

Accessible Education for Muslim Learners with Disabilities: Insights from Two Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research studied the perceptions of Muslim Learners with Disabilities (MLWD) and key informants regarding access to education utilizing case studies and thematic coding. MLWDs strongly identified with their faith as an important feature of identity. Participants were framing disability using the Islamic and the bio-medical perspectives which affirmed the synchronization of Islam with science as well as the affirmation model of disability which viewed persons with disabilities as active participants who constructed their own definitions of disability. Important elements in gaining greater access to education are: having a firm identity, parental attitudes, involvement in the child's education, having sufficient funds, and providing a nurturing home and community. However, having grit can offset a low parental level of education, low socio-economic status, and low home and community support so that MLWDs can have greater access to education.

Keywords: *access to education, accessible education conceptual framework, Muslim Learners with Disabilities, Islamic perspective, grit*

Introduction

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) estimates that there are 650 million individuals who are disabled (UNDP, 2006), and approximately one-third, according to the World Bank, are children in developing countries with little or no access to education (World Bank, 2005). Additionally, while efforts are being made to localize inclusive education across different countries in the world, reports highlight serious questions around the overall equity, quality, and efficiency of education systems, especially for many Muslim countries. Specifically, the United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported that the quality of achievement in Muslim areas tended to be lower than that in other countries even in those areas with similar income levels and with a large number of out-of-school learners (UNESCO, 2008).

As a response to the global call for inclusion in the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) stated that it universally recognized that quality higher education is accessible to all who seek it particularly those who may not be able to afford it (CHED, 2022). The Department of Education (DepEd), meanwhile, admitted that children with disabilities continued to be underserved in the education system, with only two percent of those who should be in primary education having access to Special Education (SpEd) services (DepEd, 2009).

The situation is worse in efforts to educate students belonging to minority ethnic and religious groups. Symaco and Baunto (2010) observed that minority groups were most likely to be deprived of educational and other opportunities. According to a recent extensive local study done among children with disabilities (CWD) among Muslims and indigenous peoples, the DepEd faces the challenge of reaching out to the most marginalized groups in the country, namely, the CWD in Muslim and Indigenous Peoples (IP) communities (RDFCEI, 2014).

The school is a site of social reproduction, according to Collins (2009), and is not an institution of equal opportunity and instead a mechanism for perpetuating social inequalities. To address social inequality, it is important to study Muslim Learners with Disabilities (MLWDs) who may be twice or even thrice disadvantaged by faith, ability, and socio-economic status.

Disabilities can be defined from various lenses. This research aimed to further the understanding of disability and access to education from a Muslim perspective. The research investigated how MLWDs made sense of their disabilities and how they related to others to give them a voice and provide their warranted representation in society.

This study aimed to create a framework for MLWDs to gain greater access to education. It also aimed to determine the perceptions of MLWDs, parents/caregivers, Muslim educators, community leaders, and education-focal persons about disability as well as access to education. In addition, the study intended to identify the different factors that determined MLWDs' access to education. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Muslims conceptualize disability?
2. How do Muslims perceive and experience accessible education?
3. What factors determine MLWD's access to education?

The data from this study can be utilized by parents and stakeholders to raise and build awareness on how Islam can be inherently justified to align toward greater access to education in both formal and informal education settings. All data were subjected to both descriptive and interpretive analyses to propose a framework that had the potential to harmonize ideas pertaining to the access to education of MLWDs. Lastly, the research added to limited studies about Islamic education, about MLWDs in the

Philippines, and about the use of socio-anthropology to view, understand, and address local issues.

Perspectives in Special Education

Issues in SpEd can be viewed from various lenses. Generally, the views can be categorized as socio-cultural, scientific, developmental, and technical. Under the socio-cultural perspective is the ecological perspective.

The ecological perspective is inspired by the ideas of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979). From this perspective, individuals are not seen as a tabula rasa but a growing, dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures into what he would refer to as “ecology”. In this context, the relationship between the individual and his environment is said to be bidirectional. The ecological environment is thought of as a set of nested structures which extend to incorporate interconnections including influences from the larger surroundings. Bronfenbrenner identified four environments in which people develop: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. Although the four environments are conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner as interrelated, this study limited itself to the MLWDs’ microsystems and mesosystems which are defined as:

1. **Microsystems:** immediate environments in which individuals develop. The setting consists of the connections between persons, the objects to which a person responds, or the people whom he interacts with on a face-to-face basis.
2. **Mesosystems:** the relationships between various microsystems. A mesosystem is composed of interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates.

Covered under the developmental model is the medical perspective. The medical model of disability positions a person’s disability based on their individual impairment with a focus on how the impairment can be managed and, if possible, overcome.

Under the technical model of disability are the deficit perspective and the affirmation model. The deficit perspective suggests that all human beings possess deficits of varying levels across the deficit continuum. The affirmation model rests on the premise that provision for children with special educational needs, and consideration of their strengths and needs must evolve from their own perspectives and definitions of their disabilities. It rejects the “tragic” model of disability and recognizes that disability is an integral aspect of a person’s identity (Crutchley, 2017).

Accessible Education and Inclusive Education

Accessible education and inclusive education are seen as related concepts. Accessible education answers the need for equality of opportunities among individuals while inclusive education answers the need for equity in educational opportunities

among individuals across race, gender, ability, age, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, learning styles, etc. Accessible education refers to the capacity of learners to be provided with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits in any form within the formal and the informal settings. It is intended for the teachers, the learning institutions, and the state to remove any barrier and make education and learning easy to access. The process of making education and learning easy to access is important in creating inclusive classrooms. According to Republic Act 11650, An Act Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities, inclusion is an approach where every learner is valued, supported, and given access to equal opportunities and learning experiences within an inclusive learning resource center, school setting, and the community. Inclusive education has for its end-goal full participation, presence, and achievement in learning cultures and communities, and this may entail accommodation, modification, adaptation, and individualization of content, approaches, structures, and strategies.

According to Ainscow et al. (2006), inclusive education's ethos and values include establishing a culture of belonging and support. These ethos and values are compatible with Dizon's (2011) important tenets in inclusive education which include acceptance of the child, respect for the dignity of the child, and adherence to the value of loving the child that strengthens commitment to his welfare.

DepEd Efforts for the Protection of the Disabled

Although inclusion should have been an ideal principle to observe in providing education for learners with disabilities, the special school set-up was the initial route taken by the national government as it gradually adopted the genuine philosophy of inclusion in its mechanisms. The current SpEd set-up has its roots in 1997 when DepEd promulgated DECS Order No. 26 (DepEd, 1997) which institutionalized SpEd centers. The DepEd claimed that it adopted the "inclusive educational concept" in the different types of SpEd programs to make them suited to the needs of learners and that it aimed to provide access to basic education among children with special needs through the formal system and other alternative delivery services in education. However, despite these efforts, only 2.5 percent of children with special needs were educated during SY 1998-1999, only 4.8 percent in 2004-2005 while 95.2 percent were unreached (DepEd, 2009). To rule out possibilities of disabled learners getting discriminated against in schools, the DepEd released DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012. The order was called the "DepEd Child Protection Policy" which was both a policy and a set of guidelines on protecting children in school from abuse, violence, exploitation and discrimination, bullying, and other forms of abuse.

The Six Articles of the Muslim Faith

The meaning of Islam revolves around the concepts of peace, submission, and surrender. A Muslim is said to be one who has surrendered to God. The central teaching

of Islam is the worship of one God who created all and who alone is uncreated (Arsad, 2013). The Quran has six essential doctrines, which are also described as “Articles of Faith.” The fourth, fifth, and sixth articles have direct implications for the conceptualizations of disability among Muslims as well as their regard for individuals with disabilities. The fourth article is a belief in all messengers and prophets of God. According to this article, God reveals himself in the Quran as interpreted by prophets called *khalifa*. The term *khalifa* is applied not only to these prophets but also to all individuals who are assigned to be stewards of God’s creation. The fifth article is the “Last Judgment” at the end of time known in Islam as *yawm al-din* or “the day of religion/doom.” It is a belief that every person will be raised from the dead and God will judge each person according to his faith and his actions. The fifth article presents an epistemological grounding in a Muslim’s morality and personal ethics based on the idea of divine justice. The sixth article is about the belief in the “Divine Decree and Predestination.” This doctrine is a belief in God’s ultimate authority over all that occurs. This is said to be a contentious doctrine which has led others toward a fatalistic acceptance of whatever happens as God’s will. It should be emphasized though that, even when the Quran emphasizes God’s power and control, it also pins down human responsibility as a final arbiter for a moral life.

The Muslim Conception of Man

Man is conceptualized in his place in the universe as the most significant creation of God who has been bestowed with intelligence that makes him unique among all the other creatures. Man is also believed to have a seamless connection with other creatures and is seen as equal to other men. In this belief, man’s ultimate goal should be nothing less than piety. Because of man’s power to reason and his capacity for inner knowledge, he rules over the earth, not in his own right, but as God’s *khalifa* among all of God’s creation.

According to the teachings of Islam, each individual is a *khalifah* to God. Arsad (2013) explained that being a *khalifah* presumes that man is responsible for the rest of creation and accountable for his actions. Muslims, in particular, must strive to adhere to and advance God’s will by establishing a society that reflects human dignity and justice. Accordingly, it is believed that human beings have been given the necessary intelligence, strength, and divine guidance to benefit humanity. Al-Ghazali (n.d.) wrote, “*On the day of judgment, the most severe torment will be given to the scholar to whom Allah had not benefited from his/her knowledge.*” It can, therefore, be assumed that, in the Quran, accountability and responsibility are expected from people to whom knowledge is given.

Muslim Conceptions of Disability

The Holy Book of Islam has an inherent and kind regard for people with disabilities. At the very least, disabilities in the Quran are believed to be morally neutral, neither

a punishment nor a blessing from God. The kind regard for disabled individuals has an ontological grounding in the Islamic understanding of the “problem of evil.” The “problem of evil” is not seen as a problem but rather as an instrument of God’s plan, which is intertwined with human experiences in this world – an experience necessary for man’s spiritual development (Rouzati, 2018). A careful scrutiny of the narratives of the Quran, according to Rouzati, demonstrates that the so-called problem of evil is seen as an instrument in fulfilling God’s purpose. “*We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives and crops: however, (Prophet), give good news to those who are steadfast.*” (Surah Al-Baqarah - 155, Quran). Trials and adversities are seen as necessary in order for man to realize his divine source. Exercising patience, trusting God, and loving God are essential to actualize man’s potential and purify his soul.

Concepts of normalcy or ideas about the treatment of individuals with a disability have changed over the years. Yaqut (2000) detailed that the pre-Islamic Arabs used to kill their female babies and ignored people with special needs but this treatment eventually changed. When Islam was introduced, it upheld the supremacy of the value of piety rather than looking at disability. A human’s worth in the sight of God depends on spiritual development, not on any physical or material attributes. One saying of Prophet Muhammad recorded in the *Hadith* is “*Verily Allah does not look to your bodies nor to your faces but He looks into your hearts.*” Hasnain et al. (2008) also said that many Muslims saw disability in the context of *qadar* or fate, a cornerstone of Muslim belief. This concept reflects the sixth article of faith, which is often expressed as the belief in preordination or what was meant to be, will be, and what was meant not to happen will not occur. This conceptualization, however, does not discount the idea of man’s responsibility to exercise one’s free will.

Muslim Education Philosophy

Education is held in high regard among Muslims based on the Quran and in the prophetic teachings of Muhammad, specifically anchored to Muslim’s obligation to continually seek after *ilm* (knowledge). Boransing et. al (1987) stated that Muslim scholars observed the following saying on knowledge: “*The ink of a scholar is holier than the blood of a martyr. Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave. Learning is a duty for every Muslim, man or woman*” (p. 27).

The Quran stresses the need for both religious and secular education. There is nothing in the Quran which is opposed to the pursuit of secular education. Al-Ghazali (n.d.) wrote that both knowledge and piety should be consistently sought. He said, “*My dear beloved son! Do not be deprived of good deeds, do not be without the knowledge of the external matters and do not be without internal excellences*” (p. 4).

Factors that Determine Access to Education

The literature suggests that access to education is affected by personal qualities,

identity, parental level of education and socio-economic status, the home, the school, and the community.

Personal Qualities and Access to Education

Grit. Grit is a positive, non-cognitive trait characterized by perseverance and passion to achieve a long-term goal or end-state. Grit is also the ability to persist in something or to work strenuously coupled with a powerful motivation to overcome challenges in the face of obstacles in order to obtain goals. Duckworth (2016) explained that grit is a process that starts with something one cares about that gives meaning to everything that one does and requires being steadfast to achieve this goal. Exploring grit, Christopoulou et al. (2018) said that it was rooted in two facets: perseverance of effort and consistency of interest. In his study, perseverance was a strong positive predictor of academic performance.

Identity and Access to Education

Faith Identity. An identity consists of one or many characteristics or attributes that describe a particular person and make him unique. A Muslim identity is said to be initially and deeply anchored in faith or religion. Bassiouney (2017) acknowledged that religion played a vital role in defining a public identity in the Arab world in general. He hinted that religion formed part of a Muslim's attitudes and moral valuations. Al-Oufi et al. (2012) also suggested that a Muslim's general attitude towards disability was generated from faith and belief in Allah.

Parental Status and Access to Education

Level of Education (LOE). Level of education pertains to the parental level of education, the educational attainment achieved by the parents or the caregiver of an MLWD in formal and informal educational settings. It is important to note how the level of education is potentially transmitted by parents and caregivers of an MLWD to the child to be a source for the production of other forms of capital. Findings from international and local sources point to the direct relation between the level of education and positive educational outcomes or subsequent access to education. Van Zanten (2009) noted the difference in the rearing practices between the middle and the working classes. He suggested that new middle-class parents chose to introduce their children to more stratified modes of education that appeared to offer more certain routes to higher education and occupational success. Reay (2010) cited time richness and poverty as keys, with the people in the working class relatively constrained in terms of how much time they could devote to their children's education. She pointed out the disparity between the culture of the school and the orientation of the families toward that culture. A study commissioned by the World Bank (2005) revealed that parents who had a high level of education possessed the resources to send their children both to *madrassah* and to a mainstream school. On one hand, parents who had low levels of

education were often left with no other choice but to avail of *madrasah* alone. However, the USAID (2007) report on access to quality basic education for Muslim learners suggested that the notion that less educated parents were naturally disadvantaged in achieving economic and social outcomes was largely an unfounded perception. The belief that knowledge, skills, and values can only be provided in the setting of the formal school discounts the crucial role of the non-formal or informal settings in the education system.

Socio-economic Status (SES). In dealing with issues of socio-economic classes, it is imperative to distinguish hierarchies in relation to household income or local economies in general. Individuals from higher income brackets have more access not just to education itself but also to higher levels of education. Shala (2016) reported that socio-economic status influenced family dynamics, parental techniques, parental investment, and access to resources necessary for development and that low socio-economic status hinders the development of children. Essentially, at the core of social hierarchy are resources. Bourdieu (2004) would refer to this as “capital.” According to him, capital can present itself in three fundamental forms: economic, cultural, and social. Among the three forms of capital, economic capital is the most important as it is considered the root of all the other types of capital. To demonstrate this, a local study by Basman (2010) found that economic standing coupled with the right set of family values would facilitate the accommodation of children with disabilities. According to Basman, family values included respect, nurturing attitude, independence, closeness, and understanding. The higher the economic status, the more able families can undertake activities to help the child develop. However, family fears and values might constrain families with high economic status to withhold activities that may develop the child.

Ecologies and Access to Education

Home. The home comprised what Bronfenbrenner (1979) would refer to as a microsystem, the interrelations within the immediate setting. Related studies about the home setting explored the placement of the agents at the center as being influenced by the quality of relationships one has with the immediate family.

The findings of the RDFCEI (2014) about inclusive education of Muslim learners in the Philippines held the family as the central locus of care. The caring behavior of the family appears to have been borne from the value of compassion, which makes possible the centrality of emotional capital in caring for a child with a disability (CWD). It revealed that caring practices among family members had greater attention to and investment in those experiencing multiple difficulties. Parents who have experienced formal schooling see sending the CWD to school as a way of caring for them. However, for parents with no or little education, schooling is sacrificed in favor of more basic needs.

Biglan et al. (2012) advocated for the need for a nurturing home to be established to prevent mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders. The study discussed the benefits

of establishing nurturing homes among family members and suggested that nurturing environments minimized the possibility of psychologically-toxic events. It reinforced pro-social behaviors, limited opportunities for problem behavior, and fostered psychological flexibility—the ability to be mindful of one’s thoughts and feelings.

School. The school is what Bronfenbrenner (1979) would refer to as within the agent’s mesosystem, where an active individual can participate. Related studies about the school setting revolved around the experiences of children with special educational needs and the issues and challenges related to school inclusion.

Schools as Sites of Contestation of Social Power. The school is conceptualized as more than being a physical structure but a site of “social reproduction,” of hegemony, or of contestations between dominant and minority forces in society. The school is also seen as an agency of class domination, culture, and ideologies and is filled with contradictions and produced in contestation and struggle. Nader (1997) claimed that schools were involved in the articulation of the politics of exclusion based on the alleged propensity in human nature to reject strangers.

Community. A community is an organic, natural kind of social group whose members are bound together by a sense of belonging created out of everyday contacts covering the whole range of human activities (Adair-Tottef, 2006). Conceptualizations for the term “community” center on the individuals’ interactions with each other within an enclosed geographical territory where members work together and follow a certain social structure (e.g., culture, norms, values, and status).

The Role of “Bodies” in Social Contestations. One way of looking at MLWDs is through the prism of socio-anthropology as “bodies.” Bodies are centers of discourse that relate to the contestations of competing forces in society. According to Evans et al., (2009), our bodily selves are increasingly subject to the performative expectations not only of the labor market but also of consumer culture centered around visions of physical perfection, initially articulated as “slender body ideals.” MLWDs as bodies are labeled as objects that disturb identity, system, and order and provoke the desire to expel them. The whole process of abjection involves the erection of social taboos and individual defenses. Abjection involves processes whereby those named unclean are reviled, repelled, and resisted.

METHOD

Research Design

This investigation employed the case study method to achieve the goals of the study. The case study data were generated through in-depth interviews of the two cases of participants, with each case located in varying and opposing circumstances. The multiple case study design also used the logic of replication where the inquirer

replicated the procedure for each set of cases.

Participants

The research involved two cases of participants. Case 1 was an MLWD placed in a private *madrrasah* setting while Case 2 was an MLWD placed in an inclusive, private Christian school setting. Each case consisted of the following participants: (1) the MLWD, (2) a parent/caregiver of MLWD, (3) the *madrrasah* teacher: the *ustadz (asatidz)*, (4) the community leader, and (5) the education-focal person. The research thus presented multiple perspectives in each case.

The subjects were Filipino-Muslim children aged 13-19 who had disabilities and were receiving education entirely in their respective schools. It meant therefore that the participants were learning from an exclusive formal instruction in an inclusive formal setting. The MLWDs age range of 13-19, known to be the start of adolescence or adulthood, was intentionally selected to delimit the study and to gather data from the voices of the MLWDs themselves. Although the study dealt with participants who may be cognitively impaired, the researcher attempted to evaluate the circumstances of the participants through alternative sources of data. In the absence of potential reflective and reasoning skills, insights from the MLWDs were sourced from their non-verbal reactions or by asking the people the MLWDs regularly interacted with, who were also participants in the study (parents/caregivers, *asatidz*, community leaders), which allowed the data to be triangulated. To further control and define the expected data, the learner must belong to a Maranao tribe by virtue of parental or genealogical affinity.

Respondents in the study were recruited using the snowball technique. The researcher asked for referrals initially from the community gatekeepers of barangays (villages) whose population was composed largely of Filipino Muslims. The participants were nominated by the community leaders at the two research sites, namely the Muslim communities in Brgy. 648, San Miguel, City of Manila and in Maharlika Village, Taguig City.

When endorsements were made, the researcher communicated with the family of the MLWDs to verify whether they satisfied the criteria for the study. Formal consent was secured prior to setting up an interview with the MLWDs, their parents and caregivers, the *asatidz* or the imam, the community leaders, and the education-focal persons. A letter was addressed to the key informants in the barangay (the MLWD, parent/caregiver, *asatidz*, and community leader) and to the School Operations Division (SOD) of DepEd (for the education focal persons). The letter came with a research contract indicating a guarantee that information would be held in utmost confidentiality and that the undertaking was being done only for the purpose of academic research. Verbal permission was also sought whether proceedings could be recorded through a mobile phone audio-recorder or notes or a few photographs could be taken with

the participants to document the process. The researcher followed up with the key informants and the SOD of DepEd-Manila and the SOD of Taguig-Pateros for the approval of the request for an interview. Upon approval, the researcher scheduled the interviews on a per case basis.

Profile sheets for the education focal-persons were brought during the day of the interview and were completed by the respondents themselves. Field notes were also used to record relevant observations during the conduct of the interviews. At the onset of the interviews, the researcher reiterated the confidentiality agreement in the contract and emphasized that the participants had the liberty to back out at any point during the interview process. To maintain the authenticity of the data, verbal permission was sought to use their first names in the study. After the interview, the researcher also secured permission from the respondents if he could still be in touch with them for further verification and clarification of information. Any follow-up was done through the short messaging system (SMS). The participants were assured by the researcher of feedback on the results of the study when necessary. The participants were provided a simple token for their contribution to the study.

The participant who attended the weekly *Madrrasah* was Aliacub. He was a 19-year-old male with a physical disability at the time of the data gathering. His *ustadz* in the *Madrrasah* said that Aliacub has “slow memory,” which was an indication of intellectual delay. He was born to a Muslim father and a Christian mother who later converted to Islam. He was the 5th of six children living together in an approximately 30-square-meter apartment in a Muslim community in Brgy. 648 in San Miguel, Manila. His father decided to stay in Marawi City so his mother was left supporting all six children in Metro Manila, making her technically a solo parent. Aliacub experienced going to a public school when he was in Grade 1 but he stayed for less than a month because he experienced bullying by a classmate. To make up for his lost opportunity in formal education, his mother enrolled him in the *madrrasah* (non-graded) within the compound during weekends. Aliacub had not undergone any form of therapy at the time of the research.

Sailenur was the 16-year-old female MLWD enrolled as a Grade 10 student in an inclusive private Christian school in Taguig City at the time of the study. She had congenital cataracts which resulted in a profound visual impairment. Sailenur underwent an eye operation when she was an infant, leading her to wear eyeglasses with grades ranging from 900-1000 as she grew older. Sailenur could move without eyeglasses but could not read without them. Just like Aliacub, Sailenur came from a close-knit, devout Muslim family at the heart of a Muslim community. Her mother completed a 4-year college degree while her father almost completed college until he chose to get married. The family inherited a vast estate in the same area where they lived which they leased to fellow Muslims. This secured them financially as her mother also worked in a government office. Sailenur’s school was only a few streets away from their home, and she had not received any form of therapy at the time of the research.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data underwent four levels of content analysis: (1) decontextualization, (2) recontextualization, (3) categorization, and (4) compilation.

Both descriptive and interpretative analyses were done by transcribing the interviews of the two groups of participants word for word. An example of an actual transcription is shown in Table 1. Transcriptions included non-verbal expressions that came with the participants' responses. In transcribing the words of participants and juxtaposing them with gestural observations, getting their exact words was usually not very important as their meaning took priority (Stake, 1995).

Table 1

Example of Decontextualization

	Transcript	Analysis
A.4.	I: Ano ang pakiramdam mo na ikaw ay may kapansanan? (Participant answered quickly)	
	P1: Okay lang, tanggap ko.	P1 accepts that he is disabled

This stage was what comprised recontextualization, the threshing out of data from the participants, exploring meaning out of the responses, and figuring out from the larger scheme of things where the data would fall. An example of recontextualization is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Example of Recontextualization

	Main Themes	Sub-themes	Examples of Basic Themes
MLWD	Microsystem	Disability as God's will and responsibility	"Dapat tanggapin kasi ito ibinigay ni Allah. Mabigat na responsibilidad" ("Aliacub", personal communication, January 10, 2021).

Table 3*Examples of Categorization*

Open Codes	Enumeration of Open Codes	Appearance Organizing Theme	Overall Theme
MLWD treated well by family	34	Home	Establishing Inclusive Ecologies and Possessing Positive Personal Qualities
Marginalized at school	21	School	
Well received in the community	15	Community	
Having grit	6	All	

The next level required the data to be systematically juxtaposed with the previous statements made by the participants in each case. Categorization is shown in Table 3. The open codes were systematically enumerated and assigned an organizing theme against the backdrop of previous studies and the collective voices of previous participants at different times or places. The agreement or disagreement of the new finding and the explication of the potential reason allowed for the novel finding to assume categorization.

Table 4*Example of Compilation*

P1		
Main Theme	Sub-theme	Example of Basic Theme
Identity	Acceptance of one's disability	"Okay lang, tanggap ko na ako ay may kapansanan" (Aliacub, personal communication, January 10, 2021).

The categorized data which required a bringing together of the participants were coded as to their meaning. This is the process of compilation and is shown in Table 4. The process of "compilation" was done by quoting the participants' statements verbatim and stressing the underlying meaning of the statements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study are presented with the discussion to contextualize the responses of the participants in the study to allow a smoother and continuous flow of their narrative.

Muslim Conceptualization of Disability

Disability is perceived differently across cultures. Muslims hinged their perceptions of disability on their religion, specifically from their interpretation of the Articles of the Muslim faith and the concept of *qadar*.

Disability as “God’s Will”

The study drew from the responses of Case 1 and 2 participants. Teresa, the mother of Aliacub (MLWD) said, “*Kasi iyan ang pagsubok ni Allah.*” (That is Allah’s test.). The *ustadz* in the *madrasah* said “*...iyan ang bigay ni Allah, si Allah ang bahala*” (..that is what Allah has given, Allah’s will be done.). The community leader near the *madrasah* explained, “*Kapag nagkasakit, iyan ang bigay ni Allah.*” (When we become ill, that is given by Allah.). One of the Case 2 participants made a direct reference to disability as God’s will. The *imam* of the MLWD in the inclusive school opined: “*Siya ang higit na nakakaalam. Mayroong dahilan...Pagsubok ni Allah ang paghihirap. Ibinigay ni Allah ang kapansanan pandagdag pagsubok.*” (He is the One who knows. There is a reason. Difficulties are Allah’s tests. Allah gave the disability as an additional test.) This finding supports the thesis of Rouzati (2018) that Muslims interpret the “problem of evil” or difficulties and hardships as instruments for men to realize their purpose and purify their souls.

In the interview of Case 2 in an inclusive private school, Sailenur (MLWD), her caregiver, and the community leader pointed to their belief in Allah as the ultimate cause of their conceptualizations related to “disability as a test.” The community leader mentioned, “*Sa amin, kung ano ang ibinigay sa iyo ng Allah, iyon na lang din iyong dapat mong tanggapin. Kaya nga ibinigay sa iyo iyan ibig sabihin kaya mo. Iyon talaga iyong kapalaran.*” (For us, whatever Allah has given, we should accept. It means you can handle it. It is your destiny.) Consistent with the notion that being a Muslim means surrendering to God and the Muslim’s sixth article of faith which is the divine decree of predestination or the concept of *qadar* (fate) (Hasnain et al., 2008), the conceptualizations of the Muslim participants about disability confirmed that a Muslim’s general attitude towards disability was influenced by their faith and their belief in Allah.

Table 5*Conceptualization of Disability of MLWD and Key Informants in a Private Madrasah (Case 1)*

Case 1	Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Examples of Basic Themes
MLWD	Microsystem	Disability as God's will and responsibility	"Dapat tanggapin kasi ito ibinigay ni Allah. Mabigat na responsibilidad."
Parent	Microsystem	Disability as God's will	"Kasi iyan iyong pagsubok niya (Allah). Kung iyan ang ibinigay sa iyo dapat tanggapin mo."

Table 6*Conceptualization of Disability of MLWD and Key Informants in an Inclusive School Setting (Case 2)*

Case 2	Main Themes	Sub-themes	Examples of Basic Themes
MLWD	Microsystem	Disability naturally accepted over time	"Yung bata pa po kasi ako hindi ko pa naiisip iyong mga bagay-bagay, kung bakit ganito. Pero ngayon unti-unti ko na pong natatanggap."
Caregiver	Microsystem	MLWD must socialize and persevere	"Sa kanya (MLWD), dapat patuloy lang. Makihalo lang sa iba at magsikap sa buhay."
Ustadz	Microsystem	Islamic belief in medical science	"Ang sabi ng propeta, "ang lahat ng sakit , may gamot." Ang magagamot sa atin iyong duktor, siya ang nakakaalam ng sakit."
Com. Leader	Microsystem	Disability and need for courage	"Mahirap iyon para sa isang may kapansanan na laging iisipin mo na maging matigas at matapang ka."

Factors that Affect Access to Education

The factors that affect access to education were culled from the various perceptions and experiences of the participants as they engage in their respective microsystems and mesosystems. The participants in the study, based on the analyses of themes, identified these access factors that relate to identity and positive personal qualities, parental support and positive personal qualities and supportive ecologies and positive personal qualities.

Identities and Positive Personal Qualities

Faith Identity. Consistent with the belief that a Muslim is one who has “surrendered” to God, the analysis of themes indicated that the Muslim participants strongly identified with their faith. Aliacub (Case 1) accepted his disability and associated the challenge with God, saying, “*Dapat tanggapin mo kung ano ang utos sa iyo ni Allah kahit mabigat.*” (You should accept what Allah has given you even though it is hard.) His mother concurred with this idea, “*Dapat lagi kang sumusunod sa mga pinag-uutos ni Allah. Na kahit anong hirap, kung iyon ang plano sa iyo ng Diyos dapat tanggapin mo.*” (You should always follow what Allah commands even if it is hard. If that is His plan, you should accept it.) Sailenur (Case 2) was proud to be Muslim. Her caregiver said, “*Nakakabuti naman ang aming paniniwalang pang-relihiyon, lalo na sa aming mga Muslim.*” (We Muslims benefit from our religious beliefs.) All Muslim participants had basic knowledge of proper and improper conduct and were proud to be Muslims. To have better access to education, it was essential for MLWDs to accept their identity expressed in their faith, known as “faith identity.” Faith identity is rooted in one’s spiritual beliefs.

Grit. To have access to education, MLWDs were expected to possess not only a firm faith identity but also grit. Duckworth (2016) suggested that grit started with something that gave a person meaning and was able to overcome the challenges that came with it. Sailenur (Case 2) and her community leader were proud Muslims and were willing to exert effort to fit in their broader environments. Sailenur emphasized the need to get along or adapt to her inclusive, Christian school. Her caregiver emphasized the need to be rooted in her Muslim faith, to socialize with others, and to persevere in life. The community leader in the area of Sailenur (Case 2) shared her own account of advocating for her needs inside the classroom. The community leader, who had profound visual impairment herself, also spoke of her personal experience of asking people on the street and police enforcers to read the jeepney sign boards whenever she commuted using public transportation. The MLWDs expressed their needs constantly and asked for help to achieve their desired ends. The community leader also talked about the need for persons with disabilities to have more grit, saying, “*Dapat malakas ang loob mo. Parang hindi ko sinasabi sa sarili ko na hindi ko kaya iyan kasi may kapansanan ako. Hindi iyon ang pananaw ko e. Mas matapang talaga ako.*” (One must be brave. I don’t tell myself that I can’t do things because I have a disability. That’s not how I think. I really am brave.)

Parental Support and Positive Personal Qualities

Guidance and encouragement. The analysis of themes indicated that MLWDs had to be guided and encouraged. Guidance can come from parents, caregivers, or from a knowledgeable authority in the form of follow-ups, remedial classes, or any other learning opportunities that can empower and enable MLWDs.

Marked differences were observed in the rearing of Aliacub and Sailenur, with more positive observations seen in parents who had higher levels of education. The caregiver of Sailenur as well as their community leader provided accounts of how Sailenur's parents supported the MLWD in her studies. Sailenur's caregiver averred, "*Ang mga kabataan dapat ginagabayan lagi ng magulang. Kailangan sinusupportahan talaga ng parehong nanay at tatay.*" (The youth always need guidance from their parents. They need the support of both mother and father.). The community leader of Sailenur stated: "*Tungkulin ng mga magulang magbigay ng suporta, financially, tapos iyong gabay.*" (It is the parents' duty to provide finances and guidance.)

The *asatidz* and the education-focal persons argued strongly about the crucial role of guidance and encouragement from parents for their children to access education. This finding resonated with literature about the impact of parental level of education on their children's educational outcomes and achievement (Bourdieu, 2004; Van Zanten, 2009; Reay, 2010). Parents with a higher level of education have a natural advantage as they see the importance of providing resources such as time and guidance to their children. Furthermore, consistent with the finding of the World Bank (2005), parents with a lower level of education tended to enroll their children not in mainstream, formal education but only in the *madrasah*.

Financial Resources. To access education, MLWDs needed sufficient financial support. The results of the study confirmed what Bourdieu (2004), Shala (2016), and Basman (2010) said about the inherent advantages of economic capital which they said produced other necessary tools to facilitate accommodation and economic success. The participants agreed that a certain amount of money was needed to support education. The mother of Aliacub valued having money as a very important factor in supporting her son's schooling at the *madrasah*. The caregiver of Sailenur, despite not having completed her primary school, had to work in a foreign country to support the school needs of her own children. The education-focal-persons shared personal accounts of student hunger and its effects on attendance and drop-out rates in their respective schools.

Grit. In the absence of a sufficient parental level of education or socio-economic status, the parents and the MLWDs could leverage grit and perseverance. Although parental level of education and socio-economic status are seen as instrumental to having access to education, these factors alone do not automatically guarantee access to education. Parental resources such as guidance or financial resources must be

coupled with determination and grit. This finding was consistent with what Duckworth (2016) and Christopoulou et al. (2018) said when they associated grit with passion, perseverance of effort, and interest.

Aliacub, the MLWD in a private madrasah declared, “*Para magkaroon ng pagkakataon mag-aral, dapat magsikap.*” (To have an opportunity to study, one must persevere.) His mother expressed her wish, “*Sana nga magpatuloy siya ng pag-aaral para kapag tumanda siya hindi siya ganyan lang.*” (I hope that he continues his schooling so that he will not be stuck in life.) Aliacub’s *ustadz* shared: “*Ako lang ha, para matuto, dapat magpursige talaga siya.*” (For me, he must persevere to learn.) The community leader suggested that aside from financial resources, perseverance will lead to access to education. “*Ang kailangan, pagpursige lang.*” (What is needed is perseverance.) The caregiver of Sailenur shared that she needed to instill discipline among her children to study. She said, “*Iyong mga anak ko, para lang pumasok, sinasabihan ko ang mga iyan. Sabi ko: “mag-aral ka, gusto niyong lumaki kayong mangmang?”* (I always tell my children: study hard or else grow up ignorant.). The *ustadz* of Case 2 stated that success in education depended more on the child than his parents. He said, “*Hindi dahil sa pagsisikap ng magulang, kung hindi dahil sa pagsisikap ng bata.*” (It’s not so much the effort of the parents but the effort of the children [to study].)

Supportive Ecologies and Positive Personal Qualities

Home support. MLWDs need a nurturing home to have access to education. This result was in line with the sixth article of the Muslim faith and the concept of “*qadar*” (Hasnain et al., 2008) as children with disabilities were seen as “gifts” from God. Similar to the findings of the RDFCEI (2014), the home is seen by the participants as the central locus of care, and children with disabilities are provided with greater attention compared to their non-disabled family members. A nurturing home requires consistent family involvement, not only from parents but also from other members of the family. Aliacub and Sailenur, although coming from different socio-economic backgrounds, were both provided with emotional security at home. Nobody within their immediate and extended families looked at their disability as the sole basis of their identities. The MLWDs could not think of any instance when they were mistreated or ostracized at home. The home was their safe place where they were nurtured and treated fairly. Both MLWDs enjoyed meaningful relationships not only within their homes but also in their communities. Biglan et al. (2012) stated that a nurturing home prevented mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders, minimized the possibility of psychologically toxic events, and reinforced prosocial behavior. Even when both MLWDs were aware of their disabilities, their nurturing homes provided them with the same warmth and security that non-disabled children enjoyed, and this made them feel like their disabilities did not matter.

School inclusion. Responses from participants who had experiences of public schools, namely, Aliacub, his mother, the community leader in Case 2, and the education-

focal persons in both cases, proved that being discriminated against was a reality and a possibility in the public school setting. Although the incidents in the study may be considered isolated, the findings were not in consonance with the ethos and values of inclusive education as espoused by Ainscow et al. (2006) and Dizon (2011) which revolved around the idea of accepting and loving children and being committed to their welfare. Incidences of bullying contradicted the philosophy of inclusion that the DepEd wanted to establish through RA 11650 and the “Child Protection Policy” which emphasized that every learner must feel valued, supported, and protected from abuse, violence, exploitation and discrimination, bullying, and other forms of maltreatment.

Aliacub said he was a frequent subject of teasing by his classmates who would shout “*Pilay! Pilay!*” (Cripple! Cripple!) at him. He said he was bullied because of his physical disability and not because he was a Muslim. His school experiences became too harrowing for Aliacub that he considered not enrolling in a public school again. Sailenur, meanwhile, treated bullying by an individual only as a minor incident. She said that she was accepted as a Muslim who wore a *hijab* in school and who also had a profound visual impairment. On the other hand, the Muslim community leader who had dual disability experienced bullying in primary and secondary public school. She said she was taunted because of her obvious physical and visual disabilities but she had learned to fight for herself.

The education-focal-persons both admitted that bullying among non-disabled students occurred in their schools. The experiences of marginalization in public schools by Aliacub and the visually-impaired community leader in Case 2 gave credence to assertions by Nader (1997) and Collins (2009) about schools being sites of contestation with regard to hegemonic powers in society. It should be noted though that they were not being discriminated against because of their religion but because of their physical disabilities. Adopting the socio-anthropology lens, MLWDs are seen as “bodies” which do not satisfy the “slender body ideals;” thus, they may be repelled as “rejects.”

Community support. MLWDs needed a nurturing community and home to have access to education. A nurturing community is perceived to be a natural feature of an Islamic community borne of a culture of compassion and brotherhood. The kind regard of Muslim communities for MLWDs resonated with the epistemological grounding of Islam in the sixth article of faith related to the concept of divine decree or preordination (Arsad, 2013) or *qadar* (Hasnain et al., 2008), the need to accept the will of Allah as well as the concept of *khalifa* (Arsad, 2013), where men, using their intelligence, are deemed to be responsible for the care of God’s divine creation.

Aliacub spoke fondly of the Muslim community where they lived. He said, “*Pareho lang ang trato sa akin sa iba. Pero pinoprotektahan nila ako dito. Hindi ako na-bully dito. Never akong binully dito. Magagalit iyong mga datu.*” (They treat me the same as they treat others. They protect me here. I am never bullied here. The *datus* will get mad.) His mother shared that he had a number of friends in the community. Aliacub said that even

when life was difficult he had a happy life. He associated his feeling of happiness with his family and having a number of friends. Aliacub's friends provided positive influence by ensuring he attended the *khutba* and the weekend *madrasah* where his friends were also regular attendees.

Aliacub's mother shared that Muslim elders strongly influenced the way MLWDs were treated in their community. She said that the *datus* and the *imam* who congregated at the *masjid* played very crucial roles in disciplining individuals and children within their community on how to treat individuals with a disability.

Sailenur shared that she usually stayed inside their house in the Muslim compound where her family and relatives lived. She shared, "*Wala naman pong bullying dito (community).*" (There is no bullying here.) Her grandmother, who was also her caregiver, shared that her relatives and classmates from the private Christian school kept Sailenur company. Sailenur mentioned that she was regularly invited to community activities such as jogging or some sports activities by her relatives and classmates. The *asatidz* framed their conceptualizations about community support using the Islamic perspective and said that MLWDs were treated with respect and care. The positive interactions of the MLWDs with people within their communities contradicted the theses offered by socio-anthropology about the contestations of forces in society as well as conceptualizations related to "slender body ideals" and the tendency for objects to be expelled (Evans et al., 2009). Islamic perspectives provided overarching guidance within Muslim communities.

Grit. This study also found that the MLWDs could offset the absence of nurturing ecologies such as a nurturing home, an inclusive school setting, and a supportive community, with grit. The MLWDs in both cases demonstrated grit when they showed their desire to fit in their respective communities. The other participants in the study identified the importance of grit in the community setting to be able to fit in and get by. Duckworth (2016) and Christopoulou et al. (2018) both conceptualized grit in light of a challenge or a difficult circumstance. They said that grit is the perseverance of effort and holding steadfast until one reaches the goal.

The education-focal person in Case 1 said, "*Para masolusyonan ng isang kabataang may kapansanan ang pag-aaral kahit mahirap lang siya, kailangan niya ng tiwala sa sarili, lakas ng loob. Character niya. Malaking bagay iyon, kasi iyon ang driving force eh.*" (For a learner with a disability to finish studies even when he is poor, he needs to believe in himself, courage, and character. Those are the major driving forces.) The caregiver of Sailenur stressed the importance of developing very good relations with others including non-Christians to survive, thrive, and have access to education. The community leader of Sailenur who herself has a dual disability spoke extensively of the need to develop grit and self-advocacy skills especially when one has a disability. She said she learned how to be courageous as an MLWD growing up without her mother. She said,

“Kailangang tanggap mo na may kapansanan ka. Kapag tanggap mo, iisipin mo ang mga kaya mo at hindi mo kaya. Kapag naisip mo na iyon, iyong mga hindi mo kaya, iisipin mo kung paano mo mareresolbahan, iyong mga paraan para makaya mo iyan. Hanggat magkakaroon ka rin ng lakas na loob tsaka tapang. Kailangan matibay ang loob mo.” (You need to accept that you have a disability. If you accept it, you would know your strengths and your weaknesses. If you know your weaknesses, you will learn how to address them until you develop boldness and courage.)

Lastly, the education focal person in Case 2 said, *“...kung gusto niya talaga makatapos ng pag-aaral, ginagawa niya ang lahat. Pursige.”* (If a child really wants to finish school, he will do everything. Perseverance.)

Grit is a desired personal quality that can aid any individual in achieving personal goals and become emotionally and socially adjusted. The personal quality of grit is demanded in venues or sites where vulnerable groups are often subjects of ostracism and marginalization.

Table 7

Perception and Experience of Accessible Education of MLWD and Key Informants in a Private Madrasah (Case 1)

Case 1	Main Themes	Sub-themes	Examples of Basic Themes
MLWD	Microsystem	Culture of respect for MLWD	“Ay, hindi. Never akong binully dito. Magagalit iyong mga datu.”
Parent	Microsystem	MLWD marginalized by classmates and teachers	“Kasi siyempre, siya, hindi siya marunong sa sarili niya. Kaya ang sabi ng teacher, dapat na i-transfer daw sa kapwa may kapansanan. Doon daw pag-aralin.”
Ustadz	Microsystem	MLWD must be tougher	“Pareho lang, dapat mas magpursige siya kasi madami siyang pagsubok na haharapin.”
Community Leader	Mesosystem	Parents need to provide time and guidance	“Iyong magulang dapat gabayan mo yung anak mo. Yung oras din. Dapat bigyan mo ng oras. Pangatlo na lang iyong pera.”
Educ.-Focal-Person	Mesosystem	Parents must address self-esteem of MLWD	“Sabi ko nga huwag susukuan. Para magkaroon din ng confidence iyong bata. Magkaroon siya ng tiwala sa sarili niya na kakayanin niya.”

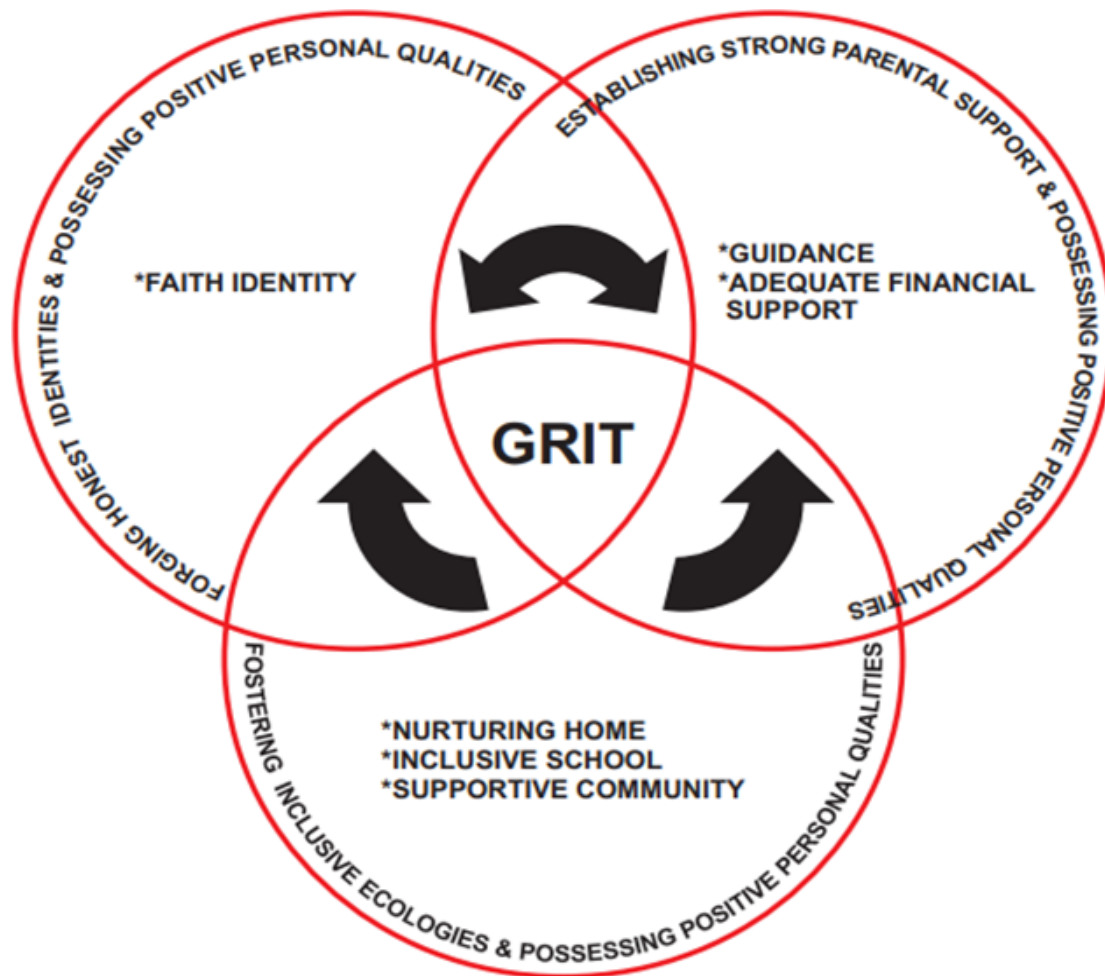
Table 8

Perception and Experience of Accessible Education of MLWD and Key Informants in an Inclusive School Setting (Case 2)

Case 2	Main Themes	Sub-themes	Examples of Basic Themes
MLWD	Microsystem	MLWD is the one who finds her way in school	“Ako na po ang gumagawa para sa sarili ko. Kapag halimbawa po may seating arrangement. Tapos sasabihin ko: “Ma’am, dito po ako kasi hindi ko gaanong nakikita.” Pumapayag naman po sila.”
Parent	Microsystem	Equal treatment of MLWD informed by belief in Allah	“Parehas lang ang tingin ng mga magulang sa kanila (MLWD) kagaya ng normal nilang anak. Bakit mo ikinakahiya iyan ang bigay sa iyo ni Allah?”
Ustadz	Microsystem	Care of child is parents’ obligation to children and Allah	“Dapat ang magulang mabigyan niya ng good moral character ang anak niya. Pananagutan iyan ng magulang sa anak at kay Allah.”
Community Leader	Microsystem	Need for disabled to have acceptance and grit	“Kailangang tanggap mo na may kapansanan ka. Kailangan matibay ang loob mo.”
Educ.- Focal- Person	Mesosystem	Low SES can be offset by determination and perseverance	“Kung gusto niya talaga makatapos ng pag-aaral, ginagawa niya ang lahat. Pursige.”

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework for the Study: Accessible Education Framework



The study upholds the agency of the individual, the MLWD, as central to determining access to education. As conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the individual lies at the center, influencing and being influenced by various ecologies surrounding him, his own family and friends, his classmates in school, and his community. Drawing from the affirmation model of disability (Crutchley, 2017), where the understanding of an individual begins from the consideration of his strengths and needs, the MLWD is considered a primary agent and actant who proactively decides and determines his own fate. The MLWD lies at the center, creating personal choices for himself and his own future. MLWD grit is an amiable positive personal quality which an MLWD must wield in all the overlapping ecologies of the self, the family, and the community to have greater access to education. In the context of the ecological perspective, the relationship between the MLWD and the various ecologies is also deemed to be bidirectional, reciprocal, and mutually evolving as represented by the two-headed arrows in Figure 1. The ecologies where the MLWD is located are also conceptualized as a set of overlapping structures which incorporate interconnections including influences from the larger surroundings. To have greater access to education, an MLWD needs to exercise grit at all levels of interaction with his ecologies. Having grit is a desirable and

positive personal quality which serves as the foundation of personal identity, parental support, and a harmonious relationship with others. Even when considered mandatory, education is not freely accessible and warrants an investment not only of money but also of personal resources and effort.

Conclusions

Several themes emerged from the case analysis and the conduct of semi-structured interviews in the study. The study found out that disability was being framed consistently by Muslim participants using religion through the concepts of *qadar* and the Divine Preordination, one of the cornerstone beliefs of the Islamic faith. The framing lays the foundation for how MLWDs are regarded in the family and in the community. However, even if participants interpreted disability based on their faith, they also viewed the treatment of disability using the bio-medical as well as the affirmation models of disability. This indicates the harmonization of religion and science and an acknowledgment that Islam values surrender to divine power as much as they act based on free will. Faith identification can be self-constructed and can be leveraged by MLWDs in developing positive personal characteristics such as grit. Acknowledging one's faith is an important factor that can determine greater access to education.

The study observed that parents' attitudes and involvement in their child's education determined access to education. In the same light, the study confirmed the relationship between parental socio-economic status and having greater access to education. It was observed that MLWDs who had parents with higher levels of education and higher social status tended to prefer education in the mainstream and provided enriching after-school activities that aided in the achievement of positive school outcomes, while MLWDs who had parents with less education and lower socio-economic status tended to avail of education only in the madrasah. All participants in the study agreed with the importance of having financial resources, even in sending their children to public schools. However, in both cases, grit could be utilized by individuals to mitigate the effects of low parental level of education and low parental social status. Having parents with less education or lower socio-economic status must not be a deterrent to having access to education. Individuals possess inherent personal qualities such as grit that can potentially enable them to overcome challenges and provide them greater access to education.

The study also highlighted the importance of nourishing and supportive environments to ensure greater access to education. The home or the family is the most important of all ecologies in ensuring greater access to education. Bullying in school is a deterrent to access to education and must not be in any way tolerated. Although public schools are trying to prevent the occurrence of bullying, the inclusion of MLWDs in the regular classroom is still an aspiration yet to be fully realized. The respondents emphasized the importance of the positive personal quality of grit in order to surmount the challenges that naturally go with a disability. With disability being framed by religion and faith and basic respect for human dignity, a Muslim home, school, and community provide a nourishing ecology for MLWDs.

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