

SCHOOL RETURNEES' LIVED EXPERIENCES: THE CASE OF NEUST-PAPAYA OFF-CAMPUS PROGRAM SELECT STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study on the Issues and Successes of NEUST Papaya-Off Campus School Returnees sought to understand the lives and situations of school returnees to understand their experiences better in pursuing a college degree. The researchers sought to address the following questions in this study: What are the reasons and motivations for returning to higher education for returnee students? How are adult returnees adapting to their new experiences and education? What issues do returnee students face throughout their school-returning lives? What are returnee students' outcomes and expected outcomes in terms of academic success? The participants are fifteen (15) students from various programs at NEUST Papaya Off-Campus, ranging from 23 to 28 years. The researchers employed a phenomenological approach to account for specific situations, experiences, and events. The researchers can conduct in-depth examinations of the phenomena under investigation. The study employed an online interview in which participants responded to questions about their experiences as school returnees. This study established that age and responsibilities do not preclude completing an education. The researchers recommend additional research on this subject and ways to assist students and the people and institutions involved in their lives in improving and overcoming specific imposed problems and challenges. (Abstract).

INTRODUCTION

Adult students are those who return to school, either full- or part-time, after some time away due to work or family commitments. Students who drop out of school when they are close to completing their final year of high school or college have a variety of reasons for doing so. People who are 25 years old and older are more likely to return to school to earn a bachelor's Degree, as found in the National Center for Education Statistics study. Having trouble juggling multiple school commitments is common among adult learners, and this often results in students dropping out of school. A variety of factors, such as one's own belief in one's ability to succeed, the encouragement of others, and the desire to do well in school, drive adults to attend university, according to Kimmel et al. in 2016. In the new phase of education, it is up to the students to take action, relying on their willingness, strength, and ability to adapt to new challenges. This qualitative research examined the lives and circumstances of each returnee student. It provided opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings about pursuing a higher education career in general. This study looked at how students coped with taking on multiple roles during their education and the coping mechanisms they used. Understanding how someone dealt with a particular situation can be gleaned from their assimilation of newly acquired knowledge and skills from their time spent in tertiary education. It is possible to encourage people to continue with education into old age.

RELATED WORK

Individuals are said to be socially excluded if they are unable to participate in the basic economic and social activities of the society in which they [1]. A similar but expanded conception is put forward by [2], social exclusion refers to the extent to which individuals, families and communities are able to fully participate in society and control their own destinies. Indicators of potential social exclusion might be financial difficulties, lack of basic necessities (IT skills, employment, autonomy in work), poor housing conditions, lack of consumer durables, poor health, limited social contact or perceived dissatisfaction. [3].

National Center for Education Statistics data indicate that 38 percent of the 2007 enrollment of more than eighteen million college students were twenty-five years of age or older. When the term "nontraditional student" is defined more broadly to include seven characteristics not typically associated with participation in college, a full 73 percent of students may be viewed as nontraditional. Social and economic forces that have led to adults' increased participation in higher education are not likely to abate in the near future.

A key characteristic distinguishing reentry adults from other college students is the high likelihood that they are juggling other life roles while attending school. A 2003 NCES report indicated that at least 56 percent of students over age twenty-four saw themselves as workers first and students second. This group was also less likely to complete a degree in six years. Reentry adults' multiple roles and commitments increase the likelihood they will look for degree and certificate programs that provide them flexibility in time and locations. In recent decades, a number of institutions have been designed around the needs of adult students. Innovative adult learning practices, such as distance learning, accelerated course formats, are increasingly commonplace today in traditional universities. NCES reported in 2008 that at least two-thirds of two-year and four-year degree-granting institutions offered online courses, blended/hybrid courses, or courses offered in other distance education formats for college-level credit. The factor most commonly cited as affecting the decision to offer distance education courses or programs was meeting student demand for flexible schedules [4]. Accelerated courses are designed to be completed in a shorter time frame and tend to be more responsive to adult learners' lives. A number of studies indicate that adult learning in accelerated courses is comparable to or better than that of younger students enrolled in conventional courses. When attitudes of alumni toward accelerated courses in management, human resource management, and corporate finance were assessed, their perceptions were nearly as positive as current students.

While much of the literature on adapting to adult learners in higher education focuses on how institutions and programs can modify student services and course delivery formats and systems to meet the needs of reentry students, adult education research also sheds light on the characteristics of these learners in the classroom or distance education environment [5]. Several theoretical approaches to adult learning have served as useful lenses for research on adult learners. Andragogy is arguably the best-known of these theoretical approaches. Transformational learning has become one of the most prominent and debated theories in adult learning research. Other theories suggest that self-directed learning can be situational and may be exhibited at different levels among college students.

A number of studies have explored the characteristics of adult learners in the college classroom. While adult learners desire flexibility, they also often desire structure. They exhibit varied learning styles and preferences influenced in part by their past encounters with higher education. This is especially true for subpopulations of adult students who have not consistently been included in the literature on adult students [15]; [6]; [7].

METHODOLOGY

The phenomenology research design was used as it is the most suitable for conducting data about the research problem. Researchers gathered different stories from different adult returnees about their issues and success regarding their education. They were selected using Non-Probability Sampling in which Judgmental or Purposive Sampling was used to gather data from the chosen sample of the study. Social media platforms such as messaging, and video applications were used instead of face-to-face interviews to collect data for the study. The researchers identified themselves as students of NEUST Papaya-Off Campus and conducted interviews with 15 adult school returnee students.

Interviews were conducted based on the questions listed in the Appendix so that only needed responses will be gathered that will be useful for this study. The research was done in the Philippines, and the people who participated in the study were all returnee students of Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology. The researchers gathered data through the use of messaging and video applications online. Responses were documented by screen recording the videos, documenting the words through Microsoft Word, and then filtered and transcribed for further data analysis. This study will help understand the stories of issues and successes of adult learners and give new information to the existing body of knowledge.

Fifteen (15) individuals were chosen through a purposive sampling technique in which the researchers made a list of those students who returned to education at Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology. The interview was done through video call, and the researchers' screen recorded the call with the participants' consent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Reasons

Many people have decided to return to school for many reasons. These are the driving forces that push them to come back as returnee students and once again face the challenge of education. Job opportunities, School Accessibility, Family, and Self Improvement, are the following themes that emerged in the analysis of the findings.

1.1. Job Opportunities

Nowadays, many jobs available to people depend upon their education and not merely on their skills and ability to work. This is one of the reasons why people who quit school and could not finish their educational tracks decide to go back to studying and earn a degree for better job opportunities that would benefit them and their families. P10, who has a family, professional work and already graduated from a vocational course in Computer Hardware Servicing, reported that:

"I started working to support my family and provide for their needs. At first, I had a hard time applying for a job because I had just finished two years, and I noticed that the graduates had more advantages, so I decided to continue my studies."

This implies that even though an individual finished a course in college and has enough experience from work, they still need further improvement in their educational status to find a better job. Added to this, the number of participants emphasized the need for a Bachelor's degree. P1, who had experienced studying college before and was not able to finish it, stated that:

"I realized that having a bachelor's degree will increase my access to job opportunities."

Similarly, P12 and Education students said:

"Well, as a student, the reason why I chose to return to studying is that I want to graduate. I want to have my Degree as a teacher..."

Various statements from the participants highlight the significance of getting a higher degree as one of the main reasons for going back to their education as it will increase the chance of finding a better job. Furthermore, even though they have experience working and are currently working, their primary desire is a more suitable and stable job. P13, who had experienced working for almost two years as a call center agent, experienced this and quoted:

"...call center job is not stable to give a good future to them, so, let us find a more stable one."

However, finding a job is also why others stopped studying and working. P8 explained:

"Kasi dati nag-aral na ako, tapos kinulang kami ng financial nahinto ako. Tapos nagtrabaho na lang ako, tapos nabalitaan ko may itinayo na college tapos libre tuition. Naisipan ko na lang bumalik sa pag-aaral, libre naman yung tuition, iniwan ko na yung trabaho ko para makapag-aral ulit..."

Money is indeed hard to earn, and it is mostly the problem of many people, especially true for college students. Going to college for those not privileged enough means constantly thinking, stressing, and worrying about educational expenses. That is hardly the truth, and this is one of the main problems for those who plan to study at college. As a result, they no longer continue studying and instead work to provide for their needs.

Even though this is the case for many, getting a higher education is a great way to increase life stability and a brighter future for aspiring returnee students.

P11 noted that:

"Number 1 reason ko lang kasi siyempre dahil mahirap buhay ngayon may mga anak na ako, hindi naman din permanente trabaho ng asawa ko kaya sinikap ko mag-aral ulit ng education kung sakaling makapag tapos ako meron akong magandang kinabukasan pa."

Likewise, P7, who was not able to finish two courses in his previous studies due to the influence of peers, said:

"Siyempre po, gusto ko din makatapos ng pag-aaral para din sa pamilya ko para sa future at magandang hinaharap."

The interviews demonstrated that their experiences influenced their decision to return to school. Such circumstances, like having a family, an unstable job, and the realization of the truths of life, inspired them to become students once again. Adult returnees still find education to be a key to better opportunities and comfortable life for the future.

1.2. School Accessibility

Access and school availability are also significant factors that increase students' reasons to continue their education. Participants highlight the importance of school accessibility for their decision to continue or study a particular course. P5, who had faced a financial problem to quit tertiary education, explained:

"Reason ko talaga is tinake ko yung opportunity na ito dahil merong malapit na umiversity dito sa atin. Kase noong nag stop ako nagpag-aaral nawalan nako ng pag-asa na makakatapos ako. So tinake to na yung chance nato."

The school's location impacts students' perception of attending school, and those who are deserted are more likely to be demotivated and less likely to continue their education.

In addition to this, tuition fees are said to be a highly motivating factor for P2:

"Isa kong reason kase diba libre yung pag-aaral ngayon sa mga University. At syempre ginrab kona yung opportunity nayon dahil nga libre kaya ginawa kona tsaka para magkaroon ng stable na trabaho."

How college would be much more available to students is never new. Many argue that this has been a factor that has been ignored.

1.3. Family

Findings show that this is one of the most prevalent reasons most returnee students get inspired to thrive and continue their unfinished business in college. P6, who is 35 years old and a single parent, noted that:

"Family tsaka anak ko single parent kase ako kaya gusto ko makapag aral para maibigay lahat ng pangangailangan ng family ko at anak ko."

Likewise, Participant 14 explained:

"My mother pushed me to study again because my brother had finished school, so I was the one to follow, also because of financial issues."

Education is not only for financial and Degree enhancement but also for self-growth and development. P9, who had experience working several part-time jobs, such as being a service crew, sales clerk, and cashier, reported that:

"Siyempre una diyan yung reality, kasi na experience ko kasi mag work bago ko bumalik sa school, sa reality kasi diyan na yung I do-down ka nila kapag wala kang diploma or degree tapos yung parang sinasabi nila na hanggang diyan ka na lang yung mga ganon. Tapos sa family magkakapatid kasi kami, wala pa nang nakatapos sa amin so parang ako na yung last chance ganon para sa family ko na makapagtapos."

This implies that the participant's experiences during the workdays become a motivating factor in striving for a better life. Aside from the outside experiences that influence the decision to return to school, the study also shows personal motivation. P15, who is 24 years old and has her own family, noted that:

"There are many reasons why I decided to go back to school. May I say that it is my disposition to decide to go back to school."

These personal motivations drive them to go back to school and continue education. It is not just for financial factors but for self-fulfillment and development.

2. Motivation

Motivation plays a significant role in influencing students' persistence in education. It also serves as a good model for a person towards success. Motivation can lead to many behaviors. It is essential to understand the importance of motivation in an educational setting. The research findings show that the greatest motivation of most of the participants is their family. It is also directed that forty percent (40%) of the participants claimed to have family, which serves as their motivation. Aside from this, other environmental factors such as peer influence become their motivation. Besides being the reason for returning to school, job stability and self-development are also a reason in their current studies.

2.1. Environmental Factors

It is found that the majority of the participants showed that family and peers became their motivational factors towards their academic journey as returnee students. Aside from this, it also corresponds to forty percent (40%) of the participants who claimed to have their own families. The following statements from P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P11, and P15 are representative:

"My family, they also serve as one of the reasons to continue and finish my studies."

"Family."

"Family ko tapos sarili ko"

"Lola ko na pumanaw na last year"

"Family ko at anak ko."

"Anak ko lang, anak ko lagi nasa isip ko."

"...Third reason or motivation, of course, my kids, my family, my parents...."

There is no need to explicitly explain why their family is their motivation for their studies for some respondents. They act as their role model and inspiration to achieve their goals. Furthermore, their parents advise and encourage them to get through tough times. P5 stated that:

"Yung mother ko kase hindi sya nakatapos so gusto nya makatapos ako para ako manlang makatapos."

In line with the external motivation given by parents to their children is the internal motivation that arises from this. P14, 3rd Year Bachelor of Business Administration student, noted that:

"I want to finish my course and help my parents. I started the first year because I stopped for a long time."

Finishing education after a long-time hiatus is still possible for the participants. Parents' motivation results in an intrinsic motivation to pursue college and finish a course. The participants showed an interest in finishing the course, and the need to help their family is their internal motivating factor. Additionally, an opportunity available to change their lives for themselves and their family has also motivated them to finish their studies and find a more stable job better than what they currently take. P8, who was unable to finish Criminology course in his previous studies, said that:

"Naging motivation ko is yung kalagayan ng buhay namin. Siyempre mahirap ka na, tapos wala ka pang natapos, hindi maganda tingnan diba? Kasi libre naman yung pag-aaral bakit hindi mo pa I claim yung pagkakataon diba?"

Likewise, P10, who is in his 3rd Year course of Bachelor of Secondary Education, explained:

"Siyempre una yung pamilya ko, parang doon lang kasi umikot yung motivation ko kasi pag nakatapos ako mas madali ako makakahanap ng trabaho, tapos yun nga, napili ko yung education, kung sakaling matapos ko tapos makapagturo edi maganda stable yung trabaho."

Aside from the similar statements mentioned above about family as a motivating factor, finishing college as a key to improving the quality of life has also affected the participants to do better in their studies. P7 claims that being one of those who succeed in life is an image to look for while struggling in studies. He stated:

"Kasi pag ano, kapag yung ibang tao nakikita ko naka graduate sila, siyempre parang nakikita ko sarili ko kailangan ko din maka graduate yun yung ginagawa kong motivation para makapag tapos din ng pag-aaral."

However, it is not just the positive motivation that comes from other people are shown in the study. P9 elaborately said:

"Siyempre yung motivation ko unang una yung mga judgemental na tao, kasi naranasan ko rin na ma judge karamihan sa kanila relatives ko kasi nga yung mga kapatid ko hindi nakpag tapos so parang iniisip nila pati ako tapos meron din na hindi ko naman kilala tapos sasabihin nila na "hanggang diyan ka na lang pala wala ka nang balak magbalik sa school, hindi ka na magtatapos" yung mga ganon. Then sunod yung father ko kasi minsan din siyang na insult dahil doon. Then yung pangatlo is yung bf ko, friends at tsaaka yung mga taong naniniwala sa akin, may mga nakakausap din kasi ako na ine encourage ako so yon naging motivation ko din sila. Last yung bad experiences ko nga."

The said family experience is unfortunately passed down to another generation, but instead of feeling down, she motivated her to do better in education.

Another experience from P15 that gives a benefit after is:

"...when I was taking my 2-year course, and I was in my last semester, my teacher said to me that I was pregnant during that time with my eldest daughter, and she asked me if I was going to attend your graduation ceremony. And then I said, of course, I will attend because I have earned the highest honor, and then she told me you were first on the run, and then later during that night, I told my mom. My teacher spoke to me, and she said those things that I am first on the run and my mother told me that there is a chance that tomorrow that you are not in the first and then the other day that I went to school, my classmate told me, my competition, her name is Coline. Coline was asked to compose a speech for our graduation. So, nobody stood for me during that time, and that was my second reason...."

This happened a long time ago is still instilled in the participant's mind. Instead of feeling demotivated, she uses this experience to study harder and prove her intentions as a student.

P15 also said that the fruit of her hard work would benefit her child.

"...I want my child to have a good future...."

Furthermore, added to this, P13 said:

"...then when I heard that there is a closer school than my previous school. This is the opportunity, there is no cost, and I will not be too busy during the flight time because it is just nearby."

This indicates that the geography of the school's location serves as an opportunity to grab on because it can lessen the problem of transportation.

It was also demonstrated that besides from family, as an education student, P12 wants to teach people and do his job. It is not purely for the benefit of money, but also for the benefit that they can share with other people.

"First and foremost, my motivation is prevalent if I say, family, they are one of the priorities or the reason why I want to, and the last is I want to teach people."

These motivating factors that come from the environment that they are in have provided a good effect on many. It was shown that both the positive and negative influences on the participants made them continue and finish their studies.

2.2. Job Stability

Aside from the fact that job opportunities have become a reason for many to return to education and finish their courses, it motivates a participant while studying. P13, who is a 3rd Year Education student, stated that:

"Maybe because my dream is to graduate, and it is just that the course I wanted before was different. When I was in my first college, that was not what I followed. What happened was that I did not like my course. That is why I did not focus, I did not give full attention until I got pregnant, I did not graduate, and that is OK with me because I did not like the course that I am taking, and also I already have a child that time, I said I need to have a stable job...."

Due to the lack of interest in a course taken a long time ago, the participant could not finish college. However, in the light of this, family occurs, which became a motivation to go back to school and finish studies. Opportunities knock on as stated in the previous statement from this particular participant about the accessibility of school. The participant decided to continue her studies to find a more stable job and benefit the family.

2.3. Self-Development

According to Schneider in an article entitled "Self-Improvement for College Students," in 2020, learning and embracing new ways to adapt to others and life circumstances is what self-improvement is all about. This means behaving professionally so that you are more appreciated at work. It means being gracious daily in order to strengthen your relationships. Self-development has been shown to motivate participants to work well in their studies. P3 claims that her motivations are:

"Family ko tapos sarili ko."

However, simply finishing a course does not guarantee a high-quality job, according to P15, who had experienced work:

" I am done schooling. I took up a 2-year course in Bulacan, Hotel and Restaurant Service course and then I worked as a cashier in S.M. hypermarket. I am a candidate for the regular employee, but I was belittled during that time because I only gained a 2-year course diploma, and they asked me for a 4-year degree. That is one of the reasons why I decided to go back to school because I think I do not deserve to be belittled only because I have two years course degree. Because I have these skills, I have the talent they badly need me, but they decided to give me the slot because I am only two years graduate. They decided to allow another person who does not deserve that job, so that is my very first reason...."

For P15, who had finished a 2-year course but was discouraged and felt degraded, finishing a 4-year course would provide much better opportunities in life and for their work, which will enhance their self-esteem and confidence, as shown by the participant in her interview statements.

"...Third reason or motivation, of course, my kids, my family, my parents, and my dreams.

This statement highlights that ambition has become the last motivation, and family significantly impacts participants' lives. Some students who focus on finishing a course forget the possibilities beyond their courses. While studying, it is not just the people or reason behind continual studies that matter, but also the things that will develop from oneself during education. It can be seen that some might forget because they only focus on external factors that they forgot to mention about themselves.

From the motivations answered by the participants, it was shown that both internal and external factors contribute to their attitude towards their education. It has shown that external motivations can turn into internal motivation afterward. Positive and negative experiences also impact an individual. However, both of them positively influence a person's motivation.

3. Challenges

Returning to school is not an easy decision for adult returnees. Moreover, it is much harder to deal with the challenges they have to cope with while pursuing their dreams. This study shows that the most relevant issues to returnee students are physical and social adjustments, time management, and course and financial aspects.

3.1. Physical and Social Adjustment

Re-entering college once again is harder for returnee students than traditional students. Challenges arise while they are in the process. Most of the participants of this study claimed that the most significant challenges are physical and social adjustment. Firstly, additional responsibility like having a family is one of the most significant adjustments for an adult returnee. P3, who is a mother of two and currently pregnant with the third, explained that:

"Diba bilang isang mommy diba pumasok ako may anak nako, mahirap sakanila yung naiiwan ko sila kase sanay sila na kasama ako, yon naging problema ko hindi ako agad nakapag adjust na maiiwan sila papasok ako. So ang nangyare sinanay ko sila, since malalaki naman sila ang ginawa ko kinausap ko sila nakailangan kong mag aral."

Aside from the family matter adjustment, the environment also holds a significant factor in the challenges of school returnees. P1 noted that:

"One of the challenges in adjusting to the environment and the people I am engaged with. Since I have already worked before, the physical and social environment is a big challenge."

It shows that adjusting to returning to school again became a new challenge because he had entered a new environment when he stopped schooling. Added to this, people are new, and it is pretty different from the environment the participant was used to. When students have the knowledge and skill to work effectively in a new environment and appreciate the new community, they are more likely to adapt well.

Aside from the physical and social environment, coming back to school after years of hiatus is not the same as what they had experienced before. There are a lot of changes, including the new curriculum of education. This was experienced by P13, who broadly explained:

"Honestly, too much struggle is like what they have said. It is not easy because, first of all, it is not my curriculum. So, I entered a new curriculum. So, my classmates are K-12 graduates. Then I went back to start, so back to zero, there are no credit units, including NSTP, even P.E. I went back to everything, so according to it, I need time management since I have a child, I have a partner to take care of, and the school activities are innovative because the most challenging part is that the teacher does have something to teach, they always say that we already know these lessons when we were in high school. Then I had no idea because I never studied that when I was in high school, though there were subjects, I got when I was in college at first, but that was all very innovative. "

This indicates that the participant's experience from the previous course was not as helpful as expected.

Another issue that affects the majority of participants is the gap between their ages and maturity levels. Adult undergraduate students typically take a year off before beginning their studies at the university level. The term "mature-age students" varies by institution, most notably in terms of the age at which the classification begins.

Based on the participants' interview responses regarding the challenges they are into when they become school returnees, P5 reported:

"Pinakamalaking hamon ko yung adjustment talaga kase nung pumasok ako dito yung mga kaklase ko may mga anak na ganon."

In parallel with this statement, many responses clearly show that the age gap is challenging. P6, P7, P8, and P11 are representatives:

"Yung adjustment syempre mas matatanda ako sa mga kaklase ko inisip ko na kaya kobang makipag sabayan."

"Siguro yung mga ano, mga batang kaklase ko mahirap pakisamahan mga isip bata pa tapos medyo matanda ka din, kaya mahirap din pakisamahan kailangan ibigay mo yung best mo para pakisamahan sila."

"Siyempre yung mga nasasabi nila na "Ah matanda na nag-aaral pa" tapos ang mahirap makisama sa mga bata kasi napag iwanan ka na mahirap na balikan yung mga pinag-aralan mo nung high school tapos biglang college ka ulit after 8 years nawala na lahat ng pinag-aralan."

"Nung unang una mas kinakabahan ako kasi matanda na ako, after 10 years nag back ako ng pag-aaral tapos ang kasabayan ko mga teenager, yung utak ko siyempre hindi na fresh katulad ng mga fresh graduate, yon masyado yung nerbyos ko at kaba na naramdaman ko."

The new environment brought the participants to meet new people. Since school is most diverse, students of all ages are included in one school environment. School returnees find it hard to adjust since their age is way older than traditional students and their experiences mature them so that they have a different mindset than those younger than them. P14 stated that it helps to have a sense of belongingness in the new environment to cope with this. He said:

"It was embarrassing at first because I did not know anyone. Of course, I also stopped for a while, seeing a friend close to us. I was just there with him at first, and then after a while, everything was OK. Studying, on the other hand, is a bit difficult. Because of my time in school, I did not understand that much, so it was difficult for me to pick up every lesson, but I could get in. Nevertheless, now it is challenging to take online classes."

Also, adjusting to the academic needs is a bit of a challenge for P9:

"...tapos yung pangalawa is yung memory. Siyempre matagal ako nag stop bago ulit bumalik, nahihirapan ako especially yung memorization, tapos yung mga pag intindi sa lessons kasi nga hindi ko na siya masyadong nagagawa dati matagal na panahon na."

In line with this, P2 also stated:

"Yung adjustment siguro diba kase mga fresh or advance yung mga isip nila eh ako kailangan kopang magrefresh."

3.2. Time Management

Another challenge of school returnees' encounter is concerning their time. Since they have to juggle school and personal responsibilities, managing their time is difficult for many of them. P10 stated that:

"Of course, there are many challenges. First of all, the time, because when you have a family, you need to have time for them and then you also need to earn money because you have more expenses and then you need time for your studies, so you should know how to manage your time."

However, for P15, challenges to returning to school are being conquered because it is a personal decision. She explained:

"The only thing that makes it hard for me is that I am having a hard time juggling with my family time, of course, having kids, and my studies. It is not hard to tell somebody. It is not hard for me to go to school because, as I have told you, it is my disposition in life. I am decided, I am determined to accomplish what I have started, so whatever those challenges, I am ready, and I must say, bring it on."

3.3. Chosen Course

Chosen courses that are not the choice of the student and do not correspond to their ability tend to impact their approach to their respective courses. Only P4 experienced this and stated that:

"Hindi ko kase gusto education mahiyahin ako. Ang hirap para saakin kasi kailangan confident ka kapag education student ka"

Participants showed that if personality and chosen course are not aligned, there will impact their academic performance. However, the participant survived this and is now in his 4th year as a Bachelor of Secondary Education student.

3.4. Financial Aspect

Finances were also seen as one of the challenges that returnee students encounter. Firstly, P9 said:

"Una don yung financial pa din, kahit sabihin mo na libre yung tuition natin, siyempre may mga expenses pa din like yung transportation kasi hindi naman ako malapit doon talaga kailangan bumyahe so yung transpo kasi nung time na yon nagsimula ako, walang wala pa din kami noon..."

Moreover, P12 further explained this situation and quoted:

"I think it would be the money or the expenses because you earned money (while working), you earned a lot, but when you are studying, you still depend on your parents or something that can be like that you will not have money, to the point that you are just a plain student, you are just an ordinary person, not working. That is why I tutor and do some sidelines so that you do not have such hassle."

Based on the participants' interview, financial status is a big concern because the urge to help the financial needs of their families is hindered as they need to study and spend money on it as well. Instead of solely thinking about their academic status, money becomes an issue while studying. The financial burden of going to college could be more significant for adults who have to fund school themselves while keeping other financial obligations.

4. Coping Mechanism

Returning to school is a difficult decision for many people, even more so when you are a returnee. Transitioning from work to school is never easy. It can be challenging as one adjusts to new behaviors. Nonetheless, many school returnees eventually adjusted to the challenges of school activities, parenthood, and working student life.

The participants claimed the following to be their coping mechanisms:

4.1. Discipline and Time Management

According to Louisiana State University Shreveport (2020), good time management, strategies, and discipline helped school returnees balance their various responsibilities. P14, who is balancing his work on a farm and studying, reported:

"Time management both in studies and work."

P15, who is a mother of two and a 4th-year education student, stated:

"One of the significant problems that I have a hard time dealing with is juggling my family time and my studies. So, to do that accordingly, I am very disciplined when it comes to my time. I have a list of things that I have to do. I have to do what is hard for me first and then deal with my daughter, and, of course, I cannot do that alone. I always have my family who support me and my decision to go back to school. "

Additionally, P8, 40 years old and a BSBA student said:

"Kunyari sa pag-aaral mayroon kang exam, siyempre focus ka lang wag kang gagamit ng mga gadgets na makakaabala sayo during your pagrereview para kinabukasan exam na, may maisagot ka tapos iwasan din yung bisyo."

Similarly, P10 and a BSED major in Elementary went to say:

"Siyempre nalampasan ko yon sa tulong din ng pamilya ko, tulad ng asawa ko bigayan lang kami kapag halimbawa may oras ng klase, may araw ng pasok pinag-uusapan namin yon para ma I adjust yung schedule."

Evaluating their needs and priorities aids them in deciding what should be taken first and what should be put on hold. In addition, P3, who is taking care of her children at the same time as studying, said that:

"Nakinig naman mga anak ko, as time goes by nasaanay naman sila sa sitwasyon ko."

Based on the participants' responses, they overcame challenges both inside and outside the school as long as they managed their time wisely and had discipline within them.

4.2. Adjustments, support, and motivation from self and others

Participants often reported that they could return to school and continue their studies with the help of adjusting to the new environment, having support from others, and believing in themselves.

P2 and Education student noted that:

"Ang ginawa ko nag adjust nalang ako."

Similarly, P1 said that:

"I learn to deal with this environment by simply adjusting myself little by little."

Some factors help school returnees to adjust to academic life. Additionally, support from self, family, and friends assists in overcoming the challenges as a school returnee. Support networks are also essential components that can help these students face the provocation of life both inside and outside the school. Furthermore, support from these certain people can help provide insights, career advice and help in encouraging them to go on. According to P13, who took a different course from the first one, she had noted:

"My classmates are very supportive, and my teachers understand my situation. That is why I can easily cope AGAIN; when I do not know, I ask my classmates when I am not on board. Because I have no idea sometimes, then, because we have the technology, I can research only when there is time. I can handle it anyway. "

Likewise, the statement of P11 also found support from her husband:

"Lagi lang sinasabi sa akin ng asawa ko "Kaya mo yan! Kaya mo yan! matalino ka gawin mo yan para sa mga anak natin"."

Having this encouragement support from the people around them guides them to become excellent students and gives them the strength that no matter what happens, they have someone on their backs to be there whenever they need them. In addition, Participant 5 sought support from a relationship built inside the school. She stated that:

"Hindi naman naging hadlang nagkaroon lang ako ng maraming ate, kuya at naging guide ko sila sa pagpasok ko sa mundo ng pag-aaral."

On the other hand, P7 said otherwise:

"So yung challenges naman kasi ano lang, wala naman masyadong challenges sakín kasi sinusupportahan ako ng parents ko tsaka kaya ko naman kaya kahit papaano di naman ako nahirapan."

Support networks made an enormous contribution to the stories of issues and success of school returnees. However, more than that, these students also found the strongest pillar from themselves, P12, a working student went to say:

"I always look for the opportunity to find money or to earn money. Like, for example, the things I can do as a student while studying, selling goods, or sidelines. These are the ways I overcome my problems and, of course, with the help of friends, relatives, the family sometimes like that, they can help me. "

Also, P9 added that it is not just about himself but for God:

"Inisip ko lang na bahala na si God ganon, iniisip ko lang matatapos din naman magpatuloy lang ako tapos nag tiyaga din ako yun lang."Even though it is difficult for adult students to come to school with a huge gap in education and life experiences, still, these students come with reasonably clear educational goals (Stephens C & Worth J. 2011). In the report of the participants, P4 said that:

"Nakayanan konaman sya ginusto konadin habang tumatagal."

Similar to what P6 stated:

"Pero lumaon nakapag adjust naman ako at napagtagumpayan koyon hindi ako na op at tinanggap nila ako. "

With the adjustments, support networks, and motivation, these school returnees could conquer their challenges not just as a student but also as a parent and working professionals.

5. Developments and Achievements

In addition to investigating the stories of issues and success of school returnees, participants also discussed the achievements they gained when they started to study again.

5.1. Self Confidence

Participants were asked during the interview about the achievements or the things they have developed as they returned to school. The researchers offered time for the participants to think about the question. During one of the interviews, P6 said that:

"It is self-confidence."

Many participants answered that their self-confidence developed when they returned to school again. Similarly, P8 also said the same thing, she stated:

"Self-confidence din na develop ko din talaga siya kasi dati ayoko talagang humaharap sa ibang tao, hanggang ngayon din naman pero kung I cocompare mo sa dating ako, feel ko naman na mas naging ano ako (she mean naging sociable? haha) tsaka stronger yun lang mas positive na ako ngayon."

Correspondingly, P11 answered that through the help of gaining more confidence, she was able to meet lots of people and helped her in her studies. She went to say:

"My self-confidence also increased, I was able to meet many people, and I was able to speak to many people, my memory also boosted a bit because I just stayed at home for a long time."

Having self-confidence also helped these students have good communication skills that resulted in gaining more friends. P8 stated:

"Tumaas din self-confidence ko, nakakaharap ako ng madaming tao, nakakapag salita ako sa maraming tao, medyo nag boost din yung memory ko dahil nga na stay lang ako sa bahay ng matagal na panahon, medyo gumana na siya ngayon."

In parallel to P12's statement:

"Yes, many things have changed. Example of this is, kung makapal man ang mukha ko mas kumapal pa mukha ko. And then I learned how to speak English nicely and sometimes fluently. It helps me a lot to talk with people with confidence and last, is I gain many friends."

Building self-confidence helped these sets of students overcome the fear of returning to school again and enabled them to build good relationships with their co-students, and helped them be better students than they were before.

5.2. Knowledge, Sacrifices, and Experience

Returning to school was a callous decision faced by the study participants. Many of them sacrifice their work to have better life opportunities that will achieve their life goals and help their family. Many of these participants shared their stories about how they decided to go to school again and what they had to let go to pursue the field they wanted to be in. P2 shared about letting go of her job to have a more positive outcome as she returned to studying again. She reported:

"Dati kase may trabaho ako, yon sinakripisyo ko, dati kase nakakatulong nako sa family ko, Ginive up ko trabaho ko para sa pag-aaral."

Similarly, P4 also quits his job to pursue education. He said:

"Yung trabaho ko dati, dati kase may trabaho ako so sinakripisyo koyon."

Participant 6 also said the same thing.

"May trabaho kase ako so ginive up koyon para mag-aral muli."

P10 also faced a tough challenge because he built his own family at an early age, and things did not go as planned, he noted:

"Hindi naman lahat ng plano mo masusunod, may mga pagkakataon na biglang mangyayari mababago yung plano siyempre kailangan ano ka lang healthy lang para maka isip ka ng bagong plano. "

Another participant shared her story of sacrifices and how she is doing everything to make herself the successful person she is aiming for. She went on to say:

"Ever since I started schooling at NEUST, I said to myself that when I graduate or when I finish my four-year journey here in NEUST, I would like myself to have a Latin award. Since the first semester, I have taken care of my grades. I am a very grade-conscious person. I asserted much effort and did everything that I did. So far, so good. Sacrifice Kasi says like I worked a lot before, I decided to sacrifice those. I quit my job for four years, of course. I ask for my mom's help para makatapos ako. Kasi wala naman mawawala, meron pala nawalan ka ng trabaho but you gained a lot of knowledge, experience and after 4 years look where you are. Where are you, diba?"

If some sacrificed the job they had, on the other hand, P5 let go of her previous program she was into to go after another program where she found a bit challenging. She noted:

"Siguro ang sinakripisyo ko yung gusto kong marating kase tourism talaga gusto ko hindi educ pero sabi nga eto nato igrab na natin."

Although these students experienced difficulty at an early age, that led them to stop education for a while and, after some time, decided to return to have new experiences and to gain more knowledge that would help them effectively. Furthermore, it was evident as P14 learned new things when he returned to school, he noted:

"Somehow, I also learned a lot. When I went back to school, I was happy that I understood and learned new things, and returning to school nowadays is very different. "

Like P1 and P3, other participants noted that returning to school helped them improve their attitudes and personalities. P1 said:

"My self-esteem was improved, and my social life was developed."

P3 stated,

"Lakas ng loob kase hindi biro mag-aral kaya kapag nagdesisyon ko haharapin mo. Lalo na educ kinuha ko hindi madali."

Even though it is indeed tough to balance studying and other responsibilities, it makes these students become the person they want to be, learns new things, and have a good relationship with other students even though there are few gaps in their age, P13 noted:

"First of all, I am happy because of the new environment. I meet new people because they are still young. It is very refreshing in the social aspect because of their way of living and thinking. After learning, of course, there is an improvement because, since I am in my 3rd year again, the theories I did not know before related to my course I know now. That is why it is tough to synchronize life when you have a family while studying. "

Participants' responses illustrated most of what they felt when they returned to school and believed that they gained knowledge and skills that helped them to become successful students.

6. Future Expectations

Returning to school is motivated by the expectations of these school returnees. These expectations motivate students to work harder and complete their tertiary education. These expectations may act as self-fulfilling prophecies, motivating students to strive to meet them. Additionally, the study participants discussed their expectations following completion of their tertiary education and how they intend to apply their knowledge in the field to which they aspire.

6.1. Career Development and Life Opportunities

Career development is defined as a life-long process of learning and work. It is also associated with the transition towards personal decisions about someone's future (Hiebert B. Borgen W. Schober K. 2010). Career development is one of the things the participants are holding to, the reason they return to studying. They have their plans that they expect when they finish their tertiary education. Some participants of this study answered that they anticipate having a better job when they finish their studies. Moreover, P6 answered that she expected to find a good job, quoted:

"Find a job."

Similarly, P10 gave a broader response to the question:

"Ang inaasahan ko kapag naka graduate ako yun nga madaming opportunity, madaling makapagtrabaho or mas madali makahanap ng trabaho."

It also gave confidence for the participants to have a stable job because of their Bachelor's Degree in the future. P1 said that:

"In terms of my career, I expect a better job than I had before since I am more advanced in terms of educational requirements."

P2 also believed that having a 4-year course will be an advantage in finding a stable job. She responded with:

"Maghahanap ng trabaho diba kase kapag 4 years course madaling makahanap ng trabaho kesa sa dati kong course 2 years lang mahirap".

Similar to what P3 said:

"Nabi-vision ko na yung better future kasi mas marami ng magiging posible na mangyayare kapag nakapag tapos kana."

Participants also expect better life opportunities for themselves and their families, just like what P9 said:

"Siyempre, una dito better life kasi mas makakakuha na ako ng better opportunities tapos ine-expect ko na din na magagawa ko na yung mga gusto ko while nakakatulong ako sa family ko."

They were confident that they would be excellent professionals in the field they had chosen because of the experiences they gained from balancing their studies and other responsibilities. The straddling voice emphasizes the value of academic knowledge as well as fundamental knowledge, and how students can apply what they've learned in school to their professional futures, as previous studies have shown. P12 stated:

"Well, I do believe that I can use my abilities and capabilities and I can find an excellent job, and I can have my way to express my credibility as a student from NEUST."

P13 gave emphasized using the concepts she learned while studying, went to say:

"Of course, I am hoping to use what I studied. I want to be a teacher so that the job is more stable and hopefully soon."

Some of the participants are assured that to find a job the moment they finish their tertiary education. Some also have other plans before they find work, most specifically those who have their course a licensure examination like those taking up the Education Program. When asked, P15 noted:

"First and foremost, I am expecting to earn my license and then get a job."

P5 also agreed to this statement, she said,

“Actually LET, tapos maghahanap ng trabaho sa private school which is meron na akong aaplayan.”

When P4 was also asked the same question, he also answered that He would take a licensure exam and find a job. He stated:

“Maghahanap ng trabaho tapos magte-take ng LET.”

While some of these participants are positive about what they will do in the future, some are also thinking twice about their steps.

P7, a BSED student might not use his Bachelor's Degree and find another job, he stated:

“Siguro hindi naman ako magtuturo, mag aabroad na lang ako, mag aapply na lang ako sa abroad.”

In the case of others, they do not expect to have a job on the Degree they finished, although they will try and resort to finding another job. P8 said:

“Hindi ko naman inaasahan na makakapasok agad ako sa trabaho pero kine claim ko na magkakaroon ako ng trabaho dahil siyem-pre nakapag tapos ako ng pag-aaral doon mapupunta yon, so meron akong aasahan.”

Similar to what P14 has in mind, he noted:

“Right now, I think it is hard to apply when you graduate because of the online class. However, now I am thinking of another job if I will not be able to use my course.”

Likewise, P11 is also worrying adding the fact that it is a bit too hard to find a job now in the pandemic, she said:

“Sa ngayon kasi dahil nga may pandemya, hindi ko masyadong sure kung paano na yung ating kinabukasan sa pag eeduc, mahirap magkaroon ng trabaho dahil yung kapatid ko matagal na din siyang graduate ng teacher hanggang ngayon di pa rin siya na lin.”

From the participants' responses, some expect that their decision to return to school will bring them career development and better life opportunities. Although some are worried about what their future may bring, they still expect that it will bring change to themselves and the people around them.

The following themes have emerged from the data:

Table 1

Summary of Codified Responses

REASONS

Family

Self-Improvement

School Accessibility

Job Opportunities

MOTIVATIONS

Family

Environmental Factors

Self-Development

Job Stability

CHALLENGES

Physical And Social Adjustment

Time Management

Financial Aspect

Chosen Course

COPING MECHANISMS

Discipline And Time Management

Adjustment, Support, And Motivation From Self And Peers

DEVELOPMENTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Self-Confidence

Knowledge, Sacrifices And Experience

FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

Life Opportunities And Career Development

Conclusion

It is concluded in the study that the main reasons of school returnees in go back to school and pursue to finish education are the expectations of participants for better job opportunities after having a Bachelor's degree, the accessibility of school, influence, and support of family, and dedication to improve oneself. Motivation is also related to participants' life stages as school returnees. It is identified that environmental factors such as family and peers, job stability in the future, and self-development are the following motivations that emerged from the data collected. It is also found that the challenges encountered by school returnees are linked to the adjustment to the environment and people, course issues, and financial problems. Many school returnees face different struggles in their studies. At the same time, the fruit of these challenges is the achievements they gained as they learned how to balance being a student, a parent, and a working professional. In discussing the management of coping with the challenges in studying, the students reported that the key in coping with these challenges are adjusting to the environment they are into, having proper time management of the things they will do as a student, as an employee, and as a parent to their children, and having support networks that help them to give a morale boost in continuing their studies. As to the expectations of school returnees when they finish their tertiary education, the answers that emerged were to take licensure examination and, finally, seek a better job that will benefit them since they have already finished their Bachelor's Degree.

The local government should help the areas far from civilization to increase students' access to college schools and universities. It is recommended to provide free transportation to accommodate students living far from their schools to carry them to their respective school colleges. Schools should also help find scholarships from public and private sectors to support students to aid their college finances. The most relevant challenge returnee students addressed was students' physical and social adjustment. Researchers recommend that teachers monitor their students' regarding the problems they are dealing with in the environment and the people around them. It is also recommended that students help their classmates (returnee students) adjust by being friendly and open to offering help if they need it.

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