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Lived Experiences, Employment Challenges, And Opportunities of Persons with Disabilities in Iloilo City

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ABSTRACT: This study explored the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Iloilo City, focusing on the challenges, support systems, and systemic conditions that shaped their journey toward equitable and sustainable employment. Guided by the Social Theory of Disability and Ecological Systems Theory, the study sought to understand how PWDs navigated barriers, accessed support, and achieved meaningful participation in the workforce. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with seven purposively selected PWDs employed in various occupations within Iloilo City. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and shared experiences. The findings revealed three major themes: Confronting and Overcoming Employment Barriers, Experiencing Support and Inclusion in the Workplace, and Finding Empowerment, Independence, and Dignity Through Employment. Participants encountered challenges such as discrimination, negative societal perceptions, workplace bullying, health-related constraints, and limited employment opportunities. However, support from family members, employers, coworkers, and workplace accommodations enabled them to overcome these barriers. Employment emerged as a transformative experience that enhanced self-confidence, independence, self-worth, and social participation. The findings further demonstrated that positive employment outcomes were influenced by the interaction of individual resilience, supportive workplace practices, and inclusive organizational environments. Based on the findings, the study developed the Framework for Inclusive Employment Practices for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). The framework was intended to guide employers, policymakers, and disability advocacy organizations in promoting equitable and sustainable employment opportunities for PWDs.

KEYWORDS: inclusive employment, Iloilo city, persons with disabilities, thematic analysis, workplace inclusion

I. INTRODUCTION

In Persons with disabilities were one of the groups that experienced vulnerability in the community due to their dependence, alienation, and even bullying in their families. This caused physical, psychological, and emotional damage. To compensate for such inequity, there was passed a law known as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (Republic Act No. 7277) with the purpose to guarantee their rights and to provide equal employment opportunities. Under the law, PWDs must enjoy the same privileges and assistance provided to other employees, while government agencies were obliged to allocate 5% of all job openings to the PWDs. However, many persons with disabilities still could not find decent jobs (Mirasol, 2024).

According to the Philippine constitution, PWDs should be enabled through this Republic Act. In Section 32 of this act, it was prohibited for any public or private entity to discriminate against a qualified disabled person on the account of his/her disability concerning employment-related matters including but not limited to employment application, hiring, promotion, discharge of employees, compensation, training, among others (Absolor, 2023).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) stated that the disabled had the right to engage in work on an equal footing with others. This encompassed the right to be afforded the opportunity of earning their livelihood through work freely chosen or accepted in a labor market and work environment which was open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities (McCusker et al., 2023)

Inclusion and employment among the disabled persons had occupied an important place in international conversations, as there were many problems involved in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016, as cited in Retuerne et al., 2021). Inclusion of persons with disabilities had been an essential part of many goals of the SDGs, which were designed in 2015, such as ensuring equality in education and professional training (Goal 4),

ensuring decent work and full productivity employment for everyone (Goal 8), and reducing inequalities through socioeconomic and political inclusiveness (Goal 10) (United Nations, 2015, as cited in Martin, 2026).

These included, SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), which was a very important global policy because it aimed at empowering and fully including PWDs through the abolition of discriminatory policies and the equal participation in economic and social activities. Goal 10.2 specifically highlighted the need to ensure the promotion of social, economic, and political inclusion of all persons irrespective of their disability status, and 10.3 targeted the elimination of structural obstacles that denied equal access to opportunities. Employment played a pivotal role in this SDG since it was only through decent and stable jobs that inequalities were eliminated or maintained. For instance, if PWDs were denied access to the job market, then they were subjected to multiple hardships such as poverty, social exclusion, and lack of access to key facilities. Therefore, SDG 10 ensured that disability-inclusive employment was not just an economic but a matter of human rights and equity. It was against this backdrop that the current research addressed the issue of inequality in this respect.

In terms of the country's vision for the future, the Philippines' Ambisyon Natin 2040 called for a "matatag, maginhawa, at panatag na buhay" for all Filipinos, wherein security in terms of employment and social integration would pave the way for a middle-class life (National Economic and Development Authority, 2016, as cited in Desiderio, 2024). It was unfortunate that the real-life experience of the PWDs in Iloilo City showed that their dream of having a matatag, maginhawa, and panatag na buhay had been out of reach because many had yet to attain secure and decent employment.

In fact, persons with disabilities in the country had increased by 35 percent from above 1.8 million to above 2.5 million as of June 2024 based on the most recent figures published by the National Council for Disability Affairs (NCDA). Of this figure, 827,189 or one-third of all PWDs had been physically disabled. The estimate was that about 70 to 80 percent of disabilities were hidden and, thus, could not be detected easily. Sadly, this hidden nature of disabilities had caused many misunderstandings, prejudices, biases, stereotypes, and perceptions. These were all indications that people did not yet know much about PWDs in terms of how they were dealt with not only by society in general but even by institutions and establishments (Inquirer, 2025).

Additionally, there was extensive literature on employment among persons with disabilities, which showed that there were substantial variations in their employment experiences compared to those of persons without disabilities.

According to the statistics about employment, in the US, only one out of three (34.9%) persons with disabilities were employed compared to 76% who were not, and this trend seemed to be widening over time. In the EU, the employment rate among persons with disabilities was 50.6% compared to 74.8% of those without disabilities. Furthermore, the Academic Network of European Disability experts reported that women with disabilities, disabled young persons, and disabled persons with high support needs tended to be discriminated against and excluded from employment. An employment gap could also be observed in Canada where persons with disabilities aged between 25 and 64 years old had an employment rate of 49% while those without disability had 79%. From these statistics, it could be concluded that the employment rate of persons of disabilities across the world was lower than the employment rate of those without disabilities (Absolor, 2023).

In the Asia-Pacific region, unemployment among PWDs was estimated at 80 percent or more. In the Philippines, the proportion of working-age PWDs who participated in the country's labor force was less than 20 percent as of January 2022, indicating poor implementation of the present laws. In addition, on the local level, only 32 percent of Albay organizations reported the hiring of PWDs, whereas the majority of the around 1.44 million Filipinos with disabilities still experienced poverty. Therefore, there was a gap between the policies and the reality, as there was no improvement in employment opportunities for persons with disabilities due to the legal protection (Siapno, 2026).

Not only was employment impeded by lack of infrastructure; according to Gamboa et al. (2024), but there were also psychological and attitudinal barriers, including personal prejudices and fears, that could prevent successful collaboration within a government workplace. Such barriers reflected the situation with PWDs, where negative attitudes from fellow employees and social segregation could become a major barrier to career progression.

Moreover, right to employability of persons with disabilities, as well as article 27 of ONU convention on the rights of persons with disabilities of 2006, had encountered several problems and challenges that were more cultural than physical. For instance, in Italy, despite the many benefits that came from employing persons with disabilities in Law 68/99, it was still viewed as an issue that affected productivity (ISTAT, 2019, as cited in Fantinelli et al, 2022).

Despite the challenges that hindered persons with disabilities from succeeding, there had been many success stories that attested to their ability to succeed when provided equal opportunities. According to the International Labour Organization (2020, as cited in Ananian & Dellaferrera, 2024), persons with disabilities had succeeded in employment in other industries like education, tourism, and IT in international studies. Persons with disabilities had also benefitted from inclusive education by completing their tertiary education and acquiring professional positions (UNESCO, 2019, as cited in UNESCO, 2026). In the case of the Philippines, many PWDs had established profitable micro and small businesses, from sewing tailoring shops to freelance jobs in IT (Jaramilla, 2026). Furthermore, Filipino para-athletes had succeeded in the Olympics and won medals in other international sporting competitions (Navarro, 2024). Internationally, there was the use of assistive technologies that had helped PWDs to be employed in digital jobs like transcription and coding (Kruse et al., 2024). In Iloilo City, PWDs had taken leadership

roles in livelihood projects and became successful advocates of their rights (LMP) – Province of Iloilo, 2025). All these successes indicated that having a disability did not mean that one lacked capacity to succeed but an enabling environment was what was needed.

Locally, although there had been laws and programs to aid and provide protection for persons with disabilities (PWDs), including the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (RA 7277) and efforts of the Persons with Disability Affairs Office (PDAO), there were still various obstacles in providing decent and sustainable employment for PWDs in Iloilo City. Even with livelihood programs and skill trainings provided, there were still many persons with disabilities who could not gain access to employability because of accessibility issues in the workplace, lack of accommodation facilities, ignorance of employers, and the stigma of society. Laws and government programs granted rights and privileges regarding health, education, and employment; however, PWDs still experienced joblessness through discrimination and inadequate access to jobs. It was quite unfortunate that most employers did not see the immense capacity of PWDs to be effective workers based on actual records.

This disparity between policy and implementation highlighted the necessity of strict law enforcement, enhanced campaigns to diminish stigma, and rigorous monitoring of compliance with employment quota regulations. At the local government level, there was a need for increased inclusion in vocational training and livelihood projects, which should be tied to employment opportunities instead of temporary support measures. On the national scale, the alignment of these activities with Ambisyon Natin 2040 assured that persons with disabilities would be a part of the vision of a secure future for every Filipino person. At the global level, the requirements of UNCRPD and SDGs provided a framework for inclusive labor markets and decreased inequalities.

It was therefore important to conduct research regarding the experience of persons with disabilities in Iloilo City because aside from identifying the difficulties that they faced, it also allowed them to have an equal opportunity in terms of acquiring a job that ensured their sustainability and equity in society. It not only highlighted the difficulties they had been experiencing, but it also gave way towards the implementation of reforms using global policies, national vision, and educational reforms.

Being a PhD Scholar in Education who had had direct interaction with PWDs whether in a class or community setting, the researcher had personally seen how many PWDs continued to be marginalized, dependent, and stigmatized regardless of the presence of policies protecting them like RA 7277 and RA 10524; from students having difficulty accessing learning accommodations to adults sharing how difficult their work environment was and how the employers treated them. Personal experiences of the researcher coincided with the available national and global statistics on low employment among PWDs, high cases of hidden disabilities, and misconceptions. The case of Iloilo City, which had also had similar trends among the schools, training centers, and institutions, was an area where PWDs encountered problems in moving from education to decent work. This personal insight made a case for studying how the PWDs live in Iloilo City because of not only understanding the problems encountered by the PWDs but also coming up with evidence for creating practices and interventions that were aligned with policies to enhance dignity and sustainability of the PWDs in society.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do persons with disabilities in Iloilo City experience the challenges, supports, and systemic conditions that shape their journey from education toward equitable and sustainable employment?
2. What themes emerge from PWDs' collective experiences of navigating barriers, accessing support systems, and seeking equitable employment opportunities in Iloilo City?
3. What insights may be drawn from the narratives of persons with disabilities regarding the influence of policies, workplace practices, and educational preparation on their employment experiences and outcomes?
4. Based on the results of the study, what framework may be developed based on the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in Iloilo City to strengthen inclusive employment pathways toward equitable and sustainable employment?

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived employment experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Iloilo City. Guided by the Social Theory of Disability and Ecological Systems Theory, the study sought to understand how PWDs interpreted and navigated employment within their social, organizational, and policy contexts. The research was conducted in the town proper of Iloilo City, a highly urbanized center of government, commerce, education, and community services, making it an appropriate setting for examining disability-inclusive employment. Using purposive, criterion-based sampling, seven (7) PWDs with at least three years of employment experience were selected as participants. Data were generated through expert-validated semi-structured interviews conducted in accessible locations, with interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes and documented through audio recordings and field notes. Ethical standards were strictly observed through informed consent, confidentiality protocols, anonymization through pseudonyms, accessibility accommodations, and compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. As the primary research instrument, the researcher practiced reflexivity through journaling, analytic memos, and peer debriefing to minimize bias and ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, verified for accuracy, securely stored, and organized for

analysis. Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework of familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and report writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited in Roseveare, 2023). The trustworthiness of the study was established through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, employing strategies such as prolonged engagement, member checking, audit trails, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and rich description. Collectively, these procedures ensured a rigorous and systematic examination of the employment experiences of PWDs while remaining faithful to the phenomenological orientation of the study.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the research findings, the employment experiences of PWDs could only be understood through the interaction of barriers, facilitators, and change. The three main emerging themes included Confronting and Overcoming Employment Barriers, Experiencing Support and Inclusion in the Workplace, and Finding Empowerment, Independence, and Dignity Through Employment. The said themes did not act separately, but rather as interrelated phenomena that helped the participants make sense of their employment experiences.

The analysis of the participants' stories indicated that employment barriers were the primary condition that defined participants' ways to empowerment and inclusion. While support and inclusion could be regarded as mediating factors, helping participants overcome the barriers and integrate into the working environment, empowerment, independence, and dignity became the result of successful participation in work. Consequently, one might say that employment experiences of the participants were the experience of going through the stages from barriers to support and finally to empowerment. However, these stages were not linear, and there was an interactive relationship between them, with empowerment being the factor that helped participants to overcome the barriers better.

Confronting and Overcoming Employment Barriers as a Foundational Condition

This theme was the fundamental context that formed the basis of the employment experiences of the participants. In the process of telling their stories, different barriers were noted to be experienced, such as self-doubt of capability, workplace bullying, discrimination, lack of opportunities, difficult environment, and health barriers. The barriers mentioned above were major barriers that the participants had to go through before they were meaningfully included in employment.

Another trend observed among the participants was the presence of social barriers more than physical barriers. While all the participants had disabilities, majority of the challenges they faced did not result from their disabilities but from how others perceived them. It was common to hear from the participants how employers, workmates, and the public doubted their capability and productivity.

One of the critical patterns seen from the analysis of the findings was that barriers often served as catalysts for resilience. Rather than completely discouraging participants, situations where people had to face exclusion and doubting made them prove their capabilities and determination. Participants who faced doubt from employers and coworkers were working extra hard to show how capable they were. Likewise, those who had to face bullying and discrimination were able to develop some kind of coping strategies which helped them to endure these negative situations. Hence, resilience became a response to multiple hardships experienced.

Nevertheless, the findings of the study showed that resilience on its own was not enough. Personal determination helped participants to continue their actions, but sometimes additional help and resources were required to deal with the barriers. This finding allowed drawing a direct analytical link between the two major themes of the study.

Cross case comparisons further highlighted this connection. Those who faced a supportive environment generally suffered less adverse consequences due to barriers to employment. Those who were bullied or marginalized generally suffered more emotional and social problems despite being employed. These differences implied that the effect of barriers was greatly influenced by the social environment around them.

This finding was substantiated by Arce's (2014, as cited in Jimenez & Cabaluna, 2021) study, where it was revealed that while there were several employers willing to employ PWDs, the immediate supervisors still doubted their capability to perform the tasks independently. The experiences of the participants mirrored those described since the participants faced disbelief, discrimination, bullying, and doubts regarding their competence even though they were able and qualified workers. As seen from the findings, the negative perceptions and misconceptions regarding disability persisted in affecting the employment possibilities and the experiences of the participants. Nevertheless, these factors were unable to prevent the participants from seeking meaningful employment. Instead, the participants proved to be resilient, adaptable and persistent in demonstrating their abilities and skills and overcoming different barriers in their way to employment. Therefore, the findings confirmed the claim that the challenges experienced by PWDs on the way to employment were related to the societal perception rather than any incapabilities on the side of the latter.

Experiencing Support and Inclusion in the Workplace as a Mediating Mechanism

Theme two became the core way through which participants overcame the employment barriers that they faced. The results revealed that inclusion and support acted as protective mechanisms that minimized the impact of discrimination, physical disabilities, and work-related difficulties.

One of the major commonalities among the stories of the participants was the availability of varied sources of support for them. These included support from employers, supervisors, co-workers, family members, friends, and the community. Despite the difference between these sources, their role remained basically the same; that was, performing one's job well.

From the results obtained, one saw that inclusion at work was about more than just accommodation. Even though access to facilities, flexibility in working and adaptation of tasks were considered vital, it seemed like people found interpersonal relations equally or even more valuable. Being respected, accepted as part of the team, and valued for one's skills proved to be vital elements of inclusion. People mentioned how they were made to feel "like family" in their work environments, indicating that being emotionally accepted was sometimes even more important than having physical access.

One could also see an interesting correlation between support and self-efficacy. Participants who were encouraged and accommodated by employers and coworkers seemed to be more certain about their competence. The positive feedback and understanding helped them believe in themselves. Therefore, support was not only eliminating barriers but creating something valuable as well.

However, the research results proved that inclusion was not consistent in its nature in different settings. Although majority of participants indicated positive relationships at work, there were some participants who faced bullying and exclusion. Thus, such inconsistency proved that inclusion depended on many factors such as organizational culture, social attitudes, and individual interactions. The same disability could bring very different work environment for people due to the acceptance level of the specific setting.

The other key finding was related to the connection between family support and workplace inclusion. The support of family members made it possible for participants to find jobs. Support was provided in terms of financial assistance, motivation, transport assistance, and support while caring about children. Therefore, inclusion at workplace could not be considered only organizational issue but also the issue which was related to social system that made it possible for people to work.

The presence of support and inclusion ultimately facilitated the movement toward empowerment, indicating a direct relationship between the second and third themes. Supportive environments not only helped participants remained employed but also enabled them to experience personal growth, independence, and dignity.

The existence of support and inclusiveness ensured that there was the movement towards empowerment, thus suggesting that there was a connection between the two themes. Supportive environments not only ensured that participants were able to retain employment but were also able to achieve growth and empowerment.

This assertion was corroborated by the findings reported by Ambiong (2021), which showed that persons with disabilities (PWDs) had traditionally been faced with exclusion from the wider society and work environment, leading to lack of access to education, unequal job opportunities and discrimination. Moreover, it was established that the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities in the Asia-Pacific region was much higher than those without disabilities. In line with these findings, the participants in this study appreciated the importance of support and inclusion in helping them overcome the obstacles related to disability and employment. Although discrimination and negative attitudes were evident, most participants indicated that the support of their employers, accommodation of their co-workers, help from their family and inclusion of them in the work environment helped them gain and maintain their jobs. This indicated that inclusion in the workplace acted as a mediating factor that helped reduce the impact of exclusion and other barriers and made them active participants in the workforce.

Finding Empowerment, Independence, and Dignity Through Employment as the Outcome of Inclusion

The third theme captured the greatest consequence of engaging in the employment process. Data showed consistently that being employed did not only mean earning money, but it was a way in which participants created positive identities and gained independence and respect.

What was clear was that a recurring theme that could be captured from most cases was that of employment and independence. Participants often emphasized how important it was to be independent and provide for oneself and one's family. Being financially independent was considered a sign of being productive and capable, enabling participants to challenge society's belief that persons with disabilities depended on others.

The results indicated the presence of another important connection, which was the association of employment and social recognition. The participants often related employment to the concept of dignity since employment implied their recognition as productive members of society. Employment made it possible for them to prove their competencies in public and break through stereotypes related to the fact that they had disabilities. In such a way, employment was not only an economic activity but also a social confirmation of personal value.

Another interesting finding was associated with the creation of meaning and purpose. While some participants were primarily focused on gaining financial stability, others noted the possibility of making contributions into their community and

helping others. Individuals who worked in the sphere of services or advocacy often associated their activities with their personal values and goals.

The significance of the analysis lay in the understanding that empowerment itself was one of the factors that strengthened inclusion and resilience. Those participants who felt confidence and dignity from the process of employment were able to better deal with potential obstacles that might arise in the future and speak up for themselves. This was because empowerment was a factor that contributed not only to the achievement of results but was also a tool that made it possible to be more involved in the process of employment.

The above argument was confirmed by the research carried out by Chumo et al. (2023), where it was revealed that employment was a key factor responsible for promoting the inclusion and empowerment of PWDs. The research pointed out that being employed was a key aspect not only in terms of earning an income but also when it came to achieving independence, dignity, and an improved quality of life. In the same manner, it could be noted that in the current research, the participants always viewed being employed as an aspect of self-reliance, self-fulfillment, self-worth, and social recognition. Being employed, they could support themselves and their family members, contributing to their communities and proving that they were productive members of the community. In other words, the participants confirmed that through being employed they were able to experience empowerment and more freedom despite all the problems of their disabilities.

Insights, Contradictions, and Implications

The study revealed that employment among persons with disabilities (PWDs) extended beyond economic participation and served as a source of empowerment, dignity, independence, and social inclusion. Participants identified discrimination, negative societal attitudes, bullying, and doubts about their capabilities as major barriers to employment, while supportive employers, coworkers, family members, and communities acted as crucial factors in overcoming these challenges. The findings further showed that inclusion was a continuous process requiring acceptance, accommodation, participation, and recognition. Despite the presence of disability-inclusive policies, gaps between policy intentions and actual workplace practices persisted, and experiences of inclusion varied across workplaces. These contradictions highlighted the need for stronger implementation of inclusive policies, greater organizational commitment to accessibility and accommodations, and workplace cultures that value abilities rather than disabilities. Consequently, employers, policymakers, and other stakeholders should promote inclusive hiring practices, disability awareness, accessible work environments, and supportive relationships to create equitable, sustainable, and empowering employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Practical Output(s) of the Study

The study developed the Framework for Inclusive Employment Practices for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) as a practical output to address employment barriers, strengthen workplace inclusion, and promote equitable and sustainable employment opportunities. The framework consisted of three interconnected components: Organizational Alignment Approaches, which focused on policy implementation and inclusive workplace structures; Coordination Processes, which emphasized collaboration among employers, government agencies, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders; and Adaptive Support Systems, which promoted accommodations, inclusive leadership, and responsive support mechanisms. Derived from the themes of employment barriers, workplace inclusion, and empowerment, the framework provided a guide for employers, policymakers, labor agencies, and disability organizations. The findings further implied the need for disability-inclusive hiring practices, stronger implementation of employment policies, improved workplace accommodations, enhanced stakeholder collaboration, and continued research on employment experiences across different disability groups, industries, and contexts to advance inclusive, empowering, and sustainable employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

CONCLUSIONS

From the findings of the study, it was concluded that persons with disabilities (PWDs) encountered social, personal, and workplace barriers, including discrimination, negative attitudes, exclusion, and limited employment opportunities; however, they demonstrated resilience and determination in pursuing meaningful employment. Their experiences revealed that employment outcomes were influenced not only by individual capabilities but also by workplace inclusion, family support, accessibility, educational preparation, and employer attitudes. Three major themes emerged from the participants' narratives: Confronting and Overcoming Employment Barriers, Experiencing Support and Inclusion in the Workplace, and Finding Empowerment, Independence, and Dignity Through Employment. The findings further showed that supportive work environments and positive social relationships played a critical role in fostering confidence, financial stability, independence, dignity, and social participation among PWDs. Based on these conclusions, the study developed the Framework for Inclusive Employment Practices for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), which emphasized organizational alignment, stakeholder coordination, and adaptive support systems as mechanisms for strengthening disability-inclusive employment and promoting equitable and sustainable employment outcomes.

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