

## CARING BEYOND HURDLES: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INTENSIVE CARE UNIT NURSES LOOKING AFTER PEDIATRIC PATIENTS IN TAGUM CITY

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### Abstract

This study explored the experiences of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) nurses caring for pediatric patients in a private hospital in Tagum City. Employing Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological method rigor was established through application of verification, validation and validity. A purposive sample of nine ICU nurses were interviewed. From 112 significant statements, 11 themes emerged. ICU nurses' experiences encompassed Navigating complexities of ICU nursing, Sense of fulfillment, Emotional challenges and attachment to patients and technical challenges and professional growth. Their means of coping were focused on Resilience and adaptability, Promoting psychological resilience, Adaptability in clinical setting, effective time and task management and Team dynamics. The insights that ICU nurses wanted to share with fellow nurses and the nursing practice in general included Improving nursing practice and patient care, Education and professional development, Being compassionate, Adequate staffing and resource management, and Effective communication and collaboration. Pediatric intensive care unit nurses are unsung heroes. Their duties and responsibilities are diverse and demanding, making a significant impact on the lives of critically ill children and their families. Their specialized skills, compassion, and dedication are essential for achieving positive outcomes in the face of challenging medical situations

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### Introduction

ICU nurses are crucial in managing critical situations, communicating with families, and coordinating care with interdisciplinary teams. Exploring their lived experiences provides insight into their challenges, coping mechanisms, and their impact on their professional and personal well-being (Arena & Mobbs, 2022). Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) nurses face unique emotional, physical, and professional challenges. Studies by Hagen, Ter-Viola, and Graves show that pediatric nurses are prone to adverse outcomes like compassion fatigue, burnout, sadness, and PTSD, particularly when caring for dying children (Radha et al., 2021).

In the United Kingdom, PICU nurses face significant stress due to the high-pressure environment, compounded by modern medical equipment, constant alarms, and physical health risks (Debelić et al., 2022; Benner et al., 2021). Challenges specific to pediatric care, such as communicating with babies and adolescents, further amplify this strain, making the role more exhausting than caring for adult patients (Chan, 2023). Strict adherence to infection control protocols due to

exposure to infectious diseases adds to the pressure. At the same time, the emotional burden of caring for dying patients or witnessing patient deaths intensifies their mental and emotional strain (Sundal & Vatne, 2020). These challenges often lead to burnout and a higher turnover risk among PICU nurses.

There is limited knowledge about the realities faced by Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) nurses in the Philippines, making it essential to explore their experiences (Cruz et al., 2023). Compassion fatigue, a common issue among pediatric nurses, is defined by Boyle (2021) as the reduced ability to empathize due to prolonged exposure to traumatic situations. Figley (2022) highlights that compassion and empathy come at a cost, often diminishing nurses' capacity to bear others' suffering. In the Davao Region, PICUs are critical in managing children with conditions like dengue, respiratory infections, and congenital diseases. However, the growing demand for pediatric critical care (Garcia, 2020), combined with the challenges of balancing patient care and family support (Cruz, 2021) and a shortage of

skilled nurses (Reyes, 2022), significantly impacts the quality of care and the well-being of nurses.

Despite their crucial function in healthcare, more research needs to be conducted on the lived experiences of Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) nurses in the Davao Region. Ramos (2019) emphasized the importance of exploring these experiences to inform policies and support structures that strengthen resilience, reduce burnout, and enhance nurse retention. By shedding light on the unique challenges of PICU nurses, Ramos highlighted the need for institutional reforms that prioritize mental health and professional development. Similarly, De Leon (2020) argued that research into these lived experiences can improve nurse satisfaction and patient outcomes. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the experiences of ICU nurses in Davao and offering actionable recommendations to improve training, policies, and support systems tailored to their specific needs.

Methods

This study used a hermeneutic phenomenology approach to explore the lived experiences of ICU nurses caring for pediatric patients. Nine ICU nurses were

selected through purposive sampling, with eligibility criteria including at least six months of experience in pediatric ICU care. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a quiet setting and audiotaped for accuracy. The interviews, which were guided by a validated questionnaire, were transcribed verbatim in real-time, and field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues. The researcher ensured participant confidentiality by using unique codes and adhering to ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent and maintaining privacy throughout the process.

The study took place in Tagum City, Davao del Norte, Philippines, where the researcher’s familiarity with the local culture fostered trust with participants. After obtaining necessary approvals from the hospital and institution, participants were interviewed based on their availability and preferred interview platforms. Data was analyzed using a phenomenological approach, guided by Van Manen's six-step methodology, focusing on identifying key themes, emotional aspects, and constructing a reflective narrative. The researcher, acting as an observer-as-participant, was responsible for data collection, transcription, and analysis, ensuring a thorough exploration of the participants' experiences while maintaining ethical rigor.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the participant’s profile.

Participant	Sex	Age	Study Group
Artemis	F	35	IDI
Hercules	M	25	IDI
Nemesis	F	37	IDI
Apollo	M	25	IDI
Poseidon	M	24	IDI
Zeus	M	35	IDI
Medusa	F	39	IDI
Ares	M	35	IDI
Hera	F	37	IDI

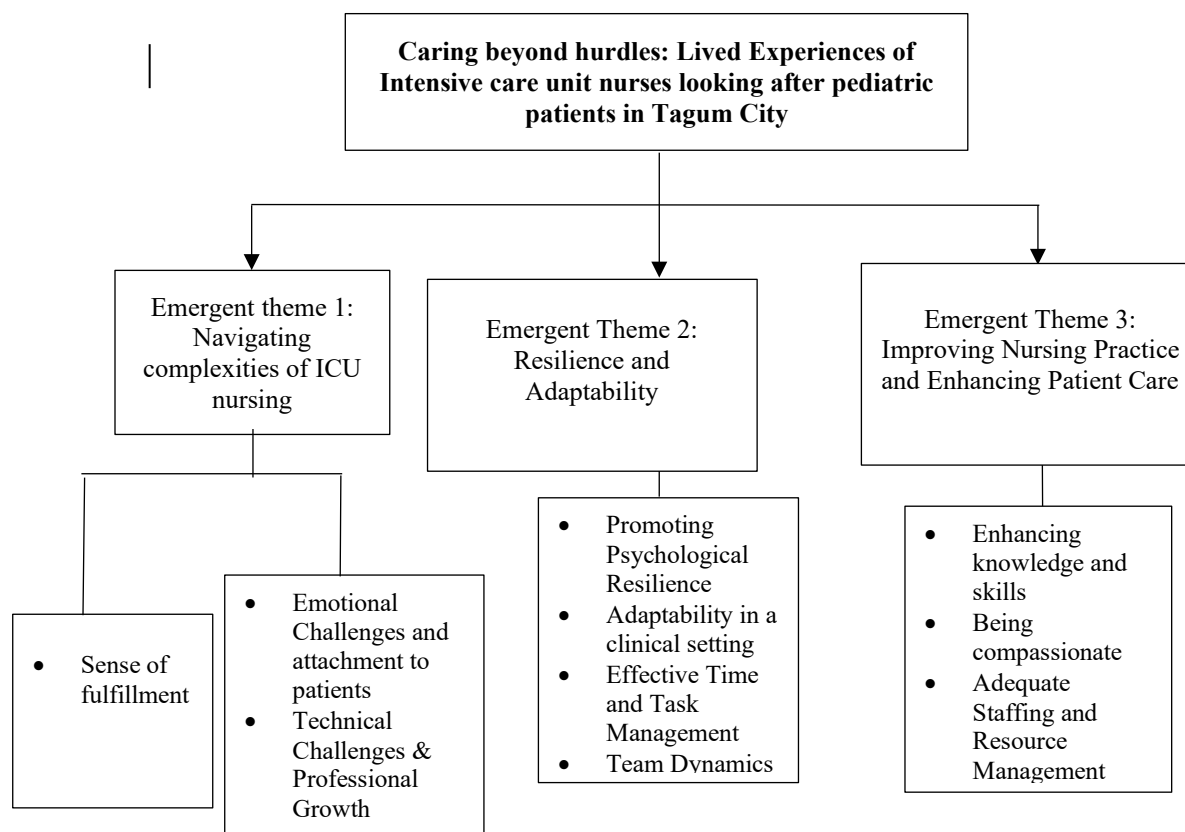


Figure 1. Thematic Map

## Results and discussion

The thematic analysis of the data from the in-depth interviews with nine ICU nurses revealed three major themes that encapsulate their lived experiences in pediatric critical care: *Navigating Complexities of ICU Nursing*, *Resilience and Adaptability*, and *Improving Nursing Practice and Enhancing Patient Care*. A total of 112 significant statements were identified across 625 transcripts, which were grouped into 11 cluster themes that captured the core of the nurses' experiences. The first theme, *Navigating Complexities of ICU Nursing*, emphasizes the challenges nurses face in managing critically ill pediatric patients, such as making quick, high-stakes decisions in a high-pressure environment. The second theme, *Resilience and Adaptability*, highlights how nurses develop coping mechanisms to deal with the emotional and physical stress of working in a pediatric ICU. This includes adapting to fast-changing situations and maintaining emotional strength despite the overwhelming nature of the job. The final theme, *Improving Nursing Practice and Enhancing Patient*

*Care*, reflects the nurses' commitment to continuous professional development and their dedication to improving care delivery and patient outcomes. These themes were drawn from the participants' shared experiences, demonstrating commonalities in their approaches to the emotional, physical, and professional challenges of ICU nursing.

The data collected from the interviews revealed three central themes related to the experiences of ICU nurses caring for critically ill pediatric patients: *Navigating Complexities of ICU Nursing*, *Resilience and Adaptability*, and *Improving Nursing Practice and Enhancing Patient Care*.

The first emergent theme, *Navigating Complexities of ICU Nursing*, highlighted the emotional and technical challenges that nurses face in a high-pressure, high-stakes environment. Many participants expressed the emotional strain of caring for pediatric patients, especially those with long-term or chronic conditions, where attachments often form. This emotional

connection can lead to significant stress, particularly when patient outcomes are unfavorable. The technical challenges related to pediatric care, such as administering precise medication dosages and managing critical procedures, also added to the pressure on nurses. Despite these challenges, the nurses emphasized the profound sense of fulfillment they derived from helping children recover, particularly when their interventions led to positive outcomes.

The second theme, *Resilience and Adaptability*, focused on how nurses cope with stress and adapt to the ever-changing demands of ICU work. Many participants described their ability to maintain emotional strength despite difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences. This resilience was essential in managing both the emotional and technical demands of the ICU. Nurses reported feeling a deep sense of responsibility to their patients and their families, which motivated them to continue delivering high-quality care even in the face of exhaustion and burnout.

The third theme, *Improving Nursing Practice and Enhancing Patient Care*, highlighted the ongoing professional development and dedication of ICU nurses. Participants stressed the importance of continually refining their technical skills and staying up to date with best practices to ensure optimal patient care. Many nurses viewed their role as an ongoing learning experience, with each new patient presenting a unique challenge and opportunity for growth.

## Discussion

The findings of this study reflect the complex and multifaceted experiences of ICU nurses caring for critically ill pediatric patients. The first theme, *Navigating Complexities of ICU Nursing*, aligns with existing research on the emotional toll of working in critical care environments. Studies have shown that healthcare workers, particularly in pediatric ICU settings, often experience secondary traumatic stress and emotional exhaustion (Deltour et al., 2023; Cherak et al., 2021). Nurses in this study faced significant emotional challenges in managing their attachment to patients while also trying to maintain professional detachment. This emotional strain was further compounded by the technical challenges of pediatric care, such as weight-based medication dosing and emergency interventions, which require high levels of precision and expertise (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020).

The second theme, *Resilience and Adaptability*, supports previous findings that resilience is a key factor in helping healthcare professionals cope with the emotional and physical demands of their work (Cummings et al., 2020). The ability to adapt to the shifting needs of pediatric patients, alongside the emotional resilience to manage difficult outcomes, is crucial in maintaining effective care delivery in the ICU. Nurses demonstrate remarkable resilience in their ability to bounce back from difficult experiences, often drawing strength from their sense of purpose and commitment to patient care.

Lastly, the theme of *Improving Nursing Practice and Enhancing Patient Care* highlights the ongoing need for professional development in pediatric ICU nursing. This finding aligns with research that emphasizes the importance of continuous education and skills development to ensure safe and effective care in high-pressure environments (Stone et al., 2019). The nurses in this study were committed to enhancing their practice and refining their clinical skills to better care for their patients. Their efforts reflect a broader trend in healthcare, where professionals are increasingly focused on improving outcomes through collaborative learning and the adoption of best practices.

## Emergent Theme 2: Adaptability in Clinical Setting

The theme of adaptability emerged as crucial for nurses working in pediatric critical care. ICU nurses described the need to rapidly adjust their clinical practices in response to the dynamic and unpredictable needs of pediatric patients. Adaptability was identified as a necessary skill for managing the complexities of the pediatric ICU (PICU) environment. Nurses demonstrated the ability to adjust care plans quickly, manage multiple responsibilities simultaneously, and respond effectively to emergencies, all while maintaining high standards of patient care. This ability to adapt is essential in a high-stakes, fast-paced environment where the unexpected is constant. Emotional resilience was also tied to adaptability, as nurses needed to regulate their emotions to stay focused and calm under pressure.

Reflective practice and experiential learning were key strategies for enhancing adaptability. Nurses described how experiences, including difficult situations and challenging cases, shaped their professional development. Through continuous learning and refining their clinical competencies, they

remained well-prepared for the ever-evolving demands of their work. This aligns with research by Fernández-Castro et al. (2022), which suggests that resilience and adaptability develop through reflective practice and professional growth.

#### **Cluster Theme 2.1: Promoting Psychological Resilience**

Psychological resilience was identified as essential for managing the emotional demands of working in the PICU. Nurses face the emotional toll of caring for critically ill children, including managing both recoveries and losses. Mindfulness, emotional intelligence training, peer support, and self-care were highlighted as critical strategies to foster emotional resilience. These strategies helped nurses manage stress and prevent burnout, ensuring they could maintain their focus on providing high-quality patient care. In the PICU, where the emotional and physical demands are significant, these resilience strategies are particularly necessary to help nurses recover from emotional exhaustion and maintain a sense of personal and professional balance.

Previous studies support these findings, noting that strategies like peer support, emotional hygiene, and mindfulness significantly reduce stress and enhance resilience among healthcare workers (Wei et al., 2020). These findings suggest that fostering emotional resilience is not only crucial for maintaining personal well-being but also for providing optimal patient care in a high-pressure environment.

#### **Cluster Theme 2.2: Adaptability in a Clinical Setting**

Adaptability was closely linked with continuous professional development. Nurses described a commitment to staying informed about the latest practices in pediatric critical care, attending seminars, watching educational videos, and seeking guidance from senior colleagues. This ongoing learning was emphasized as necessary for maintaining competence and confidence in their clinical skills. Many nurses actively sought to expand their knowledge and refine their technical skills to ensure they could handle the unique needs of pediatric ICU patients.

This aligns with findings from the American Academy of Pediatrics (2020), which highlights the importance of adaptability and professional growth in pediatric ICU nursing. As the field evolves, staying

current with new technologies and evidence-based practices becomes essential for maintaining high standards of care. Nurses' commitment to lifelong learning enables them to respond effectively to the challenges of pediatric critical care.

#### **Cluster Theme 2.3: Effective Time and Task Management**

Effective time and task management emerged as a critical skill for nurses working in the high-pressure environment of the pediatric ICU. Nurses emphasized the need to prioritize tasks, such as administering time-sensitive medications or responding to emergencies, to ensure patient safety and maintain the flow of care. Time management was often achieved through organizing tasks, creating lists, and maintaining a clear focus on patient needs. While documentation and administrative tasks were important, nurses recognized that patient care had to take precedence.

Research supports the notion that effective time management is crucial for ICU nurses. Studies have shown that time management training can significantly improve nurses' ability to prioritize tasks and manage their workload, leading to better patient outcomes and reduced stress (Ahmadi et al., 2020). In the context of the pediatric ICU, managing time efficiently allows nurses to balance the many competing demands they face each shift.

#### **Cluster Theme 2.4: Team Dynamics**

Team dynamics played a vital role in shaping the overall adaptability of ICU nurses. Nurses in the study emphasized the importance of strong teamwork, clear communication, and mutual respect among colleagues. A supportive work environment was seen as essential for managing the emotional and clinical demands of the PICU. Nurses spoke highly of the camaraderie among team members, which helped create a collaborative and cohesive environment that contributed to better patient outcomes and enhanced job satisfaction.

The significance of team dynamics is well-documented in the literature. Studies by Rasoal et al. (2022) and Hughes et al. (2021) highlight the positive impact of effective communication, shared decision-making, and mutual support in reducing stress and improving resilience. These factors not only benefit the nurses' mental health but also enhance the quality of care delivered to critically ill patients. A positive

work environment with strong team cohesion reduces burnout and contributes to higher job satisfaction, as nurses feel supported and valued.

### **Emergent Theme 3: Improving Nursing Practice and Enhancing Patient Care**

The importance of continuous professional development and compassionate care in improving pediatric ICU nursing practices was emphasized by participants. Ongoing education was seen as key for maintaining high clinical competencies and improving patient outcomes. The integration of advanced skills, new technologies, and updated treatment protocols was recognized as necessary for providing the best care to critically ill children. Additionally, having a supportive work environment with adequate staffing and resources was identified as essential for improving both nursing practice and patient care. This aligns with research suggesting that structured educational programs and sufficient resources significantly contribute to enhancing ICU practices and patient safety.

#### **Cluster Theme 3.1: Enhancing Knowledge and Skills**

The participants strongly emphasized the importance of continuous learning and professional development. They highlighted attending seminars, gaining advanced certifications, and refining both technical and interpersonal skills to ensure high-quality care. Nurses believed that staying informed about the latest advances in pediatric care was critical for responding to the unique challenges of ICU work. This reflects the broader literature, which asserts that continuous education is crucial for maintaining clinical competence and improving decision-making in high-acuity settings. Nurses' commitment to staying up to date helps them manage complex cases and incorporate evidence-based practices, which are essential for providing optimal care in a pediatric ICU.

#### **Cluster Theme 3.2: Being Compassionate**

Compassion emerged as a key component of nursing practice, contributing to improved patient and family satisfaction. Nurses recognized that empathy, patience, and effective communication fostered trust and a collaborative environment, which was vital for effective patient care. Despite the emotional and physical demands of the ICU, participants continued to prioritize compassionate care, which they noted not only enhanced the patient experience but also

provided personal fulfillment. Literature supports these findings, emphasizing that compassion improves patient outcomes, reduces anxiety, and strengthens relationships between patients, families, and healthcare providers.

#### **Cluster Theme 3.3: Adequate Staffing and Resource Management**

Adequate staffing and access to resources were identified as crucial for ensuring the delivery of safe and efficient care in the pediatric ICU. Nurses reported that insufficient staffing led to increased stress, potential risks to patient safety, and burnout. Proper staffing ratios and adequate resources such as medical equipment and supplies were seen as necessary for maintaining high-quality care standards and reducing nurses' physical and emotional burdens. These perspectives align with research indicating that optimal staffing levels are linked to improved patient outcomes and nurse well-being. Inadequate staffing and resource shortages negatively impact care quality and contribute to nurse turnover, further stressing the need for organizational support in these areas.

#### **Cluster Theme 3.4: Effective Communication and Collaboration**

Effective communication and collaboration were highlighted as fundamental for ensuring patient safety and delivering holistic care in the pediatric ICU. Nurses faced challenges such as communication breakdowns, delays in contacting attending physicians, and difficulties in understanding pediatric patients' needs. Structured communication protocols like SBAR were seen as important tools for reducing errors and improving clarity. Additionally, collaboration between nurses, physicians, and families was essential for making informed decisions and providing coordinated care. Studies corroborate these findings, showing that clear communication improves team dynamics, reduces errors, and enhances family satisfaction, ultimately contributing to better patient outcomes.

#### **Recommendation for the Future Researcher**

Future research on ICU nurses caring for critically ill pediatric patients should explore several key areas to improve the working environment and enhance patient care quality. First, studies should examine the long-term effects of emotional stress on nurses' mental and physical well-being. Investigating the effectiveness of psychological therapies such as



mindfulness, stress management programs, and peer support groups may help nurses cope with the emotional toll of their work and improve job satisfaction. Additionally, research should focus on the development of pediatric ICU nurse training and education programs that not only refine technical skills but also emotionally prepare nurses for the unique challenges they face in caring for critically ill children.

Another important area for future research is staffing strategies and resource management in pediatric ICUs. Research should explore how staffing ratios, resource allocation, and the implementation of modern technologies affect both patient outcomes and nurse well-being. Given that resource limitations often contribute to stress among ICU nurses, it is crucial to examine effective strategies for managing resources and integrating technological advancements to improve care. Finally, long-term studies on the impact of the ICU environment on nurses' career longevity, professional development, and mental health are essential. These studies could provide valuable insights into how supportive policies and organizational changes can reduce burnout, increase retention, and ultimately enhance the overall quality of care provided to pediatric patients in intensive care units.

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