

Navigating Higher Education: A Case Study on the Academic Journey of a Deaf Student in the Philippines

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Abstract. This qualitative case study investigates the academic experiences of a deaf student enrolled in a teacher education program at a state university in Bohol, Philippines. It addresses a research gap on how deaf learners navigate higher education. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with nine informants: the student, parents, peers, and teachers across different educational levels. Using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, four themes emerged: (1) intrinsic motivation and identity, (2) academic coping strategies, (3) social and environmental support, and (4) structural and social barriers. Results show that personal drive, spiritual beliefs, and family aspirations supported the student's persistence. Visual learning, lip-reading, and independent study were key strategies for overcoming communication challenges. Support from peers, family, and inclusive teaching practices reinforced both emotional and academic progress. Despite these strengths, barriers such as limited faculty adjustments and social stigma remain. The study recommends the use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), assistive technologies, peer-support systems, and faculty training to improve inclusion. By presenting the lived experience of a deaf student, the study contributes practical insights to strengthen equity and accessibility in higher education.

Keywords: Deaf student; Hard of hearing; Inclusive education; Persons with disabilities; Universal design for learning

1.0 Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a powerful tool for realizing individual potential. Like other basic rights, such as freedom from slavery, protection from torture, and the right to a fair trial, access to education ensures human dignity and equality. Nelson Mandela's (1990) statement that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world" emphasizes its transformative role. Education not only fosters critical thinking, personal growth, and discipline but also ensures the transfer of knowledge and values to future generations.

For learners with disabilities, the value of education is even greater, yet it often comes with unique challenges. Deaf students, in particular, face barriers in accessing and understanding instructional materials. Studies report that limited access to sign language interpreters, lack of assistive technology, and unsupportive classrooms reduce their academic performance (Kisanga, 2020; Alsalem & Alzahrani, 2023). Earlier findings also revealed lower achievement levels and a greater risk of social exclusion among deaf learners (Sambu, Otube, & Bunyasi,

2018; Lund & Ross, 2016). On the other hand, advances in assistive tools have shown promise. Gesture-recognition systems have improved communication between teachers and students (Zhu et al., 2022), while adaptive learning technologies have strengthened participation and self-confidence in classrooms (Soetan et al., 2020). These examples reflect both persistent challenges and emerging opportunities for inclusive education.

Despite these developments, research rarely focuses on deaf students who are enrolled in teacher education programs. This setting is unique because these learners are not only students but are also preparing to become future teachers. Their experiences raise important questions about how they address academic challenges, develop coping strategies, and interact with institutions expected to support inclusive learning. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the academic and social experiences of a deaf student pursuing a teacher education degree in the Philippines. It explores motivation, learning strategies, social support, and institutional barriers. The findings aim to inform curriculum development, teacher training, and policy reforms that promote inclusive practices and uphold the dignity and rights of all learners.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed to examine the lived experiences of deaf students. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of individual perspectives within a real-life context. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with multiple stakeholders. All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed. Generative AI tools supported transcription and initial coding, but researcher verification ensured accuracy and minimized bias. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis guided the coding and theme development process. Triangulation across participant groups strengthened the credibility of findings.

2.2 Research Environment and Participants

The study was conducted in two municipalities in the province of Bohol. These settings were purposively chosen because they provided access to individuals with direct knowledge of the participant’s academic and social journey. The primary participant was a fourth-year science education student enrolled in the College of Teacher Education since 2021. Secondary participants provided additional perspectives on their experiences. These included Parents (2), who provided insights into early learning experiences and family support, Teachers (5): Included instructors from elementary, high school, and college, particularly academic advisers, and Peers (2): College classmates who had academic and social interactions with the participant. The primary participant was selected based on the following criteria: (a) currently enrolled as a deaf student in a teacher education program during the 2024–2025 academic year, (b) resident of Bohol, and (c) willingness to participate in scheduled interviews. Secondary participants (parents, teachers, peers) were selected if they had direct involvement in the student’s academic or social development and were willing to participate in interviews.

Table 1. Profile Key Informant

Participant Group	Role of the Study	Contribution to Data
Primary Participant	Fourth-Year Deaf Science Education Student	Provided firsthand experiences of the academic journey.
Parents	Mother And Father	Shared early learning history, family support.
Teachers	Elementary, High School, and College Instructors	Offered insights into teaching approaches, challenges, and accommodations.
Peers	College Classmates	Reported on social and academic interactions.

2.3 Research Instrument

The main instrument was the unstructured interview, supported by broad guide questions developed by the researcher. These guide questions were designed to explore motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and support systems. Validation was ensured through expert review by two faculty members in the field of education research. A pilot interview with a peer respondent helped refine phrasing and clarity.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure and Analysis

Interviews were conducted from June to August 2024. Each session lasted 45–60 minutes, with follow-up interviews arranged when clarification was necessary. Depending on availability, interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online (via video conferencing platforms). All responses were transcribed verbatim, reviewed for accuracy, and subjected to coding and thematic analysis.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical standards set by institutional review boards and the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017). Informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were fully informed of the study’s purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time was respected. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the secure storage of transcripts and recordings. AI transcription was monitored through manual review to ensure data accuracy and privacy. The researcher ensured respectful and non-judgmental interactions throughout the study and obtained the necessary permissions from the university and local authorities before data collection.

3.0 Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis from nine key informants. The academic journey of the deaf student is discussed under five themes, supported by participant quotes and contextualized with relevant literature.

3.1 Case Background

The participant acquired hearing loss during elementary school rather than at birth. As Participant 2 recalled, “It was during his 2nd grade in elementary school when he started to lose his hearing, and it worsened as he grew older.” Participant 1 added that it began with ear pain; “We brought him to an expert to be examined, and the doctor recommended a hearing aid.” He did not continue using the device because “he heard a loud rumbling sound,” so he learned to live with the condition and developed alternative strategies for communication and learning. This background clarifies the context for his later academic choices and adaptations.

Table 2. Case Background of the Deaf Student

Aspect	Description
Onset of Hearing Loss	Began in Grade 2, progressive over time.
Medical Response	Consulted a doctor, recommended a hearing aid.
Adaptation	Declined hearing aid due to discomfort, learned to adjust.

3.2 Motivation and Aspirations

The participant’s determination to pursue a teaching career reflects strong intrinsic motivation and family-oriented goals. From childhood, “Since he was little, he really wanted to become a teacher,” noted Participant 2. He also stated, “I want to teach in SpEd because people say I am suited for teaching children with special needs.” His aspirations extend to family well-being: “He wants to build a proper house... The money he receives from the TES... he uses that,” said Participant 2.

Spiritual beliefs reinforce his resolve: “I am also inspired by a verse from the Bible that says, ‘He will crown your effort with success.’ ... Because of my Biblical beliefs, I want to be a role model... I always strive to be kind, forgiving, generous, and respectful... I go to church and read the Bible, which helps me stay positive in my thinking.” These accounts align with studies showing intrinsic goals in teacher education (Suyatno, Wantini, & Patimah, 2024) and the positive influence of educators with disabilities (Singal, Kwok, & Wijesinghe, 2024). His record of achievement supports the link between motivation and performance: “He graduated high school with high honors,” and “Every exam, he would answer a lot and even get high scores, higher than others,” reported Participant 9 (see also Kamberi, 2025).

Table 3. Motivational Drivers of Deaf Students

Aspiration to become a teacher.
Desire to serve students with disabilities.
Commitment to family welfare (TES funds used for household needs).
Spiritual grounding and bible-inspired perseverance.

3.3 Coping Strategies and Academic Navigation

The participant utilized visual and self-regulated learning strategies to overcome communication barriers. He explained, “I do double-check information, and I research or surf the internet for terminologies.” Lip reading was central: “He said he would look at the teacher’s mouth,” reported Participant 2; “He would really look at your lips,” added Participant 7. Note-taking supported comprehension: “He was fond of taking notes... That is how he was able to get the answers,” said Participant 8. Peers and teachers also recognized his discipline: “He finishes tasks fast; he submits before the rest of us,” (Participant 5); “He even wakes up early to finish tasks he

did not complete,” (Participant 6). In challenging subjects, help and step-by-step solutions aided understanding: “He really struggled in Thermodynamics... I would send him my answers and the step-by-step solutions, and he would eventually understand,” noted Participant 4.

These strategies mirror evidence that visual methods and metacognitive routines strengthen learning for deaf and hard-of-hearing students (Olszak & Borowicz, 2025) and that adaptive coping supports engagement and achievement (Chen et al., 2024; Malado, 2024). They also reflect findings on how persistence and self-management buffer stress and maintain performance (Benedict, Rivera, & Antia, 2015).

Table 4. Coping Strategies Adopted by the Deaf Student

Strategy	Examples from Informants	Impact on Learning
Visual Learning	Lip-reading, watching the teacher’s mouth.	Improved comprehension.
Independent Study	Online research, double-checking lessons.	Deeper understanding of concepts.
Note-taking	Organized written notes.	Strong performance in written exams.
Emotional Coping	Persistence, peer collaboration, and faith-based values.	Reduced stress, maintained resilience.

3.4 Social and Environmental Support

Family, teachers, peers, and the community formed a network that sustained progress. The student shared, “My father personally brings me to school,” while Participant 2 explained that the family avoids letting him commute alone. Financial and moral support also came from a local priest: “Fr. ___ gives financial help through GCash for school payments and shares inspiring words and prayers.” Teachers adapted roles with dignity: “I would tell his group not to assign him a speaking role, only roles he could manage,” said Participant 8. Peers provided academic help and reassurance: “We try to solve examples together,” and “Do not worry... we are here, you are not alone,” recalled Participant 5. His effort inspired classmates: “He inspires me... If Julius can do it despite his situation, why can’t I?” (Participant 4).

These accounts are consistent with research on peer-mediated support and inclusive instruction (Carter et al., 2015; McLeskey et al., 2023) and with the value of community participation for well-being (Patrick et al., 2024). They also align with Universal Design for Learning principles that encourage flexible roles, collaboration, and access to multiple engagement pathways.

Table 5. Social and Environmental Enablers

Enabler	Role
Family	Transportation; Emotional Security
Teachers	Inclusive Tasks; Differentiated Instruction
Peers	Academic Collaboration; Encouragement
Community	Leadership Roles: Financial/Spiritual Support

3.5 Barriers and Challenges

Barriers remained in instruction, technology, and social interaction. The student reported, “In ethics... he uses deep words. I also struggle with thermodynamics because it lacks step-by-step solutions.” Online delivery added difficulty: “It was mostly through Google Meet, and he could not understand the discussions,” said Participant 4. These issues echo evidence on the use of inaccessible teaching methods and the need for captions, interpreters, and visual supports (Marschark & Knoors, 2020; Millet, 2021). Emerging studies demonstrate the promise of real-time captioning and motion-guided visuals for enhancing comprehension and reducing cognitive load (Chavez et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2024).

Table 6. Coping Strategies Adopted by the Deaf Student

Barrier Type	Examples	Consequence
Instructional	Verbal lessons without visual aids.	Difficulty in abstract subjects.
Technological	Online classes without captions.	Limited comprehension.
Social Stigma	Bullying (e.g., classmates mocking in Grade 3).	Emotional distress.
Exclusion	Group rejection in college tasks.	Feelings of isolation.

Social stigma also affected participation. In early schooling, “Back in Grade 3, one time his classmate made him eat paper,” recounted Participant 3. In college, exclusion persisted: “Sometimes he says, ‘Never mind, I will just work alone since no one wants to group with me,’” reported Participant 5. Such experiences mirror broader

evidence on bullying and isolation among students with disabilities (Rose & Gage, 2017; Mosia & Phasha, 2023) and underscore the need for empowerment, equitable systems, and individual accommodations (Bartolo et al., 2025).

4.0 Conclusion

This study contributes to global work on inclusive education by foregrounding the lived experience of a deaf pre-service teacher in Philippine higher education. It demonstrates how personal agency, combined with well-aligned support, can facilitate academic success, while also highlighting everyday design practices that continue to hinder access. Motivation, faith, and self-regulated strategies helped the student persist, but these were most effective when reinforced by steady support from family, peers, and teachers—demonstrating that resilience alone is insufficient without intentional, supportive structures. The study also highlights that many access barriers are preventable; for instance, verbal lecture delivery without visuals, courses without captions, and inconsistent interpreter access can be addressed through standard course design and basic institutional services. Additionally, the student's family, faith community, and local networks served as protective anchors, suggesting that institutional plans that meaningfully engage these networks can enhance participation and well-being.

These insights lead to several implications for policy and practice. Universal Design for Learning should be adopted as a baseline approach, including required captioning for online sessions, interpreter pools, note-taking support, and clearly communicated access plans for each course. Faculty development is needed to support instructors in planning visual materials, designing accessible assessments, and establishing sustainable peer-support routines. Peer systems, such as study partners or mentoring structures for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, should be formalized and institutionally recognized. Institutions should also monitor access continuously by auditing courses and platforms for caption quality, interpreter coverage, and response times to accommodation requests.

Future research should include multi-site comparative studies across teacher education programs to determine which supports yield the most significant outcomes. Mixed-methods trials of captioning, interpreter models, and visual-first lesson design in high-demand subjects would provide deeper insight into effective practices. Longitudinal tracking from coursework through practicum and early employment could further clarify how access during training shapes preparedness and success in the teaching profession.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Author 1: Conceptualization, Data Gathering, Data Analysis

Author 2: Data Analysis, Data Gathering

Author 3: Proposal Writing, Data Gathering

Author 4: Data Gathering

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

No conflict of interest.

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