

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ECHOES OF SILENCE: THE UNHEARD STRUGGLES OF THE PHYSICALLY IMPAIRED LEARNERS IN THE MAINSTREAM EDUCATION



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## Abstract

The inclusion of the physically impaired learners in the mainstream education has, lately, become a public concern as their manifold struggles will make or break their success academically. Despite this, there is a lack of action to address the problem as evidenced by the absence of a disability perspective in the Philippine context. This study, optimistically, endeavors to serve as one of the voices (amongst many) of the physically impaired. The objective is to further urge the authorities to take into consideration their pressing concerns.

This study utilized the descriptive phenomenological approach. The researcher employed purposive sampling with the following criteria: students from a public school who are in the mainstream; those who are willing to participate; are mentally sound and; those with consent from the schools they are attending and from their guardians. The researcher utilized interview to gather data from the respondents. Documentations and audio recording were used to facilitate the data gathering. This research has gained ethical approval from the UC-IERC.

Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis. Results revealed that the difficulties of the physically impaired learners vary and are dependent on the extent of their impairment. Exploring the verbatim accounts of the six (6) participants, the researcher extracted significant statements and organized the formalized meanings into clusters of themes. Three themes emerged from the data generated in the course of conversation with the physically impaired learners. The three themes are- "Cross to bear"; "Callous consideration", and; "Mind over body".

In conclusion, the participants were found to have common problems and difficulties with respect to their education. They struggled much with the physical structure of the school environment, inconsiderate classmates, lack of social acceptance, and the problem on the curriculum they have. As such, the researcher recommends that there shall be re-structuring of the guidelines or policies for the disabled students in the mainstream. With this, the physically

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impaired learners could have equal opportunities with the physically able. Further, the teachers and physically able students will be informed on how to help and accommodate children with disabilities. Because of the limitations of the study, the researcher recognizes that the findings may not be applied to other locale and to others with physical impairment. Thus, it is strongly recommended that a further study should be done considering a wider setting and population.

**Keywords:** *Echoes, silence, unheard struggles, physically impaired, learners, mainstream education*

## Introduction

The inclusion of the physically impaired learners in the mainstream education has become a public concern as their manifold struggles will, most likely, make or break their success academically. These have been documented by studies that dealt with issues that are related to the structure of the building and the classrooms (Alahmadi, 2007); insensitivity towards physically impaired learners (Al amad, 2001, in Alqaryouti, 2010); and inflexible curriculum and assessment procedures (Peters, 2004). These concerns, however, have not been heard or acted upon by the authorities which means that the struggles of the physically impaired in the mainstream education remain unmitigated.

While numerous researchers (Groce, Kett, Lang and Trani, 2011; Mitra, et al., 2012; Mont, 2014; Sen, 2009) illustrate evidences on the strong link between disability and poverty, there is still lack of action to address the problem as evidenced by the absence or lack of a disability perspective in the Philippine context. Indeed, the report of Asian Development Bank (2005) confirmed that there are few schools in the Philippines that admit students with disabilities as there are no suitable facilities and lack of trained teachers. As such problems are not just confined in the Philippines but also to other settings. Chimedza and Peters (2001) claimed that in resource deprived locations, classrooms are constantly congested and there is a dearth of acquiescent educators who are skilled and consistently managing the needs of children with disabilities. Moreover, there are more teachers who have less regard for learners with disabilities as well

as their inclusion in general education classrooms (D'Alonzo, Carroll and Giordano, & Cross, 1996; Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Jobling, Slusher, & Saumell, 1996 in Carroll, Forlin & Jobling, 2003). For the physically impaired learners, these factors can be construed as detrimental to a successful education. Obviously, what well-abled learners can do in the mainstream education is much more challenging for the physically impaired ones.

Hence, the objective of the study is to shine a light on the problems of the physically impaired in education and to urge concerned authorities to take into consideration their pressing concerns. In effect, this research will, hopefully, provide more understanding to school and government authorities to maintain a constructive stance towards disability, as well as to avert the incidence of stigmatization as one of the major causes of exclusion. Relatively, school authorities may consider the identified problems en route to a more creative and effective learning environment among children with physical impairment.

## Method

This research utilized a descriptive phenomenological approach. As such, the researcher interviewed the respondents. Documentations and an audio recorder were used in order to facilitate the data gathering. The researcher employed purposive sampling to identify the participants while taking into consideration the following: (a) students from a public school who are in the mainstream education; (b) those who are willing to participate; (c) are mentally sound and (d) those with consent from the schools they are attending and from their guardians. This research was subjected to the ethical review of the University of the Cordilleras-Ethics Review Committee. Consent from the parents and assent from the participants were gained prior to study engagement. Respect for person, anonymity, and confidentiality were insured throughout the process. Moreover, the thematic analysis was used to analyze the data.

There were six (6) participants who agreed to be included in the study. Of the six participants, four (4)

were females and two were males. The participants were between 9 to 12 years of age, and they were all enrolled in a public school. The respondents and their parents claimed that the public school is all that they can afford since most of them are dependent on the government program for disabled persons under the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD).

## Results

The difficulties of the physically impaired learners vary and are dependent on the extent of their impairment. Exploring the verbatim accounts of the six (6) participants, the researcher extracted significant statements and organized the formalized meanings into clusters of themes. Three themes come into view from the data generated in the course of the conversation with the physically impaired learners: (1) Cross to bear; (2) Callous consideration, and (3) Mind over body.

### Cross to Bear

Educational struggles are the difficulties that impede the physically impaired to be in the mainstream education. As such, these can be viewed as one of the essential elements to be addressed as these have an impact on the educational success. The "Cross to bear" theme corresponds to the acceptance of their physical situation as they stand to face the implication of their impairment. Indeed, these physically impaired learners have embraced the consequences of their condition as they have become used to these.

While physically impaired learners present their struggles concerning their daily battles in the mainstream, they accept and are optimistic about their physical impairment. However, based from their understanding, their impairment should not be seen as an impediment to success. Here is a description from one of the participants:

*"Tanggap mi nga kastoy kami basta kuma adda kunsiderasyon ti tao kanyami. Kasla kuma dyay panagserrek ti eskwela...diba kas ma imagine yo, kasano kami ngata nga sumang-at? Marigatan kami nga aglugan ken bumaba-*

*sumang at iti second floor". (We accepted who we are, but there should be considerations. For instance, when we attend school... can you just imagine how can we go up? We are having difficulties in riding... it is difficult for us to go up and down to and from the second floor.)*

The above statement has been corroborated by another participant who is stricken by polio:

*"Ag-jeep ak santo ak agpara ejay Insular ken magna paumay ditoy classroom ko. Tapos magna ak iti pababa ken pangato idiy overpass. Isu nga kanayon ak nga ma late," (I take the jeep from home then drop by Insular and walk going to my classroom. After that, I walk going down and up the overpass that is why I am always late.)*

Another participant adds:

*"Nahihirapan po talaga ako lalo na kung paakyat na ng hagdanan. Pati din sa paglakad dahil hindi patag ang daan." (It's really difficult on my part especially when climbing the stairs. Also, I have difficulty when I am walking because of the uneven pathway).*

Two educational struggles were identified by the physically impaired learners, which include circumstances that increase their difficulty to manage the situation, as described by cluster finding "stumbling block". This also shows that there are situations, preventing them to achieve what is supposed to be attainable in the mainstream as described by cluster finding "spiral out of control".

The struggles of the participants further prevent them from achieving something or "stumbling block" and later on, these become difficult to manage. These further increase their frustration in trying to gain meaningful education.

As verbalized by the participants:

*"Isu nga haan kon kayat nga apan ag eskwela no maminsan, ta kastoy ak lang garuden ket marigatan ak pay start ti pangruar to ko ti*

*balay, panaglugaan ken panagsang at mi idia school. Actually, baka nga kastoy ti biag ko, haan ko lang ammo ti dadduma nga adda kapansanan na". (That is why I am reluctant to attend school at times because of the difficulties in going out from house, riding in a jeep and climbing the stairs in school. Actually, it seems that this might be my life; I don't know about the others who have disabilities.)*

*"...Kaya po nag usap kami ni mama kung pwede lipat na lang ako ng private school kasi sabi nila, yung mga CR malapit sa classroom at may guard na nag aabang ng jeep para sa mga estudyante. Pero alam nyo po parang lahat ng paghihirap na ito ay parang mahirap na i-manage. Kung private e mas okay daw mga facilities. Lahat daw ng may kapansanan e sa first floor lang." (I talked to my mama if it is possible to transfer to a private school as they said that private schools have better facilities. Students with disabilities stay in the first floor, the CR is nearby the classroom and there is a guard/personnel waiting for a jeep for the physically impaired like me. But, you know, these struggles seem to be difficult to manage. [Participant uses a wheelchair]*

### Callous Consideration

The callous consideration theme corresponds to no consideration to the cares or needs of the physically impaired. The non-consideration for the needs of these physically impaired learners have been identified based on the physical structure of the environment, class consideration and or any school activities that were just designed for the physically able. One subtheme has been identified which is the "Walk all over another"

The "walk all over another" subtheme implies the insensitivity of others for the needs of the physically impaired.

*"Nasasaktan [ako], kasi hindi nila matanggap na may taong meroong kapansanan na nag-aaral pa rin upang makamit ang kanilang pangarap sa buhay." (I feel upset because some still have negative notions with regard to people with disability just like me.)*

*"No umuli ak ti agdan makabanog ken nagbayag. Sagpaminsan katkatawaan dak dagijay klasmets ko ta maingangato toy paldak met. No P.E. (Physical Education) class met hanak mabalin no tinarayan ono ag ay ayam ti ball games sunga agbuybuyaak lang." (Each time I walk through stairs, I feel tired and slow. Sometimes my classmates laugh at me because my skirt gets caught with my crutches exposing my thighs or butt. Also, during P.E class, I can't participate at times, especially if our lesson is on running or playing ball games. I just watch them play.)*

### Mind over Body

The mind over body theme corresponds to the strong will of the physically impaired learners to pursue their dreams despite their present condition. Indeed, despite the identified difficulties, the physically impaired learners are pushing through with their studies. Two cluster categories emerged under this theme, including: strong determination and battling disability. Strong determination is surpassing their wants to achieve their dreams while battling the disability. This situation emerged as they do not want their disability to be a reason to hinder their achievement of success.

As implied by the participants:

*"Pinipilit ko po... maka akyat lang sa jeep para lang maka pasok sa paaralan. Sino pa bang tutulong sa sarili ko kundi ako lang (participant with canes).*

*(I am trying...so I can get into the jeep and attend my class. Who else can help me if not myself?)*

*"Nu mabalbalin kuma sir ket amin nga subject mi ket idia first floor idia nga agklase. Nu saan ket idia kami lng room mi talagan agmalmalem ta ni Madam mi nalang ti umalis ti classroom." (If possible, sir our subjects must be held at the first floor or if not, all our subjects must be taught in the same room, our teachers will be the ones to come over. [Participant with wheelchair].*

*“Sana magkaroon sila ng pang unawa sa mga taong may kapansanan. At mag bigay ng mga gawain na nararapat sa bawat mag-aaral.”* (I hope they should have a better understanding with regard to people with disability. And they should give activities that would cater to their needs. [Participant with above knee amputation using one cane])

## Discussions

The claims of the physically impaired learners seem to be an appeal for them to be considered capable to achieve their dreams despite their physical conditions. Their identified problems are common and these are all related to physical structure of the environment, minimal consideration and the curriculum are designed for the physically able. These problems were found by other researchers, to wit: the structure of the building and the classrooms (Alahmadi, 2007); insensitivity towards physically impaired learners (Al hamad, 2001, cited in Alqaryouti, 2010); inflexible curriculum and assessment procedures (Peters, 2004); and incompatibility with the skills needed for independence from the content and difficulty of the general curriculum taught in general education context (Ruppar, Dymond, & Gaffney, 2011).

From the viewpoint of the participants, being educated could be a means for them to be freed from the negative outcomes of their disability. Such perspective will help them to have pathways to be successful in the same way that normal persons are given options to get ahead in life. Conversely, Filmer (2008) and Mete (2008) regarded that a person with impairment have lesser possibility to go to school and that resulted in the lessened opportunity to raise economic value, reduced employment opportunity and decreased productivity in adulthood. Similarly, this may generally lead to earning less even when employed (Burchardt, 2005). Indisputably, a physically impaired individual experiences a difficulty to benefit from development and break out from poverty (Thomas, 2005) as there is a inequity in employment, restricted access to transportation, and lack of access to resources to support self-employment and source of revenue activities (Coleridge, 2005). There is, therefore, a clear and

strong association between these factors and the participants' quality of life as these could lead to the reduction of their ability to work their productivity, and a higher probability of lessened opportunities. One of the findings of this study is the strong determination of the participants to pursue their schooling despite the difficulties they are having. However, the participants felt that there is less concern for them while they are in the mainstream education. Goode (2007) says that disabled students' own perceptions of their teaching and learning experience are clearly important but often neglected.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The participants have common problems and difficulties with respect to their education. They struggled much with the physical structure of the school environment, inconsiderate classmates, lack of social acceptance, and the problem on the curriculum they have. As such, the researcher recommends that there shall be re-structuring of the guidelines or policies for the disabled students in the mainstream. With this, the physically impaired learners could have equal opportunities with the physically able. Further, the teachers and physically able students will be informed on how to help and accommodate children with disabilities. Moreover, the researcher recommends that since the generalizability of findings may not be applied to other locale and to others with physical impairment, a further study should be done considering a wider setting and population.

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### About the Author

**Dr. Eddieson A. Pasay-an** is an Assistant Professor of the University of the Cordilleras. He is a graduate of Bachelor of Science in Nursing at Pines City Colleges and holds a doctorate degree in development education. He started working as a professional nurse in 2004. He joined the University of the Cordilleras in 2005 where he found home up to present. Currently, he is an active member of the Philippine Nurses Association and Philippine Nursing Research Society, Inc.

“ When I’m a bedside nurse, I can only impact one person at a time, but if I’m good at research, I can impact countless numbers of people. Everything I do is still framed as a nurse. Everything I do in the lab has clear clinical applicability. ”

– Sharon Kozachik, Baltimore Sun, December 19, 2012