

Beyond Limitations: Lived Experiences of Movement Among Persons with Physical Disabilities in San Fernando, La Union

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of persons with congenital physical disabilities regarding movement, participation, resilience, and belonging in San Fernando, La Union, Philippines. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry design, six participants were purposively selected based on inclusion criteria: PWD ID, age 18-60 years, local residency, congenital disability, and informed consent. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews across three sessions per participant. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Four major themes emerged: Quiet Rise of Resilience (shadows of early years, thriving through altered form, doing it on my own); In Play, I Was Just Another Child (difference became doubt, carrying difference, finding no difference in play); Strength in Living, Leaning, and Believing (acceptance, support, faith, symptom relief); and Belonging Healed What Doubt Once Broke (capability through responsibility, participation, acceptance). Movement extended beyond physical action to encompass identity, dignity, and belonging. Participants demonstrated resilience through adaptation, support systems, faith, and meaningful community participation. The study concludes that persons with physical disabilities are defined not by limitations but by capability and desire to belong, emphasizing the need for inclusive environments in rehabilitation and community practice.

Keywords: movement; physical disability; resilience; narrative inquiry; inclusion

1. Introduction

Movement is a fundamental aspect of human existence that extends far beyond the physical displacement of the body in time and space. It represents the rhythm of muscle contraction, joint articulation, and respiration—yet simultaneously embodies transformation, interaction, and connection with the surrounding environment. As defined in contemporary literature, movement encompasses not only physical action but also the means through which individuals communicate with their surroundings, perform daily activities, and establish their presence in social spaces (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023; Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Essentially, movement is not merely movement itself but also a profound expression of human agency and transformation.

Globally, movement is recognized as essential for participation and well-being, transcending its purely biological nature. The World Health Organization (2024) defines rehabilitation as "the process of enabling people with disabilities to maximize their abilities to fulfill their roles in society," thereby positioning movement as intrinsically linked to independence, dignity, and social participation. However, physical disabilities can significantly impact an individual's mobility and environmental interactions. According to the World Health Organization (2023), disability serves as an "umbrella term covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions," emphasizing that disability encompasses not merely physical impairment but also environmental and societal obstacles. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) further specifies that physical disabilities affect mobility and physical function, potentially limiting an individual's ability to perform everyday tasks such as walking or lifting objects.

International research has provided substantial evidence regarding disability as both a medical and social construct. Kang et al. (2023) observed that accessibility issues in infrastructure, discrimination, and non-adaptive programs continue to limit individuals with physical disabilities from participating in activities across multiple global contexts. Wilson et al. (2024) determined that family engagement, supportive policies, and assistive technology devices enhance mobility and community participation. Elipe-Lorenzo et al. (2025) highlighted that despite legislative changes for disability rights, individuals continue to encounter significant challenges in education, employment, and leisure activities.

Beyond acquired impairments, congenital disorders represent another significant global source of lifelong physical disabilities. The World Health Organization (2023) reports that approximately 240,000 babies die during the first 28 days of birth annually due to congenital disorders, with an additional 170,000 children between one month and five years dying from conditions associated with congenital disorders. Survivors often experience disabilities affecting physical mobility, cognitive ability, and participation in regular activities. The Pan American Health Organization (2024) adds that approximately eight million babies are born with birth defects each year, representing nearly 10 percent of all births.

In the Philippines, disability is recognized as both a medical and social concern. Republic Act No. 7277, known as the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities, defines persons with disabilities as those whose ability to perform tasks and actions deemed normally performed by humans is limited due to their conditions. This law prioritizes the rights of persons with disabilities concerning rehabilitation,

self-development, independence, and integration into the general population. Congenital abnormalities occur frequently in the Philippines. Children born with conditions such as cleft palate or lip, club foot, and heart disorders are particularly common among Filipino children, especially those in poverty-stricken areas with limited access to quality healthcare and rehabilitation services (Padilla et al., 2003; MiracleFeet, 2025).

Despite international and domestic research examining barriers and facilitators associated with physical disability, a significant gap exists in the literature regarding the lived experiences of movement among individuals with congenital physical disabilities. Most research has addressed movement issues through the lenses of treatment protocols, rehabilitation rates, and policy implementation rather than personal, subjective experiences. This gap is particularly pronounced in local Philippine communities, including San Fernando, La Union, where limited empirical studies have explored the narratives of persons with physical disabilities regarding their daily movement, participation, and identity formation.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the lived experiences of individuals with congenital physical disabilities, with special emphasis on movement and its role in constituting their identities and life trajectories. By situating movement within both global and local contexts and shifting away from deficit perspectives, this study recognizes movement as a basic right and as a medium of self-expression leading toward dignity and belonging.

The study is anchored in three theoretical perspectives. The Affirmative Model of Disability (Swain & French, 2000) posits that disability should not be considered from a perspective of negative consequences but rather as a potential involving opportunities, strengths, positive identity, agency, and empowerment. The Athletic Identity Reconstruction Model (Martinez et al., 2020) explains how individuals reconstruct their sense of identity through bodily engagement, reflective meaning-making, and social interaction. Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) addresses how multiple intersecting social identities affect a person's identity and life experiences.

2. Objectives

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of persons with congenital physical disabilities regarding movement, participation, resilience, and belonging in San Fernando, La Union.

Specifically, the study aimed to:

1. Describe the childhood and everyday movement experiences of persons with congenital physical disabilities.
2. Explore how participants experienced social participation, play, and community interaction.
3. Identify the personal, social, and environmental factors influencing movement and participation; and
4. Understand how resilience, support systems, and belonging shaped participants' identities and lived experiences.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a narrative inquiry approach to explore and interpret the lived experiences of participants. Narrative inquiry centers on the importance of personal stories and how people make meaning through temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin, 2022). Unlike quantitative designs that reduce experience to variables, narrative inquiry values the richness of stories and allows researchers to investigate identity, agency, and meaning-making over time and across contexts. This design recognized the co-constructed nature of narratives where the researcher and participant work together in shaping the telling and interpretation of stories, thus increasing reflexivity and ethical awareness in the research process (Riessman & Quinney, 2023).

3.2 Participants and Locale

The study was conducted in the City of San Fernando, La Union, Philippines, involving persons with physical disabilities residing in selected barangays: Carlatan, Lingsat, Oeste, Catbangan, Pagdalagan, and Biday. A purposive sampling method was used to deliberately select six (6) participants who could share rich and meaningful narratives about their experiences of movement. Inclusion criteria required: (1) possession of an official PWD ID; (2) age 18-60 years; (3) residence in San Fernando City for at least three years; (4) diagnosis of a congenital physical disability; (5) willingness to disclose personal experiences; and (6) signed informed consent.

3.3 Data Gathering Tool

The primary data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers. The guide was designed to be open-ended and non-leading, allowing participants to express their lived experiences in their own words. Questions were organized in a life course order beginning with childhood experiences and moving to current life. Tagalog and Ilocano translations were provided. The interview guide underwent validation by three expert validators: two registered physical therapists and one psychologist. Translations were validated by a Licensed Professional Teacher with Ilocano expertise.

3.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data gathering, approval was secured from the LORMA Colleges Research and Ethics Committee. Letters were sent to the Persons with Disabilities Affairs Office (PDAO) and barangay officials. Interviews were conducted in three sessions per participant, each lasting 20-30 minutes, in safe and accessible environments. Two trained researchers conducted each interview, with the research adviser present to provide psychological first aid support. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated into English, and subjected to member checking.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis six-phase process: familiarization with the data, developing initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the analysis.

3.6 Establishing Trustworthiness

Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, member checking, and independent review. Transferability was promoted through rich, thick descriptions. Dependability was assured through an audit trail. Confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling and grounding interpretations in participants' direct quotations.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary with the right to withdraw. Confidentiality was maintained through alphanumeric codes. Data were stored in password-protected devices and will be destroyed after three years per the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173).

4. Results

The analysis of participant narratives revealed three major themes that captured the lived experiences of movement among persons with congenital physical disabilities. These themes reflected how participants gradually understood themselves through childhood experiences, adapted to everyday challenges, developed resilience through support systems and faith, and eventually found belonging and meaning within their communities.

4.1 Major Theme 1: Frame of Identity

This theme reflects how participants gradually came to understand themselves through childhood experiences, social interaction, movement, and everyday participation. Identity was shaped through moments of insecurity, adaptation, acceptance, and inclusion. Participants described how experiences during childhood, school life, and community interaction influenced the way they viewed themselves and their capabilities..

4.1.1 Bearing the Weight

This subtheme reflects how participants experienced insecurity, bullying, comparison, and emotional burden during childhood and adolescence. Many participants became aware of their differences through the reactions of others, such as teasing, staring, and social labeling, which affected their confidence and self-perception. Participant 5 shared:

“I noticed it during my nursery days. I would look at other children, they have 5 fingers, theirs were complete. That’s when I developed insecurity.”

Participant 1 recalled:

“When I was in elementary school, kids were bullies. There were classmates who would ambush you outside.”

4.1.2 Adjusting the Seat

This subtheme describes how participants gradually learned to adapt and become independent in their daily lives. Participants developed personal ways of managing routines, responsibilities, and self-care despite physical limitations.

Participant 3 stated:

“I bathe independently. No one helps me, it’s just me. I can also cook and collect firewood on my own.”

Participant 5 explained:

“When I was a kid, they would put scotch tape on my hand so I could manage feeding myself.”

4.1.3 Backrest of Relief

This subtheme reflects how play, friendship, and peer interaction provided emotional relief and moments of belonging during childhood. Through play and social participation, participants experienced inclusion and normalcy despite their physical conditions.

Participant 2 shared:

“I grew up playing with other kids and doing the same things they did. I was young and more focused on playing, so I didn’t really feel affected.”

Participant 3 stated:

“I also played basketball, even joining games that had bets.”

4.2 Major Theme 2: Wheels of Resilience

This theme reflects how participants developed resilience through acceptance, support systems, faith, and adaptation. Resilience emerged not through dramatic moments, but through everyday efforts to continue living, adjusting, and participating despite challenges..

4.2.1 Brake of Control

This subtheme reflects the moments when participants experienced limitations, emotional struggles, physical discomfort, and feelings of losing control due to their condition. Participants described moments of pain, exhaustion, insecurity, and emotional burden that affected their movement and participation in daily life.

Participant 1 shared:

“There was a time when I kept thinking about taking my own life. Good thing my family was there.”

Participant 4 explained:

“I used pain relievers and ointments. Since then, I have reduced my movement.”

4.2.2 Guided Push

This subtheme highlights the importance of support systems in helping participants continue despite challenges. Family members, friends, workplaces, healthcare, and community support provided encouragement, assistance, and opportunities that helped participants navigate daily life.

Participant 1 shared:

“Then my mom helped me get a job at the capitol, and that’s when things started to get better.”

Participant 5 stated:

“If you can’t use your mobility to move, then use your voice to move.”

4.2.3 Rhythm of the Roll

This subtheme reflects how participants gradually developed their own rhythm in living with their condition. Through adaptation, pacing, acceptance, and persistence, participants learned how to continue participating in daily life while managing their physical limitations.

Participant 2 reflected:

“For me, I just accept my condition. I don’t really see it as a problem anymore.”
Participant 6 shared:

“When I get tired, I stop and rest.”

4.3 Major Theme 3: Moving Beyond Limitations

This theme reflects how participants eventually found belonging, purpose, and fulfillment through participation in family life, work, religion, and community involvement. Despite experiences of insecurity and discrimination, participants gradually recognized their value and capability within society.

4.3.1 Driven by Purpose

This subtheme reflects how responsibilities, work, caregiving, and meaningful roles helped participants recognize their abilities and sense of purpose.

Participant 1 shared:

“I work as a utility at the Sangguniang Panlalawigan Office. Our bosses treat us like family.”

Participant 5 stated:

“I implemented six programs, and all our targets exceeded the expected output.”

4.3.2 Rolling Together

This subtheme reflects how participation in community, organizations, religious activities, and social interaction strengthened participants’ sense of belonging and inclusion.

Participant 3 shared:

“I am the Vice President of the PWD group here at the barangay hall.”

Participant 4 stated:

“I am a member of Parish Renewal and a choir member. When I joined, I no longer felt like there was something lacking in me.”

4.3.3 Momentum of Growth

This subtheme reflects how participants gradually developed confidence, self-acceptance, and personal growth through their lived experiences, relationships, and participation in society.

Participant 2 reflected:

“Maybe my change now is something I can be proud of.”

Participant 6 shared:

“I am still able to help my family even if I am the smallest among them.”

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that movement among persons with congenital physical disabilities extends far beyond physical action to encompass resilience, identity formation, social belonging, and dignity.

The first major theme, Quiet Rise of Resilience, aligns with the Affirmative Model of Disability (Swain & French, 2000), which views disability as a source of identity, agency, and empowerment. Participants demonstrated that resilience developed through small, consistent adaptations to daily life. This resonates with Hidajat et al.

(2025), who found that family support strengthens self-acceptance and reduces isolation. The gradual development of independence reflects what Van Dam et al. (2022) identified as the confidence and security that make life feel fuller and more self-directed.

The second major theme, *In Play, I Was Just Another Child*, highlights how play provided spaces of belonging. This supports Jackman et al. (2023), who demonstrated that pleasure during physical activity fosters long-term engagement. Participants' accounts of playing basketball and joining games illustrate how positive experiences encouraged sustained participation. Cheshire (2022) similarly found that inclusive play activities provide opportunities for friendship and belonging, reducing stigma among children with disabilities.

The third major theme, *Strength in Living, Leaning, and Believing*, reveals the multiple resources participants drew upon. The role of family support aligns with Venkatesan (2025), who highlighted that emotional and social support systems allow individuals to cope more effectively. Faith emerged as a significant source of strength, consistent with Gomez-Zuniga et al. (2023), who emphasized that acceptance lessens emotional distress by helping individuals integrate disability into their identity.

The fourth major theme, *Belonging Healed What Doubt Once Broke*, offers the most profound insight. Participants discovered that belonging—being seen, trusted, and valued within families, workplaces, churches, and communities—gradually restored wholeness. This aligns with Mawena and Sorkpor (2024), who found that people with disabilities actively participate when supportive environments are available. Employment emerged as particularly significant, consistent with Poursmaeil et al. (2024), who found that employment improves personal dignity and esteem.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of persons with congenital physical disabilities regarding movement, participation, resilience, and belonging in San Fernando, La Union. Four major themes emerged: *Quiet Rise of Resilience*, *In Play, I Was Just Another Child*, *Strength in Living, Leaning, and Believing*, and *Belonging Healed What Doubt Once Broke*.

The findings reveal that movement among persons with congenital physical disabilities extends beyond physical action to encompass resilience, identity formation, social belonging, and dignity. Despite experiencing bullying, discrimination, and insecurity, participants developed adaptability, independence, and self-acceptance. Play and friendship provided spaces of equality. Family support, faith, and symptom management enabled navigation of daily challenges. Most significantly, responsibility, participation, and acceptance within families, workplaces, churches, and communities restored wholeness.

The study concludes that persons with congenital physical disabilities are not defined by their limitations but by their capability, resilience, and desire to belong. Their narratives challenge deficit perspectives and reveal that inclusion is not merely about physical access but about being seen, trusted, valued, and allowed to participate meaningfully. For physical therapists, educators, policymakers, and community members, these findings emphasize the importance of creating environments that recognize movement as a lived expression of human dignity, agency, and belonging.

7. Acknowledgements

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9. Appendices

Appendix A APPROVAL SHEET FROM THE RESEARCH COMMITTEE



REC Reference #: 2026-099

February 27, 2026

To: **Sean Verwill Bartocillo, Princes Kyla Batoon, Genai Iris Paredes, King J-Biene Tadena and Juliana Ashlyn Udasco**
LORMA Colleges, College of Physical Therapy

Subject: Approval of the Research Study – “BEYOND LIMITATIONS: STORIES OF MOVEMENT OF PERSONS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES” – by the Research Ethics Committee (REC).

Dear Researcher/s,

The Research Ethics Committee (REC) has reviewed your application to conduct the above-mentioned research study in San Fernando City, La Union with you as the Principal Investigators within a duration of February 27, 2026 to February 27, 2027.

The Following documents have been reviewed and approved:

1. Endorsement of the Research Coordinator
2. Title and Statement of the Problem/Objective
3. Literature Review
4. Methods and Procedures
5. Population and Locale
6. Exclusion/Inclusion Criteria
7. Data Analysis
8. Ethical Considerations

We approve the study to be conducted in the presented form, provided the following are integrated in the final research protocol:

1. Indicate when did the researcher/adviser undergoes Psychological First Aid (PFA) training.
2. On page 20, remove the word “each” in the second paragraph to avoid possible confusion.

The institutional REC expects to be informed about the progress of the study, any revision in the protocol before implementation and participants’/respondents’ information/informed consent. Likewise, you are required to provide the Board a copy of the final report.

Yours Sincerely,


Chairman, LC

Appendix B RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Main question:

1. Can you tell me about your experiences with movement, starting from childhood, and how they have changed into what you are today?

Translation

Tagalog: Maaari mo bang ikuwento ang iyong mga karanasan sa paggalaw, simula pagkabata, at kung paano ito nagbago tungo sa kung ano ito ngayon?

Ilocano: Mabalín mo kadi nga ilawlawag kanyami dagiti kapadasam maipapan iti panaggalaw mo manipud idi ubing ka agingga tatta, ken no kasano a nagbalbaliw da iti kasasaad da ita?

Probing questions:

1. Can you recall the first time you realized your body was different from other children? How did that make you feel?

Translation

Tagalog: Naalala mo ba kung kailan mo unang napansin na iba ang kondisyon ng iyong katawan kumpara sa ibang mga bata? Ano ang naramdaman mo noon?

Ilocano: Malagip mo pay kadi ti immuna a tiempo a napansin mo a naiduma ti bagim kadagiti sabali nga ub-ubbing? Ania ti nariknam idi?

2. How do you handle the challenges related to your condition?

Translation

Tagalog: Paano mo hinaharap ang mga pagsubok na kaugnay ng kalagayan mo?

Ilocano: Kasano a sangsangwem dagiti rigat a maniag iti kasasaad mo?

3. Has there been a time when you were proud of accomplishing something despite your disability? Can you describe that experience and what it meant to you?

Translation

Tagalog: Mayroon bang pagkakataon na ipinagmamalaki mo ang isang bagay na iyong nakamit sa kabila ng iyong kapansanan? Maaari mo bang ilarawan ang karanasang iyon at kung ano ang naging kahulugan nito sa iyo?

Ilocano: Adda kadi oras a naipagpanakkel mo ti maysa a banag a naaramid mo uray pay iti lakeside ti disabilidad mo? Mabalin mo kadi nga iladawan dayta a kapadasan ken ania ti kaipapan na kenka?

Appendix C
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

CERTIFICATE OF CONSENT:

I have read the information stated herein or it was properly explained to me. I was provided with a chance to ask questions relative to it. All questions I asked were answered properly; therefore, I consent and voluntarily participate in this study.

Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Statement from the Researcher/Person Obtaining the Consent

All information pertaining to this study was explained to the possible participant and made sure that he/she fully understood what she/he has to do in the research.

Similarly, I affirm that the potential participant was given with a chance to ask questions which I have answered accurately to the best of my ability.

Likewise, I affirm that the participant was not coerced or forced in giving consent. That he/she has voluntarily provided the consent.

Accomplished by:

Sean Verwill A. Bartocillo

Princes Kyla D. Batoon

Geplai Iris R. Paredes

King J. Biehe C. Tadena

Juliana Ashlyn L. Udasco

Date Submitted: _____

10. Author(s) Biodata

Ms. Juliana Ashlyn L. Udasco. A third year Bachelor of Science in Physical Therapy student from Lorma Colleges, together with her group members, Sean Verwill

A. Bartocillo, Princes Kyla D. Batoon, Genai Iris R. Paredes, and King J-Biene Tadena, conducted this study under the guidance of their research adviser, Ms. Rhaycy Lei Cabanela, an expert in qualitative studies.