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Beyond the Classroom: Lived Experiences of Master of Arts in Education Students in Balancing Teaching, Graduate Studies and Personal Life at Northeastern College

¹ **Angie Flor B. Gano**

Northeastern College

Santiago City, Philippines

angie7.florgano@gmail.com

Abstract

The increasing number of teachers pursuing graduate education while maintaining professional and personal responsibilities has highlighted the importance of understanding work-life-learning balance among adult learners. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education (MAED) students at Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines, in balancing their teaching responsibilities, graduate studies, and personal life. Guided by Husserl's descriptive phenomenology, the study sought to examine the challenges encountered, coping strategies employed, support systems utilized, and personal and professional transformations experienced by teacher-graduate students. Using purposive sampling, fifteen (15) MAED students who were actively teaching while enrolled in the graduate program participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method. The analysis generated five essential themes: (1) managing multiple professional and personal roles; (2) developing effective time management and self-discipline; (3) drawing strength from family, colleagues, and academic support systems; (4) cultivating resilience through challenges and lifelong learning; and (5) transforming teaching practices through graduate education. Participants described balancing teaching, academic requirements, and family responsibilities as demanding yet rewarding, enabling them to strengthen instructional competence, leadership skills, reflective practice, and professional confidence. Although they experienced workload pressures, physical fatigue, and emotional stress, participants demonstrated resilience through strategic planning, intrinsic motivation, and supportive interpersonal relationships. The findings underscore the need for higher education institutions to develop flexible graduate programs, responsive student support services, and learner-centered instructional practices that accommodate the unique needs of working teachers. Likewise, educational institutions are encouraged to foster organizational environments that support teachers pursuing advanced education. The study contributes to the growing literature on adult learning, teacher professional development, and work-life-learning balance by providing insights into the experiences of graduate students within the Philippine educational context.

Keywords: *work-life-learning balance, Master of Arts in Education, teacher professional development, phenomenology, graduate education, adult learning, resilience, Northeastern College, Philippines*



Introduction

The teaching profession has undergone significant transformation over the past decade as educators are increasingly expected to perform multiple roles beyond classroom instruction. In addition to delivering quality teaching, teachers are responsible for curriculum planning, learner assessment, instructional innovation, administrative functions, research, community extension, and continuous professional development. These expanding responsibilities have encouraged many educators to pursue graduate education to enhance their pedagogical competence, leadership capacity, research skills, and career advancement opportunities (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2023). Consequently, graduate schools have witnessed a growing number of working teachers enrolling in Master of Arts in Education (MAED) programs while continuing to fulfill demanding professional and personal responsibilities.

For many educators, graduate education represents more than a requirement for promotion or salary advancement. It serves as an avenue for lifelong learning, reflective practice, instructional improvement, and professional identity formation. Through advanced academic training, teachers acquire contemporary pedagogical knowledge, educational research competencies, leadership skills, and evidence-based instructional practices that contribute to improved teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). However, pursuing graduate studies while maintaining full-time teaching responsibilities and fulfilling family obligations presents significant challenges that require effective balancing of multiple life domains.

The concept of work-life-learning balance has emerged as an important framework for understanding the experiences of adult learners who simultaneously navigate occupational, academic, and personal responsibilities. Unlike traditional work-life balance, this concept recognizes learning as an additional domain requiring substantial investments of time, emotional energy, cognitive effort, and financial resources (Greenhaus & Allen, 2021). Teacher-graduate students often attend evening or weekend classes, prepare instructional materials, complete academic requirements, conduct research, and simultaneously fulfill family responsibilities. Such competing demands frequently result in role conflict, workload pressures, stress, and reduced opportunities for rest and leisure. Nevertheless, these experiences also foster resilience, self-regulation, adaptability, and professional growth (Richardson et al., 2021).

The concept of work-life-learning balance extends the traditional notion of work-life balance by recognizing graduate education as a third major life domain that requires significant investments of time, energy, and emotional commitment (Greenhaus & Allen, 2021). Teacher-graduate students simultaneously fulfill the responsibilities of classroom instruction, lesson preparation, learner assessment, graduate coursework, research activities, and family obligations. These overlapping roles frequently create competing priorities that require continuous negotiation and adaptation.

Studies have shown that teachers enrolled in graduate programs commonly experience role overload, time scarcity, emotional fatigue, and work-family conflict because of the simultaneous demands of employment, academic requirements, and personal responsibilities (Richardson et al., 2021). Nevertheless, many educators successfully maintain work-life-learning balance through effective planning, prioritization, organizational support, and strong intrinsic motivation. Rather than viewing multiple responsibilities solely as sources of stress, teacher-graduate students often perceive these experiences as opportunities for personal growth, resilience, and professional development (Kossek & Lee, 2021).

Time management is consistently identified as one of the strongest predictors of academic success among working graduate students (Broadbent & Poon, 2021). Effective time management involves planning daily activities, prioritizing tasks, establishing realistic goals, and allocating sufficient time for work, study, and personal responsibilities. For teacher-graduate students, efficient time management becomes indispensable because instructional preparation, classroom teaching, assessment, graduate coursework, and family obligations often compete for limited time.

Self-regulated learning complements effective time management by enabling adult learners to monitor, evaluate, and adjust their learning behaviors according to changing academic demands (Zimmerman, 2008). Teachers pursuing graduate education frequently utilize planners, digital calendars, task management applications, and structured study schedules to maintain productivity and minimize stress. Such strategies not only facilitate academic success but also enhance self-discipline, accountability, and professional efficiency (Macan, 2022).

Research demonstrates that supportive school leaders who provide flexible schedules, professional encouragement, and opportunities for continuing education positively influence teachers' motivation and commitment to graduate studies (Day & Gu, 2020). Likewise, family support enables teachers to devote sufficient time to coursework and research by sharing household responsibilities and providing emotional reassurance during periods of academic pressure.

Peer collaboration also contributes significantly to graduate student success. Collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, and mutual encouragement among classmates foster stronger academic engagement, reduce feelings of isolation, and promote psychological well-being (Tinto, 2021). Collectively, these forms of social support strengthen teachers' resilience and sustain their commitment to lifelong learning.

Resilience refers to the capacity to adapt positively despite experiencing stress, adversity, or significant life challenges (American Psychological Association, 2023). Teacher-graduate students frequently encounter demanding workloads, instructional responsibilities, financial obligations, and academic pressures that test their emotional and psychological endurance. Nevertheless, resilient educators demonstrate perseverance, optimism, adaptability, and effective coping strategies that enable them to continue pursuing graduate education despite these challenges (Smith et al., 2022).

Closely related to resilience is the concept of lifelong learning, which emphasizes continuous professional growth throughout an educator's career. Lifelong learning encourages teachers to remain intellectually curious, reflective, and committed to improving instructional practice through continuous education and professional development (UNESCO, 2021). Graduate education serves as an important mechanism for cultivating lifelong learning by encouraging teachers to engage in scholarly inquiry, reflective practice, and evidence-based instructional improvement.

Within the Philippine educational context, graduate education has become increasingly important in response to educational reforms, curriculum innovations, digital transformation, inclusive education initiatives, and the continuous pursuit of quality instruction. The Department of Education and higher education institutions encourage teachers to engage in continuing professional development to improve instructional competence and educational leadership. Despite these initiatives, relatively few qualitative studies have explored how teachers pursuing graduate education negotiate the simultaneous demands of teaching, graduate studies, and personal life, particularly within private higher education institutions in Northern Luzon.

Existing studies have primarily examined teacher stress, job satisfaction, burnout, or professional development independently, with limited attention given to the integrated experiences of working

teachers enrolled in graduate education. Understanding these lived experiences is essential because the quality of teachers' professional learning directly influences classroom effectiveness, instructional innovation, student achievement, and educational leadership. Moreover, identifying the coping strategies and support systems that facilitate successful work-life-learning balance may inform institutional policies designed to improve graduate student retention, well-being, and academic success.

Anchored on Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964) and Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy) (Knowles et al., 2015), this study explores the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education students at Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines, in balancing teaching responsibilities, graduate studies, and personal life. Specifically, the study seeks to understand the challenges encountered, coping strategies employed, sources of support, and the meanings participants attribute to their experiences as working teacher-graduate students. By providing an in-depth understanding of these experiences, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on teacher professional development, adult learning, and graduate education while offering practical insights for graduate schools, educational leaders, and policymakers in designing responsive programs that promote teacher well-being, lifelong learning, and professional excellence.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Role Theory developed by Kahn et al. (1964) and Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy) proposed by Knowles et al. (2015).

Role Theory explains that individuals simultaneously perform multiple social roles, each carrying distinct expectations, responsibilities, and behavioral demands (Kahn et al., 1964). For Master of Arts in Education students, these roles include being classroom teachers, graduate students, parents, spouses, community members, and educational professionals. The simultaneous performance of these responsibilities frequently results in role conflict and role overload when available time, energy, and resources become insufficient to meet competing expectations (Greenhaus & Allen, 2021). Nevertheless, effective coping strategies, organizational support, and adaptive behaviors enable individuals to negotiate these competing roles successfully. Within the context of this study, Role Theory provides a framework for understanding how teacher-graduate students balance teaching responsibilities, graduate education, and personal life while maintaining professional performance and personal well-being.

Complementing this perspective is Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy), which posits that adult learners are self-directed, internally motivated, and driven by learning experiences that possess immediate relevance to their professional and personal lives (Knowles et al., 2015). Adult learners draw upon their accumulated teaching experiences to construct new knowledge, solve practical educational problems, and improve classroom practice. This theory explains why teachers remain committed to graduate education despite demanding workloads, perceiving advanced education as an investment in professional competence, career advancement, instructional excellence, and lifelong learning.

The integration of Role Theory and Adult Learning Theory provides a comprehensive conceptual lens for examining the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education students at Northeastern College. Together, these theories explain how teacher-graduate students navigate competing professional, academic, and personal responsibilities, employ adaptive coping strategies, utilize institutional and social support systems, and transform graduate learning into meaningful improvements in teaching

practice, educational leadership, and professional identity (Greenhaus & Allen, 2021; Knowles et al., 2015).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design grounded in Husserl's phenomenological philosophy to explore the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education (MAED) students at Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines, in balancing their teaching responsibilities, graduate studies, and personal life (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand the meanings participants attached to their experiences as working teachers simultaneously performing professional, academic, and personal roles. The study was conducted at Northeastern College, a private higher education institution in Santiago City, Isabela, offering graduate programs for educators and other professionals pursuing advanced academic qualifications while maintaining full-time employment. Using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), fifteen (15) Master of Arts in Education students were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) currently enrolled in the MAED program at Northeastern College, (2) actively employed as full-time teachers in either public or private educational institutions, (3) had completed at least one semester in the graduate program, and (4) voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Data saturation determined the final number of participants, ensuring that no new themes emerged during the interview process (Saunders et al., 2018). Data were gathered through researcher-developed semi-structured, in-depth interview guides consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' experiences, challenges, coping strategies, support systems, and personal reflections regarding work-life-learning balance. Prior to data collection, the interview guide underwent expert validation by specialists in qualitative research and educational management to establish content validity, followed by pilot testing involving graduate students who were not included in the actual study. Institutional approval and ethical clearance were secured before conducting the interviews, and all participants signed informed consent forms after receiving explanations regarding the study's objectives, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Individual interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes were conducted either face-to-face or through secure online platforms, depending on participants' availability and preference. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by field notes documenting non-verbal expressions, contextual observations, and the researcher's reflexive insights. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives. The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological method, which involved repeated reading of transcripts, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, development of exhaustive descriptions, identification of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and member checking to validate the accuracy and credibility of the findings (Morrow et al., 2015). Throughout the analysis, the researcher practiced bracketing (*epoché*) to minimize personal assumptions and biases, allowing participants' lived experiences to emerge authentically (Moustakas, 1994). To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were employed through prolonged engagement, member checking, peer debriefing, thick description, audit trails, reflexive journaling, and systematic documentation of the research process. Ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, justice, confidentiality, anonymity, and responsible data management were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study in accordance with the American Psychological Association's (2020) Ethical Principles of

Psychologists and Code of Conduct, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and the integrity of the research process.

Results and Discussion

The phenomenological analysis of the interview data using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method revealed five essential themes that describe the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education (MAED) students at Northeastern College in balancing teaching responsibilities, graduate studies, and personal life. These themes reflect the participants' challenges, coping mechanisms, support systems, and professional transformation throughout their graduate education journey. Representative verbatim statements are presented to illustrate each theme, followed by an interpretation supported by existing literature.

Theme 1: Balancing the Demands of Teaching, Graduate Studies, and Personal Responsibilities

The participants consistently described balancing classroom teaching, graduate coursework, and family obligations as their greatest challenge. They explained that lesson preparation, checking student outputs, attending meetings, completing graduate requirements, and fulfilling family responsibilities often occurred simultaneously, requiring them to sacrifice leisure time and personal rest.

One participant shared:

"There are weeks when I spend the whole day teaching, attend graduate classes in the evening, and continue writing papers until midnight. It is physically exhausting, but I know my sacrifices will benefit my career and my students." (Participant 4)

Another participant stated:

"Sometimes I feel overwhelmed because school activities and graduate deadlines happen at the same time. I have learned to accept that balancing everything requires patience and commitment." (Participant 9)

Participants acknowledged that balancing these multiple responsibilities was not always easy; however, they regarded these experiences as opportunities to become more disciplined, responsible, and professionally mature. Rather than viewing role conflict as purely negative, they considered it an essential part of their growth as educators and lifelong learners.

These findings support Role Theory, which explains that individuals performing multiple social roles often experience role conflict and overload due to competing expectations (Kahn et al., 1964). Similarly, Greenhaus and Allen (2021) emphasized that working professionals pursuing graduate education continuously negotiate occupational, academic, and personal demands through adaptation and prioritization.

Theme 2: Time Management and Self-Discipline as Keys to Academic Success

Participants consistently emphasized that effective time management was the most important strategy in maintaining work-life-learning balance. They described using planners, digital calendars, daily schedules, and priority lists to organize teaching tasks, graduate coursework, and family commitments.

Participant 7 explained:

"I learned to plan everything. Every Sunday, I prepare my schedule for the entire week so I can finish school work, graduate requirements, and family responsibilities."

Participant 11 remarked:

"Graduate school taught me discipline. I avoid procrastination because I know every hour is valuable. I maximize weekends and free periods to complete my assignments."

Several participants also reported limiting unnecessary social activities and using technology to improve productivity. They viewed time management as a learned skill that gradually became part of their daily professional practice.

This finding aligns with Broadbent and Poon (2021), who identified self-regulated learning and effective time management as strong predictors of academic achievement among graduate students. Likewise, Macan (2022) emphasized that planning, scheduling, and prioritization significantly reduce stress while enhancing productivity among working professionals.

Theme 3: Family, School Administrators, Colleagues, and Graduate Faculty as Sources of Strength

Participants unanimously acknowledged that they could not successfully complete graduate education without the encouragement and support of family members, school administrators, colleagues, classmates, and graduate professors. Emotional encouragement, flexible work arrangements, academic guidance, and collaborative learning significantly reduced stress and increased motivation.

Participant 2 shared:

"My husband takes care of household responsibilities whenever I have classes or major academic requirements. His support gives me confidence to continue my studies."

Participant 8 stated:

"Our principal understands that I am pursuing graduate studies. Whenever possible, she adjusts my schedule during important academic activities."

Participant 13 added:

"My classmates have become my support system. We share references, remind each other about deadlines, and motivate one another whenever someone feels discouraged."

These findings highlight the importance of supportive interpersonal relationships in sustaining graduate students' persistence. According to Social Capital Theory, social networks provide emotional, informational, and practical resources that facilitate individual achievement (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2020). Likewise, Tinto (2021) emphasized that institutional support and collaborative learning environments significantly enhance graduate student engagement and retention.

Theme 4: Developing Resilience Through Challenges and Lifelong Learning

Despite experiencing fatigue, stress, financial limitations, and occasional self-doubt, participants consistently demonstrated resilience and determination to complete their graduate education. Many

viewed challenges as opportunities to strengthen patience, adaptability, emotional maturity, and perseverance.

Participant 5 reflected:

"There were times when I questioned whether I could continue because of the workload. But I always reminded myself that every challenge is preparing me to become a better teacher."

Participant 10 remarked:

"Graduate school has changed my mindset. I became more patient, more resilient, and more confident in solving problems both inside and outside the classroom."

Participants described resilience as being closely associated with their commitment to lifelong learning and their desire to become more effective educators. They believed that perseverance would ultimately benefit not only themselves but also their learners and schools.

These findings support the work of Smith et al. (2022), who identified resilience as a protective factor against stress and burnout among adult learners. Similarly, Knowles et al. (2015) argued that adult learners remain intrinsically motivated because they perceive education as directly relevant to their professional growth and personal aspirations.

Theme 5: Graduate Education as a Catalyst for Transformative Teaching Practices

Participants consistently viewed graduate education as a transformative experience that enhanced their instructional competence, critical thinking, educational leadership, classroom management, and research capabilities. They emphasized that the knowledge acquired through graduate studies was immediately applicable to their teaching practice.

Participant 1 shared:

"Graduate school changed the way I teach. I no longer rely only on traditional methods because I now understand the importance of learner-centered instruction."

Participant 6 explained:

"I became more reflective as a teacher. Before making classroom decisions, I now consider research findings and the individual needs of my students."

Participant 15 stated:

"Every lesson I learn in graduate school helps me become more confident in handling my classes. My students also benefit because I continuously improve my teaching strategies."

Participants believed that graduate education strengthened not only their classroom performance but also their leadership abilities, communication skills, research competence, and professional confidence. Many expressed aspirations to become instructional leaders, school administrators, or educational researchers in the future.

These findings corroborate Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), who emphasized that continuous professional learning enhances instructional effectiveness and student achievement. Likewise, Avalos (2021) reported that graduate education promotes reflective practice, pedagogical innovation, and teacher leadership through sustained professional learning.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education students at Northeastern College are characterized by the continuous balancing of teaching responsibilities, graduate studies, and personal life. Participants encountered considerable challenges related to workload, time constraints, family obligations, and emotional stress; however, these experiences became opportunities for developing discipline, resilience, effective time management, and lifelong learning habits. Family members, school administrators, colleagues, classmates, and graduate faculty emerged as essential support systems that enabled participants to persist despite competing responsibilities.

The findings affirm the assumptions of Role Theory (Kahn et al., 1964), which explains that multiple social roles inevitably create role conflict requiring continuous adaptation, and Adult Learning Theory (Knowles et al., 2015), which posits that adult learners remain motivated because educational experiences have immediate relevance to their professional practice and personal development. Furthermore, the study highlights that graduate education extends beyond academic credentialing; it serves as a transformative process that strengthens reflective teaching, instructional innovation, leadership competence, research capability, and commitment to educational excellence. Ultimately, the participants' narratives illustrate that balancing teaching, graduate studies, and personal life is a demanding yet rewarding journey that prepares educators to become more competent, resilient, and learner-centered professionals capable of contributing meaningfully to educational quality and lifelong learning.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Master of Arts in Education (MAED) students at Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines, in balancing teaching responsibilities, graduate studies, and personal life. The findings revealed that teacher-graduate students continuously navigate multiple and often competing roles that demand effective time management, resilience, self-discipline, and unwavering commitment to lifelong learning. Although participants encountered challenges such as heavy teaching workloads, academic deadlines, family obligations, physical fatigue, and emotional stress, they demonstrated remarkable adaptability by employing effective coping strategies and drawing strength from supportive family members, school administrators, colleagues, classmates, and graduate faculty. The study further revealed that graduate education extends beyond earning an academic degree; it serves as a transformative experience that enhances instructional competence, reflective teaching, research capability, leadership skills, and professional confidence. Through their experiences, participants developed a stronger sense of responsibility, resilience, and commitment to educational excellence while applying newly acquired knowledge directly to classroom instruction and school practice. Anchored on Role Theory and Adult Learning Theory, the study confirms that working teachers are capable of successfully balancing professional, academic, and personal responsibilities when supported by effective time management, strong intrinsic motivation, and enabling institutional and social support systems. Ultimately, the lived experiences of MAED students illustrate that pursuing graduate education is a meaningful investment that not only advances individual career development but also contributes to improving instructional quality, educational leadership, and learner outcomes.

Implications of the Study

The findings have significant implications for graduate education, teacher professional development, educational leadership, and institutional policy. Graduate schools should recognize the unique

circumstances of working teachers by developing learner-centered programs that provide flexible class schedules, blended learning opportunities, responsive academic advising, and accessible faculty consultation. Such initiatives may improve student engagement, persistence, and academic success while reducing stress associated with balancing multiple responsibilities. Educational leaders and school administrators should likewise foster supportive workplace environments that encourage teachers to pursue graduate education through flexible scheduling, professional development opportunities, mentoring, and recognition of academic achievements. These institutional supports not only benefit individual teachers but also strengthen school effectiveness by developing highly competent educators capable of implementing innovative instructional practices and leading educational improvement initiatives. Furthermore, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on work-life-learning balance, adult learning, and teacher professional development within the Philippine context, providing empirical evidence that may guide future educational policies and graduate program enhancements. The findings likewise reinforce the importance of lifelong learning as a critical component of teacher quality, instructional excellence, and sustainable educational development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Graduate schools, particularly Northeastern College, should strengthen flexible learning policies by expanding blended and hybrid learning modalities, providing responsive academic advising, and developing wellness programs that support the academic and psychological well-being of working graduate students.
2. School administrators should establish supportive organizational policies that encourage teachers to pursue graduate education through flexible work schedules, reasonable teaching loads during critical academic periods, mentoring programs, and opportunities for continuing professional development.
3. Graduate faculty members should continue implementing learner-centered instructional strategies that recognize the unique challenges faced by working teachers, including flexible consultation schedules, collaborative learning activities, timely feedback, and authentic assessment practices.
4. Teacher-graduate students should continue strengthening their time management, self-regulation, resilience, and reflective practices through systematic planning, realistic goal setting, and effective utilization of institutional and social support systems.
5. Educational policymakers should promote continuing professional development initiatives that recognize graduate education as an essential mechanism for improving instructional quality, educational leadership, teacher retention, and lifelong learning among educators.
6. Future researchers are encouraged to replicate this study using larger participant groups across different regions and higher education institutions. Comparative studies involving public and private universities, quantitative investigations examining predictors of work-life-learning balance, and mixed-methods research exploring relationships among resilience, organizational support, teacher well-being, instructional effectiveness, and academic performance are likewise recommended. Future studies may also investigate how digital learning environments, educational technologies, and flexible graduate delivery models influence the experiences of working teachers pursuing advanced education.

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