

A Glimpse into the Lived Experiences and Challenges Faced of PWD Students towards Online Learning in the Philippines Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Amidst the global pandemic, everyone is allowed to be vulnerable and heightened by burnout. But the most unheard and most vulnerable voices linger among persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) are one of the concerns in society. But, social exclusions and biases put PWDs in a disadvantageous position. There has always been an issue in employment, social roles, and accessibility to education. These issues are eventually turning into self-doubt and feelings of inferiority, which are reasonable evidence suggesting that persons with disabilities received negative attitudes from non-PWD individuals. This study's primary goal is to explore the lived experiences of PWD Students towards online learning during the pandemic, specifically, describe their experiences, challenges faced, and coping mechanisms. Employing the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the findings of the study were: (1) PWD students experienced social exclusions primarily in the rise of online learning during the pandemic. (2) Most of the PWD students were challenged by the limitations of assistive technologies and internet connectivity. (3) PWD students remained resilient because of having a healthy support system behind them.

Keywords: *Persons with Disability; PWD Students, Online Learning, COVID-19*

1. INTRODUCTION

Amidst the global pandemic, everyone is allowed to be vulnerable and heightened by burnout. But the most unheard and most vulnerable voices linger among persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) are one of the concerns in society. But, social exclusions and biases put PWDs in a disadvantageous position. There has always been an issue in employment, social roles, and accessibility to education. These issues are eventually turning into self-doubt and feelings of inferiority, which are reasonable evidence suggesting that persons with disabilities received negative attitudes from non-PWD individuals (Au & Man, 2006). Stereotypes and alienation towards PWDs were considered as disgrace, humiliation, and inequality in a society. As Bachelet (2018) argued, PWDs have the same rights as the rest of the citizens. The rights to vote, live

independently in the community, enjoy social protection, access justice, and the educational system.

There are various aspects of challenges encountered by PWDs regardless of the type of impairment. The Republic Act 7277 of the Philippines, known as Magna Carta for Disabled Persons, mentioned the seven types of disabilities: psychosocial disability, disability due to chronic illness, learning disability, mental disability, visual disability, orthopedic disability, and communication disability. The disabilities mentioned above experienced the same stereotypes and alienation in the community, job, or school. PWDs made up to one-sixth of 15 percent of the world's population. Out of 92.1 million household populations in the Philippines, 1.4 million had a disability (Narido & Tacadao, 2016). Disability rights advocates urged the government to get the utmost attention and fought to pass the Republic Act 7277. Made disability laws here in the Philippines aim to protect PWDs from discrimination, provide every right, and transform society as the safest place for a person with a disability. As eloquently stated by Momene (2015), normalizing a non-PWDs' initiative to communicate with a PWD is one of the most effective ways to erase the prejudice against having a disability.

Since the distraught impact of Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19), it has been challenging to continue everything, particularly the learning and educational system. It can be proven by the recent announcement of the Department of Education (DepEd), which is to implement the school opening on October 5, 2020. Online and blended learning have brought earnest struggles to the students. But with the case of PWD students who find it difficult even in the traditional education setting, it is expected that the efforts would be double more in online learning amidst the pandemic. Mohammed (2020) indicated that language interpreters would find it hard to communicate with students with hearing impairments. The same goes for visually-impaired students whose apart from people who usually assist. Students with disabilities are the most affected in online learning. The no-child-left-behind goal of this school year seemed to be impossible for the PWD students. As contended by Ravassard (2018), students with disabilities' initial enrollment had a low rate. And, even some attend school, PWD students are more likely to drop out. The goal of this school year should be to educate all types of learners during the global pandemic, regardless if they are with disabilities or not.

This study will deepen the sensitivity towards PWD students' experiences in online learning amidst the global pandemic. Determining every student's attitude with disability in dealing with today's pivotal situation is one of the significant foundations of this research. The acknowledgment for PWDs should exist in any society. It is necessary to identify them as persons with disabilities rather than a disabled person. The results of this study will extend its knowledge that can contribute as a future reference for further researchers on the subject of PWD students and online learning. Moreover, this study explores how students with disabilities handle such problems and how other people support their unique needs. Generally speaking, this study seeks to discover and understand the difficulties, edges, and challenges of PWD students towards online learning during the global pandemic.

1.1 Research Questions

This study's primary goal is to explore the lived experiences of PWD Students towards online learning during the pandemic. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of PWD students towards online learning during the pandemic?
2. What are the challenges faced by the PWD students towards online learning during the pandemic?
3. What are PWD students' coping mechanisms in dealing with online learning during the pandemic?

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Experiences of PWD Students

In a society, the majority of people feel discomfort around a person with disabilities. It may be from the lack of interaction with PWDs; non-PWDs also feel awkward because of insufficient knowledge of starting a conversation and acting without offending a person with a disability (American Psychological Association, 2000). Since then, society has had a hard time accepting and understanding people with disabilities. Most parts of the culture make significant steps and approaches to the social inclusion of PWDs. The PWD community strives to have a voice in addressing both visible and invisible disabilities, along with more wide-ranging and thorough ways to social inclusion. It is also essential to make some changes in a particular community wherein any form of disability can be accommodated without noticing the apparent needs or adjustment of a person with a disability. For instance, developing the educational system, employment, and designing infrastructure that is PWDs friendly can help PWDs (Uniting Care Community Options, 2014).

Manaf et al. (2016) indicated that conducting research on people with disabilities requires better understanding, knowledge, and skills. As it is increasing extensively, the researchers must prepare emotionally, spiritually, and physically to produce publishable papers regarding the issues of PWDs. Researchers in this field should also fill themselves with knowledge in dealing with a person with specific impairment amidst barriers and difficulties. These skills include good social skills, good communication skills (e.g., primary sign language), and patience with the PWDs state of condition. Reyes et al. (2010) stated that government agencies in the Philippines focus on the rights, needs, and privileges of people with disabilities. These are the National Council on Disability Affairs (NCDA), Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Department of Health (DOH), Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Department of Education (DepEd), Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

According to Weiringo (2015), his study about students who did not complete high school shows that the students' overall sense of belongings is low. This study explores and identified the related factors of reasons that led to their decisions. The participants are male and female high school students with disabilities. Furthermore, the type of impairment was another aspect that causes a high rate of drop out of high school students with disabilities. The participants also believe that a better school environment requires more effort from the teachers and peers to sense belongingness. As stated by Kennedy Krieger Institute (2020), as the world faces severe challenges in the COVID-19 pandemic,

education institutions' needs increase to provide and ensure the quality of education using virtual platforms. During this time, the needs of giving importance to the education of persons with disabilities must be the priority. However, despite the school's creativity and flexibility, the institution is still having a hard time meeting students' individual needs with disabilities. Fortunately, various organizations help meet the students' needs with disabilities that help disseminate awareness of this problem.

According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] Bangkok (2020), there is a need to empower students with disabilities during this time of the pandemic. The Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau of Education mentioned that the world's population, approximately 15% are living with disabilities, and that is representing 1 billion people and due to the lack of information, the numbers of students with a disability that are receiving inadequate educational support in this pandemic are unclear. PWD students are facing barriers to education through remote-learning practices. In health crises such as COVID-19, students with disabilities are receiving less help and inadequately trained teachers. Furthermore, students with disabilities face difficulty participating actively due to equipment, internet access, and especially designed materials and support. These are the problems facing students with disabilities and without disability, and this learning is producing more cost.

As eloquently stated by Tabuga (2010), uplifting the lives of PWDs does not always be mirrored in giving cash subsidies, discounts, overtaking in lines, and even free assistive technologies. The real goal and crucial need of people with disabilities are removing physical and social barriers for comfortable living and social inclusion. In the Philippines, there is so much room for improvement in adapting the participation and presence of PWDs. The government should give attention to enhancing the educational system and schools for people with disabilities, ensuring the continuity of small projects made for PWDs (e.g., PWD roads, lanes, or parking), and providing medical healthcare for every person with a disability. Furthermore, Filipinos have low awareness of PWDs. Local governments' efforts should be double in disseminating information and educating public transport groups, medical establishments, schools and universities, and other facilities. There is valid evidence that awareness always correlates with education. For this reason, education should be the center in uplifting the lives of PWDs. Government institutions here in the Philippines should render effective ways to educate every person in all types of disability.

2.2 Challenges of PWD Students

As Georgina (2017) stated, the real struggle of persons with disabilities will start when they step out of their house. Although we are in modern society when it comes to accommodating PWD's, especially in infrastructure, it still needs improvement. The designs of buildings here in the Philippines have a severe usability problem to the PWD's: self-closing doors with heavy return spring, uneven surface, lack of ramps, etc. However, modern societies are not altogether unsympathetic to the PWD's. More than 180 million young people with disabilities live worldwide, 150 million live in the developing world. Typically, these people exclude from most schooling opportunities, economic, social, and cultural activities. According to the American Psychological Association (2020), research shows that people with disabilities are at risk for mental health problems. The psychological distress in the general population and high-risk groups has increased and

can be found in the emerging research on COVID-19. People with a disability in this pandemic are facing challenges and stressors that can worsen their mental health. Physical distancing measures might cause intensified loneliness and isolation to PWD's. These had associated with increased heart disease, dementia, and other health problems. With this, the policies in this time of pandemic have been increases the discriminatory attitudes toward disabled individuals, and it worsens the anxiety of PWD's and increases the feeling of needing medical care (Groce, 2004)

People with disabilities encounter health inequalities resulting from variables at the social, environmental, and framework level. Data from several settings shows that women with disabilities have limited access to health records and face challenges to screening, prevention, and care services. Often, women with disabilities are more likely than women without disabilities to suffer physical and sexual abuse, thereby further damaging their welfare (Vaughan et al., 2020). Cruz & Calimpusan (2018) stated that the issues faced by the Deaf had divided into employability and entrepreneurship. With the absence of tertiary programs accommodating them, the educational support structure for the Deaf was still weak. In terms of cooperation, support networks of the Deaf, including the family and community, were also small. There is less understanding of the Deaf community and ability. Deaf individuals were viewed as individuals with disabilities and not with skills. The level of employability of deaf graduates is low. There is very little access to entrepreneurship, and the absence of capitalization is one major factor.

As a consequence of natural or human-made disasters, millions of people internally displaced each year. While a large number are people living with impairment, the prevalence and form of disabilities they encounter are remarkably little known. Efficient procedures must be devised to recognize people with disabilities in relocation circumstances to design programs that better respect rights and meet needs. In order to represent the principles enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the recognition tools should not merely concentrate on disability, on the use of a diagnostic approach, or the labeling of persons with disabilities. Instead, people should ask more questions about accessibility and the assistance needs of an individual. In ensuring sufficient assistance and security for all refugees, proper disability recognition will go some way (Smith-Khan et al., 2015). Neeraja (2013) stated that a person with disability shown an emotional and behavioral adjustment. It may commonly occurred to those who have learning disabilities and reading disabilities.

According to the United Nations of Human Rights (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic threatens all society members, especially the persons with disabilities experiencing a more significant impact due to attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers reproduced in the COVID-19 response. During this crisis, many people with disabilities may find themselves more isolated and unable to survive during lockdown measures. PWD's also continue to face discrimination and problems in accessing livelihood and income support, participation in new forms of education, and violence protection. Distance learning services worldwide provide education and career development opportunities for those who access a computer and the Internet. However, because of the inaccessible nature of classes, potential students and teachers who do not have access to these technologies cannot participate entirely. Those with visual and hearing impairments include these people. (Burgstahler et al., 2004)

The World Bank (2020) revealed that some groups in a country still struggle to practice rights regarding political, economic, and social life. These groups experienced discrimination or unkind attitudes because of their identity, race, gender, and disability. PWDs are most commonly to experience exclusion and inauspicious socioeconomic status due to less education. The COVID-19 pandemic doubled the hurdles of children with disabilities because of lacking access to essential services from SpEd teachers and inaccessible assistive technologies such as audiobooks, print materials in Braille, and audio provision or graphics specialized for PWDs. Furthermore, the pandemic also resulted in more struggles of PWDs' parents or caregivers because they acted as teachers without formal training in teaching students with disabilities.

In higher education institutions, students with disabilities were enrolled in various academic programs, and universities have to provide the requirements to meet these students' needs. The library building and the spaces inside it are an important area of focus. While laws regulating public buildings' construction exist, disabled students can face barriers to accessibility to library spaces, meaning that they do not benefit from services and facilities. (Ilako et al., 2020)

As Almog (2018) stated, the issues regarding the identity of a person with disabilities play a vital role in studies about disability. A need to develop an academic foundation for every person with a disability in every part of the world. The disability issues will become extent as to obscure if there is no such educational foundation. Moreover, Almog (2018) also introduced the medical model of disability, emphasizing social community responsibility to the PWDs. It highlights the particular hurdles of people with disabilities that cause the disabled environment and humankind. For instance, students with visual impairment will not feel disabled if there are enough accessible reading materials such as Braille or audiobooks, and without stereotyping the ideas about disabilities. Social identity is vital to change how PWDs think about themselves and the included community. According to Milsom (2006), students with disabilities' school experiences can be positively or negatively affected by students and school employees' attitudes and actions and by general school policies. School counselors should take the lead in analyzing the school environment concerning students with disabilities and, where applicable, implement interventions or advocate for improvement.

Kabuta (2014) mentioned that students with physical disabilities in higher learning institutions in Tanzania face problems in an infrastructural situation, support system, social and financial issues. This study found a high inadequacy of teaching and learning materials and a lack of particular schemes, trained staff, funds, and scholarships for students with physical disabilities. This study recommended that the government and other stakeholders take special considerations and actions to accommodate students with physical and different impairments in higher learning institutions. As Cole (2017) stated, the teachers who lack proper training in educating students with disabilities struggle to meet students' goals and everyday needs. People have little understanding of the students' disabilities if they are not directly affected by it. As a result, a lack of knowledge has become the largest barrier for students with disabilities. However, educational institutions are finding ways to overcome these challenges and create equality in education.

Sachs (2011) stated that students with disabilities invested more time to meet their studies' demands, participated in fewer social and extra-curricular activities, and used computers and technology less. This study used higher education students and compared

students with disabilities and without disabilities for formal achievements and overall participation in higher education. This study suggests that higher education still needs improvement to reduce students' social inclusion with disabilities and adjust the standard for their needs. According to the survey conducted by Reyes et al. (2010), 106 PWDs from 31 barangays were interviewed. The significant findings in this survey are the common reasons for persons with disabilities, not finishing their education are poverty. Also, only 3 out of 10 respondents are aware of the policies intended to improve their well-being. Among the 31 respondents who know the guidelines and discounts, only ten enjoy at least one of these policies, discounts, and PWD ID.

2.3 Coping Mechanisms Used by PWD Students

Shigri (2018) indicated that people with disabilities had given enough sensitivity and attention over the past decades, making it easier for society to grow empathy. The disability awareness served as a key to attenuate the stereotypical thinking of the whole community. As a result, it will become more comfortable when building an inclusive and discrimination-free society. Over and above, disability awareness plays a vital role in teaching the community how individuals can make essential changes brought anywhere, such as home, school, and workplace. Nonetheless, not being able to learn acceptance and continue seeing discrimination towards PWDs can result in an unpleasing community as a whole. Kammerer (2015) claimed that misconception, stereotype, and prejudice could only be solved through respecting, getting to know, and seeing a person beyond the disability. This kindness will never occur for those who are not willing to run towards PWDs. The first step to inclusion for people with disabilities is to understand (Lenart, 2020).

Disability is not an obstacle to success. The real obstacle is the attitude of the public toward persons with disabilities. The outdated beliefs about PWD are needed to transform, beliefs that persons with disability are doing less than normal individuals. This kind of attitude is the one that creates the barriers for persons with disabilities; rather than mental and physical impairment, this kind of stigma is the one-factor creating significant problems for persons with disabilities (Thomson, 2016). As eloquently stated by the Mindfulword (2019), creating a better society also needs to empower people with disabilities. This article mention that people might not give more thought to not being able to do things that ordinary people do automatically. If the people are physically healthy and psychologically normal, people may not be aware of the painful feeling of discrimination of living with disabilities. However, it is not essential for people with disabilities to compete with other people; PWD's lives must be fullest. The more important is that persons with disabilities are reaching maximum achievement and independence regardless of impairment.

According to Taunt & Hastings (2002), the significance of asking more positive questions about the attitudes and experiences of families of children with developmental disabilities has progressively been recognized. In general, parents have shown to have optimistic views about their child and their families about the future. There is a steady decrease in physical function and a related decrease in quality of life (QoL) among people with disabilities. It was reported that physical activity (PA) participation increases QoL significantly. There is a small amount of research demonstrating how integrating student service learning (SSL) with PA will boost the QoL of people with disabilities, despite

several studies proving that PA enhances one's QoL (Brolsma, 2020). Manolov (2020) stated that there is a hidden lesson in this time of COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences of students with disabilities are far different from students without disabilities. PWD students are feeling more isolated and spending more time in isolation even without this pandemic. Also, Manolov mentioned that youth with disabilities are role models; these peoples are maturing and searching for who they indeed are. It shows valuable lessons that people sometimes need isolation to understand their surroundings and achieve better psychological well-being.

International awareness of the omission of people with disabilities from the Millennium Development Goals has led to greater inclusion of people with disabilities in the recently negotiated 2015-2030 Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is vital to increase the awareness of people with disabilities in the Philippines, considering the new global agenda for the inclusion of disabilities (Marella et al., 2016). Among PWD trends, the prevalence and severity of poverty are more significant than that of the overall population in Metro Manila. Among PWDs, which are linked to training and intercourse, there is an excellent benefit disparity. After controlling an individual, parent, and environmental characteristics, female PWDs are in all likelihood to earn far less than male PWDs because of fewer opportunities to engage in financial activities (Ramon et al., 2010).

Taub (2006) stated that parents of disabled children share concerns common to all parents, but they also have specific concerns special to their children's conditions. In their work with parents of students with disabilities and the students themselves, the students' teachers, and other students, competent school counselors can be more successful if they consider parental perspectives. According to Brown & Jeffress (2018), one of the effective ways to help students learn about PWDs is by learning other teaching skills and competencies that make the loss of some degree of a particular capacity immaterial. Instructors with what students identify as impairment will potentially become more productive teachers. A common problem for SpEd teachers is thinking about whether the students will be exposed to education without adverse consequences in a healthy setting.

According to Inciong & Quijano (2013), comprehensive education was formally introduced by the Department of Education in the Philippines as a viable educational option to educate as many children as possible. The 'Silahis Centres' ('school within the school' concept) described as a viable model for implementing and promoting children with disabilities in the Philippines in regular schools. Women and children with disabilities here in the Philippines were found to have lower literacy and school participation rates than males with disabilities. They found that the possible reasons for this are the type and severity of impairment, accessibility in education, household size, and income. Some recommendations included in the study are making sure that the assistive devices given to PWD's children match their needs and also explore more ways to train more teachers in handling children with disabilities (Agbon & Mina, 2017)

As Picard (2020) mentioned, to create an inclusive classroom where all students are respected, there is a need to face specific challenges that need accommodation and considerations. This study also shows a need to give importance to languages used regarding assessing the student's type of disability because there is a possibility that students with disabilities will sense that they are not as capable as their peers. Furthermore, recognizing the students with a disability rather than disabled students is

vital in their existence. As stated by Tabuga (2013), two decades earlier, when the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities was implemented, the Philippines laid the groundwork for improving the health of people with disabilities (PWDs). Since then, several other initiatives have developed to ensure that PWDs will have the ability to live the way they want to. PWDs, however, seldom profit from these laws and other services created for their advancement.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This study attempts to disseminate and provide information into how particular individuals interpret the phenomenon in the given context, as this study used qualitative idiographic psychological analysis.

According to Tuffour (2017), IPA has become the dominant qualitative research technique. Its focus is on the convergence and divergence of experiences and its mission to explore the thorough and complex study of small numbers of participants' experiences. As it involves a detailed examination of the participant, the approach is phenomenological. It attempts to analyze the personal experience and concerns the perception of an entity or phenomenon by an individual rather than an attempt to make an objective assertion of the item or event itself.

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study consisted of PWD students that were currently enrolled in school during the pandemic. The researchers determined individuals with a disability who have a long-term impairment that may interfere with the full mobility and adaptability towards their potential to maximize their capacity.

This study started with a few participants, and the criteria were the following: (1) must be a person with a disability, (2) and a college student enrolled in the school year 2020-2021. After considering each criterion, ten (10) participants were qualified as an interviewee.

3.2 Instrument

The study utilized a semi-structured interview guide to gathering the pertinent data and responses of the respondents. Also, on account of ethical considerations, this study used a consent letter that was sent to the participants and viewed beforehand. The questions from the interview guide were checked through content validation to verify their reliability. Before interviewing ten (10) participants, the verification, revision, and adjustment of the tool takes place.

3.3 Procedures

In many circumstances, it is crucial to construct a rapport between the researchers and the participants. The rapport-building can be challenging amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, it was established by developing a sense of trust towards each other and making allowances for participants' situations, language, and cultural contexts. As soon as the researchers become less of an *ibang-tao*, a semi-structured interview takes place online using any application with a video or call feature as per request by the

participants. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer can add follow-up questions and allow the interviewer and interviewee's flow of thoughts (Canals, 2017).

The interview guide was composed of twenty (20) questions that may last for forty-five (45) minutes to an hour. Following the initial stages, participants were encouraged to raise any clarification, concerns, and unclear questions due to the technical difficulties that may occur. A thorough transcription and analysis were conducted after an online semi-structured interview to make sense of the gathered data. The interview transcription includes the exact verbatim of each participant to avoid uncertainties of the data collection contents.

4. RESULTS

The summary of the demographic characteristics of participants included in this study was shown in Table 1. The study was composed of 10 PWD students residing in the province of Bulacan and Metro Manila. The participants' ages ranged from 19-24 years old, with six females and four males.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Frequency
Age	
19 – 21	9
22 – 24	1
Gender	
Male	4
Female	6

Table 2 depicts the supplementary demographic information of participants in this study. All of the participants were currently enrolled as a college student and learning synchronously. Six were visually impaired for the type of disability, one was hearing impaired, 2 has an orthopedic disability, and one was speech impaired.

Table 2: Supplementary Demographic Information

Variable	Frequency
College Year Level	
1 st Year	2
2 nd Year	7
3 rd Year	1
Type of Disability	
Visual Disability	
Totally Blind	4
Partially Blind	2
Hearing Disability	1
Speech Disability	1

Orthopedic Disability	2
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The following sections will present the analysis of data gathered through a semi-structured interview. The recordings were transcribed into texts thoroughly and used direct quotations from various participants to elaborate on each concept. Four major themes were identified in this study; namely, 1) the experiences of PWD students toward online learning; 2) the challenges of PWD students toward online learning; and 3) the coping mechanisms used by PWD students during the pandemic.

4.1 The Experiences of Pwd Students towards Online Learning

Inferiority prejudices and inequality put PWDs on the disadvantageous side of society. Most participants in this study shared the same sentiments about social exclusion. As shown in Table 3, PWD students' experiences were classified into three subthemes: adversities in communication, social exclusion, and adjustment problems.

Table 3: Experiences Themes

Experiences	Frequency
Miscommunication in the given situations	5
Social exclusion	7
Adjustment problem caused by sudden changes	6

4.1.1 Adversity in Communication

The participants frequently experienced difficulties when it comes to communicating and expressing particular needs to the instructors and classmates. Thus, this theme would address how communication adversities occur in different aspects of PWD students' lives. Conrad et al. (2017) suggested that proper communication with PWDs was significant in improving society's attitude towards them. But the global pandemic made communication harder as everything was done online. Dorothea shared:

“Mas nahihya akong i-approach 'yung mga teachers kapag may school problems ako. Kasi hindi mo makikita 'yung expression nila, kung willing ka ba talaga nilang tulungan then minsan matagal pa maseseen 'yung message mo. “

The absence of communication between a PWD student like Dorothea and their teacher was a struggle. When another participant was asked why do they need constant contact to their teachers, Inez reasoned out:

“Minsan po pag nagmemessage ako sa kanila or during virtual class, hindi ko po alam kung paano sila iaapproach na ganito, hindi ko po makikita yung picture sa powerpoint. “

It did not directly answer the question, but what Inez had said implied that they need to communicate to their teachers for assistance and let them know about their disabilities. According to UNESCO Bangkok (2020), there is a need to empower students with disabilities during this time of the pandemic. But in cases like Inez and Dorothea, they barely received empowerment and attention from the people who should help them during these times. Moreover, communication involves understanding. Inez continued:

“So sabi ko, “ma'am hindi po kase nababasa ng screen reader yung mga pictures.” Tapos, pinipilit po talaga niya na baka sa software ko lang daw yun, i-update ko daw. Mga ganon. Gawan ko daw ng paraan. Hindi ko po talaga napakiusapan na magbigay ng alternate activity para saakin. “

Kennedy Krieger Institute (2020) stated that as the world faces severe challenges in the COVID-19 pandemic, education institutions' needs increase to provide and ensure the quality of education using virtual platforms. As Inez shared her story, she emphasized that even though the educational system makes an effort to expand its scope to all kinds of learners, there were still some instances wherein educators were not trained on how students with disabilities should be handled. During this time, the needs of giving importance to the education of persons with disabilities must be the priority.

4.1.2 Social Exclusion

As eloquently stated by Tabuga (2010), uplifting the lives of PWDs does not always be mirrored in giving cash subsidies, discounts, and overtaking in lines. The real goal and crucial need of people with disabilities are removing physical and social barriers for comfortable living and social inclusion. But on the contrary, most of the participants experienced the inability to participate in some activities, which affected their quality of life as students. These experiences led them to feel social exclusion and jeopardize their well-being. Este stated that:

“Minsan po kapag by group na activities, naiilang po ko makisalamuha kasi feeling ko kakaiba ako parang, ang baba ko ganun po. Tas one time pa nga po nung first year kami, yung activity namin sa Physical Fitness. Kailangan sumayaw diko nagawa kasi ayoko pagtawanan ba ko habang sumasayaw. Kaya na-INC po yung grade ako. “

Likewise, Todrick shared the same sentiments. He narrated:

“Nung 1st year nga yung PE namin is wall climbing. Di ko kaya, kaya pinagawa na lang ako ng ibang teacher ko ng ibang activity. Tapos ngayong 2nd year, Arnis naman. Ang kaso wala naman akong both hands kaya nahirapan ako. Pero sinabi

ko naman sa faculty ng mga teacher pero wala pang update. Ngayong week nga may activity kami sa PE pero di ko magawa, dahil di ko naman mahawakan ung stick. “

Este and Todrick both have an orthopedic disability that limits their physical movements and functions. By making sure that PWDs have the same opportunities to participate in a certain activity, society can eliminate barriers to achieving social inclusivity. Furthermore, developing and designing PWD-friendly infrastructures can help them accommodate their needs (Uniting Care Community Options, 2014). As Todrick shared,

“Yung school namin hindi sya PWD-friendly, diba matataas yung building samin. Eh may PWD student din kaming ka-school mates. Most of them physically yung problem, may mga naka tungkod and minsan naka wheelchair tapos hinahatid siya kasi di nya kaya umakyat ng building mag isa. Ina-acknowledge naman nila na meron silang PWD student kaso ayun nga hindi PWD friendly and sa mga infrastructure. Tsaka pala yung tulong and organization dapat mag focus sa mga PWD students kagaya ko. “

4.1.3 Adjustment Problems

Adjustment problems have been one of the most common responses of participants. The majority of them have experienced a sudden change in the learning environment. A study conducted by Neeraja (2013) revealed that learners with disabilities have a trouble in internalizing problems and processing pieces of information accurately when stressed. Teffy mentioned that:

“Nahirapan lang ako mag-adjust nitong nag-college na kase wala namang SpEd class. Tapos, online learning pa. Naranasan ko rin na ano, ako yung maghahanap ng schedule ko sa exam. Ako yung gumagawa ng paraan para makapag-exam. “

Given the transition from a face-to-face class to online classes, PWD students had difficulty adjusting to the new normal. Alwyn, totally blind, shared his story on how he needed to learn navigating each button in the Zoom and Google meet applications.

“Natutunan ko mag-zoom. Kaya talagang tiniyaga kong pag-aralan yung user interface ng zoom, user interface ng Google meet. So, syempre with the help of screen reader. Yun talaga yung nakatulong sa akin kasi kung wala yung screen reader, mas lalo akong mahihirapan. “

Nevertheless, to cope with the situation, they chose to continue and take their responsibility as students to the fullest. As Betty said,

“Kailangan po maging responsible ka po kung paano ka po naging bilang isang estudyante. Ngayon pong online, kailangan more responsible po dahil mas mahirap na po. Kailangan din po kung ano po yung ginagawa mo nung face-to-face, ayun din po sa online mas more effort pa po gawin mo yung mga activities, tsaka yung maki cooperate din po kahit mahirap yung communication minsan. “

4.2 The Challenges of PWD Students Towards Online Learning

This superordinate theme discusses the struggles that were encountered by the participants due to online learning. Among all of the four subordinates shown in Table 4, the limitations of assistive technologies and internet connection have the highest frequency, which was associated with the participants' answers.

Table 4: Challenges themes

Challenges	Frequency
Limitations of Assistive Technologies and Internet Connection	10
Social and Financial issues	6
Susceptibility to Cognitive and Mental Health Issues	5

4.2.1 Limitations of Assistive Technologies and Internet Connection

The COVID-19 pandemic doubled the hurdles of children with disabilities because of lacking access to essential services for PWD students (Worldbank, 2020). The participants faced problems in terms of assistive technology and stable internet connectivity. With this, they express that they were having difficulties because of its limitations and unavailability. Dorothea stated:

“Noong midterms namin, kasi may time limit ang pagsasagot. Kapag nag-lag or biglang nag-error data connection mo, tuloy-tuloy pa rin 'yung time kaya ayun hindi ako nakapagsagot nang maayos. Anim 'yung subjects namin, tapos tatlo roon mababa scores ko dahil sa naabutan na ng time. “

Betty shared the same thoughts,

“Minsan po mahirap din po yung connection kasi po naranasan ko yung diba habang nagdidiscuss yung professor, biglang nawawala yung connection yun yung mahirap talaga. Di ko po alam gagawin kapag ganon, bigla po nawawala. “

The availability of internet connection has been challenging to every participant. In addition to that, some of them also encountered problems concerning the limitations of assistive technologies. Betty, totally blind, talked about specific software that was commonly used by them.

“May tinatawag po kaming NVDA na software dito po sa computer, ayun yung ginagamit ko as screen reader. Kapag sa cellphone naman po, may tinatawag po kaming Talk Back para po mabasa po nya lahat ng mga nilalaman ng na sa screen. Kung ano po yun mga halimbawa chats, massages, ganon po. “

However, Inez mentioned that assistive technology also has its limitations.

“Tas recently naman po, yung sa Business ICT application po na subject namin. Sa Excel po kaso yung activity na binigay. Yung mga nakalagay sa cell, mga pictures po. Kami po kasing mga blind may screen reader na bumabasa ng mga text sa laptop. So sabi ko, "ma'am hindi po kase nababasa ng screen reader yung mga pictures.”

Burgstahler et al. (2004), argued that distance learning services worldwide could only provide educational opportunities for those who have access to computers, assistive devices, and the internet. But, students like Inez and Betty were not covered by this so-called 'education for all.'

4.2.2 Social and Financial issues

In ensuring sufficient assistance and security for all people with disabilities, proper recognition should occur (Smith-Khan et al., 2015). Most of the participants faced social and financial issues during the pandemic. Some of them implied that they had a hard time finding assistance that they can get from their peer groups. As Alwyn stated,

“Problema siguro sa akin yung ano, yun nga... wala akong aasahan kundi ang sarili ko. Yung mga kaklase ko naman kasi hindi ko pwedeng i-obliga. “

Likewise, Austin shared the same sentiments when asked about his challenges towards online learning

“Yung pag reach out sa mga classmate ko kapag may groupings or lesson na hindi ko talaga maintindihan. “

On the other hand, some participants expressed financial issues as one of their challenges during the pandemic. United Nations of Human Rights (2020) contended that many people with disabilities might find themselves unable to survive this lockdown as they face problems accessing livelihood and income support. Todrick shared:

“Ayy oo, kasi diba daming problema. Unang-una is financially, nag sarado kasi yung junk shop namin ngayon kasi nga pandemic diba. “

4.2.3 Susceptibility to Cognitive and Mental Health Issues

Research shows that people with disabilities are at risk for mental health problems. The psychological distress in the general population and high-risk groups has increased and can be found in the emerging research on COVID-19 (American Psychological Association, 2020). With this, most of the participants faced feelings of isolation and vulnerability to mental health issues. Some of them had difficulties when it comes to maintaining their concentration during an online class. As Dorothea said,

“maraming distractions lalo na kapag may mga kapatid kang maliliit na kasama sa bahay. Yung tipong mas malakas boses nila kaysa sa teacher mo. “

Likewise, Alwyn mentioned that he had a hard time during the first weeks of online learning

“Siguro nahirapan ako harapin yung fact na syempre iba na yung way of learning ngayon... mahirap sa una pero through time naman kasi nakakapag-adjust ka at siguro ayun nalang din. Parang naging routine ko nalang din. Parang normal na lang din. “

A study conducted by Reyes et al. (2010) revealed that stress and poverty were the most common reason why people with disabilities did not finish their education. Another participant, Betty, implied that online learning doubled PWD students' hardships.

“Naisipan ko po na huminto, nung una lang. Kase sabi ko po kase kung nung face-to-face lang, nahihirapan na kaming mga PWD, paano po kaya ngayong online learning na? Diba. “

4.3 The Coping Mechanisms of Pwd Students towards Online Learning

This central theme discusses the ways of how the participants engage in problem-solving and how they take responsibility for the situation. Under the significant theme of coping mechanisms are the following subthemes: the support system from their friends and family, sense of responsibility, and a positive mindset toward their conditions and in the given situation. As seen in table 5, the latter appears to be the most commonly used coping mechanism by the participants.

Table 5: Coping mechanism themes

Coping Mechanism	Frequency
Support system	10
Sense of responsibility	9
Positive mindset	9

4.3.1 Support System

Shigri (2018) stated that people with disabilities had given enough sensitivity and attention over the past decades, making it easier for society to grow empathy. The participants needed to be surrounded by people who were willing to give them assistance and served as their inspiration despite the challenges. Neil shared:

“Nagpapalakas ng loob ko yung mga pangarap ko, yung pamilya ko. Lalo na yung nanay ko. Matanda na yung nanay ko, hindi naman ako pwedeng laging nakaasa lang lagi sa mga kapatid ko dahil syempre nakatapos na sila. May sarili na silang buhay. Yun yung nagtutulak sakin na ipagpatuloy ko pa rin yung pag-aaral ko kasi isipin mo pag nakapagtapos ako ng pag-aaral tapos meron pakong magandang trabaho. Parang dun palang maipagmamalaki na ako ng pamilya ko kahit ganito ako. “

Austin, totally blind, shared the same thoughts about how his family assists him in any way they could help.

“Mama ko, Ate ko atsaka kuya ko po. Pag kailangan ko ng assistance sa isang gawain, tinutulungan naman nila ako. Halimbawa, kapag kailangan ko ng pag need videohan, kasi may nga activity pa rin kami sa P.E. Yung mga kailangan videohan, so nakatutok lang yung ate ko. “

Taub (2006) stated that parents of disabled children share concerns common to all parents. But instead of worrying about their children, they have shown optimistic views and support in helping them do the things they think they cannot do.

4.3.2 Sense of Responsibility

The majority of the participants shared and expressed how persistent they are despite the situation. Due to their sense of responsibility as students, they were able to continue not just for themselves but also for their loved ones. Este has an orthopedic disability, and a single mother also stated:

“Una po na-inspire po ako magcontinue ng pag-aaral dahil po sa anak ko. Iniisip ko po kasi yung magiging future nya. Pangalawa po mahirap po, as PWD, na makahanap ng trabaho kaya mas pinili ko mag-aral at hanapin kung ano yung kaya ko pang gawin. “

Likewise, Austin shared the same sentiments:

“Yung motivation ko parin kase lagi ko sinasabi sa sarili ko na pag huminto ako di ko na maabot yung mga pangarap ko sa buhay. “

Students like Este and Austin supported Manolov (2020) when he mentioned that youth with disabilities were role models. The courage they have shown valuable lessons that people sometimes need. PWD students were much matured to search for who they indeed are amidst the isolation.

4.3.3 Positive Mindset

A positive mindset was the most effective and most common coping mechanism used by the participants. Through the help of their positive thinking, they were able to face their struggles. Teffy stated:

“Siguro... Ano, lakas lang ng loob tas wag magpapatalo sa mga problems na yun kahit minsan sobrang hirap na. Kase normal lang naman yung mga challenges sa buhay eh, nasa iyo na yan kung anong gagawin mo dun. Tulad ako, yung disability ko ginagamit ko siya as inspiration para mas lalong magsipag. “

Austin shared how challenges turned him strong and independent amidst his disability

“Number one, naisip ko lang talaga na yung mga challenges ko from the start is yun din yung naging reason ngayon kung bakit ako mas naging strong and independent. As a student man or as a person. Yung disability ko, at yung mga negative things na napagdadaanan ko is what makes me of who I am right now. “

Kammerer (2015) claimed that one should see PWDs beyond their disabilities. In that way, misconceptions, prejudice, and stereotype can be eliminated in this society. Students like Austin and Teffy shared the same mindset that makes them survive despite their challenges during online learning.

5. DISCUSSION

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of PWD students amidst online learning due to COVID-19 pandemic. To elaborate on these matters, it was sorted into three themes: the experiences of PWD students, the challenges of PWD students, and the coping mechanisms used by PWD students toward online learning. Moreover, the findings of this study were fulfilled by conducting an in-depth interview. The responses from the participants expanded these three major themes into corresponding subthemes. The results from the previous chapter will be interpreted and discussed further in this section.

Regarding the participants experience on the occurrence of the online learning, most of the participants expressed how they have often experienced difficulties communicating and addressing their specific needs to instructors and classmates. It was evident that most of them, the participants, struggled to have excellent or proper communication. These participants' problems and concerns indicate the need to put more effort into both teacher and the student. The participants consider the adversities in communication to be one of their biggest problems in this new environment. With this, failing to attain proper communication is affecting the participants in different ways. However, having adequate communication for both teacher and the student will result in a favorable outcome. Nevertheless, there were still people around them whose willing to uplift them from the situation.

People with disabilities still experienced social exclusion. This study's participants have to deal with this inside the school, public places, or even in online classes these days. Most of the PWD students felt that studying in an inclusive school seems to be impossible. One of the commonalities between the participants was the feeling of being excluded. This feeling was implied through each participant's story about how exclusion frequently led to discrimination and stereotypes. Society's acknowledgment of the needs of PWDs will help as a baseline in eliminating social exclusion. Non-PWDs should also know that social inclusion for people with disabilities cannot be brought in unless there are no considerations and respect.

Moreover, adjustment problems during the onset of the online class were also observed from the PWD students. Considering the transition from face-to-face courses to online courses, the participants had a tough time adapting to the new normal and new learning ways. It has been observed that most of the participants initially struggled to get a grip on using technical devices, especially for those students who were visually impaired. It was also evident that some of the participants faced adjustment problems caused by transitioning from special education into mainstream education, which teaches in a very different way. However, no matter how challenging the situation was, the participants still chose to continue their dreams.

In terms of the challenges that the respondents are facing during this pandemic, one of the commonalities of all the participants was the challenge in terms of the limitations of assistive technologies and internet connection. While it may seem like almost everyone has access to the internet, the majority of the participants shared and expressed their difficulties because of the unavailability of stable internet. These instances were familiar to them that made it hard to attend synchronous classes and to do online activities. In today's world, the quality of education can be achieved by having stable internet connectivity. Furthermore, challenges due to the limitations of assistive technology were observed from most of the participants. Assistive devices were made to help the functionality of a PWD. According to the participants that are visually impaired,

they commonly used a screen reader that reads everything in a computer screen or phone screen for them. Even though it helps them with words, this assistive device cannot obviously read nor describe pictures. Due to this, the participants had a hard time doing activities that were related to any visual illustration.

Thus, the sudden changes in the environment also caused most of the participants to struggle socially and financially. It remains evident that a student with a disability needs assistance from their peer groups and monetary. It was shown in the results that some of the PWD students had a hard time reaching out to others when they need to ask something. In addition, few participants raised sentiments about the challenges in terms of financial aid. Almost every people faced this problem during these times, but PWDs face other different yet difficult challenges. With this, the participants implied that more than anything, this kind of issue was needed attention and awareness.

It was also noted that the majority of the participants had feelings of isolation and loneliness during these days. The disconnection, sudden changes, disrupted routines greatly impacted the mental well-being of the participants. Due to this matter, PWD students become vulnerable to cognitive and mental health issues. The participants implied that online classes doubled the struggles each had. There were some instances that one of the participants almost dropped out because of the stress during online learning. In addition to the difficulty brought by the rage of the new normal, the participants also experienced distractions and a decreasing span of focus. Furthermore, few participants also expressed the struggles caused by people's views and treatment.

Likewise, in terms of the support system, it was essential for the participants to be surrounded by people who, despite the obstacles, were willing to support and served as one's motivation. It was always regarded that PWDs were a group of people with a wide range of needs. Through the help of other people, the participants were able to do the things that may seem impossible for them. Also, the majority of the participants felt relieved because they were not alone facing every day's challenge. Some of the students with disabilities place an emphasis that one's support system also serves as an inspiration to strive and continue life.

Amidst the isolation, the participants indicated that they had difficulty finding dedication, inspiration, and other reasons to face each challenge during the pandemic. It is interesting how most of the participants persevere to reach an adequate standard of living. The sense of responsibility to family or to the community was one of the things that make these PWD students survive.

The kind of mindset that most of the participants shared was a healthy mindset and a positive mindset. It was shown in the results that this strength helps PWD students for personal growth and resiliency. Because of positive thinking, the participants were able to look at one dimension of challenges and turned it into multiple angles. Some of the students with disabilities also mentioned that being optimistic was not only a solution in today's challenges, but it can also serve as a life skill.

All in all, each subtheme of this study served as a glimpse of the lived experiences of PWD students toward online learning during the pandemic. The rage of the Coronavirus pandemic put the world on pause. It has been an immense challenge because as the pandemic started, the online classes continued. From the perspective of a student with a disability, these new ways of learning would double every hurdle they have in each day, even in a face-to-face class.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to discover and understand the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of PWD students towards online learning during the global pandemic. Upon interviewing 10 PWD students, three major conclusions emerge from this study's findings: (1) PWD students experienced social exclusions primarily in the rise of online learning during the pandemic. (2) Most of the PWD students were challenged by the limitations of assistive technologies and internet connectivity. (3) PWD students remained resilient because of having a healthy support system behind them.

As the PWD students experienced social exclusions, they also felt that they live in a physical environment that was not accessible for them. In society, school, public places, and even in their own house, the participants were reminded that they were different because of a certain situation. Each of the participants indicated that more than just the social exclusion, they also experienced miscommunication and adjustment problems. Also, this theme let the PWD students to reflect on their experiences and what people around them should do about it. For instance, social exclusions in any place can be solved through the way how people include PWDs in everyday interaction. Society should view them as students with disabilities rather than disabled students, and as full and active members of the society rather than mere objects of goodwill and charity.

One of the main findings that came forth within the data analysis was that PWD students faced daily challenges such as limitations of assistive technologies and internet connection. While it may appear that almost everyone has access to the internet, due to the lack of stable internet connectivity, the participants shared and articulated their difficulties. Thus, this study proposed that more than anything, attention, consideration, and assistance were required for these challenges. Additionally, the participants in this study shared that they also faced other struggles that added fuel to the fire, such as social and financial issues and their vulnerability to cognitive and mental health issues.

Notwithstanding, PWD students stayed resilient in spite of the negative experiences and challenges they have encountered. Their family and peer groups supported them in any ways they can. From helping them to do their school works up until inspiring and motivating them every day. Strong sense of responsibility and positive mindset are part of their coping mechanism. The findings have shown that these abilities allow PWD students to achieve personal development and healthy well-being. Students with disability were able to look at one dimension of obstacles because of constructive thinking and transformed it into several angles.

Furthermore, the study recommends that the society and the educational system acknowledge every student's needs with a disability. An inclusive environment for PWDs can only be accessed through the combined effort of both institutions. Special Education schools are scarce here in the Philippines. Consequently, public and private universities should make ways to adapt distance learning virtually for learners with disabilities. Thus, the findings of this research can serve as the baseline for further studies regarding the PWD community. Future studies may also delve deeper into the lived experiences of each type of disability.

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