Lived Experiences of Differently Abled Students: A Basis for University-Based Health Programs

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ABSTRACT

Background: In the Philippines, students with disabilities continue to face challenges in higher education, including limited accessibility, lack of initiatives, and insufficient health support. These issues affect not only their academic performance but also their overall well-being. While national laws advocate for disability inclusion, there remains a limited body of localized research exploring the lived experiences of differently-abled students in university settings, particularly regarding their health-related needs and accessibility to student services. This study aimed to examine the lived experiences of differently-abled students at the Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology (NEUST) and use their insights as a basis for developing university-based health programs tailored to their specific needs. Method: The researchers used a qualitative phenomenological approach, involving semi-structured interviews with eleven (11) differently-abled students across two (2) NEUST campuses. Through purposive sampling, participants were selected, and data were analysed using thematic analysis to extract recurring patterns and core experiences. Results: Five major themes emerged, including Health Behind the Hallways, Learning through Limits, Belonging Matters, Voices from the Journey towards Campus Readiness, and Building Better Spaces. Conclusion: The findings highlight opportunities for the Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology (NEUST) to consider enhancing health services, improving campus accessibility, and establishing more inclusive support systems to create a more conducive learning environment for differently abled students. These efforts are crucial for creating equitable educational environments where all students, regardless of their abilities, can thrive.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Access to education is a fundamental right recognized globally, yet students with disabilities face significant barriers that hinder their participation in higher education. According to recent studies, these challenges

encompass physical accessibility issues, social stigma, and inadequate institutional support (Hlengwa & Masuku, 2022). Globally, the landscape of higher education has evolved, but many institutions still struggle to provide inclusive environments that cater to the diverse needs of differently abled students(Chhetri, 2025). This situation is particularly pronounced in Southeast Asia, where cultural perceptions and infrastructural limitations further complicate the educational journey for students with disabilities (Fahruddiana, 2025).

In the Philippines, the situation reflects broader regional trends, where differently abled students face significant barriers to accessing quality education. A study indicated that these students often encounter inadequate facilities, insufficient support from educators, and a lack of awareness among peers about their needs (Santiago, 2020). A need exists in the educational landscape for tailored health programs that address not only academic challenges but also the physical and mental well-being of these students; this calls for a comprehensive approach that includes training for educators and the implementation of supportive policies that promote inclusivity (Darshan et al., 2023).

At the Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology (NEUST), there is a growing recognition of the importance of understanding the lived experiences of differently abled students. The university has made strides in promoting inclusivity and accessibility; however, challenges that impact these students' academic and social experiences persist. Issues such as physical infrastructure, resource availability, and faculty awareness of diverse needs are critical areas that require attention.

By focusing on the unique experiences of differently abled students, NEUST can develop university-based health programs that enhance physical accessibility, provide essential mental health support, and foster social integration. Engaging with these students frankly will allow the university to create a more inclusive educational environment that empowers them to thrive academically and personally. This research aims to explore these experiences in depth, paving the way for effective health initiatives tailored to meet the diverse needs of this underserved population within the NEUST community.

Ultimately, this research aimed to bridge the gap between policy and practice at NEUST by advocating for inclusive health programs that cater to the diverse needs of differently abled students. By amplifying their voices and experiences, we can contribute to a more equitable educational framework that recognizes and values diversity as an asset rather than a barrier (Guterman & Detochenko, 2021). This study served as a vital step towards creating an inclusive academic community that supports all learners in achieving their full potential.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, focusing on understanding the lived experiences of differently abled students in a university setting. According to (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), qualitative research is an approach to exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of differently abled students. Phenomenological research focuses on capturing the essence of participants' experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences within a specific context (Creswell & Poth, 2025).

This study was conducted at the Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology (NEUST), a premier institution in Nueva Ecija, Philippines, specifically at the Main Campus (Gen. Tinio Street) and Sumacab Campus in Cabanatuan City. The researchers utilized a non-probability sampling method, specifically purposive sampling, when selecting the primary respondents for this study; (Sam, 2024) emphasizes that purposive sampling design, commonly called deliberate sampling or judgmental sampling, is a method where the researchers use discretion in choosing the participants who most closely match the study's objectives. Purposive sampling is used to select respondents who are most likely to yield appropriate and valuable information (Hackett et al., 2024) and is a method of identifying and selecting cases that utilize limited research resources effectively (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The study included eleven (11) participants who met the inclusion criteria as differently-abled persons who study at Gen. Tinio Street and Sumacab campuses of Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology. The participants must be college students with a PWD identification card. Participants who met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate in the interview. The researchers obtained informed consent, which was signed before the interview.

The method for collecting data for this study is a self-developed set of semi-structured interview questions based on the approach used in the study by (Babb, 2022), titled "A Phenomenological Study on the Experiences and Needs of Disabled Students in Higher Education." This tool ensures alignment with the study's research questions by focusing on specific yet flexible themes that allow participants to share their lived experiences thoroughly. The interview guide includes open-ended questions that address the challenges faced by differently-abled students and solicit their suggestions for improving their university experiences. Researchers employed a hybrid setting (online or face-to-face), offering participants a supportive, interactive, and secure environment in which to share their personal experiences. This approach enables participants to narrate their stories freely, offering rich and detailed insights into their experiences, especially concerning their health and

well-being in the academic environment. Consent was obtained from participants, and their responses were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach.

The set consists of three parts. The first addresses the experiences faced by differently abled students within the university's inclusivity. The second tackles the barriers that hinder differently abled students from utilizing university resources. In the third and last part, the participants' recommendations or additional services regarding their health needs are provided.

This study employed thematic analysis, a method well-suited for interpreting data based on its context and themes. It was developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke in 2006. Moreover, in 2022, they explained that thematic analysis is a technique for identifying and analyzing qualitative data. They added that it applies to research related to their experience and understanding of a phenomenon, for example, the specific experiences of differently-abled students in terms of health needs, academic hurdles, and social problems.
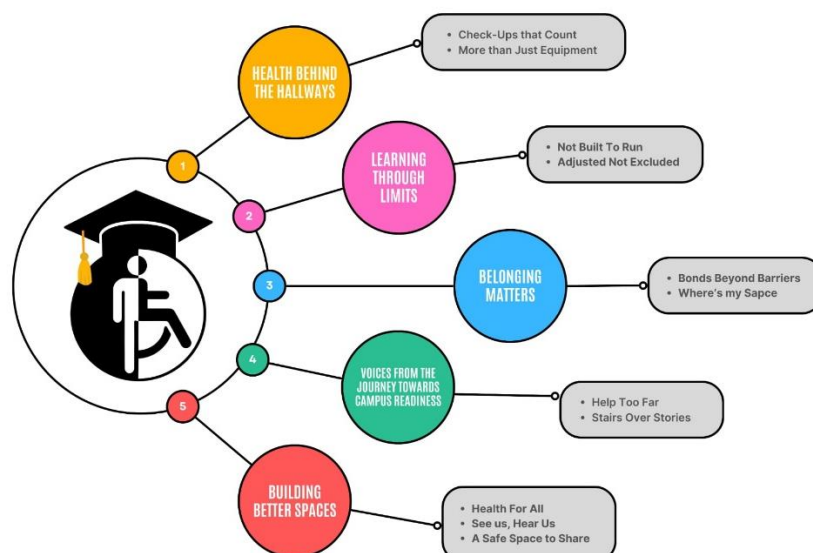
Ethical considerations are strictly followed; participants provided informed consent, ensuring they understood the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. The collected data were solely used for research purposes.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Facts and experiences shared by the student participants were refined and classified to create notable themes and subthemes. Five main themes arose: Health behind the Hallways, Learning through Limits, Belonging Matters, Voices from the Journey towards Campus Readiness, and Building Better Spaces. These were meticulously analyzed and interpreted to serve as a basis for developing university-based health programs for them. Likewise, citations are provided to prove and explain the honesty of the student participants' responses.
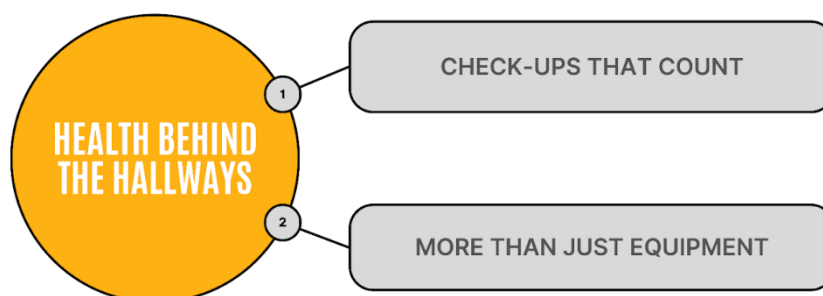
Figure 1
The Emerged Themes

3.1. *Health Behind the Hallways*
Figure 2
Health Behind the Hallways

The central theme, *Health Behind the Hallways*, revolves around the healthcare needs and experiences of differently-abled students within the university. It examines the importance of accessible medical check-ups and the vital role of assistive devices in enabling students to manage their health conditions and achieve academic success.

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As stated by Mahawariya and Yadav (2020), students with disabilities require individualized attention due to their distinct learning needs, medical conditions, or physical impairments. Institutions must make concerted efforts to provide appropriate facilities and healthcare services tailored to these students, ensuring their intellectual, academic, and cultural growth alongside all other students.

3.1.1. *"Check-ups that count"*

This sub-theme emphasizes the importance of regular and accessible medical check-ups tailored to the unique needs of differently abled students. It highlights how these essential health services significantly contribute to their ability to manage their conditions effectively and maintain a healthier, more fulfilling campus life.

The personal stories shared by the participants align with the assertion by Abodey et al. (2020), which underscores the importance of understanding students' experiences, challenges, and needs when accessing healthcare. By offering valuable guidance for health service planning and prioritization, such insights highlight the necessity of creating a healthier, more inclusive campus environment where students' needs are acknowledged and addressed.

3.1.2. *"More than just Equipment"*

This sub-theme highlights how assistive devices extend beyond their practical purpose. They serve as vital resources that empower differently abled students to meet the demands of academic life. These tools are not just functional items, but are integral to their ability to engage, participate, and succeed in their education.
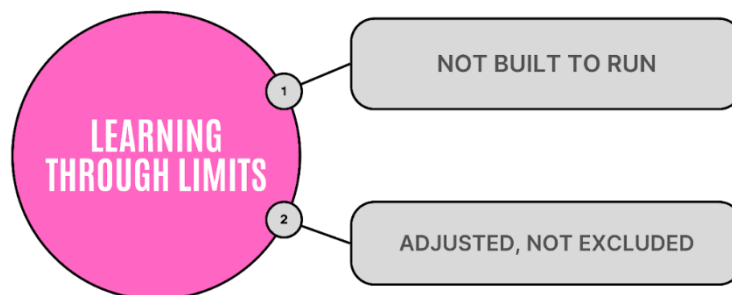
Imagine being a college student, trying to navigate the demands of academic life—getting to class on time, keeping up with lectures, and participating in group activities. Now imagine doing all that with a disability, and relying on assistive devices that are old, worn out, or no longer working correctly. It is not just a matter of convenience; it is about dignity, independence, and equal opportunity.

The participant's experience highlights the need for personalized assistive devices, a crucial aspect for many differently-abled students. Similar to Howorth and her colleagues' study in 2024 on assistive technology, students with disabilities rely on tailored tools to maintain independence and succeed in their education. Additionally, the participants' stories illustrate how these tools go beyond mere functionality, serving as essential supports for their academic participation and personal growth. Similarly, Dhamdhere and Andres (2022) assert that providing assistive devices is essential for making information accessible to all differently-abled learners in classrooms. These devices are instrumental in helping students overcome barriers, achieve their activity goals, and access educational opportunities effectively.

3.2. *Learning Through Limits*

Figure 3
Learning Through Limits

The central theme, *"Learning Through Limits," explores the challenges and adaptations faced by differently-abled students within the academic environment. It highlights how physical and mental limitations can affect their ability to participate fully in academic activities* and how these challenges can be mitigated through understanding and adjustments.

As stated in the study by Allam & Martin (2021), one of the main barriers preventing people with disabilities from obtaining a university degree is a deficiency of accessible structures. Teachers may not receive sufficient training on inclusive teaching methods and strategies to accommodate diverse learning needs, making it challenging to cater to the requirements of differently abled students (Shaukat, 2022).

3.2.1. *"Not Built to Run"*

This sub-theme focuses on how differently-abled students face physical activities that are not suited to their abilities. It highlights the importance of creating inclusive alternatives that allow students to participate in their way, ensuring they are not left behind due to their physical limitations.

Many participants shared that they found certain activities to be more demanding. Nevertheless, their stories also reflect resilience, adaptation, and a desire to remain involved in their ways. Their voices remind the researchers that inclusion is not just about participation—it is about being seen, understood, and supported in every learning environment.

One participant specifically mentioned that adjustments like paperwork served as alternative ways to stay engaged in class, but these tasks sometimes felt less engaging and disconnected from the group. Her experience highlights how the lack of inclusive physical activity can make differently abled students feel left out, even when accommodations are provided. Even though these small yet meaningful accommodations help build a more inclusive environment where every student can continue to grow, learn, and be acknowledged for their efforts, they may unintentionally reinforce a sense of separation from the rest of the group. This aligns with Harpur's (2025) statement that their limitations, which prohibit them from integrating into society, pose significant challenges to their learning and development.

The stories shared by the participants highlight the need for developing equitable solutions that are tailored to their capabilities and limitations. Supporting this idea, (Blavt, 2023) emphasizes that customized physical education approaches play a vital role in enhancing the health and activity levels of students with disabilities. These adaptive programs not only help them participate in exercises such as rhythmic movements but also foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that nurtures their overall physical development.

3.2.2. *"Adjusted, Not Excluded"*

This sub-theme emphasizes how minor adjustments in schedules and workloads can help differently-abled students manage their academic responsibilities. It highlights the need for flexibility that allows students to stay included without being overwhelmed by their physical or mental limitations.
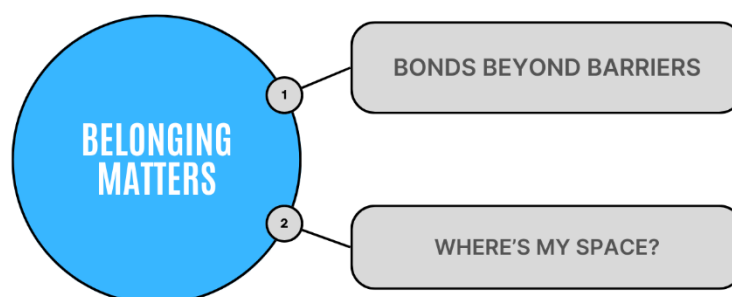
Many students shared with the researchers how challenging it can be to cope with the demands of school, especially when classes are packed with long hours, back-to-back schedules, or overwhelming workloads. While these might seem typical in a university setting, they pose extra challenges for students whose bodies and minds require more care and pacing.

The narratives shared by differently abled students reveal the importance of inclusive educational strategies and a supportive academic environment where some challenges are acknowledged and addressed. As highlighted in the study by Li and her colleagues in 2024, students with disabilities in higher education continue to struggle with a lack of disability-specific support services and the absence of inclusive academic practices, which significantly affect their academic performance and emotional well-being. These findings underscore the pressing need for higher education institutions to implement comprehensive accommodations and programs tailored to the diverse needs of differently abled learners.

3.3. *Belonging Matters*

Figure 3
Belonging Matters

The central theme, *"Belonging Matters," underscores the importance of fostering an inclusive environment where differently-abled students feel seen, valued, and connected within their campus community, ensuring that their unique contributions are acknowledged and celebrated. It emphasizes that true inclusion is not just about physical presence,* but about creating meaningful participation and mutual respect.

According to the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration in 2025, social inclusion means that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are integrated into community life— participating in schools, neighborhoods, jobs, recreation, and other areas—where they can contribute their unique talents and feel a sense of belonging. In the educational context, inclusion involves designing systems that provide all students with equal access, opportunities, and a sense of belonging, regardless of their abilities. This approach ensures that students with disabilities learn alongside their non-disabled peers, fostering mutual respect and understanding.

3.3.1. *"Bonds Beyond Barriers"*

This sub-theme explores how differently-abled students experience inclusion and acceptance within their campus community. It highlights the relationships they build, the support they receive, and how meaningful connections help them feel seen and valued—proving that genuine bonds can thrive beyond physical or social barriers**.**

The majority of participants interviewed by the researchers conveyed a genuine sense of inclusion within the university, primarily through their interactions with peers. As they shared their experiences, their happiness

and excitement were evident, highlighting how much they valued being part of the university community. This sense of belonging not only made their university life more enjoyable but also encouraged them to engage more confidently with their peers and the institution as a whole. It reinforces the need for universities to actively cultivate environments where every student feels recognized, supported, and empowered to achieve their full potential. Similarly, Ziegler et al. (2020) discussed the Peer-to-Peer program, which supports inclusion across school activities and fosters relationships among students with and without disabilities.

These participants felt welcomed and supported by their peers, which helped them adjust and thrive in the academic environment. This aligns with findings from Biggs & Robison (2022), who emphasized that peer interactions are crucial for the academic engagement of students with developmental disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Their study found that such interactions were more frequent in small group settings and elective courses, highlighting the importance of instructional formats that promote collaboration.

3.3.2.   *"Where's My Space?"*

This sub-theme focuses on the experiences of differently-abled students as they navigate campus life and seek opportunities that align with their needs. It underscores the importance of fostering a more inclusive environment where all students can actively participate, ensuring that every individual has the space to feel involved and valued in the broader campus community.
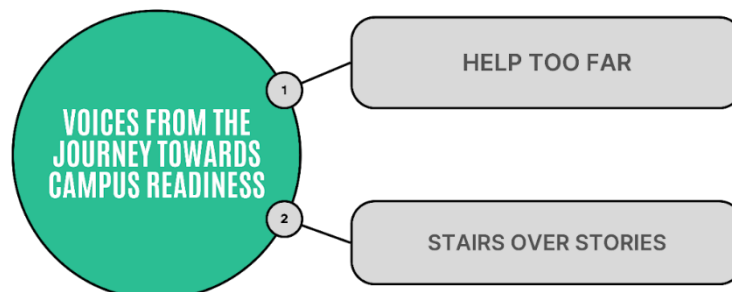
Inclusion means ensuring that every student, regardless of their abilities, feels valued and included in their school community. Sadly, as the researchers continued the interview, some differently-abled students shared challenges, such as not finding enough opportunities or activities suited to their needs, which made them feel disconnected from campus life. Their stories remind the researchers that inclusivity is not just about creating separate spaces, but about making everyone feel welcome and able to participate.

These align with findings by Murphy et al. (2025), which revealed that parents of students with disabilities were significantly more likely to report that environmental features hindered school participation and that resources needed to facilitate their child's inclusion were inadequate. They further noted that children with disabilities often participate less in important school-related activities due to barriers in the physical and social environment and limited resources, underscoring the critical need for more effective and accessible initiatives.

3.4. *Voices from the Journey towards Campus Readiness*
Figure 4
Voices from the Journey towards Campus Readiness

The central theme, *Voices from the Journey towards Campus Readiness*, captures the collective experiences of differently-abled students as they navigate physical and emotional barriers within the campus environment. The theme highlights how challenges such as distant facilities and the lack of accessible infrastructure not only hinder mobility but also impact students' overall sense of belonging and engagement.

These barriers align with findings from Hemmingsson and Borell in 2000, who identified common physical obstacles such as heavy doors, steep ramps, staircases, and uneven surfaces, including uncut curbs and thresholds. Similarly, Chataika (2007) emphasized additional challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, inappropriate seating arrangements, limited standing space, and poor acoustics, which further impede the learning experiences of physically disabled students.

3.4.1.   *"Help Too Far"*

This sub-theme examines how the distance to campus facilities poses a significant barrier for differently abled students. It highlights that access is not just about proximity, but also about ensuring that every student can reach essential spaces without facing undue physical strain or emotional stress.

Most of the participants the researchers interviewed mentioned a common challenge: the struggle of getting from one campus facility to another. As the researchers listened to their stories, it became clear that for differently-abled students, distance is not just measured in meters or minutes. It is about dealing with discomfort, uncertainty, and fatigue. It is about pushing through each step when their bodies are already telling them to stop.

A participant's statement aligns with the study by Layton and Lock (2003), which highlights that physical access to campus buildings, as well as the spatial layout of services and facilities, significantly impacts students

with mobility impairments. Poor planning of building locations or long travel distances between essential services can lead to daily fatigue, exclusion from campus events, and increased health risks for these students.

The researchers observed the challenges that some students face in navigating university spaces, where even simple activities, such as walking, can be strenuous. These experiences highlighted not just physical barriers but emotional ones, as students strive to keep up in environments that may not fully accommodate their needs. While spaces like the library are valuable for learning, accessing them can sometimes be a challenge. The university's resources are helpful, but these insights remind the researchers that there is always room for improvement to ensure every student feels acknowledged, included, and valued.

According to Gohain, Das, and Kalita (2020), students attending different colleges have faced difficulties related to infrastructural facilities. Steps must be taken to provide equal access to every category of persons with disabilities as an integral part of the education system. The lack of proper infrastructural facilities for differently abled students in institutions makes it inconvenient for them to access the available facilities. Many students discontinue their studies due to problems they face with the infrastructure.

3.4.2.   *"Stairs over Stories"*

This sub-theme examines the experiences of differently-abled students as they navigate upper-level facilities. It highlights the importance of creating an environment with improved accessibility, ensuring that all students can participate in campus life with greater ease and inclusion.
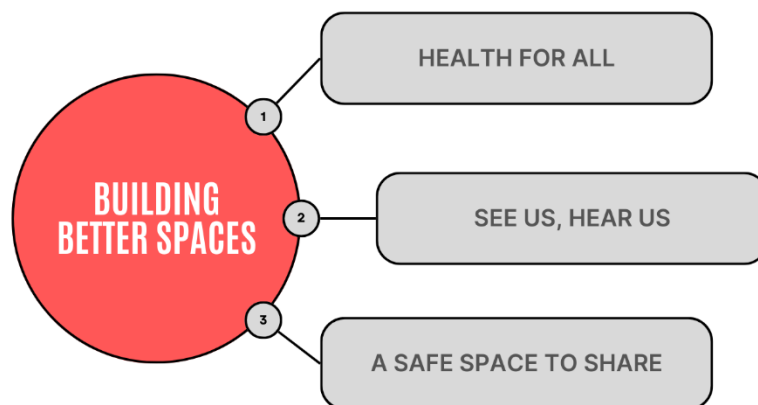
Accessibility is not a privilege; it is a fundamental right, a cornerstone of equity in any learning environment. The voices of differently-abled students echo this truth, emphasizing how thoughtful infrastructure, such as elevators and accessible restrooms, can make a significant difference in their university lives. These insights offer an opportunity to enhance the campus environment, creating a space where mobility challenges are met with understanding and support, thereby enabling all students to thrive.

The stories shared by the participants highlight that, while efforts are made to provide essential infrastructure, such as stairs and restrooms, the lack of elevators and occasional inaccessibility of certain facilities can still present challenges for students with mobility issues. These physical barriers not only affect comfort but also limit their ability to engage and participate in campus life fully. According to Amin et al. (2019), although some institutions have essential facilities such as parking, ramps, and toilets, the distance between them and the absence of lifts significantly hinder access for students with disabilities.

3.5. *Building Better Spaces*
Figure 5
Building Better Spaces

The central theme, *Building Better Spaces,* encapsulates the shared experiences of differently-abled students for a more inclusive and supportive campus environment. It emphasizes the significance of fostering accessibility, awareness, and support systems to ensure that every student feels valued and empowered. By focusing on health and wellness initiatives, educational programs, and safe spaces, this theme highlights opportunities to enhance inclusivity and create an environment where all students can thrive together.

According to fundsforNGOs (2024), inclusive education programs involve needs assessment, professional development workshops for educators, curriculum modification, resource allocation for assistive technologies, physical accessibility upgrades, and peer support programs to foster social interactions and academic support. These initiatives are essential in breaking down barriers that hinder the full participation of differently abled students, ensuring that inclusivity is a principle and a practiced reality. By addressing diverse needs holistically, such programs build a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all students.

3.5.1. *"Health for All"*

This sub-theme emphasizes the importance of inclusive and accessible health and wellness initiatives for differently abled students. It addresses both physical and mental health needs through comprehensive support systems, highlighting the role of proper medical services and equipment in empowering students.

Many participants shared their experiences with the challenges of accessing personalized health services and how these impact their academic and social lives. The researchers recognize the importance of having well-planned health and wellness programs that support both the body and mind. According to Tucker et al. (2022), universities have a unique potential to address the health-related needs of individuals with disabilities. Their case series emphasizes the development of a formal, student-assisted exercise program, which has positively impacted the perceived quality of life, exercise confidence, and functional mobility of college-aged individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities, underscoring the importance of inclusive health initiatives in educational institutions. In addition, Querstret (2019) emphasizes the need for universities to address the reduction of mental health stigma, which remains a significant barrier to students seeking help. The existing research suggests that while mental health interventions for students show promise, a recurring issue is the exclusion of student voices in the development of strategies to manage student mental health effectively.

3.5.2. *"See Us, Hear Us"*

This sub-theme highlights the importance of proactive awareness initiatives that educate students, faculty, and staff about the multifaceted realities of living with disabilities. These efforts aim to foster empathy and inclusivity across the campus, encouraging the community to view individuals with disabilities as they are and to listen to their unique experiences and perspectives.

The participants' qualitative insights align with existing scholarly literature on societal perceptions of individuals with disabilities. Park and Kim (2018) note that negative judgment towards differently abled persons is prevalent in professional settings, often stemming from unreasonable perceptions and misunderstandings that can lead to biased emotional responses and an underestimation of their capabilities. The narratives from the participants suggest that similar misconceptions may exist within the academic environment, underscoring the urgency of targeted educational interventions. Therefore, the collective voice of the participants strongly advocates for the implementation of seminars as a foundational step towards enhancing disability literacy and fostering a more inclusive and respectful campus culture at the university.

3.5.3. *"A Safe Space to Share"*

This sub-theme emphasizes the importance of establishing robust peer networks and community spaces for students with disabilities within the university. These networks aim to provide a platform where students can openly share their experiences, build meaningful connections, and create bonds despite the challenges they have encountered. Such spaces are envisioned as inclusive environments where individuals can be their authentic selves and share the adversities life has brought them without fear or hesitation.

The participants' qualitative accounts resonate with broader research highlighting the challenges faced by differently abled students. A report by the Canadian Human Rights Commission in 2017 indicates that a significant proportion of individuals with disabilities experience bullying, encounter systemic barriers, and face exclusion within educational settings. This lack of equitable access and support highlights the crucial role that dedicated support groups can play in addressing these challenges within the university context.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the thematic analysis and discussion, the following conclusions are as follows:

1. The participants reported significant, often unmet, health challenges, stressing the need for regular check-ups, personalized services, and assistive devices. Lack of availability and insufficient institutional support negatively impacted their physical well-being and academic/social engagement.
2. Student participants faced persistent difficulties in academic pursuits, classroom engagement, and social inclusion due to inadequate support and limited inclusive frameworks. While peer acceptance was present, a lack of dedicated, tailored programs hindered their full participation in university life.
3. The university environment presented significant physical barriers, including long distances between facilities and a lack of vertical transportation, leading to exhaustion, missed opportunities, and a sense of exclusion.
4. Participants articulated a strong need for more inclusive health and wellness initiatives, specifically recommending dedicated disability support groups and university-wide awareness seminars to foster a more equitable and supportive environment.

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