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Lived Experience of Parenting Nurses Pursuing a Doctorate: A Phenomenological Inquiry

Jaimee Feldstein
Walden University

Walden University

College of Health Sciences

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Jaimee Feldstein

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Review Committee
Dr. Leslie Hussey, Committee Chairperson, Nursing Faculty
Dr. Cynthia Fletcher, Committee Member, Nursing Faculty
Dr. Marilyn Losty, University Reviewer, Nursing Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2020

Abstract

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MSN, Walden University, 2012

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

The need for more doctoral prepared nurses is evident; data indicate that less than 1% of nurses hold doctoral degrees, yet, little is known about student persistence in doctoral nursing programs. Even less is known about doctoral nursing students navigating an online learning environment while balancing parenthood. The purpose of this phenomenological study, guided by Rovai's composite persistence model, was to explore the embedded meanings in the experiences of parenting nurses pursuing their doctoral degrees at an online university. Ten female parenting nurses who completed a doctorate within the last 2 years were interviewed and shared the key factors that helped or hindered their ability to persist and the meaning they attached to their individual experiences. Content analysis revealed 4 themes of managing multiple roles, acknowledging the challenging journey, overcoming challenges, and experiencing fulfillment. Future research should include larger, more diverse samples of participants, including the exploration of gender differences on the experiences of parenting nurses pursuing their doctorate. Finding suggest that when students feel supported at an academic, social, and emotional level, and graduates can model lifelong learning to their children and their nursing peers. Understanding the experiences of parenting doctoral nursing students can help universities take a progressive approach to providing resources for this growing student population and better meet their needs, thereby improving the student experience and retention rates in doctoral nursing programs.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my father who always encouraged me to further my education. He instilled in me the unwavering value of education and emphasized that no one could ever take that away from me. I wish he could have seen this milestone come to fruition. To my mother, my best friend, who always expressed her faith in my abilities and pride in my accomplishments throughout my lifetime. I could not have done this without you! To my husband and children, I love you. Nobody has been more important to me in the pursuit of this degree than you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The growing need for nurse scientists and leaders in clinical and academic settings led to the call to double the number of doctorally prepared nurses in the United States by 2020 (Institute of Medicine, 2011). The need for more nurses prepared at the highest education level is evident globally with statistics indicating that less than 1% of nurses hold doctoral degrees (Feeg & Nickitas, 2011). To date, 31 countries offer doctoral nursing education, and the total number of programs has increased from 286 to 333 programs between 2005 and 2014 (Ketefian, Davidson, Daly, Chang, & Srisuphan, 2005; Kim, Park, Park, Khan, & Ketefian, 2014).

In the United States, the number of doctoral nursing programs has increased from 101 to 132 in the last 10 years (Ketefian & Redman, 2015). The increase in programs and graduates in the United States is promising; however, it is overshadowed with growing concerns about student attrition (Volkert, Candela, & Bernacki, 2018). A national longitudinal study from the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS; 2009) revealed attrition rates for all doctoral programs in the United States was approximately 43%. To develop methods to combat attrition rates in nursing doctoral programs, it is critical to understand the multiple factors that may affect intent to leave among current doctoral students (Volkert et al., 2018). Conversely, a deeper understanding of the experiences of students who persisted in their programs may also shed some light on how to best support this student group (Volkert & Johnston, 2018). In Chapter 1, I will present the problem,

rationale for the study, my research questions, and the key terms, and a brief review of the literature.

Background of the Study

The need for highly qualified nurses to enter the workforce is at a critical point due to the growing healthcare needs amidst a population explosion, an aging population, and an infrastructure already taxed by limited educated staff and strained resources (Jeffreys, 2015). Further compounding the problem is the lack of nurse educators with formal preparation in curriculum and teaching who are equipped to meet the educational and holistic needs of the modern undergraduate nursing student (Jeffreys, 2015). The growing concern of dwindling nursing student numbers in graduate and doctoral education is less highly publicized than the push for nurses completing undergraduate education and successfully obtaining licensure. Jeffreys (2015) described the use of a panoramic lens to provide a comprehensive approach to understanding student retention and success at all levels of nursing education. However, the focus needs to shift toward bringing attention and action to student retention and success (Jeffreys, 2015) in graduate and postgraduate level nursing education.

The primary goals of doctoral programs in nursing education, similar to doctoral education in other disciplines, are to prepare research scientists who will advance knowledge in their discipline and to prepare educators to teach the next generation of nurses. However, the nursing profession has fallen short on both goals (Ellenbecker, Nwosu, Zhang, & Leveille, 2017). With less than 1% of nurses holding doctoral degrees (Feeg & Nickitas, 2011), the profession is facing a severe shortage of doctorally prepared

nurses to design and conduct research and fill faculty positions (Smeltzer et al., 2016). Fewer than half of the current nursing faculty employed by colleges and universities have earned a doctorate. This number is inconsistent with other disciplines in the academic setting where the doctorate is considered a standard entry-level requirement (Halter, Kleiner, & Hess, 2006). The shortage can be attributed to several factors unique to the discipline of nursing. Unlike many disciplines deeply rooted in the sciences and humanities since 18th century Europe, nursing as a discipline was only recently recognized as a producer of scientific knowledge (Birks, Ralph, Cant, Tie, & Hillman, 2018). Additionally, qualified applicants are not being accepted into graduate and doctoral programs due to faculty and clinical education site shortages (Rosseter, 2019). The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) has expressed frustration in the organization's inability to produce a larger pool of potential nurse educators due to this shortage of faculty and clinical education sites; in addition, higher compensation and increasing job competition from clinical sites where positions do not require a doctorate are luring nurses away from academia (Rosseter, 2019).

Furthermore, the demographics of nurses earning their doctorate differ from other disciplines. Bednash (2015) posited that nurses tend to earn their doctorate later in their careers, leaving less time to develop a research career. Ketefian and Redman (2015) theorized that nurses who choose to pursue their doctorate are older than doctoral students in other disciplines, they have financial and family responsibilities, and unlike most other doctoral students, the majority continue to work full-time and study part-time (Halter et al., 2006). Most importantly, multiple role responsibilities have been the single

most detracting factor in the doctoral student experience, which has led to higher student attrition rates among students who were parents compared to those who were not (Lee, 2009).

This factor is of great concern. Students who are parents face the dilemma of combining parenthood and studying without compromising the activities of either (Behboodi Moghadam, Ordibeheshti Khiaban, Esmaeili, & Salsali, 2017). The traditional perspective is that parenthood and educational responsibilities cannot be met at the same time by one person and that parenthood is not supported as a challenge by universities (Behboodi Moghadam et al., 2017). These individuals experience unpleasant emotional pressures and receive negative feedback from the academic setting, implying that education should be the priority. They may face shaming and be labelled as nonproductive, resulting in avoidance and students hiding their parenting roles (Vyskocil, 2018). This prejudice also results in a discriminatory allocation of educational resources to other students (Behboodi Moghadam et al., 2017).

There is growing concern among educational researchers that the rate of attrition in doctoral programs is reaching unacceptably high levels, with estimates as high as 50%, and with drop-out rates in online programs being 10–20% higher than in non-online programs (Cauble, 2015). Many new doctoral programs in nursing have been established since 2000 in response to the nursing shortage (AACN, 2014), with a variety of program options, including entirely online programs (Ellenbecker & Kazmi, 2014) to allow students enhanced flexibility and time management. The enhanced flexibility of online learning is particularly critical to students who are parents. Gibbs (1998) narrated the

experience of a mother to three young children pursuing her MBA. She predicted that, as more mothers enroll in higher education, the norm will become students logging into their online courses in between coming home from work, cooking dinner, and putting the children to bed as opposed to the idyllic image of students studying under the oak trees of a quaint campus. Ellenbecker, Nwosu, Zhang, and Leveille (2017) reported that an understanding of online doctoral program characteristics and educational experiences was limited despite the growing popularity and acceptance of this education delivery method. Lyke and Frank (2012) demonstrated equal learning outcomes and student performance of those in the online environment compared to their counterparts in the traditional classroom. Fully online educational programs have evolved with increasing rigor and recognition; Lyke and Frank (2012) emphasized the continued need for policies promoting distance education and continuing to make learning outcomes and student satisfaction in this learning context are research priorities.

Persistence is an important measure of success for individual students and institutions of higher learning (Cauble, 2015). Current theories of persistence most often begin with the Tinto model. Tinto's model has been extensively used in the literature to describe undergraduate student persistence (Mancini, Ashwill, & Cipher, 2015). Tinto's (1993) model of institutional departure is based on the main assumption that two systems exist: academic and social. Tinto (1993) suggested that those students who successfully integrate into both the academic and social systems of an institution are those who persist. Tinto adopted the views of the Van Gennep's social anthropology work on the rites of passage in tribal societies to describe the longitudinal process of students'

integration into the societies of their academic institutions (Aljohani, 2016). Students

pass through three stages in their relationships: separation, transition, and incorporation.

A student enters college with some goals and commitments. The student's pre-entry

attributes—including family background, skills and abilities, and prior education—shape

these initial goals and commitments. The student's experience at college (academic and

social integration) will continuously modify (weaken or strengthen) the initial level of

goals and commitments. The subsequent (modified) level of goals and commitments

affects the student's decision to stay or leave college (Tinto, 1993).

However, little is known about student persistence in graduate nursing programs

and even less about online graduate (Cauble, 2015) and doctoral-level nursing students

(Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). The experiences of online doctoral students are complicated

on both personal and professional levels. Understanding the perceptions of online

learning experiences of doctoral students is pivotal to the development of plans to support

this growing population (Akojie, Entrekin, Bacon, & Kanai, 2019). Researchers have

sought to identify key student characteristics of those who persist (Alhassan, 2012;

Artino, 2012; Underwood, 2002), and educational theorists have attempted to develop

models that might be useful in predicting doctoral persistence. Despite the identification

of multiple predictors of persistence, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and GPA,

Tinto (1993) called for a range of studies that empirically record the scope and the

varying experiences of individuals' academic persistence process. Studies are needed that

identify factors that influence persistence of graduate nursing students (Underwood,

2002). Aligning with Tinto's call for further in-depth observation and documentation of

this phenomenon, I conducted a qualitative phenomenological research study to

understand the lived experiences of parenting among online doctoral nursing students.

Problem Statement

Student attrition is a multifaceted issue with no single factor highlighted as a key

component to a student's demise (Griswold, 2014; Jeffreys, 2015). Nursing student

attrition is ranked as one of the highest concerns in nursing education (Griswold, 2014;

Pryjmachuk, Easton & Littlewood, 2009). The literature exploring this phenomenon of

increasing nursing student attrition rates contributes to the increasing inquiry about

closing the gap between attrition and retention. Many universities have sought to improve

student access to education and have focused on academic issues associated with attrition

(Griswold, 2014). Access to higher education across all disciplines has increased over the

past 40 years (Brock, 2010). However, the success rate of students and student

persistence have not increased (Farley, 2017). Although high attrition rates at all levels of

nursing education is not a new phenomenon, the problem has not been resolved

(Buerhaus, Skinner, Auerbach, & Staiger, 2017; Griswold, 2014; Harris & O'Rourke,

2014; Shelton, 2012). Despite the seemingly easier access to education through online

programs, the use of this education modality does not directly translate to degree

completion (Farley, 2017).

Research on students in higher education contexts to date has largely overlooked

topics relevant to doctoral students' mental, physiological, motivational, and social

experiences (Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, & Hubbard, 2018). Notwithstanding doctoral

students' continued reports of perceived or actual lack of social or academic support as a

deterrent to program completion, there remains a limited understanding of the impact of these concerns (Baker, 2010; Cameron, Roxburgh, Taylor, & Lauder, 2011; Popkess & McDaniel, 2011). Personal responsibilities (job and family) are the highest detracting factor to academic persistence (Farley, 2017; Griswold, 2014). Threats to doctoral students' well-being are plausible as they progress in their programs while managing financial struggles and maintaining a social life/family responsibilities (Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, & Hubbard, 2018). My study facilitates discussion of these notable issues affecting the doctoral experience and contributes to a student-centered approach to addressing student retention in doctoral nursing education. Institutions of higher learning that are concerned with the academic success of doctoral students but are equally concerned with maximizing students' well-being in the process of achieving a doctoral degree will contribute to positive social change (Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, & Hubbard, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

Through the lens of a persistence model (Rovai, 2002), the purpose of my study was to explore the embedded meanings in the experiences of parenting nurses pursuing their doctoral degrees at an online university. The study serves to further the current body of knowledge of persistence in doctoral education. The results of this study have the potential to provide descriptions of how individuals can make meaning of the combined experiences of being a parent while pursuing a doctorate in nursing.

Despite the variety of research in academic persistence, few studies have been conducted to examine persistence in the context of nursing education at the doctoral level

(Cauble, 2015; Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). Even within studies of academic persistence in doctoral education, few researchers examine doctoral students' experiences in their own words. Research into doctoral nursing students' lived experiences is minimal and there is dearth of rich, descriptive data as these students have not been invited to describe their doctoral journey in their own words. Using a phenomenological framework, I sought to examine the lived experiences of parenting nurses pursuing their doctorate at an online doctoral program and attempted to reveal the meanings of persistence to their academic journey.

Research Questions

The guiding question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of parenting nurses who are pursuing their doctorate at an online university?

In addition, the following interview questions were used to reveal the experiences of the participants:

1. What are the lived experiences of parenting nurses who are pursuing their doctorate at an online doctoral program in North America?

2. What helped or hindered parenting doctoral nursing students' persistence?

3. What meanings do parenting doctoral nursing students attach to their experiences as doctoral candidates?

4. How does the understanding of the meaning of student experiences contribute to nursing's knowledge of persistence in doctoral education?

Theoretical Foundation

Rovai's (2003) composite persistence model (CPM) was used as the theoretical framework for my study. Rovai's model is based on the integration of two persistence models from Tinto and from Bean and Metzner (Cauble, 2015). Rovai's CPM builds on Tinto's earlier work to explain attrition of nontraditional students by introducing a psychological component not found in Tinto's model. Adult (nontraditional) students are less interested in college social support and are more focused on academic structure, and they indicate that their social supports are predominately from outside the academic setting, including family and peers (Cauble, 2015). While Tinto's model has been extensively used in the literature to explore student retention and persistence (Ishitani, 2016) at all levels of education, Bean and Metzner's assumption of the nontraditional student was more relevant to the adult learner in an online program. Rovai's CPM incorporates a student's characteristics (academic skills and internal factors) as a predictive tool to explain persistence (Cauble, 2015). This assumption is congruent with my study's research design to explore the lived experiences of doctoral nursing students as they persist to successfully complete a nursing program. More detail on Rovai's CPM is provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative phenomenology research method to allow participants to tell their stories in their own language and voice (Chandler, Anstey, & Ross, 2015). Previous research was limited in studies that used a phenomenological orientation to explore persistence in the context of online doctoral nursing education and parenthood.

Phenomenological approaches are appropriate for learning about the meanings and experiences of individuals for which a minimal amount is known or within areas that are laden with assumptions (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; van Manen, 2014). Without hearing from doctoral nursing students, there is the potential for misinformation or false attributions regarding their experiences.

Golde (1994; 2005) has suggested that because much of the current research has been purely quantitative in nature, attrition has been conceptualized as a solitary event rather than the consequence of a dynamic process. In order to understand why students persist rather than withdraw from doctoral programs, it is essential to examine and understand the ways degree progress is influenced by students' interpretations of their doctoral experience. To date, student voices, particularly those who are parents and pursuing a doctoral degree online, are noticeably absent from this research. Statistical data provides a baseline for understanding what is known and what is not known about degree production but does not address the question of why students are withdrawing from their programs or, conversely, what facilitates their persistence. The absence of important statistical data can provide a window for researchers to understand the issues that might be worthy of further investigation.

Definitions

The following terms are defined to clarify the research question and details of the study.

Academic/student success: Successfully reaching doctoral candidacy or program completion (including dissertation; Kennel, 2018).

All but dissertation (ABD): A student who has finished coursework and has passed comprehensive exams but has yet to complete and defend the doctoral dissertation (Schuman, 2014).

Dissertation: A formal writing requirement of an original contribution to knowledge and research for a doctoral degree (Glossary of United States Educational Terminology, 2018).

Doctoral candidacy: When a student reaches candidacy once all required coursework is complete and the student has passed the doctoral comprehensive exam (Schuman, 2014). The doctoral degree is the highest award a student can earn for graduate study.

Parenting: In its simplest form, the process or state of being a parent. Chan (2004) identified several characteristics that outline the process of parenting. Chan acknowledged that parenting becomes a choice in life and that it is a lifelong commitment. Chan suggested that parenting responsibilities include caring for a child's physical and psychological well-being. Lastly, parenting can involve the whole family.

Persistence: Sustained involvement in an activity (Constantin, Holman, & Hojboti, 2012). This is especially true for academic persistence; an individual demonstrates persistence as a renewal of their commitment (Raman, 2013) and/or an intensification of effort in the face of obstacles (Kennel, 2018). Furthermore, doctoral persistence is demonstrated when a student achieves their goal of earning a terminal degree (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

Student attrition: The departure from all forms of higher education prior to completion of a degree (Johnson, 2015).

Assumptions

The first assumption was that all participants wanted to persist and finish their doctoral degree. Furthermore, I assumed that all participants responded to the interview questions honestly and accurately. Lastly, I assumed that all participants used their self-perception when answering questions during the interview. As a final point, several broader assumptions underlie my study: (a) doctoral nursing student retention is a priority concern of nurse educators worldwide, (b) student retention is a dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon and is influenced by the interaction of multiple variables, (c) environment and professional integration are key influencers, (d) both psychological and academic outcomes influence persistence, and (e) student retention is not a dichotomous (pass/fail) concept (Jeffreys, 2015). Jeffreys considered all these assumptions in the development of a model highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon of interest in this study and the critical need to support doctoral nursing students through a proactive and holistic approach to retain them. Furthermore, these assumptions are necessary to explain the interaction between the multiple variables influencing student persistence and ultimately the quality of the overall doctoral education journey as perceived through the eyes of a student. These assumptions also support the choice of qualitative methodology and the specific student population in my study.

Scope and Delimitations

Research studies are needed to examine why parenting students stay in their nursing programs (Farley, 2017). A variety of factors influence the complex phenomenon of student persistence. The literature identifies multiple important factors that lead to student success, including faculty support and motivation (Farley 2017). Self-determination theory has been previously used to explore this phenomenon; however, motivation alone does not guarantee persistence. Both external and internal factors contribute to student success (Jeffreys, 2015), and motivation cannot be examined in isolation. While personal academic factors (i.e., study skills, class schedule, etc.) and institutional interaction and integration factors (i.e., club membership, academic advising, student resources, etc.) play an important role in the overall student experience (Farley, 2017; Jeffreys, 2015; Rovai, 2002), those factors are inherently different for an online student compared to one in a traditional brick-and-mortar program. These factors will vary considerably in the context of my study, and therefore, my focus will be toward environmental factors like financial status, family emotional support, family responsibilities, employment responsibilities, childcare arrangements, etc. (Farley, 2017; Rovai, 2002) described in the literature as impacting student success and ultimately persistence. These environmental variables continue to be perceived by students as the most influential (Kennel, 2018).

Doctoral persistence has been explored focusing on specific populations, including women (Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, & Castro, 2011; Mansfield, Welton, Lee, & Young, 2010; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Lunde, 2017; Schmidt & Umans, 2014;

Underwood, 2002), international students (Evans & Stevenson, 2011), specific

disciplines such as engineering (Yang, Wang, Zhang, & Weidman, 2017) and education

(Blanchard, 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017), specific student populations

including ethnically diverse or visible minorities (Veal, Bull, & Miller, 2012), and

students who have withdrawn (Golde, 2005; Perry, Bowman, Care, Edwards, & Park,

2008). Research has generally focused on implications for doctoral faculty and programs,

including improved program outcomes (Golde, 2005), rather than on implications

specific to prospective or current doctoral students (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw,

2012). Additionally, few researchers have looked at student persistence in online

programs or persistence in students who have completed online programs (Yang,

Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017). My study was situated within fully online doctoral nursing

programs and examined students' actual completed journey, focusing on persistence, not

prediction factors, via student reflections.

I delimited this study to focus on a purposeful sample of parenting nurses who are

students enrolled in a fully online doctoral program. Consequently, the implications and

recommendations discussed were not transferrable to doctoral candidates in other

disciplines or other learning environments. Furthermore, the focus of my study was on

students who persisted by successfully defending their dissertation and/or completing

their final capstone project rather than non-completers. This excluded representation from

those who began a doctoral degree but had yet to reach this milestone, were ABD, or

withdrew.

My study was also delimited by my choice to use a qualitative phenomenological approach. The methodology of phenomenology aligned with the purpose of my study to contribute to the understanding of academic persistence in this context and provide a voice to the study's participants. Other qualitative methodologies, including grounded theory or ethnography, would have been less suitable and would not yield the same richness of descriptions. The purpose of grounded theory is to build a theoretical model (Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa, & Varpio, 2015), and my intent was to build on the earlier works of theoretical models, including Rovai (2002), and validate their meaningfulness in the context of doctoral nursing education. Furthermore, I invited participants to my study following completion of their degree. Rather than immersing myself (Teherani et al., 2015) and following alongside them during their doctoral journey, individuals provided a retrospective account of their experiences, which is incongruent with ethnographic methodology.

Qualitative research stems from a fundamentally different set of beliefs or paradigms than those that underpin quantitative research (Teherani et al., 2015). Quantitative research is based on positivist beliefs that there is a singular reality; however, this belief does not reflect the unique experiences of individuals nor account for environmental and individual differences that can influence this reality. Based on the literature, there is no single reality to the doctoral journey, and therefore I did not choose quantitative methodology for my study. The qualitative approach with the use of individual interviews further supported the individualized nuances of the phenomenon of interest.

Limitations

I sought to understand only the experiences of a sample of nurses who were parents pursuing their doctoral degree at an online university, thereby potentially limiting transferability to brick-and-mortar programs or other student demographics (i.e., those who were not parents to minors but may have other family commitments, etc.). Accessibility to doctoral nursing students was limited to the willingness and availability of students as well as the reach of social media to invite potential participants through student-created and -led Facebook pages for doctoral students. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I personally conducted all the interviews to ensure consistency among the data. This presented one significant limitation in part to my proximity to the study participants and the phenomenon being explored. As the researcher, I was a doctoral nursing student at the same university as prospective study participants. However, due to the non cohorted structure of the program, my personal connection to any of the program graduates was limited. Finally, I sought to address researcher subjectivity. One strategy that I employed to minimize my bias to the phenomenon was to intentionally identify and purposefully set aside (i.e., bracket) my own experience. I journaled my experiences as a doctoral student prior to data analysis to suspend my personal judgment about the phenomenon (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

Significance of the Study

The future of healthcare is a global concern because of the increasing nursing shortages endangering safe patient care. Several strategies have been implemented to

improve the nursing shortage crisis with the largest cited effort being increasing enrollment in schools of nursing (Halter et al., 2006). However, qualified applicants are being turned away from nursing programs due to nursing faculty shortages. The mismatch between supply and demand is expected to intensify as doctorally prepared faculty begin to retire with not enough prepared faculty to take their place. Furthermore, fewer than half of the current nursing faculty employed by colleges and universities have earned a doctorate, and this number is inconsistent with other disciplines in the academic setting where the doctorate is considered a standard entry-level requirement (Herman, 2015). Doctoral education provides the pedagogical foundation for future faculty, and the quality of undergraduate nursing programs hinges directly on the success of doctoral programs.

As student demographics continue to shift in higher education with increasing numbers of nontraditional students, particularly in the context of online learning, a greater understanding of the unique needs of these students is essential to higher education administrators and policy makers to respond to their needs through student support services (Underwood, 2002). If the system were more responsive to the needs of doctoral students who have personal/familial, economic, and occupational challenges, these students would be far more likely to persist in their doctoral programs and complete their doctorate (Underwood, 2002). Lastly, this student population has not been addressed in scholarship, specifically in the context of online program delivery. Understanding students' beliefs about factors that helped or hindered their persistence will form the foundation for strategies to increase their graduation rate (Underwood, 2002).

Persistence is an important component in educational success. Ward-Smith, Schmer, Peterson, and Hart (2013) defined *persistence* as both a characteristic and an attitude that allows a student to "master content, achieve their educational goal, and experience self-satisfaction" (p. 49). Persistence can be positively influenced by the academic institution through educational interventions like feedback and social connectedness. Despite a positive and supportive learning environment, a student may not persist as a result of factors beyond the realm of any educational intervention. Conversely, another student may persist despite opposition or inopportunity. In this study, I sought to explore and understand persistence from the perspective of the students rather than from the lens of an academic institution. My findings may help to uncover individual attributes and precursors of persistence that serve to protect student resilience (Ward-Smith et al., 2013) in the academic setting. The concept of persistence is applicable and relevant to academia and to society. Within nursing, academic persistence has an economic impact for academia through loan repayment and scholarship programs, as well as larger implications for the availability of future nurses (Kennel & Ward-Smith, 2017). The findings from my study have the potential for positive social change by designing academic programs with persistence in mind and enhancing educational outcomes and the student experience through early identification of at-risk students (Cipher, Mancini, & Shrestha, 2017).

Summary

Doctoral attrition is a complex and multifaceted issue. Approximately 50% of doctoral students do not graduate, and attrition in the distance education environment is

estimated to be 10% to 50% higher than in the traditional setting (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2011). High attrition rates among doctoral nursing students further exacerbate the problem of faculty shortages. Furthermore, the insufficient availability of nursing faculty has a significant impact on the overall supply of the nursing workforce (Dean, 2017). While the issue of retention is not a new problem in higher education (Farley, 2017; Merkley, 2016), research focused on why students stay versus why they left is an innovative approach. In the following chapter, I review the current literature that supports this trend. A multilevel supportive approach to student needs is necessary to promote retention and academic success. Creating and sustaining a supportive environment is critical (Veal et al., 2012); doctoral students require support at an academic level, but social and emotional supports must be recognized as equally important factors in contributing to their success. I present a detailed description of the theoretical framework and review of the literature in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Currently, there is an exceptional lack of qualitative research documenting the lived experiences (Mansfield et al., 2010) of nursing doctoral students. The purpose of my study was to explore the embedded meanings in the experiences of parenting nurses pursuing their doctoral degrees at an online university. My findings can be used to inform policy and program development and to understand the implications of such experiences for strategies and programs intended to support this student population.

North America continues to experience a critical shortage of registered nurses (Cohen, 2011). The reasons behind this shortage include factors such as population, increased life expectancy, need for advanced nursing skills to care for an aging population, an aging nursing workforce, a decline in interest in nursing as a career, and a lack of full-time master's and doctorally prepared nursing faculty (Cleary, Bevill, Lacey, & Nooney, 2007; Haddad, Annamaraju, & Toney-Butler, 2020; Shelton, 2012). To address the nursing shortage and the deficit of doctorally prepared faculty, Cohen (2011) asserted the collective responsibility of the profession to support doctoral nursing students. Given the rising shortage of qualified faculty, the overall doctoral completion rates estimated between 20% and 50% are concerning (AACN, 2005; Edwardson, 2004; Smith & Delmore, 2007; Tinto, 1993). Researchers have explored the doctoral experience, and the journey to the doctoral degree continues to be described in the literature similarly: exhausting, stressful, difficult, demanding, overwhelming, and daunting. It is reasonable to explore why the process is considered painful and an

experience in which only the brightest and most persistent survive (Kerlin, 1997; Lee, 2009). Nursing program administration needs to reexamine the reasons for attrition and work with students to create an environment conducive to learning and the high level of intellectual learning expected (Cohen, 2011). In this chapter, I provide a critical review of empirical literature, delineating key variables (Mansfield et al., 2010) found to impact doctoral student persistence. I provide a detailed overview of Rovai's CPM and integrate the literature and this theoretical framework that form the basis for my study.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted a literature search using the search engines of CINAHL, PubMed, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. Full-text articles were identified with keywords: *persistence, doctoral persistence, doctoral student retention, attrition, nursing persistence, PhD, DNP, doctoral education, doctoral nursing, doctoral experience, distance education, parenthood* and *motherhood.* The search was narrowed to full-text articles written in English, and the abstracts were reviewed for relevance. Articles pertaining to doctoral persistence were reviewed, and the reference lists were also examined. A review of the literature from health behavior psychology, education, medicine, and nursing offered a balanced view. Doctoral students were the focus of this review and each keyword was also paired with *nursing*. The articles chosen contained definitions of persistence as it pertained to doctoral students, exploration of the doctoral experience, and/or suggestions for improving doctoral program completion rates.

Theoretical Foundation

The theory that guided my study was Rovai's (2002) CPM. CPM was developed by Rovai (2002) to explain persistence in distance education online programs. Rovai's model focuses on reasons why students continue in their studies. The model incorporates student characteristics and skills in addition to external factors and internal influences that impact students' decision-making and intent to remain or leave their program of study.

Researchers have examined reasons for student attrition and suggested several conceptual models to describe the process. Tinto's student integration model was a pioneering work that influenced subsequent models (Lee, Choi, & Kim, 2013). Tinto believed that a student was likely to persist if they could successfully integrate academically and socially. This model was derived from the analysis of traditional undergraduate students and could potentially be less applicable to my study because it does not address the uniquely different context of online learning versus the traditional brick-and-mortar education experience. Furthermore, despite Tinto's (1993) suggestion as to the similarities between undergraduate and graduate theories of persistence, the maturational differences on entry and the differing nature of commitment demanded by baccalaureate and doctoral degrees would make it unlikely that undergraduate models of student retention, based on transition from first to second year, would provide an appropriate lens for understanding doctoral degree progress and persistence.

Subsequent to Tinto, Bean and Metzner developed the student attrition model focusing on nontraditional students. Bean and Metzner defined individuals as

nontraditional students based on three characteristics: age (older than 24), living situation

(residing off campus), and enrollment status (attending school part-time). They identified

five factors that influenced students' decisions to drop out: (a) background variables (i.e.,

age), (b) academic variables (i.e., study habits), (c) environmental variables (i.e.,

finances), (d) academic outcomes (i.e., GPA), and (e) psychological outcomes (i.e., goal

commitment). The student attrition model largely emphasized the role of the external

environment, including excessive workload and financial strain, as the reason for students

leaving their program of study. Rovai's (2003) CPM (see Figure 1) is the most updated

model, and Rovai sought to find a compromise between Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's

models. Rovai proposed a synthesis of the two models consisting of four components:

two required elements prior to admission (student characteristics and student skills) and

two after admission (external factors and internal factors). Student characteristics include

age, ethnicity, gender, intellectual development, and academic performance and

preparation. Student skills include computer and information literacy, time management,

reading and writing skills, and computer-based interaction. Following admission, external

factors influencing an individual's persistence decision include finances, hours of

employment, life crises, outside supports and encouragement, and family responsibilities.

The internal factors identified were derived from Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's earlier

models and include social and academic integration, goal commitment, and commitment

to the institution and learning community. The student's needs include study habits,

levels of stress, satisfaction, and commitment, program fit, accessibility to services like

advising, program clarity, and interpersonal relationship (Rovai, 2003).
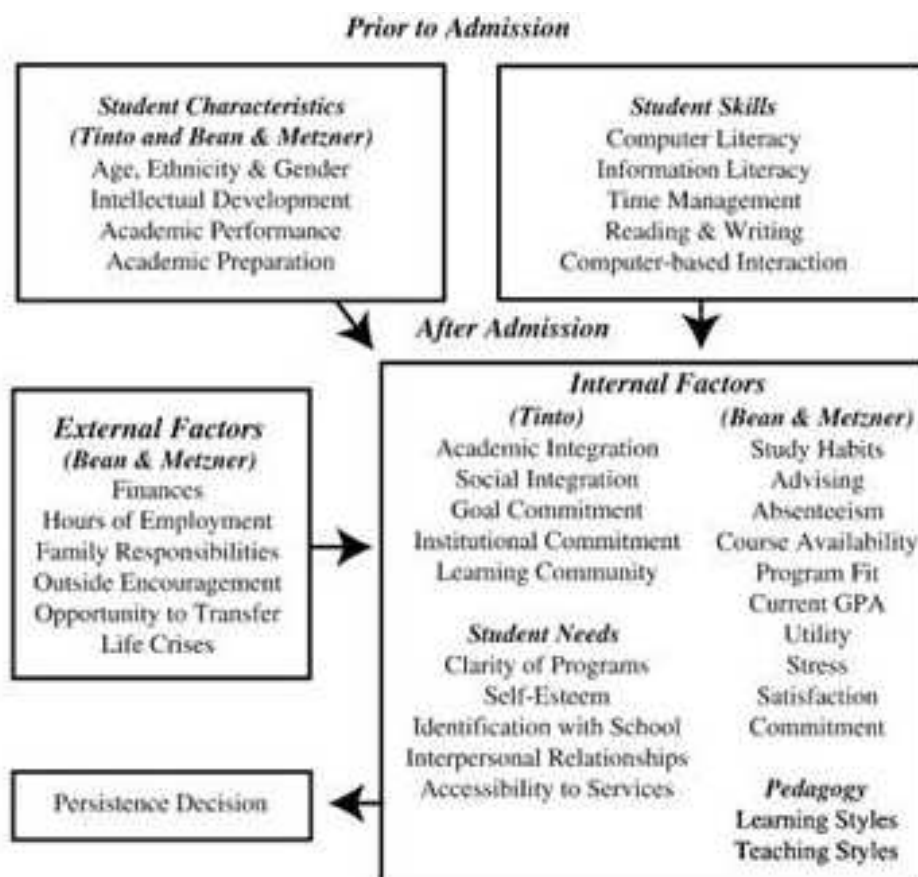
Figure 1. Composite persistence model. Adapted from Rovai (2003).

Rovai's CPM has been applied in multiple studies exploring persistence in the context of online learning both quantitatively (Bawa, 2016; Eliasquevici, da Rocha Seruffo, & Resque, 2017; Krajewski, 2015; Lee et al., 2013) and qualitatively (Johnson, 2015; Perry et al., 2008). Except for Perry et al.'s (2008) study, Rovai's CPM has had limited use in the context of nursing education. Rovai's CPM supports the context and literary rationale for my study of doctoral student persistence in the setting of online

nursing education. Johnson's (2015) review of the current literature on doctoral student attrition suggested that one of the critical factors influencing diminishing persistence in doctoral students was human relationships. Congruently, Rovai highlighted the value of human relationships within each of the constructs of the model.

The literature revealed multiple antecedents for doctoral student persistence (Wao, 2010) that is best explained as a phenomenon wherein a variety of factors interact. These interacting factors are defined as student and institutional factors (Johnson, 2015), and the use of Rovai's model in the literature has underscored the impact of distance learning in regards to the human relationships and interacting factors. The versatility of the CPM is evident in its application in earlier studies to understand academic persistence within a wide span of contexts, including individual online courses (Bawa, 2016; Lee et al., 2013) all the way to lengthy graduate programs (Perry et al., 2008).

Rovai's model was identified as a key focal point for emerging research in academic persistence given the context of modern higher education. Online universities are identifying the majority of their student population as nontraditional students who have unique adult challenges as they work full-time jobs and balance their families with education (Johnson, 2015). Furthermore, students who are thriving in their online learning endeavors often share unique characteristics essential to their success in a virtual learning environment when compared to a more traditional on-campus environment (Johnson, 2015).

Lee et al. (2013) used the CPM in their study to identify the dissimilarities between online student characteristics of those who persist and those who do not

complete their program. Similarly, Gnadt (2013) maintained the focus on nontraditional adult learners, and concluded that learners required a balance between coursework and work/family commitments to persist in their studies. Critics of the virtual classroom suggest that social interaction is limited in this environment and the community experience is lacking. This lack of interaction was the basis for Perry et al.'s (2008) study, exploring the reasons for student withdrawal from an online graduate program in nursing and health studies.

Using Rovai's CPM as a framework for analysis, Perry et al. (2008) reviewed students' withdrawal letters and identified the common theme of "competing urgencies of life circumstances" (p. 11). Their findings further extend Rovai's model to suggest that multiple compounding factors or a layering of situations eventually lead a student to withdraw rather than a solitary cause. They conclude that a more in-depth investigation of the student experience would be illuminating which supports the intent of my study.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

In this section, I explore and detail the various variables impacting persistence. I provide an overview of the primary areas identified as influential to the parenting student's doctoral journey including personal factors, the dissertation experience, connectedness, and level of integration. The aim of the literature review was to chronicle the main challenges impacting parenting students' ability to engage and persist in their studies. I describe in further detail the importance of supportive environments, and the sense of role strain (Vyskocil, 2018) experienced by this student population.

Persistence

Persistence is defined as a characteristic in which an individual displays voluntary enduring commitment to a goal despite obstacles or opposition. The concept of persistence is also closely linked with similar terms including perseverance, tenacity, endurance, personal motivation, goal commitment, goal attainment, and resilience (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). The phenomenon of persistence is best explained by the interaction of multiple factors that facilitate student success; these factors are student related or institution related (Johnson, 2015; Wao, 2010).

Research on persistence is often embedded within an ecological model that emphasizes contextual factors and interactions between individuals and their environment. These factors can include positive resources and negative stressors in a larger sociocultural construct (Clauss-Ehlers, 2008; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Tinto's (1993) longitudinal model of doctoral persistence focuses on the academic and social integrations of students in doctoral programs, with institutional commitment and interpersonal support as key factors. Likewise, Welhan found that student support, desire for career advancement, goal commitment, and internal motivation were strong persistence factors among doctoral nursing students (Williams, 2010). Tinto identified expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and learning as five conditions that facilitate persistence (Kennel & Ward-Smith, 2017).

While there has been an abundance of research investigating persistence of traditional undergraduates (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1992; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Pascarella, Salisbury, & Blaich, 2011; Sandler, 2000; Spady,

1970; Tinto, 1975), much less exists on the persistence of graduate students (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Strayhorn, 2017; Tinto, 1993; Veal et al., 2012). Although Tinto (1993) and others (Jeffreys, 2015; Millett & Nettles, 2006) have reported similar findings regarding persistence between undergraduate and graduate students, Tinto clarifies that differences between graduate and undergraduate students involve the strength of academic and social integration. Further, doctoral students pass through three distinct phases of coursework, candidacy, and dissertation which pose different persistence challenges and may be different than other degree programs. Adult graduate nursing students are often commuter, part-time, returning students, and often have work and family obligations (Cauble, 2015). These types of students have historically faced transitions without the support and infrastructure characteristic of the traditional student experience often seen with undergraduates (Borden, 2004; Schlossberg, 1989). Hence, my rationale for selecting Rovai's (2003) contemporary model of composite persistence to validate the unique nature of the doctoral process.

Persistence and retention are frequently used interchangeably. Retention, as an organizational phenomenon is measured by the number of students returning and progressing toward degree completion. Persistence is an individual phenomenon that describes the ability of a student to achieve their academic goal (Kennel & Ward-Smith, 2017). In the context of academia, Kennel and Ward-Smith (2017) defined persistence as a complex, multidimensional phenomena influenced by an interaction of personal academic, and environmental factors. A wealth of research on doctoral persistence is largely quantitative in nature, typically using survey data (Spaulding & Rockinson-

Szapkiw, 2012). Given this scarcity, researchers (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011) have recommended research on doctoral persistence using qualitative methodology. With qualitative methodology being inductive in nature, it would offer a new lens to understanding this phenomenon. It would complement and further add to the current body of knowledge on persistence based in a deductive approach.

One example of this research is the Reason's college experience persistence model which is more predictive in nature focusing on student characteristics to assess students and intervene early to enhance student success (Perry et al., 2008). Both Jeffreys' (2015) work and the earlier work of Bean and Metzner (Cauble, 2015) highlight particular environmental factors as the most influential to student academic achievement, persistence, and retention. Environmental factors are defined as factors external to the academic process that may affect performance including financial status, family financial support, family emotional support, family responsibilities, childcare arrangements, employment hours, employment responsibilities, encouragement from friends, living arrangements, and transportation (Jeffreys, 2015). Although students are drawn to online programs for their flexibility and convenience, there is a variety of personal and institutional factors impacting students' persistence (Yang, Baldwin, & Snelson, 2017).

The increased sophistication of technology has led to a greater use of distance learning for graduate and doctoral nursing education (Halter et al., 2006). In a 2006 phenomenological study of online doctoral nursing students, the researchers sampled 5 female doctoral students at various stages in the program (Halter et al., 2006). The

researchers emphasized skepticism of online learning particularly in the context of doctoral education. Since the time of this study, distance learning has continued to increase in prominence and acceptability. The findings are limited to the experiences, albeit positive, of these 5 students who chose an online program as opposed to one offered in the traditional classroom setting. Evans and Stevenson (2011) also explored the experiences of doctoral nursing students. Participants of their study were already teaching in nursing education however felt that they had reached the end of their career clinical ladders and felt that the only way to progress was to teach in higher education (graduate level education) that necessitated earning a PhD. It is interesting to note that 7 of the 17 participants were unmarried with no children, all were enrolled in a traditional 3-year PhD program.

Attrition rates vary among disciplines, and because nurses pursue doctoral degrees in a number of fields, it is difficult to pinpoint their attrition rate (Lee, 2009). Persistence specifically in nursing education is different from other disciplines (Broome, 2012). Furthermore, the current need for doctorally-prepared nurse educators compels an interest in research to examine the unique experience of nursing doctoral students. Higher practice salaries without the requirement of the terminal degree create true competition in trying to attract nurses to the career path of educator. Salary must be a consideration for prospective doctoral nursing students trying to justify the demands of doctoral study when well-paid master's level nursing positions are readily available. Lee (2009) focused on the experienced of doctoral students who were also faculty and the recommendations arriving from her study were largely workplace directed (i.e. allowing for release time

from teaching obligations, more flexible meeting schedules, etc.). Lee (2009) suggested that careful planning was vital to achieving academic success but also to coping with the impact of multiple demands. She stressed that given the age of many nurse faculty doctoral students, the likelihood of caregiver responsibilities to minor children was a very real possibility, and a strain on students' availability of time and energy.

Personal Factors: Gender and Age

Higher education demographics are shifting and the number of nontraditional students is on the rise in undergraduate programs as well as graduate programs. Every school has its own definition of what a *nontraditional* student is, but generally a nontraditional student is an older student, usually over the age of 24 or 25; a student who previously has attended college and is returning to college after a few years; a student who graduated high school and went straight into the work force, and is now attending college for the first time (DiFiore, 2003).

Nursing is considered a practice discipline, and typically nurses begin their careers in the practice setting for a number of years before pursuing their doctoral degree. Higher practice salaries without the requirement of the terminal degree deter nurses from this career path (Lee, 2009). Doctoral nursing students are older than students entering other fields with a mean age of 45–47 as compared to the average of 33 in other disciplines (Reilly & Fitzpatrick, 2009; Smith & Delmore, 2007). This is due, in part, to the predominance of females. Many wait until after their childbearing years to pursue an advanced degree (Jarnagin, 2005). This later entry into academe poses unique concerns for nurse educators and the profession (Edwardson, 2004; Smith & Delmore, 2007). This

delay reduces the number of productive years that nurse scholars can contribute to advance the profession at local, national, and global levels (Lee, 2009).

Students often struggle financially and find it difficult to balance their studies, work, and care of their families. This is particularly true of female students who still most often bear the burden of most of the parenting and household responsibilities (Jarnagin, 2005). They report feeling overwhelmed with multiple life responsibilities, and feelings of guilt when they take time away to focus on their doctoral study, or when taking time away from their studies to focus on focus on family. As a result of this internal struggle, most female doctoral students wait until their children are older to pursue their own personal goals (Underwood, 2002).

Women who pursue and persist in doctoral degrees face many challenges (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). The role conflict experienced by female doctoral students is well documented in the literature (Brown & Watson, 2010; Carter, Blumenstein & Cook, 2013; Eisenbach, 2013), however the context has historically been residential PhD students rather than those completing their degree online. The growth of distance education doctoral programs has removed barriers that once kept many women from uprooting their families and pursuing a doctoral degree. Caring for children and/or aging parents, while stressful, was also integral to women's identities and sense of moral obligation (Underwood, 2002).

Despite challenges with family responsibilities, many participants shared that family relationships provided essential support through their doctoral studies. While caring for others sometimes exacerbated imbalances in the women's educational

experiences, participants also reported that these caring relationships provided essential affective support. Participants indicated that having mentors who could serve as role models might help them develop strategies for achieving a more balanced life (Mansfield et al., 2010). Gessner, Damon, Jaggars, Rutner, and Tancheva (2011) also studied women's experiences as doctoral students. They determined that female doctoral students benefited from common individual characteristics such as intrinsic motivation, independence, resolve, perseverance, and determination (Blanchard, 2018).

Balancing doctoral studies with family and work responsibilities is a challenge. Full time employment constricts students to studying part-time; as a consequence, students experience longer time to degree completion rates than those in full time study (Wao & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). In a quantitative study surveying over 600 students across 78 doctoral programs, Wasburn-Moses (2008) found that students felt least satisfied with their ability to juggle work and family obligations with their overall workload. Time devoted towards their studies meant time away from family further perpetuating feelings of stress, guilty, worry, and anxiety (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel & Abel, 2006). Ultimately, it was for these personal reasons that 70% of surveyed respondents departed their program of study (Lovitts, 2001).

The existing literature proposes that social support is a significant resource for doctoral students, and that doctoral student attrition is often linked to stress and feelings of social isolation (Blanchard, 2018). Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) surveyed 166 graduate students from various disciplines. Participants completed two social support assessments (Family Environment Support and Graduate Program Support) and two

stress assessments (Stressful Life Events and Psychological Symptoms). Their findings indicated that gender difference existed related to social support and stress, with female students experiencing less familial support and higher levels of stress (Blanchard, 2018).

Hodgson and Simoni (1995) expanded on this earlier work and explored students' level of stress in relation to their financial status. Participants completed the graduate life events scale and graduate student stress survey, and affirmed the previous findings that female doctoral students experienced less support and more stress (Blanchard, 2018). Lee (2009) surveyed individuals who were faculty members at the time of completing their doctoral degree, and discussed the positive and negative levels of social support. Jairam and Kahl (2012) further categorized positive social support as emotional, practical, and professional. Participants revealed the value of academic friendships and how those relationships were integral to their successful program completion.

Dissertation Experience

Doctoral-level work is considered the highest form of scholarship (Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty, & Turner, 2014). Individuals who participate in this process, place high demands and expectations upon themselves as they embark on a personal life path. The student's experience within the doctoral journey matters to their success. As compared to traditional classroom education models, the online doctoral student often needs to identify and learn new ways of interacting with personal, professional, and educational outcomes, and therefore a more holistic and individualized education process is paramount (Brill et al., 2014; Evans & Stevenson, 2011). Most doctoral students are juggling the needs of their family, employment, and their studies (Cohen, 2011). During

the dissertation process, students often struggle without the structure of class assignments, and feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the task ahead of them. These feelings are further compounded by feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety (Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007; Kerlin, 1997).

The cumulative effect of isolation and exhaustion significantly diminish the quality of the doctoral experience for many students (Kerlin, 1997). Self-sacrifice and neglect of self-care are quite typical among doctoral nursing students, with a negative impact on their physical and emotional health (Jarnagin, 2005; Reilly& Fitzpatrick, 2009) leading to chronic stress, health problems, and student attrition (Underwood, 2002). The doctoral program is unlike any program students have experienced and requires more intellectual challenges, psychological demands, and independent research. The first stage of a doctoral program is coursework in which students feel comfortable and knowledgeable, however the self-directed dissertation development and research phase is unfamiliar territory.

This is the stage where students are expected to become independent scholars (Tinto, 1993). Doctoral persistence increased in programs that recognized this transition period from structured coursework to unstructured dissertation writing. In validating the challenges of this transition, successful programs built a more meaningful connection between coursework and the skills required to complete the dissertation (Gokalp & West, 2011). An appreciation of the complexities of the student experience and a critical examination of factors affecting student satisfaction and success are foundational to the design and administration of quality doctoral education (Lee, 2009).

Volkert, Candela, and Bernacki (2018) utilized a descriptive survey design to identify predictors of intent to leave. They found that significant predictors of intention to leave nursing doctoral programs were related to support issues and program stressors. As program stressors rose, an individual's intent to leave rose. Inversely, as family and friend support declined, intent to leave rose. The 57-item Nursing Doctoral Stressors and Motivation questionnaire was developed by Volkert et al. (2018). They administered the survey to 835 PhD and DNP (Doctor of Nursing Practice) students. Participants were roughly equally split between full-time and part-time enrollment, and coursework phase and capstone project/dissertation phase. Also, students were enrolled in several program delivery models including hybrid, online, and traditional delivery. 65.7% of participants were enrolled in a DNP program whereas only 34.3% enrolled in a PhD program.

In addition to effective personal support systems helping to buffer stress, the literature highlights key qualities or personal characteristics critical to student success. There is no consensus among researchers about the importance of students' background characteristics (i.e. demographics including age, gender, and ethnicity) related to persistence (Lee et al., 2013). Internal factors including motivation are integral to doctoral persistence (Grover, 2007). Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) determined that individuals who were personally and professional motivated were most likely to persist. Barbatis (2010) also attributed student success to personal characteristics including goal orientation, resourcefulness, and a sense of determination and responsibility. Locus of control influences students' academic persistence. Locus of control is defined as an individual's belief about the outcome of a situation and their degree of control over the

situation. Some individuals internalize this sense of control whereas others attribute the outcome of a situation on external circumstances (i.e. chance or fate). Rotter developed a scale for general locus of control that was later revised by Trice. Trice's academic locus of control (ALOC) scale sought to measure locus of control. Students who have an internal locus of control are more self-motivated and self-directed than those with an external locus of control (Lee et al., 2013).

Academic self-efficacy has also been emphasized in the literature. Bandura defines self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to be successful. High self-efficacy positively affects academic performance, motivation, and persistence (Lee et al., 2013), and is a critical characteristic of successful online students (Wang & Newlin, 2002). Student skills including metacognitive self-regulation and resource management skills are the most commonly discussed in the literature, and positively influence persistence (Holder, 2007; Lee et al., 2013). Metacognitive self-regulation refers to a student's ability to organize, self-evaluate, self-monitor, and seek out information. Resource management refers to the ability to manage and control personal time and the environment in order to achieve a goal (Lee et al., 2013).

Lee et al. (2013) developed 2 online surveys measuring Korean students' perception of these factors while enrolled in an online course. Their surveys were based on components of various validated instruments. The findings suggested that persistent students had significant differences from dropout students, citing academic locus of control and metacognitive self-regulation as the most influential persistence factors.

Connectedness and Student Integration

The lonely and unstructured practice of working on a dissertation may be the utmost contributing influence on doctoral student attrition. Social isolation plays a significant role as the student transitions from the dependent coursework stage to the independent stage of ABD (West, Gokalp, Pena, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011). West et al. (2011) concluded that creating opportunities to cultivate social relationships and support could alleviate the feelings of isolation experienced by doctoral students. Rather than view isolation as an individual issue, institutions of higher learning should address social isolation as an institutional or administrative matter. Rovai (2002) emphasized the importance of connectedness and community and their relationship to satisfaction, learning, and online persistence. Higher attrition rates were directly correlated to doctoral candidates' perceived level of connectedness and satisfaction in the dissertation process (Terrell, Snyder, Maddrey, & Dringus, 2012). Academic and social integration are the most prominent themes in the literature (Lovitts, 2001; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012).

Institutional factors (program type, structure, and curriculum) and student expectations about the relationship between these factors are pivotal to doctoral student persistence (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Attrition rates in distance programs are consistently 10%-20% higher than traditional programs (Rovai, 2002) where students often feel more isolated resulting from less socialization and interaction with peers and faculty (Terrell et al., 2012). Distance programs utilizing a cohort model have demonstrated higher levels of persistence (Lovitts, 2001). Cohorts can be organized

according to when student begin a program or according to a research focus (West et al., 2011).

Tinto (1993) and others like Rovai (2002) suggested that if academic institutions want students to complete a program, then they must provide support in the form of student services. So, identifying students' needs is essential to providing those services to them. One of the goals of my study was to find out the ways nursing doctoral students believe the system could be more responsive to their needs. If universities respond to student needs, the chances will likely increase that more students who are parents will persist in their doctoral programs and complete their doctorate.

Another benefit to retaining students is that is it less expensive to retain students than it is to recruit new ones (Tinto, 1993). Once in the system, institutions need students to pay tuition to maintain their status and complete their doctorates in a timely manner. Schools do not spend much time or money on students that are ABD. The current thinking in higher education is that there is no incentive to ensure that graduate students complete, only to admit them (Astin, 1999). But faculty do not get paid extra to serve as graduate advisors and many ABD students linger for years and do not complete or make progress on the dissertation.

The most important relationship for a doctoral student is with an advisor, faculty, or chairperson (Barnes, Williams, & Archer, 2010; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008). Yet, one of the root causes of lack of persistence among doctoral students is an absence of effective faculty mentoring (Brill et al., 2014). Doctoral student attrition is well documented but little information is available on what

organizational leaders at academic institutions are doing to address this issue. Mentoring models or best practice for effective mentorship should include co-mentoring, cohort learning, tele-mentoring, and e-mentoring (Mullen, 2009). In a mixed methods study, Lunsford (2011) collected data from participants of a formal faculty-mentoring program. A successful mentoring relationship was built on trust, and included aspects of coaching, psychosocial guidance, and networking assistance (Brill et al., 2014). There was a positive correlation between students' career certainty and their mentorship relationship (Lunsford, 2011; Mullen, 2009).

In addition to the important role of faculty mentor, the concept of peer mentorship is equally valuable. This is best described as the student's place or relationship within a larger community or cohort. Students who started their doctoral programs as a group stayed together as a group and had a better graduation success rate. The cohort model encouraged meaningful interaction among students, and students in a cohort were more successful than those who were not. However, the cohort model is not widely used because of lack of institutional support (Mullen, 2009). Peer mentoring promotes shared learning and motivation. The cohort model also provides a larger learning community for students and yielded higher graduation rates (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Holmes, Birds, Seay, Smith, & Wilson, 2010). In a qualitative study, Ku et al. (2008) explored a mentoring group working with international students. Mentoring did increase student success; however, this study was limited to the context of international students. Institutional infrastructure is critical in providing a positive learning environment (Black, 2010).

The doctoral journey is often lonely and isolating simply because of the independent nature of doctoral education. The student's personal experience within the doctoral journey is critical to their success. Doctoral programs should provide a framework that allows for student cohort and learning community relationships or supported networks juxtaposed by strong faculty mentorship (Brill et al., 2014). Unlike the traditional classroom education model, the online doctoral student must identify and learn new ways of interacting with personal, professional, and educational outcomes. This context demands a more holistic process of guiding the individual education process (Brill et al., 2014).

Schools of nursing must prepare faculty to meet the needs and expectations of doctoral students. Students can be better supported throughout the doctoral process (Brill et al., 2014) in a number of ways including networking, defining a mentoring path, and coauthoring publications and research (Holley & Caldwell, 2012). Program administrators and faculty can allow for more dedicated time in coaching/mentoring roles in order to provide consistent student support throughout the length of the program. They must also ensure that family friendly policies are in place to allow students to take breaks and facilitate reentry into the program.

Summary and Conclusions

Doctoral persistence is not the result of one single factor, but rather and interaction of multiple factors typically separated into two categories: student related factors and institutional factors (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). More doctoral students are enrolled in a doctoral program than ever before, however, graduation rates

have not kept pace (Veal et al, 2012) with student enrolment growth trends. Research

illuminates why doctoral students withdraw, but there remains a critical need for research

to understand how doctoral student persevere through to completion (Blanchard, 2018).

This study aims to fill that gap by identifying factors that facilitated academic persistence

and program completion, and exploring the embedded meanings in the experiences of the

target student population through a qualitative approach. In Chapter 3, I provide a

detailed overview of the research design, sample, setting, and data collection and analysis

procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of my study was to explore the embedded meanings in the experiences of parenting nurses pursuing their doctoral degrees at an online university. I used a phenomenological orientation and unstructured open-ended in-depth interviews to allow participants to tell their stories using their own voice. Using this qualitative approach allowed for exploration of this phenomenon in a holistic and naturalistic manner. In Chapter 3, I describe the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, including the data sources and the data collection and analysis plan. I also discuss the issue of trustworthiness of this study and outline the ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

I conducted a phenomenological study to understand the lifeworld (van Manen, 2014), or the experiential world, of the student participants (Colaizzi, 1978). The guiding question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of parenting nurses who are pursuing their doctorate at an online university? In addition, the following interview questions were used to reveal the experiences of the participants.

1. What are the lived experiences of parenting nurses who are pursuing their doctorate at an online doctoral program in North America?

2. What helped or hindered parenting doctoral nursing students' persistence?

3. What meanings do parenting doctoral nursing students attach to their experiences as doctoral candidates?

4. How does the understanding of the meaning of student experiences contribute to nursing's knowledge of persistence in doctoral education?

The goal of phenomenology is to explore the way things present themselves or appear to people in and through their experiences (Sokolowski, 2000). I selected a phenomenological approach to evoke, connect with, describe, and elaborate upon the qualities and inner meanings of the participants' lived experiences (van Manen, 1997). I conducted in-depth interviews to understand the subjective meaning and experience of persistence for each doctoral nursing student. The research was grounded in a phenomenological orientation. I conducted thematic analysis to examine the deep meaning structures that characterized the lived experiences of the individual participants (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; van Manen, 2014) and to identify common themes concerning the experiences of doctoral nursing education and persistence. Additionally, I used the interview method to gather rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences regarding the process of pursuing their doctoral degree and persisting. The interviews included stories, anecdotes, and recollections of experiences (van Manen, 2014). I created text through the dialogue between the individual being interviewed and the interviewer. I then developed themes based on careful analysis of each participant's descriptions.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative researchers can assume multiple roles during the data collection process, including participant, participant/observer, and observer. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis (Austin, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In my study, I created and collected data through the

interviewing process. The researcher creates a safe context for participants to share rich descriptions of their experiences and life work (Austin, 2014; Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003). I personally conducted all the interviews to ensure consistency among the interviews. Due to my high level of interest and involvement in the study as a doctoral nursing student, it was critical for me to recognize all my assumptions and biases. I accomplished this by a reflective process to make my biases and understandings explicit. Because of this dual role, my credibility was important (Patton, 2002). My research was self-funded. I provided a nominal incentive for interview participation. Furthermore, I did not anticipate any power differential between participants and myself, as they had already completed the program of study. Finally, despite my proximity to the phenomenon of interest and the study participant pool, I had limited personal connections to any individuals who had graduated from the PhD in nursing program at Walden University. Any personal relationships with study participants, if at all, were acknowledged.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Selecting participants in phenomenology involves selecting individuals who have lived the experience that is the focus of the study and who are willing to talk about their experience. Ideally, participants are diverse enough from one another to enhance the possibilities of rich and unique information about the phenomenon under investigation (Laverty, 2003). Diversity in the participant pool was exhibited by participants' differing place of residence, age, cultural/ethnic background, family composition, nursing background, and chosen program of study. Additionally, examination of specific

populations—in this case, doctoral nursing students who are parents—was necessary to better understand how to foster doctoral persistence (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017).

I used criterion-based selection, or purposive sampling, to select participants. This kind of sampling is not designed to be representative; rather, it is intended to increase the depth of information discovered (Guba, 1981). The intent of purposeful sampling is to yield insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. This approach to sampling allows the researcher to select description-rich cases to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) asserted that the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry hinge more on the information richness of the cases selected rather than the observational or analytical skills of the researcher or the sample size. My goal was to yield the richest, most descriptive information possible.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. My study was designed to include only those students who had successfully defended their dissertation and/or their final capstone project and had completed their doctorate degree. The inclusion criteria for participation were: (a) registered nurse designation, (b) primary caregiver to a child under the age of 18 living in their home at the time of completing their doctoral work, and (c) graduated from an online doctoral program within the last 2 years. Those who have succeeded on the doctoral journey understand the struggles, isolation, and hard work involved (Brill et al., 2014). The intent was to ensure that recollections of their doctoral experiences remained relatively fresh in their minds (Blanchard, 2018; Cauble, 2015). Retrospective perception can be significantly different from prospective appraisals.

Frequently students are optimistic and overestimate their ability to overcome challenges

or potential barriers, and the challenges they encounter are often unexpected. All study

participants were parenting nurses enrolled in a doctorate program at an online university.

I recruited participants via Facebook. Furthermore, using a snowball sampling approach,

I invited individuals to share the recruitment flyer with others to increase my participant

pool. It was critical that all participants in the study indicated their willingness to engage

in active self-reflection and self-disclosure about their doctoral experiences. Participants

were known to have met the study's inclusion criteria by self-disclosure. They indicated

their willingness to participate and communicated with me initially via email. Once an

individual agreed to participate, I sent an introductory letter and the consent form to the

individual by email.

Phenomenological studies typically have a small number of participants. Sample

sizes typically range from as few as 6 to 10 participants (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

For phenomenological studies, Morse (1994) suggested at least 6 participants. I aimed to

conduct at least 6 interviews, and I continued to conduct interviews until data saturation

was reached and no new themes emerged (Saunders et al., 2018). Saturation depends on

several factors, including the selection criteria and the homogeneity or heterogeneity of

the population being studied (Dworkin, 2012). The proposed small sample size was

defensible by the homogeneity of the study's participants. All participants were nurses

who completed a similar program of study, and all participants' accounts of their

experiences shared similar nuances of the experience of parenting dependent children.

Recruitment initially took place over 1 month from the time of posting the recruitment

flyer. After 1 month, I did not have sufficient participants, and I reposted the recruitment flyer. I was able to recruit enough participants following the second recruitment flyer campaign.

Instrumentation

To collect data, I conducted semi structured interviews as the primary data-gathering tool. Questions and probes were used to provide focus and flexibility during the actual interviews (Blanchard, 2018). Each research question was related to one of the four criteria of Rovai's CPM: (a) program culture experience and overall experience, (b) program characteristics experienced, (c) dissertation phase preparation, and (d) individual persistence (Figure 1).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

My study was subject to Walden University's ethical review procedures. Upon obtaining ethical approval (Walden IRB approval # 10-28-19-0244704), I solicited individuals who met the selection criteria to participate in the study via a recruitment ad placed on several Facebook pages where doctoral students sought peer support and opportunities for networking. The recruitment flyer posted to Facebook included the selection criteria to screen interested individuals: (a) to have a registered nurse designation, (b) to have graduated from an online doctoral program within the last 2 years, and (c) to be the parent of a child under the age of 18 residing in the same home at the time of completing their doctoral program. Interested participants were invited to confirm eligibility to participate in the study, and further explore information regarding the study through informal telephone and email contact with me. At this juncture, full

disclosure and transparency regarding the study was provided in addition to gathering and informed consent. This included the purpose of the study, the time commitment, the confidentiality nature, and their rights as a research participant. The consent form was emailed to participants, and consent was established when the participants responded to this email indicating they agreed to participate.

After obtaining consent, I arranged a mutually agreeable time with each participant to conduct the interview in private. Interviews were conducted via an online web conferencing platform (Skype). I also ensured access to a telephone in case there were any technical difficulties with Skype or the participant did not have access to Skype. I conducted interviews with open-ended questioning to probe participants' understandings of their experiences. I asked them to further reflect on their experiences during the interview. I invited participants to speak in their own voices, and describe, in as much detail as possible, the story of their doctoral experience, giving attention to the critical events and challenges they faced as a parent. This yielded quotable first-person prose. Interviews were recorded via an embedded feature of Skype and transcribed verbatim. The recordings were downloaded into a password-protected secure zip file stored on my computer and permanently deleted from the Skype platform. Throughout the research process, data analysis was conducted in the form of coding, theming, making clusters, and writing summaries.

Participants' verbal accounts of their lived experiences constituted the primary sources of data for my research (Osborne, 1994). The interview is considered the primary method for gathering data within a qualitative study (Kvale, 2009; Osborne, 1994; van

Manen, 1997). The goal of this research was to elicit rich descriptions of the phenomenon of persistence, as experienced by and understood by the participants. According to van Manen (2014), the interview is used as a means for gathering experiential narrative material that serves as a source for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and as a medium for developing a conversational relation with the co-researcher (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. Personal interviews are the best and most respectful way to speak to the participants about their experiences. The interviews should be minimally structured, in-depth, and recorded. The aim of these minimally structured interviews was to invite participants to share their experiences in their own words, highlighting details they felt to be the most important. Interview questions were open-ended and the process was facilitated by active listening, reflections, and probes (Olson, 2013). Participants were encouraged to participate in the interviews at their own pace and articulate their experiences in a way that they felt comfortable.

Instrumentation and Operationalization of Constructs

The focus for each interview was facilitated by several main questions, probes, and follow-up questions. Broad initial questions were designed to expand on the research question and elicit each participant's experience. The aim of probes, active listening, and reflection by the researcher was to let participant know that I was following their experience and invited depth. Participants' spontaneous verbalizations were followed up by questions to draw out detailed descriptions of their experiences.

Data Analysis Plan

Phenomenology involves obtaining data (e.g., interviews, life stories, observations) from the participants in the study and analyzing these data for themes. Through thematic analysis, the researcher attempts to create order and elicit meaning from what has been disclosed and to discover the themes that are essential to the experience (van Manen, 2014). According to van Manen (2014), in reflecting on essential themes, meaning is viewed as multidimensional and multilayered, and cannot be grasped in a single reading. Phenomenological reflection occurs during data management, data analysis, and data interpretation. Reflection also happens while transcribing the collected interview data.

I used a content analysis approach for my study. According to Grbich (2007), content analysis is a systematic process of coding large amounts of textual data for determining trends and themes. Immediately after each session, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and read several times to gain a general understanding of the text. The data were then analyzed using the method suggested by Graneheim and Landman (2004). Meaning units as phrases and sentences related to the experience of parenting and doctoral persistence were determined. The related meaning units were then labelled with codes and sorted into categories and subcategories based on their similarities and differences. Lastly, similar categories were abstracted and labelled with themes and subthemes indicating there was a latent meaning in the text.

I used NVivo 12 software to help with data classification and management during analysis. The use of qualitative software for data analysis is well-supported in the

literature. There are several advantages to using computer software to assist in qualitative

data management and analysis. Computer software can assist with managing large

amounts of data by providing a convenient method for storing large amounts of data, and

securing large amounts of data safely (Hellman, 2016). Furthermore, the software can

facilitate efficient data analysis by locating text, segments, and passages of data and

making comparisons among them, running multiple queries of data, producing a visual

representation of codes and themes, and providing a detailed record of the data analysis

process by storing field notes and descriptions (Hellman, 2016). Fereday and Muir-

Cochrane (2006) further asserted that the use of such computer software programs helped

ensure rigor by keeping such detailed records of the data management and analysis

processes.

I used field notes to contextualize and clarify themes from the interview data. I

recorded field notes after each interview and re-examined them along with the transcripts

and audio recorded interviews during the process of analysis. Bogdan and Knopp-Biklen

(2003) described field notes as the written account of what a researcher, sees, hears,

experiences, and thinks while collecting and reflecting on the data in the qualitative

study. The field notes offer a way to describe each participant and reconstruct our

dialogue and interactions during the session, reflect on the significance of what transpired

in the interview, and speculate on connections, emerging themes, methodological

difficulties, or reflect on my own subjectivity (Bogdan & Knopp-Biklen, 2003). In

addition to field notes, I also kept an audit trail. An audit trail is a collection of researcher

notes of detailed information about the methods, procedures, and decisions made during

the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I kept a journal that contained information about all of the activities related to the project, as well as made note of any emotions that arose during data analysis and interpretation. This journal served as evidence for any decisions made during the project (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Another vital consideration to my study's rigor was the manner of treatment of discrepant cases. McPherson and Thorne (2006) claim that researchers are required to ask probing questions of each outlying instance. Is the observation a mistake in measurement or recording? Alternatively, is there something else that could account for a mistake in recording or interpretation? To maintain integrity within the research processes, each outlier cannot simply be discarded without further investigation and questioning. In qualitative research, discrepant cases can provide researchers with unique opportunities to consider a study's findings from different vantage points at each stage of the analytic process. Additionally, these cases can push the researcher towards deeper thinking and more complex and sophisticated conceptualizations of the phenomenon of interest (McPherson & Thorne, 2006). Revisiting the data through inductive analysis and seeking clarification with the study participants will prompt deeper and more complex interpretations of the data set, safeguard against assumptions by the researchers (McPherson & Thorne, 2006), and enrich the study's findings and conceptualizations. Along with my other findings, any potential discrepant cases are presented in Chapter 4.

Issues of Trustworthiness

My study was guided by evaluative criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity.

Credibility

Credibility is the faithfulness of the researcher's depiction of participants' accounts. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that credibility be the criterion against which the truth value of qualitative research be evaluated. They recommended strategies such as prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, member checking and triangulation of data to ensure credibility (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement with participants is established through creating collaborative relationships with participants through which personal meanings can be accurately clarified.

Persistent observation refers to the cyclical process in which the researcher analyzes and reanalyzes the data, teasing out salient information. Triangulation involves verifying research findings through various sources, or methods. I accomplished this using field notes noting observations of participants, in-depth and multiple interviews (if needed) with participants, and the use of a reflexive journal to interpret meaning. To maintain the credibility of the data analysis, the transcripts were reviewed independently by another member of the research team using the suggested method applied in this study, and their data analysis results were compared with the authors' findings. Any differences were discussed to reach a consensus (Behboodi Moghadam et al., 2017).

Transferability

Transferability is the degree to which results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts, settings, and/or with other respondents (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Thick description is a means for describing the behaviors and experiences of participants with a detailed narrative of the context in which they occurred. This ensures that the behaviors and experiences are meaningful to an outsider. I did this by providing a meticulous account of descriptive data including the context in which the research was carried out, the setting, the sample, the sample size, participants' demographic information, interview procedures, changes in interview questions based on the iterative research process, and excerpts from the interview guide (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Dependability and Confirmability

With confirmability, the researchers' interpretation of the participants must be believable. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended including detailed descriptions of the following: (a) the decision trail that guides research procedures (audit trail), (b) characteristics of the participants and criteria for sample selections, and (c) the selected strategies used to collect, code, and analyze data. As previously described, I ensured both dependability transferability and confirmability using an audit trail.

Reflexivity

Bracketing, describes the process of abstaining from one's presuppositions, or ideas regarding the phenomenon being investigated (Gazza, Shellenbarger, & Hunker, 2012; Langdridge, 2008; Osborne, 1990). These concepts, particularly the bracketing-off of preconceptions, are debated within phenomenology and tend to be used most

frequently with descriptive phenomenological approaches (Langdridge, 2008).

Furthermore, outlining presuppositions was worthwhile in my study. Outlining one's

presuppositions involves self-reflection that makes implicit biases and preconceptions

about the phenomenon of interest held by the researcher explicitly known (Osborne,

1990; van Manen, 2014).

  I used a diary to examine my own conceptual lens of this phenomenon (Korstjens

& Moser, 2018). In addition to using a diary to ensure reflexivity, this process enhanced

the credibility and confirmability of the researcher's data analysis (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). Similar to reflexivity, confirmability serves as a measure of researcher neutrality.

The process of outlining one's presuppositions can aid the researcher in bringing

awareness to personal presuppositions as they color his or her orientation toward the

phenomenon of interest (Kvale, 2009; Osborne, 1990). In his hermeneutic approach, van

Manen (2014) emphasized paying close attention to one's own experiences during

interviews, while listening to audio recordings, examining transcripts, and writing and

rewriting findings. He placed specific emphasis on the importance of self-reflection and

urges researchers to be mindful of their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions to reveal

unknown aspects of the phenomenon under investigation (Olson, 2013). My

presuppositions regarding the experience doctoral nursing students who are parents

reflected my personal and professional experiences, as well as my knowledge base

regarding academic persistence.

Ethical Procedures

My study adhered to Walden University's guidelines for research with human participants. Confidentiality was strictly maintained. All study documents were kept in a secure locked location and computer files were password protected and encrypted. All paper documents were stored in a locked cabinet. The names of the participants were kept separate from transcripts and recordings of the interviews. The files for participants were marked with numeric and letter coded symbols rather than names. Following the study, the computer files and paper files associated with this study were kept for 5 years, and then deleted and shredded, and recordings were erased. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature, potential risks and alternatives to participation, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time. A participant would submit in writing to me their intent to withdraw. At that time, I would confirm the use of the participant's interview data leading up to the time of withdrawal.

Summary

In this chapter, I described phenomenology as a research design followed by my assumptions as they relate to the focus of this study. The sampling strategy used to identify participants in this study and the process for collecting and analyzing data, including interview protocol construction, interview administration, journaling, and thematic analysis, were explained. Details were also shared about how the data were managed and quality promoted in the research process. Chapter 4 includes the findings of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of my study was to explore the embedded meanings in the experiences of parenting nurses pursuing their doctoral degrees at an online university. The guiding question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of parenting nurses who are pursuing their doctorate at an online university? In addition, the following interview questions were used to reveal the experiences of the participants:

1. What are the lived experiences of parenting nurses who are pursuing their doctorate at an online doctoral program in North America?

2. What helped or hindered parenting doctoral nursing students' persistence?

3. What meanings do parenting doctoral nursing students attach to their experiences as doctoral candidates?

4. How does the understanding of the meaning of student experiences contribute to nursing's knowledge of persistence in doctoral education?

In this chapter, I present an in-depth discussion of the common themes drawn from participants' accounts of their experiences as they relate to the guiding question of this study. The significant themes generated from the analysis of participant responses include quotes to highlight their lived experiences of parenthood and persistence through their doctorate journey. Using Rovai's CPM as a theoretical framework, I analyzed the narratives of successful nursing doctoral candidates to uncover the personal, social, and institutional factors and contexts of the phenomenon of doctoral persistence.

Setting

For this study, I interviewed 10 women who were parenting nurses of minor children living in the same home at the time of their program completion. All participants had completed a PhD in nursing or a DNP degree within the last 2 years. The range of program completion date was 1 month to 2 years at the time of the interview. The participants represented 5 universities based in the United States. Interviews were conducted via an online conferencing platform (Skype) and were scheduled at a convenient time that was mutually agreed upon.

Demographics

The study sample consisted of 10 female participants who had enrolled in a doctorate nursing program at an online university in North America. Six participants had completed an online PhD in nursing program, and 4 had completed an online DNP program within the last 2 years. The participants' ages ranged 36–50, with a mean age of 42. Each participant had 1–3 children, ranging in age from 7 years old through 21 years old at the time of program completion. Participants worked in a variety of areas including academia and clinical practice prior to and during completion of their doctorate and years of nursing experience ranged from 7–28 years.

Data Collection

This study drew on data collected via semi structured interviews conducted over a web-conferencing system. Following IRB approval, the recruitment flyer was posted to multiple Facebook groups and pages created by doctoral students as support networks. Prospective participants then responded to the Facebook post. Those who confirmed that

they met the inclusion criteria of (a) registered nurse designation, (b) primary caregiver to a child under the age of 18 living in their home at the time of completing their doctoral work, and (c) graduated from an online PhD (or other doctorate) program within the last 2 years, were invited to participate in an interview. Interviews were then arranged at a mutually convenient time. Interviews were conducted from November 2019 through January 2020. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes, though actual times ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. Whenever possible, Skype was used to conduct the interviews with the telephone used as a back-up method. Questions focused on the participants' experiences as parenting nurses completing a doctoral degree in an online program. Questions included what hindered or helped them persist, significant influences in their ability to persist, and perceptions about how their experiences differed from those students who were not parents.

Data Analysis

To immerse myself as much as possible into the participants' experiences, I conducted face-to-face Skype interviews whenever possible at the participants' preference. I then transcribed the interview responses while repeatedly reviewing the recordings and imported the transcripts into NVivo 12. I used the word frequency query feature to capture the most frequently used words across the interviews. The word frequency feature provided me with a better sense of the key concepts from the data, and at that point, I switched to hand coding for the remainder of the data analysis process. I clustered the recurring words into generative themes. I read the interviews several times and created labels for chunks of data that summarized the essence of the participants'

responses. This process helped to identify the meanings that emerged from the data. I noted examples of participants' words to establish properties for each code. I named each code and then attempted to determine any commonalities and relationships among the codes. Finally, I was able to identify common threads that intersected each of the main categories and classified the data into four distinct emerging themes. There were no discrepant cases.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Data saturation is one measure of credibility (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). When patterns and themes began to repeat with each additional interview, I was confident that I had reached data saturation. At this point, I ended further recruitment of participants. In this study, I achieved transferability of the results through the inclusion of participants' demographic information and a description of the steps taken in data collections and analysis. Dependability refers to the ability to replicate a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To facilitate dependability, I used an interview protocol to minimize any inconsistencies in my questioning during the interviews. Lastly, I addressed confirmability using a reflective journal that I kept throughout the data collection and analysis phase.

Results

The data from the open-ended questions were coded, structured, and classified during the analysis phase of the study. Data analysis methods consisted of category construction where I used one key word or phrase to identify recurring patterns. Keywords and phrases were then further coded into categories of recurring themes.

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews provided the data from which the essence of the experience emerged. Themes were constructed by highlighting words and statements that were common to the interviews and essential in their meaning. The themes presented provide a description of what participants experienced, how they persisted, and a depiction of the essence of the phenomenon of persistence (Creswell, 2012). Finally, the results of the study showed 4 major themes detailed in Table 1: (a) managing multiple roles, (b) acknowledging the challenging journey, (c) overcoming challenges, and (d) experiencing fulfillment. Included within each major theme were several subthemes. In the following section, I present the themes and subthemes.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Managing multiple roles	Being a parent
	Being a spouse
	Being a student
Acknowledging the challenging journey	Identifying optimal timing
	Experiencing guilt
	Feeling discouraged
	Losing relationships
	Facing financial burden
Overcoming challenges	Family support
	Peer support
	Faculty support
	Discovering self
Experiencing fulfillment	Being a role model for their children
	Being a role model for others
	Being a change agent
	Beginning a new chapter

Theme 1: Managing Multiple Roles

A deep connection between personal identity as a mother and spouse, and identity as a student emerged as salient through the analysis of the interviews. In attempting to manage their multiple roles, participants found it difficult to compartmentalize their different roles: "the mom, the student, the full-time worker, the wife, the everything" as summarized by participant P9.

Being a parent. The participant descriptions painted a picture of how significant being a parent was in their decision to complete their doctorate. Being a parent was one of their biggest motivations and afforded them life skills and resources that were beneficial to their ability to manage multiple competing roles. For all participants, parenthood was their primary and priority identity. Participants described the influence of parenthood on their academic identity. They approached their degree much like they approached parenting and integrated their parenting skills in a variety of ways. Participant (P7) noted that "motherhood sets you up as a successful scholar" and provides individuals with maturity and life experience compared to younger students or those without the responsibilities associated with parenthood. This sentiment was echoed by another's response as to how her identity as a mother influenced her academic identity and how she tackled her coursework (P1). Being a parent was closely associated with participants' pursuit of the doctoral degree and motivation to persist. This was clearly illustrated in the interview responses. The choice to honor academic identity was often motivated by the participant's identity as a caregiver, and parenthood served as a central reason to finish.

Being a spouse. Participants described the permission given to them by their spouses to focus on their studies. They described how spousal support was integral to their ability to persist, and that many of the household duties that were primarily their responsibility were shouldered by their spouse. Furthermore, family dynamics shifted as participants took a step back from family activities. One participant (P8) noted that it strengthened the bond between her daughter and her husband. They had "the afternoon to go and just be the two of them. They did rely on each other more without pulling me into it, which kind of, you know, makes me a little sad."

Being a student. Although their academic identity was important, participants reiterated that their responsibilities as a mother, wife, and cook could not be set aside. They were purposeful in carving out specific time to honor their role as a student. Nighttime was most often their time dedicated to schoolwork. One participant (P3) noted that she would start working on her papers at 9:00 p.m. and would often be awake until 2–3:00 a.m. In addition to compromising sleep as a student, family time on the weekend was also impacted:

> If it was the weekend and they knew that when eight o'clock came around, I went
>
> to school. That is what I did every night. Or if I had a big paper and I had to spend
>
> more time on the weekend and we couldn't go out and do things (Participant P4).

Theme 2: Acknowledging the Challenging Journey

To achieve success in the program, participants and their families were forced to adjust to a new norm. Upon reflection, participants recounted how difficult the journey was for themselves and for their family. Participant P4 commented that it was a challenge

the whole time for her and her family. "When I wrote my dedication page and I mentioned my children and my husband, I cried realizing they've been through this with me." In addition to the journey taking longer than expected, the journey was much harder than they anticipated. One participant (P5) described the level of stress that she experienced. She described how focused she was on her school work that while she could remember the details of her dissertation, in retrospect she could not remember the milestones achieved by her child during that timeframe. She summarized her experience as one of the hardest experiences of her life likening it to "a rollercoaster ride through hell."

Identifying optimal timing. Timing was two-fold and was key to their success. One participant (P9) with teenage children noted that her choice to complete her doctorate when she did was deliberate:

> The time that I decided to go to school was strategic for me because my daughter was in her junior year and I knew that if I hadn't started then I would have been busy in her senior year of high school and I did not want to miss out on those kinds of things. If I waited too long, I'd be in college with my kids.

In addition to aligning their academic journey with that of their children, participants described their need for routine on a daily/weekly basis. Participants described feeling "scheduled to death" (P10) particularly with younger children. A strict routine allowed them to compartmentalize their time devoted to family and then to school. One of the methods in which participants maximized their available time was in their decision from the outset to complete their studies through an online program. The online format of the

program afforded them the opportunity to pursue their education they would not otherwise have been able to do without uprooting their families. The time saved commuting or attending in-person classes allowed them to maintain their commitments to their other work and family obligations. Two participants (P1, P7) were single parents and noted that this was the only feasible way for them to complete their studies.

Experiencing guilt. As participants tried to seek balance among multiple competing responsibilities, unpleasant emotions like guilt arose:

> As I moved through the program, I guess my commitment kind of increased because I saw what it was taking away from my kids and you know, things like that. And so, I thought if I get done with this faster then that's going to work well (P4).

This was echoed by other participants citing their sense of guilt as a hindrance. Despite their children seemingly understanding why they were doing this, they still felt bad. One participant (P9) noted that the thing that worried her most was her children suffering. One (P8) blamed herself for her daughter's deviant teenage behaviors and attributed them to her lack of attention over the years. She needed her spouse to remind her that these were normal teenage behaviors and not a result of her lack of parenting and her focus that was shifted elsewhere. Another participant (P5) shared how guilt ridden she felt because she was missing out and sacrificing time away from her family, whereas another felt that she could not give all of herself that she wanted to her children: "I wasn't the parent I wanted to be when I couldn't play with my child." To persist, they attempted to identify strategies that recognized and blended their limitations. Once they were able to embrace

their limitations, they felt less conflicted and guilt ridden. Knowing that the doctorate journey was temporary, allowed them to the see the light at the end of the tunnel and that they could eventually spend more time with their children.

Feeling discouraged. Entering the dissertation phase or final capstone project phase was monumental and participants described a noticeable difference in their experience moving from coursework into the final component of their program. In the absence of academic support, participants felt isolated, frustrated, and discouraged. Before being reassigned to another committee chairperson, one participant (P1) noted how depressed she became by her previous chairperson dragging the process. Participants expected to have support with their writing and/or practicums and when in reality, the support did not live up to their expectations, they felt disheartened:

The level of support decreased when I transitioned from coursework to the dissertation phase. I felt like I was on an island by myself. I could not understand how I got this far. I believed that I would have support, and in reality it turned out differently (P3).

Losing relationships. While supportive relationships were integral to success, the loss of relationships detracted from the experience, and reaffirmed the rigors of the doctorate journey. One participant (P4) recalled the reality of student attrition in her program:

I became kind of sad because we were told that the attrition rate for PhD students is high because it's such a challenge. We would meet people at residencies and

see their names in the class during the first few weeks and then did not see them

engaged anymore. Where did they go? I hope they're doing okay.

Although still distressing, this loss was more impersonal compared to the loss of

relationships outside their academic circle that were once seemingly supportive.

Participants felt that the doctorate changed people around them. One participant (P6)

noted that school was her priority and had to miss several family events. Most of her

family did not have college degrees and disapproved of her missing these functions.

Another participant (P5) further described feeling misunderstood and forced to live her

life in her own way with or without her friends and family being a part of it: "none of my

family or friends have a doctorate and they didn't understand. I lived my life in a way

nobody else could."

Facing financial burden. Contrary to the literature, the greatest hindrance cited

by 9 out of 10 participants in this study was their debt and the financial burden of

pursuing higher education. One participant (P5) shared that she could not have afforded

another term and therefore pushed herself to complete as quickly as possible. Another

participant (P10) revealed the need to consider her children's future college tuition above

hers: "I don't have enough money for them (my children) to go to college, much less

me." While another (P9) stated that she was fortunate enough to be able to pay for her

doctorate, she felt that she would not have done it if she couldn't have financially

managed it: "I think financially that's a huge issue and you can have all the fortitude in

the world, but if you don't have the financial ability, what are you going to do? You

can't, you can't do it."

Theme 3: Overcoming Challenges

Despite adversity, participants in this study persisted. They largely attributed their ability to persist to supportive relationships including support from family, peers, and faculty, and found meaning in the journey as an opportunity to discover themselves. Two participants (P5, P7) described overcoming life crises; one experienced (P5) 2 miscarriages and was grateful to receive support from her academic advisor to take a leave of absence while she grieved. Another participant (P7) went through a divorce and took solace in her dissertation as an escape from her difficult personal circumstances. All participants expressed a need for support in both their personal and academic realms to be successful.

Family support. "One thing that was a huge help, obviously my family, because they took on a lot of my roles" (P6). Participants relied heavily on their spouse or immediate family members to help with childcare and household duties. The emotional support from family was invaluable, however the encouragement expressed by their children was the most touching. Participants shared vivid memories of their children's words of encouragement, and their children became their loudest cheerleaders. One participant (P9) said: "my husband always tells me not to give up. They (my kids) were like, mama, get up mama, you got this. Don't give up. So, when I heard that from them, I'm like, okay, they're going to be all right."

Peer support. In addition to family support, peer support was also a source of encouragement and positive thoughts. Having a friend further along in the dissertation process normalized the experience for one participant (P7). She said: "That was helpful to

hear that this is okay. You're not going crazy. But that's normal. It's part of the process. That was helpful to know that you're not alone." Additionally, social media was an important platform to share advice, ask questions, and offer support to peers.

Faculty support. Faculty support was integral to participants' academic progress. Six out of nine participants felt that their committee chairperson was their greatest source of support. One participant (P9) described how her chairperson shepherded her into persisting with her chosen topic:

I can remember vividly one of the professors saying stick with this topic. Don't, don't let go of it, just stick with the topic. And I can remember saying to her, I just don't know. There's nothing out there. I'm just afraid to move forward with this topic. And she said, stick with it. Don't give up on this topic. Don't go anywhere else. Stick with this topic. I would say that was a real pivotal moment for me because I was at a fork in the road where I was going to go down another road and because I chose that topic, it yielded great results.

In addition to the chairperson, participants described an enjoyable experience when communication was open, and faculty and advisors were easily accessible. Faculty who were also parents were seen as role models, and participants felt that they understood that students had lives outside of their studies.

Discovering self. Participants found meaning in their experience by discovering their inner strength, resilience, and determination, and humbly admitting their limitations that they "couldn't do it all" (P9). Participants spoke about their determination to finish and not become an ABD statistic. Furthermore, they did not want all the time and

expense they had already invested to be in vain. "It kind of turns you outside in or inside out, and then reveals everything… you get to see what you're made of" (P9). Through a journey of self-discovery, participants revealed that the doctorate had changed who they were and led them to this study's final emergent theme of experiencing fulfillment.

Theme 4: Experiencing Fulfillment

Participants (P1, P8) became tearful during the interview in describing the realization of their accomplishment. There was an overwhelming sense of relief and pride. They described their sense of accomplishment and they could now envision a better life for themselves and for their family. "I obviously wanted my daughter to see my hard work to know what I was doing too, and that I was doing this for our family and make things better for us" (P8).

Being a role model for their children. In addition to making sacrifices for a higher purpose and persevering for a better life, participants felt that they had set a good example for their children, and instilled in them important attributes like grit and resiliency that would equip them to be future successful scholars. Their academic identity served to role model studious behaviors in their children as

Being a role model for others. Two participants (P2, P6) freely shared their upbringings from humble roots and noted that they were first generation college graduates from immigrant families. They hoped that by completing their doctorate, they would serve as role models to others from blue collar working families to pursue higher education. One participant (P2) recalled being discriminated at a residency for her young

age and race. She stated that she felt berated and this occurrence only solidified for her the desire to be a role model for young minority women in the profession.

Being a change agent. The core value of nursing stewardship was highlighted by participants desire to advocate, contribute, and serve the profession, their patients, and future nurses. Participants expressed a renewed sense of power with a doctorate to affect positive social change in nursing research, academic, and clinical practice. One participant (P9) cited the multifaceted role of the nurse, and regardless of the degree (PhD or DNP), felt like she had learned even more about herself the different roles a nurse could be beyond the bedside.

Beginning a new chapter. As participants identified the meaning of their doctoral student journey, they provided insight into what life was like while pursuing their degree, comparative to now. They became increasingly aware of the finality of a chapter in their life. "I can begin my life now… and put time in with my son" (P1). Finally, participants reflected on the years spent enthralled in their studies, and felt a sense of emptiness with the lack of busyness, and they were still trying to find a new sense of normalcy following completion of the degree.

Summary

This study illustrated the lived experiences of parenting doctoral nursing students, and how those experiences influenced their decisions to persist. Overall, the themes that emerged from the coding analysis tied to this study's guiding research question and the chosen theoretical framework of Rovai's CPM, and reflected students' experiences of persistence within their programs. Each theme contributes to a deeper understanding of

doctoral student persistence factors in an online institution. These findings provide a composite understanding of the essence of the inherit struggles of the doctoral journey, and the factors associated with doctoral persistence. I will discuss implications and recommendations for future research in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of my study was to explore the embedded meanings in the experiences of parenting nurses pursuing their doctoral degrees at an online university. I designed this qualitative phenomenological study to better understand the online doctoral student's perspectives and experiences. Participants described their struggles to complete their program and the barriers they faced through their doctoral journey. Similar to other doctoral students, participants in this study had families, work obligations, and financial concerns that created obstacles for them. At times, these outside obligations took priority over their academic work and influenced their academic journey. In this section, I share my reflections on this study, implications for positive social change, and my recommendations to increase doctoral student persistence in nursing higher education.

Interpretation of Findings

As evidenced through the descriptions of what successful doctoral candidates experienced, the findings of this study affirmed prior research suggesting that the doctoral journey can be isolating, stressful, and challenging (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). The literature has consistently shown that attrition rates in the distance environment are markedly higher than in the traditional setting and can be attributed to the factors described above. Rovai's CPM (2002) classified multiple factors that influence student attrition as academic, social, and emotional. Clearly, as supported by the findings in this study, the factors that influence attrition or persistence are not only academic, but social and emotional in nature. Therefore, supports extended to doctoral students should be pragmatic and account for their needs on a social and emotional level,

rather than simply on an academic level (Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2011). Interestingly, only one participant provided a recommendation to the question: What do you think universities can do to remove some of the barriers that you experienced while attempting to complete the program as a parent? She (P7) suggested that in-person residencies could be more family friendly with regards to social activities organized for students.

This study based on Rovai's CPM operationalized all 4 constructs of the model: (a) student characteristics, (b) student skills, (c) internal factors, and (d) external factors. All participants either implicitly or explicitly reported all 4 of Rovai's constructs throughout the study. Furthermore, each of the constructs was reflected in this study's 4 emergent themes: (a) managing multiple roles, (b) acknowledging the challenging journey, (c) overcoming challenges, and (d) experiencing fulfillment. Rovai's CPM (2002) incorporates student variables, such as personal characteristics and skills, and internal and external influences on students' decision to persist in an online learning program (Perry et al., 2008). Consistent with Rovai's model, participants' accounts of their experiences illuminated each of the factors of the model, all which may impact persistence decisions (Perry et al., 2008). Participants described who they were as individuals, as spouses, as parents, as students, and as nurses. They provided insight into their personal and professional backgrounds and their influence on their motivation to persist (student characteristics, student skills, and internal factors). The CPM's external factors, including finances, hours of employment, family responsibility, and life crises, were unequivocally reported as hindrances and reasons to consider withdrawing by

participants. Students have limited to no control over these external factors that are often unforeseen and unpredictable (Perry et al., 2008).

Despite wage disparities, participants were attracted to pursue academic careers. They felt the doctorate afforded them teaching opportunities not previously available to them with a graduate degree. Like students in any other discipline, the participants made important decisions when considering doctoral education. Their decision to enroll in an online program was purposeful as it provided them with more flexibility than a campus-based program and allowed them to complete largely asynchronous work at times that best suited their schedules (Scarpena, 2016). Similarly, for most participants, their goal was to teach, and they felt that an academic career better aligned with their children's schedules.

Managing Multiple Roles

For all participants in this study, their role as a parent was a priority, and they made every effort to not let their education impact any other aspect of their life. Participants expressed their diligence to their studies while balancing their need to be present in the eyes of their children, as one participant (P8) surmised, "It was hard as a parent. Being a mom is very important to me. There are only so many years with my kids. I cannot get them back as their 13-year-old selves." Another meaning derived from the experience as a doctoral student and a parenting nurse was that spousal and parental relationships were strengthened because of sharing the journey.

Acknowledging the Challenging Journey

Participants described their need to make sacrifices to persist and progress in their programs of study. They sacrificed sleep, health, and finances. However, one thing they were unwilling to sacrifice was their ability to parent and be present for their children. Participants shared similar daily routines and relied on others in the household to take on roles within the home.

Overcoming Challenges

The findings of my study indicate the critical importance of establishing and sustaining strong positive relationships throughout the doctorate journey. As the participants in this study stated, positive relationships and a strong support network were integral to their ability to persist. In most cases, participants described finding strength and support from their immediate family members. Familial integration was essential to persistence (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, Swezey, & Wicks, 2014). Furthermore, participants described developing a positive community of support and healthy relationships with other students through their interactions, particularly at face-to-face residencies. Participants also discussed how relationships with their doctoral student peers supported them academically and supported their need for relatedness. Face-to-face components of their program of study were instrumental in forming closer and long-lasting relationships with peers. Secondary to family and peer support, a supportive academic environment was important to many participants. Meaningful relationships with faculty, most often their dissertation committee chair, positively influenced the fulfillment of their learning needs.

Experiencing Fulfillment

Personal and career goals emerged frequently as an enhancing factor. Nine of out of the 10 participants spoke of their intrinsic motivation to complete their doctorate for themselves. They focused on completing the degree to justify the cost, and time already invested in their coursework. Participants' descriptions of how they developed and sustained motivation towards degree completion were consistent with how they created rigid schedules and meticulously set goals. These descriptions included the way they embraced academic priorities and dealt with challenges that impeded their ability to persist. Some of the most poignant accounts of this journey, were the stories told of individuals overcoming life crises including illness, loss, and divorce amidst an already challenging journey. Participants reflected passionately on their journey of self-discovery and accomplishment and shared a sense of relief that they could now wholly recommit themselves to their family, particularly their children.

<p align="center">Limitations of the Study</p>

It is important to recognize the limitations of my study. This research was confined to participants who fit specific inclusion criteria and random sampling was not used. The results were therefore derived from the experiences of a small, homogenous group of female participants. Although attempt was made to recruit male participants, the individuals in this study were all female, limiting the study findings. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the context in which it took place, and the small, purposefully selected sample, the results cannot be transferred to all parenting nurses pursuing a doctorate degree, and learning contexts aside from the online learning

environment. This limitation is acceptable however, as the purpose of the research was to develop a foundational understanding of the meaning and experience of parenting nurses pursuing a doctorate; a unique human experience (van Manen, 1997). Also, the goal of qualitative research is transferability rather than generalizability. This was a convenience sample consisting of 10 participants. Even though the numbers were low, there was a clear emergence of patterns from students from varied backgrounds that underscore the importance of the data.

The PhD has longstanding recognition as the only terminal degree in nursing. However, more recently the DNP has become more widely accepted as an alternative terminal degree (Loomis, Willard, & Cohen, 2006). Traditionally, PhD students were interested in an academic career with a research focus, and the DNP provided others who were more clinically focused with an alternative educational pathway. However, in recent years DNP graduates have sought and successfully attained tenured teaching positions (Loomis et al., 2006; Vandyk, Chartrand, Beke, Burlock, & Baker, 2017) similar to PhD graduates. This notion was the rationale for including both PhD and DNP graduates in my study, however, this may be viewed as a limitation. It is important to acknowledge the fundamental differences in the 2 programs (Vandyk et al., 2017) in terms of academic versus clinical practice focus, however as far as demand on the student, both PhD and DNP students require guidance to operationalize the process of degree attainment through the rigorous dissertation process or demanding clinical activities respectively.

By using phenomenological methodology, meaning structures (van Manen, 1997) were discovered through retrospective analysis of interview data. The qualitative method

of this research allowed for entry into the research free of theorizing. Without prior

theorizing, the participants' subjective experiences were more likely to remain at the

center of focus. However, I acknowledge that as the researcher and primary research

instrument, my subjective perspectives and interpretations inevitably colored the research

to some degree. While I attempted to limit researcher bias through the process of

bracketing, the findings inevitably are a co-construction of my experiences and

interpretations as well as those of the participants.

Recommendations

This qualitative study contributes valuable information about parenting nurses'

experiences during their doctoral journey; a topic that warrants further study. Further

research will add to and enhance this preliminary investigation. Future research should

attempt to include larger, more diverse samples of participants to enhance future findings

and increase transferability. Although both female and male individuals were sought for

this study, the 10 participants in the sample were female. Further research should make

concerted efforts to include men's experiences. I relied on the participants' abilities to

recall past experiences. Although participants spoke of their experiences as they

happened at different times in their lives, future efforts to produce longitudinal studies

could yield valuable insights as real time accounts of individuals in progress of their

program of study, and help explore this phenomenon more fully (Perry et al., 2008).

While adversity can be expected along the doctoral journey, the challenges

recounted by participants are not insurmountable (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw,

2012). This narrative provides some clarity to the rigorous nature of this process, and

allows individuals to strategically devise a plan prior to beginning the final [dissertation] phase of their program that allows them to adapt to the required sacrifices, overcome the challenges, and persist to completion (Lovitts, 2001).

Implications

While the findings generated from this study generally reinforce prior research, this study refutes earlier work (Cauble, 2015; Perry et al., 2008; West et al., 2011) citing that the most detracting factor for doctoral students was multiple competing responsibilities. Participants in this study alluded to their financial concerns and loan burden as a result of their studies yet persisted through the financial hardship. Most studies on doctoral persistence have been conducted with the purpose of improving institutional resources and program outcomes (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). None of the study's participants provided institutional recommendations to offset the financial burden which now warrants further study, in addition to identifying other practical approaches to supporting learners.

Leaders in nursing higher education could benefit from a better understanding of the resources needed to improve the overall student experience. Doctoral students should be assured that faculty, staff, and administrators, work collaboratively to enhance their academic preparedness and performance (Cauble, 2015), leading towards their success in every facet of their college experience (Johnson, 2015). Furthermore, affirming the concern shared by post-secondary institutes towards the success and well-being of doctoral students serves to advance the image of online institutes of higher education, and attract nontraditional students (Cross, 2014).

The importance of this study's findings exposes the implications not only for doctoral student success, but also persistence leading towards degree completion particularly in nursing (Halter et al., 2006). The accomplishment of degree completion provides doctoral students who are parents, with both an avenue for economic buoyancy, and motivation for other family members to follow academic achievements (Johnson, 2015). Successful program completion also positions students, as flourishing scholars and leaders to advance the nursing profession. A successful graduate may also be empowered to add to positive social change by giving back to their communities as a positive role model with enhanced self-confidence and credentials (Johnson, 2015). Participants in this study were grateful for the additional opportunity to continue with their formal education. They believed that they received a quality education and reflected on their experience as a means to influence and role-model lifelong learning to their children and to their nursing peers.

Lee (2009) reaffirmed the need for appreciating the complexities of the student experience, and insisted on the need for a critical examination of factors affecting student satisfaction and success. These factors are foundational to policy design and the administration of quality doctoral education (Lee, 2009). Although online learning departs from the traditional image of academia, the online platform fills a niche for many nontraditional doctoral students. In a competitive market, institutions should be demonstrating a student-centered approach in the delivery of quality services and education. Additionally, students should take a proactive approach in selecting a program of study that best suits their professional goals and personal needs (Lee, 2009). Finally,

by promoting online learning at higher levels of nursing education, nursing leaders in academia and in practice can assist in alleviating the shortage of nurses who are prepared at all levels (Halter et al., 2006). At a macro level, nursing will continue to need doctorally-prepared individuals who can advance nursing science, steward the profession, and educate future researchers (Wyman & Henly, 2015).

Conclusions

With approximately half of doctoral students failing to achieve their goal of earning a terminal degree in their field (AACN, 2005; Edwardson, 2004; Smith & Delmore, 2007), individuals contemplating enrollment in a doctorate program must recognize the risk (Brailsford, 2010), and acknowledge the challenges and sacrifices associated with persistence (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). By understanding what doctoral nursing students experience and what measures they took to persist, future students may be better equipped and prepared for the challenges and setbacks they may encounter. Prior research cites financial burdens, personal and professional hardships, and lack of faculty communication as common detracting factors along the doctoral journey (Blanchard, 2018). Despite these being valid reasons that could lead to student disengagement, the participants in this study are living proof in the ability to persist and push through adversity.

Participants described their involvement in this study as a positive experience and found that by articulating their experiences, they gained a greater understanding of themselves and their experiences. These participants' experiences offer a testimony to the power of phenomenological research; an approach purposefully chosen to faithfully

reveal the inspiring individual experience of completing a doctorate while parenting. The participants in this study set aside their time to describe some of their most personal experiences, and shared their stories in the interest of supporting other parenting nurses on this journey.

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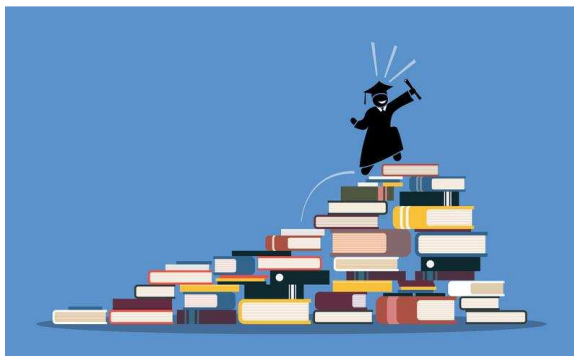10.1016/j.outlook.2014.11.003

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!!

PERSISTENCE &
PARENTHOOD IN ONLINE
DOCTORAL NURSING
EDUCATION

This study involves an interview lasting approximately one hour.

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the embedded meanings in the experiences of individuals who are nurses pursuing their doctoral degrees who are also a parent.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions about the study, please contact:
Jaimee Feldstein

You are eligible if:
- You are a registered nurse
- You have graduated from an online doctorate program in the last 2 years
- You were the parent of a child under the age of 18 residing in your home at the time of program completion

The study will serve to further the current body of knowledge of persistence in doctoral education.

Appendix B: Letter to Participants

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral student at Walden University's PhD in nursing program. I am conducting

a study for my dissertation focusing on individuals' experiences pursuing their doctorate

at an online university. The purpose of my study is to explore the embedded meanings in

the experiences of parenting nurses pursuing their doctoral degrees at an online

university. I am using a phenomenological method to explore and understand these

experiences from the student point of view. My interest in this topic stems from my own

experiences as a doctoral nursing student. I expect my research to provide a foundation

for future empirical research on persistence in doctoral nursing education in the context

of online learning. I am seeking recent graduates (within the last 2 years) from any online

doctorate programs who are nurses and are also parents to children under the age of 18

residing in the same home (at the time of program completion), who are willing to speak

with me about their particular experiences of persistence and degree completion.

Participation in this study will require about an hour of your time for an interview. Please

be assured that all information shared with me will be confidential. If you are willing to

share your experience with me, please email me so that we may arrange a mutually

convenient meeting. Interviews will be held via Skype.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jaimee Feldstein RN BSN MSN PhD(c)

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Background Information:

Please tell me a little bit about yourself.

Please tell me a little a bit about your family.

Where are you from?

What is your age?

What is your sociocultural background?

Tell me about your work experience/ nursing background.

What doctoral program of study did you complete, and from which university?

The Experience:

Please describe your decision to pursue your doctorate degree and your level of commitment at the time of enrolling. How did your level of personal motivation and commitment change over the course of the program?

Why was _____ University your school of choice?

Please describe your perception of the doctoral program before entering the program compared with that of your experience while enrolled in the program.

Please describe your experience as a parenting nurse pursuing your doctorate at an online university.

What helped or hindered your ability to persist in your program of study?

What meanings do you attach to your experience as a parenting nurse and doctoral student?

Please describe one or more situations you experienced that resulted in a significant impact while attempting to complete your degree.

Were there aspects of your doctoral program that you found problematic or that slowed your progress?

Please describe the extent of social integration you encountered while enrolled in the program. For example, how many friends did you have? How many staff did you actually interact with? Were these sources of support for you?

What circumstances influenced or affected your experience as a parenting nurse pursuing your doctorate online (positively or negatively)? (i.e. home/family life, financial-related circumstances, career-related circumstances, etc.)?

Do you feel your experience differed than others who were not parenting minors?

Do you feel your ability to parent was impacted while pursuing your degree? Please describe your experience.

What do you think universities can do to remove some of the barriers that you experienced while attempting to complete the program as a parent? In retrospect, is there anything you would like to change about the process?

Concluding Questions:

Is there anything you would like to add about your experiences?

Is there any question you think I should have asked, but did not?

Appendix D: Permission to use CPM Figure

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