



Post-retirement professional reintegration and institutional sustainability in a digitally transforming education system: A phenomenological study

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Submitted: 12 January 2026 Revised: 11 February 2026 Accepted: 25 February 2026

Abstract

Retirement is increasingly understood not only as withdrawal but as a phase in which professionals may pursue renewed, purpose-driven participation. This study explored the lived experiences of retired professionals who voluntarily re-entered the workforce and how this reintegration is shaped by wellbeing needs, role redesign, and digitally transforming work contexts. Guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological design, the study involved five purposively selected participants from Philippines. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Van Manen's six-step approach. The analysis generated 22 essential meaning statements that informed three themes: (1) Sustaining Cognitive Capacity and Lifelong Learning through Post-Retirement Work, representing the pursuit of mental sharpness and purpose; (2) Reframing Professional Identity for Sustainable Knowledge Transfer, highlighting the shift from hierarchical power to relational influence; and (3) Intergenerational Knowledge Exchange and Socio-Technical Adaptation in Digitally Transforming Workplaces, reflecting the reciprocal exchange of wisdom and digital fluency. Positioned within sustainable education and digital transformation agendas, the study highlights post-retirement reintegration as a human-centered pathway for strengthening institutional resilience through mentorship-based role redesign, intergenerational learning, and supportive conditions for adaptation in digitally evolving environments.

Keywords: Hermeneutic phenomenology; Institutional memory; Intergenerational mentorship; Professional reintegration; Retirement; Socio-technical adaptation; Sustainable lifelong learning

1. Introduction

The global educational landscape is currently navigating a dual crisis: a shrinking workforce of experienced educators and the rapid, often disruptive, shift toward digital transformation (European Commission, 2025). In the Philippines, this tension is particularly acute in rural municipalities, where institutional resilience depends heavily on the continuity of professional expertise and leadership capacity (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011; Cruz et al., 2019). Traditional retirement—once viewed as a final withdrawal from the workforce—is increasingly being reimagined as a strategic mechanism for institutional sustainability (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). As educational systems transition to technology-mediated environments, they face a significant risk of institutional memory loss as veteran leaders retire (DeLong, 2004; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). This study argues that the voluntary reintegration of retired professionals, or "unretiring," is not merely a personal choice for self-care but a critical workforce continuity strategy.

Recent discourse in sustainable education governance suggests that the "wisdom capital" of retirees can serve as a stabilizing force during digital transitions, providing the pedagogical grounding that purely technical systems lack (World Economic Forum, 2023). Furthermore, while current research often frames the digital divide as a barrier for older workers, this study explores the cross-generational digital synergy that occurs when retirees re-enter the workforce (Ivan & Loos, 2023). In rural settings, retirees are not merely passive recipients of technology; rather, they can function as mentors who help preserve tacit knowledge and ensure that digital tools complement—rather than replace—high-quality human instruction (DeLong, 2004).

Although sustainability and workforce continuity have been widely discussed in educational reform literature, little attention has been paid to how professional reintegration—particularly in rural contexts—functions as a structural sustainability mechanism within educational infrastructures (Dingemans et al., 2016). Most research on retirement has primarily examined psychological adjustment and well-being outcomes in Western, urban contexts, with limited

attention to the broader systemic contributions of retirees in developing regions (Abalos, 2014; Wang & Shultz, 2010). This research fills that gap by investigating the lived experiences of working retirees through a lens of institutional resilience and digital adaptation. By understanding how these professionals navigate new technological hurdles and intergenerational shifts, this study provides a framework for building age-inclusive, digitally resilient, and sustainable education systems.

Based on the review of the prior research, there is a population gap. Some of these sub-populations have been unexplored and under-researched. The professional retirees in rural Philippine municipalities, particularly in Lanao del Norte, appear to be important and worthy of investigation in the context of post-retirement employment and reintegration. An investigation of this group is important because little is known about their motivations, challenges, and the cultural and psychological factors influencing their decision to continue working after retirement. Furthermore, previous research has focused primarily on this population of retirees in urban or Western settings. Very little research has examined the post-retirement experiences of Filipino older adults, particularly those residing in rural communities (Cruz et al., 2019).

This study, titled "Post-Retirement Professional Reintegration and Institutional Sustainability in a Digitally Transforming Education System: A Phenomenological Study," investigates how the re-entry of retired professionals serves as a catalyst for institutional resilience within the educational infrastructures of Lanao del Norte. Rather than focusing solely on personal narratives, this research examines the strategic role of "unretired" professionals in maintaining workforce continuity amidst rapid digital shifts. Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the study analyzes how these experts navigate the tension between traditional pedagogical values and modern, technology-mediated learning environments. It specifically explores the transition from authoritative leadership to "wisdom-based" mentorship, framing this shift as a vital mechanism for preserving institutional memory in transforming systems. Ultimately, the research seeks to develop an analytical framework for age-inclusive governance that leverages the "wisdom capital" of retirees to ensure long-term educational sustainability.

The findings of this study offer critical insights into institutional sustainability and digital adaptation within the educational infrastructures of rural municipalities. By examining the professional reintegration of retirees, this research identifies "unretiring" as a strategic workforce continuity mechanism that preserves institutional memory and pedagogical quality during periods of rapid technological shift. The study demonstrates how the "wisdom capital" of veteran professionals facilitates intergenerational knowledge transfer, ensuring that the adoption of modern digital tools is anchored by decades of instructional expertise. Ultimately, these insights provide a framework for educational leaders and social planners to develop age-inclusive governance strategies that leverage retired professionals to build more resilient, sustainable, and digitally integrated academic systems.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a multi-dimensional framework that integrates Resource-Based View [RBV] and Socio-Technical Systems Theory to examine the systemic value of retired professionals. RBV allows for the conceptualization of retirees as critical repositories of 'wisdom capital' and 'tacit knowledge,' which are essential for institutional memory and workforce continuity. Complementing this, Socio-Technical Systems Theory provides a lens to analyze the synergy between veteran pedagogical expertise and modern digital infrastructures. By synthesizing these theories, the study moves beyond individual psychological fulfillment to explore how professional reintegration serves as a governance mechanism for sustainable education and digital resilience.

Recent studies have shifted the focus of retirement from personal role transition to institutional sustainability and knowledge management. The retirement of senior professionals may lead to a significant loss of intellectual capital, potentially undermining organizational stability (DeLong, 2004). Retired professionals are not merely individuals changing roles, but are "rare and inimitable resources" who possess tacit knowledge essential for institutional memory. When these

professionals re-enter the workforce, they act as a stabilization mechanism that prevents "brain drain" during periods of organizational change or digital transition.

In the context of this study, professional retirees in Lanao del Norte who choose to re-enter the workforce are engaging in a form of Strategic Reintegration. Their return is not just a personal reassertion of identity, but a critical contribution to Workforce Continuity. This perspective views their re-entry through the lens of Institutional Generativity, where the primary value lies in the transfer of decades of professional wisdom to a younger, more transient workforce. This transition is a play between personal expertise and the systemic need for stability, which is crucial for the long-term sustainability of educational infrastructures in provincial settings.

Furthermore, from a socio-technical systems perspective, digital transformation entails interdependent changes in technological infrastructures, organizational processes, and individual behaviors, which shape how employees adapt to and function within modern work environments (Venkatesh et al., 2022). Rather than just experiencing "role strain" from technology, retirees participate in a socio-technical exchange where their "Social" pedagogical wisdom balances the "Technical" demands of digital transformation. For example, in the case of retired educators, the challenge is not merely adjusting to new software, but ensuring that Digital Adaptation remains grounded in high-quality instructional standards. This ensures that the institution remains resilient and effective despite the generation gaps or rapid technological shifts often found in transforming education systems.

This hermeneutic phenomenological study aims to examine the lived experiences of working retirees within the educational landscape of Lanao del Norte, specifically focusing on their contributions to institutional sustainability and digital adaptation.

In the context of this study, the lived experiences of working retirees refer to the systemic and subjective interpretations constructed by professionals as they navigate workforce continuity after formal retirement. These experiences are understood as strategic encounters shaped by institutional memory, technological transitions, and the evolving nature of professional identity within a transforming education system. The main research question is "How does the professional reintegration of retirees contribute to the sustainability and digital resilience of educational institutions?". Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ 1) What professional experiences and pedagogical values shaped the lives of retirees before their departure from the formal workforce?

RQ 2) What systemic circumstances or organizational meanings influenced their decision to re-enter the workforce after retirement?

RQ 3) How do retirees describe and make sense of their experience of professional reintegration within the context of institutional stability?

RQ 4) What challenges and opportunities do they encounter in re-engaging with technology-mediated environments and multi-generational workspaces?

RQ 5) How is the phenomenon of returning to work revealed as a mechanism for institutional sustainability and knowledge preservation?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study utilized a Hermeneutic Phenomenological design. Hermeneutic phenomenology is an in depth research approach which looks at the lived experience. It includes phenomenology which looks at the structure of experience and hermeneutics which is concerned with the interpretation of that which is put forth (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2. Participants of the Study

This research was conducted in a municipality of Lanao del Norte which is a province in the Northern Mindanao region of the Philippines. Lanao del Norte has 22 municipalities which each have distinct cultural and social economic characteristics. The province's capital is the Municipality of Tubod. This research utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability method

designed to select information-rich cases that provide deep insights into the systemic value of professional reintegration. This approach is specifically suited for hermeneutic phenomenological studies where the objective is to understand the lived experiences of individuals who serve as repositories of institutional memory. Five participants were selected, with data saturation serving as the guiding principle to ensure a comprehensive thematic analysis of workforce continuity and digital adaptation.

Participants were selected based on the following refined criteria to ensure their experiences align with the study's focus on educational sustainability and digital transformation:

- 1) Professional Legacy Status: Individuals who have formally retired from a long-term career, representing a significant accumulation of "wisdom capital" and pedagogical expertise.
- 2) Active Strategic Re-engagement: Professionals who have re-entered the workforce post-retirement, specifically in roles that require navigating modern organizational systems or technology-mediated environments.
- 3) Geographic Relevance: Current residents of the selected municipality in Lanao del Norte, providing a localized perspective on rural institutional resilience.
- 4) Reflective Agency: Individuals who demonstrate a high degree of willingness to engage in deep reflection regarding their role in knowledge transfer and institutional stability.

Communicative Competence: The ability to articulate complex professional transitions and the nuances of adapting to shifting digital landscapes.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Research instrument

The primary data collection method for this qualitative study was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide. The guide was designed to align with the study's aim of exploring the lived experiences of retired professionals who voluntarily re-entered the workforce in a municipality in Lanao del Norte. Its development was informed by a focused review of relevant literature and conceptual discussions related to post-retirement reintegration, identity transitions, and adaptation in contemporary workplaces. Accordingly, the interview questions were constructed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' meaning-making across the full reintegration trajectory. Participants were first invited to describe their professional lives prior to retirement – key roles, responsibilities, routines, and pedagogical values – to illuminate how earlier experiences shaped their professional identity. They were then asked to reflect on what retirement initially felt like and what influenced their decision to return to work, in order to surface the systemic and personal meanings attached to reintegration. Further questions focused on how participants made sense of re-entering the workplace in relation to institutional stability, including their adjustment process, shifts in routine or mindset, and how colleagues and the organization responded. Finally, where applicable, follow-up prompts explored challenges and opportunities in technology-mediated environments and multi-generational workspaces – such as adapting to digital tools and collaborating with younger colleagues – aiming to capture socio-technical adaptation and intergenerational learning, as well as how returning to work was experienced as supporting knowledge continuity and institutional sustainability (see Appendix A).

To support content validity, the interview guide underwent expert review by subject matter specialists with demonstrated expertise in qualitative methodology and the study's thematic areas. The experts evaluated the questions for clarity, relevance, and coverage of the phenomenon under investigation. Their feedback informed revisions to wording, sequencing, and probing strategies to ensure the guide could elicit rich, nuanced descriptions of participants' experiences.

3.3.2. Data gathering procedure

The study's data collection began after approval was obtained from the relevant ethical review boards and informed consent was secured from all participants. As this was a qualitative study, the researcher used in-depth interviews to capture the lived experiences of working retirees from one of the municipalities in Lanao del Norte. The researcher used a researcher-made semi-

structured interview guide, which had been validated by subject matter experts for relevance and clarity. This guide was designed to elicit detailed narratives from participants while allowing flexibility in how they expressed their experiences.

The interviews were conducted at times and locations convenient for the participants, which the researcher believed would foster an open and comfortable atmosphere for discussion. Each session lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was audio recorded with the participants' consent, serving as the basis for accurate transcription and analysis. During the interviews, the researcher practiced active listening and used prompts and follow-up questions to probe deeper into the participants' stories. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information that could enrich the data. Once the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. To enhance the study's credibility, the researcher invited participants to review their transcripts—a process known as member checking—to verify the accuracy of the information and to provide any additional input. All collected data were securely stored and access was limited to the research team to maintain confidentiality and uphold ethical standards.

3.4. Ethical Consideration

This research adhered to established ethical standards to protect the rights and well-being of all participants. Prior to data collection, the researcher secured approval from the appropriate Institutional Review Board or Ethics Review Committee. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained through signed forms; for participants with literacy limitations, oral consent was secured in the presence of a witness.

Confidentiality and privacy were maintained through the use of anonymized data and secure storage of identifying information, accessible only to the research team. Participants were informed that their responses would be used solely for research purposes and that their identities would not be revealed in any published findings or presentations. Data were stored in encrypted electronic files and on password-protected devices. The researcher also explained the few instances where confidentiality could be legally breached, such as in cases requiring mandatory reporting. Transparency was upheld throughout the study. The researcher clearly communicated how data were collected, stored, analyzed, and reported. Reflexivity was practiced continuously, with the researcher remaining aware of personal biases and power dynamics that could influence interpretation. This reflexive process contributed to the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

3.5. Data Analysis

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of retired professionals who returned to the workforce. Hermeneutic phenomenology is particularly suited to uncovering deep, contextual meanings embedded in personal narratives, as it emphasizes interpretation over mere description. To analyze the data, the researcher combined Van Manen's (2016) six methodological activities with a structured hermeneutic process, creating a rigorous framework for interpreting participants' lived experiences. These steps are widely used in hermeneutic phenomenological studies for their reflective and interpretive structure (Van Manen, 2016):

Turning to the Nature of the Lived Experience. The phenomenon under investigation was the experience of returning to work after formal retirement. The researcher formulated research questions aimed at capturing the complexity of this transition.

Investigating Experience as We Live It. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol (see Appendix A). This step allowed participants to share their lived realities in their own terms.

Reflecting on the Essential Themes That Characterize the Phenomenon. The researcher employed both a holistic and line-by-line approach to analyze the interview data. Reflective interpretation was used to draw out recurring themes that captured the participants' experiences.

Describing the Phenomenon Through Writing and Rewriting. Through iterative writing and rewriting, the researcher constructed narratives that articulated the lived meanings of returning to work. This process emphasized clarity, emotional depth, and fidelity to the participants' voices.

Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation to the Phenomenon. Throughout the study, the researcher stayed anchored in the central research question. Theoretical sensitivity and reflexivity were applied to remain open to emerging insights while remaining focused on the study's aims.

Balancing the Research Context by Considering the Parts and the Whole. The researcher continually moved between the parts (individual themes and stories) and the whole (the overall essence of the phenomenon), applying hermeneutic reflection to ensure a comprehensive interpretation.

Following Van Manen's (2016) six methodological steps in hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher engaged in a rigorous and interpretive process to understand the lived experiences of retired professionals who chose to return to the workforce. The data analysis involved a cyclical and reflective reading of transcribed interviews, paired with thematic interpretation grounded in the context of each participant's narrative. Using NVivo software, the researcher initially extracted 35 significant statements from the five participants' transcripts. These statements represented meaningful units tied to moments of reflection, motivation, struggle, and transformation. Through continuous refinement, 22 essential meaning statements were distilled. These were coded and clustered into initial subthemes, which were later synthesized into three major systemic themes that represent the core essence of the participants' experiences of post-retirement reintegration.

3.6. Researcher Reflexivity

In this study the researcher will perform reflexivity which includes at each step of the research process the reflection of researcher's own biases, assumptions, and personal history. This self-awareness is key in hermeneutic phenomenology which is a framework in which the researcher does not play the role of a detached observer but that of an active player in the co construction of meaning. A reflective journal will be kept which documents issues, responses and decisions made during data collection and analysis. This process sees to it that interpretations are true to the participants' lived experiences at the same time as it brings to the fore the researcher's role in the study.

4. Results and Discussion

These three main themes defined the experiences of the professionals within the context of institutional sustainability and digital transformation, namely: (1) Sustaining Cognitive Capacity and Lifelong Learning through Post-Retirement Work (2) Reframing Professional Identity for Sustainable Knowledge Transfer; and (3) Intergenerational Knowledge Exchange and Socio-Technical Adaptation in Digitally Transforming Workplaces. Table 1 presents the themes and subthemes in relation with the codes.

4.1. Theme 1: Sustaining Cognitive Capacity and Lifelong Learning through Post-Retirement Work

This theme explores how professional reintegration acts as a strategic response to the psychological "void" created by retirement, framing the decision to return as a proactive measure for both individual health and institutional stability. It suggests that the transition back to work is driven by a symbiotic need where the retiree seeks mental engagement while the institution benefits from a stabilized, experienced workforce. Ultimately, this theme characterizes post-retirement work as a vital mechanism for maintaining long-term professional relevance and systemic resilience.

Table 1
Emerging Themes

Themes and subthemes	Subthemes	Initial Subthemes (Codes)
Sustaining Cognitive Capacity and Lifelong Learning through Post-Retirement Work	Mitigating Post-Retirement Cognitive Decline	Cognitive lapses post-retirement Anxiety over mental decline Preventing mental decline Lack of routine and direction Missing professional stimulation Resistance to passive aging Inner urge to act Voluntary re-application Longing for relevance
	Resistance to Passive Aging through Active Service	Identity shift from leadership titles Acceptance of new, simpler roles Transition to humble roles
	Reclaiming a Professional Activity	Re-entering leadership in new contexts Embracing new mentoring roles Emotional reward from simpler tasks Becoming emotionally available to students Acting as a safe space Sought for advice by peers
	Transitioning from Formal Leadership to Soft Influence	Adapting to educational technology Physical and technological challenges Experiencing physical strain Learning from younger colleagues Reciprocal tech-experience exchange Humility and embracing new roles Mentoring younger instructors
	Leading Quietly Through Mentorship	
	Becoming an Emotional Anchor	
Intergenerational Knowledge Exchange and Socio-Technical Adaptation in Digitally Transforming Workplaces	Navigating Technology-Mediated Environments	

Mitigating Post-Retirement Cognitive Decline. This subtheme addresses the anxiety retirees feel regarding the loss of mental sharpness and the perceived risk of cognitive "rust" during inactivity. Professional reintegration serves as a form of neuro-rehabilitation, using complex tasks like curriculum design to stimulate executive function and memory. By returning to work, retirees actively protect their mental health, ensuring they remain alert and productive contributors to the educational system.

"I started to notice something was off. I would forget things—small things like what day it was, or where I placed the house keys." (P1)

"I remembered what happened to my mother—she developed dementia late in life. That fear started growing inside me." (P1)

"I started forgetting basic things—passwords, names of former students. I sat in the living room for two hours and didn't realize I hadn't eaten yet." (P1)

Resistance to Passive Aging through Active Service. This subtheme explains the intentional rejection of a sedentary lifestyle in favor of maintaining a structured, service-oriented routine. For veteran professionals, the "stillness" of retirement is often perceived as a threat to their physical and emotional vitality rather than a period of rest. Choosing active service allows them to sustain the energetic commitment required to remain visible and impactful members of their professional communities.

"The stillness made me uneasy. I missed the daily challenges. I missed the energy of young people. I didn't feel 'done.'" (P3)

"Staying idle wasn't good for me. Some people aren't made for stillness." (P2)

"I felt restless... I felt like I was slowing down too much, and I didn't like that feeling." (P5)

Reclaiming a Professional Identity. This subtheme focuses on the psychological need to restore the social status and sense of purpose that were tied to a lifelong career. Retirement can strip an individual of their professional "voice," leading to a crisis of identity that only meaningful contribution can resolve. By re-entering the workforce, retirees reaffirm that their accumulated "wisdom capital" remains a valid and necessary asset in the modern professional landscape.

"I applied again—not to lead, not to earn—but to stay whole." (P1)

"I walked into the municipal agriculture office and asked if they needed help... I just asked for a chance to contribute again." (P2)

"Coming back to work gave me back my voice, my purpose, my place in the world." (P3)

Voluntary professional reintegration can be interpreted as an adaptive response to the disruption retirement may introduce in cognitive routines, daily structure, and role continuity, rather than simply an extension of employment. In retirement research, this post-retirement engagement is often discussed within bridge employment and related late-career transition pathways, which highlight how continued work can reflect psychological and social motivations alongside (or instead of) financial drivers (Firat, 2026; Galkutė & Herrera, 2020). From a cognitive perspective, participants' accounts align with evidence that transitions away from employment may reduce exposure to cognitively stimulating demands and structured goal systems—factors discussed in "disuse" explanations of later-life cognitive vulnerability (Sizer et al., 2024). Broader evidence syntheses also indicate that retirement effects on cognition are heterogeneous, yet cognitive decline is a plausible risk in some contexts, especially where cognitively demanding activity decreases after retirement (van Ours, 2022). The resistance-to-passive-aging orientation is consistent with literature emphasizing that many older adults continue working because they value ongoing engagement, contribution, and meaningful participation—motivational patterns that extend beyond purely economic need (Bal et al., 2012; Galkutė & Herrera, 2020). This supports interpreting reintegration as a purposeful strategy to sustain an active later-life routine and wellbeing through continued involvement in valued tasks and social environments (Firat, 2026). Finally, the identity-focused meanings resonate with work on identity negotiation in later-life re-employment, where successful reintegration involves reconstructing the self from "retired" to "active contributor" and re-establishing a credible role in the workplace (Xu et al., 2021). From an

institutional perspective, continued participation by experienced professionals is also relevant to organizational concerns about retaining expertise and continuity, with research emphasizing the importance of knowledge retention processes around older and retiring workers (Burmeister & Deller, 2016).

4.2. Theme 2: Reframing Professional Identity for Sustainable Knowledge Transfer

This theme captures the evolution of the retiree's role from "power-based" leadership to "influence-based" mentorship, highlighting a sustainable way to contribute without formal titles. It reflects a shift in professional value, where legacy is defined by the guidance provided to others rather than administrative control. This reframing allows the institution to utilize senior expertise as a cultural anchor during periods of organizational change.

Transitioning from Formal Leadership to Soft Influence. This involves the humbling process of moving from high-level administrative positions to grassroots instructional or support roles. It showcases the retiree's capacity to exert influence through their mere presence and seasoned expertise rather than through formal rank or command. This flexibility allows institutions to integrate veteran knowledge without disrupting the established hierarchy or the upward mobility of younger leaders.

"From being a dean who signed faculty contracts, I was now handling class records, making slides, and adjusting to Gen Z learners." (P1)

"I went from being the admin head to sitting quietly behind the library desk. But I found peace in it." (P4)

"I'm no longer behind a desk full-time, but I'm still shaping decisions that affect farmers." (P2)

Leading Quietly Through Mentorship. This subtheme highlights the fulfillment found in guiding the next generation of professionals through the sharing of institutional memory. Retirees act as a bridge between abstract academic theory and the nuanced realities of professional practice, providing "lived wisdom" that textbooks cannot offer. This "quiet leadership" ensures that high professional standards and institutional values are passed down to younger faculty and students.

"Even some of my colleagues, much younger than me, ask for advice... That shows me I still have a role to play." (P1)

"What I find most fulfilling is mentoring younger instructors – those still adjusting to academic life." (P3)

"I help them [students] avoid the mistakes I made, and prepare them for real-life practice." (P1)

Becoming an Emotional Anchor. Beyond technical guidance, retirees provide a sense of stability and moral support in high-pressure academic environments. Their long-term perspective allows them to serve as stabilizers, offering a "safe space" for younger staff and students to seek advice on both professional and personal challenges. This role fosters a more resilient organizational culture by providing an emotional foundation that reduces systemic stress.

"Some of them [students] talk to me about family problems, life choices, even heartbreaks. I listen." (P4)

"I draw from life experience, not just textbooks... I think they appreciate that I speak from reality." (P4)

"In meetings, they turn to me when something needs explaining. That kind of trust—it's not something you can buy." (P2)

Theme 2 shows that post-retirement reintegration is accompanied by a role and identity shift: participants describe moving from formal authority (e.g., dean/administrative head) to contribution through mentorship, presence, and trust. This pattern is consistent with evidence that later-life work often involves redesigned roles and "bridge" arrangements that allow continued contribution without reinstating prior hierarchical positions (Moen et al., 2016). In this framing, influence becomes less positional and more relational—sustained through expertise, credibility, and the ability to guide others. Transitioning from formal leadership to soft influence is illustrated by accounts of taking on lower-visibility or support-oriented tasks while still shaping outcomes

indirectly. This reflects an identity renegotiation in which retirees accept reduced formal status but retain professional agency through experience-based judgement. Such role redesign aligns with organizational strategies that value older workers' knowledge while enabling flexibility and alternative pathways—often through rehiring retirees in adjusted or project-based capacities (Moen et al., 2016). Importantly, the participants' narratives suggest that stepping back from rank does not equate to diminished contribution; instead, it signals a different mode of contribution that fits existing structures and avoids disrupting succession. Leading quietly through mentorship captures how participants' continued relevance is enacted through guidance to younger colleagues and students. This aligns with research that treats post-retirement work as a route for maintaining satisfaction and purpose, particularly when work remains meaningful and socially embedded (Dingemans & Henkens, 2019). The mentoring role is also directly relevant to knowledge continuity: organizations face risks of expertise loss with retirement, and structured or informal mechanisms of knowledge retention and transfer are repeatedly identified as critical in aging workforces (Burmeister & Deller, 2016). In this sense, mentorship functions as a practical pathway through which "institutional memory" and standards are carried forward without requiring formal leadership reinstatement. Finally, becoming an emotional anchor broadens mentorship from technical guidance to relational stability. Participants' accounts of listening, explaining, and being relied upon in meetings are congruent with the idea that continued engagement after retirement can support wellbeing through renewed purpose and social connection (Jain et al., 2017). At the institutional level, such trusted presence also fits organizational resilience logics: when workplaces normalize flexible roles and age-inclusive practices, they can better retain talent and local knowledge while supporting intergenerational collaboration (Moen et al., 2016). Overall, Theme 2 indicates that sustainable post-retirement contribution is enabled when retirees can reposition themselves as mentors and stabilizers—exerting influence through guidance and trust rather than formal authority.

4.3. Theme 3: Intergenerational Knowledge Exchange and Socio-Technical Adaptation in Digitally Transforming Workplaces

This theme addresses the "digital transformation" aspect of the research by highlighting the reciprocal relationship between the "old guard" and "new blood." It frames the workplace as a collaborative space where technological skills and pedagogical wisdom are traded for mutual benefit. This synergy ensures that digital tools are integrated with human-centered teaching values to create a more robust educational environment.

Navigating Technology-Mediated Environments. This subtheme details the physical and mental challenges retirees face when adapting to digital infrastructures like Learning Management Systems and virtual classrooms. It acknowledges the courage required to confront technological "newness" and the physical strain of keeping pace with a fast-evolving digital landscape. Successfully navigating these environments proves the retiree's resilience and their commitment to remaining functional in a technology-driven era.

"I had to learn how to use Google Classroom, prepare digital modules, and how to explain concepts clearly without sounding too technical." (P1)

"Of course, there are days when my legs ache... My voice sometimes cracks, and I have to drink salabat to get through the last lecture." (P1)

"I had to adjust to Gen Z learners who don't even read printed handouts anymore." (P1)

Mutual Learning and Reciprocity. This highlights the "fair trade" where younger "digital natives" provide technical assistance while retirees offer deep pedagogical and classroom management expertise. This reciprocal exchange breaks down traditional hierarchies, fostering a collaborative culture where every generation is both a teacher and a learner. Such synergy ensures that technology is used purposefully, grounded in the veteran's understanding of effective student engagement.

"I asked younger teachers how to record attendance online." (P1)

"Younger agriculturists help me with technology. I guide them with experience. I'd say it's a fair trade." (P2)

"I give them my patience and stories, and they show me how to navigate the new software we use." (P5)

Adaptability and Humility in New Environments. This subtheme emphasizes the retiree's willingness to become a student again, demonstrating the humility needed to learn from younger peers. It showcases the resilience required to update long-standing teaching styles to meet the needs of "Gen Z" learners who require different engagement strategies. This adaptability proves that retirees are flexible assets who can evolve alongside the changing social and technical demands of the institution.

"I never imagined myself working in a library. But now, here I am – cataloging books [and] assisting students." (P4)

"I may not hold the same power, but I hold wisdom – and now I give it more freely." (P4)

"Teaching full-time meant revisiting theories I hadn't looked at in years... but I welcomed the challenge." (P1)

Becoming an Emotional Anchor. Aside from academic mentoring, participants became trusted figures for emotional and personal support. Students and younger staff often approached them for advice, comfort, or simply someone who would listen. This role brought unexpected but deeply meaningful responsibilities.

"Students would come to me for help with thesis formatting... Some of them talk to me about family problems, life choices, even heartbreaks. I listen." (P4)

"When I teach, I draw from life experience, not just textbooks." (P4)

"Some even approached me after class, saying, 'Ma'am, I'm thinking of shifting to a medical-related course, which isn't offered in the institution where I currently teach.' That meant a lot to me." (P1)

Theme 3 frames digital transformation as a reciprocal, intergenerational process rather than a one-directional "upskilling" demand placed on older professionals. Participants' accounts suggest that technology adoption becomes workable when it is embedded in collaborative knowledge exchange, where digital know-how and practice-based wisdom circulate in both directions. This interpretation is consistent with intergenerational learning perspectives that treat knowledge transfer as a shared, relationship-based process that can strengthen organizational learning under changing work conditions (Singh et al., 2021). In technology-mediated environments, the narratives indicate that adaptation involves both cognitive-linguistic work (learning platforms, producing digital materials, communicating clearly in online formats) and embodied effort (managing fatigue while meeting instructional demands). These experiences align with research showing that older adults frequently face technology-skill barriers yet also express strong willingness to learn when support and appropriate learning formats are available (Lee et al., 2009). In education settings specifically, evidence from senior-teacher technology integration highlights that experienced teachers can develop integration capacity over time, particularly when the task is framed around pedagogy rather than "technology for its own sake" (Tsai, 2015). Researchers posit that intergenerational relationships in the workplace are vital for organizational harmony, as reciprocal knowledge exchange between older and younger employees fosters mutual learning and reduces perceived generational divides (Ropes, 2013). This synergy helps retirees feel connected to the modern era while providing younger staff with lessons in patience, ethics, and classroom management. Venkatesh et al. (2022) argue that technology must align with human experience to be effective. Their study found that institutions utilizing retirees as "pedagogical anchors" in digital environments achieved better student engagement outcomes. This is because retirees provide "context" and a "human touch" to digital modules, ensuring that technology serves as a tool for deeper learning rather than just a medium for content delivery. Finally, Dingemans and Henkens (2019) state that retirees who successfully bridge the "digital-pedagogical divide" report the highest levels of post-retirement life satisfaction. Their research identifies humility – the willingness to learn from younger colleagues – as a hallmark of "professional resilience." By

embracing tools like Google Classroom, retirees demonstrate that learning is an ageless process, embodying the principle of "lifelong learning" essential for sustainable education.

The mutual learning/reciprocity subtheme corresponds to the logic of "reverse" and intergenerational mentoring arrangements: younger colleagues help bridge the technology gap, while older professionals offer contextual judgement, classroom management insight, and professional standards. Conceptual work on intergenerational learning emphasizes that such arrangements can enable sustainable knowledge sharing—particularly when trust and openness support the exchange of tacit knowledge in evolving work settings (Singh et al., 2021). In this study's framing, reciprocity also helps prevent digital tools from becoming detached from human-centered teaching values; instead, technology use is shaped by pedagogical intent and lived professional experience. Finally, adaptability and humility can be interpreted as socio-technical adjustment: participants describe learning from younger peers and reworking established practices to fit new learner expectations and digital infrastructures. This fits a socio-technical view of digital transformation, where outcomes depend not only on tools but also on job design, learning supports, and human-centered implementation that protects work quality during technological change (Guest et al., 2022). It is also consistent with broader evidence that effective learning among aging workers benefits from an integrated approach that aligns technical systems with individual, organizational, and social conditions—including intergenerational learning as a reinforcing strategy (Ranasinghe et al., 2024).

According to Froidevaux et al. (2026), retirees with high levels of "relational resources," such as empathy and professional experience, adjust more effectively to new roles that carry less prestige. Their research suggests that accepting "simpler roles" is not a demotion but a strategic shift of energy toward guiding others. This allows educational institutions to harness "wisdom capital" without disrupting the existing administrative hierarchy or the career progression of younger leaders. Organizational memory represents a critical institutional asset, particularly in sectors such as education where continuity of practice and culture is essential. When senior professionals retire, organizations risk losing tacit knowledge—experiential insights and contextual understanding that cannot be easily codified (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). However, engaging retirees as mentors can help preserve this knowledge and maintain institutional stability during periods of structural or digital transformation (DeLong, 2004). A growing body of research advocates for more flexible and individualized approaches to retirement, emphasizing autonomy and continued engagement in meaningful roles (Wang & Shultz, 2010). Allowing retirees to serve as mentors or advisors can reduce role conflict during the transition and enhance organizational resilience by preserving tacit knowledge and institutional continuity (DeLong, 2004; Froidevaux et al., 2016). Mentorship, in particular, has been identified as a sustainable mechanism for re-engaging retirees, as it provides purpose and dignity without imposing the demands of full administrative responsibility (Froidevaux et al., 2016).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study advances an understanding of post-retirement reintegration as a meaning-centered form of later-life participation that intersects with workforce sustainability and digitally transforming work environments. By foregrounding the lived experiences of retired professionals, it reframes retirement not as withdrawal but as a reconfiguration of contribution—one that is negotiated through cognitive self-maintenance, identity reconstruction, and intergenerational collaboration. In doing so, the study highlights that continued engagement after retirement can function as a viable pathway for sustaining professional relevance while supporting continuity in practice within institutions undergoing change.

Conceptually, the findings suggest that reintegration is sustained when retirees can shift from authority-dependent roles to mentorship-oriented influence. This repositioning preserves dignity and agency while enabling knowledge continuity without reinstating hierarchical control. The accounts also illuminate digital transformation as a socio-technical process: the effectiveness of technology adoption is not reduced to individual competence, but is shaped by reciprocal learning

relations where technical fluency and pedagogical judgement circulate across generations. Such reciprocity positions intergenerational exchange as a practical mechanism for aligning digital tools with human-centered educational values.

For sustainable education and digital transformation agendas, the implications are twofold. First, institutions may strengthen resilience by designing post-retirement participation as structured mentorship and advisory pathways that protect institutional memory and support staff and learners. Second, digital transformation efforts are more sustainable when they explicitly recognize the relational infrastructure of learning—creating environments where retirees can adapt without stigma and younger colleagues can learn from experience without reproducing rigid status boundaries.

The study contributes qualitative insight into how sustainable workforce participation, mentorship-based role redesign, and intergenerational learning can support resilience during digital transformation. Practically, the findings suggest that institutions seeking sustainable digital transformation should consider structured avenues for post-retirement engagement—especially mentorship and advisory roles that preserve institutional memory, support staff and learners, and facilitate humane technology adoption.

While the study's interpretive scope is necessarily bounded by its small, context-specific sample, it offers a grounded basis for future work on active aging, role redesign, and intergenerational learning in digitally evolving institutions. Subsequent research could extend these insights through comparative and longitudinal inquiry, examining how different forms of post-retirement engagement shape wellbeing, knowledge continuity, and the sustainability of digital transformation over time.

In practical terms for sustainable education and digital transformation, the findings suggest that institutions should design post-retirement participation primarily through structured mentorship and advisory pathways that preserve institutional memory without reinstating hierarchical authority. To support humane and sustainable digital change, organizations should also provide targeted digital orientation and peer support for returning retirees in technology-mediated environments, leveraging reciprocal intergenerational learning in which younger colleagues assist with digital tools while retirees contribute pedagogical judgement and practice-based guidance.

Data availability: Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the authors on request.

Ethical declaration: This research was conducted in compliance with ethical guidelines, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and the confidentiality and anonymity of all data.

Funding: The authors stated that they received no financial support for their study.

Declaration of interest: The author declares that no competing interests exist.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

Prefatory Statement

This qualitative research is entitled “Post-Retirement Professional Reintegration and Institutional Sustainability in a Digitally Transforming Education System: A Phenomenological Study.” This hermeneutic phenomenological study aims to explore the deep-seated reflections, motivations, and adaptive challenges faced by retired professionals who have chosen to voluntarily return to the workforce. Specifically, it seeks to uncover how these individuals navigate the intersection of veteran expertise and the evolving demands of a digital-first educational landscape.

This research would not be possible without your valuable participation as a key informant. The researcher sincerely thanks you for accepting the invitation to share your insights and life experiences. Your narratives are vital in understanding how "wisdom capital" contributes to institutional memory and ensures continuity within the education system amidst rapid technological change.

During the interview, your responses will be treated with deep respect, as they are grounded in your personal and meaningful journey. All information you share will be handled with strict confidentiality, and your identity will remain anonymous in all reports or publications. You also have the right to skip any question that may cause discomfort or decline to continue at any point without any consequences.

The interview is expected to last approximately 30 to 50 minutes. Notes will be taken, and an audio recording may be made with your permission to ensure the accuracy of the thematic interpretation. Please feel free to ask any questions or seek clarification about the study before or during the interview.

Statement of the Problem

This hermeneutic phenomenological study aims to examine the lived experiences of working retirees within the educational landscape of Lanao del Norte, specifically focusing on their contributions to institutional sustainability and digital adaptation.

In the context of this study, the lived experiences of working retirees refer to the systemic and subjective interpretations constructed by professionals as they navigate workforce continuity after formal retirement. These experiences are understood as strategic encounters shaped by institutional memory, technological transitions, and the evolving nature of professional identity within a transforming education system.

Central Question: How does the professional reintegration of retirees contribute to the sustainability and digital resilience of educational institutions?

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What professional experiences and pedagogical values shaped the lives of retirees before their departure from the formal workforce?
2. What systemic circumstances or organizational meanings influenced their decision to re-enter the workforce after retirement?
3. How do retirees describe and make sense of their experience of professional reintegration within the context of institutional stability?
4. What challenges and opportunities do they encounter in re-engaging with technology-mediated environments and multi-generational workspaces?
5. How is the phenomenon of returning to work revealed as a mechanism for institutional sustainability and knowledge preservation?

A. Engaging Question

1. To begin, can you share how you feel about being back at work after your retirement?

B. Exploratory Questions

Central Question:

How does the professional reintegration of retirees contribute to the sustainability and digital resilience of educational institutions?

Sub Questions	Descriptive Questions	Probing Questions
1. What professional experiences and pedagogical values shaped the lives of retirees before their departure from the formal workforce?	Can you describe what your professional life was like before you retired?	What roles or responsibilities did you have? What values or routines defined your work life? How did you feel about your profession back then? How did your career shape your identity?
2. What systemic circumstances or organizational meanings influenced their decision to re-enter the workforce after retirement?	What made you decide to return to work after retiring?	Was it a financial, emotional, or personal decision—or a mix? Did anyone or anything influence your choice? Was returning to work your idea, or were you invited or encouraged? How did you feel about this decision at the time?
3. How do retirees describe and make sense of their experience of professional reintegration within the context of institutional stability?	How do they describe and make sense of their experience of professional reintegration?	What was the adjustment like? How did your routine or mindset change? How did your coworkers or organization respond? Did you feel welcomed, challenged, or different?
4. What challenges and opportunities do they encounter in re-engaging with technology-mediated environments and multi-generational workspaces?	What difficulties or opportunities have you encountered since returning to work?	What challenges did you face—technological, generational, or physical? What has been rewarding about working again? Have you developed new skills or relationships? Are there things you now value more or less?

C. Exit Question

1. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience of returning to work after retirement that we haven't talked about yet?