

Original Article

Pathways to Self-Empowerment: The Lived Experiences of Adult Learners in Higher Education

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Abstract. Research on lifelong learning has largely focused on access and participation. However, it has given limited attention to how adult learners aged 40 and above experience self-empowerment while pursuing higher education. Guided by Knowles' Theory of Andragogy and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, this transcendental phenomenology study explored the lived experiences of five purposefully selected adult learners from an LGU-supported institution in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines. The study gathered data through in-depth interviews using Seidman's model of phenomenological interviewing. Data analysis using Creswell's modification of Moustakas' phenomenological method generated four key themes: Inspiration, Role Management, Academic Growth, and Resilience. These findings indicate that self-empowerment develops through purpose-driven motivation, effective management of multiple roles, integration of prior life experiences into learning, and resilience that promotes confidence, identity transformation, and lifelong learning. These experiences served as pathways to transforming participants' self-concept and strengthening their commitment to pursuing personal and professional goals. The study contributes to the limited literature on adult learners in LGU-supported higher education institutions in the country. It provides insights for developing more responsive and inclusive policies and practices.

Keywords: Adult learners; Higher education; Phenomenology; Self-empowerment; Transformative learning.

The landscape of higher education has evolved to accommodate more adult learners returning to formal education for personal enrichment, career advancement, and continuous learning. As higher education institutions expand access beyond traditional college-aged students, they provide learning opportunities for individuals at different stages of life to enhance their skills, improve employability, and achieve personal growth (Naveed et al., 2023; Christie et al., 2024). This trend reflects the growing importance of lifelong learning and underscores the valuable contributions of adult learners, whose diverse experiences, responsibilities, and motivations shape unique educational journeys (Cronholm, 2021).

The increasing participation of adult learners reflects broader global commitments to educational inclusion and equity. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize education as a fundamental driver of social and economic development, with SDG 4 promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all and SDG 8 emphasizing education's contribution to decent work and economic mobility (United Nations, 2015). In line with these goals, governments have expanded higher education through policies that reduce financial barriers and

improve educational access. In the Philippine context, LGUs have reinforced these goals by establishing community colleges that offer affordable tertiary education, particularly for underserved sectors.

Despite expanded access to education, adult learners still face significant challenges in balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. Time constraints, financial limitations, role conflict, and adjustment to academic demands after prolonged absences from formal education remain significant barriers that influence their persistence and academic success (Bellare et al., 2023). To address these diverse needs, higher education institutions have implemented learner-centered interventions, including flexible scheduling, academic advising, digital literacy training, and comprehensive learner support services (Benavot et al., 2022). While these initiatives have improved access and participation, meaningful educational experiences extend beyond institutional support. For many, re-entering formal education serves as a pathway to self-empowerment that strengthens confidence, reshapes identity, and promotes personal and professional development. However, the extent to which these policy-driven interventions translate into meaningful lived experiences within LGU-supported higher education institutions remains insufficiently understood, highlighting the need for further investigation.

The Local Government Unit (LGU) of Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, has expanded educational access by establishing an inclusive higher education institution that provides free tertiary education. Beyond increasing access, the institution represents a localized implementation of global commitments to lifelong learning by creating educational opportunities for underserved populations, particularly adult learners. As enrollment increases, institutions are also expected to strengthen learner support through flexible learning arrangements, accessible resources, remedial programs, and learner-centered services that address the diverse needs of adult learners. While inclusive education policies have improved access to higher education, access alone does not guarantee meaningful participation or success. Adult learners continue to experience financial, academic, and personal challenges that shape their educational journeys. Examining how LGU-supported higher education institutions respond to these realities is therefore essential to understanding the effectiveness of inclusive education policies in practice.

The growing presence of adult learners in higher education underscores the need for theoretical perspectives that explain both the process of learning and its transformative outcomes. To explain these experiences, this study draws on Knowles' Theory of Andragogy and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. Knowles' theory emphasizes that adult learners are self-directed and draw on accumulated personal, professional, and life experiences as valuable resources for learning. Their educational engagement is largely driven by practical needs, problem-solving, and the immediate application of knowledge to personal and professional contexts (Knowles et al., 2020). Building on this perspective, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory posits that adult learning extends beyond acquiring knowledge and skills, resulting in shifts in perspectives, identities, and future actions. Together, these theories underpin the examination of self-empowerment among adult learners in a local government unit-supported higher education institution.

Existing Philippine studies have examined various aspects of adult learners' experiences in higher education. Carlos (2023), for instance, investigated the implementation of adult education in Philippine higher education institutions, focusing on program objectives, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and institutional support. Pizarro and Bansig (2021) explored the experiences and challenges of adult learners in graduate education in Northern Philippines. Despite these contributions, limited empirical evidence specifically examines the lived experiences of adult learners aged 40 and older in free, government-funded, LGU-led higher education institutions in the Philippines. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by exploring their lived experiences and identifying interventions that may support their educational participation, persistence, and advancement.

Drawing on Andragogy and Transformative Learning Theory, this study seeks to explore how adult learners navigate higher education, balance multiple responsibilities, and develop self-empowerment. The findings are expected to contribute to improving learner-centered policies and support mechanisms in LGU-supported higher education institutions.

Specifically, the study aims to explore the lived experiences of adult learners in a local government-managed higher education institution in Cagayan de Oro. By analyzing these interactions, the research intends to provide perspectives that may improve adult learners' academic journeys and lead the development of flexible learning engagements and intervention programs. The findings are intended to supplement the development of

enrichment courses and customized learning activities that address their learning needs. Beyond helping adult learners complete their degrees, the study also seeks to advance quality education and reduce social inequalities.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Mezirow's transformative learning theory and andragogy frameworks in extrapolating the experiences of adult learners at an LGU-led higher education institution in Cagayan de Oro City.

From the perspective of Jack Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, which emphasizes critical reflection and viewpoint transformation as a means of enhancing andragogy, he asserts that as people reflect on their experiences, a fundamental change in their perception of the world and themselves occurs. This is known as transformative learning. Adult learners are significantly affected by this transformational process because they often return to school after gaining substantial life experience. They often undergo a profound personal transformation as they integrate new information with preexisting beliefs and values.

In the principles of andragogy by Malcolm Knowles, the study aims to provide a foundation for understanding the unique needs and characteristics of adult learners. According to andragogy, people are independent learners who incorporate real-world experiences into their education and use these experiences as a vital resource for creating new knowledge. Unlike younger students, adult learners are driven by internal motives, including job success, personal development, and a desire for lifelong learning (Knowles et al., 2015).

As such, the study's andragogical framework highlights the difficulties adult learners face at the institution funded by the local government of Cagayan de Oro City, such as juggling work and personal and academic obligations. Knowles further asserts that adult learners benefit from learning environments open to participation, problem-centered, and matched with their innate motivations. This understanding supports the idea that these learners deserve more autonomy and assistance in pursuing their education.

Knowles' Theory of Andragogy and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory offer complementary perspectives on adult learning. Andragogy describes how adults learn through self-direction, experience, and practical application, whereas Transformative Learning Theory explains how critical reflection can lead to changes in perspectives, identity, and future actions. Together, these theories provide an integrated theoretical foundation by explaining how adults learn and the transformative changes learning can produce.

Using these frameworks, the study explores the lived experiences of adult learners aged 40 and above. It examines how participation in a government-supported higher education institution in Cagayan de Oro City contributes to their self-empowerment, personal transformation, and educational persistence. By integrating the principles of transformative learning and andragogy, the study provides valuable insights into how adult learners navigate their academic journeys while balancing various responsibilities. These principles help develop more flexible and motivating teaching strategies by providing an organized framework for examining adult learners' needs, motivations, and changes. This research further supports the institution's goal of offering accessible, learner-centered education that empowers individuals to succeed personally and professionally.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses transcendental phenomenology as its research design, following the paradigm proposed by Moustakas (1994). By focusing on participants' subjective accounts, transcendental phenomenology aims to uncover and characterize the essence of lived experiences without researcher bias or interpretation (Creswell, 2013). This methodology suits the study because it explores the individual experiences of adult learners in a higher education institution in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, that receives funding from the Local Government Units (LGUs). Using this approach, the study aims to understand the insights participants attribute to their experiences as adult learners, with special attention to the transformative learning processes they undergo.

The selection of transcendental phenomenology is consistent with the study's theoretical framework. Knowles' Theory of Andragogy recognizes that adult learners draw upon their rich personal and professional experiences as central resources for learning, while Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory explains how critical reflection on these experiences can transform perspectives, beliefs, and self-understanding. By focusing on participants'

descriptions of their experiences while applying phenomenological bracketing (epoché), transcendental phenomenology offers an appropriate approach for exploring how adult learners make meaning of their educational journeys and develop self-empowerment.

Participants of the Study

Using purposeful sampling for a qualitative research design, this study intentionally selected five adult students from a Cagayan de Oro City LGU-run higher education institution, following Moustakas' recommendation for a phenomenological investigation and Creswell and Plano Clark's (2011) deliberate sampling approach, to ensure participants' relevance to the study's topic. The researchers purposefully selected five (5) participants based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. To be eligible, participants had to be adult learners aged 40 years and above, enrolled in LGU-supported higher education during the study, actively balancing academic, personal, and/or professional responsibilities, and willing to participate voluntarily. We excluded individuals who were below 40 years of age, were not enrolled during the data collection period, or declined to participate or provide informed consent. Including five participants aligns with the principles of transcendental phenomenology, which prioritizes depth of understanding over sample size. Moustakas (1994) explained that phenomenological research seeks to uncover the essence of a shared phenomenon rather than achieve statistical representation. Accordingly, participants were purposefully selected based on their direct experience and their capacity to offer rich, reflective narratives.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The study involved adult learners who signed a consent form for audio-recorded interviews. Participants were informed about the study and assured that their answers would be kept private. The interview procedure adhered to ethical standards to ensure fair treatment and avoid undue exposure. This phenomenological interview utilized Seidman's (2006) framework. An in-depth, semi-structured interview was used to reconstruct participants' experiences while allowing them to express their thoughts in their own words. Consistent with Seidman's (2006) phenomenological interviewing approach, probing and follow-up questions clarified participants' responses, explored emerging ideas, and encouraged deeper reflection without imposing predetermined interpretations. This iterative process facilitated deeper reflection while ensuring that participants' narratives remained authentic and participant-driven.

The study involved five (5) adult learners who participated in in-depth phenomenological interviews between September and October 2024. The interviews focused on their backgrounds and reasons for participating in a government-funded higher education program, how they managed their educational path while juggling personal, professional, and academic obligations, and how their experiences shaped their views on self-empowerment, lifelong learning, and future goals. This approach enabled the researchers to understand better how adult learners interpreted their lived experiences and navigated higher education. The semi-structured interview guide comprised broad, open-ended questions designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences as adult learners. The questions explored four (4) key areas: (1) participants' motivations for returning to higher education, (2) their experiences in managing academic, personal, and professional responsibilities, (3) the learning strategies and resources they used to overcome challenges, and (4) the influence of these experiences on their perspectives, self-concept, and future aspirations.

Before data collection, three (3) qualitative research experts who had published phenomenological studies in peer-reviewed journals and whose scholarly works are indexed in Google Scholar validated the interview guide. Following expert validation, a pilot interview was conducted with one adult learner who met the inclusion criteria but was not included in the actual study. The pilot interview assessed the clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility of the interview questions. Based on the feedback from validators and the pilot participant, minor revisions were made to improve the wording and sequencing of the interview guide before its final administration. The interview guide drew on Knowles' Theory of Andragogy, which emphasizes self-directed learning and the value of prior experiences as learning resources, and on Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, which guided questions exploring participants' critical reflection, shifts in perspective, and experiences of personal transformation.

The interview transcripts were analyzed manually using Creswell's (2007) modification of Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach. Significant statements were identified through horizontalization, coded into meaning units, which were clustered into broader themes representing common patterns across participants. Subsequently, textural descriptions described what participants experienced, while structural

descriptions explained how those experiences occurred within their social and educational contexts. The textural and structural descriptions were synthesized to construct the essence of the phenomenon, revealing how adult learners experienced self-empowerment while navigating higher education. The study employed member checking, peer debriefing, and phenomenological bracketing throughout the analytic process.

The emergent themes were interpreted using Knowles' Theory of Andragogy to explain participants' motivations, self-directed learning, and use of prior experiences, while Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory informed the interpretation of critical reflection, perspective transformation, self-empowerment, and personal growth.

Trustworthiness

Adult learners' experiences are highly individual and context-dependent, making techniques like credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability crucial for research trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was established through member checking, in which all five participants received copies of their interview transcripts to verify the accuracy of their responses and confirm that their lived experiences were faithfully represented. The researchers incorporated minor participant-suggested revisions into the final transcripts. In addition, three qualitative research experts conducted peer debriefing to review the coding procedures, thematic development, and interpretation of findings. The researchers established dependability by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding procedures, theme development, and revisions throughout the research process. Confirmability was ensured through phenomenological bracketing, or epoché, in which the researchers set aside their personal assumptions and prior experiences throughout the research process to ensure the findings were grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than the researchers' interpretations. Transferability was strengthened by providing detailed contextual descriptions of the participants, research setting, and findings, enabling readers to assess the findings' relevance to comparable settings.

Ethical Considerations

At the time of the study, the institution did not have an established Research Ethics Committee (REC). Nevertheless, the study followed ethical principles. Accordingly, this study followed the Belmont Report's ethical guidelines. These guidelines emphasize respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, with participants expressing their autonomy and right to withdraw at any time. The study implemented confidentiality safeguards to protect privacy and dignity and uphold participants' rights and participation. The study aims to minimize harm and maximize benefits for adult learners, who may be more susceptible to time constraints or stress due to multiple commitments. Interviewers schedule interviews every three days to prevent overburden. The study's focus on enhancing adult education benefits participants and the adult learning community by guiding specialized interventions and support networks. It ensures fair inclusion of adult learners aged 40 and above, so they are not exploited or excluded because of their age, socioeconomic background, or vulnerabilities. Thus, the present study adheres to ethical research procedures, upholds the Belmont Report's principles, and protects participants' rights and welfare, thereby promoting justice and equality.

Personal Bracketing

Given the researchers' experiences as educators who have also experienced being adult learners through their master's and doctorate studies, personal bracketing was employed to recognize and manage assumptions arising from their own educational experiences. While these shared experiences may have enhanced the researchers' understanding of adult learners' challenges, responsibilities, and motivations, they could also influence the interpretation of participants' narratives. Thus, the researchers consciously reflected on and set aside their preconceptions throughout data collection, analysis, and interpretation, allowing the participants' own perspectives and meanings to guide the findings. Consistent with the principles of andragogy, this approach respected adult learners as self-directed individuals whose experiences and interpretations may differ from those of the researchers.

Results and Discussion

Following the phenomenological interviews of Irving Seidman's process, four themes emerged. These are inspiration, role management, academic growth, and resilience. For confidentiality purposes, participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2, P3), which are used throughout the Results and Discussion. Table 1 shows the statements extracted from adult learners' exemplars.

Table 1. Adult Learners' Experiences in an LGU-led Higher Education Institution in Cagayan de Oro City

Themes	Subthemes	Codes	Supporting Statements
Theme 1: Inspiration	Sources of Inspiration	- Motivation from family - Personal aspirations - Role modeling for younger generation - Using education for community service	Participant 1: "Ang akong mga anak mao ang akong inspirasyon kay gusto nako nga makita nila nga bisan unsa ka-lisod, kinahanglan magpadayon." (<i>My children are my inspiration because I want them to see that no matter how difficult life gets, we must keep going.</i>) P1, T1, LN 29-30
	Generational Aspirations	- Breaking generational cycles - Inspiring future generations	Participant 2: "Dili nako gusto nga maka-experience ang akong mga anak og struggles sama sa akong ." (<i>I don't want my children to experience the struggles I went through</i>) P2, T3, LN 306-307
Theme 2: Role Management	Balancing Responsibilities	- Balancing multiple roles - Time prioritization strategies - Time management tools	Participant 1: "Lisod gyud siya usahay, labi na kung naa koy mga anak nga kinahanglan nako atimanon." (<i>It is really tough sometimes, especially when I have children who need my attention and care.</i>) P1, T2, LN 47-48
	Role Negotiation	- Delegating household responsibilities - Conflict management	Participant 3: "Kami sa among pamilya, kasabot ra gyud sila sa akong sitwasyon, ug naa man pud mi group chat." (<i>My family is supportive, and they understand what I am going through. We communicate through a group chat.</i>) P3, T5, LN 552-553
Theme 3: Academic Growth	Learning Integration	- Use of prior experiences - Learning through group projects - Building professional credentials - Struggles with academic adjustments	Participant 4: "Kanang, bahalag lisod, basta kay kung dili masabtan, dili undangan hangtud masabtan ang mga lessons." (<i>Even if it's difficult, I won't stop until I understand the lessons</i>) (P4, T4, LN 1960-1961).
	Academic Strategies	- Focused study techniques - Balancing extracurricular activities	Participant 4: "Basta kung naa koy bakante, magbasa jud ko, especially sa mga subject na naay taas kaayo na mga basahon. Pero magbasa ra jud ko, pero dili kaayo ko ga memorize." (<i>Whenever I have free time, I read, especially for subjects with long readings. I don't memorize much, but I read.</i>) (P4, T3, LN 1934 - 1935).
Theme 4: Resilience	Perseverance	- Overcoming obstacles - Sacrifices for education - Emotional stress in balancing roles	Participant 2: "Bisan unsa ka-lisod, kinahanglan jud nako makahuman para sa akong kaugmaon." (<i>No matter how hard it gets, I must finish my studies for the sake of my future.</i>) P1, T1, LN 30
	Transformation	- Increased confidence - Impact of education on identity - Improved communication skills - Adaptability to challenges	Participant 1: "Sa una, wala koy self-confidence, pero karon mas confident nako." (<i>Before, I lacked self-confidence, but now I have become more confident.</i>) P1, T2, LN 75

Legend: P – participant; T – transcript; LN – lines

Theme 1: Inspiration (Sources of Inspiration, Generational Aspirations)

The theme of Inspiration highlights how adult learners cultivate self-empowerment through the motivations that sustain their pursuit of higher education despite personal, professional, and academic challenges. Their narratives reveal how family, aspirations, and the desire to inspire future generations serve as powerful sources of strength that foster perseverance, personal growth, and transformative learning.

Sources of Inspiration

Sources of Inspiration refer to the emotional and motivational factors driving adult learners to pursue education. These sources include family, community service, or personal aspirations, and the desire to become role models for future generations. Studies suggest that adult learners are propelled by both intrinsic motivation and external responsibilities, especially the commitment to serve as role models and support their familial expectations (Hamzah et al., 2022; Hachem, 2023). Participant 1 stated, "Ang akong mga anak mao ang akong inspirasyon kay gusto nako nga makita nila nga bisan unsa ka-lisod, kinahanglan magpadayon" [My children are my inspiration because I want them to see that no matter how difficult life gets, we must keep going.] (P1, T1, LN 29-30), demonstrating how children can serve as an enduring source of motivation. Similarly, Participants 3 and 4 shared, "Gusto nako ipakita sa akong mga pag-umangkon nga importante ang edukasyon" [I want to show my nieces and nephews that education is important.] (P3, T12, LN 864-865), underscoring the importance of personal aspirations and setting an example for the younger generation. "Gusto ko degree holder ko ug usa ko gusto ko mainspire akong anak na mieskwela ko," [I want to be a degree holder, and one of the reasons is that I want to inspire my child by pursuing my education.] (P4, T1, 1839-1840).

These narratives illustrate that inspiration became the catalyst for participants' self-empowerment. Their desire to improve their families' lives gave their educational experiences deeper meaning, helping them build confidence, responsibility, and belief in their own capabilities. This transformation redefined their identities as they moved beyond viewing themselves as adult learners and came to see themselves as empowered individuals capable of shaping their futures, uplifting their families, and contributing meaningfully to their communities.

Emerging literature emphasizes that adult learners' motivation is constructed at the intersection of individual aspirations and social obligations, which guided their decision to return to education (Hamzah et al., 2023). Participant 5 narrated how her father's expectations influenced her educational journey: "Nagkuha ko ug education kay I don't have a choice man gud that time nga gipa-eskwela ko sa akong papa... gusto siya nga magteach jud ko and I don't like it" [I took up education because I didn't really have a choice at that time when my father sent me to school... he wanted me to become a teacher, but I didn't like it.] (P5, T1, LN 2227, 2230). Participant 5's lived experience shows that self-empowerment is not an immediate outcome but a gradual process of redefining personal meaning. What began as an obligation to meet family expectations evolved into a personally meaningful pursuit of education. This transformation empowered participant 5 to move beyond external obligations, cultivating a stronger sense of agency and reshaping his identity as someone who actively chose education as a means of personal growth and self-determination.

Moreover, participants also identified peers as important sources of inspiration. Peers are people with whom an individual spends time and feels connected. Allen (2024) argued that strong peer relationships are essential for growth and that risk-taking and peer influence have significant adaptive elements that are often underrecognized. Observing the achievements of classmates and colleagues encouraged participants 3 and 4 to reflect on their own educational journeys and aspirations. Participant 3 mentioned that his peers are already professionals. Though he is kind of successful in his career without a degree, he was often asked what his degree is: "Ako man gyung mga batch before are already professionals, even though matawag gihapon nako akong self as a professional host or professional instructor. Pero kulang gyud sya kay ngano, professional lagi ka ana pero pangutana unsa na course imuhang gi graduatetan" [My former batchmates are already professionals, even though I can still call myself a professional host or professional instructor. But there's still something missing. Why? Because even if you are called a professional in that field, people will still ask what course you graduated from.] (P3, T9, LN 721-724). Likewise, participant 4 shared that discussions among friends about academic credentials motivated him to complete his degree: "Kana man gud usahay, sa mga barkada, mag introduce na kani siya, teacher ni siya, unya ako wala ko makahuman, walay credentials, so makapaningkamot jud ka na mahuman" [Sometimes, among friends, when someone is introduced, they'll say, "This person is a teacher," but for me, I didn't finish school and have no credentials. That's why you feel the need to work hard to finish your studies.] (P4, T7, LN 2070-2072),

sharing that this is one of his motivations to succeed. His experience reflects the motivating influence of peers, echoing Alvarez et al.'s (2024) finding that peer influence significantly affects students' motivation.

The participants experienced peer influence as a source of self-empowerment, transforming self-doubt into confidence and determination. Through this experience, they redefined themselves as capable learners who could shape their own futures through education.

Generational Aspirations

Generational Aspirations reflect the adult learners' desire to improve not only their circumstances but also the lives of future generations by breaking cycles of hardship and promoting education as a value. Moss-Pech et al. (2021) emphasized that adult education serves as a key pathway for social mobility. Participant 2 stated, "Dili nako gusto nga maka-experience ang akong mga anak og struggles sama sa akong kasinatian" [I don't want my children to experience the struggles I went through.] (P2, T3, LN 306-307), emphasizing her determination to break generational cycles of hardship. For participant 2, education became more than a way to secure her children's future; it became a transformative experience that empowered her to reshape her family's future. This strengthened her sense of purpose and redefined her identity as an individual capable of creating lasting change.

Sagna and Vaccaro (2022) found that adult learners often perceive education as a pathway to inspire others, particularly their children, to strive for better futures. This resonates with Participant 5's statement: "Feeling nako naa koy bright future na, nga mo-grow na diay ko as a person... Makashare pud ko sa lain nga importante jud kaayo ang education" [I feel like I have a bright future ahead, that I am growing as a person... I can also share with others how important education really is.] (P5, T11, LN 2674-2680). For participant 5, education was experienced as a pathway to personal transformation rather than simply academic achievement. This meaning cultivated self-empowerment by affirming the participant's capacity for growth and reshaping this identity from an adult learner into an advocate for lifelong learning who inspired others to believe that change is always possible.

Moreover, Lieu (2023) explains that adult learners use education to cultivate resilience, perseverance, and ambition within their families and communities. Participant 3 expressed that "Kinahanglan nga makit-an nila nga maayo gyud ang pag-eskwela, para sa ilang kaugmaon, mas nindot ilang pag-amos sa kaugmaon" [They need to see that education is really important for their future, so they can have a better life ahead.] (P3, T2, LN 424-425), showing her perseverance to inspire the next generation of his family to treat education as the transformative pathway to a brighter future. The lived experience of participant 3 reveals that self-empowerment emerged through the desire to influence future generations. Education transformed the participant's identity from an individual learner into a role model committed to creating opportunities and hope for others.

Theme 2: Role Management (Balancing Responsibilities, Role Negotiation)

Role management captures adult learners' lived experiences as they navigate the complex demands of higher education while fulfilling a variety of responsibilities, such as being parents, partners, spouses, employees, and members of their families and communities. Rather than merely balancing multiple roles, participants experienced role management as a continuous process of negotiating priorities, making personal sacrifices, and adapting to competing responsibilities. These experiences reveal that self-empowerment emerged through their ability to exercise personal agency, make intentional decisions, and remain committed to their educational goals despite the pressures of everyday life. As participants navigated these competing roles, they built confidence in their ability to overcome challenges, strengthening their resilience and reshaping how they saw themselves as learners, family members, and professionals.

Balancing Responsibilities

Balancing responsibilities reflects the lived experience of adult learners as they continuously negotiated their roles as students, parents, employees, and family members while pursuing higher education. Managing multiple responsibilities became more than a daily challenge; it fostered resilience and self-empowerment. Through this experience, participants recognized their ability to persevere despite adversity.

Šestanović et al. (2021) and Nieuwoudt et al. (2023) opined that adult learners frequently balance multiple responsibilities, including work, family, and academic commitments, making effective time management and prioritization essential for sustaining their studies. Participant 1 described the difficulty of balancing family and academic responsibilities by stating, "Lisod gyud siya usahay, labi na kung naa koy mga anak nga kinahanglan

nako atimanon," [It's really difficult at times, especially when I have children who need my attention and care.] (P1, T2, LN 47-48). Participant 5 shared the financial sacrifices brought about by family emergencies: "Kana lang jung sometimes nga naay mga emergencies pareha anang magkasakit akong anak... tanan nakong tinago-an naprenda na" [It's those times, like when there are emergencies such as my child getting sick... all my savings have already been pawned.] (P5, T1, LN 2234-2236), further highlighting the sacrifices adult learners make to sustain their studies. Participant 3 likewise expressed the emotional burden of fulfilling both work and academic responsibilities: "Pressured gyud kaayo, to be honest. Dili ko kabalo unsa akong una-unahon kay mag-lisod gyud ko og balance" [I feel extremely pressured, to be honest. I don't know what to prioritize because I'm struggling to balance everything.] (P3, T7, LN 643-644).

All these experiences reveal that balancing responsibilities was not merely a matter of managing time but of redefining personal priorities and discovering inner strength. Although participants faced physical, financial, and emotional challenges, these experiences strengthened their sense of self-empowerment. They came to recognize themselves as capable of adapting, making purposeful choices, and persevering toward their educational aspirations.

The participants also demonstrated that balancing responsibilities required significant adjustments to their daily lives. Participant 4 mentioned that he shifted from full-time employment to part-time work to accommodate his academic responsibilities: "Adjust jud kay need naay time sa pagstudy, pagbuhat ug report. Naghectic jud ang time. Dako kaayo na factor ang oras jud. Ga-sideline nalang ko karun kay dili najud kaya i-full time na trabaho" [I really need to adjust because I need time for studying and doing reports. My schedule is really hectic. Time is a huge factor. I'm just doing side jobs now because I can't handle a full-time job anymore.] (P4, T7, LN 2112 - 2114). Participant 5 similarly emphasized that, "Dako kaayo na factor ang oras jud," [Time is a huge factor.] (P5, T7, LN 2113). When asked how they managed their multiple roles, Participant 2 and 1 highlighted the importance of time management and planning, "Kinahanglan nga naa jud ang time management," [Time management is really needed.] (P2, T3, LN 314-315) and "Kinahanglan nako magplano og maayo para ma-balanse nako ang tanan" [I need to plan well so I can balance everything] (P1, T2, LN 51-52). Dorimé-Williams and Plancarte (2022) underscore the value of coping strategies, such as effective scheduling and time management, to address these challenges. He also further emphasizes the need to balance multiple roles to build resilience to both academic and life demands.

For the participants, these adjustments reflected self-empowerment rather than mere coping mechanisms. By reorganizing their priorities and making sacrifices, they gained greater control over their lives and redefined themselves as resilient individuals who could shape their educational and life trajectories.

Role Negotiation

Role Negotiation refers to the process through which adult learners restructured responsibilities, communicated expectations, and sought family support to manage the demands of higher education alongside their personal and professional obligations. For them, role negotiation became a meaningful collaborative experience that strengthened their sense of agency. Through shared responsibilities, they sustained both their educational aspirations and family relationships. Evidence suggests that collaborative support from family and social networks helps adult learners manage responsibilities, lessen strain, and continue their studies (Flanagan-Bórquez & Soriano, 2024; Broek et al., 2024).

Participant 4 shared that her family members help her out by taking on some of her responsibilities when she becomes overburdened with schoolwork, "Supportive raman pud akong bana ug mga anak" [My husband and children are very supportive of me as well] (P4, T3, LN 1913). Participant 3 stated that he intentionally kept his family members informed of his academic responsibilities to minimize misunderstandings: "Kami sa among pamilya, kasabot ra gyud sila sa akong sitwasyon, ug naa man pud mi group chat" [My family is supportive, and they understand what I'm going through. We communicate through a group chat.] (P3, T5, LN 552-553).

Participant 3 further emphasized the importance of open communication in negotiating household responsibilities: "Ginasultian ra naku akong family sa mga nabilin naku sa balay na bulohaton, so well-communicated ra mi ug well-informed sila sa tanan" [I simply informed my family about the tasks I left at home, so we have good communication and they are aware of everything.] (P3, T5, LN 553-554). These experiences demonstrate that family support created an environment where participants could continue their education while

fulfilling their responsibilities. Previous studies likewise recognize that emotional and practical support from family members alleviates stress and enables adult learners to remain engaged in their studies (Sagna & Vaccaro, 2023; Samra et al., 2021). Similarly, Bueno et al. (2022) emphasized that ongoing family communication, encouragement, and practical support foster an environment in which learners can successfully balance academic and personal responsibilities.

Beyond receiving practical assistance, participants experienced role negotiation as an expression of self-empowerment. By openly communicating their needs, seeking support, and renegotiating family responsibilities, participants exercised personal agency rather than silently carrying the burden of multiple roles.

Theme 3: Academic Growth (Learning Integration, Academic Strategies)

Academic growth reflects adult learners' lived experiences as they transformed prior knowledge, life experiences, and learning strategies into meaningful educational achievements. For participants, academic growth meant more than acquiring knowledge; it became a process of self-empowerment through which they recognized the value of their experiences, strengthened their confidence, and discovered their capacity to succeed despite academic and personal challenges.

Learning Integration

Learning Integration refers to how adult learners drew upon their prior life, work, and personal experiences to construct meaning from new academic learning. Knowles et al. (2020) assert that adult learners bring valuable life experiences to the classroom, enriching their learning processes. The field of adult education recognizes that learners from their life and professional experiences facilitate deeper comprehension of academic content (Boden et al., 2022).

Participant 1 noted, "Ang akong mga kasinatian sa una makatabang kaayo nako sa mga projects ug grupo nga mga activities sa klase," [My past experiences are very helpful for projects and group activities in class] (P1, T2, LN 63-65). A similar comment was expressed by participant 2: "Labi na ang akong mga kasinatian sa trabaho, makatabang ug relate sa mga lessons sa klase," [Especially my work experiences, they help me relate to the lessons in class] (P3, T4, LN 349-350). These prior experiences enabled participants to connect classroom learning with the realities of their professional and personal lives, making academic concepts more meaningful and relevant.

The lived experiences of the participants reveal that learning integration fostered self-empowerment by enabling them to recognize their prior life and work experiences as valuable assets. By drawing meaning from their life and work experiences, they developed greater confidence in their ability to understand academic concepts and actively contribute to classroom learning. This experience transformed their identities from adult learners by age or interrupted education into capable individuals whose lived experiences enriched their educational journey.

For Participant 4, she described how her work ethic shaped her approach to learning, "Sa una, bahalag dugay makauli basta makahuman sa trabaho" [Before, I would stay late at work just to finish tasks] (P4, T4, LN 1957-1958), demonstrating her dedication to completing tasks thoroughly. She applied the same strategy in her studies; she noted, "Kanang, bahalag lisod, basta kay kung dili masabtan, dili undangan hangtud masabtan ang mga lessons", [Even if it's difficult, I won't stop until I understand the lessons] (P4, T4, LN 1960-1961). Her determination to fully understand academic material, regardless of difficulty, mirrors the perseverance she developed in her previous workplace. Participant 5 added that his previous experience taught him the ability to adjust and properly deal well with people who have attitude problems, "Mao nang pag naay mga dili kaayo siya nice nga mga behavior, makuha ra nako, maadapt ra nako bah, maadjust nako dayon" [When dealing with people with difficult attitudes, I can adjust and adapt easily] (P5, T3, LN 2331-2332). This adaptability is evident in the classroom, where he interacts with peers and instructors of varying personalities. He noted that he is no longer offended, a change he attributes to the patience cultivated from his previous work.

For these participants, integrating prior experiences into their academic learning represented more than an effective learning strategy. It reflected a process of validating the knowledge and skills they had accumulated through years of work, family, and personal experiences. The discipline, perseverance, and interpersonal abilities they developed outside the classroom became meaningful academic resources that enabled them to construct new knowledge while recognizing the value of their lived experiences. In this sense, learning integration fostered self-empowerment by affirming that meaningful learning extends beyond formal education and is continuously

shaped by life itself.

This finding supports previous studies emphasizing that adult learners bridge theoretical knowledge with real-world application through their accumulated experiences (Pearce, 2023; Klein-Collins & Shafenberg, 2023). More importantly, participants' narratives reveal that learning integration became a transformative journey that reshaped their sense of self.

Academic Strategies

Academic Strategies are deliberate approaches adult learners adopted to sustain their learning while navigating the demands of higher education. These strategies included focused study techniques, effective prioritization, and the flexible use of available learning resources. Madu and Okechukwu (2023) explained that adult learners employ goal-oriented strategies to optimize learning and respond effectively to academic demands.

Participants described various strategies that support their academic success. Participant 1 emphasized taking detailed notes to aid memory: "Nagtake note ko ug dali ra nako marecall basta mag-discuss ang teacher," [I take notes, which helps me recall lessons when the teacher discusses them] (P1, T4, LN 156-157). This strategy reflects a study technique that allows the participant to recall discussions and reinforce learning. Participant 3 acknowledged the challenges posed by poor memory and difficulty focusing, which led to difficulties in remembering specific words or sentences: "Tungod kay dili maayo akong memorya, dili ko ka-focus. Dili ko mahinumduman ang mga specific nga words or sentences" [Because my memory isn't good, I can't focus and often forget specific words or sentences] (P3, T15, LN 1013-1014). Despite these difficulties, the participants continued to develop strategies that enabled sustained engagement with academic tasks.

Participant 4 engaged in frequent reading, particularly in subjects with extensive reading requirements, as her strategy. She noted, "Basta kung naa koy bakante, magbasa jud ko, especially sa mga subject na naay taas kaayo na mga basahon. Pero magbasa ra jud ko, pero dili kaayo ko ga memorize" [Whenever I have free time, I read, especially for subjects with long readings. I don't memorize much, but I read] (P4, T3, LN 1934 - 1935). Participant 4 also demonstrated proactive learning behavior such as reviewing returned questionnaires; she stated "Kanang mga questionnaire na gibalik sa amo, review-hon jud nako" [I always review the questionnaires returned to us] (P4, T4, LN 1966). Participant 4 described his approach to learning when faced with resource constraints, such as a shortage of photocopy materials. He typically chose to study on his cellphone in these situations, saying, "Kung walay pang photocopy, mag study rajud kos cellphone" [If I can't afford photocopies, I just study on my phone] (P4, T7, LN 2103). These learning strategies allow the adult learners to fulfill their responsibilities as students.

The lived experiences of the participants reveal that academic strategies became expressions of self-empowerment through intentional and self-directed learning. Rather than letting age, limited resources, or learning difficulties hinder their progress, they actively identified strategies that matched their individual needs and circumstances. As a result, these experiences empowered them to take ownership of their learning.

Moreover, balancing academics and personal commitments is crucial for success. Participant 3 shared: "I said that my priority is the studies... I will focus more on my studies gyud kay karun more critical na ang akong studies" [I said that my priority is my studies... I will focus more on my studies now because they're more critical] (P3, T10, LN 783-786). He further added, "Naay mga instance nga dili malikayan nga mag-conflict, labi na kung naa koy assignments o quizzes nga kinahanglan buhaton alang sa eskwela. Usahay stock knowledge ra akong magamit, pero kung naa ko'y oras mag-advance study, ma-prioritize ra gihapon nako ang pamilya ug trabaho human sa mga academic requirements" [There are instances when conflicts arise, especially with assignments or quizzes. Sometimes I rely on stock knowledge, but if I have time for advanced study, I still manage to prioritize family and work after academic requirements] (P3, T14, LN 971-975). By focusing on academic responsibilities, Participant 3 ensured that the required coursework was completed. This form of prioritization illustrates a strategic time management approach in which tasks are systematically arranged based on urgency and importance (Hemmler & Ifenthaler, 2024).

For the participants, prioritizing academic responsibilities reflected a conscious commitment to their educational aspirations despite competing demands. Their decisions to reorganize schedules, maximize limited resources, and remain disciplined demonstrated a growing capacity for self-regulation and purposeful learning. This experience became a process of self-empowerment as they recognized their progress not on ideal circumstances but on their

ability to make intentional choices and remain steadfast in pursuing their aspirations.

Theme 4: Resilience (Perseverance, Transformation)

Resilience captures adult learners' lived experiences as they persevered through personal, academic, and professional challenges while pursuing higher education. For them, resilience represented a process of self-empowerment through which adversity became an opportunity for growth. The subthemes of perseverance and transformation illustrate how they sustained their educational aspirations despite life's demands and gradually experienced personal growth that shaped how they viewed themselves and their future.

Perseverance

Perseverance is adult learners' steadfast commitment to continue their educational journey despite challenges and obstacles. Steel et al. (2024) highlight that perseverance is a critical trait among adult learners, as it reflects their determination to achieve personal, professional, and societal goals. Participant 1 exemplified this resilience when she stated, "Bisan unsa ka-lisod, kinahanglan jud nako makahuman para sa akong kaugmaon." [No matter how hard it gets, I must finish my studies for the sake of my future] (P1, T1, LN 30). This emphasizes her unwavering resolve to complete her education. Participant 4 emphasized the need to maintain perseverance, "Maningkamot lang jud mo. Dapat dili mawad-an ug pag-asa" [You just have to strive. Never lose hope] (P4, T9, LN 2185). These statements highlight the motivation and dedication necessary to survive the academic rigors.

Further evidence indicates that adult learners' perseverance is often rooted in their belief that education serves as a pathway to personal transformation and enhanced life opportunities. This is supported by Participant 3, who recounted the sacrifices she made to enroll in classes: "Wala koy tulog tungod sa excitement nga maka-enroll ug makasugod sa klase" [I didn't sleep because I was excited to enroll and start classes] (P3, T13, LN 928-930). Participant 4 echoed the idea of perseverance, emphasizing the importance of continuously learning and taking advantage of opportunities for growth: "In life, you are learning anytime. "So kung naay buhaton na makatabang sa learning, go lang ng go" [In life, you learn every day. If there's something that can help with learning, just go for it] (P4, T6, LN 2056-2058).

The lived experiences of the participants reveal that perseverance became a process of self-empowerment through their continued commitment to educational goals despite repeated challenges and sacrifices. Choosing to persist, even in the face of uncertainty, helped participants recognize their capacity to overcome adversity and stay focused on the future they envisioned for themselves and their families. Perseverance therefore represented more than enduring hardships; it reflected a conscious decision to continue moving forward despite obstacles. Through this experience, participants came to view themselves as individuals capable of creating meaningful change in their lives through education, reinforcing their sense of purpose and commitment to lifelong growth.

Transformation

Transformation refers to the profound personal and professional growth adult learners experience through their educational journey. Their educational journeys reshaped not only their knowledge and skills but also how they perceived themselves, their aspirations, and their roles within their families and communities. Knowles et al. (2020) assert that education reshapes adult learners' self-concept, confidence, and societal roles. Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory explains how critical reflection can lead to meaningful shifts in perspectives and personal identity.

For Participant 1, this transformation was apparent: "Sa una, wala koy self-confidence pero karon mas confident nako" [Before, I lacked self-confidence, but now I have become more confident] (P1, T2, LN 75), showcasing how education empowered her to see herself in a new light. Participant 1 further expressed a shift in focus from solely community involvement to being more passionate about self-improvement and family, "Oo, nakasinati gyud ko ug kausaban. Sa una focused ra ko sa community, pero karon mas na-passionate na ko para sa ako ug sa pamilya", [I used to focus on community work, but now I'm more passionate about improving myself and my family] (P1, T5, LN 184-185). These experiences reflect a shift toward greater self-awareness and a renewed commitment to personal and family development.

Participant 2 echoed this transformation by stating, "Naay daghan kausaban, murag mas confident nako karon kay maka-feel ko nga naa koy direksyon sa akong kinabuhi" [There have been many changes. I feel more confident now because I feel I have direction in life] (P2, T3, LN 332-333), reflecting increased self-confidence and clarity in

life direction. Additionally, participant 3 noted how education enhanced his communication skills, stating, "Ang akong hosting ug pag-eskwela nag-enhance sa akong communication skills" [Hosting and schooling have improved my communication skills] (P3, T31, LN 1741-1744). This growth reflects education's broader impact on learners' adaptability and professional competencies. His goal to enhance his communication skills until it reaches an advanced level further signifies this transformation, "Ang akong goal karon mao ang pag-improve pa ani nga skill hangtod mahimong advanced" [My goal now is to further improve this skill until it becomes advanced] (P3, T26, LN 1493-1494). Participant 4, on the other hand, highlighted how education brought a sense of pride and self-confidence, "A better future jud ma'am and a better version of myself. Kanang confident nako making-communicate sa mga tao, dili na bitaw ko maulaw Ma'am. Sa ato pa, kanang naa tay ikagarbo sa atong kaugalingon na maskin sa akong edad, nakahuman japun ko" [It's a better future and a better version of myself. Now I can communicate confidently with people, and I'm not shy anymore. At my age, I've achieved something I can be proud of.] (P4, T5-6, LN 2022 – 2026). This reflects how education can still foster resilience and a sense of accomplishment regardless of age.

The participants' lived experiences suggest that transformation was the highest expression of self-empowerment. As they progressed through higher education, they moved beyond identities shaped by age, interrupted education, and previous challenges, embracing instead identities grounded in resilience, purpose, and lifelong learning. Education became a meaningful process of redefining who they were and what they could become. Through this transformation, participants recognized their ability not only to improve their own lives but also to inspire their families and communities. This finding aligns with Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory and supports Knowles' view that adult learners construct new meanings by integrating their lived experiences into continuous growth.

Essence of Self-empowerment Among Adult Learners

In this study, the essence of self-empowerment among adult learners emerges from their lived experience of transformation. Their return to higher education became more than an academic pursuit; it was a journey of rediscovering their capabilities and redefining their identities. Through perseverance and continuous self-reflection, they experience personal transformation that extended beyond academic success. They came to understand that age, setbacks, and delayed educational journeys were not defining constraints but enduring sources of strength that shaped their confidence, resilience, and lifelong commitment to learning. Thus far, these shared experiences demonstrate that higher education serves not only as a pathway to academic achievement but also as a catalyst for meaningful personal transformation.

Conclusion

The lived experiences of the participants reveal that self-empowerment is not a fixed outcome but a continuous process shaped by personal aspirations, multiple life roles, experiential learning, and resilience. For these adult learners, higher education meant more than pursuing academic credentials; it became a transformative experience that strengthened their confidence, redefined their identities, and inspired renewed personal and professional aspirations despite the challenges of balancing multiple responsibilities. Their narratives show that self-empowerment emerges when they embrace challenges as opportunities for personal growth and self-discovery.

These findings reinforce Knowles' Theory of Andragogy by highlighting the central role of learners' prior experiences in shaping meaningful and self-directed learning. Likewise, they substantiate Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory by illustrating how critical reflection on lived experiences contributes to changes in self-perception, perspective, and identity.

To better support adult learners, LGU-supported higher education institutions may strengthen learner-centered initiatives through flexible learning arrangements, responsive academic advising, digital literacy programs, and holistic learner support services that address adult learners' diverse realities. Future studies may further investigate how adult learners experience self-empowerment across different educational settings and stages of their educational journeys.

Contributions of Authors

Author 1: conceptualization, proposal development, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, manuscript writing and revision, and response to reviewers

Author 2: data analysis, proposal writing, data gathering

Author 3: proposal writing, data gathering

Author 4: proposal writing, data gathering

Author 5: proposal writing, data gathering
Author 6: proposal writing, data gathering
Author 7: proposal writing, data gathering

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