



Returning Students' Determination and Social Validation: An Interpretative Phenomenological View

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of returning students regarding their determination to pursue education and their adjustment to social validation, utilizing the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) as defined by Creswell (2018). Employing purposive sampling, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with seven participants and were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed five major themes: (1) Empowered Resilience in the Face of Adversity; (2) Recognition-Fueled Perseverance; (3) Empowered Self-Validation; (4) Emotional Resilience and Confidence; and (5) Unwavering Self-Directed and Motivational Resilience. The study integrated several theoretical frameworks, including Adult Learning Theory, Self-Directed Learning Theory, Eccles and Wigfield's Expectancy-Value Theory, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Despite limited research on this topic within the Philippine context, the study significantly contributes to understanding how social validation impacts the determination of returning students. It highlights that the motivation to pursue education should stem from intrinsic self-determination rather than societal expectations. These insights have implications for educational practitioners and policymakers in creating supportive environments for returning students, fostering not only academic success but also personal growth.

Keywords: *Returning student, Determination, Social Validation, Adult Learners, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

At an age when societal expectations often suggest that it is “too late” to return to school, many individuals nevertheless choose to pursue higher education, driven by a strong determination to achieve personal and professional goals. However, returning students frequently experience self-doubt and anxiety, particularly regarding how they may be perceived by others. These concerns can become more pronounced when they must navigate unfamiliar academic environments, interact with younger peers, and adapt to new institutional structures. According to ProLiteracy (2023), such feelings may be intensified by previous educational experiences, including having left school earlier without completing a degree.

Adult learning has become an increasingly significant global trend. As noted by Lee (2023), the growing participation of adult learners in higher education is not confined to a single country but is occurring worldwide. In the Philippines, however, returning students encounter a range of challenges as they attempt to balance academic responsibilities with other life commitments. Mendoza (2023) highlights that college returnees often struggle with time management, long travel distances to school, adjusting to new academic environments, and financial constraints. Although free tuition policies have expanded access to higher education,

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many students still need to cover daily expenses, school supplies, and project-related costs. In many cases, returning students are already financially independent from their parents, making it difficult for them to seek financial support. Additionally, individuals who have been out of school for several years may experience difficulties readjusting to classroom learning, participating in academic activities, and recalling foundational knowledge required to keep up with coursework. These factors make the pursuit of higher education particularly demanding for adult learners.

This study is primarily anchored in Adult Learning Theory, developed by Malcolm Knowles, which serves as the central lens in understanding the motivation and persistence of returning students. The theory posits that adult learners are self-directed, goal-oriented, and intrinsically motivated, often engaging in education with clear personal and professional purposes. While previous studies support the idea that adult learners demonstrate higher motivation than younger learners, such claims are often presented descriptively. For instance, [Davidovitch and Dorot \(2023\)](#) found that undergraduate students exhibit greater motivation compared to high school students, attributing this to increased maturity and independence. However, this perspective does not fully account for how motivation is continuously shaped by learners' experiences and contexts. Similarly, [Pappas \(2025\)](#) emphasized that adult learners develop a deeper appreciation for the relevance of education, which enhances engagement and retention, yet this explanation remains limited in clarifying the processes through which such motivation is sustained.

To address this gap, the study integrates Expectancy-Value Theory proposed by Eccles and Wigfield, which explains that individuals' motivation is influenced by their belief in their ability to succeed and the value they assign to a task. In the context of returning students, persistence in education is strengthened when learners perceive themselves as capable and view their studies as meaningful and beneficial to their long-term goals. This perspective complements Adult Learning Theory by explaining that intrinsic motivation is not merely inherent but is reinforced through positive self-beliefs and perceived outcomes. Furthermore, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a contextual understanding of how psychosocial factors influence motivation. Returning students seek to fulfill their needs for belongingness and esteem through acceptance, support, and recognition within the academic environment. These factors contribute to building confidence and self-worth, which in turn support their progression toward self-actualization. Rather than occurring in a fixed sequence, these needs interact dynamically, shaping learners' motivation and determination to continue their studies.

By integrating these frameworks, the study presents a more cohesive understanding of adult learners' persistence. Adult Learning Theory explains the characteristics and motivations of returning students, Expectancy-Value Theory clarifies the mechanisms that sustain their engagement, and Maslow's framework highlights the social and environmental conditions that influence their learning experience. This integrated approach contributes to the literature by moving beyond purely descriptive accounts of motivation and instead offering a more comprehensive explanation of how internal, cognitive, and contextual factors collectively shape the educational persistence of returning students.

Despite the growing body of literature on student motivation and social validation, there remains limited understanding of how the determination to continue studying is influenced by social validation, particularly within the context of societal expectations regarding age and education. While previous studies have explored various factors affecting the persistence of returning students, there is still insufficient research examining how these

individuals pursue higher education despite societal perceptions that they may be “late” or “behind” in their academic journey.

This study aims to address this research gap by examining how returning students overcome age-related stereotypes and societal expectations while maintaining their motivation to continue their studies. Specifically, the research explores how returning students navigate issues of social validation and sustain their determination to complete their education despite potential judgment related to age. By highlighting the limited literature currently available on this topic, this study underscores the need to generate socially relevant insights that may inform more inclusive educational practices and foster a more supportive environment for returning students.

Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the emerging body of literature on returning students by examining the intersection of age, motivation, and social validation, particularly within the Philippine higher education context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformative Journey of Returning Students

According to [Ghaemmaghami et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Wellons et al. \(2023\)](#), returning to higher education during adulthood represents an important transition in an individual's educational and professional development. In many global contexts, this decision marks a significant stage in the life course of adult learners who seek to expand their qualifications, improve career opportunities, or pursue personal growth. However, re-entering formal education after a period of absence can present several challenges, particularly for individuals who must balance academic demands with employment, family responsibilities, and other socioeconomic obligations. These difficulties are frequently reported among non-traditional or mature students within higher education systems worldwide, especially those who resume their studies after extended breaks from formal schooling.

Beyond practical challenges, adult learners' experiences in higher education are also influenced by psychosocial factors, including the need for social validation. Social validation refers to the process through which individuals seek recognition, acceptance, and affirmation from peers, instructors, and members of their social environment. Research suggests that this need for acceptance can influence how students perceive their academic abilities and how they engage with learning communities. Within higher education institutions, positive social interactions and recognition from others may strengthen students' sense of belonging, which in turn supports persistence and confidence in academic settings.

Motivation likewise plays a critical role in sustaining adult learners throughout their educational journey. Educational research consistently identifies motivation as a key factor influencing engagement, persistence, and overall academic performance. Adult learners are often driven by both intrinsic motivations, such as personal fulfillment and intellectual growth, and extrinsic motivations, including career advancement and financial stability. These motivational factors can enhance learners' resilience when facing academic pressures and competing life responsibilities, thereby contributing to their continued participation in higher education and their commitment to lifelong learning.

In addition, the role of feedback and validation in the learning process is widely recognized in educational literature. Effective feedback allows students to evaluate their academic progress, identify areas that require improvement, and adjust their learning strategies accordingly. Within higher education environments, structured feedback systems

and supportive instructional practices can foster greater student engagement and self-regulation. For adult learners in particular, timely and constructive feedback may strengthen their confidence, reinforce their efforts, and ultimately contribute to improved academic outcomes.

Overcoming Barriers to Learning

Situational barriers refer to challenges that emerge from learners' everyday life conditions, including family obligations such as childcare and parenting responsibilities, financial constraints, work-related commitments, and transportation or commuting limitations that may restrict regular participation in educational activities. In contrast, dispositional barriers are linked to learners' internal attitudes, perceptions, and emotional orientations toward the learning environment. These barriers may manifest through feelings of not belonging, limited confidence in one's academic abilities, and fluctuating or diminished motivation to continue studying.

Research further indicates that fear and self-doubt constitute significant challenges for many adult learners, particularly during the enrollment stage and the early phases of pursuing educational credentials. Such psychological barriers are often rooted in prolonged absence from formal education and differences in age or life stage compared with traditional students.

Similarly, [ProLiteracy \(2023\)](#) emphasizes that adults who return to education frequently face circumstances that differ considerably from their earlier schooling experiences. Competing responsibilities related to family, employment, and daily living demands often intersect with their efforts to continue formal learning, creating additional pressures that may hinder persistence in education. Because of these challenges, continuous encouragement and structured support systems are considered essential in sustaining adult learners' engagement.

The organization further notes that feelings of fear and self-doubt can discourage participation in learning environments, particularly when classroom experiences evoke negative memories associated with previous schooling. Many adult learners also express concern about being judged for not completing their education earlier in life. Within this context, validation and positive reinforcement become critical factors, as they help rebuild learners' confidence and strengthen their motivation to persist in educational pursuits.

Self-Directed Learning Theories

Malcolm Knowles' concept of Andragogy has been widely recognized as a foundational framework for understanding self-directed learning in adult education. In identifying their educational goals, selecting appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating desired outcomes. Andragogy proposes that adult learning is most effective when it is self-directed and when learners' prior knowledge and experiences are actively incorporated into the learning process. The theory also underscores the importance of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem as central motivational factors in adult learning. Learners tend to demonstrate higher engagement when instructional activities address practical, real-world concerns and relate directly to their professional or personal contexts. Consequently, the diverse experiences and knowledge that adult learners bring should be acknowledged and integrated into educational practices ([Ngozwana, 2020](#)).

Another influential framework in the study of adult learning is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan. This theory proposes that individuals possess three fundamental psychological needs, relatedness, competence, and

autonomy, which significantly influence intrinsic motivation. When these needs are satisfied, learners are more likely to engage willingly and persist in educational activities. Within adult education, SDT supports learning environments that emphasize active participation, collaboration, and experiential engagement. Constructivist approaches aligned with self-directed learning often incorporate peer discussions, problem-solving tasks, and hands-on learning experiences to facilitate deeper understanding ([Govindaraju, 2021](#)).

Social Cognitive Theory has also significantly influenced adult education practices. This framework highlights the importance of observational learning, role modeling, social support, and learners' confidence in their own abilities. Educators can foster supportive learning environments where students collaborate on projects, exchange experiences, and provide constructive feedback. Such environments contribute to the development of self-efficacy and a sense of belonging among learners. Strengthening these elements enables adult learners to overcome educational barriers, sustain their engagement in academic programs, and work toward achieving their learning goals.

Despite their influence, these theoretical perspectives have also been subject to scholarly critique. For instance, critics suggest that Andragogy reflects a predominantly Western emphasis on individual autonomy and may overlook cultural differences in learning practices, attitudes, and social expectations ([Du Toit-Brits, 2020](#)). Similarly, some scholars argue that Self-Determination Theory places considerable emphasis on autonomy and intrinsic motivation while giving comparatively less attention to the role of external or extrinsic motivators in shaping learning behaviors.

The literature shows that returning to higher education as an adult is both a meaningful and challenging experience. Many adult learners go back to school to improve their careers or achieve personal goals, but they often struggle to balance their studies with work, family responsibilities, and other daily demands. These external pressures are often paired with internal challenges, such as fear, self-doubt, and a lack of confidence, especially for those who have been away from school for a long time.

Several studies also point out the importance of social support, motivation, and feedback in helping adult learners succeed. Feeling accepted and supported by classmates and instructors can strengthen a student's sense of belonging and encourage them to stay engaged. At the same time, both personal motivation and practical goals, like career advancement, help learners push through difficulties. Feedback also plays a key role, as it helps students understand their progress and build confidence in their abilities.

The theories discussed, such as Andragogy, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory, help explain how adults learn best. These frameworks highlight the value of independence, prior experience, and social interaction in the learning process. However, some researchers argue that these theories may not fully apply in all situations, particularly in different cultural contexts or where external factors strongly influence learning.

Overall, the literature suggests that adult learners' success depends on a combination of personal effort, social support, and effective teaching practices. While these studies provide useful insights, there is still a need for further research to better understand how different factors affect adult learners in various contexts. More studies could help develop strategies that better support returning students, especially in addressing both their personal and situational challenges.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study aims to understand the experiences of students who chose to continue their education despite delays, interruptions, or personal challenges. Specifically, it examines how their determination influences their adjustment to social validation upon returning to formal education. The research focuses on seven respondents from Tanauan Institute Inc., aged 30–50 years, who are pursuing their studies after taking a break or delaying their education for a certain period of time. The scope of the study is limited to participants from this institution and does not include students from other schools or younger learners. Therefore, the findings reflect only the experiences and insights of the selected participants and may not necessarily represent the perspectives of all returning students. Data gathering was conducted during the 2025–2026 academic year.

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. This design was selected because it allows researchers to explore and interpret the lived experiences of individuals who share similar circumstances. In this study, the focus is on understanding how students between the ages of 30 and 50 continue their education and navigate issues related to social validation while returning to school. According to [Creswell \(2018\)](#), qualitative research aims to explore and interpret meanings, perspectives, and experiences rather than relying solely on numerical data. Furthermore, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis enables researchers to examine and describe shared experiences among participants and understand how individuals make sense of those experiences. This perspective is supported by [Alhazmi et al. \(2022\)](#). Through this process, the researcher collected rich narratives and meaningful insights that illustrate the determination of older students returning to formal education.

The study involved seven participants aged 30–50 years who resumed their studies after a period of interruption. This age range was selected because individuals within this stage of adulthood often face substantial personal, family, and professional responsibilities, making the pursuit of education particularly significant. Additionally, participants within this group are more likely to have experienced interruptions in their academic journey, providing deeper insights into the phenomenon being examined. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who possess direct and relevant experiences related to the research topic ([Patton, 2002](#)). Tanauan Institute Inc. was chosen as the research setting because of its diverse student population, including individuals who have continued or returned to their studies later in life, making it an appropriate context for this investigation.

Data were collected through interviews conducted either online or face-to-face, depending on the participants' preferences and availability. A semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used to facilitate the data collection process ([Dursun & Erişen, 2023](#)). The interview guide was reviewed and validated by the research adviser to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. Participants were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities ([Creswell, 2018](#)). All ethical guidelines for conducting research involving human participants were strictly followed to ensure respectful, voluntary, and fair participation.

Recruitment was conducted via Facebook, where potential participants were invited to join the study. Institutional approval was secured from the Department Head and the Dean, and ethical safeguards were observed in line with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. At the beginning of

each interview session, the researcher explained the study's purpose and presented the informed consent form, which participants signed after being assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were carried out through semi-structured sessions conducted personally via one-on-one interviews. The interview guide, validated by a licensed psychometrician, ensured clarity and relevance while allowing participants' responses to shape the discussion. Each interview was audio-recorded to preserve accuracy. Transcription followed immediately after data collection, with all recordings transcribed verbatim to ensure fidelity to participants' words. Analysis was conducted using the systematic steps of IPA, including initial coding, clustering of emergent themes, and interpretative analysis. To strengthen credibility, triangulation was employed through validation of interview questions, member checking, and peer debriefing during analysis. Reflexivity was addressed by situating the researcher's positionality: the researcher identifies as a returning student and is culturally embedded in Filipino society, which may shape sensitivity to issues of masculinity, stigma, and relational ethics. While efforts were made to bracket assumptions, positionality inevitably influenced interpretation, particularly in recognizing cultural nuances of *loob*, *labas*, and *kapwa*. Member checking was the final step. Printed transcripts were returned to participants for review and clarification, ensuring that their perspectives were accurately represented and reinforcing the trustworthiness of the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved seven (7) returning students aged 30–50 from Tanauan Institute Incorporated who resumed their studies after an extended academic hiatus. A small sample size is characteristic of the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA), as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to them. According to [Creswell \(2018\)](#), phenomenological studies typically involve between five and ten participants, making the present sample size appropriate for the methodological framework of this research.

To ensure confidentiality and adhere to the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012, participants were assigned code names (P1–P7). Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants, including their age, sex, and the number of years they were away from formal education prior to returning to school.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

RESPONDENTS	AGE	YEAR OF ACADEMIC HIATUS	SEX
P1	30	3 Years	Female
P2	41	22 Years	Female
P3	46	25 Years	Female
P4	41	14 Years	Female
P5	37	15 Years	Female
P6	42	17 Years	Female
P7	40	13 Years	Female

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the seven participants, identified through the code names P1 to P7. The table highlights their ages, which range from 30 to 46 years, as well as the duration of their academic hiatus prior to resuming their studies. These hiatus periods range from 3 to 25 years, reflecting diverse educational interruptions and return trajectories among the participants.

The data gathered from the participants focus on the experiences of individuals who returned to formal education after a prolonged break, particularly their journeys of determination and their process of adjusting to social validation within the academic environment. Guided by the phenomenological approach, the study sought to capture the meaning and essence of their lived experiences. As a result, the research was guided by the central question: What is the essence of living as a returning student?

Meanwhile, the corollary question has been answered in the discussion below:

Corollary Question 1: How do returning students perceive the role of social validations in their studies?

Interview Guide Question 1.

How have others' opinions about your return to school influenced your motivation or confidence in studying?

Upon being asked about society's perception of returning students, P1 and P5 expressed mixed societal reactions toward returning students. While some comments reflected admiration, these reactions also implied underlying societal expectations regarding age, parenthood, and educational timelines. P1 reframed such reactions as encouragement, interpreting others' surprise as a source of motivation despite the implicit judgment surrounding her age and parental responsibilities. Similarly, P5 emphasized gratitude for being able to return to the educational system, acknowledging the emotional complexity of re-entering formal education later in life.

"Most people were amazed that I returned to school despite my age and having two children. I took those comments as motivation." – P1

"It's better to be late than never. As returnees, we're simply grateful to be part of the system again." – P5

In this regard, motivation among returning students can be understood as socially negotiated rather than solely internally generated, as individuals reinterpret external perceptions to sustain engagement. While affirming responses enhance confidence, subtle expressions of surprise may simultaneously reinforce deficit-oriented assumptions, requiring active cognitive reframing. Consistent with [Schumacher \(2025\)](#), adult learners frequently encounter age-related stereotypes; however, the present findings indicate that such perceptions can be reworked into motivational resources. Similarly, [Tao et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasized the role of cognitive reframing in fostering resilience, which is further extended here by situating this process within broader socio-cultural expectations and identity negotiation.

Interview Guide Question 2

How do you perceive society's view of returning students, and how does this shape your self-perception?

Upon being asked, P3 and P6 emphasized the importance of social validation in reinforcing their academic commitment. Recognition from peers, family members, and instructors strengthened their confidence and affirmed their decision to return to school. For many, encouragement served as a motivational resource that helped sustain their aspirations despite competing responsibilities. At the same time, reliance on social validation reflects the relational context in which returning students navigate their academic journeys. While encouragement enhances motivation, the absence of validation may also intensify self-doubt, particularly in environments where older learners feel socially distinct from younger peers.

"Social validation is a huge motivator. When someone acknowledges my efforts, it reassures me that I'm on the right track." – P3

"It boosts my confidence and reminds me that age is not a barrier to achieving my goals." – P6

In relation to this, social validation operates as a mechanism through which returning students establish legitimacy and belonging within age-normative academic environments. While recognition strengthens engagement and confidence, it may also foster reliance on external affirmation, particularly among those who perceive themselves as socially distinct. [Chen, Bian, and Zhu \(2023\)](#) argued that perceived social support enhances academic engagement; similarly, the present findings demonstrate that such support also contributes to identity formation. At the same time, inconsistent validation may intensify self-doubt, indicating that social support is context-dependent and can both enable and constrain persistence.

Interview Guide Question 3

In what ways do you think social validation (e.g. praise, recognition, or encouragement) influences your academic goals and aspirations?

Both P1 and P3 described initial feelings of self-doubt related to age differences. These feelings reflected internalized societal expectations regarding the "appropriate" time for higher education. P1 initially perceived herself as older and potentially less capable of keeping pace with younger classmates. However, positive interactions with peers reduced these concerns and fostered a sense of belonging. Similarly, P3 described using self-validation to manage feelings of inadequacy by recognizing the value of her life experiences. These accounts highlight the dynamic process through which returning students negotiate internal doubts and social comparisons. While age differences can initially create psychological barriers, supportive peer interactions and self-affirmation can mitigate these concerns.

"At first, I felt too old, but my classmates never made me feel that way." – P1

"I remind myself that everyone's journey is different and that my life experience is valuable." – P3

In this context, social validation extends beyond encouragement by actively reshaping learners' perceptions of competence and future aspirations. Initial self-doubt, influenced by dominant educational norms, is disrupted through affirming interactions and self-recognition, allowing individuals to reposition their experiences as strengths. [Weigold et al. \(2020\)](#) identified education as a transformative process for adult learners; similarly, the findings suggest that transformation is contingent upon both interpersonal recognition and internal reframing. In parallel, [Mendoza \(2023\)](#) linked persistence to resilience, which is further elaborated here as a co-constructed process emerging from social affirmation and individual agency.

Interview Guide Question 4

Can you recall a moment when someone made a discouraging or judgmental comment about your decision to return to school? How did it affect your motivation, and how did you handle it?

Upon being asked to describe experiences with criticism, P5 and P6 shared instances in which their decision to return to school was questioned by family members. Participants experienced direct criticism from family members or relatives, highlighting the structural and relational barriers returning students sometimes face. P5 described limited support from her spouse during the early stages of her return to school. Similarly, P6 reported criticism from extended family members who believed she should prioritize financial support for her family rather than education. These narratives illustrate how returning students navigate competing expectations between educational goals and familial responsibilities. Participants responded to criticism by demonstrating competence and persistence, reinforcing their sense of self-efficacy.

"My husband initially didn't support my decision because he wanted me to stay at home, but I showed him that I could manage both." – P5

"My relatives said I should focus on helping my family at my age, but I showed that I could study and still support them." – P6

In this regard, discouragement functions not only as a constraint but also as a catalyst that prompts individuals to assert competence through action. Rather than internalizing criticism, returning students actively resist imposed limitations, demonstrating that self-efficacy is enacted within socially contested contexts. [Greene \(2023\)](#) highlighted the importance of academic self-efficacy in persistence; similarly, the present findings show that such efficacy is reinforced through resistance to relational pressures. In addition, [Daza-Pérez \(2024\)](#) emphasized empowerment as a driver of engagement, which is further extended here by illustrating how empowerment develops through navigating structural expectations within family systems.

Interview Guide Question 5

How does criticism or lack of support from others influence your academic performance?

Upon being asked about strategies for dealing with discouraging comments, P1 and P2 highlighted the role of personal motivation, purpose, and social support in sustaining their commitment to education. P1 emphasized self-efficacy and family-centered motivation. Similarly, P2 described a combination of personal reflection, prayer, and supportive relationships to maintain focus. These strategies reflect forms of intrinsic motivation and self-regulation that help returning students navigate discouraging social feedback. Such coping mechanisms enable them to maintain commitment while balancing multiple responsibilities, including work and family roles.

"I believe in my capabilities and think about my children's future to stay motivated."-P1

"I remind myself of my purpose, stay positive, and surround myself with supportive people." – P2

In relation to this, the impact of criticism on academic performance is mediated through self-regulation, meaning-making, and selective engagement with supportive relationships rather than direct causation. While discouraging feedback may challenge confidence, individuals demonstrate the capacity to reorient toward intrinsic goals and affirming social contexts. [Mendoza \(2023\)](#) underscored the role of internal motivation in sustaining persistence; similarly, the findings indicate that such motivation is actively maintained through adaptive coping strategies. Likewise another study emphasized goal-directed behavior, which is further expanded here by showing how these goals are reinforced through continuous self-affirmation and relational support.

Corollary Question Number 2

What are the themes that emerged from the experiences of returning students in terms of their determination to continue studying and how they adjust to social validation?

The researchers analyzed the narratives of returning students and identified 5 key themes related to their determination to continue studying and adjustment to social validation: (1) Empowered resilience in the face of Adversity; (2) Recognition-fueled perseverance; (3) Empowered Self-Validation; (4) Emotional Resilience and Confidence; and (5) Unwavering Self-Directed and Motivational Resilience. These themes capture the essence of returning students' experiences and highlight their growth, motivation, and resilience in the face of challenges

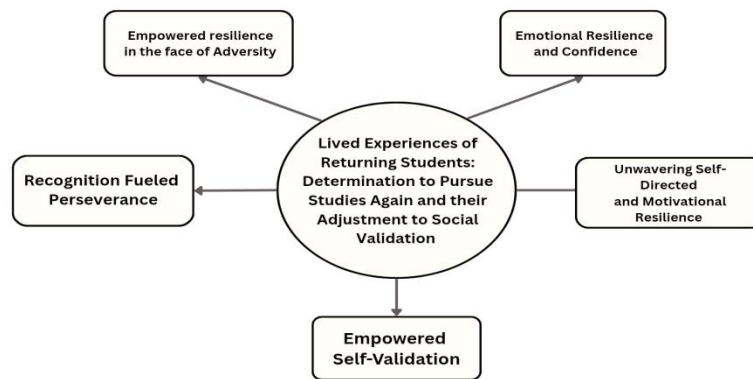


Figure 1. Themes of the Lived Experiences of Returning Students in terms of their Determination to Pursue Studies Again and the Adjustment to Social Validation

Theme A: Empowered Resilience in the Face of Adversity

In response to the first guide question, the theme Empowered Resilience in the Face of Adversity captures how returning students actively transform discouraging social perceptions into sources of motivation and persistence. This theme reflects a process in which individuals reinterpret age-related stigma and delayed educational trajectories as evidence of courage and determination rather than limitation. Instead of internalizing deficit-oriented views, returning students reconstruct these experiences as affirmations of their capability and commitment to lifelong learning. This is reflected in the statement of P2:

“Society often sees returning students as ‘too old’ or ‘late’. I see myself as brave for chasing a dream I once left behind. Education isn’t just for the young; it’s for anyone who wants to grow, and that belief helps me value myself.” – P2

Empowered resilience among returning students emerges from the active reinterpretation of social judgment into motivational capital, enabling individuals to sustain engagement despite structural and symbolic barriers. While prior studies emphasize persistence as a response to external challenges, the present findings suggest a more agentic process in which individuals redefine adversity as meaningful. [Chen \(2020\)](#) highlighted that learner-centered environments promote autonomy and empowerment; similarly, these findings indicate that empowerment is not only contextually supported but internally constructed through reframing. In addition, [Alabed \(2023\)](#) conceptualized persistence as goal-oriented endurance; however, the present analysis extends this by demonstrating that persistence is sustained through the revaluation of negative experiences as opportunities for growth.

Relative to this, Adult Learning Theory posits that learning becomes meaningful when aligned with personal goals. Self-Directed Learning Theory further explains how individuals exercise agency by regulating their responses to discouragement and maintaining commitment despite obstacles. Through the lens of Eccles and Wigfield’s Expectancy-Value Theory, persistence is reinforced as learners reconstruct both their belief in success and the perceived value of education, even in the presence of negative societal

expectations. Moreover, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides insight into how this resilience fulfills esteem and self-actualization needs, as individuals seek recognition, personal growth, and a sense of accomplishment. Collectively, these perspectives highlight that resilience is not merely a coping mechanism but a dynamic, meaning-making process shaped by the interaction of social context, personal agency, and motivational beliefs.

Theme B: Recognition-Fueled Perseverance

In response to the second guide question, the theme *Recognition-Fueled Perseverance* captures how acknowledgment from others functions as a critical driver of sustained academic engagement among returning students. Participants describe recognition not merely as encouragement but as a validating force that affirms their legitimacy within educational spaces often perceived as youth-centered. Such acknowledgment strengthens confidence, reinforces belonging, and motivates continued effort despite personal and academic challenges. This is reflected in the statement of P2:

"Whenever someone appreciates my effort or recognizes my perseverance, it gives me extra strength to continue. Those validations push me to aim higher, not just for myself but also to inspire others who think it's too late to study again." – P2

Recognition-fueled perseverance emerges as a relationally grounded process in which external affirmation reshapes learners' academic identity and sense of capability. While prior studies link recognition to increased motivation, the present findings suggest that its role extends beyond reinforcement toward identity reconstruction. [Team, D. R. B. \(2025\)](#) emphasized that acknowledgment enhances confidence and belonging; similarly, these findings indicate that recognition legitimizes the presence of returning students within academic environments. In addition, [Aeq-Prince \(2025\)](#) associated recognition with intrinsic motivation; however, the current analysis shows that such validation also compensates for initial self-doubt, particularly among individuals navigating nontraditional educational pathways. This suggests that recognition operates both as a motivational stimulus and as a mechanism for redefining self-perception.

From a theoretical standpoint, Eccles and Wigfield's Expectancy-Value Theory explains that recognition strengthens both expectancy for success and the perceived value of educational pursuits, thereby sustaining engagement. Adult Learning Theory highlights the importance of validating learners' experiences, suggesting that acknowledgment affirms their relevance and competence within the learning process. Self-Directed Learning Theory further illustrates how individuals internalize external validation to regulate motivation and persist independently. Moreover, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides insight into how recognition fulfills belongingness and esteem needs, which are essential for maintaining commitment and progressing toward self-actualization. Taken together, these perspectives position recognition as a multidimensional force that not only motivates persistence but also reshapes identity, reinforces purpose, and sustains long-term educational aspirations.

Theme C: Empowered Self-Validation

In response to the third guide question, the theme Empowered Self-Validation reflects how returning students construct confidence through reflective acknowledgment of their lived experiences. Rather than relying solely on external affirmation, participants

describe a process of internal evaluation in which maturity, resilience, and prior life roles are repositioned as academic strengths. This reorientation enables them to challenge deficit-based comparisons and reframe their educational trajectories as purposeful rather than delayed. This is illustrated in the statement of P3:

“I manage these feelings by reminding myself that everyone’s journey is different and my life experience is valuable.” – P3

Empowered self-validation emerges as a meaning-making process through which individuals transform perceived inadequacies into sources of competence and legitimacy. While existing studies emphasize the role of institutional and social support in fostering confidence, the present findings suggest that internal validation functions as a parallel and, at times, compensatory mechanism. The [Education Revolution Association \(2025\)](#) highlighted that self-belief enhances resilience and engagement; similarly, the findings indicate that confidence is sustained through deliberate self-recognition of strengths. In addition, [Centeio et al. \(2023\)](#) associated personal agency with academic success; however, the current analysis extends this by demonstrating how agency is enacted through reflective reinterpretation of life experiences. This suggests that confidence among returning students is not passively developed but actively constructed through ongoing self-appraisal and identity negotiation.

In connection with this, Adult Learning Theory explains how prior experiences serve as foundational resources for learning, enabling individuals to integrate personal histories into academic contexts. Self-Directed Learning Theory further clarifies how learners assume responsibility for regulating their motivation and redefining their self-concept in response to challenges. From the perspective of Eccles and Wigfield’s Expectancy-Value Theory, positive self-evaluation enhances both expectancy for success and the perceived value of educational goals, thereby sustaining persistence. Moreover, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs provides insight into how self-validation fulfills esteem needs, supporting the development of confidence and progression toward self-actualization. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that self-validation is not merely a psychological response but a critical mechanism through which returning students reconstruct identity, maintain motivation, and sustain long-term engagement in education.

Theme D: Emotional Resilience and Confidence

In response to the fourth guide question, the theme Emotional Resilience and Confidence reflects the gradual psychological reconfiguration of returning students as they navigate criticism, uncertainty, and earlier life decisions. Rather than perceiving these experiences as setbacks, participants reinterpret them as formative moments that strengthen purpose and academic direction. This process indicates that emotional resilience is not merely reactive coping but an active reconstruction of meaning, where past experiences are integrated into present motivation. This is reflected in the statement of P4:

“Some people might say, ‘Now that you’re older, that’s when you decide to study again?’ Well, that’s reality, and I made those mistakes. But that reality is my motivation—because I’m doing this for myself, not for anyone else.” – P4

Emotional resilience emerges as a form of identity reconstitution, where individuals reposition regret and external judgment into self-directed purpose. While prior literature conceptualizes resilience as adaptation to adversity, the present findings extend this view by illustrating its role in transforming self-perception and agency. [Smaliukienė et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasize resilience as a mechanism for psychological adjustment, while [Slack \(2025\)](#) links confidence to sustained engagement under pressure; however, the current analysis suggests that resilience also involves reinterpreting past mistakes as meaningful catalysts for educational re-engagement. Similarly, [Nelson et al. \(2023\)](#) associate resilience with self-awareness and self-compassion, yet the findings here indicate that these processes are deeply intertwined with identity renegotiation and purpose formation rather than isolated psychological traits.

In relation to this, Adult Learning Theory explains that learning becomes meaningful when it is connected to lived experience. Self-Directed Learning Theory further emphasizes the learner's active role in regulating emotions, setting goals, and sustaining persistence despite external judgment. Through the lens of Eccles and Wigfield's Expectancy-Value Theory, emotional resilience strengthens both expectancy for success and the perceived value of education, thereby reinforcing sustained engagement. Meanwhile, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides insight into how confidence and self-direction reflect the fulfillment of esteem needs, enabling individuals to progress toward self-actualization. Collectively, these frameworks suggest that emotional resilience is not merely a response to adversity but a dynamic process of meaning-making, where returning students reconstruct identity, strengthen agency, and sustain academic commitment through internally driven transformation.

Theme E: Unwavering Self-Directed Motivational Resilience

The fifth guide question revealed the theme Unwavering Self-Directed Motivational Resilience, which reflects the strong internal drive that enables returning students to remain committed to their educational goals. Participants emphasized that genuine motivation must originate from personal belief in one's ability to succeed. This intrinsic motivation allowed them to continue their studies despite competing responsibilities and external discouragement. Their persistence was supported by self-regulation, goal orientation, and personal discipline. One participant emphasized that external encouragement alone is insufficient without internal conviction.

"...even if you're surrounded by people who motivate you, if you don't believe in yourself that you can do it, it's pointless." – P7

Unwavering resilience emerges as a self-regulated process grounded in personal agency, where goal orientation, discipline, and reflective awareness sustain academic continuity. Motivation is not positioned as reactive to external validation but as actively maintained through internal commitment and cognitive regulation. [Tang and Zhu \(2023\)](#) identified persistence and emotional engagement as key determinants of academic outcomes, which aligns with the observed emphasis on sustained effort and participation. [Nazari et al. \(2025\)](#) highlighted self-compassion as a protective factor in academic resilience, corresponding with the capacity of learners to maintain psychological stability while managing academic demands. The present findings extend these perspectives by showing

that resilience is not only supported by adaptive traits but is continuously enacted through deliberate self-directed practices that prioritize internal motivation over external reinforcement.

This motivational pattern aligns with Self-Directed Learning Theory, where learners assume responsibility for planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning trajectory, reinforcing autonomy in academic engagement. Adult Learning Theory further explains this orientation by emphasizing that adult learners are motivated when learning is self-relevant and aligned with personally defined goals, particularly in contexts involving life responsibilities. Within Eccles and Wigfield's Expectancy-Value Theory, persistence is maintained through strengthened expectancy beliefs and sustained perception of task value derived from incremental progress and goal clarity. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs situates these experiences within the progression toward esteem and self-actualization, where internal validation becomes central to sustaining confidence, purpose, and long-term educational commitment.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the experiences of seven returning students from Tanauan Institute, focusing on their determination to continue their education and their experiences of social validation. The results of the interpretative phenomenological analysis showed that returning students largely rely on self-belief, intrinsic motivation, and family support to pursue their studies. The findings revealed five major themes: Empowered Resilience in the face of Adversity, Recognition-Fueled Perseverance, Empowered Self-Validation, Emotional Resilience and Confidence, and Unwavering Self-Directed and Motivational Resilience.

Participants also shared several strategies that helped them remain motivated despite discouraging comments or criticism. These strategies included practicing self-compassion, maintaining optimistic thinking, setting realistic goals, and surrounding themselves with supportive individuals. At the beginning of their academic journey, many participants reported feeling "too old" or "behind." However, these feelings gradually faded when they received respect and acceptance from their younger peers.

Over time, their discipline, maturity, and life experiences became sources of strength rather than insecurity. Their narratives highlighted how returning to school can be both a life-changing experience and an important academic decision that fosters resilience, personal growth, empowerment, and an evolving sense of self-worth. There are limited studies that explore how returning adult learners, particularly older students, maintain their determination despite social judgment, age-related pressure, and societal expectations.

This research is especially limited in the Philippine context. The findings of this study help address this gap by showing how social validation influences the determination of returning adult learners, particularly those who worry about being judged because of their age. Participants emphasized that simple acts of acceptance from classmates, encouragement from others, and strong self-belief played a significant role in maintaining their motivation, even when they felt older or left behind. Their experiences also revealed different ways of overcoming challenges, such as setting achievable goals, practicing self-kindness, and using their life experiences as motivation to stay focused.

Overall, the themes identified in this study provide a clearer understanding of the emotional experiences of returning students. These findings contribute to the limited research on adult learners and offer valuable insights into the resilience, determination, and personal

growth of individuals who choose to return to education, particularly within the Philippine context.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has a few limitations that should be kept in mind when looking at the results. First, the research only had seven participants. While this is normal for phenomenological studies, it still limits how much the findings can represent all returning students. Their experiences might be different from others who have different backgrounds, ages, or school experiences. Second, all the participants came from the same school, Tanauan Institute Incorporated. Because of this, the things they shared were influenced by the school's environment, culture, and support system. Returning students from other schools might have different challenges or forms of social validation. Third, the study depended only on what participants shared during the interviews. Since these are self-reported stories, there is a chance that they did not open up about everything, especially more personal or sensitive experiences. This means some parts of their experience with social validation or motivation may not have been fully captured. Lastly, the interviews were done within a short period of time. The study was not able to track long-term changes in the participants' motivation, confidence, or academic performance. Their experiences might change as they continue studying, but this research was not able to follow that progression.

For further research, it is recommended that future studies conduct a quantitative analysis with a larger, more diverse participant pool to identify the factors driving returning students' motivation to resume their studies, focusing on the impact of learning modality. Examining the relationship between status in life and academic goals among adult learners in various learning modalities (online, blended, face-to-face) can reveal effective support strategies. Moreover, researchers are allowed to identify patterns and relationships between self-determination and academic success, providing insights into the role of self-determination in returning students' academic achievement. By exploring these factors, future research can identify key predictors of student success and inform strategies to support returning students in achieving their academic goals. Additionally, examining the interplay between self-determination and academic success can reveal key insights into what fuels returning students' achievement.

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