



Exploring the enablers of athletic success among deaf and mute learners in mainstream athletic programs

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ABSTRACT

While inclusive education emphasizes the equitable participation of learners with disabilities, empirical attention to the athletic experiences of Deaf and Mute learners in mainstream secondary schools has been limited. This qualitative descriptive phenomenological study investigated the factors contributing to athletic success among ten Deaf and Mute learners enrolled in mainstream secondary schools in Pasuquin, Ilocos Norte. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. Results revealed two interrelated domains influencing athletic success. At the individual level, participants highlighted discipline, perseverance, resilience, and self-motivation as essential to sustained participation and performance. At the contextual level, heightened visual awareness supported skill development through observation and demonstration, while inclusive support mechanisms—such as adaptive coaching strategies, peer assistance, visual instructional materials, and basic sign language—facilitated effective communication, confidence, and engagement in sports activities. The study underscores the importance of inclusive, learner-responsive coaching practices and supports the development of policies that enhance accessibility and meaningful participation in school-based athletic programs.

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Introduction

Inclusive education advocates the equitable participation of all learners, regardless of physical, sensory, or cognitive differences, across both academic and non-academic domains of schooling (Florian, 2014; Slee, 2018). Global policy frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, further emphasize the obligation of educational systems to provide accessible and meaningful learning environments that extend beyond the classroom (UNESCO, 2020). Despite these commitments, inclusion in extracurricular activities—particularly school-based athletics—remains unevenly realized and insufficiently examined, positioning sports as a critical yet marginalized dimension of inclusive education.

Participation in athletics has been widely associated with positive psychosocial, cognitive, and physical outcomes, such as enhanced self-esteem, social connectedness, resilience, and motivation (Eime et al., 2013; Shields & Synnot, 2016). For Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) learners, however, mainstream athletic contexts often reproduce exclusionary practices through communication-dependent instruction, auditory cues, and rapid verbal feedback that privilege hearing norms (Antia et al., 2009; Marschark et al., 2015). These structural barriers may restrict meaningful participation, constrain skill development, and limit social integration, underscoring the need for adaptive and inclusive coaching practices that accommodate diverse modes of communication (Haeghele et al., 2017; Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2018).

At the same time, emerging research suggests that DHH learners possess distinctive strengths—such as heightened visual attention, observational learning capacity, and spatial processing—that may function as compensatory advantages in athletic settings (Bavelier et al., 2006; Dye et al., 2009; Capek et al., 2009). Studies further indicate that inclusive support mechanisms, including visual-based instruction, written cues, peer-mediated support, and sign language, can effectively reduce communication barriers and foster engagement in sports (Obrusnikova & Block, 2016; Curran et al., 2018; Horsepool & Kutz, 2019). These findings resonate with the Social Model of Disability, which conceptualizes disability as arising from environmental and structural barriers rather than individual deficits (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2014).

Nevertheless, the existing body of literature remains limited in several important respects. First, research on disability and sports has predominantly emphasized academic inclusion or general physical activity participation, with comparatively little attention to competitive or school-based athletic programs in mainstream settings. Second, few studies have examined athletic success among DHH learners through the lens of their lived experiences, particularly regarding how personal attributes (e.g., discipline, perseverance, intrinsic motivation) interact with environmental and institutional supports. Third, there is a paucity of context-specific research in low- and middle-income settings, including the Philippine educational context, where inclusive policies may be unevenly implemented and resources variably distributed.

Addressing these gaps, this study explored the enablers of athletic success among Deaf and Mute learners enrolled in mainstream secondary school athletic programs. Using a phenomenological approach, it examined how learners perceive and navigate personal, social, and institutional factors that support or constrain their athletic participation and achievement. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of Deaf and Mute learners, this study contributed empirical evidence to the fields of inclusive education and adaptive sports and informed the development of learner-centered, inclusive coaching practices and policy initiatives that promote equitable and meaningful participation in school athletics.

Literature review

This literature review examines the existing literature on inclusive education, adaptive sports, and the athletic experiences of Deaf and Mute learners in mainstream school programs. It seeks to synthesize

empirical and theoretical studies that illuminate the personal, social, and environmental factors influencing athletic participation and success among learners with hearing impairments.

Inclusive education and athletic participation

Inclusive education is grounded in the principle that all learners, regardless of disability, should have equitable access to meaningful learning opportunities within mainstream educational settings (Florian, 2014; Slee, 2018). While inclusion has traditionally focused on academic participation, scholars increasingly emphasize the importance of extracurricular activities—particularly athletics—as integral to holistic education (Eime et al., 2013). Athletic participation fosters physical health, psychosocial well-being, self-esteem, resilience, and social belonging, all of which contribute to learners' overall development (Shields & Synnot, 2016).

For learners with disabilities, however, inclusion in sports often remains uneven. Structural, instructional, and attitudinal barriers continue to limit meaningful participation, particularly in mainstream athletic programs designed primarily for hearing and non-disabled students (Haegele et al., 2017). These challenges highlight the need to examine not only access to sports but also the conditions under which learners with disabilities can achieve success and sustain engagement.

Deaf and mute learners in mainstream athletic programs

Deaf and Mute learners, often categorized within the broader Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) population, face unique challenges in mainstream sports environments. Communication in athletics relies heavily on verbal instructions, auditory cues, whistle signals, and rapid in-game feedback, which may disadvantage learners with hearing impairments (Antia et al., 2009; Marschark et al., 2015). These communication barriers can affect skill acquisition, safety, performance, and social interaction, potentially leading to exclusion or reduced participation.

Despite these challenges, research indicates that Deaf and Mute learners are not inherently limited in their athletic abilities. Instead, barriers arise primarily from environmental and instructional practices that fail to accommodate diverse communication needs (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2014). This perspective aligns with the Social Model of Disability, which frames disability as a result of socially constructed barriers rather than individual deficits. Within this framework, athletic success becomes contingent on inclusive environments rather than sensory impairment.

Personal attributes as enablers of athletic success

Personal attributes such as discipline, perseverance, resilience, and self-motivation have been identified as critical contributors to athletic engagement and success among learners with disabilities (Martin, 2013; Moreno et al., 2019). These attributes enable learners to persist despite challenges, adapt to demanding environments, and maintain commitment to training and competition.

Among Deaf and Mute learners, intrinsic motivation plays a particularly significant role. Participation in sports is often associated with enhanced self-confidence, self-identity, and a sense of purpose (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Eime et al., 2013). Studies suggest that when learners define success in terms of personal

improvement, teamwork, and enjoyment rather than solely winning, sustained engagement is more likely (Li et al., 2021). These findings position personal attributes as foundational variables that interact with environmental supports to shape athletic success.

Visual strengths and observational learning

A substantial body of research highlights the enhanced visual attention and perceptual abilities of Deaf individuals, which may serve as compensatory strengths in athletic contexts (Bavelier et al., 2006; Dye et al., 2009). Deaf learners often demonstrate heightened peripheral vision, faster visual processing, and strong observational learning skills, enabling them to acquire motor skills effectively through demonstration and modeling (Capek et al., 2009).

In sports settings, where movement imitation and spatial awareness are essential, these visual strengths can facilitate skill acquisition and performance when instruction is visually accessible. This challenges deficit-oriented views of deafness and supports asset-based approaches that recognize sensory differences as potential advantages rather than limitations.

Inclusive support systems and adaptive coaching practices

Inclusive support systems play a critical role in enabling athletic participation and success among Deaf and Mute learners. Teachers, coaches, and peers serve as key agents in fostering inclusive environments through adaptive instructional practices (Obrusnikova & Block, 2016). Visual demonstrations, written instructions, hand signals, basic sign language, and structured routines have been shown to enhance understanding, confidence, and safety in physical education and sports (Horsepool & Kutz, 2019).

Peer collaboration further supports inclusion by promoting social integration, teamwork, and shared responsibility (Curran et al., 2018). Peer-mediated strategies not only assist with communication but also reduce feelings of isolation and reinforce a sense of belonging. These findings underscore that athletic success is not solely an individual achievement but a product of collaborative and inclusive team cultures.

Statement of the problem

This study explored the enablers of athletic success among Deaf and Mute learners in mainstream athletic programs. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research question: What factors enable athletic success among Deaf and Mute learners in mainstream school athletic programs?

Methodology

This section outlines the research design, participants, sampling, data gathering instrument, data analysis, and ethical considerations employed in the study.

Research design

This study employed a Qualitative Descriptive Phenomenological Research Design. The qualitative design was selected to explore the depth and complexity of the lived experiences and perceptions of

Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing learners, thereby generating rich, contextualized data on the factors that enable their athletic success. The descriptive approach was chosen to provide a detailed, accurate account of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants.

Participants and sampling

The study involved Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) students from Pasuquin, Ilocos Norte, who were enrolled in mainstream classrooms and demonstrated excellence in athletics. Purposive sampling was employed to select ten participants (n = 10; coded P1–P10) who met the following inclusion criteria: (a) formally identified as DHH or hearing impaired, (b) currently or recently participating in a mainstream athletic team or program, and (c) capable of communicating their experiences via written, sign, or visual aids.

Data gathering instrument

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit detailed narratives regarding participants' experiences in sports, factors contributing to success, specific communication challenges, and adaptive or coping strategies. Open-ended questions allowed participants to freely express their perspectives while enabling the researcher to probe for elaboration as needed.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data, after which meaningful units were systematically coded. Codes were then examined for patterns and organized into overarching themes. These themes were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure coherence and accurate representation of participants' experiences. The final themes were synthesized into a narrative account supported by illustrative participant quotations. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms (P1–P10) were used, and the analysis was conducted iteratively to ensure the findings reflected the participants' lived experiences.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Divine Word College of Laoag – Graduate School of Education before data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants and/or their legal guardians. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. The study emphasized voluntary participation and ensured that participants fully understood the research process by providing qualified sign language interpreters upon request.

Presentation and analysis of result

What are the primary factors that contribute to the athletic success of deaf and mute learners in mainstream athletic programs?

This section presents the thematic analysis of participants' responses using Braun and Clarke's (2006), the athletic success of Deaf and Mute learners in mainstream classrooms is influenced by five interrelated primary factors: (1) Personal Attributes as Foundations of Athletic Success, (2) Inclusive Support

Table 1. Summary of themes, categories, and representative participants' statements.

Theme	Category	Representative participants statements
1. Personal attributes as foundations of athletic success	Discipline	"I am patient, focused, and hardworking... I also have strong self-control and perseverance." (P1)
	Focus and perseverance	"Discipline, focus, determination, and resilience are key qualities that help me succeed." (P5)
	Visual awareness	"I pay close attention to body language and movement, which helps me improve my techniques." (P1)
	Observational learning	"I learn by observing others closely. My visual awareness helps me perform well." (P2)
2. Inclusive support systems in mainstream classrooms	Teacher support	"My teachers provide written guides, and my coach uses demonstrations instead of verbal explanations." (P3)
	Coach adaptations	"They use visual aids, written instructions, and basic sign language." (P10)
	Peer support	"My classmates help by using gestures or writing to communicate with me." (P1)
	Social inclusion	"My classmates often help interpret drills so I can follow along." (P2)
3. Adaptive communication and coping strategies	Use of visual aids	"I ask for written or visual explanations when I don't understand." (P4)
	Written and technological aids	"I use visual cues, written notes, sign language, and technology." (P5)
	Self-advocacy	"I remind my teammates and coaches to use visual signs." (P3)
	Team coordination	"The ability to advocate for my needs is crucial." (P10)

4. Motivation and redefinition of athletic success	Intrinsic motivation	“Sports give me confidence and a sense of belonging.” (P1)
	Sense of purpose	“I love the feeling of accomplishment when I improve.” (P4)
	Success beyond medals	“Success is not just about medals but about growth and teamwork.” (P1)
	Winning	“Success means proving that disability is not a limitation.” (P2)

Source: Galvezo 2026

The analysis revealed four primary factors influencing athletic success among Deaf and Mute learners: personal attributes, inclusive support systems, adaptive communication and coping strategies, and motivation and redefinition of athletic success. Personal attributes such as discipline, focus, perseverance, and resilience served as foundational enablers, allowing learners to maintain commitment to training and competition despite communication barriers. These findings are consistent with sport psychology research identifying discipline, perseverance, and resilience as critical predictors of sustained athletic engagement and performance, particularly among athletes who encounter structural and social challenges (Martin, 2013; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002; Jaarsma et al., 2014). Heightened visual awareness and observational learning further supported skill acquisition, enabling learners to interpret body movements, demonstrations, and game dynamics effectively. Prior neurocognitive studies similarly indicate that Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing individuals often demonstrate enhanced visual attention, peripheral awareness, and observational learning capacities, which can function as performance-enhancing strengths in movement-based contexts such as sports (Bavelier et al., 2006; Dye et al., 2009; Capek et al., 2009).

Inclusive support systems from teachers, coaches, and peers were crucial in translating personal strengths into successful participation. Adaptive instructional practices—including visual demonstrations, written guides, structured routines, and the use of basic sign language—improved comprehension, reduced ambiguity, and fostered confidence and engagement. These findings align with the inclusive physical education and adaptive sports literature, which emphasizes the importance of visually accessible instruction and flexible coaching strategies for learners with hearing impairments (Obrusnikova & Block, 2016; Haegele et al., 2017; Lieberman & Houston-Wilson, 2018). Peer support through gestures, written notes, and informal interpretation further strengthened teamwork, social inclusion, and a sense of belonging, echoing studies demonstrating the effectiveness of peer-mediated strategies in promoting participation and social integration in mainstream sports settings (Ellis et al., 2014; Curran et al., 2018; Shields & Synnot, 2016). Collectively, these findings support the Social Model of Disability, which emphasizes that disability-related barriers are largely produced by environmental and instructional constraints rather than individual impairments (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2014).

Adaptive communication and coping strategies highlighted learners’ active role in shaping their athletic experiences. The use of visual and technological aids, coordinated team communication, and self-

advocacy enabled learners to navigate fast-paced environments and ensured that their communication needs were understood and respected. Self-advocacy, in particular, enhanced autonomy, engagement, and persistence, reflecting broader findings in adaptive sports research that emphasize agency and self-determination as central to sustained participation among athletes with disabilities (Martin Ginis et al., 2019; Van de Vliet et al., 2022). These strategies demonstrate that Deaf and Mute learners are not passive recipients of inclusion but active contributors who negotiate and shape inclusive athletic environments. Finally, intrinsic motivation and a broader redefinition of athletic success sustained long-term engagement. Participants viewed success not solely as winning or earning medals but as personal growth, teamwork, resilience, confidence, and the affirmation that disability does not limit potential. This perspective is consistent with Self-Determination Theory, which posits that intrinsic motivation is fostered when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness within supportive environments (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Similar studies on athletes with disabilities indicate that success is often conceptualized in terms of identity affirmation, social belonging, and personal development rather than purely competitive outcomes (Moreno et al., 2019; Jaarsma et al., 2014; Van de Vliet et al., 2022). This holistic understanding of success reinforces the importance of learner-centered and inclusive approaches in mainstream athletic programs, where achievement is measured not only by performance outcomes but also by participation, well-being, and personal growth.

Discussion of findings

This study examined the primary factors contributing to the athletic success of Deaf and Mute learners in mainstream athletic programs. The findings suggest that athletic success arises from the interplay among personal attributes, inclusive support systems, adaptive strategies, and intrinsic motivation, rather than from isolated traits, highlighting how inclusive environments enable agency and achievement.

Personal attributes such as discipline, focus, perseverance, and resilience were foundational, sustaining engagement and performance despite communication barriers. These results align with the sport psychology literature, which identifies discipline and perseverance as predictors of athletic persistence (Martin, 2013; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002), underscoring their importance for athletes with disabilities navigating structural and social challenges (Jaarsma et al., 2014). Heightened visual awareness and observational learning further supported skill acquisition, allowing learners to interpret body movements and game dynamics effectively without reliance on auditory input, consistent with neurocognitive studies on Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing individuals (Bavelier et al., 2006; Dye et al., 2009; Capek et al., 2009).

Inclusive support from teachers, coaches, and peers translated personal strengths into successful participation. Adaptive practices—including visual demonstrations, written guides, structured routines, and basic sign language—enhanced comprehension, confidence, and engagement. Peer support functioned as informal communication mediation, promoting teamwork and inclusion, consistent with research on peer-mediated strategies in sports (Ellis et al., 2014; Curran et al., 2018; Shields & Synnot, 2016) and the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2014).

Adaptive communication and coping strategies, including visual and technological aids, team coordination, and self-advocacy, further enabled learners to navigate fast-paced environments. Self-

advocacy enhanced autonomy, engagement, and persistence, supporting findings in adaptive sports research (Martin Ginis et al., 2019; Van de Vliet et al., 2022). Intrinsic motivation sustained long-term participation, with learners describing sports as a source of confidence, purpose, and belonging, consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and research linking inclusive environments to well-being in athletes with disabilities (Jaarsma et al., 2014; Martin Ginis et al., 2019).

Learners redefined success beyond medals, emphasizing personal growth, teamwork, resilience, and the affirmation that disability is not a limitation. This holistic perspective aligns with studies showing that athletes with disabilities prioritize identity affirmation and social inclusion over competitive outcomes (Moreno et al., 2019; Van de Vliet et al., 2022), supporting inclusive frameworks that value participation, effort, and personal development as legitimate indicators of achievement.

Finally, the findings affirm the Social Model of Disability, demonstrating that athletic success among Deaf and Mute learners is enabled by inclusive environments and adaptive practices rather than sensory impairment, and extend Self-Determination Theory by showing how autonomy, competence, and relatedness—supported through self-advocacy, skill mastery, and social belonging—sustain intrinsic motivation in mainstream sports. Practically, the study highlights the need for visually accessible coaching strategies, peer-mediated support, and professional development for teachers and coaches to institutionalize inclusive athletic practices. However, the study is limited by its small, context-specific sample and reliance on self-reported data, restricting generalizability. Future research should involve larger, more diverse samples, include multiple stakeholder perspectives, and employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs, while schools and policymakers should explicitly integrate athletics into inclusive education frameworks to ensure equitable and meaningful participation.

Conclusion

This study examined the enablers of athletic success among Deaf and Mute learners in mainstream secondary schools, revealing that success arises from the interaction of personal strengths, inclusive support, adaptive communication, and intrinsic motivation. Discipline, perseverance, visual awareness, and observational learning enabled sustained engagement and skill development, challenging deficit-based views of deafness. Adaptive coaching practices, peer support, and structured visual aids fostered comprehension, confidence, social inclusion, and teamwork, demonstrating that meaningful participation requires intentional environmental adaptations. Grounded in the Social Model of Disability and Self-Determination Theory, the findings show how socially constructed barriers can be mitigated and how autonomy, competence, and relatedness sustain motivation. By foregrounding learners' lived experiences, this study contributes new insights into inclusive sports practices. It is recommended that schools implement visually accessible coaching strategies, train teachers and coaches in adaptive practices, and extend inclusion policies to extracurricular programs, while future research should explore the athletic experiences of Deaf and Mute learners across diverse contexts to strengthen evidence-based inclusive practices.

Author's contribution: The author conceptualized the study, conducted data collection and analysis, and prepared the manuscript.

Ethical review statement: The study received ethical approval from the Graduate School of Education, Divine Word College of Laoag. All participants provided informed consent before participation.

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