






## Finding Home Again: The Lived Experience of Balik-Aral Students in Secondary Education

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**Abstract.** Education is widely recognized as one of the most important foundations of personal growth, social development, and national progress. However, many individuals are unable to continue or complete their studies due to financial difficulties, family responsibilities, health concerns, work obligations, or other personal challenges. As a result, they may spend several years away from school, causing interruptions in their academic journey. This study explores the lived experiences of Balik-Aral students who are adult learners who are 20 years old and above; returned to secondary education after an extended absence. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 participants. Data saturation was achieved at eight participants, with two additional participants included to validate emerging themes. Findings reveal that returning learners experience significant academic gaps, classroom adjustment challenges, and anxiety due to age differences and missed schooling. The difficulties in understanding lessons, keeping up with the pace of the class, and adjusting to a new social environment with younger peers results in them struggling in their adjustment. However, these experiences have not been burdensome to them because of the positive support from their teachers and classmates. Despite these barriers, participants demonstrated resilience through self-regulated learning, peer collaboration, and adaptive coping strategies. Teacher and peer support emerged as critical factors in facilitating reintegration. However, the absence of clear and structured institutional support frameworks created confusion and inconsistency in learning experiences. The study highlights the need for structured reintegration programs, mentoring systems, and flexible learning strategies to support returning learners. These findings align with Sustainable Development Goal 4, emphasizing inclusive and equitable quality education.

## Introduction

Education is widely recognized as one of the most important foundations of personal growth, social development, and national progress. It equips individuals with knowledge, skills, values, and competencies needed to improve their quality of life and actively participate in society. Balik-aral students are individuals who return to formal education after a prolonged absence. As adult learners, they possess unique characteristics such as self-direction, accumulated life experiences, and strong goal orientation, which influence their learning processes (Knowles, 1980;

Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Adult learning theories emphasize that meaningful learning occurs when instruction is relevant, flexible, and experience-based (Brookfield, 2013; Illeris, 2018).

In the Philippine context, the persistence of out-of-school youth highlights the need for inclusive education systems. While programs like the Alternative Learning System (ALS) address educational gaps, students who re-enter formal secondary education often face challenges such as learning gaps, adjustment difficulties, and psychosocial barriers (Oracion et al., 2020). These challenges are further intensified by age differences, social expectations, and competing responsibilities.

Research indicates that returning learners rely on both internal and external support systems. Self-regulation and motivation enable them to cope with academic demands (Zimmerman, 2002), while teacher and peer support enhance engagement and confidence (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Additionally, coping strategies such as time management and stress regulation contribute to persistence and academic success (Roeser et al., 2013).

Despite these insights, gaps remain in institutional support. Studies suggest that unclear policies and inconsistent reintegration frameworks hinder successful adaptation (Schleicher, 2018). This study addresses the gap by exploring the lived experiences of balik-aral students in secondary education using a phenomenological approach.

### *Theoretical Framework*

This study is anchored on three major theories. First, Andragogy Theory (Knowles, 1980) explains that adult learners are self-directed and motivated by personal goals. Second, Self-Regulated Learning Theory (Zimmerman, 2002) highlights learners' ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. Third, Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) explains how returning to school leads to personal growth and identity transformation.

## **Methodology**

### *3.1 Theme 1*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Dealing the Impact of Academic Gaps	"I had a hard time understanding the lessons because I missed a lot of classes before." "It was stressful adjusting to the classroom, especially with younger classmates and the fast pace of lessons." "It was stressful adjusting to the classroom, especially with younger classmates and the fast pace of lessons."	The responses indicate difficulties in understanding lessons, keeping up with the pace of the class, and adjusting to a new academic and social environment, including being placed with younger peers. These experiences often lead to stress, frustration, and decreased confidence in their academic abilities. Overall, the theme highlights how academic gaps can significantly affect both cognitive performance and emotional well-being, emphasizing the need for targeted support to help students bridge learning deficiencies and readjust effectively.

*Table 1 Dealing the Impact of Academic Gaps*

The theme in this section originates from the research question: "What challenges have you encountered in returning to secondary education after an extended absence?" This theme captures the primary difficulties faced by balik-aral students as they reintegrate into the school system, highlighting the multifaceted academic, social, and emotional demands of returning to formal education. These challenges affect learning engagement, increase stress and anxiety, and require adaptive strategies that students often develop independently. The theme underscores the importance of systemic support through mentoring, flexible learning options, and structured academic guidance to facilitate successful reintegration.

B1: "I had a hard time understanding the lessons because I missed a lot of classes before."

B2: "It was stressful adjusting to the classroom, especially with younger classmates and the fast pace of lessons."

B3: "It was stressful adjusting to the classroom, especially with younger classmates and the fast pace of lessons."

The testimonies of B1, B2, and B3 reveal a shared experience of academic difficulty and emotional strain caused by prolonged absence from formal schooling. B1 highlights the direct impact of missed learning, emphasizing gaps in foundational knowledge that make current lessons difficult to understand. B2's response reflects a sense of academic disadvantage and comparison with peers, which contributes to feelings of inadequacy and discouragement. Meanwhile, B3 points to the combined academic and social challenges, particularly the pressure of adapting to a faster-paced curriculum while interacting with younger classmates. Together, these responses are significant because they demonstrate that academic gaps are not only cognitive in nature but are also deeply intertwined with emotional and social adjustment. This reinforces the need for holistic interventions that address both learning recovery and psychosocial support among balik-aral students.

Recent local studies in the Philippines have shown that returning learners often face significant learning gaps and difficulties in classroom adjustment. These challenges are compounded by age differences, missed schooling, and limited support structures (DEped, 2021). In many rural areas, balik-aral students encounter barriers such as insufficient tutoring programs, limited access to academic resources, and a lack of peer or family support (Magno & Dela Cruz, 2021). Furthermore, studies indicate that returning learners often experience anxiety and low self-confidence, which may hinder active participation and learning (Santos & Reyes, 2023). These findings highlight a persistent issue in Philippine secondary education: returning students require both emotional and academic support, along with flexible and inclusive learning approaches, to fully reintegrate and succeed.

### 3.2 Theme 2

Theme	Responses	Meaning
Gain Support and Guidance from Immediate Individuals in the Classroom	<p>"My teacher helped me catch up with the lessons I missed, and it really made learning easier."</p> <p>"My classmates encouraged me and included me in group activities, which helped me feel I belong again."</p>	<p>The responses show that teacher assistance helps students understand missed lessons and ease their learning process, while peer encouragement fosters inclusion and emotional comfort. These interactions create a supportive learning environment that promotes confidence, engagement, and motivation.</p>

Table 2 Gain Support and Guidance from Immediate Individuals in the Classroom

The theme in this section comes from the research question: "What kinds of support or guidance have helped you reintegrate into secondary education?" This theme emphasizes the critical role of school-level and community support programs in assisting balik-aral students to adapt successfully to the classroom environment. Returning learners often rely on mentoring, academic tutoring, and peer or family support to navigate academic gaps, adjust socially, and build confidence. However, the effectiveness of such support depends on its accessibility, consistency, and relevance to the learners' unique needs.

B2: "My teacher helped me catch up with the lessons I missed, and it really made learning easier."

B3: "My classmates encouraged me and included me in group activities, which helped me feel I belong again."

The testimonies of B2, B3, and B4 highlight the significant role of immediate classroom support in facilitating the reintegration of balik-aral students. B2 emphasizes the importance of teacher assistance, showing how structured academic guidance helps bridge learning gaps and makes lessons more manageable. B3 reflects the value of peer support in enhancing understanding, demonstrating that collaborative learning and approachable classmates can serve as accessible sources of academic help. Meanwhile, B4 underscores the emotional and social dimension of support, where inclusion and encouragement from peers foster a sense of belonging and rebuild confidence. These responses are significant because they reveal that effective reintegration is not solely dependent on formal instruction but also on the presence of a supportive classroom environment. The combination of teacher guidance and peer encouragement creates a holistic support system that addresses both academic and socio-emotional needs of returning learners.

Balik-aral students face multiple challenges in adjusting to school, including learning gaps, classroom anxiety, and age differences with peers. Studies from the Philippines highlight that mentorship programs, structured academic support, and family engagement are vital in helping returning learners persist and succeed (DepEd, 2021; Magno & Dela Cruz, 2021). Research shows that well-organized support systems, aligned with students' academic and socio-emotional needs, significantly improve reintegration outcomes (Santos & Reyes, 2023). However, gaps in guidance, inconsistent follow-up, and limited resources can reduce the effectiveness of these programs. Strengthening systemic support at the school and community levels is essential to ensure returning learners receive equitable opportunities to succeed academically and socially.

### 3.3 Theme 3

Theme	Responses	Meaning
<b>Apprehension on the Ambiguous Support and Reintegration Frameworks</b>	<p>"I didn't know what to do when I came back to school because no one clearly explained how I could catch up with my lessons."</p> <p>"Sometimes the teachers had different ways of helping me, so I got confused about what I should really follow."</p> <p>"There was no clear program for students like me, so I had to figure things out on my own."</p>	<p>This theme reflects students' feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety due to the lack of clear and consistent support systems during their reintegration into school. The responses indicate that students struggle to adjust because of unclear guidelines, inconsistent assistance from teachers, and the absence of structured programs tailored to their needs. As a result, they are often left to deal with academic recovery on their own, which can hinder their confidence and progress.</p>

Table 3 *Apprehension on the Ambiguous Support and Reintegration Frameworks*

Without clear support structures and reintegration frameworks, balik-aral students may face unnecessary challenges in adjusting to secondary education. Ambiguity in policies or guidance often leads to inconsistent practices among schools, teachers, and administrators, which can result in uneven academic support, fragmented social integration, and varied learning outcomes.

*B1: "I didn't know what to do when I came back to school because no one clearly explained how I could catch up with my lessons."*

*B2: "Sometimes the teachers had different ways of helping me, so I got confused about what I should really follow."*

*B3: "There was no clear program for students like me, so I had to figure things out on my own."*

The testimonies of B1, B2, and B3 reveal the significant impact of unclear and inconsistent reintegration frameworks on the experiences of balik-aral students. B1 highlights the lack of proper orientation and guidance upon returning, emphasizing how the absence of clear instructions creates confusion and delays academic adjustment. B2 points to inconsistency in the support provided by teachers, which reflects a lack of standardized procedures and leads to uncertainty in following academic expectations. Meanwhile, B3 underscores the absence of a structured program specifically designed for returning learners, forcing students to rely on self-directed strategies that may not always be effective. These responses are significant because they demonstrate that ambiguity in support systems does not only affect academic progress but also contributes to confusion, stress, and unequal learning opportunities. The findings suggest that clearly defined and consistently implemented reintegration frameworks are essential to ensure that all returning students receive coherent, equitable, and effective support.

This lack of clarity affects mentoring programs, academic interventions, and monitoring processes, ultimately limiting students' ability to fully benefit from returning to school. Schools and the Department of Education should provide well-defined support systems, structured reintegration guidelines, and consistent evaluation mechanisms to ensure successful adaptation.

Research has shown that many educational interventions fail when policies and support frameworks are unclear. Fullan (2020) emphasizes that effective student reintegration requires systematic planning, clear communication, and adequate support for both educators and learners. When guidance is ill-defined, teachers and staff struggle to provide consistent academic assistance, while students experience uncertainty and uneven opportunities for learning (Darling-Hammond, 2021). A study on returning learners in the Philippine context by Bernardo and Mendoza (2020) found that ambiguous reintegration procedures caused confusion among educators, particularly regarding remedial strategies and individualized learning plans. Bautista et al. (2019) also noted that the absence of detailed operational frameworks hindered timely provision of resources and mentoring programs.

When returning students are not supported by clearly articulated guidelines, they face gaps in instruction, inconsistent mentoring, and insufficient academic scaffolding (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Schleicher (2018) points out that structured reintegration protocols enhance educators' competencies, enabling them to provide targeted guidance and support. In the Philippines, Javier et al. (2019) observed that learners returning after an extended absence often lacked access to standardized academic resources and clear school-based support systems, leading to inconsistent learning experiences. To optimize the reintegration of balik-aral students, policymakers and school administrators must ensure that educators are equipped with clear procedures, adequate resources, and structured support frameworks before students reenter secondary education.

### 3.4 Theme 4

Theme	Responses	Meaning
<i>Innovative Support and Adaptation Strategies</i>	"I try to study with my classmates and ask for help whenever I don't understand a lesson."	These strategies are a testament to student resilience. However, while these individual innovations are impressive, they are often born out of a necessity caused by the "Ambiguous Frameworks" we discussed earlier. The ideal scenario is where the school provides the framework, and the student uses these strategies to <i>enhance</i> it, rather than <i>replace</i> it.
	"I review my lessons at home and watch videos online so I can understand topics better."	
	"I make my own schedule to catch up on lessons I missed before."	

Table 4 Innovative Support and Adaptation Strategies

The theme for this question arises from the specific research question: "What strategies have you found most effective in adapting to returning to secondary education after an extended absence?" This theme emphasizes the coping strategies and adaptive measures that balik-aral students, together with their teachers, have employed to manage academic gaps, social

reintegration, and classroom adjustment challenges. Participants described the use of flexible learning approaches, peer mentoring, and self-directed learning as key strategies that facilitated their reintegration and personal growth. These adaptive strategies helped students build confidence, stay motivated, and gradually bridge learning gaps while adjusting to classroom routines.

S1: "I try to study with my classmates and ask for help whenever I don't understand a lesson."

S2: "I review my lessons at home and watch videos online so I can understand topics better."

S3: "I make my own schedule to catch up on lessons I missed before."

The testimonies of S1, S2, and S3 highlight the proactive and self-regulated strategies employed by balik-aral students to overcome challenges in their reintegration. S1 demonstrates the importance of peer collaboration and help-seeking behavior, which not only improves academic understanding but also strengthens social connections within the classroom. S2 reflects the use of independent and technology-supported learning, indicating how students maximize available resources to supplement missed instruction and enhance comprehension. Meanwhile, S3 emphasizes self-discipline and time management through structured scheduling, showing a high level of personal responsibility in addressing learning gaps. These responses are significant because they illustrate that successful reintegration is not solely dependent on external support but also on the learners' initiative and adaptability. The combination of collaborative, independent, and self-managed strategies reveals the development of resilience, autonomy, and problem-solving skills among balik-aral students, which are essential for their sustained academic success and personal growth.

Studies have shown that flexible learning arrangements, mentoring, and individualized support significantly enhance the academic success and engagement of returning learners (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Project-based and collaborative learning strategies enable students to apply concepts in practical contexts, increasing participation and motivation while supporting critical thinking development. Likewise, Mioduser et al. (2022) highlight the effectiveness of digital tools and peer support networks in promoting active learning and sustained engagement among learners facing diverse challenges. In the context of balik-aral students, these strategies provide structured yet adaptable pathways to academic achievement and social adjustment, ensuring that learners can successfully reintegrate while strengthening self-determination, resilience, and overall personal growth.

### 3.5 Theme 5

Theme	Responses	Meaning
Taking Time for Personal Conversation with Peers	<p>"I talk with my classmates and teachers whenever I feel overwhelmed with lessons."</p> <p>"When I feel stressed, I share my problems with my friends, and it helps me feel lighter."</p> <p>"I make a daily schedule and take short breaks to stay calm and focused."</p>	<p>This is the internalization of balance. The student is recognizing their own "redline"—the point where they become too stressed to function—and is using tactical breaks to reset their nervous system. This is a high-level maturity skill called Metacognitive Regulation.</p>

Table 5 Taking Time for Personal Conversation with Peers

This theme is derived from the research question: "What strategies or practices do you use to manage stress related to returning to secondary education after an extended absence?" This theme highlights the ways balik-aral students cope with stress associated with academic gaps, classroom adjustment, and social reintegration. Participants reported employing various strategies, including structured study schedules, peer support, self-reflection, and relaxation techniques. Organizing study time and breaking down tasks allowed students to manage their workload effectively, while seeking support from classmates and teachers provided emotional relief and practical guidance. Self-reflection and relaxation practices helped them maintain focus, reduce anxiety, and improve overall well-being. These strategies are crucial in enabling students to adapt to the challenges of returning to school while sustaining motivation and personal growth.

S2: "I talk with my classmates and teachers whenever I feel overwhelmed with lessons."

S4: "When I feel stressed, I share my problems with my friends, and it helps me feel lighter."

S5: "I make a daily schedule and take short breaks to stay calm and focused."

The testimonies of S2, S4, and S5 highlight the importance of both social interaction and self-management strategies in coping with stress among balik-aral students. S2 emphasizes open communication with classmates and teachers, showing that seeking guidance and emotional support helps reduce academic pressure and promotes a sense of reassurance. S4 reflects the emotional benefit of peer conversations, where sharing personal concerns provides psychological relief and strengthens social connections, making students feel less isolated in their struggles. Meanwhile, S5 demonstrates the role of structured routines and self-regulation, where effective time management and planned breaks help maintain focus and prevent burnout. These responses are significant because they reveal that stress management is a combination of interpersonal and intrapersonal strategies. The integration of peer support and personal discipline enables balik-aral students to manage anxiety, sustain engagement, and develop resilience, which are essential for successful reintegration and overall well-being.

Research supports the importance of stress management for returning learners. Flexible learning arrangements, mentoring, and supportive peer networks have been shown to reduce anxiety and improve engagement, persistence, and academic outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Likewise, studies on adult learners emphasize that structured coping strategies, such as time management, peer support, and mindfulness practices, enhance resilience and self-efficacy, enabling students to face academic and social challenges with confidence (Roeser et al., 2013; Skaalvik, 2017). In the context of balik-aral students, adopting stress reduction strategies ensures that learners can effectively navigate classroom pressures, maintain motivation, and achieve both academic success and personal growth.

### 3.6 Theme 6

Theme	Responses	Meaning
Handling Tasks Through Time Management	<p>"I make a weekly schedule to divide my subjects into smaller tasks and make sure I don't fall behind."</p> <p>"I prioritize my assignments first before other activities so I can finish them on time."</p> <p>"I set deadlines for assignments and take short breaks to keep myself focused."</p>	<p>The responses show that students practice breaking down tasks into manageable parts, setting clear priorities, and establishing personal deadlines to ensure timely completion of their work.</p> <p>Additionally, incorporating strategies such as scheduling and taking short breaks helps maintain focus and productivity.</p>

Table 6 Handling Tasks Through Time Management

The theme identified in this question is derived from the research question: "How do you prioritize tasks and manage time to cope with returning to secondary education after an extended absence?" In this theme, balik-aral students described various strategies to handle the increased demands of coursework, assignments, and classroom participation. Students reported creating study schedules, breaking tasks into manageable parts, and setting personal deadlines to stay on track. These strategies are critical in balancing academic responsibilities, household or work commitments, and personal life, allowing students to adapt to the demands of returning to school without becoming overwhelmed. Effective time management enables students to focus on high-priority learning tasks, maintain consistency in studying, and achieve academic goals, thereby reducing stress and improving overall performance.

S1: "I make a weekly schedule to divide my subjects into smaller tasks and make sure I don't fall behind."

S3: "I prioritize my assignments first before other activities so I can finish them on time."

S4: "I set deadlines for assignments and take short breaks to keep myself focused."

The testimonies of S1, S3, and S4 demonstrate the practical and intentional use of time management strategies among balik-aral students as they cope with academic demands. S1 highlights the importance of planning and organization, where breaking down subjects into smaller tasks makes learning more manageable and prevents academic backlog. S3 reflects prioritization skills, showing that students consciously identify and focus on important tasks first to meet deadlines and maintain academic performance. Meanwhile, S4 emphasizes self-regulation through setting deadlines and incorporating breaks, which helps sustain concentration and avoid burnout. These responses are significant because they illustrate how structured time management not only supports academic productivity but also promotes discipline, responsibility, and balance. The ability to effectively allocate time enables returning learners to navigate multiple responsibilities, reduce stress, and gradually build confidence in their capacity to succeed in school.

Research indicates that adult learners and returning students benefit from structured time management strategies to handle competing demands effectively. Studies by Jerrim and Sims (2020) and Knowles et al. (2015) emphasize that breaking down large tasks, prioritizing responsibilities, and creating schedules improve focus, reduce anxiety, and enhance learning outcomes. Peer support and mentoring further help students allocate time efficiently and stay accountable. In the context of balik-aral students, these strategies ensure persistence, academic progress, and the development of self-regulation skills necessary for successful reintegration into secondary education.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study highlighted several significant challenges faced by balik-aral students in reintegrating into secondary education after an extended absence, including academic gaps, classroom adjustment difficulties, initial anxiety, ambiguous support structures, and increased workload. These challenges affect students' engagement, confidence, and learning outcomes, emphasizing the need for systemic support to ensure successful reintegration. Without clear guidance, mentoring, and structured academic support, returning learners may struggle to catch up, manage stress, and participate fully in the classroom. The findings underscore the importance of flexible learning approaches, peer mentoring, self-directed study, and structured stress reduction strategies in helping balik-aral students adapt. Time management practices, such as creating schedules, breaking tasks into manageable steps, and prioritizing responsibilities, were critical in balancing academic and personal commitments. Support from teachers, peers, and families played a central role in facilitating both academic success and personal growth. To optimize reintegration, schools and policymakers should provide clear reintegration frameworks, well-defined support systems, and access to resources that address both academic and socio-emotional needs. Structured mentoring, individualized guidance, and flexible learning options can bridge learning gaps, reduce anxiety, and strengthen self-determination and resilience among returning learners. These strategies align with UN SDG-4 on Quality Education, promoting inclusive, equitable, and effective learning opportunities for all students. Strengthening systemic support, clarifying policies, and providing targeted interventions will empower balik-aral students to persist, achieve academic success, and fully realize their personal and educational potential.

### *Glossary*

**Balik-Aral Program** - The Balik-Aral Program in the Philippines is a DepEd (Department of Education) recognized initiative designed to reintegrate out-of-school youth and adults (dropouts) into the education system to complete elementary, junior, or senior high school. It provides a second chance for education, often utilizing flexible learning, Alternative Learning Systems (ALS), or special admission slots to help returning learners overcome academic disruptions.

**Balik-Aral Students**-Refers to learners who have previously dropped out or discontinued schooling and have decided to return to formal education to resume their studies and complete their academic requirements.

**Old Curriculum returnee**-Refers to students who re-enter the education system after being previously enrolled under an earlier or outdated curriculum and must transition into the current curriculum structure, often requiring adjustment to new content, standards, and academic expectations.

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## Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements with participants, the data are not publicly available.

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## Appendices

Appendix upon request