sup> very significant and relevant in the course, and<sup>A.131, B.65, C.120, G.76</sup> it's a learning experience that I'll never exchange with anything else.

## **Role juggling: Harmonizing responsibilities**

In pursuing PhD in nursing education just like other academic program, one has to follow and complete a specified curriculum. Embodied in this curriculum are unique courses to take which require different academic tasks and challenges, facilitated by diverse professors. <sup>G.102</sup>Once you are in a PhD, you have to take note that you are going for PhD and not for Masters. <sup>D.108, B.59, H.16</sup> Requirements are hard, and <sup>I.76, H.31, G.97, C.107, B.61</sup> we have to do many tasks. <sup>L.65</sup>We had a professor before asking to submit 7 papers with the span of 7 days. Other PhD tasks are depicted in the following statements, <sup>I.7</sup> we have to review many literatures, <sup>H.28</sup> there are book reviews, oral reports/ presentations, and synthesis; <sup>B.63</sup>Bawat subject, ay may mga research talagananire-require (every subject requires research), <sup>K.54</sup> everything was tough because everything was new. Apart from the different course requirements, specifically, the most challenging part of the program is <sup>K.42, L.135, I.90, A.239</sup> the dissertation. <sup>K.119</sup>Yung dissertation talagadugo at pawis (the dissertation is considered as blood and sweat). What made it challenging is because <sup>L.136</sup> you are on your own. <sup>L.85</sup>These are the circumstances that make the process more challenging.

Moreover, aside from the curriculum requirements described above, there are also challenges that can be tagged as tasks unrelated with academics. For instance, <sup>L.18, D.198, J.130</sup> it's the travel (transportation) because I ride public vehicle (I do not drive in Manila), everything like flood, and the environment, <sup>L.17</sup> it's one of the most challenging. Experiences like, <sup>D.119</sup>kailangankongumalis ng sobrang aga (I need to leave early), <sup>A.9</sup> 4 to 5 hours yungbyahe (travel), while others are, <sup>J.8</sup> coming from province travelling 12hrs by bus. <sup>D.200</sup> Sa byahe, physiologically parang talagangitutumba ka (with travel, you will physiologically be exhausted). In addition to these are financial implications in pursuing doctoral, <sup>C.208,234</sup> of everybody financial ang number one nakailangan (financial is the first need). One has to be prepared financially when it comes to PhD because, <sup>C.207,F.238</sup> it will take much of the budget; For instance, <sup>C.213</sup> I have to sell properties, <sup>L.128</sup> my paper, cost me as much as the prize of a car. This cost pertains largely in <sup>C.215</sup> The dissertation expenses. Finally, <sup>L.127</sup> one reason why a lot of knowledgeable people are not taking PhD is because they are not financially able.

<sup>G.148</sup> The main problem in PhD is that, once you're employed, time really is a big problem. One has to perform several roles and tasks for a period of time, often simultaneous and competing, thus, PhD students <sup>H.12</sup> have to juggle their time with schooling or in work and the graduate school. One has to manipulate or rearrange especially in order to achieve a desired end. <sup>K.51</sup> So if you look at it, it's an additional thing. <sup>B.4, A.414, C.60, D.106, G.139</sup> Kasi nagwoworkako (because I'm working), <sup>A.420, B.5</sup> at the same time may family ako (I have my family), <sup>A.416</sup> tapos nag-aaral (while studying). Considering these, there are times wherein <sup>B.233</sup> hindi ko naalamyunguunahin ko (I already don't know what to do first), which leads to <sup>B.234, G.141</sup> physical, emotional, & psychological stress.

In this case, a PhD student should <sup>G.145</sup> exert all efforts, to balance all these demands, and it is <sup>C.245</sup> not that easy at times conflicting sila. <sup>C.249, H.7, F138</sup> It's a matter of management, and priority management. In doing so, <sup>H.33, B.242, H.187</sup> I really planned my activities, for example

<sup>C.250</sup> *this week anu bang mauuna (what comes first)?* <sup>H.186</sup> *I have learned to manage my time very well* <sup>H.34</sup> *so that on the last day I'll be able to submit all the requirements.* This kind of adjustment is necessary, although <sup>C.71</sup> *not that easy actually but you have to prioritize.*

### **The Silver Lining: Visible and ulterior push factors**

This subtheme referred to the external and internal motivators in pursuing PhD in nursing education. For external motivation, <sup>G.133</sup> *You won't survive PhD if you're alone;* The arepillars of PhD like the support group or relationship to different people and personalities in which significantly influenced their PhD experience and contributed in their success, specifically their peers, family, and mentors/ adviser.

Peer relation such as one's colleagues and classmates can be viewed as substantial pillar in pursuing PhD. Its significance in terms of easing academic loads is described by these statements, <sup>D.146</sup> *mahalagatalagayung company ng klase (the company of the class is really important),* <sup>A.172, C.140, E.142, H.77</sup> *kapag may mga assignments talagangnagtutulungan kami (if there are assignments we help each other).* <sup>G.132</sup> *It's a group effort and* <sup>C.142, E.146, G.137</sup> *we're helping each other.* As one's PhD journey progresses, <sup>H.63</sup> *you also share the moments,* <sup>H.73</sup> *we share the same experiences, which creates stronger bonds, linkages, and successively, friendship among their group.* <sup>G.74, H.60</sup> *I enjoyed most of the time that I was with my classmates.* <sup>L.70</sup> *You'll improve together and* <sup>A.170</sup> *ang damikongnatutunan (I have learned a lot) at the same time friendship.* Accordingly, peer relation is perceived to be positive, primarily constructive and supportive.

The support from their families (either parental or marital) and the experiences they have together are deemed necessary for the success of their journey. It can be determined that PhD journey <sup>D.199</sup> *is a challenge for the entire family.* <sup>D.213</sup> *Para sa akin, hindisyakayanggawin ng mag-isa ka lang (to me, it cannot be done alone),* <sup>D.203, C.178, K.65</sup> *my family supported me.* This is represented by the following circumstances, <sup>D.204</sup> *I had my mother during the data collection,* <sup>K.71</sup> *my husband picks me up kasi I cannot do it alone,* <sup>G.159</sup> *my wife had to do other work for me,* <sup>A.136</sup> *I was encouraged by my sister,* <sup>H.101</sup> *I was sponsored by my father.* <sup>C.112</sup> *Buti naman (it's good) I had a son na very good in doing the powerpoint.* Primarily, vital to one's success can be attributed to his/her family for being a capable pillar in pursuit of PhD, on that account, <sup>D.217</sup> *my family served as an inspiration for me to go on.*

Mentors and adviser of the graduate school can also be compared to a pillar that is indispensable to support one's PhD journey. They are illustrated as <sup>L.76, K.41</sup> *very approachable,* <sup>D.155, 156</sup> *kahitsobrayung achievements nilait's not traumatic on our part na mag-approach sakanila (even though they have many achievements, it's not traumatic on our part to approach them);* Hence, teacher-student relationship is perceived to be positive and <sup>D.164</sup> *sobrang smooth ng relationship.* On the other hand, <sup>K.43, L.77, I.93, A.242</sup> *my adviser was very supportive.* This is evident <sup>I.94</sup> *everytime I'll be consulting him, right away he has response with my queries,* <sup>D.159</sup> *to the extent natutulungan ka talaganilangmataposyung dissertation mo (they will really help you to finish your dissertation).* Importantly, <sup>D.42, L.78</sup> *I*

cannot finish my study without the support of my adviser.<sup>D.162, I.33</sup> They also give you motivations na 'you can do it'. Having all these support groups and pillars in pursuing PhD helped a lot in terms of creating a positive atmosphere and shaping students' motivations and morale in completing the journey.

Another part that constitutes this subtheme is internal motivation. Pursuing PhD is described as <sup>A.1</sup> tough and rough or <sup>D.103</sup>sobranghirap (very difficult)/ challenging nyabecause of the demands and competing roles as discussed above. One conclusion that can be grasped from this <sup>D.35, 34</sup> (PhD) hindi lang sya talaga degree (it's not just a degree), kasama ng nate-test yung personality mo (it's also a test of your personality), your character as a person.<sup>D.38</sup> It will also test your attitude and values as a person. There are times <sup>A.20</sup> natalagang gusto ko nang umayaw (I really wanted to quit).<sup>A.431, D.216</sup> Umiiyak na talaga ako nun (I'm already crying).<sup>B.212</sup> Pumapasok ka kahit nanacha-challenge ako (I had to attend even though it was challenging). Apart from the external motivations provided by the support groups, another thing to consider is one's internal drive and desire to accomplish PhD. As stated, <sup>K27, G.19</sup> since I was already in the program, <sup>K28, G.220</sup> might as well as finish it. This is where the perseverance and dedication of PhD students comes in. The conviction to complete what they have started and <sup>G.222, 223</sup> not giving up, rather, compose yourself, step forward and finish it.<sup>F.196, 197</sup> Talagang dedication talaga at perseverance, yun yung tingin ko na kailangan na baon mo (Dedication and perseverance, that's what I think you should have). Therefore, <sup>A. 464, F.8, K73</sup> Pag pinagtyagaan mo, masipag ka, matatapos mo rin (if you persevere, with your hardwork, you will also finish).

### **Behind the Curtain: The unfolding of a new beginning**

This theme embodies the success stories of each of the participants. From the beginning of PhD journey until the end, it can be described as <sup>L.2, L.3</sup> Life changing. In all aspects: spiritually, socially, mentally, and even more on emotional. Included as significant part of their PhD endeavor are their experiences, realizations, and changes following the completion of doctorate degree.

Succeeding in PhD is described as enjoyable, fun, and satisfying or fulfilling experience. <sup>D.176, F.4</sup> Sobrang fulfilling sapakiramdam (It felt fulfilling) after finishing PhD in nursing education.<sup>I.174</sup> Fulfilling in a sense nana-achieved moyung goal monamagkaroon ka ng doctoral degree (fulfilling that you have achieved your goal to have a doctoral degree). Hence, a sense of accomplishment has been achieved in completing the highest form of education. <sup>A.52, C.366</sup> Ngayonnakataposnaako, ang sarapsapakirmadam (now that I'm finished, it felt good). Correspondingly, <sup>I.137</sup> finishing the degree as a scholar, it was like I'm in the heaven sasobrangsarapsapakiramdam (it really felt good). The feelings of completing the degree <sup>C.364, .L88</sup> \*expression\* Wooooouhhh!!! Finally! It's like winning! After completing all the requirements, overcoming all challenges, <sup>I.138</sup> all the burdens and sacrifices paid off. Indeed, you reap what you sow, <sup>C.372</sup> wherever you go, sarappakingganipapakilala ka doctor (it's good to hear that you will be introduced as a doctor). <sup>G.75, L.93</sup> Truest to the Doctor of Philosophy it's fun, enjoyable, difficult, really and <sup>C.362</sup> the wait is very worthy one.

<sup>D.155</sup> Ang laki ng nagbago (many has changed), after completing the degree. Accomplishments in PhD brought graduates to a higher level in terms of their professional growth and development, career opportunities, and even responsibilities. With one's growth and development <sup>D.85, K.102</sup> *sapagiging equipped malaki yung nagagawanya* (it plays a great deal when it comes to being equipped). <sup>D.143</sup> I gained enough confidence for me to really stand for our college <sup>D.144</sup> and for the university to achieve our target as an organization. Likewise, <sup>H.182, I.186</sup> I learned how to be more responsible with what I do now. Apart from this, one can also realize that <sup>E.140, A.182, K.106</sup> *syemprenakabuoko ng* (I've gained) friends and connection in PhD. <sup>K.107</sup> You learn to connect and widen your network which is an advantage. On the other hand, with one's career and its financial gains, <sup>J.252</sup> *sangayon* (As of now) I am enjoying the benefit of it <sup>L.97, J.255</sup> because your rank is higher compared to others. <sup>J.256</sup> I was able to pass the accreditation for professorship, since having a doctorate degree is a factor. There are many opportunities and <sup>C.344</sup> lots of opening doors na. For instance, <sup>C.345 H.205</sup> it paved the way for me especially in the grad school. <sup>C.349</sup> Experiences ko din I was invited as speaker and guest lecturer, and finally, <sup>K.108</sup> it adds premium to you as a professional.

To address participants' recommendations for supportive practices in pursuit of Doctor of Philosophy in nursing education, during the interview, they were asked "What are your recommendations to improve the program and support the experiences of PhD students?" Although the curriculum design is perceived as <sup>G.248</sup> good, <sup>G.249</sup> were all relevant, and <sup>A.256, I.151</sup> well recommended, suggestions to improve the program were solicited and considered in this study from their experiences.

1. Starting PhD in nursing education: <sup>H.222, G.259</sup> Discuss the curriculum to the studentson the first day of the class; <sup>G.260</sup> The subject areas, overview of the journey, so that student will realize the journey.
2. Teaching- Learning process: <sup>H.225</sup> Of course, I suggest that it's more of a facilitative learning. <sup>H.226, I.168</sup> We learn from the experiences of our classmates, and professors. <sup>I.166</sup> Additionally, incorporate more of experiential learning for students. <sup>I.169</sup> We should focus more on hands on experiences rather than concept. Additionally, <sup>F.236, 237, G.265</sup> I'm for online courses and face-face courses/ blended learning is a better solution in line with convenience.
3. PhD Mentors: <sup>A.262, F.225, E.232</sup> There should be a screening for professors, <sup>E.235</sup> in terms of not only the qualification <sup>E.236</sup> but the attitude of the teachers should be taken into consideration. <sup>E.237</sup> Also, the school should have a serious student-teacher evaluation (every semester), wherein <sup>E.244</sup> they have go to their students and have an evaluation <sup>E.245</sup> through a paper and a qualitative type and based on the evaluation of the professor <sup>E.246</sup> and then they would be very objective.
4. Curriculum design and review: <sup>B.353</sup> Kung may (if there is) curriculum review <sup>B.354</sup> *dapatmaging* (it should be) regular na protocol or process. <sup>D.206</sup> They should design it in a manner na hindi masyadong madami (not too many requirements). <sup>D.208</sup> Try to re-design it and <sup>L.119, D.216</sup> also consider the situation of the student, <sup>D.217</sup> and consider ano ba talaga yung makakatulong sa student for the long run (what could

really help the student).<sup>H.223</sup> The professors must see to it that all the requirements, all the assignments, a student can accomplish them for 5 Saturdays, that<sup>H.224</sup> they are workable/ doable within the time allotment.

5. Dissertation writing: <sup>J.319, L.121</sup> In dissertation writing, the panel members/ heads must be aligned in terms of the degree. <sup>J.320</sup> Sana consistent sya all throughout (hopefully they are consistent). <sup>L.122</sup> They are also research capable in terms of the topic.
6. Financial Resources: <sup>F.238</sup> Yung paggawa ng research, yung nawawalang part is the word “resources” (in making research, the missing part is the resources). <sup>F.240</sup> Yung pangtustos mo sa research (your expenses in research). <sup>H.228</sup> I wish that their institutions would support them financially, through scholarship programs.

## DISCUSSION

The study seeks to answer the question “What are the lived experiences of graduates in pursuing PhD in Nursing Education?” In the process, the journey of doctorally prepared nurse educators was captured in three major themes: (1) Career jumpstart: unplanned opportunities; (2) Sharpening the Saw: Tales of the Learners; and, (3) Behind the Curtain: The unfolding of a new beginning. Under the 2nd major theme, minor subthemes surfaced, specifically: Forming and Molding: The Learning Cycle, Role juggling: Harmonizing responsibilities, and The Silver Lining: Visible and ulterior push factor. All these themes answered the research question central to the study, each of which tackles about the experiences of participants in their pursuit of Doctor of Philosophy in nursing education.

The demand for more academic nurse educators with doctoral degrees is well documented (Aziato, 2015; IOM, 2011) and as nurses seek to attain this pinnacle of education, it is significant to be reminded that it is more than a degree. Earning it can be challenging as the estimated attrition is deemed 40% to 50% for doctoral program (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008), hence, it is a distinctive educational endeavor. One should recognize that pursuing PhD is a meaningful journey, each stage presents unique opportunities and challenges, it is multifaceted and life-changing series of individual and professional development for nurse academicians or nurse practitioners (Heinrich, 2000). The meaningful journey begins with PhD students’ preconception in enrolling to a doctoral program, either encourage by their administrators, influence by their friends, or by aspiring for career progression, thus, (1) Career jumpstart: unplanned opportunities. This is in conformity with the aim of schools of nursing in developing competent and intellectual nurses and to attain that, it is essential that there are qualified faculty nurses with doctorate degree as the optimal eligibility. Nursing schools should have doctoral graduate educators equipped with knowledge and proficiency to endure and succeed in university. Furthermore, PhD graduate nurses are expected to advance the features of nursing profession & education (Moghadam et al., 2017). It is indicated that nurses who are considering an advanced degree beyond the master’s level of education should commence the decision-making process by considering their professional goals, among other issues (Rice, 2016).

Following the initial steps of doctoral students in their PhD life are their experiences and feats all throughout the journey. The major theme identified is: (2) Sharpening the Saw: Tales of the Learners. Embodied in this are the three minor themes; first, Forming and Molding: The Learning Cycle. It is in this stage of their doctoral journey wherein PhD students can be characterized distinctively, encounter with adult-learning teaching strategies and complex requirements, and, actual application of what was learned in actual life. Role juggling: Harmonizing responsibilities, wherein a doctoral student tries to fulfil various roles such as student, employee (teacher), family man/woman. Finally, The Silver Lining: Visible and ulterior push factor, which refers to the external and internal motivators of students in pursuing PhD until the end of the journey. External motivators include the support from students' significant relationship such as family, friends, peers/ classmates, mentors/ advisers, and organization while their conviction or perseverance amidst the difficulty to finish the degree is classified under internal motivation. The task of earning a PhD is an exercise and struggle in relation to writing skills (Gazza et al., 2013), juggle various functions, balance numerous activities, and cultivate discipline to remain in their endeavors (Jarnagin, 2005). The desire to enhance professional and personal identity was the core influential factor, while challenges included balancing of family, social, work and academic responsibilities. To overcome those challenges, nurses created a system through the use of a range of coping mechanisms, which included their personal attributes as well as other resources available to them (Baldwin, 2013). Institutional influences in graduate student attrition comprise coaching aspect, program setting, and culture (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). Nurses should create effective relationship with their mentors to improve PhD experience (Engler, Austin, & Grady, 2014). Further, as they advance in the course, students should display more control of their tasks and establish better self-esteem (Baptista, 2014). Pursuing doctoral degree can be stressful; numerous students encounter difficulties of both family and work along with academic responsibilities. Hence, support system/ group for students increase accordingly (Lee, 2009).

Another part of the participants' PhD endeavor is their experiences, realizations, and challenges following the completion of doctorate degree. It is elucidated by the major theme: Behind the Curtain: The unfolding of a new beginning. It represents the success stories of each of the participants in completing the doctoral program, which opened new paths and opportunities in their career and profession. Novice or existing doctoral students should be advised that, while beneficial, the journey is neither simple nor smooth (Lee, 2009). The three main elements in completing the program include identifying the program type, devising a strategy, and establishing logical approach in finishing all the tasks (Smith & Delmore, 2007). The completion of doctoral qualifications in a positive light with PhD graduates affirmed their achievements which they believed opened new opportunities and possibilities for advancement of themselves and the profession (Welch, Happell, & Edward, 2010).

The following recommendations are solicited from the participants: (1) PhD graduate mentors to discuss the curriculum to the students on the first day of the class; (2) In terms of learning, it should be more of facilitative and incorporate more experimental learning, wherein students gain necessary values, knowledge, and skills from direct experiences such as simulation online, service learning, internship or international practicum. It obligates them to take part in the experience activity, and at the same time to reflect upon their intellect and how the skills they have obtained can be applied beyond the classroom; (3) There should be a screening for professors and also, the school should have a serious student-teacher evaluation (every semester); (4) There should be a curriculum review, and the professors must see to it that all the requirements are workable/ doable within the time allotment; (5) In dissertation writing, the panel members or heads must be aligned in terms of the degree; (6) Finally, for aspiring PhD students and those who are already in the program to receive support from their institutions such as scholarship grant. These tips are important for PhD students new or currently in the program and to their advisers and mentors who can use these ideas to help prevent student frustration and dropout.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The meaningful journey of doctorally prepared nurse educators commenced by an unplanned decision to pursue higher education with a goal of career progression at the back of their minds. While in the program, their tales are mostly about their classmates who came from various and diverse backgrounds, their description of the fully imposed adult mode of learning and their appreciation of actual application of conceptual learning. Towards the end, completing the degree, unfolding of new opportunities came about.

Nurse educators are encouraged to pursue continuous education up to PhD level and even though the undertaking can be challenging, nurses must use applicable strategies to attain the desired intention. PhD students must be cognizant of the challenges that accompany in learning new things and strive to realize completion of the program. For educators such as graduate school professors, as well as school administrators/program coordinators should be opened to innovative models and strategies such as online classes/ blended learning, consistently create a positive academic environment and efficient academic coaching program to aid students earn the competencies anticipated to them that can promote student success. This implies that graduate professors/ mentors/ advisers should account themselves for such assistance for PhD students.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

It is suggested for the future researchers to conduct complete replication to verify the findings of this study or yield a different result. They may also consider partial replication with modifications such as using a different setting (i.e. expanding locale) or participants like those who are still studying (not yet a degree holder), using a different



qualitative design such as interpretive phenomenology, or different approach in analyzing data such as Colaizzi's (1978) or Giorgi's (1970) methods, and compare results of the study. For the research design, one can use grounded theory in order to develop a model of the "meaningful journey". Moreover, it is recommended that themes formed from this research be subjected to construct validation through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) in order to address the limitations of generalizability.

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