

# The Lived Experience of Doctors of Nursing Practice in Pursuit of a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Nursing

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## Abstract

This qualitative research study using a heuristic, descriptive phenomenological approach explored the lived experience of 12 DNPs who have returned to in pursuit of a PhD in nursing. Three themes were identified from the study participants: Wanting to Know Something More, Social-Individual Tensions, and Challenges to Transformational Learning. Based on the study findings, the DNPs desire to expand on their limited research knowledge and the tensions and challenges to transformational learning surrounding this quest were worth it as the participants gained personal and professional fulfillment.

**Keywords:** *Clinical doctorate; Nursing doctorate, Doctoral education; DNP to PhD; Research focused doctorate.*

## Introduction

Doctoral preparation in nursing has a long history of growth with variation and is at the forefront of discussion within our nursing community. The nursing profession has accepted numerous provisions of doctoral education designed with unique objectives and outcomes. Doctoral program curriculum differs from those designed to focus on clinical practice and supplant the master's degree to programs intended to develop the nurse researcher.<sup>(1)</sup> Numerous new nursing degrees have emerged in healthcare in the last decade. Some of these emerging degrees are referred to as clinical or practicing doctorates and presently are not recognized as a professional degree for licensure. Practice doctorates have components of research embedded in the curriculum but do not require a dissertation as a culminating degree requirement. These programs place less emphasis on theory, meta-theory, and research method compared to research-focused programs.<sup>(1)</sup> One alternative to the professional practice doctorate is to obtain the traditional Doctor of Philosophy degree (PhD) whose curriculum focuses on research and developing the nurse scientist. Several healthcare disciplines such as medicine, dentistry, psychology, pharmacology, and physical therapy presently offer the practice doctorate as their professions' terminal degree. Providers who have earned this terminal degree in clinical practice are returning to school to pursue a second doctoral degree,

the PhD.

Ongoing discussion has evolved over the last decade, yielding both constructive and disparaging criticism as well as concerns surrounding the practice degree within the nursing community. One concern associated with the pursuit of a second nursing doctoral degree addresses the value and the application associated with the degree. The individual who possesses a doctoral degree has, by definition, achieved a terminal degree in his/her chosen discipline. Therefore, the pursuit of a second doctorate degree could be perceived by nursing, members of the scientific community, and/or society as an acknowledgement of a hierarchal structure for terminal doctorate degrees.

Unless nursing understands the essence of practicing DNP-prepared nurses actively pursuing the PhD in nursing, the profession will remain in the unknowing of the perspective of having clinical nurses practicing as nurse scientists. Discussions exist in the nursing literature regarding nurses' professional and personal motivation as well as inhibitors and job satisfaction on intent to returning to school in pursuit of a higher educational nursing degrees.<sup>(2)</sup> This trend is often a result of the shift in the nursing shortage with nurses advancing their education for job security.<sup>(3)</sup> It is essential that nursing understand the lived experience of DNP-prepared nurses who are in pursuit of a PhD in nursing.

This qualitative study using heuristic, descriptive phenomenology examines the essence of the lived experience of DNP-prepared nurses actively pursuing the PhD in nursing degree. This study sought to identify common experiences voiced by the DNP participants as they shared and described the experience of returning to school for a second nursing doctoral degree.

### Material and Method

A qualitative phenomenological research design using heuristic, descriptive phenomenology was used to examine and understand the essence of the lived experience of DNP-prepared nurses in pursuit of the PhD in nursing degree. After Barry University's Institutional Review Board granted human subject approval, purposive and snowball recruitment strategies were undertaken to help identify potential study participants.

Qualified candidates for the study were DNPs that graduated from an American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) accredited program and who were enrolled in a PhD in nursing program. An information flyer was sent via email to the participants asking for participation. Requests were made to solicit known DNP participants and were asked to distribute the flyer to DNP colleagues who are pursuing a PhD in nursing or who have pursued a PhD in nursing wanted to participate in the study. Assistance was requested from the participants helping to identify other DNP experiencing a similar career trajectory. The sample consisted of 12 ( $n=12$ ) DNPs who were in pursuit of a PhD in nursing, six males and six females. Participants varied in age from 45-65 years. Six of the participants enrolled in the study were actively taking classes from a DNP-PhD bridge program while six were enrolled in a traditional PhD program. Ten of the participants were advanced practice registered nurses and all but three held academic appointments at a college or university.

After consent was obtained and participant questions were answered, data collection began and consisted of semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Two interviews were conducted in person with the additional ten through Skype. In order to obtain basic demographic data, each participant completed a demographic data questionnaire that was collected from the participants and included, gender, age group, race/ethnicity, year DNP program was completed, type of PhD program attended, year PhD studies began, year PhD studies were completed, advanced practice registered nurse (APRN) status and

specialty, academic affiliation with either a college or university, and if the participant held a clinical practice in a healthcare facility. The participants were then asked to provide a pseudonym that was used to identify them aiding to safeguard their identity. The interviews were recorded using two electronic digital recorder devices and interviews ranged from 36-62 minutes in length. The first research question for this study was "What is the lived experience of a practicing DNP returning to school in pursuit of a PhD degree in Nursing?" The second question asked "How do DNPs who have returned to school in pursuit of a PhD in nursing explain their motivation?" A third and final research question sought to answer "What factors do participants perceive have influenced their decision to pursue a PhD in nursing?" At the end of the interview, a member check interview was scheduled. The researcher then utilized the Epoche process by reflecting and journaling, which enabled him to make his experiences, thoughts, and feelings visible as well as observations of behaviors of each participant in the study. All interviews were sent to a transcriptionist who signed a third-party confidentiality form. Interview transcriptions were entered into NVivo for MAC 11.4 computer software and phenomenological reduction were used for data analysis.

### Findings

There were many commonalities in the participants' experiences and a total of three themes were uncovered from the analysis that conveyed the experience of these DNP nurses returning to school in pursuit of a PhD in nursing and clearly grounded the data: *wanting to know something more, social-individual tension, and challenges faced to transformational learning.*

**Theme I: Wanting to know something more.** One theme that emerged from the data analysis was the desire to want to know something more after graduating from a DNP program. This presents a discrepancy between the actual state and the desired state and such progress is rewarded by positive affect. The desire the DNP participants sought out of wanting something more and the lack of skill needed for the DNP to translate evidence contributed to the desire for the DNPs to pursue the PhD degree in nursing. One of the DNP participants verbalized how his DNP limited him in practice and did not offer what it was he needed to *know* to implement research findings. He shared his experience:

“I knew the DNP would not offer me research skills but thought at least the program would cover what was needed to translate the evidence to practice. I was lacking this skill when I finished the DNP program. I think we only had only one class in translational research. What they didn’t cover in my program was the different type of research methodologies, and that’s what I want it. When reviewing literature, you have to understand the research methodology which I don’t think is done very well in the DNP programs.

**Another student spoke about occupying a different nursing role and needing additional skills to attain this goal. She shared her plan as:** I was interested in health policy. I was also interested in possibly working for the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or the National Institute of Health (NIH) at the time I decided to enroll in the PhD program. I recognized the fact that I probably needed that PhD, that heavy research-based degree, in order to be appropriately prepared for that kind of role.

**Theme II: Social-Individual Tension** was represented in this study by reasons that led the DNPs to return to school in pursuit a PhD in nursing. One PhD candidate explained how she was passed over for a position as a Program Director because she did not hold a PhD degree. She spoke about her *social-individual tension*: “The university where I was working was looking for a Program Director for the Nurse Anesthesia Program. They were not looking for DNPs to fill this role and would only interview PhDs. Those of us who held a DNP recognized that the opportunity for advancement was not present. I decided that going back for a PhD would afford me more career advancement.”

One of the DNP to PhD students shared his experience of serving on a hospital research committee and recognized he lacked the skills to conduct research. He explained his *social-individual tension*: “I was invited to serve on the research committee at the medical center where I was practicing at that point in time and I thought if I had a better understanding of the research methodology and entire research process, I would be seen as being a more credible committee member amongst other researchers”.

**Theme III: Challenges to Transformational Learning.** This description of *transformation* coupled with challenges faced by the DNPs who have returned to school in pursuit of a PhD in nursing connected with the participant’s voices in this study. The following stories explain how

the education experience of returning to school in pursuit of a PhD in nursing has been challenging time during their transformational process. One DNP to PhD student described the *challenges* that returning to school presents:

“This is definitely a challenging experience! It was a humbling experience as well because you are that student again that is back in a desk writing papers for grade, trying to appease your professors. It’s very hard to go back to school for the doctorate degree especially when you already hold a terminal degree”. Other DNP students described a challenge which evolved her engagement in coursework since a terminal degree had already been obtained. One student explained: “It’s 2 years as a DNP, and now another 3 years as a PhD, so it’s a long time to be a student, particularly an adult with a full-time practice”

## Conclusion

Based on study findings, DNPs returning to school in pursuit of a PhD in nursing is rigorous, but DNPs are gaining the knowledge quested, leading to success in achieving their professional goals. Participants spoke about *wanting to know something more*, the key factor that motivated the DNP to return to school to pursue a second nursing doctorate degree and the first theme that evolved from analysis of the data. According to Michael and Clochesy,<sup>(4)</sup> the focus of DNP program highlights practice and evidence translation. In these DNP programs, less emphasis is placed on research and statistical method when compared to the research focused PhD degree. Since the application of rigorous method and highly advanced techniques in data management and analysis are essential to the translation of evidence into practice, many DNPs are taking the lead and returning to school for a PhD to acquire the skills needed for this practice.<sup>(4)</sup> Nurse scientists, holding a PhD degree in nursing, are a critical link in the discovery and translation of knowledge that can be generated by nurses.<sup>(5)</sup>

Loomis, Willard, and Cohen<sup>(6)</sup> found in their Internet-based exploratory study that the majority of DNP students reported considering the PhD degree as their degree of choice but decided to pursue the DNP because of their desire to become clinical experts and were not interested in nursing research. Tomlinson<sup>(7)</sup> conducted a qualitative study focusing on the way higher education students understand and interpret the role of their higher education credentials in shaping their future outcomes in the labour market. It was clear from their responses that they viewed the acquisition of higher education qualifications as a significant boost to their level of human capital that would provide them with advantages in the labour market.

The DNPs openly spoke about *social-individual tensions* faced while in pursuit of a PhD degree. Listening to the nursing community erroneously attempt to define the DNP degree and be subjected to other negative opinions and perceptions regarding the degree produces stress on the DNP to PhD student. In addition, participants expressed earning a DNP degree instead of a PhD caused them to be passed over for a promotion in academia. They also spoke about not being considered for promotion solely because they did not carry the PhD credential. They described time management tensions as well as juggling personal and professional responsibilities. In addition, participants expressed the financial challenges and role ambiguity that have developed during the course of their PhD studies. Role stress was identified as some of the social tensions experienced by the participants. Role Stress is described as any physical or psychological strain experienced by an individual who needs greater resources than those available to effectively perform the role. <sup>(8)</sup> Role stress can develop from dissimilar patterns of mismatch in expectations, resources, capabilities, and values about the role one is to assume. <sup>(9)</sup> Among the many dimensions of social and individual tensions, most researchers have focused on the influence of role ambiguity or conflict on personal or organizational outcomes; however, the role of the nurse, more specifically the DNP, has not been the focus in these research studies.<sup>(9,10)</sup>

Although much referenced in the adult learning literature about transformational learning, there are limited studies on the challenges faced during transformational learning. Attempts to turn the rhetoric into reality are seen as developments to the teaching and learning process in higher education aiding students to identify and address challenges encountered during their studies. Deep, transformational learning is prized and is meant to be achieved through experience, discovery, social interaction, and individual challenges. <sup>(11)</sup> There is an absence in the literature surrounding challenges faced with transformational learning.

In conclusion, the DNP participants in this study demonstrated motivation in their quest for knowledge and recognize the benefits of obtaining a PhD degree in nursing. The current study allowed the researcher to derive meaning from the experiences of the DNP returning to school in pursuit of a PhD in nursing degree. The interviews highlighted *wanted to know something more* than what the DNP curriculum offered, *social-individual tension* such as intrinsic or extrinsic motivational factors that have inspired the DNP to return to school in pursuit of a second doctoral degree in nursing, and

obstacles and *Challenges to transformational learning*. Recommendations for future studies should include a larger sample size and a grounded theory design to examine and understand the factors motivating the DNP to return to school in pursuit of a PhD in nursing.

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