

BEYOND PHYSICAL PRESENCE: DEAF COLLEGE STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION IN PHILIPPINE HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: Inclusive policies and accommodations do not automatically produce meaningful participation for Deaf students in higher education. This descriptive phenomenological study examined how 10 Deaf college students experienced academic and social inclusion at a Philippine state university. Participants were purposively selected and interviewed through their preferred visual communication modes, principally Filipino Sign Language. Interview and group-discussion records were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological procedure. Five themes described the phenomenon: physical inclusion without interactional membership; communication access as the basis of participation; hearing-centered institutional practices; threatened belonging, identity, and emotional well-being; and self-advocacy as both agency and burden. The composite essence was conditional belonging: students were formally present in the university but were required to negotiate access repeatedly in classrooms, group work, and informal campus life. Interpreters and note-taking support enabled access to planned instruction but did not consistently resolve rapid peer exchanges, spontaneous discussion, or culturally hearing-centered expectations. The findings indicate that inclusion should be evaluated through communication equity, participation, recognition of Deaf linguistic identity, and shared institutional responsibility rather than by enrollment or accommodation provision alone. Higher education institutions should strengthen Filipino Sign Language access, faculty and peer capacity, universal design for learning, emotional support, and mechanisms through which Deaf students can co-design inclusive practices.

Keywords: Deaf students; Filipino Sign Language; higher education; inclusion; participation; phenomenology; belonging

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive higher education is a legal and educational commitment to equal opportunity, accessible communication, and full participation. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires inclusive education at all levels and recognizes sign languages and the linguistic identity of Deaf communities [1]. In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 11106 designates Filipino Sign Language (FSL) as the national sign language of the Filipino Deaf and mandates its use in education and public transactions involving Deaf persons [2]. These provisions establish a strong rights-based foundation, but the quality of inclusion must ultimately be judged by students' access to learning, interaction, recognition, and belonging.

Research on Deaf students in higher education has long shown that access to classroom information remains uneven and that the effectiveness of interpreting, note-taking, captioning, and tutoring depends on how these services operate within actual teaching and social environments [3]. The concept of membership is therefore more demanding than placement: a student may be enrolled in a mainstream classroom yet remain a 'visitor' when teaching roles, peer interaction, extracurricular participation, and institutional structures do not support reciprocal involvement [4]. Recent accounts from further and higher education similarly identify limited Deaf awareness, communication barriers, and inconsistent interpreter access as continuing sources of exclusion [5]. Cross-national evidence also indicates that inclusive outcomes depend on coordinated academic support, transition preparation, technology, interpreting, and institutional commitment rather than a single accommodation [6].

This distinction is important because hearing-centered institutions often treat spoken interaction as the default and require Deaf students to adapt to systems not designed around visual communication. The apparent 'choice' of an

inclusive placement can be constrained when sign-language-rich environments and adequate resources are unavailable [7]. In such settings, physical presence may coexist with missed discussion, delayed access, social isolation, and repeated demands for self-advocacy.

Philippine scholarship has examined the lived experiences of special education teachers navigating distance-learning modalities and demonstrated the value of phenomenology for revealing how institutional conditions are experienced by participants in Northern Mindanao [8]. However, limited local research centers Deaf college students' own accounts of inclusion across academic, social, linguistic, and emotional domains. Existing policy discussions often describe services provided, but provide less evidence on whether those services create interactional membership and belonging. This study addresses that gap by asking how Deaf students experience inclusion and participation, which conditions facilitate or hinder these experiences, and how these experiences shape identity, emotional well-being, and self-advocacy.

Research questions

The study addressed three questions: (1) How do Deaf college students experience inclusion and participation in academic and social settings? (2) What communication, institutional, and cultural conditions facilitate or constrain their participation? and (3) How do these experiences shape their belonging, identity, emotional well-being, and self-advocacy?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design and setting

A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was employed to describe the shared meaning and essential structure of Deaf students' experiences. The design was appropriate because the research questions concerned how inclusion was lived and interpreted, rather than the

prevalence of barriers or causal relationships. The study was conducted at the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines, where Deaf students were enrolled in undergraduate programs and received institutionally available support services.

Participants and sampling

Ten currently enrolled Deaf college students were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling. Participants communicated principally through FSL and other preferred visual communication modes and had direct experience of academic and social participation in the university. The sample size was consistent with the intensive, information-rich orientation of phenomenological inquiry. To strengthen transferability, the final manuscript should report the participants' age range, gender, year level, degree program, communication preferences, and length of university enrollment:

Data collection

Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews and a group discussion. Interview prompts addressed interaction with instructors and peers, participation in group work and campus activities, use of accommodations, barriers to inclusion, belonging, identity, and self-advocacy. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and were conducted using participants' preferred communication mode with interpreting support. Video or audio recording and field notes captured signed content, nonverbal expression, and contextual observations. Because the researcher was also a trained sign-language interpreter, a reflexive record was maintained to distinguish facilitation from interpretation and to identify assumptions that could shape questioning or analysis.

Phenomenological analysis and rigor

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive phenomenological procedure: repeated reading, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, preparation of an exhaustive description, articulation of the fundamental structure, and participant validation [9]. The procedure parallels the participant-centered use of phenomenology in Philippine special education research [8]. Credibility was supported through member checking and peer debriefing; dependability and confirmability through an audit trail and reflective journal; and transferability through contextual and participant description [10]. Reflexivity was treated as an ongoing examination of the researcher's position, interpretive influence, and relationship with participants rather than as a one-time declaration [11].

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw. Pseudonymous participant codes were used, and recordings and transcripts were stored securely.

RESULTS

The analysis yielded five interrelated themes. Across themes, the composite essence was conditional belonging: participants were enrolled and physically present, but meaningful inclusion depended on whether communication, interaction, and institutional recognition were accessible in the moment.

Table 1. Phenomenological themes and central meanings

Theme	Central meaning
1. Physical inclusion without interactional membership	Students were present in class but excluded from rapid discussion, group decision-making, and informal exchange.
2. Communication access as the foundation of participation	Interpreting supported planned instruction, but spontaneous peer communication often remained inaccessible.
3. Hearing-centered practices and Deaf linguistic identity	Spoken-language norms positioned Deaf students as the ones expected to adjust; FSL affirmed identity and agency.
4. Belonging, identity, and emotional well-being	Repeated exclusion produced fatigue, loneliness, and invisibility, while Deaf peer connection protected belonging.
5. Self-advocacy as agency and institutional burden	Students asserted access needs and educated others, but responsibility for inclusion was frequently shifted onto them.

Theme 1: Physical inclusion without interactional membership

Participants differentiated being located in a classroom from being recognized as an active member of it. Scheduled lectures were more accessible when interpreting or written support was available, but group work and fast-moving discussion frequently placed students outside the interaction. One participant summarized the distinction:

"I am in the classroom, but I am not really part of the conversation" (D5).

Another described group inclusion as temporary and peripheral: "I am part of the group, but I am like a visitor" (D3). Students sometimes nodded or appeared to follow discussion even when the interaction had moved beyond accessible interpretation. This response was not evidence of limited ability; it was a strategy for managing inaccessible conversational pace and avoiding repeated interruption.

Theme 2: Communication access as the foundation of participation

Communication access was experienced as the mechanism through which academic and social participation became possible. Interpreters supported access to formal teaching, but participants emphasized that peer talk, humor, side comments, and spontaneous contributions were easily lost.

"I can follow the lecture with the interpreter, but when classmates talk to each other, I am left out" (D2).

Belonging was consequently defined through reciprocal communication rather than mere co-presence. As D4 explained, "Belonging is not just being in the room; it is being able to talk, laugh, and share with others." The theme shows that communication equity must extend beyond teacher-to-student transmission to student-to-student interaction and campus life.

Theme 3: Hearing-centered practices and Deaf linguistic identity

Participants described institutional routines in which speech and listening were treated as normal and sign language as an added service. This orientation required Deaf students to lip-read, rely on notes, or wait for interpretation while the class continued.

"Teachers think I should adjust to them, not them to me" (D6).

FSL countered this marginalization by providing an accessible language and a basis for cultural identity. D3 stated, "When I use FSL, I feel I am myself. It is my voice." The accounts therefore framed FSL not as a compensatory aid but as a legitimate language through which students could participate, be recognized, and exercise agency.

Theme 4: Belonging, identity, and emotional well-being

Interactional exclusion carried emotional consequences. Participants described fatigue from monitoring inaccessible communication, frustration when excluded from groups, and loneliness despite being surrounded by classmates.

"I feel tired pretending to understand, but inside I feel alone" (D7).

Belonging was strengthened when participants connected with Deaf peers, joined Deaf cultural activities, or interacted with hearing students who used FSL or visual communication. These experiences affirmed that emotional well-being was shaped not only by individual coping but by recognition within academic and social relationships.

Theme 5: Self-advocacy as agency and institutional burden

Participants actively requested slower pacing, reminded teachers to pause for interpretation, encouraged classmates to use FSL or natural gestures, and sought resources. D8 explained, "I always remind my teachers to slow down and wait for the interpreter. If I don't speak up, I will be left behind." Self-advocacy created practical improvements and reinforced identity, but it also revealed a structural problem: equitable participation often depended on the student's willingness and emotional capacity to repeatedly negotiate basic access.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that inclusion is relational and interactional, not simply administrative. Theme 1 reproduces the distinction between membership and visitorship: students can occupy the same space as hearing peers yet remain peripheral to the knowledge-making and social processes of the class [4]. This interpretation also extends higher-education evidence showing that Deaf students' exclusion frequently occurs beyond formal lectures, especially in rapid interaction and informal communication [5].

The centrality of communication access explains why interpreter provision, although necessary, was insufficient. The participants' experiences suggest that access must be designed across the entire interactional ecology: instructor speech, peer discussion, group tasks, multimedia, announcements, and extracurricular activities. Research on inclusive settings identifies classroom communication participation and extracurricular involvement as important predictors of social outcomes for Deaf and hard-of-hearing learners [12]. Thus, institutions should evaluate not only whether an interpreter is assigned but whether the timing, interaction design, and peer practices allow Deaf students to contribute in real time.

The hearing-centered practices described in Theme 3 reveal a mismatch between formal rights and everyday norms. The CRPD and RA 11106 recognize sign language and Deaf linguistic identity [1], [2], yet participants were still expected to adapt to spoken-language routines. This supports

critiques that inclusion becomes illusory when students are placed in mainstream settings without adequate linguistic resources and institutional transformation [7]. The finding also clarifies why FSL was experienced simultaneously as communication access, identity affirmation, and resistance to marginalization.

Themes 4 and 5 show that barriers affect more than information access. Repeated exclusion can undermine confidence, peer relationships, and emotional well-being, while self-advocacy can become unpaid accessibility work. Participants' resilience should therefore not be used to normalize institutional gaps. The educational goal is not to produce students who can endure inaccessible environments, but to create environments in which advocacy is supported and the responsibility for access is shared by faculty, peers, administrators, and support personnel.

The implications also extend to academic success. Studies of Deaf college students indicate that academic preparation and language flexibility contribute to learning outcomes, while no single audiological or communication variable explains success [13]. Broader research similarly shows that academic achievement among Deaf and hard-of-hearing students reflects interacting individual, household, communication, and educational conditions [14]. In a different Philippine flexible-learning context, Branzuela, San Diego, and Namoco found that learner, teacher, parental, and learning-facility factors jointly shaped the academic performance of computer-aided design students [15]. Although that study involved a different population and design, it reinforces the present interpretation that student outcomes cannot be separated from instructional practices and institutional resources. For Deaf students, communication access is one essential component of this wider educational system.

Implications for higher education practice

Institutions should move from accommodation-by-request to proactive access design. Faculty development should include FSL awareness, visual pacing, turn-taking protocols, accessible multimedia, advance provision of materials, written reinforcement of oral instructions, and assessment options that preserve learning outcomes without privileging hearing. Universal Design for Learning provides a practical framework for multiple means of engagement, representation, and action or expression [16]. Peer FSL orientation, structured group roles, captioning, interpreter coordination, Deaf cultural events, and accessible counseling can strengthen both academic participation and belonging. Deaf students should be included in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of these practices.

Limitations

The study involved 10 students from one state university and does not represent all Deaf students or higher education institutions in the Philippines. The absence of a detailed demographic profile limits assessment of variation by program, year level, language background, or prior educational placement. Data were based on interviews and a group discussion rather than direct observation of classrooms and campus activities. Translation from signed communication to English may have compressed visual, affective, or culturally specific meanings, particularly if independent translation verification was not used. The researcher's dual role as investigator and trained interpreter

offered contextual understanding but also required sustained reflexivity. Future research should include multiple institutions, Deaf-led or co-produced analysis, classroom observation, faculty and peer perspectives, and longitudinal examination of whether institutional reforms change participation and belonging.

CONCLUSION

Deaf students' lived experiences revealed a gap between formal inclusion and interactional membership. Interpreters and accommodations enabled access to portions of university life, but hearing-centered practices continued to restrict spontaneous communication, group participation, social connection, and recognition of Deaf identity. The essence of the phenomenon was conditional belonging: students were included when communication systems and people adapted, and excluded when access depended on their repeated negotiation. Genuine inclusion therefore requires more than services attached to individual students. It requires communication equity, institutional recognition of FSL, inclusive instructional design, emotional and social support, and shared responsibility for participation. Higher education institutions should regard Deaf students not as recipients of accommodation but as partners in creating a culture in which their language, identity, knowledge, and contributions are fully valued.

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