

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Lived experiences of work-life balance among doctoral nursing students: a qualitative descriptive study

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning and nature of nursing doctoral students' lived work-life balance experiences.

**Methods:** A qualitative descriptive study was conducted with 11 doctoral nursing students who worked and raised children. In-depth interviews were conducted to collect data, providing insight into the participants' work-life balance experiences. As proposed by van Manen, four lifeworld existential, namely lived place, lived body, lived time, and lived relations, were used for qualitative data analysis.

**Results:** Four existential themes emerged: 1) existing in multiple spaces; 2) busy, tired, hard, and painful but must endure; 3) time to endure and grow until the end of schooling; and 4) realizing walls of togetherness.

**Conclusions:** This study explored how the work and life of doctoral nursing students with multiple roles are balanced and how they relate to others in different contexts. We revealed the problems and difficulties they face in their daily lives and the centres and motives behind their lives. Support from families, universities, and workplaces is needed to continue the Ph.D. program, which will eventually ensure the quality of the discipline.

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## Introduction

Work-life balance refers to the proper allocation of time or mind and body energy to work, family, or personal time (Omar Fayaz & Asif Iqbal, 2016). When balance is well maintained with minimal conflict between roles, individuals can achieve a sense of control and satisfaction in life (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). If the balance between work and life is not well-maintained, individuals experience stress and exhaustion, which can cause further deterioration in their physical and psychological health (López-López et al., 2019). It is necessary to take breaks and distribute physical and psychological energy according to the situations that individuals encounter daily to balance work and life. When conflict occurs between work and life, individuals can experience emotional exhaustion, sickness, distress, and a poor quality of life (Ali & Ashraf, 2021).

Most doctoral students attending a tertiary level of academic education play multiple roles in working and studying. A previous study revealed that graduate students are vulnerable to mental health crises (Evans et al., 2018). Individuals who work and study together find it difficult to balance work and life since they spend extra time, which should be stored as spare energy for their personal life, on schoolwork, such as class participation, assignments, and examinations

(van Rooij et al., 2021). Married people have even less personal time because they have multiple responsibilities as spouses and parents. Substantial evidence has revealed that people with multiple roles suffer from excessive stress, burnout, and physical symptoms such as fatigue and pain (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

Many nursing students in Ph.D. programs have various roles; they study intensively as graduate students, work in clinical settings, schools, or other health-related occupations, and many are married and raise children. Due to their multiple roles and responsibilities, they experience high levels of tension, exhaustion, and stress (Jeong & Kim, 2019; Xu & Song, 2016). Burnout or exhaustion can prevent students from actively engaging in school (Wei et al., 2021) and worsen their quality of life (Ribeiro et al., 2018). Imbalances between work and life can lead to conflict between roles, low self-rated health, negative emotions, depression, reduced energy levels, fatigue, and sleep disorders (Goong et al., 2016; Kim, 2018). In particular, colleges with a large proportion of women have shown a high degree of discontinuation and dropout of doctoral degrees because of role conflicts (Volkert et al., 2018). Therefore, research on work-life balance among nursing doctoral students can be an



area of academic interest in nursing. Since current nursing doctoral students are future researchers and educators in clinical settings and schools, providing a supportive environment for them to graduate without attrition is important to maintain their well-being and the quality of nursing academia.

Nevertheless, previous research in this area has involved quantitative studies focused on the stress or exhaustion of undergraduate students or qualitative studies focused on the adaptation of undergraduate nursing students (Quina Galdino et al., 2020; Ulupinar & Aydogan, 2021). Some studies have explored the well-being of doctoral students; however, few have been conducted on doctoral nursing students (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). With limited literature, it is difficult to understand the meaning of work-life balance among nursing doctoral students in depth. Therefore, this study aimed to describe the lived experiences of work-life balance among nursing doctoral students in various roles, such as parents, workers, and students.

## Methods

### Study design

This qualitative descriptive study was inspired by phenomenology to understand the lived experiences and meaning of work-life balance among nursing doctoral students. As a clear manifestation of this phenomenon, van Manen's approach was used to research lived experiences. As suggested by van Manen, we revealed "a priori" and assumptions that we had at the initial stage of our research. This process was essential because the authors were also nursing students in a Ph.D. program and could not be completely unbiased. We also carefully followed van Manen's thematic analysis method to deepen our understanding of the structure of the experiential world experienced by participants in everyday situations and relationships.

### Participants

In Korea, nurses complete their undergraduate education and take exams to obtain a nursing licence after graduation. Admission to graduate schools (master's and doctoral programs) depends on individual preferences and needs. Therefore, in the case of a doctorate in nursing, students are licenced nurses, and a doctoral degree is a process of gaining deep learning to become a researcher and nursing scholar, similar to the United States nursing doctorate system. Doctoral programs in nursing in Korea require students to complete a certain number of course credits to be eligible to write a dissertation. In some graduate schools, end-of-semester examinations are also held

for academic evaluation, depending on the nature of the course. In the school to which the study subjects belong, students are examined for required courses at the end of the semester, along with their term papers to evaluate their academic performance.

The participants in this study were 11 doctoral nursing students. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) doctoral students currently in the second semester or more at a nursing college, (2) professional doctorate students who both worked and studied, (3) married persons living with a child or children, and (4) who agreed to participate in the study. Individuals in their first semester and on leave of absence from school were excluded, and no restrictions were placed on age or sex. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling methods, and approached face-to-face. Recruitment began with the participant who best described the phenomenon, and concluded when the data reached saturation. There were no dropouts.

### Interviews

Participants took part in a one-on-one in-depth interview with only the interviewer and presented and shared their work-life balance experiences. Before the interview, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire on general characteristics (i.e., age, sex, with whom they lived, number and age of children, field, type of work, and the number of semesters they finished). Face-to-face in-depth interviews were then conducted in an unstructured format for approximately 60–90 min. The interview started with an open-ended question: "We want to hear about work-life balance as a nursing doctoral student. How do you experience work-life balance as a Ph.D. student in nursing?" Secondary questions and probes were used as required during interviews. The interviews were conducted until the data reached saturation and no new content emerged.

All content was audio-recorded during the interview with the participants' permission, and field notes were used to take notes. Interviewers listened attentively to allow participants to speak deeply and freely about the nature of work-life balance. At the end of the interview, the participants clarified the ambiguous areas. In addition, we asked participants if they wanted to add anything before the interview was terminated. Recorded data were transcribed verbatim. Interviews were conducted by four authors (female doctoral students at the time of the study), who used a qualitative research methodology and conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews at least twice. Prior to the interviews, a team meeting was held to enhance the interviews, and active communication between authors was achieved using email and messengers during the interview period.



## Analysis

Hermeneutic phenomenological reflection involves grasping the essential meaning of a phenomenon represented by data from participants (van Manen, 1990). As suggested by Van Manen, thematic analysis was carried out using four existentials as a guide in the process of phenomenological reflection. "Spatiality" refers to the lived place we exist in and how we feel this space; "corporeality" is the lived body that points to the phenomenological truth that we always exist physically in the world and meet people through the body; "temporality" is lived time which implies subjective time; "relationality," or "lived relation," indicates the experiential relationship maintained with others in an interpersonal space (van Manen, 1990).

Exploring the four existentials help us better understand the complex phenomenon of work-life balance among nursing doctoral students by structuring the nature of the phenomenon they experience. All four authors participated in data analysis, with at least two to four authors reading each transcript reflectively and in-depth. As proposed by van Manen, we read the transcripts holistically (as a whole), selectively, and subdivisively (line-by-line). First, we repetitively read the transcripts; carefully examined words, sentences, and paragraphs, and separated meaningful statements or expressions into units. The codes were created based on these units. Separate statements were divided and classified into codes and categories using Microsoft Excel. We grouped and abstracted the codes and categories into concepts and themes. Regular team meetings were held, and active communication between the authors was maintained to gather and deepen hermeneutic insights throughout the data analysis period.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (approval number: Y-2018-0143). To establish a relationship before starting the interviews and research, we carefully explained the purpose and benefits/inconveniences of the study to the participants. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without providing a reason. All participants signed an informed consent form to participate in the study and for recording. They were assured that all data would be kept confidential. To maintain confidentiality, code names were used instead of real names during recording and throughout data analysis.

## Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative research, we considered four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). Credibility was established by recruiting participants who met the inclusion criteria and could describe the lived experiences of the work-life balance of nursing doctoral students. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable environment (e.g., a location designated by the participant, such as a private meeting room), and the authors maintained a receptive listening attitude throughout the interview to gather rich and diverse data.

Additionally, after the data analysis was performed, the findings were shown to two participants for member checking and feedback. For transferability, the interview content was transcribed verbatim, and at least two authors cross-checked to confirm the accuracy of the written transcripts. Dependability was achieved by faithfully following Van Manen's method. To ensure confirmability, critical reflection was achieved by discussing the biases, prejudices, and assumptions made by the authors.

In particular, since the authors themselves were doctoral students, the authors went through a process of self-reflection and group discussion before, during, and after the research on the assumption that doctoral students with multiple roles would have difficulties in work-life balance. An objective attitude was maintained during the interviews, excluding any understanding of the authors' personal assumptions. Additionally, the data analysis strictly followed Van Manen's methodology as a guide; we asked ourselves whether the analysis results were thoroughly derived from the qualitative data of the participants and iteratively discussed them as a group.

## Results

Of the 11 participants, ten were women, and one was a man. Five were in their forties and thirties, respectively, and one was in the twenties. Participants mostly lived with a spouse and children ( $n = 9$ ) or with their parents. They were raising two ( $n = 7$ ) or one child ( $n = 4$ ). The children's ages ranged from 0 to 17 years, but the youngest children were mostly toddlers or preschoolers (72.7%). They worked in schools as assistive researchers or lecturers ( $n = 7$ ) or in hospitals as registered nurses ( $n = 4$ ). The semester varied from the 2nd to the 7th semester. The themes analysed using the four existential areas were: 1) existing in multiple spaces; 2) busy, tired, hard, and painful, but must endure; 3) times to endure and grow until the end of schooling; and 4) realizing walls of togetherness (see Table I).

### *Lived space: existing in multiple spaces*

#### *Existing in a separate space, but not divided*

The participants spent each day transitioning between the distinct spaces of work, school, and home. They dropped off their children, went to work



**Table 1.** Existentials, themes, and sub-themes derived from lived experiences of work and life balance among nursing doctoral students.

Existentials	Theme	Sub-themes
Lived space: existing in multiple spaces	Existing in a separate space, but not divided	Went everywhere with textbooks but failed to open them Traveling to home, work, and school; multiple places with multiple roles
	School, a space that I can be understood as myself	A space where one is recharged and motivated Place where one is called by one's name Place where one belongs
Lived body: busy, tired, hard, and painful, but must endure	One body but multiple roles	Having multiple roles; No role can be given up Tightly arranging work and life to play all roles Burden of studying loaded on life
	Burst of emotions in extreme situations and worsening situations	Deteriorating emotions in extreme situations Messing up in daily life
	Tug-of-war between studying and health	Health problems due to squeezing energy even for studies Experiencing a crisis due to health problems
	Feeling emotional ambivalence	Overwhelmed by too many roles, questioning why I should live like this Being proud of oneself and growing through studying in harsh conditions
Lived time: times to endure and grow until the end of schooling	Narrow, but time goes by	Narrowly flowing days without role conflicts Endless work but there are 24 hours only Hours of enduring
	Growing through painful fights with oneself	Process of fighting with oneself, with no time to be aware of stress Looking back at the past, reflection, and growth Expecting the future self
	Hoping the end with expectation	Time: eventually there is an end Being deserted sometimes by family, a reason for existence, object of care and support
Lived relation: realizing walls of togetherness	Feeling hurt by, sorry for, but thankful to the family	Exhausted family and self because of studying for a lengthy PhD Growing together with family by sharing difficulties Requiring help and support from all families Needing support from and understanding of colleagues at work
	Requiring someone's help and understanding	Peers as running mates for growing and enduring together through this hard time Comradeship, battling together against the difficult process of obtaining a PhD
	Expanded understanding and sympathy with peers	

at hospitals, schools, or offices, and attended classes on school days. They had to split the 24 hours into several spaces to play various roles, so they could not fully concentrate on the role of that place. The burden of studying, completing assignments, and conducting research added to their stress. As exams approached, they carried books to home and work but failed to open them.

At school, I must think about arrangements for my child continuously like, 'With whom will I leave the child today?' or 'I have to pick him up at what time as he finishes at what time,' or 'I will ask my mom to come till what time,' thinking ceaseless. (participant 4)

During the term exams, I carry books everywhere, even to the ward to study, but fail to open one. You know it is difficult, even more difficult to study in the ward. But I have to try as I have to prepare presentations and for exams. (participant 2)

### *School, a space that I can be understood as myself*

The participants added more roles to their lives by enrolling in a Ph.D. program. Despite the added responsibilities, they perceived the school a space where they could understand themselves. School was perceived as a space of recharge and motivation, rather than being difficult and painful. It was a place

where they could spend time on themselves or take a break from work or home. At school, they studied and met colleagues with whom they could communicate. It was a place where they could find themselves because they were addressed by their own name and not by their roles as mother, father, wife, or husband. School also provided motivation to study harder through sympathy and relationships with peers who were struggling and faced the same difficulties, as well as a place to have academic conversations that could not be obtained at work or at home.

I cannot ask my family to sacrifice more time to take care of my child to have private time with friends or join meetings. So, I enjoy the time when I am at school (with laughter). For example, lunch times at school, I enjoy the time with good friends and release my stress; otherwise, it is really difficult to spare extra times for this. It is like working moms taking a rest at work, away from babysitting ... Feeling released at school and going back home recharged. (participant 6)

### *Lived body: busy, tired, hard, and painful, but must endure*

#### *One body but multiple roles*

The participants undertook multiple roles—parent, student, and worker—none of which could be



relinquished. They wanted to perform all the roles well and achieve a better work-life balance. The constant need to fulfil these roles left them without a moment of relief, and they were always nervous and busy. It often felt impossible to achieve a work-life balance because the body is one; however, they must study, work, and raise children. Since the school required them to prepare for assignments or exams, they had to carefully plan how to allocate their time. However, when a child fell sick or something unexpected happened at work, they were unable to prepare for the task as planned. This heightened their compulsion to achieve a work-life balance.

Class hours cannot be adjusted for me. When a child was sick, I got stressed. Things get worse if I, my husband and I both cannot arrange our schedule for caring for the child. But most of the time, I must arrange my own schedule or ask my mom to support me. For arrangement, I got stressed and stranded because I don't know what else to do (syncopation). I ... if possible, it is good to get support from my parents or parents-in-law, but I rather try to do all the things by myself. And struggling and difficulties are in me while I'm trying everything to make it work and solve the problems. (participant 9)

I'm always preoccupied with how my child is doing, and I can't concentrate 100% on work, and... I have a lot of urgent things to do at school, and I can't always take the lead in doing those things. I'm naturally an active person, but since I can't do that, it's difficult for me to be passive". (Participant 11)

### ***Deteriorating emotions in extreme situations and worsening situations***

Each role presented its own set of challenges, leading to various limitations. Although they should not, they expressed negative feelings about the inevitability of these limitations to their families. They wished every day that things would flow smoothly; however, events such as exams, busy periods at work, or a sick child disrupted the balance between work and life. In such difficult situations, conflicts arose between family and job responsibilities, leaving them feeling misunderstood and abandoned. These feelings often led to anger and trouble, particularly affecting their relationships with their children and spouses.

There were tearing at the corner, out of direction in studying, messing of household works, and suffering in mind. As time went by, I learned to manage by making plans. However, one day, I found myself, frustrated, angry, and arguing with my children, husband, and family members. It was another affliction for me to see my ugly, bottomed-out self. (participant 8)

Maybe it's because this tendency as a nurse has been ingrained in me for 20 years, but now I feel like it comes into play a bit when I'm at home or doing research for a doctoral program. Even if I try to shake off this need to balance everything in life ... it is a habit, a habit (syncopation). Sometimes I think

that I might not be able to maintain a good work-life balance ... They say it's not good for health, but I guess that's why I live such a difficult life and can't maintain a work-life balance. I consciously try to remind myself that this should be different, but I keep perceiving the situation as the same as working in the hospital. For example, on Mondays, I always get stressed because it's a long way to work, so I have to arrive by a certain time, which makes me rush around in the morning. In fact, outside of a hospital, it is okay to be late 5 or 10 minutes, but it's uncomfortable for me. (Participant 7)

### ***Tug-of-war between studying and health***

Academic life brings about health problems due to excessive stress, late night studies, and lack of exercise due to insufficient time. During the day, they were busy with childcare and work, so they started studying late at night. During exams or before assignment presentations, they had to study with less sleep, yet continue their daily routine as usual the next. Consequently, they were unable to rest. The lack of time also prevented them from exercising adequately. Eventually, they experienced a health crisis due to chronic fatigue or other health problems. This crisis made them realize the necessity of maintaining a balance between work and life.

I was too tired to even think, exhausted. I slept only four hours a day and woke up at five (syncopation). I could not handle it, as it was physically impossible; the mind cannot deal with this physical exhaustion (syncopation). Sleep deprivation was so hard for me to bear. (participant 10)

It is difficult for me to manage a balance between work and life. You know, only after you realize that you get sick, you try to be alert to health. I thought of a balanced life after my shoulder got hurt. I already have inflammation in my shoulder because I have used it (computer) too much. (participant 1)

### ***Feeling emotional ambivalence***

They questioned why they live such a hard life, balancing work, study, and family without taking a leave of absence. This process was undoubtedly difficult, but it also brought positive emotional experiences, such as feeling pride and personal growth through studying.

It is a heavy burden to study, work, and manage household tasks and children simultaneously. But when I think positively, it is meaningful to study, as I feel proud and rewarded while studying. (participant 2)

### ***Lived time: times to endure and grow until the end of schooling***

#### ***Narrow, but time goes by***

The participants had to maintain tight schedules at home, school, and work; therefore, they felt that they were always chased by time. They were constantly busy playing multiple roles within the limited



24 hours. They were grateful when the day passed as planned, without conflicts between roles. However, on some days, their child was sick, work was busy, or exams and assignments needed to be prepared. Nevertheless, they could endure the semesters individually by running against the clock and planning ahead of time.

Well, I always feel like I am chased by time. My family is waiting, but I have nobody to take care of my child for me. I have to find someone; ask my husband to take a leave or ask my mother or mother-in-law. When my mom is not available, call my mother-in-law instead. It cannot be scheduled in advance or stable. So, I feel chased all the time. I got stressed out for the first and second semesters because I by myself had to manage all times. You know, I had to do things fast, move fast, finish fast ... always be anxious and in a hurry. (participant 6)

I tried to save time. On weekdays, I literally have no time for studying or working extra. In a spinning time span, I got stressed, anxious, and nervous because I was not sure I could do all the things in front of me. There are times I don't know what to do, feeling stranded in time, especially when work comes all together at the same time. Then, I start to arrange the work by time and work accordingly. I feel stable when work has been done. (participant 9)

### *Growing through painful fights with oneself*

They felt there was less time in the early semester of the Ph.D. program because it took time for the participants and their families to adapt. The Ph.D. program was a process of painful fights with oneself, and the participants did not even have time to recognize their stress. As each semester passed, they adapted to distribute their time more efficiently and effectively. Looking back, they finally got around to reflecting on their growth.

Even feeling stressed is a luxury to me. I was trying hard but was sometimes, overwhelmed by the burden of work, too exhausted to do a thing. It is like fighting with myself; like an oppression to keep working hard. Well, it is like an everlasting fight with myself, more difficult than a fight with others. (participant 4)

I had shaken off the feeling of being chased now but I still try to manage that feeling. Managing is ... well ... it is like finding balance and adjusting myself and adapting to the situation. (participant 6)

### *Hoping the end with expectation*

Knowing that the Ph.D. program was temporary and would eventually end, they hoped to endure the suffering. They regarded the difficult present as an investment for the future, sustain themselves with the expectation of their achievements after obtaining a Ph.D.

I have difficulties but other have more. I feel sorry for my husband, as he suffers from his wife studying. I know my graduation will be a gift for all and I try to finish as early as possible. It is a difficult process, but people around me will praise to me when I finish. I am proud of myself doing great. Like this, I control my mind. I know there is an end. This is my hope. (participant 4)

## *Lived relation: realizing walls of togetherness*

### *Feeling hurt by, sorry for, but thankful to the family*

For the participants, family was the reason for their existence, an object of care, and a source of real support. Throughout the long academic process, not only were the participants exhausted, but their families were as well. Feelings of frustration caused discord among family members. The participants felt sorry for their family for not understanding their hardships and for not being able to help more. However, upon reflection, however, they realized that their families also needed time and struggled together. They realized that their families provided material and emotional support, whether big or small, to some extent.

Spending a lot of time on studying and little time with my children ... this made me realize that I was not a good mother (syncopation). I feel guilty for not giving my time and energy to the children and thank them for understanding. If there were no trust and expectations from my family, I would have stopped studying by now. (participant 5)

At the beginning, it was really difficult to balance between life and work. As time passed, he (husband) adapted to me studying and my children grew up. And I grew up, too (syncopation). My relationship with my mother-in-law became good after I started my P.hD. You know, I needed her support to keep my work-life balance; I had to communicate with and meet her frequently to ask her to take care of the children. I became thankful as she supported me. I could not make it without support from my family. I feel that respecting and caring for people around me is a way to maintain balance between work and life. (participant 6)

### *Requiring someone's help and understanding*

As the participants worked and studied, attending school also required assistance. They had to ask for help from family to take care of or pick up children while working or going to school, and they needed to coordinate time with colleagues at work. Due to their multiple roles, participants were always busy and chased by time. It was difficult to continue their Ph.D. studies without help or understanding from family, work, and school.

There are people who support me; my husband or my mom, when I cannot take care of household work or children. They are so important to me (syncopation).



There are also institutes such as kindergartens and schools to support childcare in society. I hope that the working conditions or system of these organizations will get better. (participant 9)

I knew that I could not make it if nobody helped me (syncopation). When there was nobody to take care of the children, I become anxious and nervous. When my husband could not help me, I was frustrated (syncopation). Still, I cannot do things by myself, I need someone to support me. (participant 8)

### *Expanded understanding and sympathy with peers*

At work or home, they could not talk about the difficulties of doctoral students' lives because other people did not fully understand how they lived, felt, or why it was so hard. However, schoolmates in the same situation could fully understand the difficulties, sympathize with each other, and help them overcome tough times. They studied alone, but the Ph.D. program was a process they could not complete on their own. They cooperated and built relationships to help each other.

I have a good classmate who is also a working mother. We became good friends, leaning on each other. During the first semester, we shared our lack of knowledge. We also shared our growing knowledge and capacity as semesters passed. By sharing this process of growth, we were sympathetic toward others who experienced the same patterns of living. (participant 3)

I feel that a Ph.D. cannot be completed when undertaken alone. It does not matter whether I am an excellent student or not; I need guidance and direction from professors. There are limitations when there are no classmates. Classmates are running mates and study together to finish the work (syncopation). Fortunately, I have good classmates who willingly help me. I thank them because their help made my studies easier. I am thinking of helping others in return. (participant 10)

## **Discussion**

This study revealed the lifeworld experience of work-life balance among nursing doctoral students using a phenomenological lens. Nursing students in the Ph.D. program juggle multiple roles as parents, workers, and students, which are challenging to perform simultaneously. This study aimed to illuminate the meaning of these experiences, and the significance lies in uncovering what is hidden behind their lives and giving meaning to the experience of work-life balance.

Obtaining a Ph.D. requires more than just studying; it entails extreme emotional torment and physical limitations. Therefore, maintaining work-life balance is important for continuing and completing the Ph.D. program. For doctoral students, adequate rest and time allocation between work and life are difficult

due to the burden of studying. They also suffer from excessive stress caused by a high workload, coursework, paper and assignment deadlines, evaluations, and uncertainty about the future, as well as depression and physical problems such as fatigue and lack of sleep (Boolani et al., 2021; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

In particular, the nursing doctoral students in this study faced more difficult and complex situations. They dealt with family issues and heavy workloads, similar to nurses or researchers. The everyday lives of the participants were described as being pressed for time due to their multiple roles. While their bodies were at school, their minds could not fully immerse in their studies due to distractions from work or family affairs. Conversely, when at the workplace or home, they worried about not being able to study. Although studies added an extra burden to their lives, it provided empowerment and inspiration. This finding aligns with that of a previous study (Jackman & Sisson, 2022). Doctoral nursing students are willing to endure difficulties and unrealistic workloads during the doctoral process to achieve their goals. Inner motivation serves as a powerful driving force for enduring hardship.

Work-life balance can be experienced differently by each individual because there is no absolute standard for the proper amount of time or energy allocated (Park & Son, 2014). In this study, the distinction between studying as work or life varied from person to person. However, it is notable that the participants in this study were somewhat obsessed with maintaining a work-life balance. They expressed a desire to manage every role they played while contemplating why they had to live so intensely. They believed this might be because they were parents and nurses who naturally wanted to excel in everything they did. Additionally, as nurses, they understood the importance of maintaining a better balance between work and life to prevent deterioration in psychological and physical health and interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, they were committed to trying to balance work and life, recognizing it as essential for fulfilling all their roles. For a healthy balance, they found time for their children and families and divided their time among all roles. They planned ahead and tried to live efficiently, knowing that unexpected clashes could ruin their carefully maintained balance. This finding is similar to that of a previous study, which found that Ph.D. students with children managed their time more efficiently than those without children (Martinez et al., 2013).

As nursing is a practical science related to clinical practice, many nurses attend graduate school for qualification maintenance, achievement motivation, and academic research. They often go to graduate school after working as nurses for several years. The average age of doctoral nursing students is higher, and the



proportion of married individuals is also higher due to their financial stability (Han & Lee, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary for doctoral nursing students to maintain, harmonize, and balance their roles in work, school, and family. A well-balanced work and life may lead to successful academic achievement and an improved quality of life.

In the literature, the lives of doctoral students are often described as a self-driven, individual, and internal process (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). However, nursing doctoral students in this study experienced a paradoxical situation where there was no time for oneself in what should have been time entirely for oneself. Some participants did not feel busy or experience physical symptoms because they were too pre-occupied to recognize them. With lives centred around their children, these nursing students reminisced that there was no time to reflect on themselves.

One important implication of this study was that it provided participants the opportunity to discover themselves and look back on their lives, even if only during a one-hour interview. For them, this was a process of self-discovery. This opportunity also allowed them to reflect on how their lives and work were balanced. Due to their multiple roles, continuing their Ph.D. program was impossible without the help of their family, fellow students, and workplace.

Family, in particular, evoked complex emotions, such as guilt about not spending more time with their children, sadness towards the family who did not fully understand, and gratitude for the emotional support and help in sharing childcare responsibilities. Additionally, peers are companions who fully understand themselves and their competitors in good faith. Because networking and support between colleagues can be of great help in one's long journey, more emphasis should be placed on understanding the meaning of mutual growth. Family and schoolmates grew together during the Ph.D. program. Togetherness is another driving force enabling students to continue their studies without attrition. This indicates that their work-life balance is circumstantial rather than personal. Considering the current endemic situation of the infectious disease crisis, it is necessary to provide peer support systems, including virtual mentoring and online programs, for nursing doctoral students, who especially have busy schedules (Clement & Welch, 2021; Sigaroudi et al., 2016).

In South Korea, family integration and harmony are considered central virtues in life. In light of the theme of "realizing walls of togetherness," participants in this study thought that the doctoral program was an investment in the family's future. This is a distinctive feature of Asian culture, where it seems natural for the entire family to provide support and help during a doctorate program. This support gave the

participants the strength to complete the program. Therefore, it might be greatly helpful to provide information on how the doctorate program will affect families and encourage the coordination of roles within the family from the beginning.

The Korean doctoral nursing program was initiated in 1978, and the number of doctoral programs expanded to over 20 in the 2010s (J.-I. Kim et al., 2020). South Korea faces a shortage of doctoral-level nurses. The retention of doctoral nursing students is crucial in Korea and globally because of the shortage of nursing faculty members in academia. Educating more nursing scholars will not only improve the quality of the nursing discipline but also enhance the quality of clinical nursing care for patients in Korea. However, stress, lack of peer support, and excessive working hours may cause them to quit their doctoral programs (Robinson & Volkert, 2018). Therefore, it is necessary to establish support systems or programs to reduce stress and parenting burdens and to ensure the proper distribution of work and family responsibilities from universities and society.

## Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, we included male students because the focus of our study was on nursing doctoral students with multiple roles of working, studying, and parenting, not only female graduate students. Only one male participant was included in this study, reflecting the sex ratio of nursing graduate programs in South Korea. Finding male nursing doctoral students who met the eligibility criteria was challenging because there are very few such students in Korea. Since there is an increase in the proportion of male nurses in doctoral programs, we suggest that further studies include more male students to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon and to consider the gender ratio and roles that may vary from country to country.

Second, the number of participants in our study was relatively small. We tried to recruit participants who could explain the phenomenon very well with careful consideration and to ensure sufficient in-depth interviews. Third, by including participants in the second semester or beyond and married with children, we might have overlooked the experiences of other doctoral students in the early stages of the doctoral program and with different roles and demographics.

Moreover, we acknowledge our experiences with doctoral nursing students. Therefore, to alleviate the researcher's bias, peer debriefing was conducted to seek expert opinion, and the entire process, from the research data collection process to the content, interview process, and data analysis, was recorded and stored as an audit trail. Additionally, a follow-up



study is needed to develop and evaluate a program that can reduce stress and role conflict and improve the quality of life of graduate students majoring in nursing.

This study provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon as basic data through the exploration of work-life balance for doctoral students in nursing. Therefore, future studies should focus on the establishment of practical support systems. For this purpose, we suggest participatory action research encompassing various stakeholders, including doctoral nursing students, families, universities, and society.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provided a deeper understanding of the meaning of work-life balance regarding the lived experiences of doctoral nursing students who work, study, and have children. We already know that obtaining a Ph.D. is not easy in many ways. Still, this study explored how the work and life of nursing doctoral students with multiple roles are balanced and how they relate to others in different contexts. We explored their lived experiences of work-life balance by revealing the problems and difficulties they faced daily and the centres and motives behind their lives. Backup for childcare and supportive environments from the workplace and school can help them complete their Ph.D. without interruption.

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