

# Exploring the Higher Education Journey: Adult Learners in Early Childhood Education

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**Abstract:** The increase of adult learners attending college emphasizes the importance of understanding the meaning of college education experience among adult learners. This research was conducted to fulfill this condition. The participants in this study include six adult learners enrolled in the Department of Early Childhood Education at B College, located in P City. Data collection involved individual interviews, phone interviews, and messengers. The collected data were analyzed in four stages in accordance with the phenomenological research method and derived two categories, four subject groups, and six subjects. Difficulties of adult learners included “the burden of learning” and “maladjustment to various roles”. On the other hand, deriving meaning from this experience encompassed a sense of “preparing for a new life” and “joy from expanding relationships”. Adult learners entered college for various reasons and are differently placed compared with younger students. Challenges are met under the circumstances, yet adult learners continue to strive to successfully adapt and achieve their goals. In the future, improvements in the systems, processes, and curriculum are needed to improve the overall experience of adult learners in and after college. Following the limitations revealed in this study, it is recommended that future research should further investigate other similarly situated participants in different colleges in other areas or consider the investigation for other genders.

**Keywords:** Adult Learner, Opsimath, Early Childhood Education, College Experience

## 1. Introduction

With the increase of life expectancy, our society has entered a ‘super-aged society’ which has led to changes in the system of vocational education, to equip oneself for a longer life. Thus, the shift in the paradigm of vocational education has mutual influence with the changes in the employment structure, as the lifelong job market or the traditional employment structure of having only one job althroughout, is gradually disappearing. Instead, the society has been evolving to having a lifelong learning environment. As a result, more adult learners or opsimath’s engage in college education.

Colleges have also now recognized that more adult learners are inclined to taking up higher education, impacting adjustments in college admission policies. As the school-age population declines, adult learners are seen as potential enrollees and changes are implemented to accommodate additional sources of admission. A study has shown that the number of adult learner college applicants from 2017 to 2021 has increased by 2,000, totaling to 8,150, and this number continues to increase every year [1]. Thus, admission processes have now included options for adult learners to diversify and facilitate entrance for students of a certain age[2]. This shift has caused better awareness to the changing conditions of society and learning as more adult learners decide to enter college[3].

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Similarly, the number of adult learners in the Department of Early Childhood Education is increasing. Taking up a regular course in liberal arts or other majors is less attractive for adult learners while still wanting to improve their credentials with a degree or certificate[4]. Finishing Early Childhood Education training enables its graduates to acquire the national teacher certification Level 2 and this appeals to many adult learners.

As adult learners rise, studies conducted on the matter also grew. In the past three years, existing researches focus on the subject of college life adaptation and satisfaction[5-8] and the academic value of college life[9-11]. Results have shown that adult learners are generally satisfied with college life due to self-realization

Lee and Mo[1] argued that this is because adult learners with extensive life experiences, including childcare, choose learning with low entry barriers and relates to their own lives. Early Childhood Education offers this opportunity, including the chance to be re-employed after a career break. However, despite the rising number of adult learners in the Department, there are a few studies on their experience. These studies only include: a study on the meaning of college life to adult learners; a comparative study between adult and college learners majoring in Early Childhood Education and Childcare[12]; an examination of the college life of child-care center principals[13]; and the life experiences of adult learners in the Department[3].

Literature on adult learner's experiences in college life is limited pointing out a gap in terms of fully understanding the relationship between college experiences to life long learning pursuit. Adult learners being satisfied with college life reveals an important question on their motivations and valuing of college life. Answering these questions extends the current knowledge on the bigger roles of educational institutions that caters to the needs of adult learners. Therefore, it is necessary to further explore the experiences of adult learners attending the Department of Early Childhood Education to enrich understanding of the various factors affecting the increase of their enrollment and the ways they are adapting to college life.

Therefore, this study aims to provide basic data from examining the college education experiences of adult learners in Early Childhood Education. To achieve this, a qualitative research method allowing in-depth analysis was selected.

The research questions are as follows:

Research Question 1: What are the experiential difficulties of college education adult learners attending the Department of Early Childhood Education?

Research Question 2: What is the meaning of a college education experience to adult learners attending the Department of Early Childhood Education?

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Design**

The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of adult learners attending college. This is intended to explain the evolving concept of the disappearing lifelong job market, a phenomenon responsible for the shift in lifelong learning intentions of adult learners. To describe the phenomena, a qualitative design was used in this study using the phenomenological research. Phenomenological research is aimed at exploring the experiences of a group of people within a specific phase of their life[14]. The phenomenological research method is an inductive research method that seeks to reveal the meaning and essential structure of subjective experiences through statements of human experiences in a situation. For the purpose of this research the phenomenological method developed by Colaizzi's[15] was used. The data analysis in this method extracts meaningful sentences or phrases from the study participants' statements, creates general and abstract statements, categorizes them into

subject bundles, and identifies the essential structure of the experience. Colaizzi's [15] method focuses on deriving the common attributes of all research participants rather than individual attributes. This study described the vivid experiences of adult learners who experienced college education, revealed the common meanings and essence they found, and it was considered suitable for the research to understand adult learners' lives as a whole.

## 2.2 Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study were six female adult learners attending the department of Early Childhood Education at B College which is located in P City. Since 2019, the researcher of this study has been teaching adult learners every semester while serving as a full-time professor in the department of Early Childhood Education at B college, and has continuously formed rapport from the admission as an advisor to the research participants in this study. As for the criteria for selecting research participants, adult learners aged 25 or older and those who have a lot of interest in Early Childhood Education and who agreed to the research ethics and research participation were selected. The interviews with the study participants were confidential, and they were notified that they could stop participating in the study at any time if they did not want to. The general background of the research participants selected through these selection criteria is shown in [Table 1].

[Table 1] The General Background of Research Participants

category	year of birth	grade	gender
participant 1	1981	1	female
participant 2	1975	1	female
participant 3	1972	1	female
participant 4	1986	2	female
participant 5	1987	2	female
participant 6	1989	2	female

## 2.3 Data Gathering Procedures

In this study, data on adult learners' college education experiences were gathered through interviews using semi-structured questions. Participants were encouraged to freely express their opinions, drawing from their experiences and adaptation to college life. The interview spanned the first and second semesters, considering the college's semestral system. During the first semester from March 2, 2022, to June 30, 2022, eight individual interviews were conducted --- four face-to-face and four over the phone. Similarly, for the second semester, spanning September 1, 2022, to December 16, 2023, another eight interviews were conducted --- four face-to-face and four over the phone. Face-to-face interviews delved into individuals' personal stories, while phone interviews accommodated researchers' late-night schedules. Face-to-face interviews, lasting 30 minutes to 1 hour, took place in either the researcher's lab or an empty lecture room. In contrast, phone interviews only ranged from 10 to 30 minutes. To ensure accuracy and transparency, all interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and questions were asked through Messenger or in subsequent interviews.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

In this study, the data collected through interviews were analyzed in four stages according to the phenomenological research method proposed by Colaizzi [15]. First, to understand the overall context of the study, meaningful statements were derived by repeatedly reading the transcribed data. Any

contexts where the expression was ambiguous or incomprehensible were confirmed with the participants. Next, the derived statements were restated in a general form to derive the constructed meaning. The constructed meanings derived in this way were grouped with similar topics and categorized into subject groups, and finally, the contents were confirmed by the study participants to secure validity. Finally, in order to exclude subjective judgment and analysis that may occur to the researcher, the dean of the Department of Early Childhood Education who has experience running an adult learner class was asked to confirm the contents and positive feedback was received that this study was valid in light of clinical experience. Using Collaizi's [15] phenomenological stages of analysis to identify themes to answer the questions of the study, 2 main categories emerged each with 2 sub-categories. An outline of the categories and sub-categories are shown in Table 2.

### 3. Results

The result of analyzing the college education experience of adult learners attending the department of Early Childhood Education is shown in [Table 2].

[Table 2] The College Education Experience of Participants

category	subject group	Subject
difficulties of the college education experience	the burden of learning	difficulties in participating in classes and assignments and pressure to get good results
	maladjustment to various roles	The burden of performing various roles and feeling of being a different type of student
meanings of the college education experience	preparation for a new life	designing the new life as an Early Childhood Educator
		the expansion and joy of learning
	joy from expanding relationships	changes in family values and restoration of family relationships
		interaction with new people

#### 3.1 Difficulties of the college education experience

##### 3.1.1 The burden of learning

The result of analyzing the college experiences of the study participants showed that they experienced the burden of learning. These learning burdens could be classified into two themes: 'difficulty in participating in class and assignments' and 'pressure to get good results'.

##### 3.1.1.1 Difficulties in class and assignment participation and pressure to get good results

The participants were found to have difficulties with class participation and assignments. In particular, as distance learning were required due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was difficult to adjust to the non face-to-face lecture system. In addition, it was found that they were suffering from memory lapses and difficulty in adjusting to the need for digital literacy involved in class and assignment participation. Another learning burden for adult learners include the pressure to get good results as to the academic, time, and financial aspect. The following are excerpts from their actual responses:

*At first, I thought it would be convenient because I didn't have to go to campus due to the COVID-19. I thought it would be easier to focus more on the lecture because all I had to do was just listen to the lecture at home. But I didn't know how to enter the learning management system(LMS) when I was about to take a class. The guideline said I need to*

*log-in website first and then click on the banners and so on, but I was like... 'What's what?'. After all, I had to visit campus to figure it out. I didn't know where to ask, so I went to professor's lab. I felt ashamed and sorry for the professor. [...] I thought maybe I could do it on my own next time, but I forgot again when I got home. I was very frustrated.'* (Participant 1).

*It wasn't easy to sit down on the chair all day. It was too tough to physically be in the class for long time. I sometimes even had to go class on Saturday. I thought, 'Was my school schedule this tight?'. [...] As I get older, I can't think of what I learned. I thought I understood it with my head, but when I turn around, I can't remember. That is the most frustrating and difficult moment while I am here.* (Participant 4).

*Among the assignments, making videos with ppt was the hardest. Young students these days are really good at using computers. One day, we had a training session at the computer lab. The one next to me already made a moving one, but I couldn't even remove the background, so I was frustrated. Since I was not good at it, the professor kept come to my seat to help me, but I felt embarrassed. Sometimes, I pretended like I know how to use the function of ppt because I was too embarrassed to be cared by professor.* (Participant 2)

*Adult learners pay only 50% of tuition fee because of the scholarship. That's for every adult learners. But, academic scholarship is another story. It is hard to receive academic scholarship but I am doing my best because this is my second diploma. I must receive scholarship for my husband too.* (Participant 6)

*It was my choice to start learning. I have to get an A. So far, I've gotten an A. But I'm worried that I won't be able to get it next semester.* (Participant 5)

*Professors helped me a lot. I want to do well to meet the professors' expectations. Young students may have lack of experience, but I'm an adult.* (Participant 3)

### **3.1.2 Maladjustment to various roles**

The result of analyzing the college experiences of the study participants revealed that they were experiencing maladjustment to various roles. Looking closely at this, it could be classified into two themes: 'the burden of performing various roles' and 'feeling of being a different type of student.'

#### **3.1.2.1 The burden of performing various roles and feeling of being a different type of student**

As adults, the learners in the study expectedly play a range of roles at home, at work, and in their local communities. Considering this, they went through physical and mental fatigue after entering college from fulfilling responsibilities as students and as members of other societal sectors. Thus, the burden of having a range of responsibilities from playing different roles was high. At the same time, their being considered as older students isolated them from the average students as they were treated differently by their classmates and professors. The following are excerpts from their actual responses:

*I run an academy next to the kindergarten. At first, my husband opposed me to going college because I had a lot of work to do. The teachers from academy also asked me why I study more in college. I can't neglect my work. It cannot be an excuse. This is my*

*personality. I play the role of director in the academy, the student in the school, the wife and mother at home. I play the four roles. It's not easy. It's hard. (Participant 2)*

*I'm busier on the weekend. It's like a war. Participating in family events, doing assignments, taking classes, etc. As time goes on, I am getting busier and busier. I'm so distracted. (Participant 5)*

*I just got married last year and my baby is still young. I'm busy taking care of my husband and baby. As a wife and a mother, I have lots of work to do. I'm sorry that I left my baby behind to study early childhood education, so I'm trying to work harder at home. (Participant 6)*

*Since there is a big age difference with the young students, I felt uncomfortable sometimes. I'm older than their mom so I told them to call me 'ma'am' comfortably. I am not sure if I am right, but at the beginning of the semester, I felt that young students were treating me with difficulty. I felt like I wouldn't be able to join a group. I felt I am in different world. [Summary] For the team project, I had to work with young students. Whenever I started talking, they spoke formally. I felt like I wasn't a same student as they are. (Participant 3)*

*I don't know the exact age of the professor, but some of them seems like they are younger than me. Some professors call me 'teacher'. Some professors call me 'Ms'. How they call young students? Just by their names. I feel like professor are being more careful when they treat me. I'm thankful, but sometimes I feel like I get too much special treatment. [Summary] I'm in a position to learn the same thing as young students, but sometimes I feel like I am not the same student. (Participant 1)*

## **3.2 Meanings of the college education experience**

### **3.2.1 Preparation for a new life**

The result of analyzing the college education experiences of the study participants showed that attending college could help them prepare for a new life through improved college credentials and experience. Looking closely at this, it could be classified into two themes: ‘designing a new life as an Early Childhood Educator’ and ‘the expansion and joy of learning’.

#### **3.2.1.1 Designing the new life as an Early Childhood Educator**

Participants in the study were expecting to get a teacher certificate and were preparing for a new stage in life as an Early Childhood Educator.

*I don't know if I can do well, but I want to try. Before I enter the college, I had never thought that I wanted to try something new. I was lethargic. Everyone around me is like that, too. They say they don't know what to do after they raise their child...[Summary] I want to graduate quickly and become a teacher. I heard that there are many older teachers in the all-day class, so I'd like to apply for that position. (Participant 3)*

*It's good to get a certificate after graduating from the Department of Early Childhood Education. I used to work for a company before I got married, but after I got married, I quit my job to raise my kids... If you have a license, you can get a job whenever you want.*

*I want to open a kindergarten later.  
(Participant 4)*

*I should have started studying earlier. It would have been much more helpful to raise my children. From this year, I started volunteering at the church to help children.  
(Participant 5)*

### **3.2.1.2 The expansion and joy of learning**

The participants in the study felt joy in the process of expanding knowledge. It included knowledge related to early childhood education as well as knowledge about oneself.

*Sometimes it's hard, but it's fun at the same time. It's different from when I'm just at home. I feel like a female college student again. I think it's good to learn something.  
(Participant 1)*

*Since I have already raised two children, I thought I have enough knowledge about child development and education. However, I could realize that there's a lot of new things to learn. I feel proud every time I learn something new. It's exciting when new knowledge is connected to the knowledge I already know. (Participant 2)*

*Even though I was too tired after finishing house chores, I sat in front of the desk. Was I this strong-willed? These days, I feel a sense of satisfaction for my student life and I'm proud of myself. (Participant 6)*

### **3.2.2 Joy from expanding relationships**

The participants in the study experienced a positive change in their perception of people around them including their family and schoolmate. Looking closely at this, it could be classified into two themes: 'changes in family values and restoration of family relationships', and 'interaction with new people'.

#### **3.2.2.1 Changes in family values and restoration of family relationships**

The participants in the study experienced a positive change in their perception of family. It included feeling the importance of family and satisfaction with the changed role of family members.

*I married a typical Busan man. He is rather blunt. I thought he wasn't interested in my school life because he never asked about it. But one day, he said to my children, 'read books and study like your mother' and 'do not bother your mother because she has an exam soon'. I was surprised. 'He was this interested in me?' (Participant 1)*

*I thought about taking time off from school because my child was too young. My husband said, 'Since you started, wouldn't it be better to finish it without talking time off?'. He said he can spend more time on taking care about housework. I was grateful to him. (Participant 6)*

*Deacon from the church encouraged me about studying at college. I never told her about this so I asked how she knew about it. She said my mother-in-law asked her to pray for me. I was very touched when I found out that my mother-in-law's friends were praying*

*for me. To be honest, I started studying for myself at first, but now I am doing it for my family. (Participant 5)*

### 3.2.2.2 Interaction with new people

The participants in the study experienced expansion in their relationships by interacting with new people they met in college. They reported that they gained strength and comfort through interacting with schoolmates.

*I can say my life was focused on my family. But these days, I feel like I found another life by interacting with my friends. It is nice to meet adult learners who are in similar situations with me. (Participant 2)*

*Thinking back, there was depression and lethargy after having children. I also felt like I had lost myself. However, in college, I experienced joy. I enjoyed eating snacks and studying for exams with classmates. Everyone became friends regardless of age. Young students now call me 'Wang Unni(big sister)'. I really like that nickname. (Participant 1)*

*When I was in college before, I didn't interact with professor this much. I only met him/her briefly in class and that's it. However, after coming back to college, I feel closer to the professor. I think it is because I gained confidence in asking questions. Maybe in the old days, I wouldn't even be interested in participating in these research. (Participant 6)*

## 4. Discussion

Through the phenomenological research method of Collazzi[15], this study attempted an in-depth investigation about the college education experience of adult learners attending the department of Early Childhood Education. Six female adult learners are the research participants in this study, and the results of analyzing the data collected through interviews are as follows:

First, difficulties of the college education experience included 'the burden of learning' and 'maladjustment to various roles'. Memory lapses often occurred which contributed to the learning challenges. On top of that, adult learners also felt the pressure to do well academically, cope with the financial demands of schooling, and time management. Nevertheless, the pressure to succeed in their endeavours as adult learners is shown to have impacted their increased determination to study better.

The 'burden of learning' also involved the barriers of technological and digital skills given that much of the studying occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they had to function as students in a distance learning environment using unfamiliar gadget and processes. Thus, participants reported receiving additional assistance and supervision from other students and their professors. Participants were grateful for the consideration, yet it also made them feel frustrated and embarrassed by their lack of skills. Lee and Mo[2], who studied adult learners attending the Department of Childcare, concluded that adult learners felt burdened by the special attention they receive from professors. Accordingly, the results of the study show that adult learners are more comfortable with being treated the same as other students. Thus, professors concerned must educate adult learners using the same methods and considerations they give to school-age students.

In addition, participants from this study were experiencing maladjustments in performing various roles in life. Unlike younger students, adult learners expectedly have more responsibilities from having their own families and households, jobs, and more social relationships to attend to. Simultaneously running a household, holding down a job, and being a student causes physical and



mental exhaustion among the female study participants. These results reflect the prevalent gender inequality in society which pressure women into diligently fulfilling the roles set for them. According to the concept of 'second shift' from Hochschild and Machung[16], women are still expected to carry the responsibility of childcare and household maintenance despite being employed outside the home. In addition, the American Association of University Women suggests the occurrence of the 'third shift', where education would be added to these responsibilities while also contributing to their economic well-being[17]. These circumstances underscore the importance of understanding how factors affecting female adult learners could be improved to better situate them in a society causing pressure from too many roles and responsibilities. At the same time, research on male adult learners may warrant further exploration to understand whether gender may impact the changes in college experience.

Second, for the meanings of the college education experience, the subject group was divided into 'preparation for a new life' and 'joy from expanding relationships'. The participants from this study reported that they were able to achieve self-realization to equip themselves for a new life through acquiring college education experiences. Specifically, it was found that they expected to start a new in their lives as a professional early childhood educator by actively utilizing the national teacher certification level 2. This expectation is along the same line with a study by Cheon and Lee[12], who found that adult learners tend to put value on education as certificates or degrees would help them in advancing their professions. Moreover, the participants of this study showed a strong desire for re-employment. In other words, college experience is a tool for them to prepare for their old age. They have a goal to be integrated as professionals after graduation which can influence their career paths and retirement goals. These results suggest that colleges should identify the needs of adult learners and establish a system that can link them with employment and expand their expertise based on their needs. Meanwhile, the participants of this study reported that they felt pleasure in the process of learning new knowledge. Although they responded that they had suffered a lot of difficulties in the learning process, such as frustration due to memory lapses, pressure on getting good results, and financial burden, they overcame the challenges by the fulfillment from learning. These results reflect studies concluding that adult learners become revitalized and satisfied in life[13], improve their self-esteem[18], and develop a desire for learning[3][9] through college education. The high emotional satisfaction of adult learners is also linked to life satisfaction. Considering this, it would be helpful if adult learners were given a systematic learning process that could further encourage emotional satisfaction in college education. At the same time, the participants of this study reported that they felt pleasure from expanding their personal relationships. Participants reported experiencing positive changes in family values and dynamics which can be further considered in relation with the challenges of physical and mental exhaustion from simultaneously attending to their families while studying. While responses included raised increased discomfort from playing a lot of roles upon entering college, there are positive outcomes that were also mentioned. In particular, a high percentage of respondents said that their husbands, parents-in-law, and their children who support them have been essential to successfully pursuing their studies. These points are believed to have influenced the discovery of the value of family. In addition, research participants found meaning in building and expanding relationships with different people in college. The adult learners were delighted by identifying with other adult learners. Moreover, building friendships with classmates who are younger than their children, and professors who express support was similarly fulfilling for the participants. Considering that colleges are not just a place for learning, but also a source of experience and social connection, these findings are valuable for academic institutions to devise ways for adult learners to successfully adapt to college life and gain benefits from human relationships formed in its environment.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the phenomenological research method, this study attempted to investigate in-depth the college education experience of adult learners attending the Department of Early Childhood Education. Participants were found to be challenged by the burdens of learning and maladjustment to the various roles they have to fulfill. On the other hand, it is concluded that college education experience also creates value and meaning through its being an instrument to prepare for a new life and as a source of joy from expanding relationships. It is found that adult learners are uniquely situated as to the impact of college learning on their lives, given that they are positively different from regular college students. Thus, in the future, educational institutions must make system improvements to address the problems that may arise for the adult learners they accommodate.

Following the limitations revealed in this study, it is recommended that future research should further investigate other similarly situated participants in different colleges in other areas or consider the investigation for other genders. Moreover, as the number of adult learners in higher education increases every year, improvement on academic systems, processes, and curriculum must be explored to ensure a better experience for adult learners both during college and after graduation.

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