



The Lived Experiences of Doctoral Students in Professional Education: A Phenomenological Inquiry into Social Skill Development

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Abstract:

This study examines the lived experiences of Filipino doctoral students in Professional Education in relation to the development of social skills critical for their academic and professional advancement. Unlike existing literature, which often emphasizes theoretical models or competency frameworks, this research adopts a phenomenological approach to foreground the subjective meanings, personal challenges, and culturally embedded practices that shape skill development. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten doctoral candidates from diverse Philippine universities and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meaning units. Four key themes emerged: the cultural significance of *pakikipagkapwa* (interpersonal harmony) in fostering effective communication, the resilience–resourcefulness paradox in balancing academic responsibilities and socio-economic pressures, the instrumental role of mentorship and coaching in professional growth and network building, and the adaptation to technological and educational shifts that demand innovation and digital literacy. Findings highlight that while the categories of social skills align with international models, the ways in which they are experienced are deeply influenced by Filipino cultural values, collective identity, and relational ethics, offering implications for culturally responsive doctoral education.

Keywords: doctoral students, Higher Education, Professional Education, Social skills development

Introduction:

The contemporary educational landscape increasingly demands that Doctors of Philosophy (PhD) in Professional Education possess competencies that extend beyond disciplinary expertise. Doctoral graduates are now expected to function as effective communicators, reflective leaders, and collaborative professionals who can respond to complex educational challenges.

In the Philippine context, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) underscores the formation of “future-ready” educators capable of navigating globalization, digital transformation, and evolving professional standards in higher education. These expectations place social skills at the core of doctoral preparation and professional identity formation.

Despite their recognized importance, the development of social or “soft” skills remains insufficiently examined within research-intensive doctoral programs. Traditional doctoral education often prioritizes academic productivity, methodological rigor, and scholarly output, inadvertently marginalizing the interpersonal, emotional, and self-regulatory dimensions of doctoral training. As a result, the lived processes through which doctoral students cultivate communication, resilience, leadership, and collaboration are rarely foregrounded in empirical research, particularly within non-Western contexts.

Recent international studies—particularly those emerging from European educational research—have offered conceptual models and typologies of social skills among doctoral candidates. However, these studies tend to emphasize categorization and functional modeling, often overlooking the cultural and experiential dimensions that shape skill development. In contrast, Philippine educational realities are deeply embedded in relational values,



collective responsibility, and contextual constraints, suggesting the need for inquiry approaches that privilege meaning-making and lived experience over abstraction.

Phenomenological research has proven effective in capturing such nuanced experiences within Philippine education. Studies by Collo (2021) and Tolentino, Valenzuela, and Cruz (2024) demonstrate how phenomenology reveals the emotional, relational, and contextual dimensions of learning and research engagement among Filipino students. Similarly, Bantugan (2025) emphasizes that a qualitative mindset grounded in phenomenology allows researchers to uncover the essence of participants' experiences rather than merely describing observable behaviors.

These works highlight the value of phenomenology in understanding how individuals interpret and internalize complex educational processes within culturally situated contexts. Guided by this methodological and theoretical orientation, the present study seeks to explore how Filipino doctoral students in Professional Education experience the development of social skills throughout their doctoral journey. By adopting a phenomenological lens, this research moves beyond skills as abstract competencies and instead examines them as lived, culturally mediated experiences shaped by mentorship, professional demands, and socio-economic realities. In doing so, the study contributes to the growing body of Philippine qualitative research while offering context-sensitive insights that may inform doctoral education policy and practice.

Literature Review:

The development of social skills has gained increasing attention in higher and professional education as institutions respond to rapidly changing educational, technological, and socio-cultural demands.

For doctoral students in Professional Education, social skills function not merely as supplementary competencies but as foundational elements that shape academic productivity, professional identity, and leadership capacity. Existing literature emphasizes that these skills are formed through sustained interaction with academic communities, professional environments, and cultural contexts, making them particularly suitable for qualitative and phenomenological inquiry.

Volkova, Lebid, and Korobeinikova (2024) provide a comprehensive framework for understanding social skills among Doctors of Philosophy in Professional Education. Their model categorizes social skills into five interrelated domains: effective social communication, collaboration and teamwork, cognitive skills, self-organization, and personal qualities. This conceptualization offers a structured lens through which social skill development may be examined, while also allowing flexibility for contextual and experiential interpretations, particularly in non-Western educational settings.

Effective social communication, as defined in the framework, encompasses active listening, persuasive discourse, and the strategic use of verbal and non-verbal cues. In professional education, these competencies enable doctoral students to facilitate learning, engage in scholarly dialogue, and negotiate academic relationships.

Phenomenological studies in education suggest that such communicative abilities are often refined through lived teaching and research experiences, especially in culturally diverse and relationally oriented learning environments (Cortezano et al., 2021).

Collaboration and teamwork represent another critical dimension of social skill development, particularly in contexts that value collective engagement and shared responsibility. Establishing professional networks with students, parents, institutional leaders, and external partners allows doctoral students to model ethical and productive relationships. Research on educators engaged in continuing professional development across multiple countries highlights that collaborative practices foster adaptability, intercultural sensitivity, and professional sustainability (Cortezano et al., 2021), reinforcing the relevance of this skill domain in doctoral education.

Cognitive skills—such as critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy—are increasingly recognized as socially situated competencies rather than purely intellectual processes. In the Philippine context, studies on graduate and non-



teacher education scholars reveal that cognitive growth is closely tied to experiential learning, reflective practice, and mentorship (Alalid et al., 2025; Dulay & Sumbalan, 2020). These findings suggest that doctoral students develop higher-order thinking not in isolation but through continuous engagement with academic challenges and professional realities.

Self-organization and personal qualities further extend the social skill construct by highlighting the internal dimensions of professional functioning. Goal setting, self-reflection, resilience, emotional intelligence, and adaptability are particularly crucial for doctoral students who balance academic responsibilities with teaching, research, and personal obligations. Phenomenological investigations into socio-emotional learning and graduate student experiences emphasize that these qualities are cultivated through adversity, reflective meaning-making, and sustained professional practice (Mangaliman, 2025; Dulay & Sumbalan, 2020).

Anchored in the Philippine context, this study interprets social skill development through the lenses of andragogy and Sikolohiyang Pilipino. Adult learning principles underscore autonomy, experiential learning, and self-directed growth, while Sikolohiyang Pilipino emphasizes pakikipagkapwa, relational harmony, and collective identity.

Together, these perspectives frame social skills not as isolated competencies but as culturally embedded, lived experiences. This integrated conceptual framework provides a culturally responsive foundation for examining how Filipino doctoral students in Professional Education experience and make meaning of their social skill development.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological research design aimed at capturing and describing the essence of doctoral students' lived experiences in developing social skills within Professional Education programs. Phenomenology is particularly suited to this inquiry as it prioritizes participants' subjective meanings, perceptions, and interpretations of their academic and professional journeys. Consistent with prior phenomenological studies in education, this approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals make sense of complex experiences shaped by personal, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts (Ramirez, 2022; Cabiles, 2022).

The research was conducted in the Philippine setting and involved doctoral students enrolled in programs equivalent to "Specialty 015" or Professional Education. Participants were drawn from universities across the three major geographical regions of Visayas to ensure contextual diversity and representation of varied institutional and regional experiences. This multi-regional scope strengthens the credibility of the findings by situating the lived experiences within the broader Philippine higher education landscape.

Purposive sampling was employed to select ten (10) PhD candidates who were in their second or third year of doctoral study. These participants were deemed information-rich cases due to their sustained engagement in doctoral coursework, research, and professional practice. Similar sampling strategies have been effectively used in phenomenological investigations involving Filipino educators and doctoral students, as they allow researchers to access participants with direct and meaningful experience of the phenomenon under study (Gamez-Catiis, 2024; Abrigo et al., 2024).

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit in-depth narratives about participants' perceived growth in social communication, leadership, resilience, and self-management. This method provided flexibility for probing emerging insights while ensuring alignment with the study's conceptual framework. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized in phenomenological research as effective tools for uncovering rich descriptions of lived experience, particularly within educational contexts (Ramirez, 2022; Cabiles, 2022).

The collected interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on the identification of recurring patterns, significant statements, and meaning units across participants' narratives. Through systematic coding and theme development, the analysis sought to distill the shared essence of the participants' experiences while honoring individual variations. This analytic approach is consistent with phenomenological studies of educators and doctoral



students, where thematic interpretation enables the translation of personal narratives into theoretically and contextually grounded insights (Abrigo et al., 2024).

Findings and Discussion:

Theme 1: Pakikipagkapwa as the Foundation of Communication

Participants consistently articulated that effective communication within the Philippine educational setting extends beyond technical proficiency in persuasion or argumentation. Rather than viewing communication as a means of control or authority, doctoral students described it as a relational process aimed at creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. This perspective reflects a deeply ingrained cultural orientation in which communication serves to build trust, mutual understanding, and shared meaning between educators and learners. Central to this theme is the cultural concept of pakikipagkapwa, which frames communication as an ethical and relational act grounded in mutual respect and shared humanity.

Participants emphasized that meaningful classroom interaction involves listening with empathy, acknowledging students' experiences, and responding with sensitivity to individual contexts. This aligns with phenomenological findings among Filipino educators in leadership roles, where communication was likewise experienced as a tool for nurturing relational harmony rather than asserting hierarchical dominance (Hibaya et al., 2025).

Doctoral students further described communication as an opportunity to “share personal meaning” rather than to function as a “legislator” of knowledge. This shift from authoritative transmission to dialogic engagement allowed participants to foster openness and psychological safety within learning spaces.

Similar experiences were reported in studies of educators and college students navigating uncertainty, where open communication reduced anxiety and strengthened relational bonds (Cabungcal et al., 2025).

A strong relational focus also emerged as participants highlighted the importance of recognizing students' right to their own judgment. Respecting learners as autonomous meaning-makers enabled more authentic exchanges and encouraged active participation. This finding resonates with phenomenological research on non-fluent English teachers, which revealed that relational sensitivity and self-awareness significantly enhanced communicative effectiveness despite linguistic limitations (Rino et al., 2022).

Participants noted that such relational communication practices contributed to their evolving professional identities as doctoral students and educators. Engaging with students as partners in meaning-making allowed them to reconcile academic authority with cultural humility. This mirrors findings in hermeneutic phenomenological studies that emphasize the role of lived communicative experiences in shaping professional identity over time (Nigar & Kostogriz, 2025).

Moreover, participants perceived pakikipagkapwa-oriented communication as a critical leadership competency. By fostering mutual interest and shared responsibility, doctoral students were able to model ethical leadership practices within academic settings. These experiences parallel those of education graduates in leadership positions who identified relational communication as central to their effectiveness and credibility (Hibaya et al., 2025).

The findings suggest that for Filipino doctoral students in Professional Education, communication is inseparable from relational ethics and cultural values. Pakikipagkapwa emerges not merely as a social skill but as a foundational framework that shapes how communication is practiced, interpreted, and lived.

This culturally grounded understanding challenges Western-centric models of communication and underscores the need for doctoral programs to integrate relational and culturally responsive approaches in developing future educational leaders.

Theme 2: The Resilience–Resourcefulness Paradox



Filipino doctoral students in Professional Education commonly navigate the dual demands of full-time teaching responsibilities and the rigorous expectations of doctoral study. This balancing act places significant strain on their time, energy, and emotional resources, requiring high levels of self-organization and resilience.

Participants described their doctoral journey as “saturated” with overlapping academic, professional, and personal obligations, highlighting resilience not as a fixed trait but as a continuously negotiated process.

Central to this theme is the paradoxical relationship between resilience and resourcefulness. While institutional support was often limited, participants relied heavily on their capacity to mobilize personal resources, including time management strategies, intrinsic motivation, and informal support networks. This self-management echoes phenomenological findings among in-service graduate students, who similarly experienced advanced academic pursuit as a test of endurance and adaptive capacity rather than purely intellectual ability (Khan et al., 2025).

Participants emphasized self-organization as a survival mechanism that enabled them to sustain progress in their doctoral programs. Strategic planning, reflective self-monitoring, and prioritization of academic tasks were described as essential practices for maintaining equilibrium between professional duties and scholarly demands. Comparable findings were observed among BEED graduates and teacher interns, who relied on deliberate self-regulation and adaptive planning to overcome structurally imposed challenges (Mendez, 2025). Coping mechanisms emerged as another critical dimension of resilience.

Participants identified stress-resistance, optimism, and meaning-making as vital tools for navigating prolonged academic pressure. Rather than eliminating stress, doctoral students learned to reframe difficulties as opportunities for growth, a pattern consistent with hermeneutic phenomenological studies on teachers’ professional development and career transitions (Whaley, 2023; Serrano, n.d.).

The lived experience of resilience was also shaped by participants’ prior leadership roles and professional identities. Those with experience in student leadership or institutional governance described drawing on leadership competencies—such as decisiveness, accountability, and emotional regulation—to manage doctoral demands. Similar patterns were documented among former university student leaders transitioning into professional roles, where resilience was cultivated through responsibility and sustained engagement with complex organizational environments (Rodriguez et al., 2025).

Participants further noted that resilience was not developed in isolation but through ongoing negotiation with personal values, family expectations, and professional commitments. This relational aspect of resilience underscores its social dimension, wherein perseverance is sustained through purpose and connectedness rather than individual grit alone. Such findings resonate with phenomenological accounts of in-service teachers pursuing advanced degrees, who framed resilience as an outcome of commitment to professional calling and long-term aspirations (Khan et al., 2025).

The resilience–resourcefulness paradox reveals that Filipino doctoral students’ capacity to endure and succeed is deeply intertwined with their ability to creatively mobilize limited resources. Resilience, in this context, is not merely resistance to stress but an active, reflective process shaped by lived experience, professional identity, and socio-cultural realities. These findings suggest that doctoral programs should recognize and support resilience-building practices as integral to doctoral formation, rather than treating them as individual responsibilities alone.

Theme 3: Mentorship and Coaching as Facilitators of Growth

Participants consistently identified mentorship and coaching as pivotal influences in their doctoral development. Beyond academic supervision, advisors were experienced as facilitators who guided students through intellectual, emotional, and professional transitions. This form of mentorship was characterized not by directive authority but by dialogic engagement, reflecting contemporary coaching approaches that emphasize trust, reflection, and shared responsibility for learning.

A key feature of effective mentorship was the quality of interaction between mentors and doctoral students. Participants highlighted the “Principle of Social Partnership,” wherein they felt empowered to freely express their ideas, uncertainties, and personal insights without fear of judgment. Such open communication mirrors findings from



phenomenological studies on graduate student preparation and adaptation, which underscore the importance of psychologically safe mentoring relationships in sustaining academic confidence and motivation (Molina et al., 2024; Delgado & Arellano, 2021).

Mentorship also played a crucial role in helping participants navigate institutional and pedagogical shifts, particularly in contexts shaped by flexible and hybrid learning modalities. Advisors who modeled adaptability and provided consistent guidance enabled students to reinterpret challenges as opportunities for growth.

Similar patterns were observed among pre-service and graduate students transitioning between learning environments, where mentor support functioned as a stabilizing force amid uncertainty (Liven et al., 2025; Delgado & Arellano, 2021). Participants further described mentorship as a process of professional socialization, wherein advisors introduced them to the norms, expectations, and ethical standards of the academic community.

Through collaborative research, conference participation, and scholarly discourse, doctoral students gradually developed a sense of belonging within professional circles. This aligns with phenomenological research on early-stage PhD students, which highlights mentorship as central to academic identity formation and integration into disciplinary cultures (Chowdhury, 2023).

The expansion of professional networks emerged as a significant outcome of effective mentoring. Participants viewed their advisors as gateways to both domestic and international scholarly communities, enabling connections that broadened research perspectives and career pathways. These professional relationships were perceived as essential for enhancing academic visibility, fostering collaboration, and accessing future leadership opportunities within and beyond higher education institutions.

Importantly, mentorship was experienced not as a unidirectional transfer of expertise but as a reciprocal learning relationship. Participants noted that constructive feedback, collaborative problem-solving, and shared reflection allowed them to gradually assume greater autonomy and confidence as emerging scholars. This relational dynamic reinforces the value of coaching-oriented mentorship in developing self-efficacy and professional maturity among doctoral students.

The findings suggest that mentorship and coaching function as critical facilitators of growth for Filipino doctoral students in Professional Education. By fostering open communication, professional socialization, and network-building, mentoring relationships contribute significantly to students' academic resilience and identity development. These insights underscore the need for doctoral programs to institutionalize mentoring practices that prioritize partnership, reflexivity, and long-term professional formation.

Theme 4: Navigating the Digital and Educational Shift

Adaptability to technological innovations and evolving educational standards emerged as a central lived experience among Filipino doctoral students in Professional Education. Participants described the rapid digital transformation of higher education as both an opportunity for professional growth and a source of persistent challenge. The shift toward hybrid and flexible learning environments required them to continuously reconfigure their teaching practices, research routines, and scholarly identities.

Digital literacy was consistently identified as an essential social and professional skill accelerated by the transition to hybrid learning in the Philippines. Participants emphasized the need to master learning management systems, online collaboration platforms, and digital research tools, often with limited institutional training. Similar experiences were documented among international doctoral students and university lecturers, who framed digital adaptation as a process of self-directed learning shaped by institutional expectations and cultural adjustment (Robert, 2023; Sipe & Segumpan, 2024). Participants further noted that digital adaptation extended beyond technical proficiency to include pedagogical innovation.

The challenge of sustaining student engagement, fostering interaction, and ensuring meaningful learning in online and blended environments required creative instructional strategies. This mirrors phenomenological findings among



educators navigating unfamiliar teaching contexts, where innovation emerged from necessity rather than abundance of resources (Nob & Tañola, 2024).

Innovation, however, was often constrained by limited access to technological infrastructure and instructional support. Doctoral students described difficulties in generating new ideas and sustaining creativity within resource-limited academic settings. Despite these constraints, participants demonstrated adaptive creativity by repurposing available tools and integrating contextualized teaching approaches. Such experiences resonate with studies on synchronous and asynchronous learning, which highlight how learners and educators negotiate innovation within structural limitations (Armada & Armada, 2024).

The digital shift also influenced participants' professional identities as educators and researchers. Engaging with technology required them to renegotiate traditional conceptions of teaching authority, classroom interaction, and scholarly productivity. These identity negotiations parallel the experiences of international doctoral students in education programs, who reported ongoing recalibration of professional roles in response to changing academic environments (Robert, 2023).

Participants emphasized that adaptability to digital change was closely linked to resilience and reflective practice. Rather than perceiving technological challenges as disruptions, doctoral students increasingly viewed them as integral to professional growth. This reflective orientation enabled participants to transform uncertainty into learning opportunities, reinforcing adaptability as a lived competence rather than a static skill.

Theme 4 reveals that navigating the digital and educational shift is a complex, multidimensional experience for Filipino doctoral students in Professional Education. Digital literacy and innovation are not merely technical demands but socially and contextually mediated practices shaped by institutional constraints, cultural expectations, and professional aspirations. These findings underscore the need for doctoral programs to provide sustained, context-sensitive support for digital transformation as a core component of doctoral formation.

Conclusion:

The development of social skills among Filipino doctoral students in Professional Education serves as a foundational element for their success as researchers, educators, and leaders. These competencies enable them to navigate complex academic and professional environments, effectively engage with diverse stakeholders, and contribute meaningfully to educational innovation.

Beyond technical expertise, social skills such as communication, collaboration, resilience, and self-organization are critical for sustaining professional growth and fostering constructive learning communities.

This phenomenological study highlights that while the core categories of social skills align with international conceptual frameworks, the lived experiences of Filipino doctoral students reveal culturally specific nuances. Skills are not merely practiced as abstract competencies but are enacted through relational ethics, collective responsibility, and adaptive strategies embedded in the Philippine socio-cultural context. Concepts such as *pakikipagkapwa* and mentorship-oriented learning underscore the role of relational harmony and collaborative engagement in shaping skill development.

Hence, these findings suggest that doctoral education in the Philippines should move beyond a purely research-centered focus to cultivate social skills that are culturally responsive and contextually grounded. By integrating participatory approaches, reflective practices, and mentorship structures, doctoral programs can better prepare future educators to meet the dynamic demands of contemporary educational spaces while honoring the collective and relational values central to Filipino professional life.

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