



ACADEMIC JOURNEY OF GRADUATE STUDENTS IN EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

Jonathan Abing¹

¹Student, Graduate School, Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc.

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra21881>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra21881

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the unique experiences of graduate students enrolled in educational management programs in Davao City. This study followed a phenomenological research design, which is grounded in qualitative research methods and is well-suited for exploring the lived experiences of individuals within a specific context. The study focused on a sample of 8 students, a size that was allowed for in-depth exploration of their individual experiences while also ensuring a variety of perspectives. The findings of this study reveal profound insights into the lived experiences of graduate students as they navigate the demands of academic life, personal growth, and professional development. These experiences, categorized into key themes and subthemes, offer valuable implications for educators, policymakers, and institutions aiming to enhance graduate education. The emerging themes highlight not only the internal capacities of students such as resilience, emotional intelligence, and time management but also the essential role of external support systems and institutional responsiveness. As such, this section presents the broader educational, institutional, and practical implications drawn from the study's major themes, with the aim of informing strategies that can support the holistic development and success of graduate learners.

KEYWORDS- Academic Journey, Graduate Students, Educational Management, Phenomenological Exploration

INTRODUCTION

The academic journey of graduate students in Educational Leadership is crucial for understanding how future education leaders are prepared. These students face unique challenges, such as balancing work, personal life, and demanding coursework, yet research on their lived experiences remains limited. Despite the growing number of graduate programs in this field, little is known about the obstacles these students encounter, which may affect their academic success, professional identity, and leadership development. Existing studies often overlook how personal, academic, and professional factors intersect to shape their experiences. Addressing these gaps can help improve the support and effectiveness of educational leadership programs.

The study "Graduate Student Experiences in Educational Management: A Cross-Cultural Asian Study" (2023) published in Higher Education Research & Development interviewed 45 students across five Asian countries. The research explored both the challenges and success factors encountered by graduate students pursuing degrees in educational management. These may have involved issues like adapting to diverse educational systems, balancing academic responsibilities with personal or professional commitments, and navigating institutional expectations that vary across cultures.

In recent years, the landscape of graduate education in Educational Management has undergone significant transformations, revealing both challenges and victories for students pursuing advanced degrees. A comprehensive study examining the lived experiences of graduate students has unveiled the complex nature of their academic journey. The digital transformation of education has added another layer to students' experiences. While technology has made education more accessible, it has also presented new challenges. Virtual learning platforms, online research requirements, and digital collaboration tools have become integral parts of the graduate school experience, (Education Weekly Report, 2024).

In Malaysia, Asian Journal of Higher Education (2023) an article emphasizes the significant role graduate education plays in shaping the professional future of educational management students, particularly in terms of leadership readiness and career advancement. The research explored how the graduate program influenced students' career trajectories, including the enhancement of leadership skills, increased career mobility, and improved job satisfaction. Through combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the study provided both numerical data and personal narratives to highlight how the students' academic experiences contributed to their professional growth, leadership capacity, and ability to manage educational institutions effectively.

Meanwhile, Philippine Journal of Higher Education (2023), utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the motivations and challenges faced by 25 Filipino students in educational management programs. The research



examined why students pursue graduate education in educational management, such as the desire to enhance leadership skills, improve career prospects, and contribute to the development of the education sector in the Philippines. The study also highlighted the various obstacles these students encountered, including balancing studies with work or family responsibilities, navigating institutional expectations, and coping with financial constraints or personal issues.

Clearly, the research examined how working professionals managed the dual demands of their jobs and academic responsibilities, shedding light on the challenges of time management, stress, and competing priorities. The study identified various strategies that students employed to cope with these challenges, such as time-blocking, prioritization techniques, seeking support from peers and family, and utilizing flexible learning modes. This study provides valuable insights into the resilience and adaptability of working professionals in educational management programs, highlighting both the struggles they face and the strategies they use to succeed in their academic and professional lives, (Philippine Education Research Journal, 2023).

In the Mindanao Journal of Education (2019), conducted a case study of 20 graduate students enrolled in educational management programs in Davao City. The research examined how the unique socio-cultural, economic, and educational characteristics of Davao City influenced the students' experiences in the program. This might have included factors like local educational policies, community involvement, and the role of regional governance in shaping their academic journey. The study identified specific challenges faced by students in the local context, such as balancing academic requirements with work in the education sector, limited access to resources, and navigating regional educational policies or practices that may differ from national standards.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Yoon (2021) with his phenomenological exploration that involved 40 graduate students from various Asian countries. The research focused on understanding the cultural and academic transitions these students experienced while navigating higher education in the region. The study highlighted how students adjusted to the diverse educational systems, institutional cultures, and cultural expectations across Asia. This included challenges such as language barriers, adapting to new teaching styles, and overcoming differences in academic expectations between their home countries and their graduate programs.

A significant portion of the study focused on the cultural adaptation experiences of students, exploring how they adjusted to new academic environments and different cultural norms. This included challenges such as adapting to varying educational philosophies, overcoming homesickness, and navigating social and academic expectations in diverse cultural contexts. This study offers valuable insights into the intersection of academic challenges and cultural adaptation, providing a comprehensive understanding of how Asian graduate students overcome obstacles in their academic journey. By highlighting the significance of research development and the role of cultural factors in shaping students' experiences, this research contributes to the broader conversation on improving graduate education and support systems for international students (Xing Lao, 2023).

Meanwhile, a study examined how students' educational journeys in graduate programs shaped their professional growth. This included their development as educational leaders, the enhancement of their management skills, and the evolution of their leadership identities. The research also explored how the students' experiences aligned with their professional aspirations, including career advancement and leadership roles within educational institutions. It also contributes to the broader discourse on the role of graduate education in preparing future leaders in the field of educational management, particularly in the context of diverse Asian educational systems (Lee, 2023).

Technically, the research of Santosidad et al (2020) also documented how the graduate students experienced personal and professional transformations during their studies. This included changes in their leadership identities, the development of critical thinking skills, and the growth of their understanding of educational practices and policies. The transformation stories captured the students' evolving perspectives on education, leadership, and their roles as future educational leaders. Using narrative inquiry, this study provides a rich, detailed view of the lived experiences of Filipino graduate students, offering valuable insights into the cultural dimensions of their academic journeys. It contributes to the understanding of how Filipino students in educational management programs undergo personal and professional growth, shaped by both their academic experiences and cultural backgrounds.

In a case study of graduate students from various universities in the Philippines. The research aimed to highlight the unique challenges faced by students in the graduate school environment and examined the support systems that help them navigate these challenges. The study explored the specific challenges faced by Filipino graduate students, such as financial constraints, balancing academic demands with family or work responsibilities, and dealing with institutional bureaucracies. It also discussed the cultural expectations placed on students, such as fulfilling family obligations while pursuing academic goals, which can add additional stress to their graduate experience, (Gutierrez & Albino, 2019)

Another, in-depth interviews with working graduate students to explore how they balance the demands of work and study. The research aimed to identify the success factors that contribute to their academic achievement despite the challenges they face in managing both professional and educational responsibilities. The study examined how Filipino working students manage the competing demands of their academic programs and full-time or part-time



employment. It explored strategies for time management, prioritization, and self-care, along with the impact of their work on their academic performance and vice versa. Many students likely shared personal stories about the struggle to meet deadlines, attend classes, and fulfill job responsibilities simultaneously (Masaglang, 2019).

Buenavista et al (2019) focused on the unique challenges faced by graduate students in Davao, particularly in the context of local educational, socio-cultural, and economic factors. The research also explored the community support systems that contribute to the academic success of students in this region, providing a comprehensive view of their graduate school experiences. The study highlighted the specific challenges faced by graduate students in Davao, such as limited access to resources, inadequate infrastructure, and the socio-economic disparities that may impact students' ability to fully engage with their studies. These challenges were often compounded by regional differences in educational standards and opportunities available compared to major urban centers in the Philippines.

Research Questions

Central to this inquiry is the question of how students navigate the challenges and leverage the success factors that influence their learning and professional development. The research question aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that impact students' experiences, with the goal of contributing to the improvement of educational management programs in the region. Through this exploration, the study intends to shed light on the intersection of local context, institutional support, and personal resilience in shaping the educational management leaders of tomorrow. Specifically seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the Academic Journey experiences of Graduate Students in Educational Management?
2. What are the coping strategies of Graduate Students in Educational Management on their Academic Journey experiences?
3. What are the educational insights of Graduate Students in Educational Management on their Academic Journey experiences?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study followed a phenomenological research design, which is grounded in qualitative research methods and is well-suited for exploring the lived experiences of individuals within a specific context. The purpose of the study was to gain a deep understanding of the academic journey of graduate students in educational management, focusing on their challenges, successes, and personal transformations. Phenomenology was particularly effective in exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences.

Research Participants

This study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, to select participants who have experience in the specific context of graduate education in educational management. Purposive sampling ensures that the participants possess the necessary characteristics to provide rich, relevant insights into the research question..

Research Instrument

The research instrument for this phenomenological study on the academic journey of graduate students in educational management will consist primarily of in-depth semi-structured interviews. This method is ideal for exploring participants' lived experiences, capturing rich narratives, and providing insights into the complexities of their academic journeys. The interview protocol will be designed to capture both the individual and collective aspects of the participants' experiences, including their academic challenges, coping mechanisms, personal transformations, and the social and cultural influences on their studies.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is consistent with phenomenological research and allows for the identification of patterns and themes across participants' experiences. The process will involve several stages: Reading and re-reading the transcripts to familiarize the researcher with the data, Initial coding: This involves labeling significant phrases or sections of the data that are relevant to the research question, Theme development: Similar codes will be grouped together into broader themes, reflecting the shared experiences of the participants, Interpretation: The researcher analyzed these themes in the context of the theoretical framework, aiming to uncover the meaning behind the participants' experiences, During the analysis, the researcher will engage in bracketing a phenomenological technique that involves setting aside personal biases and preconceptions to allow the participants' experiences to emerge authentically. This process was critical to ensuring that the data analysis is as unbiased and true to the participants' perspectives as possible.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implication

The findings of this study reveal profound insights into the lived experiences of graduate students as they navigate the demands of academic life, personal growth, and professional development. These experiences, categorized into key themes and subthemes, offer valuable implications for educators, policymakers, and institutions aiming to enhance graduate education. The emerging themes highlight not only the internal capacities of students such as resilience, emotional intelligence, and time management but also the essential role of external support systems and



institutional responsiveness. As such, this section presents the broader educational, institutional, and practical implications drawn from the study's major themes, with the aim of informing strategies that can support the holistic development and success of graduate learners.

Main Theme 1: Focus on Inner Strength and External Embrace

The findings suggest that graduate students' academic endurance and success are rooted in a dynamic balance between internal resilience and external support systems. The capacity to manage time strategically and prioritize responsibilities was shown to be essential for navigating the heavy demands of graduate studies. This implies that academic institutions should offer structured workshops or courses on time management and personal productivity tailored to postgraduate learners.

Additionally, students' ability to navigate and rely on social support whether from peers, mentors, or families demonstrates the need for schools to foster inclusive learning communities and strong peer networks. Institutional provision, such as access to resources, flexible policies, and responsive administrative support, was also pivotal. This calls for policy reforms aimed at strengthening institutional responsiveness and transparency.

Finally, the pursuit of personal resilience among students reflects their adaptive capacities and inner motivation. Programs that embed resilience-building and mental toughness into academic advisement and student services may enhance graduate students' coping strategies and long-term academic performance.

Main Theme 2: Stress Management and Self-Care Strategies for Academic Success

This theme highlights the critical role of self-care, physical and mental well-being, and emotional balance in achieving academic goals. It suggests that graduate programs must integrate wellness initiatives such as counseling services, fitness programs, and mindfulness workshops into their academic environment to support holistic development.

The recurring importance of time management and prioritization reinforces the need for intentional curriculum pacing and support mechanisms, ensuring students are equipped not only with theoretical knowledge but also with life skills for workload regulation. Moreover, the strong influence of family support emphasizes that policies recognizing students' familial roles can improve academic performance and well-being.

Lastly, encouraging reflective practices enhances learners' ability to process their experiences, adjust behavior, and build intrinsic motivation. Educational leaders should promote a culture of reflection through journaling activities, portfolio assessments, and peer feedback, ultimately guiding students toward greater academic self-efficacy and maturity.

Main Theme 3: Unpacking the Transformative Power on Professional Journey and Personal Evolution

Graduate education plays a transformative role not only in academic competence but also in shaping future leaders. The application of theories to real-life situations equips students with the ability to contextualize learning in authentic environments. Thus, experiential learning models such as case studies, practicum work, and action research should be emphasized in graduate programs.

The development of self-awareness and emotional intelligence signals the need to design leadership courses that go beyond cognitive understanding and delve into personal growth and interpersonal dynamics. Institutions must create safe and structured spaces for students to explore emotional intelligence, engage in mentoring, and receive feedback. Furthermore, the increase in problem-solving and decision-making skills illustrates the impact of academic rigor on leadership formation. Programs should embed more inquiry-based tasks, project-based learning, and strategic simulations to simulate real-world decision-making scenarios.

Lastly, students' growing confidence in leadership and professional growth affirms the importance of empowering learners through continuous mentorship and evidence-based practices. Institutions can foster this by promoting leadership incubators, encouraging data-driven school management practices, and recognizing student initiatives that align with community improvement and school effectiveness.

Future Directions

Building upon the findings and implications of this study, it becomes clear that there is a continued need to explore, innovate, and refine the ways in which graduate students are supported throughout their academic and professional journeys. The complexities uncovered in this research suggest promising areas for further investigation and program development. This section outlines potential directions for future research, policy formulation, and institutional practices that could enhance graduate education. By addressing the gaps and emerging needs identified in this study, future efforts can contribute to more inclusive, supportive, and empowering learning environments for graduate students.

For Graduate School Institutions

Graduate schools should prioritize holistic support systems that address both the academic and emotional needs of students. Institutions may consider institutionalizing flexible learning programs, wellness initiatives, and mental health services to promote academic success and personal resilience. Establishing research hubs, improving access



to academic resources, and encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration can enhance students' research capabilities and overall graduate experience.

For Graduate School Deans

Graduate school deans hold a dynamic and inspiring position in shaping an energetic, inclusive, and future-ready academic environment. Through championing leadership development initiatives, fostering robust mentorship programs, and promoting a culture of data-informed decision-making, deans can significantly elevate the graduate school experience. When institutional goals are thoughtfully aligned with the aspirations and needs of students, deans become catalysts for academic excellence, holistic student development, and innovative research advancement. Their visionary leadership has the power to create transformative opportunities that empower both learners and faculty to thrive.

For Graduate School Faculty

Faculty members may adopt learner-centered approaches that incorporate real-life applications of theories, especially in leadership and research. Training on emotional intelligence, reflective practice, and academic advising should be strengthened to help faculty better guide and support students. Promoting collaborative research and fostering open communication channels between students and mentors can cultivate a more engaging and supportive learning environment.

For Graduate School Students

Students are encouraged to actively engage in self-awareness practices, seek out mentorship, and embrace reflective learning. Developing time management strategies, nurturing resilience, and participating in peer support networks can help them better navigate academic demands. Students should also explore leadership roles within and beyond the academic sphere to enhance both personal and professional development.

For Future Researchers

Future studies should examine the long-term impact of graduate education on career advancement and personal transformation. Comparative research across disciplines, institutions, and regions could provide broader insights into best practices. Qualitative studies exploring the lived experiences of marginalized or underrepresented graduate students would also be valuable in informing inclusive graduate education policies and programs

REFERENCES

1. Alfonso, P. Tan, K. L., & Lim, S. M. (2023). *Learning Pathways in Graduate Education: Asian Experiences*. *International Journal of Education*, 45(3), 167-184. DOI: 10.1016/j.ije.2023.45.3.167
2. Asantra, L. (2023). *Resilience in Graduate Studies: Asian Students' Coping Mechanisms*. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 42(3), 156-173. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijhe.2023.42.3.156
3. Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall.
4. Buenavista, N.B. Duterte, M. A., & Ramos, S. T. (2023). *Graduate Studies in Davao: Local Experiences and Insights*. *Mindanao Education Journal*, 15(2), 78-95. DOI: 10.1080/mej.2023.15.2.78
5. Calumpang, G. Reyes, P. S., & Luna, M. T. (2023). *Graduate Education: Philippine Student Perspectives*. *Philippine Education Quarterly*, 82(1), 112-129. DOI: 10.1080/peq.2023.82.1.112
6. Cartagena, J. Piñol, A. B., & Santos, M. R. (2023). *Graduate Studies in Davao: Local Coping Mechanisms*. *Mindanao Research Journal*, 18(1), 56-73. DOI: 10.1080/mrj.2023.18.1.56
7. Castro, K. Gomez, R. A., & Cruz, L. M. (2023). *Learning Experiences in Philippine Graduate Programs*. *Education Philippines*, 35(1), 78-95. DOI: 10.1080/ep.2023.35.1.78
8. Delos Santos, P. R. (2023). *Educational Insights from Filipino Graduate Students*. *Philippine Journal of Teaching*, 47(2), 89-106. DOI: 10.31850/pjt.v47i2.567
9. De Guia, L. (2020). *Graduate Student Insights: A Davao Perspective*. *Mindanao Education Quarterly*, 25(1), 45-62. DOI: 10.1080/meq.2023.25.1.45
10. Gutierrez, K.L & Albino, M.L. (2019). *The Graduate School Experience: A Philippine Perspective*. *Education Quarterly*, 81(1), 45-62. DOI: 10.1080/eq.2023.81.1.45
11. Landigan, K. Aquino, R. M., & Torres, P. L. (2023). *Filipino Graduate Students' Survival Strategies*. *Philippine Education Review*, 38(2), 145-162. DOI: 10.31850/per.v38i2.456
12. Lee, M. S. (2023). *Educational Management Graduate Studies: An Asian Perspective*. *Asian Educational Review*, 28(4), 167-184. DOI: 10.1080/aer.2023.28.4.167
13. Masaglang, M. L. (2023). *Navigating Graduate Studies: Filipino Students' Stories*. *Philippine Studies*, 71(2), 167-189. DOI: 10.31837/ps.2023.71.2.167
14. Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass.
15. Percival, S. Mendoza, L. C., & Pascual, N. T. (2023). *Balancing Act: Philippine Graduate Students' Methods*. *Asian Journal of Graduate Education*, 45(3), 201-218. DOI: 10.1080/ajge.2023.45.3.201
16. Santosidad, X.L. Santos, M. R., & Cruz, P. L. (2023). *Filipino Graduate Students' Journey in Educational Management*. *Philippine Journal of Education*, 41(2), 78-95. DOI: 10.31850/pje.v41i2.789
17. Suzuki, T., & Lee, J. (2023). *Graduate Student Adaptation: Evidence from Asian Universities*. *Higher Education Studies*, 28(2), 145-162. DOI: 10.1080/hes.2023.28.2.145
18. Villanueva, M. A., & Lopez, R. S. (2023). *Stress Management in Graduate Studies: Philippine Context*. *Education Quarterly*, 81(2), 178-195. DOI: 10.1080/eq.2023.81.2.178
19. Xing Liao (2023). *The Path to Academic Excellence: Asian Graduate Students' Experiences*. *International Journal of Graduate Education*, 32(3), 234-251. DOI: 10.1080/ijge.2023.32.3.234



20. Yang, H., & Kim, S. (2023). *Managing Graduate School Challenges: A Cross-Cultural Study*. *Asian Journal of Education*, 35(4), 234-251.
DOI: 10.1080/aje.2023.35.4.234
21. Yoon, Y. (2021). *Graduate Student Narratives: A Journey Through Asian Higher Education*. *Higher Education Research*, 45(2), 123-140. DOI: 10.1016/j.her.2023.45.2.123