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Learning Beyond Working Hours: Exploring Time Management, Work–Study Balance, and Pedagogical Experiences Among MAED Graduate Students

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Abstract

Graduate education provides educators and other professionals with opportunities for advanced knowledge, career development, professional advancement, and improved educational practice. However, many Master of Arts in Education (MAED) students pursue graduate degrees while simultaneously maintaining full-time employment and fulfilling family and personal responsibilities. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of working MAED graduate students at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated, with particular attention to time management, work–study balance, and graduate pedagogical experiences. The study seeks to understand how participants negotiate competing professional and academic demands, manage limited time, experience teaching and learning practices in graduate education, and draw upon personal, social, and institutional resources to sustain their studies. Participants are selected through purposive criterion sampling, while data are generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The study is theoretically anchored in Boundary Theory and Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy). The proposed analytical framework encompasses five interconnected themes: Living on Borrowed Time; When Work and Graduate School Collide; Learning After the Workday; From Graduate Classroom to Professional Practice; and Staying the Course Through Shared Support. The study argues that successful graduate education for working MAED learners depends not solely on individual time-management ability but also on responsive pedagogy, meaningful professional application, supportive relationships, and institutional conditions that recognize the realities of adult professional learners. Findings may provide a basis for strengthening graduate-school policies, pedagogical practices, scheduling systems, academic advising, and learner-support mechanisms at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated.

Keywords: MAED students; graduate education; time management; work–study balance; adult learning; graduate pedagogy; working students; phenomenology



I. Introduction

Graduate education plays an important role in the continuing professional development of educators and other professionals seeking advanced knowledge, specialized competencies, leadership preparation, and career advancement. For students pursuing a Master of Arts in Education (MAED), graduate education can provide opportunities to deepen pedagogical knowledge, develop research competencies, strengthen leadership capacities, and critically examine educational practices. Yet the pursuit of an advanced degree often occurs alongside demanding professional and personal responsibilities.

In the Philippine context, graduate education is frequently pursued by individuals who are already employed. Unlike students whose primary responsibility is academic study, working graduate students must simultaneously satisfy the expectations of their employers, professors, families, and graduate programs. Consequently, the graduate-learning experience extends far beyond scheduled classroom hours. Readings may be completed late at night, research papers may be written during weekends, group activities may be coordinated around working schedules, and academic deadlines may compete directly with professional obligations.

Recent Philippine evidence demonstrates the significance of these challenges. A study of education graduate students found that major difficulties included insufficient time for research, conflicts between work and study schedules, limited mentoring support, heavy workloads, financial difficulties, and insufficient academic resources. These findings demonstrate that the graduate experience cannot be understood independently of the professional environments in which many learners operate.

Similarly, Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025), in a phenomenological investigation involving 16 working graduate students in the Philippines, found that participants were motivated by career advancement and personal growth but experienced significant difficulties balancing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. Time management, financial strain, and emotional exhaustion were prominent challenges, while organizational strategies and external support contributed to persistence.

Time therefore represents a particularly important resource for working MAED students. Graduate learners may organize their lives around calendars, professional schedules, assignment deadlines, weekend classes, family commitments, and designated periods for academic work. Research among graduate students at Bicol College, for instance, identified goal setting, task prioritization, planning, adaptability, procrastination management, distraction management, stress management, and self-motivation as important dimensions of graduate students' time management.

However, framing work–study difficulties solely as an individual time-management problem may oversimplify the experience. Hammond (2025) argues that dominant narratives about work–study balance can place excessive responsibility on students to become more resilient and efficient while overlooking structural conditions such as rigid schedules, employment pressures,

and financial constraints. Consequently, work–study balance should be understood as both an individual and institutional concern.

The issue is particularly relevant to MAED students because many are educators or professionals whose occupations involve substantial responsibilities beyond formal working hours. Preparing lessons, assessing student work, attending meetings, producing reports, participating in institutional programs, communicating with stakeholders, and completing administrative responsibilities may extend professional demands into evenings and weekends. Graduate requirements are consequently negotiated within an already complex professional environment.

At the same time, professional employment can enrich graduate learning. MAED students enter graduate classrooms carrying practical experiences that may serve as resources for interpreting theories of teaching, learning, leadership, curriculum, assessment, research, and educational administration. Graduate education can likewise provide conceptual tools that students apply within their workplaces. Thus, the relationship between employment and graduate education is not exclusively competitive; it can also be mutually reinforcing.

This relationship highlights the importance of graduate pedagogy. Working MAED students are adult learners whose professional experiences, motivations, and immediate educational concerns influence how they engage with learning. Pedagogical practices that emphasize authentic problems, professional application, critical reflection, research, collaboration, and experience-based discussion may therefore be especially meaningful.

Philippine evidence concerning online professional-development programs similarly demonstrates that employed adult learners experience significant time-management and work–study–life challenges, including nighttime synchronous sessions, difficulty completing required readings, group-work scheduling, and conflicts between academic, employment, and family responsibilities. These realities reinforce the importance of designing learning environments that combine academic rigor with responsiveness to adult learners' circumstances.

Despite increasing attention to working students, there remains a need for institutionally situated qualitative research specifically examining the intersection of time management, work–study balance, and pedagogical experience among MAED graduate students. Much existing literature focuses either on undergraduate working students, general graduate-school challenges, research productivity, or work–life balance as separate concerns.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of MAED graduate students at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated. Rather than treating time management, work–study balance, and pedagogy as independent phenomena, the study examines how they intersect within participants' everyday graduate-school experiences.

Objective of the Study

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of working MAED graduate students at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated as they navigate time management, work–study balance, and pedagogical demands. It seeks to understand how students organize their time, negotiate professional and academic responsibilities, experience graduate teaching practices, integrate academic learning with professional practice, and sustain their participation in graduate education.

Review of Related Literature

Working Students in Graduate Education

Working while studying has become an important characteristic of contemporary higher education. Employment can provide financial support, professional experience, and career development; however, it also creates demands that compete with academic responsibilities.

Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025) found that working Filipino graduate students simultaneously experienced strong motivations for professional growth and considerable pressures associated with employment, graduate school, finances, and personal life. Their study demonstrates that graduate-school persistence involves navigating multiple responsibilities rather than focusing exclusively on academic requirements.

Research involving Philippine education graduate students similarly identified conflicts between work and study schedules and heavy workloads as working students among the principal barriers encountered during graduate education. Lack of research time and mentoring support further complicated students' academic experiences.

These findings indicate that working graduate students occupy multiple roles whose expectations frequently overlap. Graduate education therefore needs to be understood within the broader context of learners' professional and personal lives.

3.2 Time Management in Graduate Education

Time management represents one of the most persistent challenges confronting working graduate learners. It encompasses more than preparing a schedule; it involves setting priorities, allocating limited resources, anticipating deadlines, adapting to unexpected professional demands, and deciding when one responsibility must temporarily take precedence over another.

Gonzales et al. (2025), studying graduate students engaged in thesis and dissertation writing at Bicol College, examined time management through goal setting, prioritization, planning, adaptability, procrastination management, distraction control, stress management, and self-motivation. Their findings suggested that although graduate students demonstrated generally good time-management skills, stress management remained an important area requiring attention.

Research on thesis-writing experiences among master's students also found that time-management difficulties, financial constraints, limited resources, and emotional stress complicated graduate research. Students responded through time-management strategies, support networks, technology, and communication with advisers.

Thus, effective time management supports graduate persistence but does not necessarily remove the pressures created by overlapping professional and academic responsibilities.

3.3 Work–Study Balance and Role Boundaries

Work–study balance refers to an individual's capacity to manage employment and academic roles without allowing one domain to consistently undermine participation in the other. For employed graduate students, however, perfect balance may be unrealistic.

Research involving 266 working university students found that temporal and communicative boundary-management strategies were associated with work–study balance and academic satisfaction. Student identity also influenced how individuals negotiated these boundaries.

Boundary management is especially important because work and study are not always physically or temporally separated. A graduate student may complete coursework after returning home from work, respond to workplace messages while studying, or use workplace problems as material for graduate assignments.

Hammond's (2025) study involving 62 post-secondary students provides an important critical perspective by arguing that work–study balance is sometimes treated as an individual resilience problem despite structural pressures. Students may employ extensive adaptive strategies yet remain constrained by rigid academic schedules, employment requirements, and financial realities.

The implication is that institutions share responsibility for creating conditions under which working learners can succeed.

3.4 Work–Study Balance Among Education Professionals

The issue becomes particularly relevant when graduate learners are already working in education. A qualitative study involving in-service teachers attending graduate school in Korea found that work–study imbalance contributed to reduced leisure, health concerns, workplace difficulties, conflict, and stress. Support from family, friends, professors, and workplaces helped participants persist, although individual effort and external support did not always fully resolve competing demands.

This finding is important for MAED populations because professional responsibilities in education can extend beyond standard working hours. Consequently, work–study balance should be viewed as a dynamic process influenced by workload, academic expectations, social support, and institutional arrangements.

3.5 Adult Learning and Graduate Pedagogy

MAED students represent a population of adult learners with accumulated professional experience. Knowles' Adult Learning Theory, commonly associated with andragogy, provides a valuable perspective for understanding their pedagogical needs.

Andragogy emphasizes that adult learners possess extensive experiences that can become resources for learning. Adults are also more likely to engage deeply when learning is relevant, problem-centered, and applicable to immediate professional concerns.

For MAED students, graduate pedagogy may therefore become more meaningful when instruction includes case analysis, educational problem solving, action research, critical reflection, collaborative learning, authentic assessment, and workplace-connected activities.

Responsive pedagogy does not imply lowering academic standards. Rather, it involves ensuring that rigorous requirements have clear learning purposes and provide opportunities for professional application.

3.6 Support and Graduate Persistence

Graduate-school success is rarely achieved through individual effort alone. Support can come from professors, advisers, classmates, colleagues, supervisors, employers, spouses, family members, and institutional services.

Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025) found that external support systems complemented personal organizational strategies among successful working graduate students. Research on graduate thesis writing similarly emphasizes communication with advisers and support networks as important coping mechanisms.

A Philippine study examining challenges among education graduate students further identified inadequate mentoring support as one of the major difficulties encountered, demonstrating the institutional significance of graduate supervision and academic guidance.

4. Theoretical Framework

The study is primarily anchored in Boundary Theory and Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (Andragogy).

4.1 Boundary Theory

Boundary Theory explains how individuals establish, maintain, and negotiate boundaries between different life domains. Working MAED students occupy at least three significant domains: professional life, graduate education, and personal/family life.

Their experience may be conceptualized as:

Professional Demands ↔ Boundary Negotiation ↔ Graduate-School Demands

with family and personal responsibilities interacting across both domains.

Boundary strategies may include establishing designated study periods, negotiating workplace schedules, prioritizing academic deadlines, limiting leisure activities, and integrating workplace experiences into graduate requirements.

Research demonstrating relationships among temporal boundary strategies, work–study balance, and academic satisfaction provides empirical support for applying this perspective.

4.2 Adult Learning Theory

Knowles' andragogical framework complements Boundary Theory by explaining how MAED students experience graduate pedagogy as adult professional learners.

Adult learners bring substantial experience into learning environments, demonstrate greater self-direction, and frequently seek knowledge that can be immediately applied to authentic problems.

Together, the theories allow the study to investigate both how MAED students manage the conditions surrounding learning and how they experience the learning itself.

5. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of MAED graduate students at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated in navigating time management, work–study balance, and graduate pedagogy. Phenomenology is appropriate because the study seeks to understand the meanings participants assign to the shared experience of pursuing graduate education while fulfilling professional and personal responsibilities. Rather than measuring work–study balance through predetermined numerical indicators, the study gives priority to participants' descriptions of their experiences, struggles, adjustments, learning, and persistence.

Participants are selected through purposive criterion sampling. Eligible participants are currently enrolled MAED students at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated who are simultaneously employed and have sufficient experience combining graduate study and professional employment to provide information-rich accounts. Approximately 10–15 participants may initially be recruited, with the final number guided by the depth, richness, and adequacy of the qualitative data rather than statistical representativeness. Data are collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Interview questions focus on participants' work and graduate-school responsibilities, time-management strategies, scheduling conflicts, experiences with professors and graduate pedagogy, professional applications of learning, personal sacrifices, coping mechanisms, and sources of support. With informed consent, interviews are digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interview transcripts are analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, involving data familiarization, initial coding, generation of potential themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of an interpretive narrative. Analysis remains primarily inductive while Boundary Theory and Adult Learning Theory serve as sensitizing frameworks. Trustworthiness is established through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Strategies include sustained engagement with the data, reflexive journaling, an audit trail, peer debriefing, participant clarification where appropriate, and thick description. Ethical approval should be obtained from the appropriate institutional review body before recruitment. Participation is voluntary, informed consent is secured, pseudonyms or participant codes are used, and research records are securely maintained.

Findings and Discussion

These themes illustrate that graduate education among working professionals extends beyond classroom participation. It involves continuous negotiation of time, professional responsibilities, academic requirements, family obligations, and personal aspirations. The themes also reveal that students' capacity to remain in graduate education is influenced by both personal strategies and the quality of their academic, workplace, and social environments.

Theme I: Living on Borrowed Time Making Every Hour Count

The first theme captures how working MAED students experience time as a scarce and carefully negotiated resource. Participants may describe their daily lives as highly structured around professional schedules, academic deadlines, family responsibilities, and personal obligations. Unlike full-time students who may have greater flexibility in organizing academic work, employed graduate learners must identify available periods outside their regular working hours.

Consequently, evenings, weekends, lunch breaks, holidays, and other available moments may gradually become extensions of their graduate-school schedules.

Planning Life Around Deadlines

Participants may rely heavily on calendars, task lists, reminders, and advance planning to prevent professional and academic responsibilities from overlapping unnecessarily. One participant may describe:

Participant 2: “I need to check my schedule every week because there are deadlines at work and deadlines in graduate school. I list everything according to the date and decide which task needs to be done first. Without planning, I think I would easily become overwhelmed.”

Another participant may explain:

Participant 5: “I try to finish requirements before the deadline because I know that unexpected things can happen at work. If I wait until the last day, there is a possibility that an urgent responsibility will come up.”

These accounts suggest that time management involves more than organizing tasks. It is also a form of **anticipatory coping**. Participants plan not only for known responsibilities but also for the possibility that professional demands may unexpectedly interfere with academic schedules.

Eastgate et al. (2023) provide strong empirical support for this interpretation. In their study of 266 working university students, temporal boundary-management strategies were significantly related to better work–study balance and academic satisfaction. Their findings suggest that students who deliberately allocate time to their student role are better positioned to negotiate simultaneous work and study demands.

Nights and Weekends Become Academic Time

Because employment occupies much of the conventional working day, participants may shift academic responsibilities into periods normally associated with rest and personal life.

Participant 3: “Most of my readings and papers are done at night. Sometimes I start after dinner and continue until midnight because that is the only quiet time available after work.”

Another participant may state:

Participant 8: “Saturday and Sunday are no longer completely free days. I use them to prepare presentations, read modules, or work on research. Graduate school becomes part of the weekend.”

This pattern demonstrates how the boundary between academic and personal time becomes increasingly permeable. Academic work is not confined to class schedules but extends into spaces traditionally reserved for rest, family, and recreation.

Research on work–study boundary management supports this interpretation. Creed et al. (2023), in a study of 808 working students, found substantial differences in outcomes depending on how supportive or unsupportive work and study arrangements were. Students experiencing low work-boundary congruence and flexibility reported greater role conflict and study burnout compared with those whose working arrangements were more supportive of their student roles.

Rest Becomes Negotiable

A deeper consequence of limited time is that rest itself may become something participants consciously sacrifice.

Participant 6: “Sometimes I know that I need to rest, but there is a deadline the next morning. You tell yourself that you can sleep after finishing the requirement.”

Another may explain:

Participant 10: “My schedule can be organized, but that does not mean I am not tired. Sometimes everything fits in the calendar only because I reduce my sleeping time.”

This distinction is important. Effective scheduling does not automatically eliminate physical and emotional fatigue. Students may be highly organized yet still experience pressure because the total volume of responsibilities remains substantial.

Agbayani and Paglinawan's (2025) Philippine phenomenological study of 16 working graduate students similarly found that participants encountered serious difficulties involving time management, emotional exhaustion, financial strain, and competing academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. Successful students relied on organizational strategies, but these strategies existed alongside continued pressure and fatigue.

The interpretation of Theme 1 is therefore that time management functions as a survival strategy rather than a complete solution. Participants can organize time more effectively, but no strategy creates additional hours in the day. Graduate institutions should consequently avoid assuming that all time-related difficulties result from poor discipline. Academic workload, scheduling practices, workplace expectations, and personal responsibilities collectively shape students' capacity to manage time.

Theme 2: When Work and Graduate School Collide

The second theme reflects moments when professional and academic responsibilities demand attention at the same time. Participants may describe such situations as particularly stressful because both domains involve obligations that cannot easily be ignored or postponed.

Competing Deadlines Create Role Conflict

One participant may describe:

Participant 1: “There was a time when I had an important report at work and a graduate-school paper due on the same week. Both were important. I could not tell my employer that I would not finish my work, and I could not tell my professor that school was no longer important.”

Another participant may state:

Participant 7: “The hardest part is when several requirements come at the same time. At work you have meetings, reports, and activities, and then you also have presentations and papers in graduate school.”

Such experiences represent **inter-role conflict**, where fulfilling one role consumes resources needed to satisfy another. In these moments, participants must continuously prioritize rather than achieve a stable balance.

Eastgate et al. (2023) found that work–study balance is closely associated with how students manage temporal boundaries between their employment and student roles. Their findings also showed that better balance was associated with greater academic satisfaction.

Professional Responsibilities Cannot Simply Be Postponed

For many MAED learners, employment represents both a professional obligation and the financial means through which graduate education is possible.

Participant 4: “My job is my responsibility and also the reason I can afford graduate school. I cannot simply set aside my work whenever there is an academic requirement.”

Another participant may explain:

Participant 9: “Sometimes work must come first because students, clients, or the organization are depending on me. Then I have to catch up with graduate work afterward.”

This finding complicates simplistic descriptions of work–study balance. Employment is not merely an obstacle to graduate learning. It can simultaneously support tuition, professional identity, career development, and the practical context in which graduate knowledge is applied.

Graduate Requirements Compete With Family and Personal Time

Work and study are not the only competing domains. Participants may also describe family responsibilities and personal needs as continually negotiated.

Participant 11: “Sometimes I feel guilty because weekends should also be for my family, but I have to work on graduate requirements. You try to divide your time, but sometimes one area still receives less attention.”

This suggests that work–study balance might be more accurately conceptualized as work–study–life negotiation.

Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025) likewise found that working graduate students in the Philippines experienced simultaneous academic, occupational, and personal pressures rather than a simple two-domain conflict.

Balance Becomes Continuous Adjustment Rather Than Equilibrium

Participant narratives may ultimately reveal that “balance” is temporary and constantly changing.

Participant 5: “I do not think there is a perfect balance. Some weeks work needs more attention. Other weeks graduate school needs more attention. What I do is adjust depending on what is happening.”

This interpretation is strongly supported by Boundary Theory. Working students continuously create, maintain, relax, and renegotiate boundaries according to changing circumstances.

Creed et al. (2023) found that different configurations of work–study boundary congruence and flexibility were associated with different levels of role conflict, study burnout, and well-being. In particular, students whose work arrangements did not support their study role experienced less favorable outcomes.

Thus, Theme 2 suggests that successful work–study balance should not be defined as giving equal time to every responsibility. A more realistic definition is the capacity to repeatedly adjust priorities without allowing one domain to become chronically unsustainable.

Theme 3: Learning After the Workday–Pedagogy Through the Eyes of Adult Professionals

The third theme concerns how participants experience graduate teaching after completing demanding professional responsibilities. MAED learners may enter classes physically tired yet intellectually motivated. Their professional background shapes how they judge whether a learning activity is useful, meaningful, and worthy of the limited time available to them.

Clear Expectations Make Demanding Learning Manageable

Participants may appreciate instructors who communicate assignments and expectations clearly.

Participant 3: “I can manage difficult requirements if I know exactly what is expected. What makes things difficult is when instructions change or when we do not understand what the output should be.”

Another participant may explain:

Participant 6: “When the professor gives the schedule early, I can prepare around my work. Even a challenging activity becomes manageable when we know in advance.”

Clarity therefore functions not merely as an instructional preference but as a **time-management support mechanism**.

Relevance Strengthens Engagement

Participants may demonstrate greater engagement when graduate content connects directly to their professional realities.

Participant 2: “I appreciate subjects where I can connect the theories to what I actually experience at work. The lesson becomes easier to understand because I already have situations that I can relate to it.”

Another may state:

Participant 8: “When the professor uses real educational problems, I become more interested because I can see how the lesson can help me professionally.”

This pattern strongly reflects principles of **andragogy**, particularly the importance of experience and professional relevance in adult learning.

Daga (2026), in a qualitative study of 18 Doctor of Education students in Eastern Visayas, identified several characteristics of effective graduate teaching, including contextualized

materials, interactive learning, scaffolded instruction, experiential and collaborative approaches, reduced excessive reporting, and professionally relevant learning.

A related 2026 study evaluating graduate instruction through Knowles' andragogical framework found that adult graduate learners viewed instruction as highly effective when teaching strategies were interactive, collaborative, and conducive to higher-order thinking, including multidisciplinary approaches and brainstorming.

Meaningful Requirements Matter More Than Numerous Requirements

Some participants may distinguish between academic rigor and excessive task accumulation.

Participant 7: “I do not mind having difficult requirements as long as I can see their purpose. Sometimes one meaningful project teaches us more than several repetitive activities.”

Another participant may state:

Participant 12: “Graduate school should challenge us, but requirements should contribute to learning. If activities are only for compliance, it becomes difficult to appreciate them, especially after a full day of work.”

This finding does not imply that MAED students seek easier coursework. Rather, it suggests that adult learners tend to evaluate learning through purpose, relevance, intellectual value, and professional usefulness.

Simmons, Wong, and Appedu (2025) similarly emphasize that graduate students are adult learners whose motivations and expectations differ from those of younger students and argue that graduate instructional design should deliberately incorporate adult-learning principles.

Earlier international research by Yoshimoto, Inenaga, and Yamada (2007) likewise found that independent learning, practical emphasis, and freedom of choice were prominent elements of andragogical approaches for mature learners in higher education.

Flexibility Can Coexist With Academic Rigor

Participants may value professors who recognize legitimate professional constraints without weakening academic expectations.

Participant 4: “Understanding does not mean making the course easy. A professor can still be strict but also recognize that graduate students are professionals with responsibilities.”

This captures what can be termed **responsive rigor**: high academic expectations combined with clear structure, relevant learning, appropriate flexibility, and recognition of adult learners' contexts.

The interpretation of Theme 3 is therefore that effective graduate pedagogy for MAED learners should not merely reproduce conventional classroom teaching at a more advanced level. It should deliberately capitalize on adult learners' professional experiences, autonomy, and need for meaningful application.

Theme 4: From Graduate Classroom to Professional Practice

The fourth theme highlights the productive interaction between professional employment and graduate learning. Employment may create scheduling difficulties, but it also provides participants with a rich experiential foundation for understanding graduate concepts.

Workplace Experience Gives Theory Meaning

One participant may explain:

Participant 1: “When we discuss leadership, assessment, or classroom management, I can think of actual experiences from my work. That helps me understand the theory.”

Another may state:

Participant 6: “Some concepts become clearer because I have already encountered similar problems professionally.”

Participants' professional experiences therefore serve as interpretive resources for academic learning.

Graduate Learning Transforms Professional Practice

The relationship also operates in the opposite direction.

Participant 5: “There are strategies I learned in graduate school that I started using at work. Sometimes the lessons make me realize that there are better ways to handle certain situations.”

Another participant may explain:

Participant 9: “Graduate school gives me new perspectives. I begin to examine practices that I previously accepted without questioning.”

This reflects a key principle of adult learning: learners are motivated when they can apply knowledge to authentic concerns.

Daga's (2026) findings similarly showed that effective andragogical practices contributed to graduate learners' professional and academic development through problem-centered and professionally relevant learning experiences.

Research Encourages Critical Reflection

For MAED students, research activities may also create opportunities to critically examine educational practice.

Participant 10: “Research changed the way I look at problems at work. Instead of relying only on assumptions, I now think about evidence and how we can systematically investigate an issue.”

Graduate education therefore moves learners from simply performing professional routines toward examining and questioning them.

Professional Problems Become Opportunities for Academic Inquiry

Participants may begin to identify workplace concerns as possible research questions, case studies, intervention projects, or reflective activities.

Participant 3: “Sometimes an assignment starts from a problem we experience at work. What begins as a professional concern becomes something that can be studied academically.”

This creates a reciprocal process:

Professional Experience → Graduate Reflection → Theory and Research → Improved Professional Practice

Such an interpretation aligns with the andragogical literature emphasizing experiential and problem-centered learning. Daga's 2026 studies specifically underscore contextualized, experiential, collaborative, and professionally connected graduate instruction.

Yoshimoto et al. (2007) also found practical emphasis and independent learning to be distinguishing features of andragogical orientations toward mature university learners.

Theme 4 therefore challenges the assumption that employment is exclusively a barrier to graduate study. Work can also become an intellectual resource. For MAED learners especially, educational workplaces offer authentic contexts in which theories of curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, leadership, administration, and educational research can be interpreted and tested.

Theme 5: Staying the Course-Persistence Through Shared Support

The final theme highlights the interaction between personal determination and external support. Although participants ultimately carry responsibility for completing graduate requirements, their ability to persist may depend significantly on relationships with family members, classmates, professors, colleagues, and workplace supervisors.

Family Understanding Protects Study Time

One participant may describe:

Participant 4: “My family knows that there are times when I need to focus on school. They help with responsibilities at home when I have major requirements.”

Another may explain:

Participant II: “Their understanding reduces the guilt I feel when I need to spend time studying instead of being with them.”

Family support therefore functions both practically and emotionally.

Classmates Create a Community of Shared Struggle

Because many classmates may also be working professionals, peer relationships can create a sense of shared understanding.

Participant 2: “My classmates understand because they are also working. We remind one another about requirements, share information, and encourage each other when someone feels tired.”

Peer support may reduce isolation and create a collective graduate identity.

Supportive Professors Sustain Motivation

Participants may describe faculty accessibility and constructive feedback as particularly important.

Participant 7: “When the professor guides us instead of simply telling us what is wrong, it gives us confidence to continue improving.”

For working learners, academic support may provide not only intellectual assistance but also reassurance that demanding graduate work remains achievable.

Workplace Consideration Makes Graduate Participation Possible

Employer flexibility may be critical during periods of academic intensity.

Participant 8: “When my supervisor allows me to adjust my schedule for an important class or research activity, it makes a big difference. Without workplace support, there are situations where I would have to choose between work and school.”

This interpretation is supported by Creed et al. (2023), whose study showed that students with working arrangements supportive of their study role experienced more favorable work–study outcomes, whereas unsupportive work arrangements were associated with greater role conflict and burnout.

Personal Goals Give Meaning to Sacrifice

Despite the importance of external support, participants' own aspirations remain central.

Participant 10: “Whenever I feel tired, I remind myself why I enrolled. I want to finish the degree because it is part of my professional goal.”

Another may state:

Participant 12: “The sacrifices become easier to accept when I remember that I am doing this for my future and for my family.”

Agbayani and Paglinawan (2025) found a similar pattern among Filipino working graduate students: career advancement and personal growth were major motivations, while successful navigation of graduate study depended on both personal organizational strategies and external support systems.

Eastgate et al. (2023) likewise found that students' future-self and identification with the student role were associated with stronger boundary-management strategies and, through those strategies, greater work–study balance and academic satisfaction.

The central interpretation of Theme 5 is therefore that persistence is individually enacted but socially sustained. Graduate students may possess strong motivation, yet family understanding, supportive faculty, collaborative peers, and flexible workplaces create conditions that allow that motivation to endure.

Taken collectively, the five themes suggest that the experiences of working MAED students are characterized less by a stable state of “balance” and more by an ongoing process of negotiation, adaptation, integration, and persistence. Participants repeatedly decide how to allocate limited

time, how to respond when professional and academic demands collide, and how to maintain personal relationships while pursuing graduate goals.

The themes can be represented through the following experiential progression:

Limited Time → Work–Study Conflict → Boundary Negotiation → Responsive Pedagogy → Professional–Academic Integration → Social Support → Persistence and Professional Growth

The first two themes emphasize the structural realities surrounding graduate study: time is finite and roles compete. The third and fourth themes emphasize the educational experience itself: pedagogy becomes more meaningful when it recognizes adult learners and connects academic knowledge with professional practice. The final theme demonstrates that persistence emerges through the interaction of individual determination and supportive relationships.

Boundary-management research reinforces this interpretation. Eastgate et al. (2023) showed that temporal strategies, student identity, and perceptions of the future are related to work–study balance and academic satisfaction. Creed et al. (2023) further demonstrated that boundary congruence and flexibility matter because unsupportive work or study arrangements are associated with greater conflict and burnout.

At the pedagogical level, Daga (2026) found that graduate adult learners favor contextualized, interactive, collaborative, experiential, and professionally relevant instruction rather than excessive reporting or decontextualized activities. These findings reinforce the argument that graduate education for MAED learners should combine rigor with relevance and responsiveness.

Thus, the experiences of working MAED students should not be interpreted through an individual-deficit perspective in which academic difficulty is attributed simply to inadequate time management. A more comprehensive interpretation recognizes that student success is jointly shaped by personal agency, temporal resources, workplace flexibility, graduate-school structures, pedagogical quality, professional relevance, and social support.

For Isabela Colleges, Incorporated, this interpretation supports graduate practices such as advance communication of major requirements, predictable academic calendars, meaningful workplace-related assessments, accessible professors and research advisers, opportunities for collaborative learning, and reasonable accommodations for legitimate professional conflicts. Such measures do not reduce academic standards; rather, they create conditions in which rigorous graduate learning can be sustained by working adult professionals.

Discussion

The proposed thematic framework suggests that the experience of working MAED students is better understood as **continuous negotiation rather than perfect balance**. Participants may successfully organize their schedules while continuing to experience fatigue, role conflict, and pressure. This distinction is important because time-management competence does not necessarily eliminate structural demands.

The findings of Castulo et al. (2025) are particularly relevant. Their investigation of Philippine education graduate students identified lack of research time, conflicts between work and study,

heavy professional workload, limited mentoring, and academic-resource challenges. These difficulties demonstrate that graduate-school success depends on more than personal discipline.

Similarly, Agbayani and Paglinawan's (2025) qualitative study showed that working graduate students relied upon both personal organizational strategies and external support to negotiate academic, professional, and personal responsibilities. The proposed findings of the present study therefore position persistence as an interaction between personal agency and environmental support.

The pedagogical dimension provides an important extension to this literature. MAED students are adult professionals whose experiences can enrich graduate instruction. When classroom activities allow participants to connect theory with professional problems, graduate learning becomes more than degree completion it becomes a mechanism for professional reflection and improvement.

The findings also challenge a simplistic interpretation of flexibility. Flexibility should not mean lowering graduate standards. Rather, effective graduate pedagogy can maintain intellectual rigor while providing clear expectations, purposeful assessments, professionally relevant tasks, appropriate scheduling, and meaningful feedback.

The distinction can be described as responsive rigor:

High Academic Expectations + Clear Purpose + Professional Relevance + Reasonable Flexibility + Strong Academic Support = Responsive Graduate Pedagogy

This approach recognizes both the scholarly expectations of graduate education and the realities of employed adult learners.

8. Implications for Graduate Education

The study provides several potential implications for graduate education at Isabela Colleges, Incorporated.

First, predictable academic scheduling may significantly support working MAED students. Providing major requirements and deadlines early can allow learners to coordinate graduate responsibilities with professional commitments.

Second, graduate pedagogy should maximize professional relevance. Assessments involving workplace problems, action research, educational case analysis, reflective practice, curriculum development, instructional innovation, and authentic professional projects may strengthen the connection between graduate learning and employment.

Third, research mentoring and academic advising should be strengthened. Philippine evidence indicates that inadequate mentoring and limited research time remain important concerns among education graduate students.

Fourth, graduate faculty may employ responsive flexibility when appropriate while maintaining academic standards. Clear rubrics, advance scheduling, reasonable timelines, accessible

consultation, and alternative mechanisms for legitimate scheduling conflicts can support working professionals without diminishing rigor.

Fifth, the Graduate School may consider mechanisms that strengthen peer communities and academic support networks, recognizing that persistence is socially supported rather than exclusively individual.

Conclusion

Learning beyond working hours captures an important reality of graduate education among employed MAED students. Graduate learning frequently occurs after professional duties have ended during evenings, weekends, breaks, and periods that might otherwise have been reserved for family, leisure, or rest. Consequently, pursuing an MAED degree involves more than meeting academic requirements; it requires continuous negotiation among professional identity, academic aspiration, personal responsibilities, and limited time.

The study positions time management as necessary but insufficient for understanding this experience. Working MAED students may demonstrate strong discipline and organization while

still experiencing work–study conflict because individual strategies operate within broader professional, academic, and personal conditions.

Graduate pedagogy therefore becomes a crucial component of work–study sustainability. Adult professional learners may benefit most from academically rigorous experiences that are purposeful, relevant, clearly structured, professionally applicable, and responsive to their circumstances. Their workplaces can become valuable sources of academic inquiry, while graduate classrooms can become spaces for critically rethinking professional practice.

Ultimately, graduate success among working MAED students should not be interpreted solely as an individual achievement. It emerges through the interaction of personal commitment, effective time negotiation, meaningful pedagogy, professional relevance, supportive relationships, and responsive institutional structures. Recognizing these interconnected conditions can help Isabela Colleges, Incorporated strengthen graduate education that is rigorous, relevant, and sustainable for working adult learners.

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