

## RESEARCH PAPER

# Exploring the Lived Experience of Students with Hard of Hearing Impairments in Primary Schools at Ambo Town

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## Abstract

*The purpose of the study was to investigate the lived experiences of students with hard of hearing impairment (SWHHI) in Ambo town, Ethiopia. A phenomenological study was employed for this study. Seven students with hard of hearing were purposefully selected and interviewed. The qualitative analysis yielded three overarching themes: challenges of SWHHI, support provision for SWHHI, and coping strategies. The findings of this study showed that participants received support from home and school though not in a consistent and planned manner. SWHHI faced challenges including, communication barriers, social isolation, and community attitude related problem. Moreover, coping mechanisms such as self-help, adaptation, social networking, and creating supportive learning environments, were emerged as crucial strategies for overcoming academic challenges emanated from hearing loss. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of SWHHI and offering implication for creating accessible and inclusive learning environment for SWHHI.*

**Keywords:** Hearing impairment, inclusive education, phenomenology, coping strategies

## Introduction

Globally, individuals who are partially deaf are referred to as hearing impaired (WHO, 2011). When someone uses amplification devices like hearing aids to help them hear better (Asres, 2018), it usually relates to their difficulty hearing sounds, especially speech (WHO, 2011). People who have hearing impairments are typically described as having difficulty with communication, social participation (Malado, 2024), and daily functioning, especially in noisy environments or environments where there are many speakers and loudspeakers (Smolen and Paul, 2023). It is recognized that hearing impairment (SWHHI) poses significant barriers in various walks of life, particularly in educational settings (Aldersey *et al.*, 2024).

The challenges for primary school students with hearing impairments include a lack of

good support provision, the problem with the school physical setting, a lack of community support for SWHHI, a lack of social integration, and the impact on their emotional health (Malado, 2024). Hearing impairment is considered a high difficulty and risk for providing quality education to students with hearing impairment in developing countries (WHO, 2011). Students with hearing impairments have special challenges and opportunities in Ethiopian primary schools (Tesfaye, 2020), which have a significant impact on their academic development and social integration (Wezzie *et al.*, 2020). According to earlier studies, social isolation, communication hurdles, and educational challenges are common issues faced by SWHHI (Tesfaye, 2020). Overcoming all obstacles, particularly those posed by their classmates and the school community as a whole, is essential for children with SWHHI to

successfully navigate this crucial time (Tedla and Negassa, 2019).

Provision of technical and resource must be available for SWHHI, teachers, and educational experts who work with SWHHI more closely and help them by using sign language (Wolderufael, 2022). Education stakeholders need to acknowledge and assist students with hearing problems (Chimdi *et al.*, 2015), regardless of their severity, since they can greatly hinder their capacity to learn and communicate in the classroom (Mekonnen *et al.*, 2015). Hearing issues, ranging from minor to severe, can significantly impair students' abilities to communicate and learn in the classroom, and it is the responsibility of education stakeholders to recognize and support them (Tedla and Negassa, 2019). Children with SWHHI require specific assistance, particularly schooling materials and support services for students with hearing impairment because they frequently experience severe problems and hazards with inadequate support (Deginesh and Arsat, 2016). Since primary school sets the groundwork for later learning and personal growth, it is seen as a crucial stage in a child's development (Abunu, 2022).

Extended and systematized help is necessary for students with hearing impairment if we want them to benefit from educational opportunities like their age mates (Tedla and Negassa, 2019). In particular, issues such as adapting teaching strategies, having access to assistive listening devices, or improving learning environment in the way barriers to academic and social activities will be resolved should be thoroughly investigated and put in place (Tesfaye, 2020). However, the poor quality of such provisions (Garbi, 2023), particularly in resource-scarce settings, causes serious challenges on the education of SWHHI. In line with this notion, a study conducted by Mekonnen *et al.* (2015) unpacked the socio-emotional challenges SWHHI had been going through in Ethiopia.

Coming to Ambo town where the principal researcher has been working for over 15 years, there are SWHHI across the schools within the

town. And these students have been going through hardships with no or a meager support to address their specific needs. However, there is no formal study conducted and documented the experience and the challenges these students are going through and how they are managing the challenges and able to stay in school. Therefore, this article aimed to explore the lived experiences of students with hearing impairments (SWHHI) in primary school grades 5 to 8, in Ambo Town, Ethiopia. It highlighted issues like their experience of being hard of hearing, available supports, challenges they faced and coping strategies they employed. The results are meant to help concerned bodies create resources and tactics that work for SWHHI.

## Materials and Methods

### Research Design

Phenomenology is the study of phenomenon, i.e. experience, event or emotion where they lived experiences of people will be explored and conceptualized in the way they understood and lived with (Creswell and Poth, 2018). As a result, a phenomenological study was chosen to study the lived experience of students with hard of hearing in Ambo Town Elementary School.

### Participants of the Study

In the phenomenological study, the number of participants typically ranges from 5 to 25 (Creswell, 2014). In this context, 7 students with SWHI from grades 5 to 8 were purposively selected for the study. The purposive sampling method was employed as the primary method for selecting the participants (Creswell, 2013).

### Procedures of Data Collection

Three schools having students with Hard of Hearing Impairments were purposefully selected. They are Addis Ketema, Awaro, and Liban Mecha Primary Schools. Following the selection of the schools, the principal investigator reached out to students with SWHHI to obtain their consent (Creswell,

2013) after permission granted from each school. The ethical clearance letter the researchers obtained Ambo university's Department of Special Needs and Inclusive Education were presented to schools while requested them their cooperation.

In-depth interviews were utilized to gather data for this study (Creswell and Poth, 2018). All interview were conducted by principal investigators being supported with interview guides developed by both researchers. During the interview, the researchers was used open-ended prompts to encourage students with SWHI to reflect on their experiences and articulate their perspective. In so doing, the tips and tricks proposed by Creswell and poth (2018), to solicit deep and authentic experiences.

The prompt are designed to elicit rich descriptive account that capture the nuances and complicities of the schooling experiences (Creswell 2014). After conducting in depth interviews ,the researcher transcript each of the seven interviewees in the language of the interview (Afan Oromo). They assigned pseudonyms to each transcript ,labeling them as transcript 1 through 7. All identifiers that could reveals the participants entities were removed. Subsequently, each transcript was translated them in to English, preparing them for analysis. Then, we analyzed data though thematic analyzes to identify key theme and pattern in participants lived experiences.

Finally, we interpreted finding to understand the essence of the phenomenon under investigation; all with an emphasis on the perspectives and meaning participants generate for their experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

### **Method of Data Analysis**

In this article ,a detailed and interactive process of analyzed individual cases to understand the lived experiences of participants was employed. In this study reflective thematic Analyses was employed. Open coding was employed during analysis to break down

qualitative data into meaningful codes and concepts (Chinyere and Val, 2023).

This allowed the researcher to identify important themes and arose directly from the experiences of the participants without the needs for preconceived categories ,an essential step in delving into lived experiences. To develop a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon by analysis the interactions between various themes, the researchers then employed axial coding ,which involves finding connection and relationship between the initially coded concepts

The data interpretation involves a deep immersion into students with SWHI impairments narratives ,focusing on identifying key themes and meaning related to their lived experiences of their educational challenges and opportunities. To gain a thorough grasp of participants lived experiences and significant the attach to a given phenomenon ,the researcher coded categorized and analyzed the data

### **Trustworthiness**

Creswell (2009) outlines several strategies for enhancing trustworthiness in phenomenology studies Among these, one is establishing a clear and coherent process for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Alase, 2017). As a result, the researchers documented their methods thoroughly to allow for replication and verification of the findings (Adler, 2022).

The second strategy is ensuring credibility. The researchers were engaged in prolonged engagement with the phenomenon under study (Adler, 2022). This entails devoting enough time to fully comprehend the research setting to have a thorough comprehension of the experiences of student with hard of hearing impairment (Creswell, 2009).

Additionally, researchers used two types of data sources, such as interviews and observations to triangulate findings and corroborate interpretations (Tsang, 2014). However, the data from observation was not included in the report. We used it only to

triangulate and understand better what has been accounted by interviewees.

In this article, transferability was also ensured. While phenomenology studies often focus on the unique experiences of specific individuals or groups, researchers strive to provide rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon to enhance transferability (Adler, 2022). By

The researchers ensured the confidentiality of participants identities and data. This includes securely storing and anonymizing data to prevent unauthorized access or disclosure (Creswell and poth, 2028).The researchers used pseudonyms or code to refer to participants in any report or publication to protect their privacy

In addition, Participation in the study was voluntary ,participation did not feel coerced or pressured to take part (Creswell and poth, 2018). Researchers was made it clear that participation in entirely voluntary and that individual can withdrawal from the study at any time with consequences.

Results

Table 1. The participants descriptive demographic data

Name	Sex	Grade	Types Disability
P01	Male	7	Hard of hearing impairments
P02	Female	8	Hard of hearing impairments
P03	Female	5	Hard of hearing impairments
P04	Male	5	Hard of hearing impairments
P05	Male	5	Hard of hearing impairments
P06	Male	6	Hard of hearing impairments
P07	Male	6	Hard of hearing impairments

Table 1 indicates that the 7 students with hard of hearing impairments (SWHI) in grades 5 to 8 participants in this study.To maintain secrecy, each student is represented by a code; sex, grade, and kind of disability are among the demographic characteristics. Students with hard

providing thorough contextual information and vivid descriptions of participants' experiences, researchers enable readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts or populations. In sum, by incorporating these strategies, researchers enhanced the trustworthiness of the study.

Ethical Consideration

Moreover, in the study the researchers obtained ethical approval from institutional review boards (IRBS) before conducting the study. Ethical Approval ensures that the researcher meets established ethical standards and guidelines and protects the right and welfare of participants (Creswell, 2009).

By adhering to these ethical considerations, the researcher conducted phenomenological studies responsibility and ethically ,respecting the rights, well- being and dignity of participants while producing valuable insight into the schooling of students with disability at primary school in case of Ambo Town.

of hearing impairments (SWHI) are the focus of this study. This data sheds light on the makeup of the student sample and helps to clarify the traits of the participants who contributed to the study's conclusions.

Theme 1: Challenges of the schooling experience for SWH

Table 2. Themes and Subthemes

Groups	Categories
Theme 1	Challenges of the schooling experience for SWHI
Subthemes	Communication barriers
Subtheme	Social isolation
subtheme	Community’s attitude
Theme 2	Support provision for SWHI
Subtheme	Support from family for SWHI
Subtheme	Support provision in school for SWHI
Theme 3	Coping strategy for SWHI
Subtheme	Self-help
Subtheme	Adaptability and resilience
Subtheme	Networking
Subtheme	Creating accessible and inclusive learning environment

Table 2 shows that the study's findings were categorized into themes. Three main themes were developed, with sub-themes established beneath each theme.

Theme 1: Challenges of the Schooling Experience for SWHI

One of the most recurring themes in the discourse of the participants was *the challenge* they were going through in relation to hearing status. *The challenge* appeared to manifest itself in terms of communication barriers, social isolation, and community’s attitude.

*Communication barrier* – In this context, it refers to the lack of effective information flow necessary for creating a shared understanding with one’s environment. Shared understanding

is crucial for social interaction and the learning process. The creation of this understanding depends on how well individuals receive, analyse, and respond to information from their surroundings. However, communication barrier emerged as one of the common challenges students with hard of hearing impairments are facing. Communication barrier, according to participants, deprives learners’ valuable learning opportunities. For illustration:

*....I frequently missed important information during lessons and struggled to follow classroom discussions...” (P01).*

*“....My hearing condition is challenging me to understand my teachers and fellow peers. (P02)*

*The biggest issue has been understanding the teacher's voice clearly. Particularly when there is a noise and disruption in the classroom, it becomes very difficult to follow what the teacher is saying. This in turn affect my ability to follow instructions, participate in class discussions, and engage in group activities. P07*

As the above excerpts show, SWHHI in Ambo town are experiencing communication barriers which negatively interfere with their learning process. Because of the hearing challenges, these students couldn't properly understand instruction, and engaged in the learning process.

*Social isolation* - being SWHHI in Ambo Town, is not only hindering academic engagement but also contributing to feelings and/or act of *social isolation*. These students are tend to isolate themselves and other also leave them behind. The following excerpts were selected to shed light on the issues from the house's mouth.

*I often perceived as silent or withdrawn. Because of that, I ended up distancing myself from my classmates and became quite isolated. This social isolation made it difficult to form network with other classmates. (P07).*

*I also struggle to communicate with my friends. Because of communication problems, I was often left out. Participating in group work was difficult. I could not understand what was going on, and sometimes others seemed to avoid working with me. This made me feel lonely and less confident. P01.*

*Sometimes, having a hearing impairment feels like being isolated from others. But I try to stay calm. I know that I'm different from others, and often that brings me anxiety. If someone is angry because I didn't hear them, I feel hurt. P03.*

*Community's attitude* - Another critical challenge faced by SWHHI is the lack of a supportive school community that understands their needs and acts responsibly. While some teachers and classmates offer excessive care,

others tend to ignore them, primarily due to a lack of understanding. One student noted:

*I experience mixed attitudes. I enjoy learning with friends and teachers who support me, but it's difficult to deal with those who don't understand me. a few others treat me differently. Sometimes they act like I'm not smart just because I can't hear. It makes it hard to talk or play with them. P04.*

Another interviewees added:

*No one really understands my situation properly. Sometimes, I remain silent in class out of fear because I didn't hear what was said. Teachers tend to overlook my hearing problem. P05*

*Some teachers don't understand that arranging seat and providing resource that compensate student with hearing impairments is their responsibility. ...these teachers and school leaders don't provide us the support we entitled to received. P06*

*".....no one can understand me... lack of awareness leads me to misconceptions, inappropriate actions, or even discrimination in educational settings...."(P04)*

In general, students who are hard of hearing (SWHHI) face significant challenges related to communication, social isolation, and the community's understanding and attitudes toward their needs. The communication barriers resulting from hearing difficulties often exacerbate these challenges. Many SWHHI struggle to fully comprehend what teachers and fellow students are saying, leading to discomfort and a diminished sense of belonging. This discomfort can result in social withdrawal or exclusion from peers. Additionally, a lack of awareness regarding the nature of hearing impairments, as well as the rights and support required by SWHHI, causes the school community, including teachers, school leaders, and fellow students, to overlook their needs.

## Theme 2: Support Provision for SWHI

The support provision for students with hearing impairment in schools is critical for facilitating their academic success. Within this context, the availability and accessibility of learning materials are critical factors that influence the learning experiences of students with hearing impairments. The discussion on support for students with hearing impairments revealed two key subthemes: support from schools and support from families.

*School-based support* - Schools are normally expected to identified the specific needs of students and make necessary preparation and support that make all learning environment, learning materials, and learning activities accessible to SWHHI. However, as seen from the extracts below, such support is not provided in the study cites in a planned and consistent manner.

"....Throughout my elementary school years in Ambo Town, I had limited access to assistive technology, such as hearing aids."(P07).

*Some people try to understand and support me, but many do not. That makes me feel like I lack self-worth or confidence. Sometimes, when I try to explain myself, others don't understand or even seem to ignore me, which feels painful.* P02

*Most of the time, when teachers assign homework, I don't fully hear what they say. Either their direction or voice doesn't reach me clearly. So, I struggle to understand what I'm supposed to do for homework.* P05

From this result, school-based support for students with hearing impairments in primary school in Ambo Town was very limited from year to year. Even the important educational material for SWHI was very limited and needed the attention of the responsible body.

*Family-based support* - some of the respondents reported that the family-based support provision was a reason for their success at least in school attendance. One participant

said: .... *to overcome the difficulties I am with because of my hearing, my family's support has been crucial. They speak out for my needs, emotionally supporting me, and avail resources and accommodations to facilitate my education...*"(P06)

Another participant added:

*Despite the hardships they are going through at home, my family has been the most supportive pillars in my educational journey. Even though my family has a limited budget, they are giving me practical help, motivation, and emotional support. ... They are the only reason for my progress in schooling despite my hearing loss. They constantly support me at home and bring my issues to my teachers through discussion...*(P09).

*Family-based support* is perceived by many respondents as an immediate and plausible solution for tackling challenged posed by hearing impairment. One important factor in overcoming these difficulties turned out to be family-based assistance. To obtain needed resources and accommodation, respondents mentioned that their families played a crucial role in supporting them emotionally, speaking up for their needs, and advocating for them (P06). The grants not only enhanced their educational path but also enabled them to practice communication strategies at home and interact with teachers in the classroom (P09 & P01). While social and family support were generally found to have some beneficial elements (Wakoya, 2024), it is clear that educational settings need better support systems and more comprehensive assistive technologies (Tedla and Negassa, 2019).

## Theme 3. Coping Strategies of SWHI

Students with hearing impairments have their coping strategies in primary school in Ambo Town. *Self-help, adaptability and resilient, networking, and creating accessible and inclusive learning environment.*

The respondents responded that *self-help* (assertiveness) is a way of overcoming the challenges of the schooling experience. "...For

*me, being hard of hearing in school is about embracing who I am and finding strength in the unique experiences I have had. ".....I have a profound respect for the strength of advocacy and self-determination as a result of overcoming the difficulties associated with attending school while hearing-impaired. I believe in advocating for my needs and rights as a student with a disability, while also empowering others to do the same."(P07).*

Another participants added that adapting oneself to and resiliently confronting the challenge posed hearing loss as one of the best coping strategy.

*Despite the obstacles, I learned valuable lessons like being resilient and keep on flexibly adapting myself to the situation. I do all possible things to catch up with my classmates...(P06).*

*Yes, I commit to lifelong learning! My experience has reinforced my belief in the transformative power of education and lifelong learning. Despite the challenges I have faced, I remain committed to pursuing knowledge, growth, and personal development, recognizing education as a lifelong journey of discovery..." (P03).*

It is interesting that SWHHI tends to use flexibly combination of strategies such as changing seating position, using assistive device, and seeking support from fellow students.

*... I use a range of techniques, including making use of assistive technology, taking a seat in the front of the room to improve my ability to hear the teacher, and being honest with both teachers and peers about my needs. To prevent burnout, I also make sure to give self-care priority and effectively regulate my energy levels. I try to reach out friend also for their help whenever I need.... (P07).*

Based on these results, we can infer that an important tactic employed by students with hearing impairments in Ambo Town primary schools to get over obstacles in their educational journey is *self-help* and *assertively*

*adapting self* to the existing situation. . According to the respondent's view, resilience is mostly attributed to accepting oneself and finding strength in one's own experiences.

There are also participants who witnessed the act of initiating and sustaining *social network* as ways of overcoming challenges triggered by hearing loss. Two of the interview extracts presented hereunder for illustration.

*.... I have good relationships with some of my classmates. I borrow an exercise book from them. They are cooperative in this regard. ...This helps me to compensate for what I missed during teachers' teaching....I do the same with my family members and teachers as well (P04).*

*I always take the initiative to create a contact and friendship with fellow students. ...My friends are my mirror. They are my second family. They understand me well, and they facilitate everything for me in the classroom... (P05).*

The above excerpts, therefore, indicate that students with hearing impairments in primary schools in Ambo Town demonstrated the possibility of overcoming educational challenges driven by hard of hearing through establishing network with fellow students, teachers and family members.

*Creating an accessible and inclusive learning environment* is another strategy that participants in the study emphasized as essential for ensuring quality primary education for all students, despite having been denied this opportunity themselves. For illustration:

*....My experience has made me a firm believer in the value of accessibility and inclusivity in education. I believe that every individual, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, deserves equal opportunities to access education and thrive in a supportive learning environment....However, reality on the ground is far from this...(P06).*

*".....I couldn't find conducive situation like alternative seating, access to assistive*



*technology, and communication support like sign language, or writing services that I actively seek out, and no one at this school remembers this. Sometimes, I need teachers or administrators to meet my needs, but I have learned that I have never spoken to them, and their understanding is low....”(P03).*

In general, there are multiple strategies that can be used to overcome education related to challenges by students with hearing impairment. Among these, *self-help, adaptability and resilient, networking, and creating accessible and inclusive learning environment* emerged as core strategies by the study participants. The evidence implies that to ensure equal opportunities for all students, it is necessary to increase inclusion and accessibility in educational settings, educational materials and teaching methods. Besides, school-based and home-based support should be well coordinated and provided in program manner.

## Discussions

The study provides insight into the lived experiences of students with hard of hearing impairments. Several recurring themes brought to light the difficulties SWHI students encounter, as well as the coping mechanisms and network of support that help them remain resilient.

The study highlights how it is for families and educational institutions to support SWHI students (Vuuren *et al.*, 2023). While it may be difficult for school to make suitable modification (Fite, 2023), family support is essential for promoting students' needs and advancing their education (Asres, 2018). Nonetheless, there are still accessibility and understanding, which suggested that SWHI students require more resources and support.

During their time in school, SWHHI face a variety of difficulties, among which *social isolation* is one. This finding is also confirmed by study conducted by Tadla and Negassa (2019), in their study on deaf students in the northern part of the country. Moreover, *communication* obstacle, and lack of

understanding from school community also reported as difficulties that affect students' well-being and academic achievements, which emphasizes the need for more understanding and assistance in learning environments (Asres, 2018). Students at SWHHI show tenacity and resourcefulness in overcoming obstacles to education despite the difficulties they encounter (Chimdi, 2015). The development of supportive relationship, flexibility, and self-help become an essential strategy for overcoming the challenges of education for those with hard of hearing impairments (Malado, 2024). SWHHI students enable others and themselves to achieve academic success by speaking up for their needs and creating inclusive environments (Wolderufael, 2022).

## Conclusion

This study focused on the lived experiences of SWHHI in primary school Ambo Town. The result of this study indicates that SWHHI face difficulties in various aspects of their educational journey.

Notable challenges such as isolation, communication barriers, and issues related to their characteristics of school community were observed. Parents and the school support are seen as crucial to the academic success of children with HHI at Ambo Town Primary School.

The research indicates that children should be able to advocate for themselves and adapt to their environments to overcome challenges. These findings suggest that educational institutions must support system establish inclusive policies and a thorough support system to embrace and children to overcome challenges, they should be able to advance for themselves and adapt to their environments.

## Implication

To ensure that students with hard of hearing impairments can fully participate in educational activities, school should prioritize providing adequate material support and accessible infrastructure. Training teachers and other school staff on the specific needs of hard

of hearing is essential for creating a more inviting and supportive learning environment. Involving family in the education process and encourages peer support network can enhance educational activities of SWHHI. Additionally, fostering self-assertiveness and resilience's among these students can empower them to overcome challenges and achieve academic success.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study students with hard of hearing should receive support tailored to their specific needs and challenges within the educational setting. It's important to increase among classmates, teachers and administrators regarding the problems SWHHI students face, and to be appropriate instructional actions when problem arise. SWHHI students should be provided with adequate resources and accommodation, such as assistive technology and sign language, to develop their learning and communication skills and to live well with the community.

In a welcoming and inclusive school culture that celebrate diversity, it is good to make and encourage students and staff to feel compassion and empathy for each other. To better support SWHHI students it's necessary to provide teachers and with opportunities for professional developments and train to improve their knowledge and skill on the issues of students with SWHHI.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declare that there is not conflict interest regarding the publication of the paper.

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