

A Retrospective Study of Dentists’ Lived Experience as Student Clinicians

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ABSTRACT

Finishing higher education on time is important to each student, especially in a health science course such as dentistry. The Philippine dentistry program is a six-year course which combines both theoretical and practical learning. Student clinicians start their internship program when they reach their fifth-year level, while still attending classroom subjects. The rigorous curriculum poses a challenge to most as evident in the number of enrollees and the number of those who graduate on time. This research aims to explore the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of the dental student clinicians. The researchers utilized a qualitative research design, specifically hermeneutic phenomenological study. Dentists who graduated from years 2017–2019 in a private dental university in Cavite, Philippines, had passed the dental licensure examination, and are currently practicing their profession were asked to participate in one-on-one interviews. Colaizzi’s method of data analysis was used to understand the lived experiences of the dentists as student clinicians. Four respondents consented to undergo one-on-one interviews. All agreed they went through many experiences and challenges. The themes which emerged were positive and negative experiences such as noncompliant patients and patient satisfaction, challenges as student clinicians such as fear of making mistakes, and coping mechanisms such as receiving social support. The lived experiences of dental student clinicians can help university administrations understand the uniqueness of dental education. Dentistry students and parents can also benefit from this as they can learn from the experiences of others and gain new insights on the essence of this phenomenon.

Keywords: Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Lived Experience, Retrospective Study, Qualitative, Dental Education

INTRODUCTION

Each year, dental schools nationwide receive more than 79,000 applications (Garvin, 2017). For students who dream of getting accepted, becoming a dentist is a way of giving back and being rewarded with a fulfilling career. Individuals are motivated to pursue a dental career for various reasons, and these motivations can vary based on personal values, interests, and circumstances. Whether driven by financial goals, a passion for helping others, entrepreneurial aspirations, or a desire for flexibility, a career in dentistry can offer a fulfilling and rewarding path for those motivated to pursue it. The effectiveness of teaching and students' learning styles

are important in determining how much effort students put into the course to pass the examination. Hence, it affects academic performance upon completion of the dentistry course.

The Philippine dentistry program is a six-year course which combines both theoretical subjects and practical learning. This consists of basic sciences, clinical sciences, and dental public health courses. General education, basic medical and dental sciences, as well as pre-clinical subjects comprise the first four years, while clinical training is in the last two years (CHED, 2018). The rigorous curriculum poses a challenge to most students as clinical requirements are done at the same time with classroom lectures. Furthermore, combining clinical competencies with interpersonal skills creates an integrated approach to patient care. It is crucial as future healthcare professionals to excel in both areas, not only to diagnose and treat dental conditions effectively but also to build a strong, trusting relationship with one's patients. Sudhir et. al. (2019) believe that it improves patient outcomes and enhances the overall quality of healthcare, which is one of the program outcomes of the degree.

Graduating on time is just one of the factors defining the success of dental students. Their experiences on the challenging curriculum may help others understand how it affects their chance to graduate on time. This experience may be pleasant to share with the people they love and make a good memory out of it. On the other hand, experiences that may be unpleasant may serve as valuable lessons which can shape their professional development and character. By confronting and learning from these experiences, dental professionals become more skilled, resilient, and compassionate practitioners, better equipped to provide quality patient care. Whatever it is, bad or good, in the end, it will give an indelible lesson that can be used in life.

This study aims to determine the lived experiences of dentists as student clinicians. The following research questions were sought to be answered: What are the experiences of dental clinicians during their student life? What challenges do dental clinician graduates face during their student life? How were the participants able to cope with their challenges and experiences? The researchers utilized a qualitative research design, specifically hermeneutic phenomenological study. Dentists who graduated from 2017–2019 in a private dental university in Cavite, Philippines, had passed the dental licensure examination, and are currently practicing their profession were asked to participate in one-on-one interviews. Colaizzi's method of data analysis was used to understand the lived experiences of the dentists as student clinicians.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Philippines dentistry is a six-year course with the first two years called as Associate in Pre-dental Arts. Here, the students only take minor subjects. The next two years are the proper years, during which all the curriculum subjects are major courses, such as oral anatomy, operative dentistry, orthodontics, and oral pathology. In the last two years, the student must take clinical work to deal with live patients. There are clinical divisions that the students are mandated to finish the different clinic levels. As the clinical level gets higher, the requirements also increase. The student clinicians are in the 5th and 6th year level and they have both pre-clinical and clinical subjects to take, aside from rendering treatment to patients.

It is documented that communication between a healthcare provider and the patient, if applied with good interpersonal interaction, will lead to satisfactory and therapeutic results. Better inter-relationship as a two-way communication process signifies a better outcome and satisfaction. Looking for a patient is one of the struggles of a student clinician. Convincing the patient how important their mouth is, and that it should be treated may serve as a challenge for students. For some patients, they do not agree with the proposed treatment. Thus,

communication is one of the challenges the students face. A student clinician should develop communication skills to gain the patient's trust, especially for those less fortunate, to have a proper education. Moreover, students often tend to be frustrated with patients who do not understand some common terms. It adds to their challenge in explaining the terms that the patient can understand. It also highlights a crucial aspect of the clinician-patient dynamic. While the student clinicians may possess extensive knowledge and expertise, they must first recognize that patients may have a different understanding, especially with the concepts of oral health.

Despite the challenges, clinicians are responsible for educating their patients about their oral health and treatment options. This education empowers patients to make informed decisions about their care and actively maintain their oral health. Effective communication is key to building trust and fostering a positive clinician-patient relationship. By striving to educate patients clearly and understandably, clinicians can help ensure their patients are knowledgeable and empowered partners in their oral health care journey.

Dental clinicians face stress associated with academic and clinical requirements. Based on the study made by Maderazo (2017), student clinicians tend to display changes in behavior and feel anxious about not being able to finish their requirements at a given time because of stress associated with academic and clinical requirements. Dentistry is a challenging course, so stress always comes with dentistry.

Another challenge for student clinicians is the extent of their flexibility in finishing clinical requirements while having limited time. Uncontrollable situations can contradict plans and change their schedules, such as emergencies, natural calamities, and family matters. Student clinicians are more challenged to adapt to these changes.

Case requirements done on patients is the standard practice in many dental education programs. This hands-on experience is invaluable to students as it allows them to apply their knowledge in real-life scenarios and develop their clinical skills under supervision. There may be times that students shoulder the logistical concerns of their patients (i.e., transportation fees going to the clinic). While it is not a universal practice, paying for the patient's food and transportation is common. Some clinicians may choose to provide these out of consideration for the patient's convenience and wellbeing.

According to Chen (2008), parents' involvement in their child's education is an advantage money cannot buy. Education, especially in fields like dentistry, can be financially demanding. Parents should be aware of the expenses associated with their child's education and work together to plan and budget accordingly. Exploring financial aid options and discussing realistic expectations can help alleviate some of the stress related to economic concerns. Parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's education and overall wellbeing, regardless of whether they have prior knowledge of the field their child is studying. Communication between parents and their children about school experiences, challenges, and achievements can foster trust and understanding. Parents can encourage their children to share their concerns and seek guidance when needed, creating a supportive environment for addressing problems. Even though parents may not have a background in dentistry, they can take an interest in their child's studies by asking questions and learning more about the program by showing curiosity and willingness to understand their child's challenges; parents can provide more effective support and guidance. Giving motivation and support to their children can give them success in their studies. Parents can boost their child's confidence and resilience by expressing belief in their child's abilities and offering encouragement during challenging times. Positive reinforcement and celebrating achievements, no matter how small, can help keep their

child motivated and focused on their goals. Parents can positively influence their children's educational experiences and outcomes. By being involved, supportive, and understanding, parents can help their children navigate the complexities of higher education and pursue their dreams with confidence and determination.

Clinical requirements provide dental students with hands-on practical experience to perform specific procedures. But sometimes, students cannot accomplish their requirements sooner because of the limited time allotted. Furthermore, as the clinical level of the student increases, there is also an expected improved performance of their clinical work. Feedback from their clinical instructors can make the students realize their mistakes and try to improve their clinical work.

According to Malcmacher (2008), the ability to manage both academic and clinical requirements synthesizes crucial success. This factor requires effort, patience, and determination. Every day, student clinicians face different obstacles, challenges, and problems. Still, despite how hard it is or how long it takes, if the student has the trait of perseverance, the goal of finishing clinical work on time will surely be achieved. In dentistry, passion and persistence play a role in a successful journey.

This research study aims to explore the lived experiences of the student clinicians, as anchored on the theory of experiences. The term most commonly used for education as it relates to learning is experience. Experience can be modified as a coping mechanism as they encounter a situation or condition that can be put to life (Falk & Needham, 2011). Experience is a means of learning and education. It is the goal of education that a person can use it as part of their growth and achievement (Roth & Jornet, 2014). An individual's experience leads to seeing and analyzing situations and conditions differently from practices in a person's field of study or career. Similar to nursing, dentistry knowledge and skills are being taught through a combination of theoretical and practical learning experiences. Hence, the clinical experience is considered an integral part of the curriculum (Jamshidi et al., 2016).

METHODS

The researchers reached out to the prospective respondents through a mobile messaging application and informed them about the objectives of the study. Upon voluntary agreement, a schedule was made for a face-to-face or online one-on-one interview according to their availability. Informed consent was given by explaining the study's purpose and procedure. The researchers ensured that participation was voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without penalty. The researchers created a safe, comfortable space, keeping the privacy of the respondents as a priority. Also, the respondents consented to the audio recordings done to ensure completeness of the data gathered and their actions, gestures, and facial reactions were listed together with their answers.

A semi-structured interview guide was used. The questions were pertinent to their experiences when they were dental student clinicians. One minute was allotted to the respondents after each question to let them reflect before giving their answer. When the respondents gave a vague answer, a follow-up question was pursued. This was later transcribed for member checking and data analysis.

Collaizi's method of data analysis (Morrow, 2015) was used to understand the lived experiences of the dentists as student clinicians. Familiarization with the data was done by reading all the respondents' accounts several times. Next, the researchers identified all statements in the accounts that were of direct relevance to the phenomenon. After that, meanings to the phenomenon were identified. This was done after careful consideration of the

significant statements. Then the significant statements were clustered into common themes across all respondents. Next, the researchers developed an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Then, this was condensed to a short, dense statement that captures the essence of the phenomenon. This was then returned to the respondents to verify if it was able to indeed capture their experience. The feedback may modify the previous steps.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four respondents agreed to take part in the one-on-one interviews. The dentists who graduated in the years 2017–2019 articulated that they have gained significant experiences while completing their clinical requirements as student clinicians. The themes which emerged were positive and negative experiences, challenges as student clinicians, and coping mechanisms.

The codes under positive experiences were case accomplishments, patient satisfaction, cooperative patient, and having a good community inside the university. Finishing their cases (as clinical requirements) gives them a sense of accomplishment. It can boost a student's morale and thus help them perform better. Having cooperative patients also gave them a positive experience because there was less difficulty in setting appointment schedules. Majority of their patients were compliant and seeing their patients satisfied with the dental treatment rendered gives them a sense of pride in their work. Having a good community inside the university contributed to their positive experience because of the support that they receive and a sense of belongingness. It also made the challenges easier to overcome. In the study by Crego et al. (2016), the researchers found a negative correlation between perceived stress among dental students who have high social support and positive reappraisals.

The codes under negative experiences were having some noncompliant patients, disturbing patients, delays in graduation, repeating in preclinical examinations, psychological state, turned over position, and, financial problems. Patient compliance was one of the challenges that the student clinicians encountered. Noncompliant patients pose as a challenge because they missed out on opportunities to finish their cases (as clinical requirements), especially on long procedures or multiple appointment visits. They had no choice but to take on new patients and start over again. Students generally agree that repeating procedures because of noncompliant patients, may help contribute to their learning. But what they consider as a negative experience is having to reserve the timeslots for their patients in the clinics. According to Joy Higgs. et al. (2019), patients whose management costs were not covered sometimes rejected or postponed the treatment. This made the students wonder because their patients do not pay for dental fees. The most common reason that they hear is a conflict with work of family schedule. Since the treatment setting is in a dental university, protocols in treating patients were followed. This usually takes up more time compared to being treated by a licensed dentist. Returning to the university several times might not be something that the patient can afford during the time of treatment. Unsettling patient behaviors is something that a student clinician can also experience because they give their personal contact information for setting of appointment schedules. Rees et al. (2015) in their study termed this as workplace abuse narratives, and this happens not only in dentistry but also in nursing and pharmacy. Delays in graduation contributed also to their negative experience. Delays can be due to decreased motivation and knowledge on how to use their time effectively (Borbon, 2021). It may sometimes lead to losing interest in studying and scheduling their patients. Failing examinations and having to repeat preclinical examinations also contribute to the delays in

graduation. Dentistry is a six-year course, and most courses are at a maximum of four years. This can affect a student's motivation because most of the pre-college friends have graduated by then and they may feel left out. Student clinicians experience this concern on graduating more than the lower year levels (Polychronopoulou et al., 2005). Students especially in their graduating year have more feelings of hopelessness, stress, and breakdowns, and this is similar to the study of Alzahem et al. in 2011. Not graduating on time also led the student clinicians to experience financial problems because they had to extend for at least one semester. This situation is also experienced in dental universities abroad with the students having similar sentiments (Alzahem et al., 2011).

Student clinicians encounter different challenges in their clinical years. This was categorized into patient compliance, fear, and time management. Some patients are very compliant, which makes the treatment right on schedule. This is easy for simple treatment procedures such as tooth restoration and oral prophylaxis. But for those who were not compliant, this challenge contributes to the negative experiences that the student clinicians experience, and thus delay their graduation because of lack of cases. They mentioned the need to establish a good relationship with the patient to help gain the trust to undergo dental treatment. Overcoming fear was also one of the challenges that student clinicians have to face. This can come from one-on-one case discussions with a strict clinical instructor. As students, they also had a fear of making mistakes that may result in being apprehended. It had an effect on their confidence and capability to finish their requirements on time. Similarly, in a study by McKenzie et al. (2024), grit, resilience, and the ability to face clinical challenges could affect grades and clinical performance. Balancing academic and clinical time was also a challenge because the students had patients to treat and classroom lectures with quizzes and examinations. This is related to time management and planning their schedules well. There are also times of procrastination and feeling of laziness, which they have to overcome.

Student clinicians use different coping mechanisms during their clinical years. One of these coping mechanisms is good support which helped them overcome the challenges that they experienced. Family, friends, and clinical instructors provided them support. It contributed to their motivation and encouragement to finish the course. Another coping mechanism was having a positive mindset. They realized that the circumstances which happened is for their character development. A proper mindset can significantly impact daily performance, depending on how one deals with it. Having courage helped dental clinicians build self-confidence in doing the required tasks; as manifested in their initiating in opening cases, undergoing case discussions with clinical instructors, finding patients for their specific procedures, and the like. This attitude led them to more chances of making progress in the clinics. According to Kershaw and Wade (2017), having a sense of fearlessness and boundless curiosity is innate in us. If things went well, one develops self-confidence and a keen interest in exploring life and its mysteries. Another coping mechanism was the environment that students had during their clinical years. One example is having a powerful spiritual life. They believe that the university provided a community which focuses on both academics and spiritual aspect. This spiritual aspect practiced prayers and worship, strengthened their faith, and promoted their psychological and physical wellbeing. It motivated the students to work positively while facing challenges and experiences. According to Seaward (2017), seeking support from others is natural in times of stress. Turning to friends and family for comfort and guidance or to a Higher power is a great source of solace is similar to what the students did as part of their coping mechanism.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, SUGGESTION, AND LIMITATIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of dentists as student clinicians who graduated from year 2017–2019. The themes which emerged were positive and negative experiences such as patient satisfaction and noncompliant patients, challenges as student clinicians such as fear of making mistakes, and coping mechanisms such as receiving social support. The lived experiences of dental student clinicians can help university administrations understand the uniqueness of dental education. Dentistry students and parents can also benefit from this as they can learn from the experiences of others and gain new insights on the essence of this phenomenon. However, this study is limited only to those who studied in one dental school in Cavite, Philippines, as such, it cannot generalize the results. Also, only four respondents consented to undergo one-on-one interviews. Some factors which might have affected this are respondents' availability (work schedule and location) and researchers' availability (school schedule and transportation expenses). It is recommended to do further research on other Philippine dental schools to be able to generalize results. Future studies may look into the emergent themes such as noncompliance of patients as a separate phenomenon.

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