
Research Article

Lived Experiences of Graduate School Students in A Philippine University: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract:

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of graduate school students at the University of Saint Anthony (USANT) in Iriga City, Camarines Sur, Philippines. The study aims to uncover how these students balance academic responsibilities with personal and professional obligations, adapt to online learning, and manage stress, particularly in the context of their motivations for career advancement as DepEd teachers. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five graduate students and analyzed using a phenomenological approach. The findings reveal significant challenges in time management, technological adaptation, and stress management, highlighting the importance of supportive family, peer networks, and faculty. The study emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation, driven by career aspirations, in sustaining students' engagement and perseverance. The results underscore the need for flexible learning environments, robust institutional support, and tailored policies to accommodate the diverse needs of graduate students. The integration of phenomenological and adult learning theories provides a comprehensive understanding of these experiences, offering valuable insights for improving graduate education programs. For schools offering graduate programs, the study suggests enhancing technological infrastructure, academic support services, and flexible scheduling to support their students better.

Keywords: career advancement; graduate students; online learning; phenomenology; stress management

1. Introduction

Graduate education is geared towards making individuals change for the better with the aim of finding the meaning of the knowledge that they are disseminating in their academic endeavors. This research investigates the life experiences of graduate school students at the University of Saint Anthony (USANT) in Iriga City, Camarines Sur, in the Philippines. Compared to their undergraduate students, graduate students carry certain distinct stresses that stem from the fact that most are employees, parents, etc., in addition to being students (Gardner, 2009; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005). The generally urban students in the Philippines, especially those in the Bicol Region, experience cultural, economic, and institutional determinants that affect the pursuit of higher education, specifically advanced degrees.

University of Saint Anthony (USANT) is a private Higher Education Institution (HEI) situated in the Bicol Region, in the city of Iriga. Due to its broad curricula and emphasis on the all-round development of students, USANT presents the best environment for graduate education. The programs offered by the university are geared towards the working population, thus strategically placing the university in establishing the experiences of the graduate students (USANT, n.d.). Because of COVID-19, USANT has adopted online learning and teaching techniques that have greatly expanded the horizons of the student's academic endeavors.

Graduate School students at USANT encounter numerous challenges. In the academic aspect, they struggle with the increased academic load, research requirements, and, thereby, time management difficulties. Individually, most of them are in between their classes, working, taking care of their families, and attending other engagements. The expectations inevitable in graduate education make the students hire efficient ways of operating in their academic pursuits as they make efforts to manage the little time and resources at their disposal, hence suffering from high levels of stress burnout (Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001). The presence of COVID-19 worsens these issues, and transitioning to an online learning environment adds an extra layer of struggles for students having to address technical problems, keep discipline while studying remotely, and often feel loneliness caused by online classes (Garris & Fleck, 2020).

Another factor that affects the exam intensification of graduate students is the socio-economic set-up of the Bicol Region. Additionally, lots of learners originate from the countryside, where they are prone to internet-related challenges and other technological hitches that hamper their engagement in online lessons. This also poses an extra challenge in their education process as they must factor in the costs and time required to guarantee stable connectivity for the online learning tools. Furthermore, graduate learning costs a reasonable amount of money, and many graduated students must find a way to pay for the expenses by working or through scholarships, grants, or assistance from their parents or relatives (Gopaul, 2011).

Many graduate students at USANT learn to be very resilient and innovative. They use various use strategies to cope with their

academics and other related responsibilities. These strategies include, among others, time management procedures, support from friends and families, and support from the institutions and centers. Thus, students' and their families' ability to adapt and search for balance is critical for them to succeed and remain healthy (Tinto, 1993; Weidman et al., 2001). The shift to online learning has also brought innovations at the social level as students share strategies and information needed in virtual learning.

Various resources help graduate students in the institution and support services. Thus, this research will investigate various organizational services like academic advice, counseling, or research services. It will also consider students' views of these resources and the effectiveness of these resources on students' achievements (Bair & Haworth, 2004; USANT, n. d.). Due to COVID-19, this University has changed to online classes, thus calling for the improvement of online support facilities like online counseling and university academic resources.

Consequently, by exploring and analyzing graduate students' lived experiences, universities will be able to construct specific prevention and promotion steps to foster students' success and well-being. This study intends to be of significant value in the current debate on the enhancement of graduate education in the Philippines (Braxton, 2000; Gopaul, 2011). This study's findings can shape policies and programs that support graduate students, especially those from underserved and rural areas.

The cases of graduate school students studying at the University of Saint Anthony reveal useful information about the state of education in the Philippines. By doing so, the study's main purpose is to unpack the hurdles, coping mechanisms, and resources that define students' educational experiences. The findings will not only expand the current knowledge of their experiences but also help in improving policies and practices regarding graduate students and their educational processes.

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored in two key theories: Constructivism and andragogy, which are the two major theories that support the use of collaborative technology strategy. Constructivism is based on the works of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, who explain that knowledge is built up through experience as well as through the interactions of the person with the surroundings (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). This approach is particularly significant for explicating graduate students' experience at USANT because of its focus on context and individual interactions. This is accosted by Malcolm Knowles' Adult Learning Theory, otherwise known as Andragogy, which enlightens educators on the reasons for learning and the show of adult students (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2015). Andragogy focuses on students' initiative in the learning process; colleges and universities place a focus on the utilization of prior experience within educational settings and stress the importance of relevance and use of knowledge in further adult education. Altogether, the frameworks allow for a better understanding of graduate students' experiences at USANT while considering both the construction of experience knowledge and general principles of adult learning.

Thus, understanding the socio-economic context of the University of Saint Anthony and, more so, the Bicol Region helps in establishing the challenges and opportunities experienced by graduate students. As such, this study emphasizes the role of discussing cultural, economic, and institutional contexts when studying the process of graduate students' education. It becomes one of the steps toward developing a more complex understanding of their learning process.

1a. Literature Review

Students' experiences describe what their graduate school challenges are, how they deal with them, and how grad school affects their everyday lives. This review of related literature aims to present phenomenological research that unveils the actual experiences of graduate school students in Philippine universities with a focus on the synthesis of findings discussed in various articles.

In the presented research on the family business involvement of the business graduates in Iloilo City, the following learner outcomes are crucial: group involvement in family business on graduation, maintenance of strong family relations, work and personal conflicts in families, and the impact on family businesses (Leong-on et al., 2023). Female graduate students who were learning online, especially the development communication students during the COVID-19 pandemic period, experienced several hardships academically and personally. This, they said, required institutional support and coping mechanisms to surmount these factors (Collo, 2022).

Six themes noted in the study on the graduate student scholars of Bukidnon State University include availing student-learning experience, positive approaches of faculties and administrators, work-family conflict, and positive work-family balance. Such outcomes highlight the necessity of an encouraging educational context and the difficulties in handling various roles (Dulay & Sumbalan, 2020). In line with the research challenges faced by the faculty researchers in Cagayan Valley, they encountered some problems like heavy workload and lack of mentorship but had enrichment personally and professionally due to writing, presenting, and publishing research papers (Vecaldo et al., 2019).

The respondents in this study, graduates from Philippine Normal University teaching in foreign countries, faced academic and cross-cultural issues. Both of their experiences stressed the role of psychological preparedness, which involves techniques involving function-based and functional social support while transitioning to new academic settings (Bautista, 2022). These are work-family role strain, time demands that affected the students' management of time, and financial problems that the student mothers encountered. Sicam et al. (2021) observed that these student mothers were encouraged by their families and academic communities. Alums of the Philippine School Doha who took college courses overseas experienced difficulties in the areas of acculturation, specifically, homesickness, language, and academic culture. They affected their well-being, academic achievement, and interactions (Mat, 2022). In the same way, the off-campus internet facilities that graduate students used in their research work also had

advantages ranging from convenience to discomfort, which include noise pollution, safety, and privacy (de la Cruz, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the mental health of the population influenced students' lived experiences. First-year college students in a private university in the Philippines stated their coping strategies as ways to turn to family, faith, and finding personal meaning, according to Asiones (2023). The findings about cultural adaptation also pointed out the fact that PFD has a certain extent of impact on non-Filipino students and their adaptation to cultural differences (Keh et al., 2020).

The situational understanding of Filipina teachers confronting the work-life dilemma in Thailand during the pandemic. These issues pointed to the need for internal resources and organizational resources to manage these challenges (Deguma, 2022). Based on the findings, the first clinical placement enacted self-awareness, confidence, anxiety, facilitation, and professional issues among the student nurses, implying that student nurses need improved preparation and assistance in the clinical area (Chesser-Smyth, 2005).

There were adverse factors that struck student mothers hoping to attain higher education while carrying out their parental responsibilities. Burnett and her fellow student mothers' experiences suggest that institutional policies that benefit student mothers include daycare centers within the school compound and stress-relieving activities (Andres, 2021). The issues faced by teacher education students who were reluctant to speak English were related to language, shyness, and pronunciation. The mentioned problems include difficulties with rapid speech and classroom activities; thus, it would be pertinent to recommend further steps to increase oral fluency regardless of the selected topic (Jungco et al., 2022).

Common patterns of the African International Graduate Students (IGSs) included cultural, social, and linguistic barriers concerning African International graduate students in the US. In this manner, instructors, social interaction, and active classroom participation came out crucial in the change process in his adaptation (Aurah, 2014). The male college student's intent on becoming elementary teachers was gendered on a largely feminized career path. The stakeholders' main reason for their persistence was their love for teaching young children and the progressive practice of inclusion (Cahapay, 2021).

Therefore, the struggles in graduate school within the Philippine university setting involve both the student's personal and academic lives as well as their cultural backgrounds. Academic environments, organizational climates, and individual coping mechanisms play a vital role in facilitating these students' student experiences and successful course completion.

2. METHODS

2a. Research Design

The research method used in this study was phenomenological research since it focused on exploring the participants' experiences at the University of Saint Anthony (USANT) in Iriga City, Camarines Sur, Philippines. Phenomenology was especially helpful in studying the way people within a specific context apprehended and interpreted their lived experiences, thus offering profound insight into the participants' lived worlds (Moustakas, 1994). This approach of interviewing aimed at extracting the core of those experiences to compare and analyze similarities and differences in the graduate student's academic experiences. Phenomenology was helpful in formulating a research approach necessary for studying the participants' meanings and experiences; first-person accounts facilitated the understanding of the phenomenological significance of graduate students' educational experiences.

The phenomenological method was firmly founded on the assumption that various lived experiences constituted reality, and so, therefore, analysis of these experiences must involve active immersion in the participants' stances. This approach was useful for the current research since it enabled analysis of both the similarities and differences in the students' experiences of an online learning environment. The pandemic pushed students to adopt online learning, thus changing the direction of education at USANT, and the study aimed at expounding the experience aided by phenomenological research. Thus, this study sought to expand the knowledge in terms of the employees' experiences, factors of stress, and/or support that impacted their performance and well-being in academic facilities (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

2b. Participants

The participants for this study comprised five graduate school students enrolled in different graduate programs at the University of Saint Anthony (USANT). For the participants in the study, purposive sampling was adopted because it targets individuals who have prior access to the knowledge or experience that forms part of the research question, as pointed out by Creswell and Poth (2018). This made the collected information to be detailed and informative to depict the experiences of the students at USANT.

The inclusion criteria for participants were: These participants included: (1) those enrolled in their graduate programs at the USANT, (2) those engaging with the online learning environment, (3) those who provided detailed experiences, and (4) had a minimum of one semester of graduate study under their belt. The exclusion criteria were: (1) students who had not engaged in any online learning in USANT; (2) students who had enrolled in the university for less than a semester; and (3) people who were either unwilling or unable to undergo a detailed interview.

Data saturation was attained when further interviews failed to provide extra major themes and variations of participants' views (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This saturation point provided a clear sign that the proposed data was sufficient to capture the richness as well as the depth of the students' lived experiences.

2c. Data Collection Methods

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Data collection involved adopting in-depth and structured interviews, which were semi-structured. This method provided the chance to consider agendas that the participants considered vital in their lives if the main research question was answered (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The questions incorporated into the interview guide were designed in a semi-structured manner, allowing participants to explain their experiences and views in detail, which enriched the understanding of the research participants' real-life experiences. The interviews were conducted via Zoom because of the prevailing situation, learning mode, and logistical factors. This was conducted during Summer classes of USANT (June-July 2024) A.Y. 2023-2024. All the semi-structured interviews were conducted with the permission of the participants, and each interview was subsequently recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2d. Data Analysis

Data analysis was done phenomenologically in accordance with the useful guide provided by Moustakas (1994). This involved several steps: techniques such as bracketing, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. Some techniques adopted were entailment, that is, excluding one's prejudice and assumptions and concentrating on the experiences of the participants. The phenomenological reduction involved text revival to single out the most crucial statements and themes. Imaginative variation aimed to focus on other meanings and ways of looking at things, while synthesis referred to the need to come up with the consolidated meaning of participants' experiences. Two intercoders were responsible for coding all the reported cases to guarantee intercoders' reliability. They performed the data analysis and coding of the data set, and all the inconsistencies were addressed to yield an agreement on the themes.

3. Results of The Study

Balancing Academic and Personal Responsibilities

Integrating studies, work, and family life was one of the key themes highlighted by the participants who complained of being overwhelmed by their schedules. This theme reflects how to fit received assignments and various obligations into students' daily schedules and the tactics used.

The participants also captured a situation whereby, due to the several responsibilities in different capacities, the participants were overworked. For example, P1 said, *"Sometimes it feels like I lost track of how to balance when to be happy or content. There is work, family, and, of course, there are assignments and research."* P2 also said, *"There is always pressure. Whether it's work during the day or school at night. It's like there is no time for oneself."*

Time management was a significant factor that played out for these students. P2 said, *"Definitely, you need to have a schedule. Me? I write what I need to do for the day as if it is a checklist."* This way of time management and organizing tasks was beneficial for students to have a clear plan and prioritization to meet all the roles and responsibilities they have.

Nevertheless, there were moments when they felt that the expectations of graduate school were very high. P4 said, *"Sometimes, I wish I could just give up, but I find it hard to balance everything, especially when there are deadlines."* The pressure to excel academically comes with immense stress, which students feel when attempting to live up to the expectations of people and to their own expectations.

It would be significant to note that family dues also helped students a lot in handling most of their committed responsibilities. P5 said, *"If it were not for the support that my family gives to me, I don't know how I would make it. They are the ones who take care of the children when I need to finish some paper."* It was evident that families supported the participants emotionally and practically because they needed to study at some point.

Employer flexibility also emerged prominently from the participants. P3 also said, *"Well, at least my principal is supportive. I understand the situation that I am in, which sometimes allows me to adjust my work schedule."* Such understanding from the employers enabled the students to go to their classes and fulfill their assignments without neglecting their duties at work.

However, not all participants liked their organization and the support they had in their working environment. P1 said, *"It is hard when the work is not supportive. There are times you need to be absent to finish the requirements at school but cannot."* This means that employers were not supportive of student workers, which contributed to the respondents' struggles in trying to balance academic demands with the requirements of their jobs.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new challenges into the mix for many students who struggled to find the proper balance between academics and life. P4 said, *"When it became a pandemic, it became even more difficult. Everybody is home, and so you needed to learn how to adjust to online learning while handling the family at the same time."* This shows that shifting to online learning meant that students had to change learning and teaching strategies while dealing with family issues.

The stressors participants encountered are as follows: Strategies that participants came up with to deal with these challenges include: P2 stated, *"I learned how to multitask, I had to cook while reviewing at the same time, which you have to be creative with time."* A mode of creativity that combined efficiency and discipline of time made the students work effectively and meet any responsibilities they have in their lives.

However, participants continued to be motivated to pursue their graduate studies even with the identified challenges. P5 said, *"I know na mahirap, pero worth it naman. Gusto ko maging good example sa mga anak ko na kahit gaano kahirap, kaya basta't magsikap."* This passion and perseverance pointed to no other but the students' resolve in the pursuit of their academic and/or family

dreams despite the difficult circumstances they experienced.

Adaptation to Online Learning

In this case, the change of education delivery through online modality was a big shift of paradigm for graduate students at the University of Saint Anthony (USANT). This theme elaborated on my initial experience with technology, physical contact issues, and changes in learning patterns. The change of place to online learning affected students in terms of learning processes and methods of communication, which can be considered a significant change.

Some of the participants, especially at the onset of the study, had some problems with technological matters. According to P1, he had this to say, “*At first, I struggled a lot. Our internet connection at home was quite unstable; sometimes, the signal was weak.*” P3 also complained, and they were as follows: “*There were many times that I had problems logging in to the class. Sometimes, there was no audio; sometimes, there was no video. It is stressful.*” The technical issues that occurred proved to be a source of stress.

Another social cost the participants noted was the inability to have direct face-to-face contact with people during their working day. P2 said, “*Nami-miss ko yung actual classroom setting, yung may interaction sa mga classmates at professors. Iba talaga kapag online, parang ang layo ng connection.*” Online settings restrict the connection of students with the classroom; physical presence is essential to creating a community and getting students to engage actively in class discussions.

This challenged the participants and forced them to establish new habits and approach on how to operate under online delivery system. P4 said, ‘*Honestly, I needed to change my routine. I created a study area at home so that for a class, I am really focused.*’ Setting a routine at home allowed students to build structure and focus amidst their distractions. He or she continued, “*I do it; what I did was I set a schedule like it’s a class. You must be disciplined because if not, it’s easy to get distracted.*”

It also shifted the learner autonomy and initiative responsibility to students themselves since learning moved to and through the online environment. P3 said, “*Before, it was easy to ask questions to the professor or classmates in the classroom. Now, you need to research yourself more.*” The level of independence helped the students to develop their research and analytical skills more, but at the same time, the workload and stress were also increased.

Nevertheless, the participants noted the following benefits of online classes. For instance, P1 agreed and said, “*I no longer need to travel to school, so I get to save more time and money.*” This choice enabled them to save time traveling to and from school, not to mention the time saved by not needing to attend physical classes. To this statement, P2 concurred, saying, “*It is more flexible with the time; I can manage my schedule better.*”

In particular, the teachers’ initiative played a significant role in a seamless transition to the online format. P4 said, “*Some of the professors are easy to approach and talk to online. Some even provided additional resources and one-on-one consultations.*” Academic facilitators indeed played a positive role as they supported the shift to a flexible learning system. P5 continued, “*Some of my professors still have office hours even when things are online. That really helps when asking questions and clarifying some assignments.*”

Another key component was peer support in the process of adaptation. P3 said, “*We established the online study group. We benefited a lot from knowing that someone is also reviewing and exchanging notes.*” These study groups gave students a sense of feeling that they were not alone in this kind of learning setup. P1 continued, “*Sa group chat namin, we update each other related to course matters. The group chat became an extension of the classroom.*”

Thus, throughout the years, students cumulatively achieved a comfortable and competent level in the usage of online learning platforms. As P2 said, “*At the beginning, it’s really hard, but as time goes by, you get used to it too. Now, I can navigate through the online tools for courses more quickly.*” Consequently, students were able to engage in their courses better and perform their academic tasks more fluently because of the presented familiarity with the tools and resources.

Most of the participants also noted that while change and new opportunities accompanied the transition, most of them preferred face-to-face classes. P5 said, “*Okay naman yung online, pero iba pa rin yung may personal interaction.*” This desire to return to face-to-face classes proved that online education itself has advantages, and students have significantly benefited from face-to-face learning.

Such conversations underscore the flexibility of the USANT graduate students in their attempt to successfully manage the change in the learning environment from face-to-face to online. It is in these elements that they have had to rely on strong technological support, encouraging faculty, and relevant peer networks to enable them to have a successful transformation to virtual education.

Motivations for Pursuing Graduate Education

Concerning the reasons for completing a graduate degree among the participants, most of whom were teachers from the DepEd, it was evidenced that their decision was primarily based on career and individual development. Such motivations were closely connected with intentions of further promotion to a higher level in the sphere of education, enhancement of pedagogical skills, and realization of personal desires in the sphere of education completion.

The promotion proved to be a vital incentive among the employees as a career ladder was identified as a major boost. They understood, as teachers of DepEd, that getting a graduate degree was a major step towards promotion and getting higher ranks in the teaching system. P1 said, “*At DepEd, having a master’s degree is a big factor to be promoted. I really wanted to be a Master*

Teacher or Principal someday, so I enrolled in graduate school.” P4 also stated, *“It is very difficult to be promoted if you do not have a master’s degree. That’s why one needs it to advance in the career.”* It demonstrated compelling reasons that forced teachers to finish graduate school.

Professional development was the other reason, according to the participants. They aimed at improving performance as well as gaining more understanding of how to teach effectively to improve the outcome of the student’s academic status. P2 said, *“I want to learn more to become a better teacher. There are a lot of things I want to learn that can also be taught to my students.”* This perception that there is always more to learn and upgrade in becoming a teacher, in synchronization with the modern approaches to teaching, was also present in other participants’ responses. P5 also said, *“Many things I got from the master’s program that I did not get from the undergrad. The program made me more confident in teaching now.”*

Self-development and self-actualization were other reasons that made the participants study for graduate education. Others viewed it as a chance to get what they had wanted for years and establish to themselves that they could do it in college. P3 said, *“For me, that is an accomplishment already that I did it for myself.”* The desire to earn a master’s degree was already an aspiration of the participants, and the opportunity to continue their education was also one of the main factors that motivated them to pursue graduate programs. Similar to this, P1 expressed the same opinion, saying, *“I am happy that even if I am old already, I can still study or be a student; for me, that is an achievement.”*

The participants also mentioned external pressure as a factor influencing their choice of going for a graduate study. Encouragement from family, friends, colleagues as well as school authorities helped them in this endeavor. P4 said, *“My principal always encouraged me to pursue the master’s degree, saying that it would be a big help for my career.”*

Another factor that influenced DepEd teachers was the likelihood of obtaining more financial rewards, given their current financial situation. The level of education and training received dictated the level of pay and other incentives as well in the case of government employees. P2 said, *“Kapag may master’s degree ka, mas malaki chance na tataas ang sahod. Malaking tulong yun sa pamilya ko.”* This is practicality that the teachers can want: the promotions that came with the increase in the teachers’ pay proved that the time and money spent on education were worth it.

Also, it was found that the participants had a concern about positively influencing their students and the communities. They wanted to enter a higher level of learning to demonstrate and promote the recognition of education. Gaining from this motivation, P5 said, *“I wanted my students to know that education is important. If they see me studying and doing it hard, I want them to be inspired to study well.”*

Another reason was the option of flexibility characteristic for online graduate programs, especially for those who continue working while studying. Options where a learner can attend classes and complete their coursework at their own convenience were ideal to enable them to enroll for further education. P1 said, *“If there is no online class, I cannot juggle between work and school. It is a big help that the schedule is flexible.”* This flexibility helped them to achieve work and school balance as they pursued educational achievements.

Although the participants faced the aforesaid difficulties, they continued to be enthusiastic in their actions. The participants responded to questions related to the rationale of engaging in a master’s program with career-related motives, personal development, monetary rewards, and a passion for encouraging others. As for the last one, P3 said, *“Mahirap pero worth it. Alam ko na sa huli, magbubunga rin lahat ng paghihirap ko.”* These opinions and such determination can be regarded as an indication of their perseverance to achieve the intended goals in their lives and demonstrate that the motivations behind the decision could be varied and different.

These discussions shed light on the multiple and mutually entailing reasons that motivate DepEd teachers to undertake graduate programs. Identifying and comprehending these motivations can help them gain knowledge of what drives them to continue studying and pursuing their careers despite hardships in the teaching profession.

Coping Mechanisms and Stress Management

Participants reported that stress and pressure resulting from their programs, plus their responsibilities as DepEd teachers, were evident. This theme analyzed all the ways through which they kept stress at bay; these include time management practices, exercise regimens, and hobbies, as well as seeking support from one’s social contacts. It was also evident from the participant’s accounts that these strategies are helpful in managing the well-being of these healthcare workers during their academic and career demands. The ability to manage time became one of the most important competencies when it comes to working and learning at the same time. P1 said, *“To keep me on track and to avoid cramming, I write down everything that I need to do for my assignments and the like, and I check each item off as I finish them. This is also my routine at work.”* The present schedules allowed participants to be organized not only at school but also at work. P3 continued, *“There were a lot of deadlines to meet. That’s why time management is crucial here. I made sure that I have time for work, studying, and family.”*

Exercise, moving the body, and other similar activities are widely used to relieve stress. People reported in the study that exercise assisted them in freeing their minds and bringing down levels of stress. P2 described, *“I used to jog before starting work in the morning. It helps me to keep alert the whole day.”* Likewise, P5 stated, *“I joined the online Zumba classes, and just doing Zumba makes me happy and reduces stress.”* Thus, physical activity addresses the pressures arising from academics and work.

Another useful way to prevent and cope with stressful situations, as noted by the participants, was the need to participate in hobbies and artistic activities. P4 said, *“I paint in my free time now. It does not have to be a masterpiece, but it is relaxing because I have a different focus.”* These activities help them to release stress and let out their creativity by transforming the energy they use in studying and working. P1 continued: *“Sometimes, I bake whenever I have the time. It is really nice to have something else to do other than working and studying.”*

The amount and quality of social support offered to the participants created a significant buffer in stress management. Most went to family members, friends, and co-workers for comfort and recommendations. Participant P3 said, *“It helps that there is someone to talk to about what you are going through. Sometimes, as easy as going out with friends lifts your spirit.”* Therefore, having a strong support network helped the participants to feel less alone and deal with the issues they had. P5 continued, saying, *“If I ever find it hard, my partner is always there to provide encouragement, and that was a big help.”*

The part of peers and fellow students appeared to be exceptionally important here. There was always cooperative learning with related members and friendship groups, which helped to assist and encourage each other. P2 said, *“Group chats with other classmates were created. We exchange notes and help with assignments and other requirements. We establish a good friendship.”*

The relationships described were positive as they offered participants academic support as well as a sense of companionship during their processes. P4 said, *“If I have questions that I can’t comprehend, I easily ask my classmates; they are always ready to help.”*

Academic support is also significant in students’ success, and support from the faculties and academic advisors is imperative. Participants were happy, citing the fact that the instructors were more available and attentive because it reduced their load, hence the stress. P1 said, *“Our professors are friendly. If there is something that you want to clarify or get the answer to, you can easily approach them.”* This positive academic environment made dealing with graduate school easier and more pleasant. P3 further intimated, *“My instructors are always available anytime I need them for directions; such support helps me pay much attention to my studies.”*

Another coping strategy used by participants with regard to personal care was the use of stress management methods for the health of their minds. Others included being aware of the stressful activities, learning to relax, and, when necessary, consulting a specialist. P5 said, *“I learned how to meditate in order to manage stress. Even if it is only 10 minutes a day, it makes a big difference.”* Such measures enabled the participants to adopt a healthier and stronger attitude towards the tasks assigned to them. P2 said, *“If it gets really bad, I ask others for help, again with the notion that there is no shame in asking for help.”*

In one way or another, the participants were still very much focused and disciplined in the face of various difficulties. Thus, they began to build various forms of coping mechanisms to help them deal with the stress that had become their everyday reality. P4 agreed and said, *“It’s really hard, but one has no choice but to look for ways to de-stress and not surrender to stress.”* This kind of determination and flexibility showed their willingness to work hard and accomplish academic and career goals.

These discussions also explain the various and viable means by which graduate students at USANT overcome stress. These affect their time to show the need to manage time, engage in exercises and hobbies, have social support, and engage in mental health practices to keep them healthy. The study gives insights into the approaches needed in the management of graduate school amid the pressuring working scenarios as DepEd teachers.

4. Discussion

Balancing academic and personal responsibilities is evident to graduate students of USANT, like others in other Philippine universities, who are facing the problem of role identification. This is similar to the works of Dulay and Sumbalan (2020), who discussed the stress of integrating work, family, and academic life among the graduate student scholars of Bukidnon State University. These students’ conflict with other people and their time-management problems are like those of student mothers and other students with a dual role (Sicam et al., 2021). This blurring of boundaries and the promotion of one’s personal interests may demand effective ways of dealing with such challenges through support from institutions as postulated by Andragogy, whereby learning is applied to real life.

Adaptation to online learning was determined to be a major theme, which addressed the technical and affective issues that USANT graduate students experienced. This corresponds with the research done by Collo (2022) in which development communication students encountered similar challenges during COVID19 pandemic. The shift to online learning required students to change and teach themselves, two of the components of the Andragogy model. The present study highlighted that the availability of technological resources, support from the faculty members, and a favorable learning environment was crucial because, as mentioned in the literature review (Vecaldo et al., 2019), institutional support is crucial.

Thus, the study on motivation for pursuing Graduate Education among DepEd teachers focused on career advancement as the major reason. This motivation is similar to the study of Leong-on et al. (2023), in which business graduates from Iloilo City enrolled for further studies to enhance their careers in family businesses. To the DepEd teachers, it is a requirement to acquire a graduate degree to be promoted or to enhance one’s career in the field of education. This motivation towards professional growth is underlined by Knowles’ Andragogy principles, which state that learning is related to one’s employment and the need to grow and be recognized. The two areas identified as important by the participants were coping mechanisms and stress management, which showed the participants’ resilience and flexibility. These findings are similar to those of various graduate students in different settings, including

the African international graduate students in the US who encountered cultural and social issues (Aurah, 2014). Thus, the skills that help to build up coping mechanisms, including time management, exercise, and seeking support from other people, are crucial for a person's mental health. The papers on the mental health impact of COVID-19 also stress the value of family, faith, and meaning as resources to manage stress (Asiones, 2023).

The literature review in this study shows that supportive academic environments influence the students' experiences in an affirmative way. Research such as those of Dulay and Sumbalan (2020) and Keh et al. (2020) reveal the significance of faculty and institutional support in the enhancement of students' learning experience. This is evident with the USANT students who received faculty and peer support that was easily accessible and attentive. These support systems are very important for students to be able to manage their academic and other life issues.

A similar theme of role and task juggling is also portrayed by the stories of student mothers and teachers working and studying overseas to handle work, academic responsibilities, and family (Bautista, 2022; Sicam et al., 2021). The results from the USANT students support these studies by stressing the importance of specific support policies and flexible learning approaches that can accommodate the needs of graduate students.

With the shift to online learning, there were certain challenges but at the same time, the students' determination was seen. Similar to the situations of the graduate students who are using off-campus internet (de la Cruz, 2022), USANT students also faced technical difficulties and had to come up with learning environments in their homes. This adaptation process shows that institutional support plays a significant part in the success of online learning experiences.

The reasons why DepEd teachers seek to enroll in graduate studies are anchored from their career choice and advancement. This is akin to the student nurses and teacher education students who pursue master's to upgrade their proficiencies and marketability in the job market (Chesser-Smyth, 2005; Jungco et al., 2022). Enrolling for graduate education is a noble quest for self-actualization and enhancement of one's standing in the society and workplace.

Thus, the combination of phenomenology and andragogy allows for an extensive framework for analyzing the essence of graduate students' experiences. Phenomenology describes the essence of what they go through, while Andragogy focuses on the fact that adults are independent learners. This dual framework enables the investigation of the student's experience of their academic journeys, stress management, and motivation in the pursuit of their educational objectives.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The phenomenon of graduate students at the University of Saint Anthony (USANT) is well articulated in this study, especially on the challenges they experience, such as handling academic work while attending to other personal and professional commitments, dealing with online learning, and stress in the pursuit of career growth. Thus, it is possible to state that only the combination of a positive academic setting, proper ways of dealing with stressors, and internal motivation would help achieve academic success and personal development. Thus, the incorporation of phenomenological and adult learning theories, particularly Knowles' Andragogy, has allowed for a thorough analysis of these students' perceptions of reality and their acquisition of knowledge.

The study concluded that the management of multiple roles is a major problem for graduate students, thus requiring effective time management skills besides strong support systems from family, friends, and employers. This was rendered even more difficult with the shift to remote learning, which underlined the importance of stable technology and adaptable learning spaces. The results indicated that career progress was the most important reason for the DepEd teachers to engage in the graduate program to acquire promotion. Stress management and coping strategies like exercising, doing hobbies, and turning to friends and family were useful in maintaining good health.

It is therefore suggested that future studies should employ a larger population and participants from various parts of the country and different universities to encompass all the graduate students in the Philippines. Longitudinal research could also give more information about the changes in these experiences and strategies over time. It is also important for future studies to establish the effects of certain institutional policies and services on students and determine which ones are most effective so that other institutions can replicate them. Moreover, there is a possibility of comparing the two modes of delivery in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of in-person and online learning environments.

Future research may also explore the experiences of the following subsets: the graduate students, the working class in different occupations, parents, and international learners. Learners' and communities' backgrounds and concerns can be known to improve support and educational activities for them. Expanding the focus on the psychological and emotional issues in graduate education, such as mental health problems and personal courage, would enhance the understanding of the phenomenon.

The schools which offer graduate programs should ensure that they embrace their student's needs in the most efficient way possible. This includes offering the right technological support and tools for online learning, as well as changing the class timetable and using other approaches to teaching that will allow the students to balance their studies and other responsibilities. The institutions should expand their academic support services, such as readily available faculty, academic advising, and counseling services, to ensure that the students receive all the help they need.

Having peer mentoring, study groups, and professional development workshops can help create a supportive environment and a sense of community among graduate students. It would also be important for schools to include policies that take care of working

professionals and parents with children in school, such as offering classes in the evening or on the weekends, on-campus childcare, and even scholarship programs. Motivating the faculty to embrace new ways of teaching is beneficial to the student population and ensures that all students are accepted in the institution.

There is a need for policymakers and education leaders to promote policies that would encourage the nurturing of the total graduate student. This entails the provision of money for technology support, tuition, and other fees that help students cut down on their costs. Government agencies, academic institutions, and industry partners can offer professional development, internships, and research that will enrich the graduate education of the students.

Other policies that educational leaders should encourage regarding graduate programs include the culture of improvement. This entails checking the appropriateness of the curricula in relation to the current trends in the market and future trends. Funds for faculty development and the opportunities for faculty to participate in research and other professional activities can also improve the quality of graduate education. It is, therefore, imperative to ensure that all graduate programs are open to all students, irrespective of their status in society.

Therefore, the study of the graduate students' experience in USANT shows that they have positive academic environments, ways of dealing with stress, and intrinsic motivation to succeed. Thus, if the mentioned challenges and strengths are taken into consideration, educational institutions will be able to offer better and more diverse, adaptable, and supportive graduate programs for students to succeed.

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