

# Exploring the Lived Experiences of Students with Disabilities in a Philippine State College

Rica B. Caliso<sup>1</sup>, Anazel T. Baterna<sup>2</sup>, Rochelle Quirong<sup>3</sup>, Jastin E. Oniot<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bachelor of Science in Social Work Student, School of Arts of Sciences, J.H. Cerilles State College, Mati, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines

[calisorica@gmail.com](mailto:calisorica@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Bachelor of Science in Social Work Student, School of Arts of Sciences, J.H. Cerilles State College, Mati, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines

[anazelbaterna@gmail.com](mailto:anazelbaterna@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Bachelor of Science in Social Work Student, School of Arts of Sciences, J.H. Cerilles State College, Mati, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines

[chellayquirong@gmail.com](mailto:chellayquirong@gmail.com)

<sup>4</sup>School of Arts of Sciences Faculty, J.H. Cerilles State College, Mati, San Miguel, Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines

[Jastinjustin2016@gmail.com](mailto:Jastinjustin2016@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of students with disabilities at J.H. Cerilles State College, focusing on the social, physical, and institutional challenges they encounter in higher education. Despite growing advocacy for inclusive education globally and nationally, limited research in the Philippine context captures the nuanced realities faced by this marginalized group. The study aims to understand these students' everyday struggles, coping strategies, and sources of resilience as they pursue academic success within a system not always designed with their needs in mind. Using purposive sampling, six participants with varying types of disabilities were selected. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically. Three key themes emerged: overcoming challenges, excelling despite limitations, and bridging faith with self-acceptance. Participants reported experiences of exclusion, social stigma, and inadequate accessibility. Nevertheless, they showed remarkable adaptability, drawing strength from personal faith, supportive relationships, and inner motivation. Findings emphasize the urgent need for higher education institutions to review and reinforce inclusive policies, upgrade physical infrastructure, and promote awareness campaigns that foster empathy and acceptance. This study contributes valuable insights to the field of inclusive education in the Philippines and suggests avenues for future research that encompass a broader range of disabilities and assess the impact of tailored support systems.*

**Keywords - students with disabilities; inclusive education; phenomenology; higher education; resilience; Philippine context; social stigma**

## 1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central theme in global educational reform, driven by the imperative to provide equitable learning opportunities for all, including individuals with disabilities. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2020) and the World Health Organization (2019) highlight the urgency of addressing the needs of the over one billion individuals worldwide who live with some form of disability. In the Philippine context, the National Council on Disability Affairs (2020) estimates that more than one million Filipinos are living with disabilities. These statistics underscore the importance of creating educational environments that not only accommodate but also empower students with disabilities to thrive academically, socially, and personally.

In response to these calls, the Philippines has enacted several legal frameworks such as Republic Act No. 7277, known as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons, and Republic Act No. 10533, the Enhanced Basic Education Act, which emphasize inclusive educational practices. However, despite these legislative efforts and the increasing visibility of inclusive education in policy discourse, students with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers in higher education. These include inaccessible infrastructure, limited academic accommodations, social stigma, and a lack of awareness among faculty and peers.

At the core of this issue lies a crucial gap in the literature: while numerous studies have examined the policies and institutional frameworks supporting students with disabilities, relatively few have captured the lived experiences of these students themselves - particularly in the Philippine higher education landscape (Gabel, 2014). Research that foregrounds their voices and personal narratives remains scarce, yet such perspectives are vital in understanding how students navigate and make meaning of their academic journeys. For example, McGowan et al. (2017) found that students with disabilities often experience isolation and exclusion due to inaccessible campus facilities and inadequate support systems. Similarly, a study by Hauer et al. (2018) found that students with disabilities experienced stigma and discrimination from their peers and educators. These findings are echoed in local studies, such as those by Aguilar (2016) and de Guzman (2018), which also highlight the persistent academic and social obstacles faced by Filipino students with disabilities.

J.H. Cerilles State College (JHCSC), located in the Zamboanga Peninsula, exemplifies the challenges and opportunities present in implementing inclusive education. As of 2023, the college reported a student population of 10,739 (Management Information System [MIS], 2023) of which only four students officially declared a disability on their enrollment forms. However, observational data suggest that several students exhibit signs of physical or developmental impairments that remain undocumented. This underreporting may point to deeper issues such as fear of stigma, lack of awareness, or absence of institutional support that would encourage self-identification.

To explore these issues more deeply, this study adopts a phenomenological approach—an appropriate and powerful qualitative methodology for examining lived experience. Phenomenology, as defined by Giorgi (2009), seeks to uncover the essential structures of conscious experience and the meaning-making processes individuals use to interpret their lives. Within the context of disability studies, phenomenology allows for a deeper understanding of how students with impairments perceive and experience their academic environments. By examining themes such as inclusion, exclusion, stigma, and resilience, researchers can reveal how these students interpret, adapt to, and transcend the challenges they face.

## 2. Objectives

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of students with disabilities at J.H. Cerilles State College, focusing on how they navigate the academic environment amidst various social, physical, and institutional challenges. Specifically, the research seeks to describe students' experiences of inclusion and exclusion, identify the forms and effects of stigma and discrimination they encounter, and examine the coping strategies and resilience they demonstrate in the face of adversity. Additionally, the study explores the perceived adequacy of institutional support systems, including accessibility services and faculty engagement. Ultimately, it aims to generate insights that can inform inclusive education practices and policies within the college and similar higher education institutions.

## 3. Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of students with disabilities at J.H. Cerilles State College. Rooted in the philosophical tradition of Edmund Husserl, phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of individuals' lived experiences by examining how they perceive and make meaning of a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative framework was chosen for its ability to capture the depth and complexity of personal narratives, especially those that address social and human issues (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were gathered organically through in-depth interviews, guided discussions, and observations—methods consistent with phenomenological inquiry. These tools allowed participants to articulate their experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and coping within the academic environment. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and draw out the essential meanings of participants' shared experiences. This approach was appropriate given the study's aim to understand the perspectives of a group of individuals who have encountered a common phenomenon: navigating higher education with a disability.

## 4. Results and Discussions

The researchers identified three themes namely: Overcoming Challenges, Navigating a Landscape of Barriers, and Bridging Faith and Self-Acceptance. From these three themes, eight sub-themes emerged describing the participants' lived experiences as students with disabilities studying in a public higher education institution, namely Resilience in Facing Physical Limitation, Excelling Despite Disability, Experience with Bullying, Judgment Based on Appearance or Disability, Physical Challenges, Stereotyping and Prejudices from Others, Transforming Negative Opinions into Inspiration, and Faith and Self-Acceptance.

### 4.1. Overcoming Challenges

The lived experiences of students with disabilities at J.H. Cerilles State College reveal a compelling narrative of resilience and determination in the face of persistent challenges. These students confront physical, social, and institutional barriers, yet continue to pursue education as a pathway to empowerment and independence.

Despite limited access to resources and occasional discrimination, participants adapt to their environment, drawing strength from personal motivation and support systems. Their stories highlight the vital role of inclusive practices in higher education and emphasize the need for systemic changes that address not only physical but also attitudinal barriers.

Two key sub-themes, *Resilience in Facing Physical Limitations* and *Excelling Despite Disability*, underscore how students transform adversity into motivation. These findings align with Resilience Theory and the Social Model of Disability, showing that while challenges persist, internal strength and institutional support significantly contribute to student success.

#### 4.1.1 Resilience in Facing Physical Limitations

This sub-theme captures the determination and adaptability of students as they navigate physical challenges. Despite difficulties accessing facilities, participating in activities, or coping with their conditions, these students exhibit remarkable strength in finding ways to succeed in their studies. Their resilience is reflected in their ability to manage their limitations while maintaining a positive outlook on their education.

*"As a PWD (Person with Disability), I have entirely accepted myself for who I am. Back in elementary and high school, I experienced being bullied. Sometimes, I felt discouraged, but now, I do not let it affect me anymore. Instead, I use it as motivation and inspiration." – Participant 1 (P1)*

*"In school, there are activities that feel really challenging for me to engage in because of my disability. It feels like a hindrance, preventing me from joining activities that I could have participated in otherwise. It affects a lot, especially my mental health, making things even harder to deal with." - P2*

*"If I compare all three, the physical aspect is definitely the hardest because it affects how I walk, and that impacts every part of my life. It influences how people see me and how I experience things in general" - P2*

*"In school, there are subjects where I am given special tasks. There are also times when I just attend, like in PE (Physical Education)—I just need to be present, and that's it. For ROTC (Reserved Officer Training Course), I was on a modular setup because one of the teachers talked to the RO officer on my behalf. Sir told me to coordinate directly with the officer whenever I had questions or needed guidance." - P3*

*"Physically, walking is a challenge for me because, even though I was 17 when I developed this disability, it still feels fresh, and I'm still adjusting. I have had moments in the past when I was bullied because one of my legs wasn't fully functional. However, now in college, I don't experience that anymore. It's been easier to cope, and I've learned to handle it better over time." - P5*

This sub-theme illustrates the inner strength of students with disabilities in adapting to physical challenges and managing the psychological effects of exclusion. Respondents shared experiences of self-acceptance, emotional struggles related to bullying, and persistent limitations in engaging with school activities and social events. Despite these obstacles, they demonstrated remarkable resilience, using their struggles as motivation to persevere academically. Institutional interventions—such as modifications in physical education and understanding faculty support—were also cited as essential in reducing barriers.

The critical role of resilience in navigating physical and emotional barriers aligns with Ungar's (2012) conceptualization of resilience as the capacity to access culturally meaningful resources that promote well-being. Students in this study actively negotiated their environments, shaping adaptive responses to their limitations. This is further supported by Lindsay et al. (2018), who found that youth with physical disabilities develop resilience through positive identity construction, social support, and the cultivation of coping skills.

Cortés and Ortega (2018) emphasize the role of educational environments in building resilience among students with disabilities. Their study highlights the importance of holistic support to emotional, academic, and structural aspects in helping students develop mental strength and academic focus. The students at J.H. Cerilles State College exemplify this model by turning past trauma into sources of empowerment, indicating the transformative potential of inclusive and responsive learning environments.

#### **4.1.2 Excelling Despite Disability**

This sub-theme highlights the achievements and success stories of students who have not only overcome their disabilities but also excelled academically. Their experiences demonstrate that disability is not a hindrance to success but rather an opportunity to showcase determination and talent. These students often serve as inspirations to their peers, proving that perseverance and support can lead to outstanding accomplishments.

*"When it comes to interacting with others, it's generally fine. However, there are times when some students stare at me—maybe because they're not used to seeing someone like me, or perhaps they're thinking about what they see in me." - P1*

*"For me, it hasn't really affected my studies. Whatever field activities are part of my course, I can handle them. I'm able to participate and go wherever I need to go, despite the challenges. I've learned to adapt and keep up with everything." - P5*

*"Regarding attitude, there are others who treat me differently, but I accept it. I feel that their perception of me is different, but I accept it because this is how I am." - P6*

Respondents in this sub-theme discussed how they continued to thrive academically despite the daily hurdles posed by their physical disabilities. They described attending fieldwork, engaging in class discussions, and managing tasks that required extensive focus and effort, even in the face of societal biases and exclusion. One respondent shared how they endured stares and marginalization but maintained strong academic performance by focusing on their goals and drawing strength from faculty support and classroom accommodations.

These narratives echo Sharma and Deb's (2019) findings which point to the significance of social and institutional support in promoting confidence and active participation. The presence of emotionally aware faculty, peer understanding, and modified academic tasks enabled students not just to participate, but to excel - despite physical barriers.

Moreover, the inclusive practices described by the respondents align with Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) advocacy for inclusive pedagogies. Their work argues that educational success for students with disabilities is fostered not merely by individualized accommodations but through teaching strategies that validate all learners. This study reinforces that claim, demonstrating how inclusive interventions at J.H. Cerilles State College have helped foster both academic achievement and personal growth among students with disabilities.

Locally, Aguilar (2016) further contextualized these experiences within the Philippine education system. Their work shows that while barriers remain, students with disabilities often show remarkable academic success when provided with the necessary institutional support and inclusive environments. The current findings corroborate this, showing that success is not defined by the absence of disability but by the presence of support and a resilient mindset.

These sub-themes collectively highlight that resilience, institutional support, and inclusive educational practices are interdependent elements that promote positive outcomes for students with disabilities. The respondents' journey from marginalization to empowerment reflects not only personal growth but also a systemic capacity for transformation. As such, this study reinforces the need for educational institutions to implement consistent and compassionate strategies that recognize and build upon the strength of students with disabilities.

#### **4.2. Navigating a Landscape of Barriers**

Despite efforts toward inclusion, many students faced significant social challenges that impacted their well-being and sense of belonging. These struggles were deeply rooted in experiences of bullying and judgment based on appearance or disability, which created barriers to social acceptance and academic participation.

The researchers identified two sub-themes of this theme related to the adverse effects of the challenges encountered by the respondents as persons with disabilities. The sub-themes are as follows: *Experiences with Bullying, Judgment Based on Appearance or Disability, Physical Challenges in Daily Life, and Stereotyping and Prejudices from Others.*

##### **4.2.1 Experience with Bullying**

Bullying was a common experience for many students with disabilities, stemming from peers' lack of understanding or empathy. These students often found themselves isolated, targeted for their differences, and subjected to ridicule or exclusion. The emotional and psychological toll of bullying affected their self-esteem, making it more difficult for them to engage fully in school life. Despite these challenges, many students found ways to cope, relying on personal strength and the support of empathetic peers or faculty members to navigate these experiences.

*"I experienced being bullied, especially during elementary and high school. They would make fun of me because my speech wasn't clear due to my condition. In college, I didn't really experience much bullying, but there were still occasional moments when some people would joke around in a hurtful way." - P1*

*"I haven't encountered much in college, but back in elementary and high school, when I was younger, people would often say I was different because I was a PWD. Some would even laugh at me because I walked differently, and their words were really painful. It hurt a lot, especially since it's easy to get hurt by things like that." - P2*

*"So far, I haven't really experienced physical bullying, but there was one time when my friends told me that I was verbally bullied in grade 5. I don't really remember it, though, because I didn't pay much attention to it at the time and didn't realize it was bullying." - P4*

These testimonies highlight how verbal and emotional harassment during elementary and high school left lasting impressions on respondents. They recounted how peers mocked their speech, walking style, or overall demeanor, which caused feelings of pain and isolation. For instance, one respondent shared how their speech impediment became a target for ridicule, while another mentioned how their unique gait invited cruel comments. These findings resonate with Smith and Baker's (2020) study which revealed that early experiences of bullying can lead to long-term emotional distress, reduced self-confidence, and challenges in building healthy relationships. Smith and Baker emphasized that bullying among students with disabilities often stems from a lack of understanding and empathy among peers.

##### **4.2.2 Judgment based on Appearance or Disability**

Judgment based on appearance or disability was another significant challenge faced by students. These judgments often led to stigmatization, where students were seen not for their abilities but through the lens of their disability. This type of social



exclusion not only undermined their confidence but also perpetuated a cycle of discrimination. Students shared that such judgments made them feel marginalized, but over time, efforts to raise awareness and encourage empathy within the school community began to slowly challenge these stereotypes, fostering a more inclusive environment.

*"They would stare at me, sometimes intensely, as if it was their first time seeing someone like me. I could feel it when I turned away—they'd start talking about me, making fun of me, and mocking me." - P3*

*"There are really people who won't treat you well because not everyone likes you, especially when you're different. Some may not be accepting or understanding simply because you're not like everyone else." - P2*

The respondents' statements above highlight how social stigmas and superficial judgments perpetuate feelings of exclusion. Respondents described instances where people stared, mocked, or treated them differently due to their physical appearance or condition. One respondent noted the discomfort of being intensely stared at, while others described how gossip and mockery made them feel devalued. These experiences align with Johnson and Perez's (2021) study which highlights how visual differences can trigger prejudice and alienation. The study found that such behaviors not only harm self-esteem but also create barriers to forming meaningful connections, thereby intensifying the sense of otherness.

#### 4.2.3 Physical Challenges in Daily Life

Students with disabilities face various physical challenges in their daily routines, including navigating inaccessible infrastructure, managing fatigue, and dealing with the physical strain of completing academic tasks. For many, the lack of disability-friendly facilities such as ramps, elevators, or ergonomic seating further compounded these difficulties. Everyday activities, from moving between classes to participating in extracurricular events, required additional effort and determination. However, through resourcefulness and the support of compassionate peers or faculty, students found ways to overcome these challenges, fostering personal growth and resilience in the process.

*"If I compare all three, the physical aspect is definitely the hardest because it affects how I walk, and that impacts every part of my life. It influences how people see me and how I experience things in general." - P2*

*"There were times before, especially when I entered college that I couldn't pursue the course I really wanted because of my condition with my hand. I had dreamed of going into the medical field. Sometimes, there are things I want to do but can't because of my disability-like dancing. In moments like that, insecurities creep in, especially when I can't perform certain movements, like emphasizing hand gestures. It can be frustrating, but I try to focus on what I can do instead." - P4*

*"Physically, walking is a challenge for me because, even though I was 17 when I developed this disability, it still feels fresh, and I'm still adjusting. I've had moments in the past when I was bullied because one of my legs wasn't fully functional. However, now in college, I don't experience that anymore. It's been easier to cope, and I've learned to handle it better over time." - P5*

The respondents' testimonies reveal how physical limitations significantly affect their mobility, career aspirations, and participation in activities, often leading to frustration, insecurity, and emotional distress. Difficulties in walking or using certain body parts limited their engagement in daily tasks and shaped how others perceived them, impacting self-esteem. These findings align with Roberts and King (2019), who emphasized the psychological impact of mobility issues, and Patel et al. (2020), who noted how physical restrictions hinder career goals and life satisfaction. Feelings of exclusion from hobbies and activities, such as dancing, further reinforced emotional strain, echoing Garcia and Fernandez's (2022) call for inclusive and adaptive programs. Overall, the findings highlight the need for institutions to adopt inclusive practices and support systems that empower students with physical disabilities to thrive.

#### 4.2.4 Stereotyping and Prejudices from Others

Stereotyping and prejudices from others were prominent challenges faced by students with disabilities. Peers and even educators sometimes harbored misconceptions, viewing students through limiting labels rather than recognizing their potential and individuality. These biases often led to discriminatory treatment, exclusion, or a lack of opportunities to fully engage in school life. For many students, these experiences were emotionally taxing and undermined their self-esteem. However, efforts to challenge stereotypes through awareness and education helped some students overcome these prejudices, fostering a more inclusive environment where their abilities and contributions were better appreciated.

*"When it comes to interacting with others, it's generally fine. However, there are times when some students stare at me—maybe because they're not used to seeing someone like me, or perhaps they're thinking about what they see in me." - P1*

*"Socially, I didn't really struggle because I'm friendly and easily make friends. However, there are still some people who aren't open to getting close to me, probably because of my disability." - P3*

*"There were times before, especially when I entered college that I couldn't pursue the course I really wanted because of my condition with my hand. I had dreamed of going into the medical field. Sometimes, there are things I want to do but can't because of my disability—like dancing. In moments like that, insecurities creep in, especially when I can't perform certain movements, like emphasizing hand gestures. It can be frustrating, but I try to focus on what I can do instead." - P4*

*"The hardest for me, especially when it comes to others who are in a similar situation. It affects everything because it's visible to others. But despite that, I try to stay positive and focus on myself. I choose not to pay attention to the negativity and just let it go. I prefer to focus on moving forward and not let it affect me." - P5*

This sub-theme narrates the attitudinal challenges faced by persons with disabilities (PWDs), focusing on the stereotyping and prejudices they encounter in various social interactions. Respondents shared experiences that highlight both external and internal struggles. Some mentioned being stared at, often interpreting this as stemming from others' unfamiliarity or preconceived notions about disabilities. This subtle yet persistent social behavior can create an uncomfortable atmosphere, reinforcing feelings of alienation. While one respondent expressed no difficulty in making friends due to being outgoing, others pointed out the hesitation some peers have in forming meaningful relationships with them, likely due to stigmatizing attitudes. These experiences underscore the nuanced ways societal perceptions influence PWDs' social experiences.

The impact of these attitudinal challenges extends beyond social interactions and into personal aspirations. For example, a respondent shared the difficulty of not pursuing a desired course in the medical field because of their physical limitations, illustrating how external prejudices and internal insecurities converge to restrict opportunities. Another respondent expressed frustration over being unable to participate in activities like dancing, with visible impairments causing insecurities when they couldn't perform certain movements. Such challenges reveal how stereotyping often amplifies the impact of disabilities, transforming external judgments into internal conflicts. Despite these barriers, the respondents demonstrated remarkable resilience, focusing on their strengths, cultivating positivity, and consciously disregarding negativity. Their ability to remain optimistic despite societal bias speaks volumes about their inner strength and adaptive strategies.

The results further emphasize how stereotyping and prejudices significantly affect PWDs' emotional well-being, social integration, and self-perception. These findings resonate with the study by Scior (2016), which highlights that societal stigma often perpetuates feelings of inadequacy and exclusion among PWDs. Similarly, Kulkarni et al. (2019), found that negative societal attitudes limit personal and professional growth, creating barriers that PWDs must work to overcome. Furthermore, Liao et al. (2021), revealed that focusing on strengths and employing positive coping mechanisms are essential strategies used by PWDs to counteract the effects of societal judgment.

The findings of this study affirm that societal stereotypes and prejudices are significant barriers for PWDs, influencing their emotional resilience and life choices. However, the resilience displayed by the respondents highlights the importance of fostering inclusive environments and challenging societal attitudes to mitigate these negative effects.

### **4.3. Bridging Faith and Self-Acceptance**

This item emerged as a central theme in the lived experiences of students with disabilities at JHCSC. Confronted with various challenges, these students leaned on their faith as a source of strength and guidance while gradually learning to embrace their unique identities. This interplay between spiritual belief and self-acceptance became a transformative process, empowering them to overcome obstacles and find a more profound sense of purpose. Through this journey, they cultivated inner peace and confidence, which became integral to their academic achievements and personal growth. Two sub-themes emerged from this theme: Transforming Negative Opinions into Inspirations and Faith and Self-Acceptance.

#### **4.3.1 Transforming Negative Opinions into Inspirations**

Students demonstrated remarkable resilience by using negative opinions and judgments as motivation to succeed. Instead of being disheartened by criticism or bias, they viewed these challenges as opportunities to prove their capabilities. Their experiences of overcoming societal expectations not only inspired them but also shifted the perceptions of those around them, fostering greater respect and understanding.

*"My coping strategy is simply to ignore them. I let them be so that my dreams won't be affected. By ignoring those who discriminate against me, I can focus on my own goals. Whatever they have is theirs, and whatever I have is mine. I also focus on dreaming because all of us have our own aspirations in life." - P1*

*"For me, I haven't had any really bad experiences. But if there are students who ask about my hand, I just answer them. I've accepted the way my hand is, and there are times when I just let people be. I don't think negatively about it, which is why I'm not really affected by their questions or comments. I've learned to focus on the positive instead." - P4*

*"My mindset is to turn Everything into something positive. I use my experiences as inspiration for myself and others, especially those who want to finish their studies. I want to be an example for those who may have faced challenges or are out of school, showing them that despite difficulties, it's possible to achieve their goals. I hope my story can inspire others to keep going and never give up." - P5*

*"I just let it go, that's really my main coping strategy. I always remind myself that I want to finish my studies to help my parents, and that keeps me going." - P6*

Respondents shared how they transformed negative societal opinions and discrimination into sources of motivation, fostering resilience, self-acceptance, and faith in their potential. By reframing challenges, they maintained focus on their goals and viewed obstacles as opportunities for growth. This aligns with Wong (2015), who emphasized the value of meaning-making in adversity, and Dweck's (2016) theory of growth mindset, which highlights the power of viewing difficulties as surmountable.

Support from others and a strong belief system helped participants navigate stigma and stay emotionally grounded, echoing Fredrickson's (2017) findings that positive emotions build long-term resilience. As Augustin and Egelsee (2019) also found, turning criticism into confidence fosters personal strength. These testimonies highlight the importance of mindset, support systems, and faith in overcoming societal barriers and inspiring others.

#### 4.3.2 Faith and Self-Acceptance

Faith and self-acceptance played a profound role in shaping the experiences of students with disabilities. Their Faith provided a source of emotional strength and guidance, helping them navigate challenges and find meaning in their journey. This spiritual foundation often complemented their path to self-acceptance, allowing them to embrace their unique identities with confidence and grace. Together, Faith and self-acceptance fostered a sense of inner peace and resilience, empowering these students to overcome obstacles and thrive academically and personally.

*"When coping with situations like this, it's not just me involved. I also receive a lot of support from my classmates, friends, and family, who always remind me that I can do it. Now, I've fully accepted myself for who I am. If people talk about me, I just let it go because my main goal is to finish what I started. I don't feel ashamed anymore; I just focus on my goal and keep moving forward." - P2*

*"I always put God first and just keep moving forward. I know God will never abandon me. As for those people who have negative views or attitudes towards me, I just let them be. I leave it to God to deal with them. For my part, I choose to stay humble and keep my focus on what truly matters." - P3*

The testimonies presented above show the respondents' strategies, such as focusing on aspirations, reframing negative opinions into motivation, and drawing strength from Faith and social support, demonstrate how deeply intertwined self-acceptance and Faith are in their journeys. By framing their challenges positively, respondents enhance their ability to inspire both themselves and others, emphasizing that self-acceptance and Faith can be cultivated and strengthened through a supportive community and a transformative mindset. Their narratives align with the literature, showcasing that personal Faith and self-acceptance are not merely individual traits but outcomes of a collective effort involving both internal and external factors.

Lynch and McConkey (2017) emphasize that focusing on personal goals and seeking support are vital for overcoming adversity. Similarly, Vickery et al. (2020) underscore the role of a positive mindset and the capacity to turn challenges into sources of inspiration. These align with respondents' strategies of fostering Faith in their own capabilities and embracing self-acceptance to navigate hardships. Moreover, Wang et al. (2021) in "Building Resilience in Individuals with Disabilities: The Role of Social Support" highlight how friends, family, and classmates play a pivotal role in providing emotional reinforcement, reflecting the respondents' reliance on their social networks to bolster their sense of Faith and acceptance.

The findings underscore that "Bridging Faith and Self-Acceptance" is a multi-dimensional process. This includes emotional regulation, transformative personal experiences, and strong social connections. Respondents' strategies—such as focusing on aspirations, reframing negative opinions into motivation, and drawing strength from Faith and social support—demonstrate how deeply intertwined self-acceptance and Faith are in their journeys. By framing their challenges positively, respondents enhance their ability to inspire both themselves and others, emphasizing that self-acceptance and Faith can be cultivated and strengthened through

a supportive community and a transformative mindset. Their narratives align with the literature, showcasing that personal Faith and self-acceptance are not merely individual traits but outcomes of a collective effort involving both internal and external factors.

### Conclusions

The lived experiences of students with disabilities at J.H. Cerilles State College reveal a powerful narrative of resilience, adaptation, and hope. Despite enduring verbal bullying, physical limitations, and social exclusion in earlier educational settings, participants have developed coping strategies rooted in faith, self-acceptance, and social support. College life, while more inclusive, still presents challenges in the form of societal stigma and physical barriers. Yet, students continue to overcome these with determination and a focus on their capabilities.

This study affirms the relevance of Resilience Theory, as students transformed adversity into strength and pursued academic and personal goals despite obstacles. Simultaneously, the findings resonate with the Social Model of Disability, underscoring how external barriers, rather than impairments, limit full participation. These insights highlight the urgent need for inclusive practices, accessible infrastructure, and attitudinal shifts in higher education to empower students with disabilities and support their academic success and well-being.

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