Research article

Unveiling the keys to success: Insights from a phenomenological study on recent nursing graduates

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A B S T R A C T

Background: The phenomenon of academic success of undergraduate nursing students is a global issue in higher education institutions due to the direct effects on the availability of future nurses and care, thus impacting public health. Available quantitative research has highlighted factors influencing academic success, although most of these factors are not effectively manageable with intervention strategies.
Aim: The purpose of the study was to describe the lived experiences and their meanings of Bachelor nursing graduates who successfully completed the program.
Design: Phenomenological descriptive study.
Setting: University of L'Aquila, Italy.
Participants: A purposive sample of twenty-two successful nursing graduates.
Methods: Participants were interviewed at the end of the 2022 academic year. A thematic analysis was conducted to describe their lived experiences as students.
Results: Five themes represent the key to success for undergraduate nursing students. Specifically: (1) have a single-minded determination, (2) adopt versatile and evolutionary learning strategies, (3) have strong supportive relationship, (4) apply strategies for emotional regulation, and (5) perceive themselves as the heartbeat of education.
Conclusions: This phenomenological study unveils the keys to the academic success of undergraduate nursing students, providing insights to appropriate supporting strategies.

1. Introduction

The literature defines the academic success of nursing students as the students' ability to earn the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree at any time, i.e., either within the expected duration of the study or at a later time (Cameron et al., 2011; Caponnetto et al., 2021). However, as showed in a recent systematic review, most of the authors who have investigated the academic success and its associated and predictive factors define students' success as earning the BSN within the regular duration of the program (Caponnetto et al., 2021). Despite the variability of definitions adopted by authors, academic success and failure are "two sides of the same coin". Promoting success and reducing failure in undergraduate nursing courses is a global issue for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) due to its direct impact on the future nurse workforce availability. Each student who fails represents one less nurse for the

workforce, which can have significant consequences for care accessibility and public health (Boniol et al., 2022; Cameron et al., 2011; Merkley, 2016). Given nurses' pivotal role in shaping healthcare policies and delivering essential care, understanding the factors influencing academic success and failure can be instrumental in effectively addressing the anticipated surge in demand for timely preventive and long-term nursing care driven by rising life expectancy, rapid population aging, and the increased prevalence of chronic conditions (OECD, 2023).

2. Background

Relevant quantitative and historical research shows that associated and predictive factors of academic outcomes for undergraduate nursing students are manifold, often influence each other, and can be classified into three levels, namely the micro level (which includes students'

individual characteristics), the *meso* level (which includes institutional and organizational factors affecting the educational program), and the macro level (which includes external factors related to political, social, and professional aspects) (Caponnetto et al., 2021; Urwin et al., 2010;). Most of the influencing factors identified in quantitative research are not modifiable. In particular, being female, having better high school final grades, and having attended classical or scientific upper-secondary school are unmodifiable factors associated with success (Brimble, 2015; Dante et al., 2015; Deary et al., 2003; Lancia et al., 2018; Mulholland et al., 2008; Pryjmachuk et al., 2009; Salamonson et al., 2011; Salamonson et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). While the role of other factors, such us age, native language, or previous work experience in healthcare field, is still unclear (Caponnetto et al., 2021), these data may contribute to early identification of "at-risk" students in order to implement effective supporting strategies (Jeffreys, 2022). There is available research on the effects of formal and informal supporting strategies on academic outcomes (Edge and Gladstone, 2022; Middleton et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021;). These strategies are multifactorial and mainly based on tutorship, study, and psychological support, as well as on the promotion of self-efficacy and sense of belonging among students (Middleton et al., 2021). However, their theoretical grounding is lacking and limitations in the evaluation of their effectiveness have been remarked (Edge and Gladstone, 2022; Jeffreys, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2021). Moreover, these interventions often targeted student profiles associated with lower academic performance, including those from underrepresented minority backgrounds (Mitchell et al., 2021). This highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of support strategies.

To develop a holistic and comprehensive approach enabling academic success, supporting strategies should be based on a deep knowledge of both nursing students' needs and modifiable factors associated with students' outcome. Specifically, supporting strategies should involve organizational features and leverage on factors and strategies that allow students to achieve their goals (Cameron et al., 2011; Veesart and Cannon, 2022). In this regard, there is a need to deeply understand the underlying mechanisms and strategies that contribute to student success. Quantitative research, while proficient at identifying associations between variables and outcomes, often falls short in elucidating the lived experiences and cognitive processes that underpin student's success. Considering the highly detailed description of phenomena achievable by conducting qualitative research, this study contributes to the international debate about nursing students' academic success and informs potential supporting strategies for nursing students by identifying specific strategies employed by successful nursing graduates. Understanding these strategies is crucial for informing targeted support interventions aimed at enhancing academic success in nursing education. Therefore, the study aims to explore the lived experiences of nursing graduates who successfully obtained their BSN degree within the expected program duration, seeking to capture the essence of their educational journey and uncover the underlying key elements contributing to their academic success. In this study, the choice of defining academic success as "completing the course within the expected program duration" is rooted in the fact that, in Italy, this indicator has been considered a key measure of university efficiency driven by national Law (Law n.1, 2009 - Measures for the Quality of the University System).

3. Method

3.1. Study design

A descriptive phenomenological study was conducted (Speziale et al., 2011). This methodology developed by Husserl in the late 1800s serves as a framework for investigating human experiences from a subjective perspective (Matua and Van Der Wal, 2015). Husserl's philosophy emphasizes understanding phenomena as they are perceived and experienced by individuals, free from external theories or biases.

This approach aligns with our objective of exploring the lived experiences of successful nursing graduates to gain an authentic understanding of the strategies and factors contributing to their academic success (Giorgi, 2009). The consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ-32 checklist), which was developed to improve the quality of reporting of interview and focus-group studies, was used to guide the manuscript drafting (Tong et al., 2007).

3.2. Setting

The study took place at the University of L'Aquila, a teaching and research institution located in Abruzzo, a region in central Italy. In the 2021–2022 academic year, just over 16,000 students were enrolled in educational programs offered by seven departments. The University of L'Aquila provides students with many facilities and services aimed at easing their academic pathways. These include archives and libraries, canteens, transport services and accommodation, sport centers, support services for students with learning disorders, listening and consultation services for students with psychological discomfort, and multidisciplinary services for students with affective and relational dysfunctions. Students with economic difficulties can also access special grants and scholarships. Before enrolling, students can participate in orientation days and seminars offered by teachers with the aim of clarifying course contents and teaching methodologies.

Among its academic courses, the University of L'Aquila offers a three-year BSN program which requires students to obtain 180 credits (5400 h) by passing both theoretical and practical exams. Clinical training is carried out with the supervision and guidance of specifically trained tutors. Clinical and related activities account for 60 credits (1800 h).

3.3. Participants

In the 2019–2020 academic year, a total of 100 students enrolled in the BSN program. Among them, seventy-three (73.0 %) obtained their degree in the 2021–2022 academic year. Consequently, according to the purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2014), all successful students were preliminarily contacted by phone to explore their willingness to participate in the study. They were informed about the aim of the study and that the confidentiality of their data would be guaranteed in accordance with national laws. Those who agreed to participate were sent the informed consent via e-mail, which they promptly filled out and sent back. In accordance with the qualitative nature of the study, the sample size was not defined a priori. While ensuring the richness and quality of collected data, enrollment was closed when saturation was ascertained, i.e., when no new data or themes were obtained from the interviews (Patton, 2014).

3.4. Procedure and data collection

Nursing graduates who consented to participate in the study were asked to complete an online semi-structured questionnaire using Microsoft Forms. The questionnaire consisted of seven questions for the purpose of documenting their characteristics (i.e., gender, age, type of upper-secondary school, upper-secondary school grade, time employed to reach the university every day, extracurricular activities, life events). These data were also collected to assess whether the characteristics of participants were in line with those reported in the literature for "successful students" (Lancia et al., 2018; Caponnetto et al., 2021). Subsequently, for each participant, an appointment with a Research Fellow in nursing with a PhD qualification was arranged for audio-recorded face-to-face interviews based on seven open guiding questions (Table 1). To prepare the interview, the authors conducted a focus group, after individually consulting available evidence on the topic. To foster in-depth self-reflection on their experiences, participants received questions via e-mail one week to the scheduled meeting. The guiding questions were employed as flexible prompts rather than strict directives, aiming to

Table 1

Guiding interview questions.

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1. What were your individual strengths or personal traits that helped you to complete the pathway on time?
2. In your social life, what were the factors that facilitated the achievement of academic success?
3. How did you deal with high emotional stress situations experienced during the course?
4. Describe your 'typical' day as a student.
5. What were the strategies you used to learn effectively in clinical practice and pass the theoretical exams?
6. What were the organizational characteristics facilitated the achievement of academic success?
7. What could be improved to increase the chances of success of nursing students?

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broadly evoke students' experiences and being adjusted or omitted as necessary when participants fully shared their stories. The focus of interviewer was to ensure that the same general areas of information were collected from each student. Students were explicitly informed that the questions were intended to help them reflect on their journey through the BSN program and to share their experiences without being influenced by the questions themselves. Each audio-recorded interview, conducted in Italian language, began with a general introductory inquiry aimed at eliciting the participant's lived experiences in their academic journey, focusing on experiences that contributed to their successful completion of the program, including the challenges they faced and how they navigated them.

To maintain consistency across interviews, all participants were interviewed by the same researcher in a dedicated room at the university, one person at a time. No other subjects were involved during the interview. To detect any element useful for a better understanding of the significance of participants' experiences as students, field notes were also collected.

After conducting each interview, the interviewer held a debriefing with other researchers to obtain insight regarding the interview process and to adjust it according to the study aim.

3.5. Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim after each meeting with the participants. Data analysis followed Giorgi's framework for phenomenological data analysis, which aligns with Husserl's descriptive phenomenology aiming to preserve the lived experiences of individuals as they are perceived, free from external theories or biases (Giorgi, 1997). This methodological framework was particularly suitable for exploring the educational journeys of nursing graduates, facilitating a systematic investigation into the meanings they attribute to their experiences. Giorgi's framework comprises four phases: 1) bracketing, 2) intuition, 3) analysis, and 4) description (Giorgi, 1997). In the bracketing phase, researchers consciously set aside their own preconceptions about the participants' experiences to prevent bias. This critical step, grounded in Husserl's philosophical approach, ensured that the analysis proceeded without preconceived notions, allowing the genuine experiences of the participants to emerge authentically.

During the intuition phase, researchers immersed themselves in the transcripts and field notes, repeatedly reading them to grasp intuitively the essential meanings embedded within the narratives. This immersion was essential for capturing the nuanced aspects of the participants' lived experiences.

In the subsequent analysis phase, significant statements from the interviews were identified and translated into clearer, more accessible language, facilitating the categorization of key information and aspects of the experiences. This process involved organizing these categories into coherent themes to enhance understanding. Categories were highlighted in the results using quotation marks.

Finally, in the thematic description phase, themes were described and supported with the most significant quotations from participants, with indications of the interviews they refer to (e.g., interview 3). This synthesis adhered strictly to phenomenological principles, aiming to faithfully describe the phenomena as perceived directly by the participants, free from external influences. Two researchers simultaneously but independently carried out thematic analysis and subsequent triangulation of the results (Speziale et al., 2011). No software was used to manage qualitative data, and all analyses were performed in Italian. Translations of themes and quotations were performed for publication.

After data analysis, the authors recognized that the experiences of successful students could be embedded into a visual conceptual framework derived from the literature (Caponnetto et al., 2021; Jeffreys, 2022; Lancia et al., 2018; Urwin et al., 2010). This integration was possible because students are immersed in an organizational context, whose functioning rules are influenced by the political-institutional environment. The students' experiences occurred through the interaction between their individual characteristics and the organizational context. The final outcome of this interaction was the students' academic success, which, in turn, can impacts the political-institutional context.

3.6. Trustworthiness

According to the criteria provided by Guba (Guba, 1981), trustworthiness was ensured utilizing the following complementary strategies. The authors thoroughly and transparently detailed procedures, methods and setting, that they persistently observed by prolonged immersion. The audio-recorded interviews were conducted by the same researcher involving a purposive sample of students. The interviewer also collected field notes that were used in debriefing sessions aimed at orienting subsequent interviews. Rigorous bracketing process and triangulation were employed throughout the analysis to maintain objectivity and focus on participants' lived experiences, adhering to Husserl's phenomenological philosophy. A thick description of results was provided by including themes in a visual framework derived from literature ensuring strengthening their understandability.

3.7. Ethical issues

Based on local regulations and considering that the topic of the study is noteworthy for quality improvement of the BSN program, approval of both the Quality Committee and Board of the Course was requested and obtained (letters July 04, 2022 and July 12, 2022). All participants gave their written informed consent. In accordance with Italian laws, participants' anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed throughout the study.

4. Results

4.1. Characteristics of participants

Fifty-four fresh graduates agreed to participate in the study, but data saturation was achieved after 22 graduates were interviewed, so the remaining 32 were not interviewed. Most of the participants were female ($n = 17$, 77.3 %), with an average age of 23.9 years ($\pm$ 4.17; median 22, min–max 21–39).

Most of the participants ($n = 15$, 68.2 %) attended a scientific or classical upper-secondary school before admission to the BSN program, and their average final grade was 76.1/101 points ($\pm$ 10.7; median 76.5, range 60–97). During the BSN program, most of the participants ($n = 21$, 90.9 %) spent <30 min each day to reach the university. Six out of the 22 participants carried out extracurricular activities during their studies

(27.3 %), while 15 (68.2 %) reported separation from family as their most significant life event. Details of students' characteristics are reported in Table 2.

4.2. Lived experiences of successful BSN graduates

The average duration of the face-to-face interviews was 26.0 min (± 8.31; median 26.08, range 10.07–42.59). From the content analysis of the interviews emerged 5 themes and 17 descriptive categories (Fig. 1).

4.2.1. Single-minded determination
One of the secrets of the participants' success as students was their clear focus on the goal they were pursuing and channeling of their efforts and attention towards its accomplishment. The participants exhibited specific characteristics that collectively embodied the ability to focus on a specific goal. "Personal determination" as the main character trait represented the unwavering resolve and perseverance to overcome challenges and obstacles while staying committed to the goal. This highlights the strength of will and tenacity required to maintain a single-minded focus.

> "*I'm determined in my choices. When I make a commitment, I always tend to keep it, even if it's not always easy* [...], *if I set a goal for myself, I want to keep it.*"
>
> (Interview 1)

> "*I'm a very determined person, generally in my life, and if I set a goal for myself, I do everything I can to achieve it, even if there are obstacles.*"
>
> (Interview 22)

As students, the participants showed a strong "sense of duty", signifying the responsibility and obligation they felt towards their academic activities. This reflects a commitment to fulfill their educational responsibilities and recognize the significance of investing time and effort to achieve academic success. The sense of duty felt by students stemmed from either internal or external influences.

> "[...] *I graduated from a scientific upper-secondary school with a low grade, therefore I had a desire for a sort of redemption at university, a*

Table 2
Participants' characteristics (*n* = 22).

ID	Gender	Age (years)	Upper-secondary school	Upper school grade (60–101)	Time to reach university	Extracurricular activities	Life events[a]
1	Female	23	Technical and professional education	90	>30 min	No	Separation from family Significant life events
2	Female	25	Technical and professional education	77	≤30 min	No	Separation from family Economic difficulties
3	Female	23	Technical and professional education	97	≤30 min	No	Separation from family
4	Female	22	Classical or science education	66	≤30 min	No	Separation from family
5	Female	21	Classical or science education	79	≤30 min	Yes	Familiar commitment
6	Female	30	Classical or science education	64	≤30 min	No	Familiar commitment
7	Female	24	Classical or science education	91	≤30 min	No	Separation from family
8	Female	21	Classical or science education	84	≤30 min	No	Separation from family
9	Male	25	Technical and professional education	83	≤30 min	No	Sport
10	Female	22	Classical or science education	67	≤30 min	No	Separation from family
11	Female	30	Classical or science education	60	≤30 min	Yes	Separation from family Economic difficulties
12	Female	21	Classical or science education	80	≤30 min	Yes	Separation from family
13	Female	23	Classical or science education	91	≤30 min	No	Separation from family Significant life events
14	Male	22	Classical or science education	80	≤30 min	No	Separation from family
15	Female	22	Technical and professional education	76	≤30 min	No	None
16	Female	22	Classical or science education	83	≤30 min	No	Separation from family
17	Male	22	Technical and professional education	67	>30 min	Yes	Significant life events
18	Male	22	Classical or science education	65	≤30 min	No	Familiar commitment
19	Female	39	Technical and professional education	67	≤30 min	Yes	Familiar commitment Economic difficulties
20	Female	22	Classical or science education	61	≤30 min	Yes	Separation from family Significant life events
21	Female	22	Classical or science education	76	≤30 min	No	Separation from family Economic difficulties
22	Male	23	Classical or science education	70	≤30 min	No	Separation from family

[a] Significant life events include bereavement, marriage, serious illnesses, temporary disability; familiar commitment include children management, elderly or disabled care.
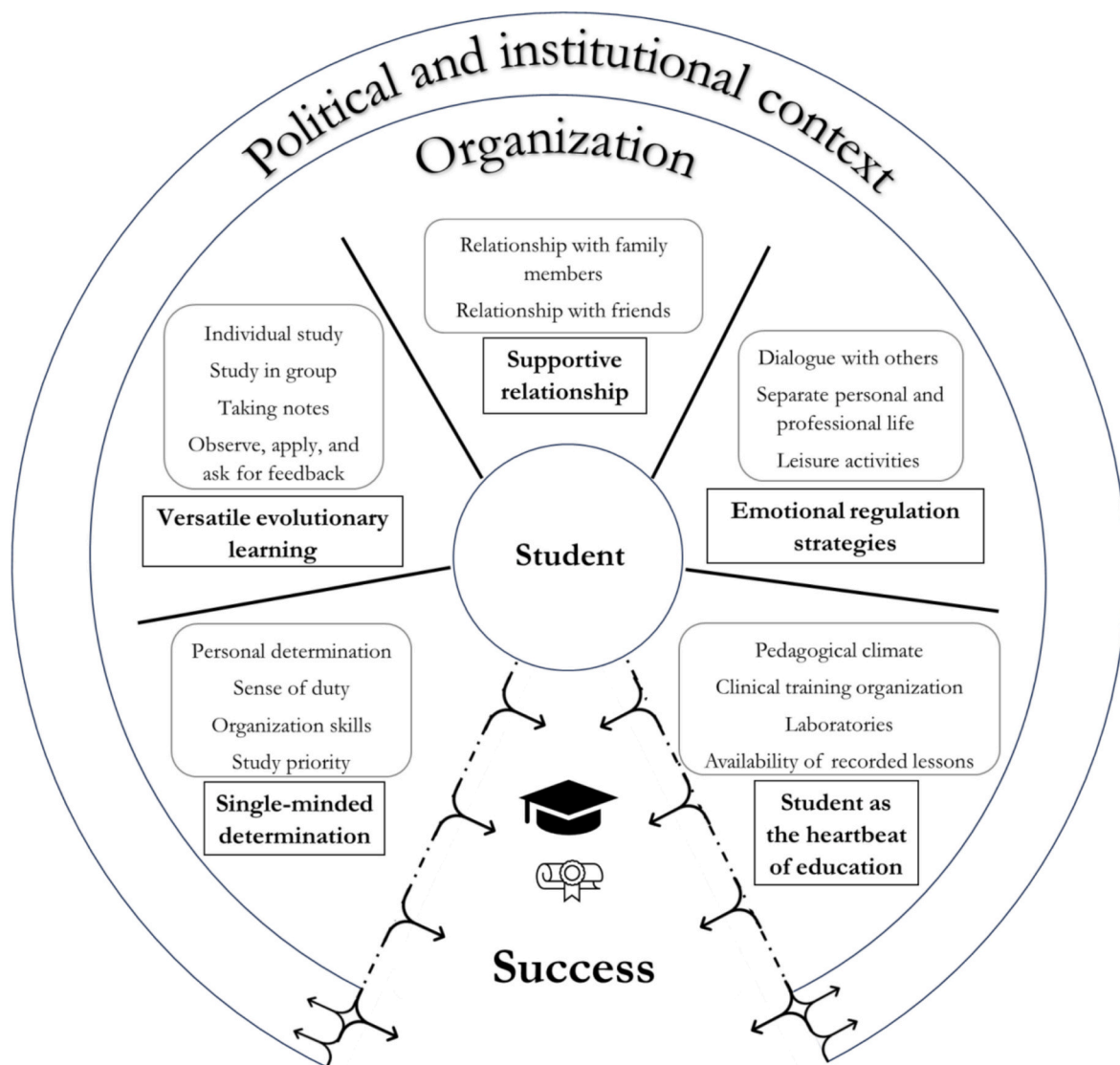
Fig. 1. Academic success: student strategies and key elements.

sense of duty arose in me to excel, to prove to myself and others that I was capable […]"

(Interview 14)

"[…] *My parents incurred expenses to support me, and in addition, the desire not to disappoint my father weighed heavily on me due to the trust he placed in me.*"

(Interview 19)

"Organizational skills" played a crucial role in fostering single-minded determination to achieve academic success. Being organized helped the participants to effectively structure their time, resources, and tasks. Organizational skills enabled them to stay on course, manage priorities, and optimize their study efforts.

"*I consider myself very organized. If I know that I have a specific commitment at the time, I make an effort to organize myself and ensure that I do not miss out on anything […]"*

(Interview 10)

The interviews also revealed a common attitude of successful students to consciously allocate time and energy for learning by "prioritizing study" over other activities. In this regard, studying was put first, and leisure and extra activities were voluntarily renounced.

"*During the course, I worked in a call center […] At some point, I decided to quit because I realized that I could not manage to study effectively.*"

(Interview 9)

"*I focused only on my studies, finding relaxation and enjoyment through my friendships, but I deliberately avoided any additional distractions.*"

(Interview 14)

4.2.2. Versatile and evolutionary learning

Throughout the entire journey, students experienced a variety of study approaches and an evolution of theoretical learning strategies, shaped by the experiences they encountered during the degree course. Initially, students adopted collaborative learning strategies, i.e., mostly oriented towards shared or group study and a division of tasks with classmates.

"[…] *initially, we divided the tasks [with classmates] or faced half of the subject each and we studied together. Then this faded away because at a certain point different study rhythms and methods started to emerge, so it gradually declined.*"

(Interview 14)

"*The first year we performed shared studying* [*with classmates*]*, and it was a bit chaotic, then, over time I found my own method* […]"

(Interview 8)

Following their first experiences with theoretical exams, each student sought for their most appropriate strategy. In this research, participants experimented a broad range of study strategies and techniques to enhance learning. They highlighted the value of being flexible, open-minded, and willing to explore various approaches to studying in order to optimize understanding, retention, and mastery of course contents. As result, participants reported independent learning as the most powerful strategy, i.e., "individual study". They transcribed recorded lectures or rewrote notes, then studied individually. By reworking information in written form, students deepened their understanding using additional resources like handouts, books, and the internet.

"*Primarily, I would summarize the lessons and read my notes, and if the topic was not very clear, I would delve deeper through internet sources or books* […]"

(Interview 22)

"*For studying, I always recorded each lesson. At home, I used a method that might be a bit long and unusual: I listened to the recordings, wrote a rough draft of notes, and then reworked all those notes, integrating them with slides and textbooks. It was like creating my own personal manual.*"

(Interview 10)

Subsequently, the participants also consolidated and enhanced their learning through discussion and recitation of topics with their classmates, going back to "study in group".

"*I preferred studying alone, and then I would review in a group and listen to my classmates reciting to memorize.*"

(Interview 13)

"*My strategy initially involved studying alone, but as the exam date approached, I found it beneficial to review with a classmate by quizzing each other.*"

(Interview 15)

"*I began studying alone and summarizing notes repeatedly. However, I preferred reviewing the lesson with someone else, perhaps just to listen to them; this approach has also been very beneficial to me.*"

(Interview 12)

Similarly to theoretical learning, in order to better learn from the clinical training, students used to carefully "observe" what happened in wards and "taking notes" and then, reprocess those data once they got home. Additionally, to reinforce their learning, they seized every opportunity to "apply" nursing interventions as first operator and asked for "feedback" from nurses. A further opportunity of growth towards professionalism was sought in discussions with classmates or nurses.

"*During the internship, I had a notebook for taking notes, were I jotted down all the points that needed to be learned. At home, I would go through everything I didn't understand... every day served me to learn new things.*"

(Interview 6)

"*If in the morning I saw a nursing intervention, in the afternoon I would try to review it and search in the guidelines for everything that was not explained to me during the internship…. I would also try to ask for additional information from available nurses. When I found discrepancies between practice and theory, I would go back to review the procedures in the books.*"

(Interview 2)

"*During the internship, I would follow the nurse and ask for advice. When I saw a procedure for the first time, I would observe the nurse performing it. Then, I would do it myself while the nurse observed me and corrected my mistakes* […] *I tried to seize every opportunity to learn.*"

(Interview 17)

4.2.3. Supportive relationships

Participants highlighted the significance of having a strong support system and the positive impact of interpersonal relationships on their well-being, resilience, and personal growth. They also emphasized the importance of social connections, empathy, and mutual support in tackling academic challenges and achieving personal fulfillment. According to the participants, one of the most powerful support systems they had during their academic pathway was their "relationship with family members".

"*I had a significant moment when I wanted to give up and doubted the path I had chosen. Additionally, around the same time, there was an exam that everyone said was particularly difficult, and I went into a tailspin. I overcame this moment thanks to my family. They helped me by reassuring and encouraging me, telling me to at least try and see how the exam would go. Once you've studied, you have a clear conscience, and if you don't pass, you can always take it again. In the end, the exam went well, and from there, I felt encouraged and took off.*"

(Interview 13)

"*My family's support has certainly played a crucial role. I'm a local student, so I could discuss things with my family and receive a lot of motivational encouragement. Being able to talk about my experiences and feel understood helped me a lot. I could reflect on certain actions I took and consider how I might have done things differently, which helped me improve* […]."

(Interview 17)

"Relationship with friends" also played a crucial role in determining a positive progression of the study path. Most of these friendships were built during the educational pathway with classmates, also by studying together.

"*A determining factor for my success was the support of the people who were close to me and being able to create a favorable environment made up of friends who have the same passions and who share studying. This allowed us to keep up with the times, moving forward together towards achieving the goal* […]. *Being an out-of-town student, getting up in the morning and knowing that I would see my friends, even if only for a few hours of lessons, reassured me.*

(Interview 16)

"*We supported each other and faced exams together* […]. *The group we formed offered support in even the smallest things, often through shared laughter. Their presence* [friends] *was crucial, as they were there in the literal sense of being present without necessarily needing to do anything specific. If I had gone through this journey without forming a group of friends, I'm not sure if I would have made it, especially since I was living away from home. My group of friends was a lifesaver*"

(Interview 13)

4.2.4. Emotional regulation strategies

The journey towards academic success required students to deal with high emotionally intense and stressful situations, generally arising from internship activities. Students were highly impacted by experiencing patients' death.

"*I faced death of an oncology child, and it deeply affected me. I had to work on myself for a month to come to terms with the fact that death is a natural event.*"

(Interview 11)

"[…] *I had already been exposed to the world of suffering* […] *but the experience with death was different. I remember that the first death I*

witnessed happened on the second day of my first-year internship. I had to face death immediately, and it was a shock [...]."

(Interview 9)

The internship caused students, especially in the initial stages, an emotional burden featured by thoughts, fears, and doubts that they carried home.

"*At the beginning, I was attending the internship in an oncology ward, and I didn't really react [...] I used to go home and think about everything I had seen and what patients told me. I reached a breaking point and felt extremely bad [...].*"

(Interview 15)

"*I became very attached to patients, especially a 'papa' who later died. His death left a mark on me, so entering geriatrics triggered fear in me. I started with the handbrake on.*"

(Interview 10)

"*[...] I attended internship in an oncology ward, and it was quite challenging to be in that environment and I kept trying to understand how I could be helpful in certain situations. I kept wondering: Is this the right job for me? Will I be able to be a nurse? [...]*"

(Interview 2)

However, the students realized that it was necessary to adopt emotional regulation strategies to face the emotional burden and continue their pathway. Hence, they achieved emotional decompression that allowed them to find serenity again. To obtain this result, most of the participants engaged in "dialog with others", i.e., their peers, tutors, or nurses.

"*I faced particularly stressful situations [...]. I dealt with them by engaging in dialog with my tutors or classmates who tried to support me. Always, I was able to manage these situations, maintaining composure and keeping a clear head.*"

(Interview 20)

"*[For] problems [that] occurred during my internship, I immediately tried to talk about it with the nurses [...]. Their advice and experience helped me in finding the right answers.*"

(Interview 21)

Another strategy frequently used by the participants was keeping their "personal and professional lives separate".

"*[...] death was a shock that allowed me to understand that I had to separate my professional life from my personal life. What happened in the hospital had to stay there, and I shouldn't bring it home because, otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to move forward.*"

(Interview 9)

"*I learned not to carry at home with me everything I heard and saw, by separating my personal and work life.*"

(Interview 15)

Often, students sought emotional release by dedicating part of their time to "leisure activities".

"*[...] I had to go to the gym for about half an hour every day [...] It helped me a lot, as well as playing the piano. I would channel all the nervousness and disappointment I felt into playing, releasing all the [bad] energy and tension I felt.*"

(Interview 11)

"*Volleyball was a relief when the days were too heavy for me [...]. Sport is essential; I used it a lot to release both physically and mentally. Without sport, I feel lost.*"

(Interview 19)

4.2.5. Students as the heartbeat of education

To achieve academic success, the participants emphasized the importance of a student-centered organizational policy in education institutions. Specifically, as students, the participants felt themselves at the center of the educational project, receiving tailored teaching methods in an educational environment that met their needs and aspirations. Seen through the eyes of the participants, the most relevant organizational factors that led to their success were the "pedagogical climate" and the presence of a clinical tutor.

"*[...] I had my tutor. Whenever I had any doubts, I always asked her [for clarification], and that was the organizational aspect that helped me the most [...]. The wards, with their good climate, were encouraging because they fostered curiosity, were stimulating and made me want to say: 'I want to do it too, I want to understand too, I would also like to be as skilled as her'.*"

(Interview 2)

Also, the "organization of the clinical training" was perceived as a factor that influenced academic success.

"*In my opinion, the numerous hours of internship were crucial to gaining a good clinical experience. The choice of internship placements by the university was appropriate; it allowed me to get to know departments that I would have never chosen based on my personal expectation, but they turned out to be pleasant and instructive settings.*"

(Interview 16)

Another element that many participants considered an added value in ensuring a positive academic outcome was the availability of "laboratories". Their usefulness was related to the possibility to fix theoretical learning and to prepare for practice.

"*Another organizational aspect that facilitated my journey was the laboratory. I found the anatomy lab particularly interesting [...]. It helped me to better understand what I studied [...]*"

(Interview 9)

"*The laboratory was extremely useful before the internship because it reduced the fear of starting [...]. You had already practiced that technique on the mannequin [...]*"

(Interview 14)

Finally, the "availability of recorded lessons" was also considered an added value in facilitating learning because it allowed to capture all information provided by teachers and integrate notes.

"*At the organizational level, it was important to be able to review the recordings of the lectures. In my opinion, this opportunity was excellent because it helped to capture all things indicated by the professor*"

(Interview 3)

"*[...] if during the lecture I missed anything, I could re-listen and integrate my notes, though this was time-consuming*"

(Interview 6)

5. Discussion

The characteristics of enrolled participants are in line with those reported in the literature for 'success students' (Dante et al., 2015; Lancia et al., 2018), suggesting that their experiences might provide useful insights into the topic.

Quantitative research on academic success has identified key characteristics associated with successful students. For example, factors such as being female, pursuing classical or scientific studies, achieving high grades in final high school exams, being local students, and native speakers have been associated with success (Brimble, 2015; Dante et al., 2015; Deary et al., 2003; Lancia et al., 2018; Mulholland et al., 2008; Pryjmachuk et al., 2009; Salamonson et al., 2011; Salamonson et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2011). However, possessing these characteristics does not guarantee academic success, as educational practice and

research demonstrate a complex interplay of individual, organizational, and socio-political factors (Urwin et al., 2010). This phenomenological study explored the experiences of successful students, uncovering hidden and lesser-studied aspects such as personal attributes like determination, sense of duty, and organizational skills. It also highlighted factors evolving throughout students' journeys, including supportive relationships and coping strategies developed through emotional elaboration. Additionally, organizational factors such as fostering a conducive pedagogical environment, providing laboratory resources, and offering varied clinical experiences seem to be crucial for students' integration into the educational process, thus contributing to academic success.

More specifically, a key hidden factor of success was the strong motivation to achieve goals exhibited by successful students. Although this motivation could be driven by different factors, such as the desire to prove oneself or not to disappoint one's parents, it needs to be addressed from the beginning of the students' journey in the degree program. Therefore, recognizing this attitude early among freshmen and fostering it by creating a positive learning environment, promoting effective time management by prioritizing study, and facilitating peer mentorship could help guide students towards academic success (Andersen and Watkins, 2018; Kim et al., 2021; Rusticus et al., 2023).

Based on experiences shared by participants, another key to success was being open-minded regarding learning strategies. Participants followed a versatile and cyclic learning process: they initially studied in groups, developed their individual methods, and then returned to group study for confirmation and discussion with peers. This adaptable approach to learning likely reflects a broader progression towards maturity and professionalism among successful students. Therefore, understanding students' learning approaches could be useful in guiding them to address methodological weaknesses and enhance their study skills (Alsayed et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021). Among the strategies highlighted by the interviewed students, audio-recording lectures for later transcription and note revision were highly valued. Although these strategies are time-consuming and traditionally considered 'passive,' they seem to effectively aid students in consolidating acquired information.

Despite the limited evidence in the literature on study strategies that faculty should recommend to nursing students to facilitate learning (Michael and Martin, 2019), making lecture recordings available and encouraging their use seems to enhance the likelihood of success. Notably, this approach was also applied by students during clinical training. Therefore, an effective learning strategy hinges on the active reworking of acquired information through various methods, particularly between concrete learning experiences (such as subsequent lectures or clinical placement days). This method provides the opportunity for continuous and mutual integration between students' background knowledge (i.e., previously acquired) and foreground knowledge (i.e., currently acquired), along with their competencies. This highlights an in-depth approach to learning that maximize theoretical learning and translate contents into practice for both academic and clinical success (Alsayed et al., 2021; Takase and Yoshida, 2021). Discussion and "quizzing" among peers were also highly valued following individual study and should be proposed as effective study strategies due to their ability to promote both reflective and clinical skills (Yoong et al., 2023). These strategies would also contribute reducing the risk of academic underachievement associated with suboptimal individual study strategies (Seshan et al., 2021; Tang and Chow, 2020; Yardimci et al., 2017). The association between the study strategies used by successful students and their academic performance requires further investigation through quantitative research, especially since the existing literature offers insights into effective study methods while also revealing gaps specific to nursing education (Anderson, 2016; Lown and Hawkins, 2017; Michael and Martin, 2019).

Another key to success highlighted by participants was their access to a robust support system provided by family and friends. This underscores the importance of the social environment in students' experiences and suggests the need to create socialization opportunities, especially for freshmen (McCloughen et al., 2020; Soerensen et al., 2023). These opportunities should encourage the sharing of experiences and the building of relationships between peers (Mitchell et al., 2021). When students work to manage negative emotions by reflecting on their experiences and discussing them with peers, they participate in a type of emotional support that can enhance active learning and foster resilience (Lopez et al., 2018; Thomas and Revell, 2016). The influence of the support system appears to be implicitly embedded in almost all themes, especially in 'emotional release.' In fact, participants emphasized the usefulness of sharing experiences with peers and nurses, as well as the cathartic power of this process. This effect seems to have been enhanced by the participants' ability to balance empathy with detachment in emotionally intense and stressful situations, as well as their search for a 'relief valve'. These results offer several useful suggestions for potential support strategies. Social events could be beneficial for building relationships between peers and may provide students with a valuable 'relief valve' through recreational activities.

Finally, participants described experiences that more broadly involved the educational institution and was related to the organization of the educational program. The positive 'pedagogical climate' perceived by the participants during their days as students was mainly related to the presence of a tutor who was also perceived as a mentor and a model. The importance of this relationship has been widely highlighted in the literature and further supports the suggestion to train clinical nurses to act as mentors and effectively educate students (Roldán-Merino et al., 2019; Sundler et al., 2014). Other factors leading to the academic success of nursing students, from the point of view of the participants, referred to the need for clinical experiences in different types of settings, which might strengthen students' foreground knowledge and competences, and the effectiveness of integrative educational strategies. In particular, laboratories and recorded lessons, beefed up or introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, were highly appreciated and deemed as successful strategies by students. These results suggest that new technologies and innovative educational strategies could enhance learning and should be part of the nursing education pathway.

6. Strengths and limitations

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study investigating this topic with a qualitative approach involving traditional and successful students. Trustworthiness ensured by the combination of different methodologies and the deep immersion of authors in the topic and HEIs context allowed to contextualize results and provide useful suggestions. However, the study does have some limitations. Specifically, the qualitative nature of the study design and the monocentric approach warrant caution in generalizing the results to other educational settings. Therefore, it would be beneficial to document the experiences of successful students using multicentric approaches and maximum variation sampling in order to generate further insights (Polit and Beck Tatano, 2008).

Since only nursing students who completed their educational journey within the legal duration were enrolled in this study, the results can only be generalized to this specific target population. To provide a comprehensive overview of successful students' experiences, further studies including those who complete the program regardless of the time taken are required. Quantitative research should follow to validate and generalize findings.

7. Conclusions

Results of this phenomenological study revealed BSN students who graduated within the regular duration of the program exhibited a single-minded determination, characterized by a strong sense of duty and focus on their learning goals. Students explored different learning strategies and methods during the pathway, ultimately preferring individual study

as main strategy for theoretical learning, while utilizing group study as a method to reinforce and fix acquired knowledge. Information gathered were reworked and deepened through other sources when deemed necessary, both those acquired in theoretical and practical learning, i.e., during the clinical placement. Supportive relationships with family members, friends, and colleagues permeates all study results and often helped students to face challenges encountered during the pathway, including the emotional stress experienced during the clinical training. These latter led students to elaborate strategies to regulate their emotions and acquire the needed detachment during their professional activities. To achieve this goal, they shared their experiences also with nurses, engaging discussion that helped them to cope with those situations. Another strategy aimed at regulating emotions was the search of a "relief valve" that they usually found in recreational activities. Finally, their perceived centeredness within the learning program and the availability of different clinical areas for their placement were considered facilitators of their success.

The results of this study, along with the results of relevant quantitative studies in the literature, may serve as basis for developing supporting strategies for undergraduate nursing students.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Valeria Caponnetto: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Elena Voltarel:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Vittorio Masotta:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Data curation. **Loreto Lancia:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Cristina Petrucci:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Angelo Dante:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

Authors have nothing to disclose.

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