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### Examining the Lived Experiences of Adult Learners in Practical Nursing Programs: A Qualitative Study

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# Examining the Lived Experiences of Adult Learners in Practical Nursing Programs: A Qualitative Study

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the literature for the role of motivation in adult learners in post-secondary practical nursing programs. While literature exists on supporting traditional learners in nursing programs at the college and university levels, research lacked on the motivations, barriers, and support provided to adult learners in practical nursing programs. This study contributes to literature and fills that gap by exploring the lived experiences of these adult learners using the self-determination theory and hermeneutic phenomenology to explore these motivations, perceived barriers, and needed support. This was accomplished using semi-structured interviews with seven graduates from a post-secondary practical nursing program located in the Western New York region. Overall, the participants described the positive experience graduating from a practical nursing program and the opportunities that it provided from a personal and professional standpoint. The participants provided a holistic view of their lives before, during, and after completion of the program. As a result of this rich data and open discussions, a three-phase framework was developed. These phases include the lived experiences of the adult learners before, during, and after program completion. These findings suggest a need for development of supportive resources in practical nursing programs for adult learners to navigate these experiences successfully. With successful program completion and licensure, these individuals can enhance their socioeconomic status and provide communities with a qualified healthcare workforce creating positive health outcomes.

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Examining the Lived Experiences of Adult Learners in Practical Nursing Programs:  
A Qualitative Study

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher University

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## **Dedication**

The motivation in everything that I have and have yet to accomplish, I owe to my beautiful family. My sons, two amazing human beings, who have been with me every step of the way in all my journeys. My husband, who provides unwavering support in my educational, professional, and personal goals and dreams. My dad, who has always been a strong pillar in my life. My grandmother, who although is no longer with us physically, has inspired me to go beyond my limits and challenge any obstacle in the way. You are with me in Spirit always.

My DEXL family and Cohort 16, all the best to you! Team Trinity will be forever in my heart. I am so proud of the hard work and dedication that we had as a team and as friends. My committee members, Dr. Joshua Fegley and Dr. Kathleen Dever, thank you for your incredible patience, knowledge, and kindness throughout this process. You have ignited a passion for research in me!

Finally, to the late Dr. Jason Berman, my friend and ally, to whom I owe immense gratitude for your wisdom and supportive mentorship. I will not settle for the status quo and will always advocate for what is right and just. I miss you dearly.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Amy Archey is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Nursing at the Wegmans School of Nursing at St. John Fisher University. Amy attended St. John Fisher University for her Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing (2010) and Master of Science Degree in Nursing Education (2014). She began her doctoral studies at St. John Fisher University in May 2021 in the Ed. D. program in Executive Leadership with a focus on social justice. Amy pursued her research on exploring the lived experiences of adult learners in practical nursing programs under the direction of Dr. Joshua Fegley, and Dr. Kathleen Dever and received an Ed. D degree in 2023.

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the literature for the role of motivation in adult learners in post-secondary practical nursing programs. While literature exists on supporting traditional learners in nursing programs at the college and university levels, research lacked on the motivations, barriers, and support provided to adult learners in practical nursing programs. This study contributes to literature and fills that gap by exploring the lived experiences of these adult learners using the self-determination theory and hermeneutic phenomenology to explore these motivations, perceived barriers, and needed support. This was accomplished using semi-structured interviews with seven graduates from a post-secondary practical nursing program located in the Western New York region. Overall, the participants described the positive experience graduating from a practical nursing program and the opportunities that it provided from a personal and professional standpoint. The participants provided a holistic view of their lives before, during, and after completion of the program. As a result of this rich data and open discussions, a three-phase framework was developed. These phases include the lived experiences of the adult learners before, during, and after program completion. These findings suggest a need for development of supportive resources in practical nursing programs for adult learners to navigate these experiences successfully. With successful program completion and licensure, these individuals can enhance their socioeconomic status and provide communities with a qualified healthcare workforce creating positive health outcomes.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The population of adult learners in post-secondary education, continuing education after high school, continues to grow in the United States (Rabourn et al., 2018). According to the U.S Department of Education (2021), the adult learner is the fastest growing student population. Adult learners are generally over age 24 and may share one or more of the following characteristics: (a) experiencing extended time between high school and enrolling in post-secondary programs, (b) only enrolling in part-time studies, (c) having financial independence from parents or guardians, (d) having dependents, or (e) failing to complete high school in a 4-year period (Raybourn et al., 2018). This differs from traditional learners who enter post-secondary education immediately upon high school graduation or completing an equivalency exam (Raybourn et al., 2018). Many adult learners face economic and educational barriers as part of a marginalized population (Tate et al., 2014).

Marginalized populations can be defined as oppressed groups of people who, due to societal norms and structures, experience disadvantage, lack of social support, and access to resources to prepare for higher education (Tate et al., 2014). These populations include, but are not limited to females, some racial and ethnic groups, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning) community members, older adults, and individuals from lower socioeconomic status (Tate et al., 2014). Since the U.S. recession in 2008, there has been a continuous lack of adequate educational and supportive resources for marginalized populations. Consequentially, limited

resource allocations for successful educational outcomes have impacted education and career training for adult learners (Tate et al., 2014). Other barriers that adult learners may face include lack of healthy childhood development and educational support due to lower socioeconomic status, lack of resources that support higher education, and poor high school completion rates (Tate et al., 2014). The adult learning experience also may vary depending on their level of engagement and ability to prioritize their educational endeavors over other commitments (Rüber et al., 2018). Overcoming these barriers and achieving a post-secondary degree is a way for adult learners to obtain a new career that can positively change their lives (Shanaker et al., 2013).

Examples of post-secondary programs that assist adult learners to have a positive educational experience include practical nursing programs leading to state licensure. There are distinct levels of licensed nursing; the entry level in nursing is the licensed practical nurse. A licensed practical nurse (LPN) is defined as an individual who can:

Perform tasks and responsibilities within the framework of case-finding, health teaching, health counseling, and provision of supportive and restorative care under the direction of a registered professional nurse or licensed physician, dentist, or other licensed health care provider legally authorized under this title and in accordance with the commissioner's regulations (NYS Office of Professions, 2022).

There are several reasons that adult learners choose this type of program. First, practical nursing programs are shorter in length as compared to associate or baccalaureate nursing programs. A post-secondary practical nursing program runs

between 9 and 24 months (Curtis, 2022). A registered nursing program is more advanced in the nursing profession and consists of more rigorous educational preparation. For example, an associate degree in nursing (ADN) requires 2 years of nursing education, and a baccalaureate of science in nursing degree (BSN) demands at least a 4-year commitment of nursing education prior to taking the RN licensure exam (NYS Office of Professions, 2022). With these different educational levels, adult learners often will choose the fastest option to enter the workforce (Rothes et al., 2017). The post-secondary practical nursing programs meet those needs and enhance the socioeconomic status of these adult learners who complete their field of study, are licensed, and enter the nursing profession (Rothes et al., 2017).

A second reason for choosing a practical nursing program is cost. Currently, a practical nursing program costs an average of \$10,000 to \$18,000 (Curtis, 2022) as compared to a 2 year or 4-year higher education degree costing up to double or quadruple this amount (Hanson, 2021). The financial burden can be offset by student loans, grants, and scholarships based on financial need and economic status (Curtis, 2022). Adult learners often have a job, working around their school schedules, which can offset costs (American Council on Education [ACE], 2020).

Finally, job growth for licensed practical nursing is trending upward. Since 2018, New York State LPN jobs have been on the rise and are projected to continue to grow at a rate of 10.7% by 2028 (Curtis, 2022). This growth promotes the creation of more than 66,000 new jobs in the US alone (Curtis, 2022). New jobs for LPNs in New York are projected to outpace the national growth rate, increasing new opportunities by

nearly 20% (Curtis, 2022). Therefore, beginning a nursing career in New York State as an LPN can benefit individuals looking to enter the nursing profession (Curtis, 2022).

### **Adult Learners**

Increased student enrollment in adult education programs can be traced back to the 1960s with the evolving Civil Rights Movement and a demand for equal opportunity for all in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). President Lyndon Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964 provided the catalyst to expand adult education opportunities in individual states with federal support (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). After President Johnson's declared "War on Poverty" legislation was passed, domestic policymakers increasingly focused on the following areas over the next 5 years: (a) improving American schools, (b) launching the Medicare and Medicaid programs, (c) increasing housing subsidies and urban development programs, and (d) creating employment and training programs (Bailey & Duquette, 2014). With a growing realization of the importance of quality education for all Americans, along with evolution of the American workforce, amalgamation of technology and rising global competition, legislation concerning adult education was imperative (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

In 2008, President Barack Obama called on each American adult to commit to at least one year of post-secondary education or career training through enrollment into a 2- or 4-year higher education institution, vocational program, or a work apprenticeship (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). However, the Obama administration had several challenges in achieving these commitments. These included

encouraging adult literacy, engaging lifelong learning to compete globally, and providing for a better future economy in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Post-secondary practical nursing programs answer this call to action as they are vocational programs that provide adult learners the ability to join the workforce (Rothes et al., 2017).

### ***Motivation for Adult Learner Enrollment in Post-Secondary Education***

Adult learners often hold themselves to different standards than traditional students. According to Cannady et al. (2012), adult learners are highly self-motivated, self-conscious about success, and have differing social and emotional needs than those of a traditional learner. Adults can be motivated to return to school for several reasons. One reason may be to change their economic status and provide a better future for their families (Renirie, 2017). Economic stability can lead to a healthier lifestyle, safer living conditions, and improved self-esteem (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Other reasons adult learners choose to enroll in post-secondary education often are professional, societal, and social (Gardner et al., 2021). Post-secondary education gives the individual a sense of personal value and professional accomplishment (Gardner et al., 2021). From a societal standpoint, educated adults tend to participate in community sustainability in forms of volunteering and voting more often (Gardner et al., 2021). Socially, an individual with some form of higher education tends to have better physical and mental health which leads to better life choices (Gardner et al., 2021).

When examining motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations must be considered. Intrinsic motivation refers to the accomplishment of an act that is self-



rewarding (Rothes et al., 2017). Learning a new skill for the interest of doing so is an example of intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is defined as accomplishing something for reward like notoriety, a degree, or to avoid disapproval or failure (Rothes et al., 2017). For adult learners, intrinsic motivation is considered superior to extrinsic motivation due to the basic human need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

### ***Barriers to Educational Success for Adult Learners***

Adult learners experience barriers to academic success that are different than those experienced as traditional students. These barriers include faculty members' instruction and attitudes towards adult learners and the adult learners' perspectives on institutional practices (van Rhijn et al., 2016). Non-cognitive and social self-perceived barriers also impact adult learning experiences for those adults who graduated with a high school equivalency exam or general education diploma (GED). Additional barriers include availability of and accessibility to resources (e.g., financial aid, information on resources and support, flexible scheduling options), life balance (priority setting with multiple responsibilities as an adult), and social exclusion (lack of ability to socially engage) as an adult learner (van Rhijn et al., 2016).

One barrier for adult learners is how faculty perceive them (Yarborough & Welch, 2020). Faculty can have a challenging time managing the educational expectations of the adult learner, particularly when it comes to self-reported anxiety and the need for academic accommodations or adjustments (Yarborough & Welch, 2020). There is a lack of formal education for the faculty to understand the process of awarding accommodations, communication, and collaboration between faculty and accessibility services administrators (Yarborough & Welch, 2020). Faculty in post-

secondary educational programs may have a different perception of adult learners' motivations and desire for success based on need for academic resources (Brinthaup & Eady, 2014).

Adult learners, having different motivations and expectations for their learning, may find the unknown perceptions of their faculty to be distressing, thus increasing their anxiety (Day et al., 2011). Day et al. (2011) researched the perceptions of adult learners in the classroom, identifying that faculty valued the adult learner's persistence to balance school and other life priorities. Faculty also reported they had limited training on meeting the educational needs of the adult learner (Day et al., 2011). For example, some non-cognitive social pressures for adult learners are the desires to feel included among their peers and to be accepted for their experiences (Rabourn et al., 2018). Being socially included and valued for having life experiences which contribute to the group can lead to personal satisfaction and successful educational endeavors for the adult learner (Raybourn, et al., 2018).

### **Post-Secondary Vocational Programs**

Educational options for adult learners, in addition to college and university settings, include post-secondary vocational programs (ACE, 2020). This type of program provides academic coursework that is an occupation specific to that industry's recognized credentials and standards (ACE, 2020). Post-secondary vocational programs also can provide education and job training in a shorter time than a traditional college or university degree (ACE, 2020). The goal of achieving a post-secondary vocational degree can be the motivation needed to positively change one's socioeconomic status

(Shankar et al., 2013). One such program is a post-secondary practical nursing program.

Licensed practical nurses (LPN) work collaboratively as part of the core health care team and practice under the supervision of a registered nurse (RN) or medical doctor (MD) to ensure the holistic well-being of patients and the community (American Nurses Association [ANA], 2022). In the United States, each state has a core curriculum for practical nursing programs to ensure competent preparation for licensure (NYS Office of Professions, 2022). Practical nursing programs provide a basic knowledge of the nursing sciences and practices in preparation for obtaining licensure (National Council of State Boards of Nursing [NCSBN], 2020). Entry-level knowledge for a practical nurse includes the following categories of patient need: (a) safe and effective care environment (coordinated care, safety, and infection control); (b) health promotion and maintenance; (c) psychosocial integrity; and (d) physiological integrity (basic care and comfort, pharmacological therapies, reduction of risk potential, and physiological adaptation) (NCSBN, 2020).

The safe and effective care environment curriculum prepares the entry-level nurse with the knowledge for the prevention of adverse events such as infections and falls. Health promotion and maintenance skills are used to educate the patient on healthy lifestyle choices and proper self-care. Psychosocial integrity focuses on promotion of mental health and wellness through identifying positive and negative effects on mental health and ways to promote psychological wellbeing for the patient. Physiological integrity is a substantial portion of the nursing curriculum for licensure as it covers the training of skills to support basic human needs like comfort and nutrition,

medication therapy and outcomes, disorders of body systems, and preventing and treating disease processes (NCSBN, 2020). The comprehensive nature of practical nursing may be challenging to adult learners; however, successful completion has a positive outcome for both graduates and the communities they serve (Jayasinge, 2015). For this reason, it is imperative that the lived experiences of adult learners in these programs be examined.

### **Problem Statement**

Adult learners in practical nursing programs experience a myriad of barriers to academic success. While literature exists on supporting traditional learners in nursing programs at the college and university levels, there is a gap in research on the motivations, barriers, and support provided to adult learners in practical nursing programs. Exploring the educational experiences of adult learners who completed a practical nursing program may give insight as to their motivations to return to school and the barriers to their academic success. Research is needed on the adult learners' educational experience in practical nursing programs to create a better understanding of the needed academic and non-academic support. These supportive resources can be designed based on the new knowledge of those experiences and enhance successful program completion. Understanding the lived experiences of an adult learner's educational journey in a practical nursing program is important for the students, faculty, nursing program leaders, and the community. For the students, there would be improved chances of degree completion and positive life outcomes. For the faculty, development of new strategies to help support adult learners could be created and implemented. Nursing program leaders can use the knowledge to build enhanced

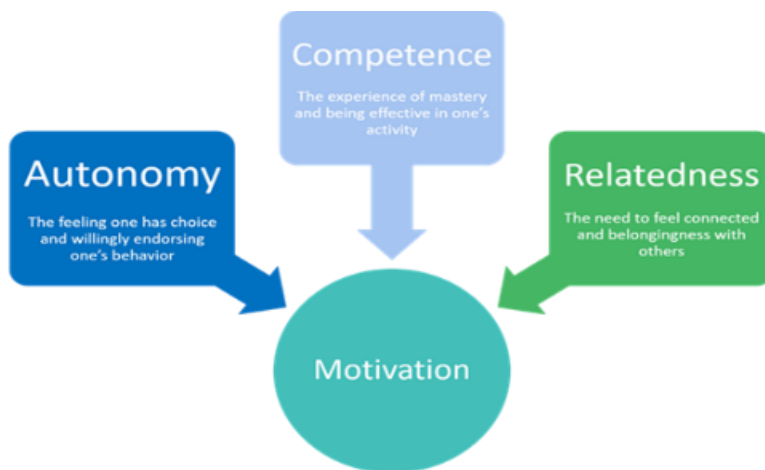
systems of support and policies. Finally, the community will be provided with a qualified LPN workforce, enhancing health outcomes.

### Theoretical Rationale

When considering learner motivation, there are several theories that support traditional learners, but limited theories on the adult learner (Rothes et al., 2017). Self-determination theory (SDT) explores both the humanistic motivators and personality traits of adult learners and how these affect behavioral self-regulation. Behavioral self-regulation is defined as how an individual is motivated to sustain a certain behavior such as reward, punishment, or values (Ryan et al., 1997). There are three constructs within SDT that promote optimal individual motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These constructs are competence, relatedness, and autonomy and are required for personal growth, behavior and social development, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). (See Figure 1.1)

**Figure 1.1**

*Self-Determination Theory: Constructs of Motivation*



*Note.* This model shows the three constructs of the Self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness and how each relates to motivation. Reprinted from Center for Community Health and Prevention, University of Rochester Medical Center. (<https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/community-health/patient-care/self-determination-theory.aspx>). In the public domain.

An individual demonstrating competence possesses interest, excitement, and confidence that boost their performance and self-efficacy or belief in oneself to achieve goals through chosen behaviors (Akamatsu et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Relatedness refers to the individual's ability to associate with others in a similar social context and environment as their own. Relatedness, in correlation with personal growth and well-being, is needed for both intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy provides an individual with self-governance and the ability to make decisions based on experience, behavioral self-regulation, and perceived outcomes in situations and is inherently part of intrinsic motivation (Rothes et al., 2017). Learning strategies are a person's way of organizing and utilizing knowledge and skill sets to achieve a particular goal (Rothes et al., 2017). Competence is achieved through different learning strategies (Rothes et al., 2017). Learning strategies that align with these constructs include critical thinking (using experience and observation to make decisions), self-awareness (knowledge of individual character, feelings, and motivations), cognition (process of acquiring knowledge), organizational skills (actions taken to prioritize the order of information), and interest in learning (seeking knowledge) (Rothes et al., 2017).

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the motivations and barriers, if any, to adult learners' educational experiences in post-secondary practical nursing programs.

## **Research Question**

There is a gap in the literature on adult educational experiences in practical nursing programs, with most current literature focusing on traditional learners' educational experiences in traditional college and university nursing programs. This study seeks to answer the question: What are the lived experiences of adult learners in practical nursing programs? The lived experience of adult practical nursing students is inclusive of their motivations for study, experienced barriers to success, and strategies utilized to ensure completion of program requirements.

## **Potential Significance of the Study**

Results from this research study may assist in understanding more about the adult learners' educational experiences in post-secondary practical nursing programs. Exploring how the adult learner engages in their educational experience using competence, relatedness, and autonomy is required for understanding the personal growth, behavior, social development, and well-being of the learner. This study will provide data on motivations and barriers that impact the experiences and educational outcomes of adult learners. With that knowledge, post-secondary practical nursing programs may enhance the resources available to their students to achieve successful educational outcomes leading to nursing licensure. These outcomes could alter the livelihood of students, faculty, program leaders, and the community. For students it would improve the likelihood of degree completion. Faculty would develop new strategies to support adult learners. Program leaders would enhance support systems and policies. The community would have better health outcomes with an increase in the LPN workforce.

## **Chapter Summary**

Adult learners have been returning to post-secondary education programs for several decades (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Exploring adult learners' lived experiences during practical nursing education is imperative to assist in successful educational outcomes. Data collected on the adult learners' motivations and barriers and how these impact those experiences would be significant to the educators and leaders of post-secondary practical nursing programs (Rothes et al., 2017). Findings from this study would assist in developing resources to support positive educational outcomes for this unique population (Jayasinge, 2015). Competence, relatedness, and autonomy are required for personal growth, behavior and social development, and well-being of the adult learner (Ryan & Deci, 2000). A well-designed educational experience in practical nursing programs will build upon these constructs and prepare adult learners for successful program completion. This will lead to better socioeconomic advantage, give communities competent nursing professionals to care for them, and provide the nursing profession with well-qualified healthcare providers to help fill the employment gap (Curtis, 2022).

The following chapter reviews literature on adult learners' motivation and levels of engagement in their educational experiences given the barriers that exist in those experiences. Gaps identified in the literature review establish the need for this qualitative study.



## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Post-secondary educational experiences can vary between adult learners for several reasons. First, adult learners may hold themselves to different standards than traditional students. Adult learners often are highly self-motivated, self-conscious about success, and have differing social and emotional needs than that of a traditional learner (Cannady et al., 2012). As an adult learner, achieving successful educational outcomes, social and professional inclusion, and other personal and professional responsibilities are factors considered when returning to school (Lin & Wang, 2018). Second, adult learning experiences also may vary depending on the learners' motivations and level of engagement, ability to be present in their academic institutions and peer groups, and in their educational experience (Rüber et al., 2018). Finally, institutional barriers can be a challenge for adult learners. Many higher educational institutions' policies and procedures are geared toward traditional students, leaving adult learners searching for academic, social, and technological support (Renirie, 2017).

Although there have been many studies on adult learners in higher educational settings, research is lacking on adult learners and their post-secondary educational experiences in vocational training opportunities. During this research review, several themes arose regarding adult learners' needs for successful educational experiences. The areas of research relevant to this search as described in the introduction were adult learners' motivations for achievement of educational goals, levels of engagement of

the adult learners, and the barriers adult learners face when returning to post-secondary education. The Self-determination theory (SDT) provided a framework in which current literature was reviewed and synthesized. SDT explores both the humanistic motivators and personality traits of adult learners and how these contexts affect behavioral self-regulation. Behavioral self-regulation is defined as what motivates an individual to sustain a certain behavior, be it through reward, punishment, or values (Ryan et al., 1997).

A literature search included the following databases: ERIC, Proquest, Ebsco, APA PsycNet, and Google Scholar. Keywords used in the search were a combination of the following terms: “adult education,” “adult learners,” “non-traditional students,” “traditional versus non-traditional students,” “vocational programs,” “post-secondary education,” and “self-determination theory.” The search was refined to dates of peer-reviewed articles from 2011 to 2022. Renirie (2017) and Rüber et al. (2018) articles were used for introductory purposes but were excluded from the full literature review. While the primary review includes student data from the United States, a review of articles from Canada, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, and Japan also were used as student comparisons to adult learners needs for successful educational experiences.

### **Motivation and Achievement of Educational Goals**

Gardner et al. (2021) researched the role that motivation plays in post-secondary adult education. The study reviewed the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators for post-secondary education with a focus on the following: (a) enrollment type (part-time or full-time), (b) previous level of education, (c) work experience if any, and (d) type of

educational program (Gardner et al., 2021). A convenience sample was taken from four Midwestern post-secondary institutions of students 25 years of age or older. In all, 10,675 responses were received (Gardner et al., 2021). Four research questions were given based on the above criteria. Results indicated that 76.4% respondents identified as female and 23.6% male (Garner et al., 2021). Three sets of chi square tests were run to compare motivation and (a) gender, (b) type of academic degree, (c) academic program, and (d) enrollment status (Gardner et al., 2021). A descriptive analysis suggested that adult learners are more intrinsically motivated than traditional learners (42.8% vs. 40.3%). Gender analysis revealed that while males are more extrinsically motivated (49.8% vs. 37.7%), females are more intrinsically motivated (45.3% vs 20.8%) (Gardner et al., 2021). There was no statistical significance in ethnicities and motivating factors in this study; however, there was a statistical significance in level of education and pursued degree where the current level of education is predictive of type of degree studied (Garner et al., 2021). Remarkable results also were seen in academic programs, academic majors, and enrollment status indicating that type of motivation impacts type of degree selected and enrollment status (Gardner et al., 2021). Finally, the number of years an adult learner has been employed decreases their intrinsic motivation for obtaining a post-secondary education degree (Gardner et al., 2021). This research concludes that several factors impact the adult learner motivation, such as degree of choice, academic programming, and enrollment status (Gardner et al., 2021). This has implications for academic institutions and how to support adult learner motivations for successful post-secondary educational outcomes (Gardner et al., 2021).

Messineo et al. (2019) evaluated self-reported motivation for choosing nursing as a field of study from a SDT perspective (Messineo et al., 2019). For this mixed methods study, a two-part questionnaire was given measuring socioeconomic status and motivation for enrolling in nursing school (Messineo et al., 2019). The participants were 133 first year nursing students of which 84 identified as females and 49 males ages 18 to 41 years old (Messineo et al., 2019). Using dimensional analysis, four categories of nursing students' quantity and quality of autonomy and controlled motivation were determined in this study within the context of SDT framework. These included students with: (a) high autonomy/low controlled motivation, (b) low autonomy/high controlled motivation, (c) low autonomy/low controlled motivation, and (d) different results indicating low quality and quantity of motivation (Messineo et al., 2019). Results indicated that nursing students' motivations are unidimensional (having one dimension or single factor) and aligned with a person-centered approach (needs of the individual) (Messineo et al., 2019). The significance of these results provides information for educators and nursing programs on how to motivate and support nursing students based on their self-reported levels of autonomy and motivation to be successful in nursing programs. This would lead to a better understanding of factors contributing to retention in nursing programs (Messineo et al., 2019).

Rothes et al. (2017) looked at adult learners' motivations within the SDT framework using self-regulation, self-efficacy, academic self-concept, engagement and learning under the SDT framework. A total of 188 adult learners in Portugal were evaluated in several diverse types of adult educational programs including: short-term training, vocational, and higher education courses (Rothes et al., 2017). Several

qualitative questionnaires were used including the Learning Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ-L), Self-Description Questionnaire-III (SDQ-III), and an adapted Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). These instruments measure learning strategies and motivations for learning (Rothes et al., 2017). The researchers integrated these scales to create a cluster analysis of differing motivational profiles (Rothes et al., 2017). Results indicated that adult learners chose higher education programs based on interest and personal importance (autonomous motivation) (Rothes et al., 2017). Other adult learners choose higher education due to pressures to keep a job or guilt (controlled motivation). The SDT framework was partially supported in this study due to the evidence of autonomy for learning, engagement, and self-efficacy but fell short on providing meaningful evidence that controlled motivations are always negative (Rothes et al., 2017).

Goulão (2014) reviewed self-efficacy and academic achievement as it relates to adult learners in an online platform. Self-efficacy connects the learners' responsibility to self and learning processes. Goulão (2014) collected data on three components of self-efficacy as it relates to academic achievement levels of self-efficacy in a specific class, performance in that class, and what role, if any, gender plays in self-efficacy. After evaluating the outcomes of the 63 students (average age 42 years and mixed gender) who took a modified MSLQ results indicated the following for self-efficacy level in a specific class (Goulão, 2014). The average score for the eight areas evaluated in the MSLQ was the self-efficacy scale 45.03 ( $SD=5.96$ ) with a mode of 48 and reliability of  $\alpha=.908$  (Goulão, 2014). Overall final performance in the class unit of the 63 students had a final classification of 13.40 ( $SD=3.69$ ) on a 0 to 20 scale with a

median of 15 and mode of 16. Finally, when comparing self-efficacy and gender in this study, where men ( $n=12$ ) and women ( $n=51$ ), there were no statistical significance between gender and self-efficacy (Goulão, 2014). Therefore, the researchers concluded that gender did not play a role in the three areas of self-efficacy and learning in this study (Goulão, 2014).

Urban and Jirsáková (2021) had a different focus on achievement goals for the adult learners versus traditional learners and focused on certain personality traits. Using the Business-focused Inventory of Personality (BIP) questionnaire, six separate groups of students were self-assessed on the following four criteria of work behaviors (a) occupational orientation, (b) occupational behavior, (c) social competencies, and (d) psychological constitution (Urban & Jirsáková, 2021). These four criteria were broken down into sub-categorical work-personality traits (Urban & Jirsáková, 2021). Occupational orientation traits include achievement, power, and leadership motivations. Occupational behavior includes conscientiousness, flexibility, and action orientation. Social competencies include social sensitivity, openness to contact, and assertiveness. Finally, psychological constitution contains traits such as emotional stability, working under pressure, and self-confidence (Urban & Jirsáková, 2021).

The groups were divided into two groups of part-time adult learners ( $N=67$ , mean age 33 years and 10 months,  $SD=120$  months) and the traditional students ( $N=84$ , mean age 21 years and 3 months,  $SD=13$  months) (Urban & Jirsáková, 2021). A two-way MANOVA was used to look at significant contrasting data between the age groups. The analysis showed the significance of the effect of age (Urban & Jirsáková, 2021). Furthermore, individual ANOVAs resulted in significant differences between

the part-time adult learners and the traditional learners in all four categories of the BIP revealing that the adult learners had higher levels of work-related personality traits than that of the traditional learners (Urban & Jirsáková, 2021).

Remedios and Richardson (2013) used the original version of the Achievement Goal Questionnaire (AGQ) to examine differences between traditional and adult learners. Using a principal components analysis, four approaches to learning were reviewed: mastery approach, mastery avoidance, performance approach, and performance avoidance (Remedios & Richardson, 2013). Results suggested that adult learners have similar goal performance as traditional students but may lean toward mastery avoidance (engaging in tasks to decrease the chance of losing the acquired knowledge of that skill) which can be detrimental to their educational experiences (Remedios & Richardson, 2013).

General conclusions drawn from these studies were that adult learners have elevated expectations for their academic goal attainment when it comes to SDT strategies and cognitive behaviors (Remedios & Richardson, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The limitations of these studies included using online questionnaires versus in-person surveying, the type of post-secondary institutions in which the students were enrolled, and the lack of consistency and honesty that can coincide with self-reporting (Remedios & Richardson, 2013).

### **Engagement of the Adult Learner**

Engagement in adult educational experiences is individualized and affected by different influences. These influences include the educational facilities' role in student engagement from a policy, procedure, and student affairs perspective (Arjomandi et al.,

2018; Leslie, 2019; Price & Baker, 2012; Rabourn et al., 2018; Wyatt, 2011). Other research has investigated student social inclusion and the relation to self-regulation, motivating factors and beliefs, and stress management perspectives of the student (Chukwuedo et al., 2021; de Greef et al., 2015; Rothes et al., 2014; Sogunro, 2015; Wayment & Cavolo, 2019). Lastly, studies on engagement have focused on the adult learners' perceptions of campus resources, faculty interaction, and involvement with campus activities.

Arjomandi et al. (2018) researched active teaching strategies that were significant for academic engagement for both traditional and adult learners. Utilization of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) showed correlations between psychosocial influences and engagement, active teaching strategies, and academic workload and motivation (Arjomandi et al., 2018). Initially, these researchers noted a positive, bivariate correlation between engagement and psychosocial abilities. However, after adjusting for other variables such as time (working 30 hours per week) and participation (engaging in lecture and tutoring) a partial correlation revealed that non-traditional students had a strong link between motivation and engagement over traditional students. The data from traditional students showed that active teaching strategies had a stronger impact on their engagement (Arjomandi et al., 2018).

Leslie (2021) focused on the redesigning of a course utilizing adult learning principles and frameworks. The task was to foster faculty participation in transparency of course redesign and to predict what the outcomes of the new course would be from a participation standpoint (Leslie, 2021). The students ( $n=18$ ) and faculty member identified six criteria on a Likert scale survey administered online. These criteria were:



(a) engaging course content, (b) opportunities for student interaction and group collaboration, (c) communication activities that enhanced learning, (d) proper rubric and guidelines for performance and grading, (e) degree to which the faculty member was active in the process of connecting students and moderating discussions and activities, and (f) the degree to which the faculty member provided relative, timely feedback (Leslie, 2021). Student responses ( $n=11$ ) were as follows for the above criteria as *agreed* or *mostly agreed*, respectively: (a) engaging course content (18.182%) (81.818%), (b) opportunities for student interaction and group collaboration (45.455%) (54.545%), (c) communication activities that enhanced learning (36.364%) (63.636%), (d) proper rubric and guidelines for performance and grading (9.091%) (90.909%), (e) faculty active in process of connecting students and moderating discussions and activities (100%), and (f) faculty provided relative, timely feedback (100%) (Leslie, 2021).

Price and Baker (2012) evaluated the *National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)* and how it relates to adult learners versus traditional learners. The researchers asserted that the NSSE may not accurately assess the needs of undergraduate traditional students, therefore adult learners may score significantly lower on the NSSE than traditional students in all five benchmarks (Price & Baker, 2021). The five benchmarks assessed in the NSSE for this study were: (a) Level of Academic Challenge (LAC), (b) Active and Collaborative Learning (ACL), (c) Student-Faculty Interaction (SFI), (d) Enriching Educational Experiences (EEE), and (e) Supportive Campus Environment (SCE) (Price & Baker, 2021). Results indicated that out of these five benchmarks, adult learners did score lower in three out of the five categories when compared with

traditional learners: ACL, SFI, and EEE (Price & Baker, 2021). However, adult learners scored significantly higher in the LAC benchmark in the amount of work and fortitude they applied to their academic studies (Price & Baker, 2021). In the SCE benchmark area, there was no statistical significance between the types of learners, but it was noted that the adult learners placed a higher emphasis on their relationships with their professors than did the traditional learner (Price & Baker, 2021).

Similarly, Rabourn et al. (2018), conducted a study using the NSSE to discover what drove academic engagement for adult learners. Like many of the earlier studies, there was a comparison between adult learners and traditional college students. Results of this study showed a correlation between the adult learners and their need for academic engagement opportunities that support positive experiences with faculty and peers. The results, however, did not disclose that more opportunities were provided due to the findings (Rabourn et al., 2018). Adult learners also found their institutions to be less supportive for adult learners versus traditional students in on-campus support networks such as faculty mentoring and experiential (hands-on) learning for example (Rabourn et al., 2018).

Wyatt (2011) suggested that higher educational institutions must do a better job of attracting, engaging, and retaining adult learners based on a qualitative case study and subsequent interviews of adult learners completed at the University of Memphis. The findings indicated that many institutions do not acknowledge the academic needs of adult learners (Wyatt, 2011). The case study findings further led to the development of a model of components that create successful adult learner engagement (Wyatt, 2011). The model consisted of the following components: a) institutional commitment

(to adult learners), b) faculty (experience in instructing adult learners), c) staff (understanding and respecting the experiences of adult learners), d) counselors (recognizing the unique needs for advising with adult learners), e) curriculum (adaptable to the priorities of adult learners outside of school), f) programs and services (support for the adult learners across campus), g) communication (on and off campus communication that includes marketing to their needs), and h) environment (engaging environment that is welcoming to adult learners) (Wyatt, 2011).

Additional research on engagement has focused on social inclusion and perceived stress in college students. For example, de Greef et al. (2015) gave the Social Inclusion after Transfer (SIT) survey to vulnerable adult students in adult education programs. This survey evaluated various social interactions between individuals of differing ethnic groups and socioeconomic statuses to explore their perceived level of social inclusion in their educational institutions. Results showed a positive correlation of adult learners having an increase in perceived social inclusion after entering an adult educational program depending on their sociodemographic, marital, and educational background statuses (de Greef et al., 2015). Wayment and Cavolo (2019) researched perceived stress on college students using several scales measuring ego (awareness, identity, perspective, growth), self-control (discipline and impulse control), perceived stress (subjectivity of stress), and grit (perseverance and intensity). Their findings indicated that college students self-reported a powerful sense of self-control over grit when it came to perceived stress and ego (Wayment & Cavolo, 2019).

Lastly, several articles have focused on motivating factors and beliefs of adult learner engagement. Chukwuedo et al. (2021) researched academic engagement and

lifelong learning as important motivators for adult learners with supportive academic interventions. In their quasi-experiment between a control group ( $n=116$ ) and an intervention group ( $n=127$ ), results suggested that adult learners who engaged in an academic and support intervention had a higher success rate in motivation, perseverance, self-regulation, and curiosity (Chukwuedo et al., 2021). The interventions consisted of academic interactions and guidance from faculty and counselors that supported the adult learner's participation in successful educational, career, and future outcomes (Chukwuedo et al., 2021). A similar outcome was higher achievement in the intervention group in areas of vigor (effort), dedication (commitment), and absorption (taking in knowledge) when it came to their studies (Chukwuedo et al., 2021). Similarly, Rothes et al., (2013) and Sogruno (2015) reviewed student beliefs and how self-determination, self-concept, and self-efficacy play a role in the learning process. Both studies showed a correlation between the adult learner and how self-regulation (autonomy and accountability for learning) and environment (conducive to learning and adapting to the needs of adult learners) motivate the adult learner to succeed (Rothes et al., 2013; Sogruno, 2015).

There were several different limitations to note in the studies of engagement for adult learners. Many of the studies had self-reporting surveys for “college students” and included results from both traditional and adult learners which were not clearly delineated between the two types of learners. Also, differing variations of "institutional involvement" in the studies were noted and may not provide a consistent measure of how a higher educational institution provides support to adult learners.

## **Barriers to Successful Educational Experiences**

Reviewing research into perceived barriers to success in adult learning educational experiences is essential in understanding their lived educational experiences. This research includes articles on faculty members' instruction and attitudes towards adult learners, adult learners' perspectives on institutional practices and self-perceived barriers, and the non-cognitive and social issues that impact adult learning experiences of those adults who graduated with a high school equivalency exam or general education diploma (GED).

Bourke et al. (2020) through qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 11 post-secondary faculty, sought to disclose faculty's teaching methods and outcomes through a social justice lens. The faculty members' views on teaching low-income adult learners were the focus of the interview questions. Results indicated that the faculty all believed in adult learners being accountable for their learning process (Bourke et al., 2020). Further, the researchers found it is important for faculty to understand that how they engage with adult learners and provide a positive learning environment is crucial (Bourke et al., 2020). Respecting and advocating for this student population also was found to be an integral part of the adult learners' academic progression and success (Bourke et al., 2020). The faculty reported that there must be a working relationship in a trusting, safe environment to assist the student to engage in learning. Faculty also reported that teaching through a social justice lens (considering the disparities of different socioeconomic groups and ethnicities) is not a part of general education (Bourke et al., 2020). Faculty further discussed that most post-secondary institutions

focus more on tangible statistics like enrollment and attrition and not personal needs such as self-regulation and socioeconomic considerations (Bourke et al., 2020).

Similarly, Brinthaupt and Eady (2014), surveyed community college and university faculty using a qualitative survey on their attitudes and perceptions of non-traditional students (adult learners). Results indicated that while faculty had positive thoughts and perceptions of this student population, there was little evidence as to how that goodwill was incorporated into their instruction and interactions with students (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014). Some faculty reported that they do not treat traditional versus non-traditional students differently. This was identified as a concern since non-traditional students have different motivations and needs for their academic experience (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014).

Two other studies of note have reviewed adult student perceptions of barriers to their educational experiences. Crouse et al. (2018) used a mixed methods approach to look at institutional norms for student enrollment into certain adult programs of study and what barriers to adult student enrollment may exist. The path to enrollment reviewed what the individual student behaviors were as to their decision to attend an institution, in conjunction with how the policies and procedures of the institution link to the student's decision to enroll (Crouse et al., 2018). Among the top reasons for the adult student's decision to enroll were convenience of location, affordability, and the "fit" of the program to the adult learners needs and degree granted (Crouse et al., 2018). The top reason for enrollment in a particular institution was to achieve transfer college credit for their education. The two top reasons for the decision not to enroll were the barriers created due to the institution's poor or lacking transfer of credit

process and the lack of “face to face” classes (Crounse et al., 2018). The results also suggested that use of technology for some adult students was intimidating as a barrier to enrollment (Crounse et al., 2018).

Four universities in southern Ontario, Canada using the Mature Student Experience Survey (MSES) studied the adult learner’s experience (van Rhijn et al., 2016). This study was conducted over three years and evaluated the correlations between the mental health and academic outcomes of adult students with open and closed questioning. A cross-sectional component was conducted annually, reviewing the specific areas of study for the participants (van Rhijn et al., 2016). Thematic analysis was used to determine the findings. Three primary themes emerged from the data on the perceptions of the adult learners and their educational experiences: availability of and accessibility to resources (e.g., financial aid, information on resources and support, flexible scheduling options), life balance (priority setting with multiple responsibilities as an adult), and social exclusion (lack of ability to socially engage) felt as an adult learner (van Rhijn et al., 2016). These themes led to suggested institutional practice changes to assist with the following concerns: (a) updates to current policies and procedures to enhance the inclusion and access, (b) integration of social supports, and (c) accessibility to financial counseling and support (van Rhijn et al., 2016).

Salusky et al. (2021) studied the emotional impacts of lack of support and other emotional factors as they relate to barriers to adult education. Through an online survey, several different emotional and support questionnaires were used to evaluate adult students from a post-secondary educational center where most enrollees were

GED recipients and were considered a vulnerable student population (Salusky et al., 2021). Researchers evaluated three categories in these surveys that included coping, social stigmas, and social supports. These categories were assessed as to how they affect positive attitudes towards education (Salusky et al., 2021). With respect to emotional coping and social stigmas, the more the student felt social stigma and coping difficulties, the less positive they were about education. Conversely, as self-esteem increased and greater coping mechanisms were used, the more positive the attitude towards education (Salusky et al., 2021). Lastly, students exhibited more positive attitudes towards education if they experienced greater social and emotional support during their education endeavors (Salusky et al., 2021).

Several limitations from the barrier studies included the level of higher education studied (vocational, associate, baccalaureate, graduate) and the self-reporting and perceptions of the individual participants (Salusky et al., 2021). Lacking was the discussion of how faculty are prepared to engage with adult learners in a positive, productive way. This would be a recommendation for future research.

### **Chapter Summary**

Although the adult learner population has undergone steady growth in post-secondary educational institutions over several decades (Rabourn et al., 2018), there still are limitations to the availability of resources and knowledge on the adult learners' needs for their educational experiences. Adult learners bring a wealth of life experience to their educational settings and there needs to be a consistent and respectful way to integrate this population into post-secondary education (Gardner et al., 2021). As discussed, adult learners have different motivating factors such as family and career



obligations, as well as differing self-regulatory mechanisms that affect their educational experiences (Ryan et al., 2000). Several areas of engagement were explored to define how this student population engages in the curricula, campus activities, and with their peers since this affects their educational experience (Rabourn et al., 2018). Finally, the types of barriers change depending on the perceptions the adult learner has about their situations, reasons for attaining a post-secondary degree, and the decision to enroll in specific programs (Crouse et al., 2018; van Rhijn et al., 2016).

Further research is needed to determine how institutions can provide fair and equitable educational opportunities for all adult learners despite their motivations and barriers. This study further examines the lived experiences of adult learners in practical nursing programs to assist with this need. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth review on the selected research design, context, and methodology used for this study which fills the gap in the existing literature on the adult learners' experiences in practical nursing programs.

## **Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Exploring the educational experiences of adult learners in practical nursing programs may lead to understanding adult learners' motivations for seeking post-secondary education and the support needed for successful educational outcomes. Through the examination of adult learners' lived experiences, an understanding of the motivations and barriers to post-secondary education of adult practical nursing programs may be better understood. With this information, educational organizations and program leaders can identify academic and social support needed for adult learners to have successful educational outcomes (Roths et al., 2017).

This study sought to examine the lived experiences of adult learners in practical nursing programs including factors related to motivation, barriers, if any, to academic success, and formal and informal support. Many higher education institutions' policies and procedures are geared toward traditional students, leaving adult learners searching for academic, social, and technological support (Renirie, 2017). Data from this study may lead to a better understanding of factors that support or prevent the completion of their academic preparation and licensure. The research question "What are the lived experiences of adult learners in practical nursing programs?" will address a gap in the research on adult learners in post-secondary educational experiences.

Understanding the lived experiences of an adult learner's educational journey in a practical nursing program will impact not only the students, but their support systems,

faculty and nursing program leaders, and the community. Students will gain improved support for degree completion and life outcomes. Support systems will learn what is expected of them to provide positive support for their loved ones. Faculty will develop new strategies to help support adult learners' needs. Nursing program leaders will use the acquired knowledge to build enhanced systems of support and policies to enhance adult learners' experiences. Finally, the community will be provided with a qualified LPN workforce which may enhance access to quality healthcare outcomes.

### **Research Design**

A phenomenological qualitative design investigates a participant's lived experiences through exploration of their personal stories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative design was used to inquire about the lived experiences of adult learners and their educational experiences in a practical nursing program. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach utilizes a philosophical (relationship to knowledge) and psychological (mental and emotional state) view of the described lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was selected as a research design to gain a rich understanding of the adult learners' motivations and perceived barriers through an exploration of their lived experiences. This exploration will fill the gap that exists in qualitative research on the adult learners' motivations and barriers in practical nursing programs and the unique supports systems needed for success. Based on the knowledge derived from this study, insight into how to develop, design, and implement these supports and resources will be beneficial to the adult practical nursing student.

## **Research Context**

This phenomenological study took place in Western NY at a shared cooperative which is two or more school districts that share programmatic and educational resources that one district alone may not be able to afford independently (Madison-Oneida Board of Cooperative Educational Services [BOCES], 2022). The program student population is aged 18 years and older, consists of a variety of racial and ethnic groups, and is predominantly female (94% student body) with an average of five (or 6%) male students each year. The program's admissions process includes an entrance exam and essay. Interviews also may be conducted to clarify data on an application, or if the entry exam score is close to the accepted score and space is available in the cohort. The practical nursing program class size is approximately 30 students twice per year.

## **Research Participants**

The goal of this study was to recruit 10 practical nursing graduates 6 months to 2 years post-graduation. Due to the small response rate, seven graduates participated in this study. The participants included six female and one male and had different responsibilities in both their work and personal lives.

## **Instruments Used in Data Collection**

The semi-structured interview consisted of questions including "what" motivated the adult learners to return to higher education, and "why" they chose a post-secondary practical nursing program. The researcher inquired also about motivations and perceived barriers to their educational experience. Additionally, the participants

were asked to describe any academic or social support systems they used or could have used during their educational experience (see Appendix). The essence of the hermeneutic method is to capture the relationship between the stated lived experiences of the participants to their surrounding environments and personal history (Moustakas, 1994). The interview questions were developed based on the constructs of motivation according to the SDT of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Questions also encompassed the themes discovered in the literature of motivation and achievement of educational goals, engagement of the adult learner, and barriers to educational experiences.

### **Procedures Used for Data Collection**

The initial step in the data collection was to obtain permission via email to the shared cooperative practical nursing program coordinator to assist in the research study. The program coordinator emailed class of 2022 graduates a letter with a description of and request for permission to participate in the study. A statement of informed consent was included in this email along with permission to conduct and record a 60-minute Zoom session. Semi-structured interviews were scheduled with the participants and conducted via a Zoom account owned by a private university in Western New York. Data was stored in the researcher's password-protected laptop. This data was backed up on a Google drive provided by a private university in Western New York. The participants received the Zoom link 24 hours prior to the agreed upon interview date.

An established interview protocol was used that included basic information about the interview, an introduction to the connection between the interview and

study, open- and closed-ended questions with follow up probes, and a closing summary that included gratitude to the participants for their time and effort in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The questions began with opening framing questions to ease the participant into the process followed by the remaining questions with probing sub-questions (see Appendix ). Participants were assigned a numerical pseudonym (1-10) to protect their identifiable information. A \$20 VISA gift card was emailed to each participant after the interview as a thank you for their participation.

### **Procedures for Data Analysis**

After the semi-structured interviews were performed, a series of steps based on Moustakas' (1994) method for research analysis was conducted. These steps included, in order: (a) listing and preliminarily grouping every relevant statement to the experience, (b) reduction and elimination to determine the code themes of the lived experience in the interview, (c) clustering and thematizing data into related themes and labels, (d) final identification of themes and validation to ensure the codes and themes match the data from the participant, (e) constructing an individual textural (verbatim examples) description of each participant's experience to ensure authenticity to each participants responses, (f) constructing an individual structural (vivid account of feelings and thoughts) description for each participant's experience, and (g) combining the textural-structural description of each participant's experience to identify the meanings and essences of that experience with the codes and themes (Moustakas, 1994).

Participant data was collected during the interviews. After the conclusion of the interviews, the data was organized and prepared for analysis. This included

transcribing the interview through a review of computer and handwritten notes and the audio transcription feature through Zoom. These notes were categorized with a Word document as verbal responses. Using Moustakas' analysis of data described above, the findings of the analysis were written in narrative form to detail the findings of the study.

Intercoder reliability was used to ensure consistency among the codes and themes. A doctoral candidate served as the additional coder. The advantage to the intercoder reliability was to establish another perspective on the obtained data and the ability to discuss different data perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Frequent cross-checking and collaboration meetings were held to discuss differences in code choices and collaborate on the final code decisions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Chapter Summary**

While literature exists on adult and traditional learners in registered nursing programs, there is a gap in understanding the motivations, barriers, and positive supports that affect adult learners in practical nursing programs. This chapter described the participants and methods used in this phenomenological study to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of adult learners in practical nursing programs. This was accomplished by providing the basis for phenomenological study and conducting semi-structured interviews to collect data on factors of motivations, barriers, and positive support systems before, during, and at program completion. Lastly, the procedures for data analysis were outlined and conducted using Moustakas' method of analysis for a rich understanding of the experiences. Participants direct quotes and identified themes are presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the motivations for and barriers to adult learners' educational experiences in post-secondary practical nursing programs. To gain this understanding, a phenomenological method was chosen to explore the lived experiences of the adult learners. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through Zoom and data then examined using Moustakas's (1994) method of phenomenological analysis. The participants' experiences and perspectives were shared through open-ended interview questions and in-depth discussions about motivations and barriers. This provided textural descriptions (verbatim answers) and core structural components (subthemes of the textural descriptions) of their experiences.

This chapter is framed around the research question "What are the lived experiences of adult learners in practical nursing programs?" The textural and textual-structural descriptions as well as the participants' combined experiential statements provide a rich understanding of their lived experiences. In addition, summations of the interview questions and method of data analysis are reviewed. A summary of the study results is provided, with verbatim examples and personal accounts of participants' experience.

The participants were recruited through an introductory email about the study. The seven participants (P) had graduated from a practical nursing program located in Western New York within the last 2 years. Each of the participants was assigned a



numerical pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. They were numbered in order of interview dates and times P1-P7. The participants were willing to provide open and honest accounts of their lived experiences before, during, and after their program completion. For example, P1 stated "I had been working as a PCT (patient care technician) for 3 years and decided that nursing was something that I'd be more interested in." A PCT is unlicensed assistive personnel and is part of the healthcare team that takes direction primarily from the licensed nurse. Participant 4 stated "I had different ways of learning due to my disability." Lastly, P5 stated " I have my own little career now." Table 4.1 shows the textural and textural-structural descriptions as well as composite themes of the data analysis (See Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1***Themes for Interview Questions*

<b>Interview Question</b>	<b>Textual</b>	<b>Textual-Structural</b>	<b>Composite Themes</b>
Do you recall when you first thought about going back to school for nursing?	"I have prior Healthcare experience." "Right time in my life" "Always wanted to be a nurse" "My desire for education" "Wanted more for my life."	Experience Desire Dream	Desire
Why did you choose a practical nursing program?	"It was a reasonable option." "Easiest pathway to nursing career." "I thought it was a best value." "RN took too long." "It got my foot in the door."	Options Shorter Value Exposure	Opportunity
What concerns did you have about returned to school?	"Being an adult learner" "Having to work full time." "I was not a good student in high school." "Worried about life balance" "Affording bills and other expenses"	Adult Work Student Life balance Finances	Life Balance
Describe what motivated you to make the decision to return to school?	"I wanted to challenge myself." "My drive" "My experience in healthcare" "Current job unfulfilling" "My kids"	Challenge Drive Experience Self-fulfillment Family	Drive
Explain any academic challenges that you experienced during the program?	"Didn't feel I had enough time." "Lack of experienced teachers" "Lack of study time because of only working and going to school." "Distracting peers" "My learning disability"	Time constraints Faculty Distraction Disability	Distraction
Explain any non- academic challenges that you experienced during the program?	"Disorganization of program" "Life balance" "Having adult responsibilities" "Time management and organization" "Stress and anxiety"	Organization Balance Responsibilities Mental Health	Responsibility
What barriers, if any, did you experience while attending the program?	"Program navigation" "Financial problems" "Learning new things" "Having ADHD" "Schedule and commute"	Finances Disability Program Schedule Distance	Barriers
What positive supports did you have while attending the program?	"My family and pets" "Coworkers" "Family members who are nurses." "My classmates" "School staff"	Family Peers Teachers	Relationships
How has graduating from the practical nursing program impacted your life?	"I have a career that I love." "Opened doors" "Path to my RN and BSN" "I have answered my calling." "I have my own career"	Career Satisfaction Opportunity Pride	Fulfillment

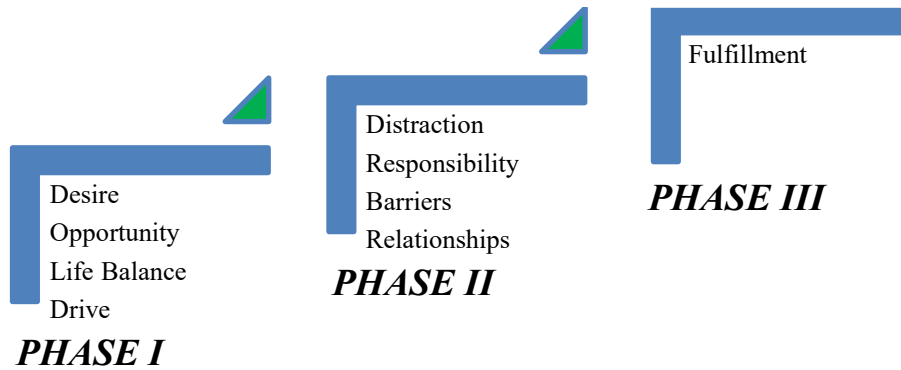
## Results

Examination of the answers to the interview questions gave both textural and structural context. This led to themes that provided essence to the lived experiences of adult learners in practical nursing programs. Data regarding motivations of and barriers to their lived experiences were threaded throughout the interview. Participants answered with subsequent examples and personal stories which added a richness to the data. There were nine composite themes that arose to support the inquiry of the lived experiences. These themes also provided insight into the experiences at the time of participation in the study.

Exploring the lived experiences of the participants regarding their perceived motivations, barriers, and supports led to several textural and structural subthemes and subsequent composite themes. Although each of the participants had their own unique experiences and stories to tell, common meanings between these experiences arose. The composite themes were grouped into three phases. The first phase contains themes that pertain to the timeframe before the participants started the program. These include (a) desire, (b) opportunity, (c) life balance, and (d) drive. Phase 2 discusses themes associated with the participants experiences during the program and includes: (e) distraction, (f) responsibility, (g) barriers, and (h) relationships. Lastly, phase 3 includes the final theme of fulfillment which pertains to program completion (see Figure 4.1).

**Figure 4.1**

*Composite Themes: Three Phases of Lived Experiences for Adult Learners in Practical Nursing Programs*



*Note:* This figure was created to provide a visual to the composite themes based on the three phases of the lived experiences as stated by the participants of this study.

***Phase 1: Before the Program***

Reflecting on what participants were doing in their lives prior to returning to school provided a trajectory of motivational discovery. Several participants realized they had something more to accomplish in life. They described a desire to change their current situation. They took time to evaluate why they would re-engage in their education and what the motivating factors were to begin this journey.

Participant 1, a single male working as a PCT for 3 years prior to returning to school, felt that despite the healthcare experience he already had, there was more to learn. Without having a family to care for yet, he felt that it was the right time to return to school and establish a more interesting career as a nurse. He was determined to make his interest in healthcare more substantial by stating, "Being a patient care technician is an important job. I absolutely try to do everything for my patients that I can. I wish I had the time to go back to school to be a nurse." He took the steps necessary to complete course

work for returning to nursing school, but RN programs were long and costly. He felt the decision to go to practical nursing school was a good start to a nursing career as he stated, "It got my foot in the door."

Participant 4 realized that being a full-time bank manager was not her calling. She stated, "Although I didn't have healthcare experience, I knew I was meant to be a nurse." Other than wanting to be a nurse, she also recalled that it was a tough financial decision to make for her family. She stated, "My husband and I decided that I would work one more year, then go to do my thing and become a nurse. I felt this was the best thing for my family, especially my son."

Participant 5 reflected on her dedication as a young girl to assisting others. When she was old enough, she enjoyed working as a camp counselor and in a group home. She sometimes felt it was an outlet for her. When deciding to go back to school, she wanted to continue caring for others and be a part of something greater. She stated:

I liked helping others, so I wanted to make that into a career and get paid for it.

Getting to be a part of the healing process and helping someone move forward in a positive way sounded like a good profession.

She continued to talk about her role as a direct support professional in a group home. She stated, "I helped people with mental disabilities live their daily lives and wanted to continue that path." Participant 6 had a unique type of motivation. She was new to her town and looking for ways to engage with others in a meaningful way. She was younger than the other participants and did not have a family at the time. She stated, "I wanted to meet people, so I thought why not go to nursing school?"

The participants in this study saw entering a practical nursing program as an opportunity for a career they had always wanted, a chance to make a difference in their lives, and a means to get into the nursing profession in a timelier way.

Participant 7 stated that she knew nursing was a path she wanted to take as she had family members who were nurses. She stated, "I decided that nursing was something I wanted to go into between family members, you know, doing that." She continued with her timeline and when to begin this process. She stated "My kids were young, so I knew we were waiting kind of for a time that would be feasible for our family. So, once they got old enough...I knew it was an okay time to look into it." Her opportunity arose when her kids were old enough to be home longer periods without her.

Participant 3 discussed that her opportunity came about after her husband was transferred back home due to his job change and she was having her last child. She stated "When my youngest son was born, I knew I wanted to be a nurse. My husband had been transferred back home and I felt it was the right time to go back to school to become a nurse." She continued to explain that "Practical nursing school was the easiest path into nursing and getting experience."

Participant 2 discussed financial value, time, and opportunity as motivators to return to school. When considering enrolling in a nursing program, she stated:

I wanted to go to RN school, but it took a long time. I wanted to get my foot in the door. The practical nursing program was in and out in a year and was a great value and experience.

She continued, "I knew I wanted to be a nurse, so I said to myself, it's time, I just have to go."

Several of the participants discussed having life balance. Exploring the participants' concerns about returning to school disclosed several factors. Concerns about work, family, finances, past educational success, and having time for themselves were common among the participants.

Participant 1 was concerned about having time for the things in his life that he enjoyed while going to school and working full-time. He stated, "Becoming an adult learner and having to work full time in order to maintain my bills, paying for different things, and living my life was my biggest concern." He continued, "I had the drive to go and get it done and that I knew it was just something that I had to do."

Participant 3 had additional concerns about life balance with young children at home and the time since she was last in school. She stated, "I was concerned about how long I had been out of school, the technology, research, library time, my age. I was working and raising a family. Where would I find the time?" She continued, "I had to juggle being a mom and a student."

Participant 4 wasn't sure she could do it. She stated, "I was not a good student in high school and had a learning disability. I also wasn't sure that we could afford to go to one income." She continued, "How was I going to be a good mom, wife, and student?" These were her biggest concerns about life balance and being successful.

When asking the participants to describe what motivated them to decide to return to school, responses showed strength and determination towards reaching a goal. Participants shared past experiences, job dissatisfaction, important people in their lives and the challenge of doing something more fulfilling as the drive for their decision to return to school.

For example, Participant 7 shared that she was excited about the knowledge she would gain through going back to school. She stated, "I think it was the content and what the new knowledge base would be. I wanted to challenge myself." She continued, "I did not like the job that I was in. It was very, very unfulfilling for me personally, so I knew I had to make the jump, but that motivation really increased after school started!" She finished by saying, "My kids were also a motivator. I wanted more for them too."

Participant 5 discussed how she wanted to give more to her patients. She stated, "My experience working in healthcare in a nursing home made me realize that I wanted to have more control as a nurse. Patients would ask me for medications, and I couldn't give them." She continued, "After the doctor would leave, my patients would ask me questions and I would tell them I had to get the nurse. I wanted to be the nurse."

Participant 1 discussed one thing that motivated him was to overcome distractions. He stated, "It's hard to describe motivation. It was really just knowing that I had to push past the distractions." He continued, "The motivation really came from knowing that further down the road in my 5, 10-year plan and wanting to have a family one day, and wanting, ya know, to provide for them."

### ***Phase II: During the Program***

When asked about academic challenges that the participants faced while in their program, several listed distractions such as time, lack of experienced teachers, peers, and personal learning disabilities. The participants offered how they dealt with and overcame their distractions. Participant 4 discussed her time constraints and her learning disability. She stated:



I have a learning disability, so for me I have to read things like at least 3 or 4 times to try and retain the readings. So, it took 3 or 4 times longer for me than it did for anyone else. I also had to learn different ways to learn like rewriting my notes and watching videos, so it took up much more time.

She continued to describe how she was able to overcome this. She stated, "I ended up finding ways that worked for me, so I studied probably differently than others did."

Participant 5 also discussed how she overcame the distraction of her learning disability. She stated, "I really struggled in high school. I had resources in school to help me with my learning disability. These resources were not made available to me in my program." She continued by saying,

I feel the way I learn and like to make progress is kind of like small steps. I did get testing accommodations and it was easier during COVID because I could read the tests aloud to myself at home. I needed extra tutoring and had one instructor who took more time with me.

Participant 3 talked about the lack of challenge and experience from a particular clinical instructor. Clinical instructors are nurses who provide teaching at the bedside in a setting such as a hospital or nursing home. Participant 3 stated, "The lack of experienced teachers in clinical made it difficult. I wanted more challenges, and I was not getting that." She stated that she advocated for herself and was able to get a different clinical assignment. She said, "I went to the teachers and program coordinator and asked for a more challenging assignment and was able to move to a different group. I felt that I lost time, but it was good for me."

When asking participants about non-academic challenges while in their program, several topics emerged regarding disorganization of their program, having adult responsibilities, time management, and stress and anxiety. In reviewing these responses, several areas discussed were personal responsibilities versus responsibilities of the program. Therefore, the theme of Responsibility took on meaning both for the participant and for the program. Participant 1 discussed how the program felt a bit disorganized. He stated:

Sometimes I would find the class disorganized. Clinical sites were being changed at the last minute along with due dates. I also had my own responsibilities like the extended commute and working full-time. This often made it difficult for a day off.

He continued to talk about his adult responsibilities and life balance by stating, "This affected my personal life. I wasn't able to go and do the things that I wanted to do. It definitely made me appreciate things a lot more."

Participant 4 discussed having peer distractions and lack of classroom control at times. She discussed how the program could have taken some responsibility for this. She stated:

I think it would probably be the peers around you. Some of them didn't have very good work ethic so they would create noise and stuff and I would get very distracted in the classroom. This led to stress and anxiety on top of my learning disability.

Responsibility to family was something that Participant 4 struggled with during her program. She discussed that her grandmother had died during the program. She was

stressed and saddened that she could not spend the time with her family that she wished she could have. She stated:

My grandmother died while I was in the program. I remember what I was going through at that time and wondered if it was still worth it like I'm away from my family and I can't see them on a regular basis. I decided to stay as that's what she would have wanted. She wouldn't have wanted me to drop out.

When asking participants if they experienced barriers while attending their program, areas of program navigation, learning, and finances were among the common responses. Along with having a learning disability and scheduling issues, several participants once again described ways around those barriers, while some participants stated they did not feel they had any barriers.

Participant 1 talked about the program and personal issues. He stated, "I was able to navigate the program, but it was disorganized. This took time but I feel I did a fairly good job." He continued describing personal barriers, stating, "Maintaining the whole cycle of personal life, work, school and trying to find that balance was my biggest barrier."

Participant 4 discussed how having a learning disability was a barrier that she had to overcome. She stated, "I would say a lot of struggling, especially with getting to know how to do like the testing, I have really bad test anxiety on top of that." In addition to her new study habits and learning differently, she stated, "I was just like learning how to take a nursing test versus like a regular test."

Participant 5 described how her learning disability was a barrier that she knew she would always have to overcome. She continued to discuss limited classroom support for this. She stated:

Having limited support in the classroom when you have ADHD can be tough. I guess I wish there was more teachers. I know there are only so many teachers that work there, but I feel like it was only one teacher sometimes. She taught everything and I needed more one on one time with her.

She continued, "Fridays were the most availability for extra help and there were only a few teachers that would. So, I guess there were more people I could go to for extra support, but she was really the only one."

Participants 2, 3, 6, and 7 stated they did not have any specific barriers to overcome. Participant 6 stated "I just go with the flow and manage. It's worth a try since there was little risk." Participants 3 and 7 both said "None." Participant 2 stated while discussing her grandmother's death, she felt it was an unfortunate and sad experience, but not a barrier.

The discussion of relationships emerged from the question on positive supports while attending the program. Answers ranged from family to other nurses, to pets and classmates. None of the participants felt they lacked positive support.

Participant 7 discussed the several family members who were nurses that served as positive role models and supports. She stated, "I have a sister-in-law that set me up with a whole care package for nursing school. I also have an aunt that is a nurse. It was like having a safety net for me." She continued, "My husband was crazy supportive and

other people in my life where willing to help me with my actual work and family load. I have a big family support and even my kids."

Participant 6 was the only participant who recounted how her pets were a positive support. She stated, "So I think I would consider my dog and cat definitely as therapy animals. I feel they always definitely know when I was high stressed. They knew what to do just to melt my heart a little bit." She finished by saying, "My boyfriend was always there for me, ya know, if I needed to cut back on my work hours. He would help me figure it out."

Participant 3 discussed support from her teachers and family as well. She stated, "I had support from my teachers and my experiences. My family and especially my mom, who is a nurse." She continued to state that she relied on her mother a lot who was always there for her and her family when she needed it.

### ***Phase III: After Program Completion***

Several participants discussed how completing the practical nursing program gave them a new career, fulfilled a dream, opened many doors, and answered their calling. The final theme, fulfillment, concluded the third phase of the lived experiences of adult learners in a practical nursing program. Participant 1 finished by stating:

I have a career that I love. I have respect from other nurses and providers, and I am providing the best care possible to my patients. I am grateful to be responsible for others as their nurse for the day. It is inspiring me to keep going for my RN.

Participant 3 stated, "I have a great foundation to go onto higher education for my RN and BSN." Participant 5 said "I have my own career now. I will make a difference."

Finally, Participant 7 stated, "I have a career like no other. There is nothing I would rather do, and I feel that I have finally found my calling."

### **Summary of Results**

To capture the essence of the lived experiences of these seven participants, the researcher outlined the interview questions in a pattern of before, during, and after program completion. The seven participants shared their lived experiences through answering questions that explored returning to school as an adult learner, motivations for returning to school, and why they chose a practical nursing program. They shared their academic and non-academic concerns and discussed what barriers, if any, they overcame. The interview questions also looked at the positive support they had during their program, and how achieving this goal as a licensed practical nurse changed their lives. Through analysis of this data, nine themes emerged. These themes were: a) desire, b) opportunity, c) life balance, d) drive, e) distraction, f) responsibility, g) barriers, h) relationships, and i) fulfillment.

All seven participants described the positive experience of graduating from a practical nursing program and the opportunities that it provided from a personal and professional standpoint. The data connected the self-determination theory of motivation to both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Through analysis of the participants data collection, however, there was a stronger tie to the intrinsic (self-rewarding) factors of motivation within the self-determination theory of motivation.

The participants provided a holistic view of their lives before, during, and after completion of the program. They discussed wanting more for themselves or family to enhance their current life situations whether it was work, experiences, family, or desire to

do more for others. The data within this study shows how with determination, perseverance, and support, these participants were successful in completion of their program.

These results also can serve the support systems of adult learners who wish to return to school. With this knowledge, it would make discussions about returning to school as an adult learner more inclusive for everyone involved. Data on how adult learners met and overcame barriers to their success would help the learners and their support systems navigate the experience together.

Practical nursing program administrators and faculty could utilize this data to have a better understanding of the monumental decision it is for adult learners to return to school. For example, it would provide a basis for creating supportive networks within the program when a student discloses their learning disability. Providing academic and supportive resources to assist the adult learner in their successful program completion would be a positive attribute of that specific institution. As consumers, adult learners want to choose a program that meets their needs to ensure success. When previewing how practical nursing programs provide these resources, it would help the adult learner choose an institution that fits their needs for academic success.

Chapter 5 will provide further implications on how the three phases of adult learners' experiences in returning to school can assist adult learners, support systems, practical nursing programs, and communities. It will further discuss the strengths and limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

Exploring the educational experiences of adult learners who completed a practical nursing program provides insight into their motivations to return to school, the barriers to academic success they navigated, and the positive support needed to complete the practical nursing program. While literature exists on supporting traditional learners in nursing programs at the college and university levels, there is a gap in research on the motivations, barriers, and support provided to adult learners in practical nursing programs. Understanding the lived experiences of an adult learner's educational journey in a practical nursing program is important for the students, faculty, nursing program leaders, and the community. For the students, degree completion would increase positive life outcomes and the chance for a better socioeconomic standing. For program leaders and faculty, development of added support strategies and policies would help adult learners successfully navigate the practical nursing programs and increase retention in these programs. Finally, job growth for licensed practical nursing has been trending upward since 2018. It is projected to continue to grow at a rate of 10.7% by 2028 (Curtis, 2022). Therefore, a practical nursing career would not only benefit individuals looking to enter the nursing profession but also contribute to a qualified workforce decreasing the staffing shortage and enhancing positive health outcomes in their communities.

This study included semi-structured virtual interviews with seven participants



who graduated from a post-secondary practical nursing program. The interview questions were developed based on the motivational constructs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness according to the self-determination theory (SDT). Autonomy refers to an individual's self-governance and independent decision making. Competence is gained through different learning strategies to achieve goals and outcomes. Lastly, relatedness refers to the individual's ability to associate with others in a similar social context and environment as their own (Rothes et al., 2017). Relatedness, in correlation with personal growth and well-being, is needed for both intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These constructs will be discussed within the three phases of the framework as they pertain to the participants' experiences.

The interviews consisted of questions that included "what" motivated the adult learners to return to higher education and "why" they chose a post-secondary practical nursing program. The participants were further asked about motivations and perceived barriers to their educational experience. In addition to motivations and perceived barriers, the participants provided descriptions of any academic or social support systems they used or could have used during their educational experience. Finally, participants shared their sense of fulfillment when graduating from the program and becoming a licensed practical nurse.

### **Implications of Findings**

This study resulted in the development of a three-phase framework which adult learners returning to school, their support systems, program faculty and administrators, and communities can reference to inform how to successfully navigate a practical nursing

program. The phases are categorized as before, during, and after completion of their academic program. Although this framework was developed during the data analysis of adult learners in a post-secondary practical nursing program, the information provided within the framework may be applicable to adult learners in other contexts.

Participants' experiences further reflected several concepts in the SDT and were consistent with peer-reviewed literature on adult learners returning to school. This study had similar findings on motivation, engagement, and barriers during their educational experiences and will be discussed in each phase. Further implications related to the findings from this study will be presented within each of the three phases and include how the implications, if applicable, impacted adult learners, support systems, programs, and communities.

### ***Phase I: Before the Program***

**Adult Learners.** This study provides a reference for adult learners deciding to return to school. Considerations discussed among participants in this study included changes in life balance, length of program, career, and finances. The drive and desire to acquire new knowledge and change their current situations was evident in their responses as to what motivated them to return to school. Cannady et al. (2012) described adult learners as highly self-motivated, self-conscious about success, and having differed social and emotional needs from traditional learners. They return to school to change their economic status and provide a better future for their families. The decision to return to education as an adult gives the individual a sense of personal value and professional accomplishment (Renerie, 2017). Adult learners consider the following when deciding to return to school: (a) enrollment (part-time or full-time), (b) previous level of education,

(c) work experience, if any, and (d) type of educational program (Gardner et al., 2021). This was consistent with the findings of this study.

Concerns about program length between registered nursing and practical nursing programs were raised by several of the participants. They discussed choosing the practical nursing program because of the shorter time commitment and the ability to enter the nursing profession sooner. Several participants who had previous health care experience as PCTs or nursing assistants felt that a practical nursing program was a logical next step in their education. Participants without previous healthcare experience described their motivation as "answering a calling" or to "follow a dream of becoming a nurse." Understanding the motivations of adult learners may assist other adults who are considering returning to school.

**Support Systems.** This framework also can serve the support systems of adult learners who wish to return to school. Support systems include, but are not limited to, spouses, significant others, children, and friends. Participants shared how important it was to have positive support and encouragement from their spouses, children, and friends in their decision to return to school. These shared experiences from the participants could be used in program literature and could lead to the development of a support program orientation. Information on program content, time management, ways to support the adult learner outside of the program, and other non-academic services the program provides would inform the support systems of what to expect during their educational experience. With this knowledge, the supportive individuals would be able to describe and discuss the commitment of time, money, and energy it takes for their loved one to be successful. Strategies informed by this study included sharing

calendars, considering a dedicated space and time for studies, and providing social and emotional support would a positive environment during the program. Meeting these objectives would build a stronger foundation to support the decision to return to school for both the adult learner and their support systems.

**Practical Nursing Program Administrators and Faculty.** Further implications exist for practical nursing program administrators and faculty. The results of this study lead to a better understanding of the motivations and challenges for adult learners returning to school. This provides a basis for creating supportive resources within the program. Adult learners who engage in academic and supportive interventions have a higher success rate in motivation, perseverance, self-regulation, and curiosity (Chukwuedo et al., 2021). These interventions include academic interactions and guidance from faculty and social work support that enhance adult learner's participation in successful educational, career, and future outcomes (Chukwuedo et al., 2021). Therefore, programmatic supportive services are holistic in nature and focus on student success. An individual may choose a program with these student-centered services to ensure successful program completion and positive educational experiences.

**Communities.** Job growth for licensed practical nursing has been trending upward since 2018. New York State LPN jobs have been on the rise and are projected to continue to grow at a rate of 10.7% by 2028 (Curtis, 2022). This growth promotes the creation of more than 66,000 new jobs in the U.S. alone (Curtis, 2022). Successful completion of the program and licensure addresses the need for a qualified workforce. The participants of this study discussed how their new nursing career will benefit them, their families, and the workplaces and communities they serve.

## ***Phase II: During the Program***

**Adult Learners.** During the program, participants explained how they remained engaged despite perceived barriers. Distractions by peers, the need for additional academic support, and changes in life balance during their program were discussed as barriers to learning in their educational experience. Implications in this phase would be to obtain strategies to overcome both academic and non-academic barriers. Rothes et al. (2017) discussed learning strategies that adult learners utilize when engaging in their educational environments. These strategies include organizing and utilizing knowledge, and using skill sets to achieve a particular goal (Rothes et al., 2017). Competence is the second construct of the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2020) and achieved through different learning strategies (Rothes et al., 2017). Learning strategies that align with these constructs include critical thinking (using experience and observation to make decisions), self-awareness (knowledge of individual character, feelings, and motivations), cognition (process of acquiring knowledge), organizational skills (actions taken to prioritize the order of information), and interest in learning (seeking knowledge) (Rothes et al., 2017).

Participants in this study described what strategies they used to get through some of the perceived barriers during their program. For example, the two participants with learning disabilities shared taking responsibility in their academic needs with extra help and resources from faculty and peers. These participants also discussed how they developed learning strategies that worked for them including rewriting notes from class and finding videos to watch on the internet to explain concepts or skills that were difficult to understand.

**Support Systems.** Another area discussed among participants was their relationships in and out of school. Several participants reported having strong, positive support from their families and peers. Participants also discussed family members who were nurses that served as positive role models and supporters. Significant others, children, and pets were listed as positive supports and therapeutic at times. This included financial, emotional, psychological, and social support while in their program. Work peers and some program faculty were also listed as positive relationships.

During this phase of the program, the adult learner needs continued support beyond the motivations for successful engagement. Moving from the initial motivational support to the engagement phase, positive encouragement, support for both academic and non-academic challenges and successes can strengthen the relationships between the adult learners and their support systems. With this balance, the educational experience can be more rewarding and lead to greater success.

**Practical Nursing Program Administration and Faculty.** Further implications during Phase II are how to best support the adult learner during the program. Several participants described barriers regarding program management, organization, and support and are related to previous literature. van Rhijn et al. (2016) discussed barriers that included faculty instruction and attitudes towards adult learners and the adult learners' perspectives on institutional practices. Participants shared the difficulty in navigating the program due to disorganization and lack of classroom management and faculty experience at times which led to frustration and increased stress.

Non-academic and social self-perceived barriers also impact adult learning experiences. Additional barriers include availability of and accessibility to resources

(e.g., financial aid, information on resources and support, flexible scheduling options), life balance (priority setting with multiple responsibilities as an adult), and social exclusion (lack of ability to socially engage) as an adult learner (van Rhijn et al., 2016). Like Phase I, implications for practical nursing programs would be to provide supportive resources within their program to ensure a successful educational experience for the adult learner. This would include providing social work support for social emotional needs and financial aid counseling to help with school and out-of-pocket expenses.

### ***Phase III: Program Completion***

**Adult Learners.** During this last phase of the framework, program completion and becoming a practical nurse led to fulfillment for the participants. They described this as worth the effort, sacrifices, and time it took to complete the program. Several participants discussed how having new knowledge led to a career that was all their own. They described the pride in the ability to communicate with other healthcare professionals. This coincides with all three constructs of the SDT- autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This data confirms research that adult learners have elevated expectations for their academic goal attainment when it comes to SDT strategies and cognitive behaviors (Remedios & Richardson, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Similarly, Rothes et al. (2013) and Sogruno (2015) researched how self-determination, self-concept, and self-efficacy coincided with the learning processes. These studies also showed a correlation between the adult learner and how self-regulation (autonomy and accountability for learning) and environment (conducive to learning and adapting to the needs of adult learners) motivated the adult learner to succeed. This was aligned with the participants' experiences from this study and supported the fulfillment of their goals.

**Support Systems.** Knowing that support given to their loved one to successfully fulfill a personal and professional goal provides a sense of accomplishment for the support system as well. Through use of the strategies provided in this study, support systems can contribute to positive educational experiences for their loved ones.

**Practical Nursing Program Administration and Faculty.** Successful outcomes within a program are vital. Not only does it improve retention rates, but these successful educational experiences also lead to positive career goals and outcomes through subsequent licensure and job placements. These could be measured in a program's ability to receive accreditation and funding for valuable resources within their institutions. Adopting this framework would ensure that students choose their program, remain successful during the program, and graduate and become licensed nurses. Follow up graduate and employer surveys may help create a positive connection to their program and the successful outcomes of their students and community healthcare needs.

**Communities.** Upon successful completion of the program and nursing licensure, practical nurses will enter the workforce as qualified healthcare professionals working collaboratively to enhance the health outcomes of their communities. Not only does this have implications for the profession and workplaces they serve, but it helps the socioeconomical status of the nurse. Economic stability can lead to a healthier lifestyle, safer living conditions, and improved self-esteem (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Educated adults tend to participate in community sustainability in forms of volunteering and voting more often (Gardner et al., 2021). An individual with some form of higher education tends to have better physical and mental



health which leads to better life choices (Gardner et al., 2021). The positive implications of this achievement have a lasting effect on the community at large.

### **Limitations**

The findings in this study were based on semi-structured interviews with seven participants. A limitation noted was the small sample size and lack of diversity in the participants. Six out of the seven participants were female with only one male participant. This limitation prevents us from generalizing the experiences of adult males in practical nursing programs.

A second limitation is the use of only one practical nursing program. Data from multiple programs may provide a richer database for comparison of lived experiences. Using only one school in a single geographical location limits the availability of sample size, differing socioeconomic considerations, and diversity among participants.

### **Recommendations**

While literature exists on supporting traditional learners in nursing programs at the college and university levels, there is a gap in research on the motivations, barriers, and support provided to adult learners in practical nursing programs. Recommendations for future research and actions based on this study may benefit adult learners and their support systems, practical nursing programs, and the community.

Addressing the gap that existed in the research, this section will provide suggestions relating to future research, considerations of adult learners returning to school, and how practical nursing programs can provide support for those needs. It will further suggest how the community may benefit from this study.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research and/or Actions***

Research is needed on the resources available to adults who wish to return to school. Several participants described economic concerns with changing or leaving jobs, finding childcare, and being able to afford to return to school. According to Crouse et al. (2018), among the top reasons for the adult student's decision to enroll were convenience of location, affordability, and the "fit" of the program to the adult learners needs and degree granted. A recommendation would be to conduct a quantitative survey to adult learners regarding their financial needs. Results of this survey may indicate the financial needs of the student and their ability to afford a practical nursing program. In addition, the results could be provided to practical nursing programs as a resource for private and public financial assistance they may be able to offer their students during their educational experience for tuition and other related expenses. In the decision-making phase, exploring the enrollment management process of a practical nursing program may lend itself to understanding why an adult learner decides to enroll or not enroll in a program.

Another recommendation would be to look at a cost/benefit analysis of what the adult learner invested in the program to the financial and occupational outcomes after program completion. Part of this analysis would be to determine how the social determinants of health (SDOH) play a role in adult learners returning to school. A quantitative survey of the SDOH of adult learners prior to the program compared to after graduation and job placement would benefit those considering returning to school as part of the cost benefit analysis. Another consideration regarding the cost benefit analysis would be for the adult learner to analyze the job outlook in the area for LPNs

including salary and benefit information and community need for qualified healthcare workers. This analysis could also provide information on the practical nursing programs in the area, licensure pass rates of said programs, and job placement within the community. Having this analysis would assist the adult learner in the decision-making process prior to committing to the cost of a program. Changing the socioeconomic status was a motivator for participants seeking a practical nursing degree. This cost benefit analysis and quantitative data would show if enhancement of the adult learner's socioeconomic status is a positive outcome.

Data from this study also included that entering a practical nursing program was a "foot in the door" to the nursing profession. Several of the participants shared the desire to continue with their education to achieve a registered nursing degree after their practical nursing degree. A recommendation for future research would be to survey these adult learners who achieved their LPN degree and if they continued to a registered nursing program. If so, exploring the difference between the two educational experiences and comparing the socioeconomic, personal, and professional status would add to the literature for adult learners who are contemplating entering the nursing profession.

### ***Recommendations for Practical Nursing Programs***

Several participants described having academic and non-academic issues during the program. Lack of resources for learning disabilities and distractions in the classroom were described as areas of concern for these participants. Two participants in this study discussed the barriers of time and testing as well as studying habits that were different than those of their peers. Taking longer to understand testing questions,

rewriting notes several times to understand curricular content, and needing to watch videos to understand some of the concepts were among the challenges shared by these participants. An academic advisor could share resources supporting the differing learning styles and needs of adult learners. The academic advisor could be a faculty member who can advocate for the extenuating needs of these students. Surveying students prior to the start of the program may assist in identifying needed resources to enhance the development and support for differing learning needs and styles. Having these supports in place would assist in positive educational experiences and outcomes.

Another resource could be a social worker who could help with the social emotional barriers adult learners experience when returning to school and how to develop tools to use to assist with these concerns. Participants of this study described distractions in the classroom by their peers that created a negative atmosphere. They shared the discomfort of having conversations with these peers. Communications skills provided by a social worker may assist in changing the classroom environment and making it a more positive experience as well as enhance the professional communication needs of the adult learner. One participant had suffered the loss of a family member during the program and considered leaving due to the commitment she felt to her family. Coping mechanisms provided by a social worker may assist with these personal conflicts and difficult decisions.

Another recommendation for the practical nursing program would be the completion of a needs assessment by faculty and administrators of practical nursing programs to evaluate their current understanding of the lived experiences of adult students returning to school. This could provide a way to measure whether program

resources are consistent with the shared needs of the participants. With those results, tools for faculty and administration could be developed that define resources and support needed for adult learners. This tool could assist the program administration in developing job descriptions of social workers, academic advisors, and financial aid counselors. These job descriptions would include the support person's responsibilities, expectations, and how they relate to adult learners and their success in the program.

A major finding from this study details the importance of support systems in the success of adult learners in practical nursing programs. To capitalize on the benefit of these systems, practical nursing administrators can develop orientation programs for family members, significant others, and other supportive individuals in the lives of enrolled students. The orientation could include an in-depth discussion about the academic calendar, time management, what the classes and clinical experiences include, and organizational skills. This may provide insight into how best to support the adult learner in their educational experience and well-being. It could foster a discussion on how the short-term investment of the program could impact the long-term satisfaction for the learner and their support systems. The orientation could include graduates of the program to discuss their experiences and how this investment impacted their lives.

### ***Recommendations for the Community***

Participants discussed having the desire to be a nurse but were not sure where to start. Looking at the projected job growth and the positive impact these programs have on individuals, families, and communities, a recommendation would be to provide practical nursing programs in areas where nurses are needed most. New York State

LPN jobs have been on the rise since 2018 and are projected to continue to grow at a rate of 10.7% by 2028 (Curtis, 2022). This growth promotes the creation of more than 66,000 new jobs in the U.S. alone (Curtis, 2022). New jobs for LPNs in New York are projected to outpace the national growth rate, increasing new opportunities by nearly 20% (Curtis, 2022). A recommendation in filling these needs is to create partnerships with schools in these communities to engage students in what it's like to be a practical nurse. There could be programs that lead to post-secondary practical nursing programs outside of the surrounding high schools. A suggestion would be to educate local high school guidance counselors on the advantages of individuals becoming licensed practical nurses after graduation and recommend healthcare classes that would prepare them for the nursing field post-graduation. Programs could also provide information about their programs to these students and their parents when making post- high school graduation plans.

Another recommendation could be to have program information at local community centers and chambers of commerce with contact information or information sessions held regularly. Post-secondary practical nursing programs may create a pipeline of licensed nurses to fill the staffing needs in healthcare facilities which positively impacts the health and economic outcomes in their communities. Practical nursing programs could be presented in community health and career fairs explaining what a practical nurse does and how it impacts their community healthcare outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

A key finding in this study was the development of a framework consisting of three phases an adult learner experiences when deciding to return to school. Phase I:

Before the Program, Phase II: During the Program, and Phase III: Completion of the Program. Although this study explored the lived experiences of adult learners in a practical nursing program, there are implications that this framework could be used for adult learners in different contexts such as other higher education programs. This study sought to address a gap in the literature by considering the role of motivation and perceived barriers in adult learners in post-secondary practical nursing programs. That gap has been narrowed with the data in this study. This exploration not only gave insight as to the participants' motivations to return to school and their perceived barriers to academic success, but how they overcame those barriers to succeed.

In addition to this study shedding light on the common drives and desires of these participants, it lends itself as a resource that can now be used by adult learners, their support systems, practical nursing programs, and communities. Results of this study provide information on the decision-making process to enter a practical nursing program as an adult learner and the outcomes of that experience. Support systems are armed with tools to best support their loved one before and during their educational experience. Both the practical nursing programs and communities will benefit as well. Given this was a small sample size, additional research including more LPN students, a variety of programs within New York State, and international programs would be beneficial. A larger quantitative study could provide a greater amount of data on the motivations and barriers of adult learners in practical nursing programs which would reach a broader number of individuals. Programs can develop supportive resources and policies to assist adult learners successfully achieve personal and academic goals.

Communities will have the added benefit of qualified nurses entering the workforce to ensure positive health outcomes and lasting socioeconomic improvements.

More adults are returning to post-secondary and higher education for a sense of fulfillment and desire to improve their lives, the lives of their families, and to provide service to their communities (Gardner et al., 2021). By paving a smoother road for that journey, the adult learner can focus on the importance of those goals and the impact their success will have on the world as a licensed practical nurse.



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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

1. How are you doing today? Tell me something about yourself that you are most proud of?
2. Do you recall when you first thought about going back to school for nursing?
  - a. What were you doing currently in your life (probe)
  - b. What responsibilities did you have (probe)
3. Why did you choose a practical nursing program?
4. What concerns did you have about returning to school?
  - a. How did you manage and/or overcome them?
5. Describe what motivated you to make the decision to return to school.
6. Explain any academic challenges that you experienced during the program.
7. Explain any non-academic challenges that you experienced during the program.
8. What barriers, if any, did you experience while attending the program?
9. What positive supports did you have while attending the program?
10. How has graduating from the LPN program impacted your life?