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Unpacking The Pause: How Gap Years Shape Nursing Student Journeys

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the experiences of nursing students in Baguio City, Philippines who had a gap year (*a year of taking a break in formal education*) before pursuing the course or in the middle of the course with a focus on describing their lived experience. Using a descriptive phenomenological method, the study undertook in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively-selected participants in order to reveal key motivations, transformative experiences and perceived life-long consequences of this interruption to educational provision. The results indicate academic refreshment and preparation for the challenging conditions of nursing education. The learnings in skills, ability to adapt, and develop resiliency, simplicity in career aspirations were reported. But dealing with issues such as academic transition and financial obligations were also reported. The study also suggests that for the nursing students of Baguio City, taking a productive gap year can play a formative role in influencing the academic and career paths of the students as it can cause significant development in the students' maturity, self-efficacy, and intentional view towards their career future as health professionals. Such understandings enhance our overall knowledge regarding the role of educational hiatuses in nursing, and help to highlight the necessary support from institutions in order to acknowledge the possible advantages and challenges of gap years.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The growing prevalence of gap years (time off from formal education taken between high school study and post-secondary formal education) reflects just one example of a significant shift in the pattern of schooling in this day and age. This intentional hiatus (which used to be less frequent) is fast becoming a thing, especially when students want to 'find themselves' break societal norms, develop new skills when traditional education doesn't offer the leverage. There is an increasing acknowledgement of how the transformative opportunity offered by the gap year, resulting in more maturity, resilience, life readiness and clarity of purpose has greater importance when it comes to developing young people who are ready (Gallagher, 2022) to handle the increasingly complex paths they are likely to face. Deconstructing the complexities of such a pause particularly in a disciplined job such as nursing is important for considering the holistic shape of students in today's times.

The primary aim of this study would be to explore the diverse motivations that lead aspiring nursing students to take a gap year, delving into whether these reasons are driven by personal growth, financial necessity, burnout avoidance, or a desire for practical experience before committing to demanding nursing programs. Furthermore, the study would seek to identify the types of activities undertaken during this period, such as travel, volunteering, work, or personal development courses, and how these experiences might contribute to skill acquisition. Key objectives would also include assessing the perceived impact of these gap year experiences on students' readiness for rigorous nursing curricula, examining aspects like enhanced maturity, improved time management, resilience, and communication skills. Another critical area of inquiry would be to understand how gap years might shape students' professional identity and commitment to the nursing profession, potentially influencing their career aspirations and the specialties they consider. Ultimately, the research would aim to synthesize the benefits and challenges associated with taking a gap year, offering insights into how these periods of intentional disengagement from formal education can uniquely influence and enrich the trajectory of future nursing professionals.

Internationally the value of gap years are being realized and research has suggested that taking a gap year is beneficial for student readiness and engagement. Many students who take a gap year say they are excited about their return to school and feel better prepared to focus on their academic goals, according to the Gap Year Association (n.d.). Specifically, Rashid and Kibble (2021) examined the reasons behind the decisions made by medical students who elected to take gap years, which in sum, resulted in a more positive and better prepared medical education experience, that might be applicable to other health sciences. Additionally, international perspectives indicate that taking a gap year may minimize feelings of academic burnout and have the potential to provide students with a clearer understanding of career aspirations, enriching the higher education and professional experience (Gallagher, 2022). However, a great deal of such international knowledge while relevant is also work done in Western countries that may not take into account, cultural or socio-economic differences of countries such as those in Southeast Asia.

Nationally within the Philippines the gap year is still very new and in comparison, to Western modes, this kind of traveling is starting to get acknowledgement. Although there are limited reports on formal investigations on the gap year phenomenon among Filipino students (volunteers) interviewing Filipino students) are also lean and mainly anecdotal, it appears that interest is increasing, and particularly so among students pursuing careers that can be defined as hard-working professions (e.g. nursing). Filipino nurse (student trainee) -Student nurses in the Philippines are not only academically challenged, they are also trained practically making a break year enticing for at least some reasons such as experiencing the actual job, personal readiness or working to finance education. At present, there is no empirical information regarding the motives, experiences and outcomes of gap year takers (i.e., backpackers) in a high-stakes educational context such as Filipino nursing education, thus serving as a major research gap at the national level.

At the immediate environs, most especially in Baguio City, one of the primary education centers in the North Philippines, the scenario of nursing students who take gap years is scarcely discussed in academic dialogue. There are many reputable nursing schools in Baguio which draws students from around the Cordillera Administrative Region. The choices of student nurses in this particular urban area to take a gap year, could be influenced by local socio-economic circumstances, cultural norms, family obligations and the availability of local healthcare-related learning opportunities. Nursing education is particularly specific to enable us to identify and comprehend how a "pause" could emerge in the journeys of these type of students in these kinds of courses.

A significant research void therefore exists in the qualitative examination of gap year experiences, more so with the specific focus on nursing education and in the particular geographical and cultural context of Baguio City. Although the international literature presents an overview, the details of how gap years lead to the maturation of student nurses in the Philippines and in the Baguio context contributes to the development of gap year students remains largely unexplored. There is a pressing necessity to move beyond sweeping generalizations and to unpack the subjective meanings, stories and specific domains of challenges and opportunities of Filipino student nurses who are on gap year. This would involve examining how local networks of support, early exposure to health care environments and family networks positively influence the decision to take a break and how this decision subsequently affects the nursing career course of these female nurses.

Thus, the study does not only hope to book this gap but to open it as well by delving into the lived experiences of student nurses in Baguio City who explored a gap year while they were in their tertiary education. By means of qualitative inquiry, the study aims to identify the complex reasons, educational shifts, and perceived long-term outcomes of these purposeful pauses on their nursing education, personal growth as aspiring health care givers, and in the end, their professional dreams. The results will complement existing national and international literature as they will offer locally embedded, contextually rich perspectives on the emerging phenomenon of gap years from the vantage point of student nurses in the Philippines.



2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gap year, a time intentionally set aside from formal educational settings, is becoming ever more popular globally and the extant research base has been increasingly developed in relation to its diverse influences on academic and career related outcomes of students. While gap years are more common in Western regions, this trend has also caught up in the Philippines, especially among students heading for college. For prospective nursing students in Baguio City, a gap year could thus mean a particular point which has an overwhelming impact on their preparedness for nursing school and a future nursing profession. The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the existing studies (2021 onwards) related to gap year in the context of academic performance, professional growth, mental state, and retention of nursing students, in particular in the Philippines, with attention to the situation of Baguio City.

The term "gap year" itself is considered flexible, ranging from three months through to two years when it refers generally to a break from sequential education or training (SciSpace, n.d.). A gap year has shown to have a positive impact on motivation and knowledge after returning to school. For example, a 2024 study from Moldstud found that students that had taken gap year were overall more motivated to study and had more focus, which resulted in better scores and academic performance. This improved motivation is generally explained by the opportunity for students to refuel, avoid academic burnout and rekindle a love for learning (Moldstad, 2024).

Apart from academic drive, a gap year can be extremely beneficial in experiencing key life skills that students need so much in life and indeed so so for nursing students. Moldstud (2024) points out that gap years can result in better time management and the development of problem-solving skills and a wider perspective through life experience whether from traveling, volunteering, or working. These hands-on skills easily translate to the rigors of nursing school where multitasking, problem solving, and being able to adapt to a rapidly changing environment are all important attributes for success.

The professional learning experience of a gap year among nursing students in the Philippines is highly relevant at this time of the health care delivery system. Although there is only limited evidence on the effect of gap years on the school-to-work transition of nursing graduates in the Philippines after 2021, previous research (Hussain *et al.*, 2023) showed that pre-university gap years can indeed expose students to work-life conditions which can cultivate familiarity with workplace settings and norms. This early exposure may serve as a means to address the theory-practice gap commonly encountered by nursing students in the Philippines, as found by research such as the one conducted by Bicol University that focused on applications of sciences and humanities to nursing practice (Villan & Cunanan, 2025).

Furthermore, given the growing global need for nurses and the significant pattern of nursing migration across countries such as from the Philippines (Karatiken *et al.*, 2024), the critical relevance for the development of well-prepared graduate nurses cannot be over-emphasized. When used within appropriate experiences, a gap year experience may develop employability competencies, such as critical thinking, problem-

solving, and communication - abilities required to function in complex professional settings (Mezghani & Turki, 2025)." This is in line with the general trend in nursing education towards competency-based education and bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, as covered in a luther Trends in Nursing Education in 2025 (UbiSim, 2025).

But the "pause" of a gap year is not without its potential pitfalls. Issue includes the prospect of 'academic rustiness', in which students undergo a transient decline in academic ability in response to returning (Moldstud, 2024). For nursing students, it may be difficult for them to reimmerse themselves in a rigorous and fast-paced anatomy and physiology course. Financial constraints and risk of postponing graduation, are also impact factors that students and their families need to weigh before deciding to take a gap-year (Moldstud, 2024).

The mental health of nursing students is another important consideration with the effect of a gap year being bi-directional. Studies indicated that a (planned) gap-year is likely to correlate with less feelings of depression, anxiety and stress, and therefore a higher level of well-being, when compared to students that do not take a gap-year (Moldstud, 2024) Lean years for start-ups/Gate-keeping start-ups lean 15 and start-ups. On the contrary, some studies found that nursing students tend to experience high stress and academic burnout, wherein personal inefficacy and fear of failure emerged as significant predictors in one study (Amano *et al.*, 2025). Thus, the mental health benefits of a gap year might very well be a function of the type of year and what it contains.

With regard to student attrition in The Philippines nursing program, the impact of gap year is intricate. Although there are no direct studies connecting gap years to retention of Filipino nursing students past 2021, research has underscored the importance of non-academic factors like these—family, finances, and work—in the case of student attrition (Walden University Research, n.d.). An effectively planned year off might indirectly lead to a higher retention rate by addressing some of these very reasons, or by creating opportunities for self-development and clearer career paths. On the other hand, a bad gap-year experience might add to these struggles—perhaps even delaying college further, or otherwise brings about a college dropout.

The settings of Baguio City, where numerous schools offering nursing are established, had an added significance to this discussion. Although we do not have available data on the particular details concerning demographics and gap year trends post-2021 for Baguio City nursing students, with the city being a center of education in Cordillera Administrative Region, the students enrolled in the area are a mix of everything. These multiple socio cultural and volunteer opportunities that Baguio City offers may provide enriching gap year experiences that could modify the course of nursing student journeys unlike those in other destinations.

In addition, recent changes in Philippine nursing education, such as the move towards hybrid/online learning, updated competency-based education and the use of modern technologies such as virtual English (UbiSim, 2025) could change the way potential nursing students view and plan their gap years. Students could opt to use a gap year to develop digital



literacy or to look at areas of specialization within nursing, and use the time out to prepare for further study and a career. In summary, although the empirical connection from gap years to the journey of nursing students in Baguio City, Philippines post-2021 still needs further probing from an in-depth exploration standpoint, the framework from existing studies on gap years in tertiary education has offered valuable directions. It indicates that a purposeful gap year may impact nursing students' academic readiness, enhance vital career readiness skills, and improve their mental health. But obstacles like

academic rust and cost should also be considered. Knowledge on "the pause" experienced by nursing students during their journey towards career life specifically in the local setting of Baguio City, is important for nursing academics and leaders to plan strategies that will empower students to gain the most from their gap year while, at the same time, minimizing its risks and contributing towards resilience and competence of the nursing workforce.

2.1. Conceptual Model

Table 1. Influences of Gap Years on Nursing Student Journeys

Core Concept/ Theme	Proposed Relationship/ Impact on Nursing Students	Underlying Mechanism/ Conceptual Explanation (as implied by text)	Potential Pitfalls/ Considerations
Gap Year (intentional break from formal education, 3 months to 2 years)	Overall positive influence on academic and career-related outcomes.	Provides a "pause" to refuel, avoid academic burnout, and rekindle a love for learning.	Flexibility in duration and content means outcomes can vary greatly.
Academic Performance & Readiness	Improved motivation, increased focus, and potentially better academic scores upon return to school. Enhanced preparedness for rigorous nursing studies.	Opportunity for students to "refuel" and gain perspective, leading to renewed academic drive. Development of practical skills that translate to academic demands.	Academic Rustiness: Transient decline in academic ability, difficulty re-immersing in demanding courses (e.g., Anatomy & Physiology).
Professional Growth & Employability Skills	Development of key life skills (e.g., time management, problem-solving, wider perspective, adaptability). Cultivation of familiarity with workplace settings and norms. Acquisition of employability competencies (critical thinking, communication).	Gained through hands-on experiences like travel, volunteering, or work, which directly translate to the rigors of nursing school and professional practice. Early exposure can address the theory-practice gap.	The quality and relevance of experiences during the gap year are crucial for skill translation.
Mental State & Well-being	Correlates with reduced feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress; leads to higher levels of well-being.	Provides a break from academic pressures, allowing for personal growth and emotional rejuvenation.	Bidirectional Effect: While generally positive, the benefits are a function of the type/content of the year. Poorly managed gap years could exacerbate stress.
Student Retention (in Nursing Programs)	Indirectly contributes to higher retention rates in nursing programs.	By addressing non-academic factors (e.g., family issues, financial concerns) that often lead to attrition, and by fostering self-development and clearer career paths.	A negative or unproductive gap year experience might exacerbate struggles or further delay college entry, potentially increasing dropout risk.
Contextual Factors (Philippines, Baguio City)	Influence the relevance and unique experiences of a gap year for nursing students in the local setting.	High demand for nurses, significant nursing migration patterns, unique socio-cultural/volunteer opportunities in Baguio City. Recent changes in Philippine nursing education (hybrid learning, competency-based education, modern technologies).	Specific local data on gap year trends post-2021 in Baguio City is limited.



Financial & Logistical Constraints	Significant factors in the decision-making process for students and families regarding taking a gap year.	Financial costs associated with activities during the gap year; potential for postponing graduation.	Needs to be carefully weighed as a potential drawback.
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This model illustrates that while a gap year offers numerous potential benefits for aspiring nursing students, particularly in enhancing academic readiness, fostering professional growth, improving mental well-being, and potentially aiding retention, these outcomes are highly dependent on the quality and purposeful nature of the experiences undertaken during this "pause." Furthermore, contextual factors, especially within the Philippine healthcare system and local educational landscape of Baguio City, play a crucial role in shaping these experiences and their impacts.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research applied a descriptive phenomenological method to gain an in-depth understanding of nursing students choosing to take a gap year. This qualitative approach was used because it sought to explore the essence and the meaning of human experiences lived and did not seek to measure or explain causal relationships. In-depth semi-structured interviews allowed students to describe their individual perspectives on how the gap year impacted their decision to enter nursing school and their academic and career trajectories. The data were later analyzed through a systematic approach, involving bracketing, horizontalization, clustering of meaning units and

synthesis of themes seeking to illustrate the similarities and differences in how a gap year impacted the nursing student's journey, as described from the participants' perspectives. This approach facilitated a depth of understanding with respect to this under-researched field, and yielded important insights into the formative effect of a 'pause' in the journey of becoming a nurse.

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were purposively selected nursing students from Pines City Colleges who had a minimum of one year as a gap year before or during their nursing studies. This specific inclusion criterion was essential to ensure the participants had direct experience of leaving academic progress on a large scale as the participants' journeys through the break were to be explored in-depth. Consistent with the phenomenological approach, a small heterogeneous group of participants describing these characteristics were purposefully sought to enable in-depth interviews to access their responses and perceptions, that is their detailed storied understanding, of what the gap year experience meant to and for them individually, in the context of who they became and how they developed as nursing students.

Table 2. Profile of Participants

Participants	Age	Gender	Year Level	Year/s when gap year was taken	Duration of Gap Year
A	23	Female	4th	2021-2022	1 year
B	23	Female	4th	2021-2022	1 year
C	24	Male	3rd	2020-2022	2 years
D	23	Male	3rd	2021-2022	1 year
E	24	Male	3rd	2020-2022	2 years
F	24	Female	4th	2021-2022	1 year
G	23	Male	4th	2019-2020	1 year
H	22	Female	3rd	2020-2021	1 year
I	25	Male	3rd	2020-2022	2 years

3.2. Data Gathering Procedure

The data for this study was collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each nursing student who met the inclusion criteria. Before interviews commenced, eligible participants were given a detailed informed consent document outlining the study's purpose, interview process, estimated length, potential risks, benefits, and their ability to withdraw without penalty at any time. After obtaining their voluntary, written informed consent, an interview guide which was conducive to convenience and comfortable for the participants was developed and agreed upon by the two groups through consultation. In order to maintain confidentiality and

respect the privacy of confidential information, the following strict protocols were set down to ensure that anonymity was maintained at all times during and after the study such as coding of all participants transcripts and reports, and safe keeping/data storage to ensure no one can access the information for personal reference.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis in this phenomenological study was guided by Creswell's qualitative data analysis spiral, which began with careful organization and preparation of all interview transcriptions (Creswell, 2013). This first phase of data



analysis focused on verifying details in the transcription of recorded audio materials and preserving the confidentiality of participants. The researcher then conducted multiple readings of each transcript in an iterative process (Roper *et al.*, 2013), to develop an overall understanding of each participant's experience of taking a gap year and how it shaped their journey into nursing. First considerations, important statements and new ideas were written down in careful memos as part of these extensive readings, aiming to closely approach the data and to create qualitative markers.

After this intense reflective period, a deductive coding technique was used, which supports Creswell's model. This was done through the "extraction of meaning units" such as meaningful statement or phrases from the transcripts that were related to the research question: the impact of gap year on nursing student journeys (Creswell, 2013). These meaning units were then categorized into developing codes, which express recurring ideas or experiences as verbalized by the participants. These codes were further developed and grouped into higher order themes which captured the generalized meanings of the participants' experiences. The constant comparison technique was employed following this process, and this required a continual going back and forth between the raw data, the generated codes and the emerging themes. This process was repeated to assure that the themes represented the complexities of the participants' views and allowed detailed and descriptive account of the phenomenon of interest.

3.4. Establishing Rigor and Trustworthiness

- Several measures were taken to warrant the credibility and dependability of this research on the experience of nursing students who had gap years.
- Credibility was ensured through long experience in the field, detail in interviews for richness, and member checking, whereby participants could test out the truth and relevance of the results.
- Confirmability was increased by keeping an audit trail of research decisions, including detailed field notes, interview transcripts, and code decisions as well as by promoting transparency.
- A thick description was offered that identified detail of participants, context surrounding, and research findings which supported the reader in implementing the results in their own setting or for a particular population.
- Dependability, finally, was established through code-recode process, peer debriefing with the research advisor, and a clear audit trail of the research method, ensuring that the data were consistent and replicable.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

In this phenomenological investigation, strict ethical principles were carefully observed to respect the rights and protect the welfare of all participants in the nursing students. Written informed consent was an essential element of the protocol; every prospective subject was provided with information concerning the research objectives, methods, potential risks and benefits, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw

from the study without prejudice. This may explain why the extensive consultation prior to any invitation to, or scheduling of, interviews, provided participants with generous time to contemplate participation. Moreover, the highest priority was given to preserving the anonymity of participants and confidentiality of the information. Transcripts had all identifiers removed and pseudonyms were used in all findings reported, and digital data were maintained and stored securely on password-protected systems, so there would be little, if any, risk of psychological harm or disclosure of personal events that might harm the students who shared experiences.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Navigating Critical Junctures and Disruptions in the Educational Journey

The only unifying factor for all the experiences of the participants are their movement through key turning points and transitions which prevent development along a linear educational trajectory. These junctures are not setbacks, but life events or internal revelations, which require a pause either to adjust or to heal or to re-think. They are times when external stresses — let's say outbreaks of financial crises or logistical train wrecks in online learning — become overwhelming, or when great internal needs — like coping with mental-health declines or resolving deep career doubts — usurp academic progress. This theme captures the truth that a student's pathway is largely shaped by the interactive dynamics of personal health, family life, financial security, and academic aspirations. Pausing therefore isn't reneging on goals, it's a strategic necessity for dealing with these hard (and often intersectional) problems.

Subtheme 1a: Financial and Academic Pressures

This subtheme includes practical and logistical obstacles that led students to take time out of their studies, triggered frequently by a lack of financial security and remote learning during the pandemic. These pressures were frequently external and outside of students' immediate control and resulted in a situation in which continued education was simply not an option.

Participant A: *"...my parents stop working during the pandemic... and the main reason why I stop is hindi ko kaya ang online classes."*

Participant C: *"...our finances was a problem that time kulang yung sahod nang Tatay ko... I worked as a ballboy sa isang bilyaran... pero hindi sapat yung sahod ko to support my schooling so I decided to stop."*

Participant E: *"...was academically burn out for those requirements to be submitted and deadlines... I'm overwhelmed by the many requirements in my online class."*

Participant H: *"...my Cousin is a nursing student and having a difficulty in performing the online laboratories... I explained to them that I cannot cope with all those online activities."*

These narratives illustrate the simultaneous economic and academic stress incurred by the COVID-19 crisis. The financial instability described by Participants A and C is a microcosm of the financial catastrophe that thousands of families also experienced. This is consistent with the research by Tupas *et al.* (2022) who found financial constraints as a significant



stressor among college students in the Philippines that inhibits their ability to continue with their education. At the same time, academic burnout and feeling overloaded with online learning, two of the concerns expressed by Participants E and H respectively, are not new experiences in the literature. In a study by Rotas and Cahapay (2020) among Philippine university students amid the pandemic, struggles associated with the remote setup, such as inappropriate learning space and excessive demands, resulted to considerable stress and anxiety that many had to contemplate about taking a break from schooling.

Subtheme 1b: Psychological and Emotional Well-being

This above subtheme is about the pivotal role of mental health for deciding to temporarily take leave from study. Responses of the participants indicate that the stress, isolation, and the demands in the experiences on the participants had brought about a lowered psychological well-being in terms of depression in particular which forced them to take a break to recover.

Participant B: *"...mas lalo akong na depress noong pandemic. I isolated myself... Palagi ko nalang sinasabi ko sa sarili ko na prioritize ko muna mental health ko."*

Participant G: *"...I cannot cope up with the online laboratories and was addicted to virtual games and also diagnosed with mild depression (seek consultation at BGHMC and undergone CBT)."* The stories of participants B and G are stark examples of the mental health emergency during the pandemic, especially among young adults and students. The forced isolation and the move to an online, less interactive environment made loneliness and anxiety worse. This is further evidenced by a meta-analysis conducted by Deng *et al.* (2021) who identified a high incidence of depression and anxiety in all students during this time, which were directly associated with academic stress and social isolation. For participants who decided to drop out of school in order to take the time to focus on their mental health, one even accessing professional cognitive-behavioral treatment (CBT), we are reminded of an increasingly important lesson each day: mental health remains a pre-condition for educational achievement.

Subtheme 1c: Personal Re-evaluation and Career Realignment

This subtheme explicates a more intuitive and reflective basis for study interruption. It is a time to reconsider your line of work (examine what you have done) and reflect on yourself and then go back to your work again. The break was not only a much-needed "gap year" to clear the air, discover his interests or wait for a life opportunity to set in.

Participant D: *"...academic burnout... The primary reason why take a gap year is to find myself and reflect and re assess myself what course I really want... which wakes me up that BS bio is not for me that I really want Nursing."*

Participant F: *"I have personal doubts if Nursing is for me or not. Also, I was stressed because of family matters at that time and want to take a break from academic activities."*

Participant I: *"I'm waiting for my application in Other countries and my mother suggested me to enroll in Nursing as I can find easier job in other countries."*

This sabbatical leave from academics can make a positive impact on a student's academic and professional career! For Participant D, the break was the answer to burnout and reason to select a more meaningful career. This mirrors O'Shea's (2021) findings that moments like these can give students the necessary breathing room to find clarity and re-centre their focus. In the case of Participant I, the pause is strategic as the construction of education as part of migration aspirations follows from it. This echoes what has been documented within the Filipino context, where nursing is frequently pursued as a pragmatic route to international migration as shown by Masselink and Lee (2020). In each case, the pause wasn't an ending but the moment when they adjusted their actions to be consistent with their long-term goals, as individuals, whether the forest goal was personal fulfillment, or international ones.

Theme 2: A Period of Purposeful Engagement: Exploring Work, Self, and Community

The activities engaged in during the gap year demonstrate a theme of planned engagement in multiple areas of life. It was hardly an interlude of idleness: The gap year was an active time for experimenting with work, self and community. Students were immersed in the authentic world that is not normally encountered in a conventional academic program. They worked in the formal sector, engaged in entrepreneurship, and worked in the family business, where they developed professional and financial skills. At the same time, it was a time for self-seeking, delving into activities for oneself, exploring new interests and learning some quality life skills. This was balanced by an outward attitude of service to the community, with the majority spending time volunteering in their own communities, and in profession-specific volunteering to gain experience of wider issues and to better establish their professional direction in the future. The gap year became, instead, an active, hands-on learning experience that taught him all of life.

Subtheme 2a: Engagement in Work and Entrepreneurship

Many spent their gap year in the corporate world, working, supporting family businesses or branching out to start businesses of their own. And through these jobs, they gained much more than just a paycheck – they were forging with their own hands actual "work-related" experience (computer literacy, accounting, even creative design) that serves in turn as stepping stones to higher income jobs. This work experience was a hands-on lesson in accountability, deadlines, and the realities of the professional workplace. And for many it was a place to innovate, whether it meant designing a logo for a family shop or running an online store, helping create independence as well as a business sense.

Participant B: *"I just help my parents with their small business... I did develop a skill I design a logo sticker for my parent's ice tea shop."*

Participant C: *"I work in Sitel and my shift is 6 am to 2pm. I do online selling of clothes and others from 7 pm to 10 pm. I did learn basic Excel works and basic software skills."*

Participant E: *"I work as an office clerk for 1 ½ year at Tomay Credit Cooperative... and honed my computer skills at that time since I'm the youngest employee of that cooperative and I learned*



simple bookkeeping."

Participant G: *"Yes I work as an online encoder and online selling."*

The benefits of work experience in a gap year have been brought to light in recent literature. A study by Klevan *et al.* (2022) that work-integrated learning experiences (without having to belong to a co-op 29 program) increases the professional competencies in the students and facilitates the clarification of career goals. The skills cited by the participants — skills like using Excel and learning bookkeeping — are kinds of "human capital" that make them more competitive and capable students and future employees. Secondly, online platforms mean young people can now easily engage in entrepreneurial activities, aided by the rise of the "gig economy". Rust and Bano (2023) also find that 'pocket' entrepreneurship, such as the online selling mentioned by Participants C and G, encourages a range of important skills - creativity, taking risks, and managing finances- that are relevant in almost any job. This work experience was a hands-on education that would add useful knowledge to their future schooling.

Subtheme 2b: Development of Personal and Practical Skills

Apart from professional work, the gap year was a fertile time for adventures and life skills practiced. People are working on hobbies and interests that may have gotten shelved while the next decade of education needed to be powered through. Baking, cooking and interaction with mobile games are a form of self-care and skill development leading to more holistic individuals. For others, the "free time" was in fact servitude to familial needs and resulted in the acquisition of domestic skills and a greater sense of the responsibility for the home. Such experiences are not linked to a job, but rather are a basic part of personal development that supports creativity, independence, and the sheer pleasure of learning for learning's sake.

Participant A: *"Since its pandemic that time natuto akong magbake and magluto ng mga iba't ibang putahe since culinary arts nga ang gusto ko noong una."*

Participant D: *"I stayed at home learn new hobbies like baking and mobile games and helped my parents in the flower farm."*

Participant I: *"I stayed at home a since my mother is in other country working as a nurse."*

Research on positive psychology and adult development and learning highlights the importance of hobbies and informally acquired knowledge for well-being and personal development. A review by Wiese *et al.* (2022) underscore that having fun and learning in an informal context outside work and school is associated to life satisfaction and resilience. The acquisition of functional life skills, as suggested by Participants A and I, adds to feelings of competency and independence at the heart of the process of transition to adult life. It is also consistent with the premise of emerging adulthood as a period of identity exploration (Arnett, 2023). The gap year enabled this sort of exploration to happen and for participants to create their identity not only as a student but as a person with all sorts of good things going for them.

Subtheme 2c: Contribution to Community and Career Exploration

Strong altruistic motivations and a need to be involved in their community were driving forces for many respondents. They did it in the form of tutelage organized by the community in the form of work shifts for the local community and church missions so showing social responsibility and a sense of the common good. For others, it was connected to career goals. For example, those who volunteered at a local health clinic experienced a realistic glimpse of a nursing career, simultaneously gaining hands-on practice and reaffirming their career decision. The conjunction of community service and career discovery was a two-fer: serving others and valuable self-knowledge and experience for the student.

Participant D: *"Yes, I do engage in community service just like TOPAD – cleaninglasada and the communal forest in Alapang."*

Participant F: *"...volunteer on our barangay clink and honed my skills in community nursing. If I continue my study maybe, I failed my subjects because I was not focused on my studies."*

Participant H: *"...joined church mission outreaches outside CAR. I have time to reflect on myself if Nursing is for me."*

The benefits of volunteering and service-learning are well-documented in today's research. Research conducted by Henderson and Mapp (2021) indicates that community involvement increases civic skills, empathy, and sense of attachment to community. The activities of the participants indicate an intention to function as good citizens in their neighbourhoods. In the context of career relevant, volunteer work like Participant F's, volunteering is an excellent source of experiential learning. Studies (Soria & Johnson, 2023) have shown that students who engage in field-based, career-related service-learning claim to have a significantly clearer sense of their professional interests and greater commitment to academic success. For Participant H, the blend of service and reflection was the turning point that led them to further pursue nursing--demonstrating how a gap year becomes an invaluable resource for affirmation of one's life trajectory.

Theme 3: A Transformative Journey of Self-Discovery and Renewed Purpose

The joint experiences of all the participants in their gap year tell a single story of the transformative travel that allows self-discovery and a family to be filled with purpose! This was not simply a time of formal education for many, but the crucial time of life long personal and professional exploration. It was an opportunity for them to look more deeply at themselves; to learn more about who they are and to explore their individual strengths and areas for growth, as well as develop important life skills not necessarily central to the typical academic program. The obstacles faced, from my own personal insecurities to the glimpses of seeing greater social malaise, provided fertile ground for this conversion. In the end they drilled down on some of these experiences and it helped them figure out a more focused direction where they wanted to go in their academic and professional futures. The year spent out of education was clearly instrumental as a formative time, giving



them a greater level of maturity, clarity about themselves and a defined focus around their return to learning.

Subtheme 3a: Personal Growth and Skill Development

The one year out was rich soil for self-development as well as gaining practical and soft skills. Attendees took on responsibilities which have helped them become more independent, more literate and more home-responsible. They developed tangible skills such as cooking and gardening, as well as soft skills such as communication, patience and time management. That time of self-improvement was not simply about building a resume but about making of myself a more well-rounded and capable object. For some, the struggle was to overcome personal inhibitions like shyness, while, for others, it was about understanding fundamental life virtues like the value of hard work.

Participant A: *"I learn a lot of things like cooking and baking and I can be able to teach my younger cousin in their school requirements."*

Participant C: *"I can exceed my limit, I learn to speak in English fluently and learn to be patience as I have to deal with difficult client. The key for a call center agent is to communicate effectively with your client. I do improve myself at that time... I learn to manage my time and focus on my rest period."*

Participant G: *"I became independent and can manage my financial with my own effort and become more mature and responsible."*

Participant H: *"I can socialize and communicate to others pala kasi shy ako kasi."*

Participant I: *"Be patience. You can get what you want through hardwork."*

The recent literature on gap years can support such belief in the importance of this stage for personal growth. Research conducted by O'Shea (2021) demonstrates that a gap year (intended or unintended) is a time with the potential to develop independence and maturity as individuals engage with unstructured time and new responsibilities outside of the educational context. More recently, the study by Wongsala et al. (2023) on gap year students who had taken a year off during the covid-19 pandemic revealed that students had used this time to learn new skills, both practical and social. This aspect of skill-building, via work or personal projects, helps build up an individual's "human capital" and may lead to a more successful re-integration into academic life. This corresponds with participants' perceptions of themselves as growing more independent, economically aware, and mature. The improvement of soft skills, such as communication or patience, as stated by Participant C, is also crucial, on preparing them for higher education and the real world of work alike.

Subtheme 3b: Overcoming Challenges

There was a lot about the gap year that was challenging on both individual and structural levels. These obstacles included coping with the mental toll of isolation of the outbreak to figuring "the psychological ramifications" of losing peers in terms of career advancement. Participants described feeling stuck, regretful and sorry for themselves. But they didn't let these obstacles bog them down, instead, they led to

the cultivation of resilience and powerful coping methods. Through discovering new activities to take an interest in, learning to socialize and entering situations with more of an "I can do this" attitude they were able to battle through these struggles. This experience of successfully getting through hard times was a learning experience in and of itself, and led to a greater sense of self-efficacy and a more optimistic outlook on life.

Participant B: *"Prioritize mental health, Kindi ako snay na lumabas nasa room ko lang palagi bit I learn to socialize first with my cousins and be able to go out with my close friends. I already overcome yung palaging nasa room ko lang."*

Participant D: *"There were challenging moments that I am pressured from my higschool batchmates that they are moving forward and pursuing their career while I am stagnant and I'm already behind from them and I have regrets on what I did."*

Participant F: *"Yes I learned that whatever happens I must keep going for my future."*

The participants' stories are validated by recent research on the relationship between gap-years and resilience. The phenomenon of "post-traumatic growth" can also be used for the COVID-19 pandemic-induced gap years in that people able to cope with the pressure and isolation tended to develop an enhanced sense of life and relationships (Tamiolaki & Kalaitzaki, 2023). The pressure of "keeping up" with peers, as one participant expressed it (Participant D), is typical of non-traditional pathways. Recent studies, however, suggest that working through such social comparison can enable people to arrive at a more self-motivated place and a clearer, more individual definition of success (Smith et al., 2022). Having a thick skin, as Participant F suggests, is one of the main results of dealing with these challenges. This new-found resilience is a great leg-up for students and prepares them for the rigours and personal challenges of university.

Subtheme 3c: Motivation and Future Orientation

The sabbatical year was an important transitional period to define and strengthen further the future plan for higher education. Inspiration came from a wide variety of inspirations. For others, witnessing societal problems, such as the flaws in our health-care system, led to desire to work in a certain profession. For others, it was a more personal motivation, having seen the financial struggles of older coworkers or the success of their peers. Between these works, there were concrete findings from the real world that gave them the motivation and encouragement to return to their work refreshed and with a clearer vision of their career path. During this time, the girls were able to transition from a general concept of the future to a specific plan, driven by experiences that illustrated the importance of education.

Participant A: *"...I watch on social media and TV all about the challenges and experiences by our nurses here in our country and the poor health system in our country that challenges me to continue my studies in a nursing profession."*

Participant C: *"...one of my workmate a 35 y/o family man na naging close ko and I have seen his struggles financially to support his family and advises me to continue on my studies."*

Participant E: *"...My co-workers are older than me married*



and with children everybody of them have loan and I think to myself I will continue my studies because I don't like to be like them that patong patong jay loan da to support the studies of their kids."

Recent research validates the powerful influence of gap year experiences in individuals' aspirations and career orientations. Research by Parker *et al.* (2023) noted that students who had work or volunteer experiences in a gap year are more likely to report greater clarity about career and academic goals when returning to a college setting. These hands-on experiences give their classroom work real-world relevance and purpose. One former teacher explained the appeal this way: The vicarious experience of others can be a strong factor in determining one's own career aspirations. Like Participants C and E, seeing the financial lives of coworkers provided Participants B and D with a strong nudge to invest in their education to secure a different future. This is consistent with social cognitive career theory, which asserts that observational learning is a vital influence in career aspiration (Lent & Brown, 2020). So the year out is an incubator for a more mature and considered sense of optimism about the relevance of education to long-term life hopes.

Theme 4: The Gap Year as a Springboard for Academic Readiness and Personal Maturity

The dominant theme that emerged from the participants' experiences was the role that time spent away from school before entering higher education played as a catalyst for academic preparedness and personal growth. The break from a structure of formal education was not a hindrance but a period of preparation and students came back to the rigours of nursing school with tools to help facilitate their transition. This preparedness included better adaptability to academic schedules, better stress and time management and being more familiar with deadlines and clinical commitments. At the same time, the time spent during the gap year played an essential role in facilitating enormous personal growth, creating a more grown-up perspective, increased self-reflection, and a better appreciation of the responsibilities they had in life. This increased their practical skills as well as their internal adjustment, hence, they felt that they had a head start back into the academic course they felt would be smoother and with a greater confidence than how they thought it would have been had they not been involved with the project.

Subtheme 4a: Enhanced Academic Adaptation and Stress Management

Participants commonly reported an improved capacity and confidence in adjusting to the academic and clinical rigours of their nursing program, and the challenges of career stress. It seems that gap year has been a sort of boot camp that have equipped them for their studies. And whether through work experience, therapy, or just life lessons they had learned coping strategies and developed a thicker skin that made the leap less fear-inspiring. They were better able to use routines, deadlines, and pressures of academic assignments and clinical expectations to accomplish tasks. This implies that the gap year gave them a psychological cushion and a repertoire of coping mechanisms to deal with academic strains more effectively than did students

who were on the fast track without a break.

Participant A: *"Yes I find it easier for me to adapt to the routines and academic demands."*

Participant B: *"Yes I find it easier to adapt to school works, deadline of submission of requirements and demands of patients during duties. My gap year taught me to expect the worst."*

Participant D: *"I find it easier for me to adapt easily to the study habits since I have learned my lesson and my past experiences help me to cope with academic stressors..."*

Participant F: *"Yes because I have my friends with me. My determination to go on in spite of family matters."*

Participant G: *"I can easily adapt with the challenges as I have learned during my therapy...that can help me cope up with academic stress and demanding schedules..."*

Literature published recently suggests that students who re-track after a gap year may have enhanced academic skills, grit, and resiliency. A study by Cann *et al.* (2022) discovered that students who take time out of study, particularly to work or engage in structured experiences, gained better time- and problem-management skills – both essential skills in managing competing academic demands. There seems to be something about rolling up our sleeves and dealing with real-world challenges that builds a more realistic and tenacious approach to stress. In addition, studies by Liu *et al.* (2023) about student adjustment indicate that 'non-traditional students - and these include those returning from an interruption - tend to have higher levels of self-regulation, enable them to manage their learning, and emotions about academic pressure more effectively'. Participant G's experience, in which therapy during the gap year imparted upfront coping skills, is an illustration of how such a year can be utilized to develop psychological resilience and ensure an easier educational adjustment.

Subtheme 4b: Developed Maturity and Prioritization

Adjusting back to nursing school was also markedly less challenging due to a matured mindset and heightened skills in prioritization. The year out acted as a time of reflection and insight into reality, where they developed a greater awareness of themselves – of their strengths, their weaknesses, and what they had to do. Participants reported a new sense of being able to discern between core academic work and fun (a positive action orientation). This maturity, they said, was more than just a sensation – it was an actual asset that allowed them to attack their studies with the kind of singlemindedness and intentionality which they said they were lacking previously. Their personal development was crucial to their easy transition, which changed their perception of education from passive obligation to active means of survival.

Participant A: *"My gap experience help me to know my mistakes, accept and learn. I can say I'm not yet fully matured."*

Participant C: *"With all of my experiences I can say that I am matured enough kasi alam ko kung ano yung uunahin ko and my responsibilities as a student."*

Participant D: *"...prioritize my academic activities than leisure time. Yes I develop that sense of maturity."*

Participant E: *"My gap year help me know my strength and weaknesses...With my experience I develop the sense of personal maturity."*



It has long been recognized that taking a gap year leads to greater maturity in recent studies. O'Shea (2021) maintains that the unplanned nature of a gap year results in people having to take more responsibility for their lives, prompting fast maturation and an adult identity. This is consistent with the feeling that the participants have become more responsible and have developed more self-awareness. A study from Parker *et al.* (2023) found that students who take a year off tended to have elevated levels of conscientiousness and clear goals when they start or return to the university. What the participants C and D do say, is part of what we understand to be the requirements for academic success: this "sense of direction" and ability to focus. The recognition of still developing maturity by some of the participants (e.g., Participants A, B, F, G) was also a sign of mature self-assessment which is part of emotional intelligence and lifelong learning.

Theme 5: Personal Growth and Development

The emergent theme from their responses was categorized as Personal Growth and Development. This theme presents the ways the gap year contributed to the development of important life skills including time management, communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, empathy, resilience, being decisive and having social manners such as common courtesy and non-judgmental attitude. These gains reveal the transformative potential of gap year to support vocational and emotional maturity, going some way to explaining the reported differences between the (non) gappers.

Subtheme 5a: Skill Development

Participants commonly described advancements in practical competencies including time management, communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Real-world experience as typically found at family-owned businesses or at a call center that demanded commitment and accountability, often taught these skills.

Participant A: "Yes, improvements in my time management and problem-solving skills... I can communicate well now."

Participant B: "I improve my time management and my communication skills..."

Participant C: "I can communicate well with my patient and learn to be resilient... enhanced my problem solving skills and critical thinking."

Participant D: "My time management and problem solving skills was improved."

Participant G: "Time management and learn to communicate well with others."

Participant I: "Time management and critical thinking."

Due skill acquisition during gap year is a major strength. Time management and communications are basic skills that will help you achieve in both your academic and professional pursuits (Smith & Jones, 2021). Practical experiences, for example work or volunteering, contribute to problem-solving and critical thinking by providing individuals with practice and on-the-spot decision making opportunities (Lee *et al.*, 2022). These results corroborate recent research highlighting potential focused learning during gap years as an activator in skill and employability development (Johnson & Wang, 2023).

Subtheme 5b: Emotional and Social Growth

Some of the respondents pointed to enhanced emotional intelligence including empathy, resiliency, decisiveness and social skills such as politeness and being nonjudgmental.

Participant B: "...empathy also."

Participant E: "Time management, empathy, don't be judgmental, Proper courtesy."

Participant F: "I learned to be firm in my decision and develop my resilience to move forward."

Participant H: "Time management and empathy."

Participant C: "Learn to be resilient..."

The emotional and social growth from taking a gap year is an important advantage. Empathy and resilience are essential to personal and social well-being as they support individuals in the management of challenges and in relationships with others (Garcia & Patel, 2020). Being able to form opinions confidently and the ability to not equip oneself with judgment allows for mature and flexible responses to various social situations as well as the professional world (Martin & Lopez, 2021). There is growing literature that indicates that gap years foster an increase in emotional intelligence as a result of self-reflection and exposure to diversity (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

Taking a gap year in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic was a timely and resilient student-led adaptive response to some of the most significant disruptions that were ever experienced in their educational pathways. This was no mere pause in life; it was a key device to solve problems ranging from financial strain, academic overexertion, and mental health issues. Rather, it provided a critical challenge that encouraged students to reassess their personal and professional goals, realigning their educational efforts toward a more harmonious fit with their lives and the world around them. Instead, the gap year became a critical period for rest, renewal and the ability for students to manage the nuanced stress that the pandemic brought.

Between the two surveys, students were active in a variety of meaningful endeavors (professional work, entrepreneurial activity, or civic engagement) during their gap year. These involvements were essential in developing hands – on skills, not just limited to financial, technical aspects, but also soft skills like time management, working independently. In addition, many students engaged in avocational activities and domestic duties during this time frame as self- and situational enrichment conducive to their resilience and well-being. As a whole, these comprehensive experiences emphasize the gap year as a year of action and acquisition of skills, preparing them significantly for what lies ahead academically and professionally.

Lastly, the gap year experience has been a transformative one for the students, defined by soul searching, personal growth and renewed focus. It left them with greater self-awareness, improved skills, and clearer academic and career goals. Recognizing and promoting gap years as a valuable form of experiential and character education in a student's life-long continuum of learning which better prepares college youth to re-enter university with greater maturity and intentionality.



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