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DEVELOPING A POSITIVE AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR LGBTQ+ THROUGH THE LENS OF THE STUDENTS

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Article history:	Abstract:
Received: 18 th August 2021	This study investigated the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in secondary school to develop a positive and inclusive environment inside the classroom. A qualitative phenomenological study was employed to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students (n=11) via semi-structured interviews to guide the selection and coding to identify emerging themes. Thematic analysis revealed four themes from the lived experiences of the LGBTQ+ students, namely: (a) impact of discrimination and bullying in studies, (b) support, respect, and acceptance; (c) creation of LGBTQ+ students' bodies; and (d) inclusivity of LGBTQ+ students in the curriculum. It was recommended that schools provide a positive and inclusive environment inside the classroom and implement an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum to create gender equality. An inclusive curriculum will create a safe and positive classroom climate for LGBTQ+ students.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer+ (LGBTQ+) people worldwide continue to face challenges in education, especially in secondary school (Burns, 2011). Adolescence is a time of physical, cognitive, psycho-social development, and identity formation can be difficult, especially for students who identify LGBTQ (Lozier & Beckman, 2012; Patterson, 2013). In addition, bullying, suicide attempts, homelessness, alcohol use, and unsafe sex are higher risks for LGBT teenagers (Kann et al., 2011 & Coker et al., 2010). The way parents respond to their LGBT adolescents can greatly impact their children's current and future mental and physical health. Supportive reactions can help adolescents cope and thrive (Coker et al., 2010 & Bourie et al., 2010).

Students who classify as LGBTQ+ in schools report feeling less secure, respected, and validated than their heterosexual and cisgender peers, resulting in lower participation and achievement (Kosciw, Greta, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016; Lecesne, 2012; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). In addition, the secondary school campus is often a hostile and lonely environment for secondary level LGBTQ students (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014), who are frequent targets of school-based victimization ranging from seeing or hearing anti-gay nicknames to physical abuse (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010).

According to UNDP, USAID (2014), LGBTQ+ people are subject to abuse, bullying, and discrimination, under the guise of "academic freedom," which encourages schools and educational institutions to make their policies. The curriculum does not include the issues among LGBT students. In 2012, the Department of Education (DepEd) issued an order to protect children from abuse, bullying, and exploitation, regardless of sexual orientation. Pride celebrations on schools and campuses and the appointment of LGBT students to student councils were examples of positive case

studies. DepEd consolidated a report on bullying cases in elementary and secondary schools in private and public with 31 daily bullying incidents.

Teachers were less comfortable intervening with bullying based on gender identity than with bullying based on ethnicity, skill, or religion, according to the study, which surveyed approximately 2,500 teachers and students across the country. In addition, only half of the teachers had taken steps to establish a safe atmosphere for their LGBTQ pupils, such as providing visible signs of support or penalizing students who used homophobic language (Minero, 2018).

The Cebu City Council has passed an anti-discrimination ordinance that further safeguards all people's rights, regardless of age, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, to combat discrimination and foster a culture of respect. The resolution is following City Ordinance No. 2339, also known as "An Ordinance Prohibiting Discrimination in the City of Cebu based on Disability, Age, Health Status, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Ethnicity, and Religion," which prohibits discrimination based on disability, sexual orientation, health status, gender identity, ethnicity, age, and religion. The city is the first local government body to pass anti-discrimination legislation. In addition, the ordinance further promotes the institutionalization of LGBTQ+ community services and initiatives (Leyson, 2016).

As much as these measures have been determined to effectively address the situation, LGBTQ+ people, especially students in school, still face bullying and discrimination in terms of gender expression and sexual orientation and remain a pervasive issue in schools. Hence, the study was conducted to investigate the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in secondary school to develop a positive and inclusive environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many students who identify as LGBTQ report being confronted with an exclusionary and hostile school environment (Arredondo, Gray, Russell, Skiba, & Snapp, 2016; Birkett, Russell, & Corliss, 2014; Currie et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2014; Patterson, 2013; Pearlman & Dunn, 2016). Marzetti (2017) argues that a radical shift is required to transform institutions to successfully support and celebrate LGBT+ campus communities, allowing universities to truly call themselves 'proudly proactive' (Marzetti, 2017).

There were more negative reactions than positive attitudes towards LGBT students. However, a result has shown that most respondents have accepted and supported the LGBT people and can become allies (Duhaylungsod et al., 2018). Beck et al. (2018) discussed interdisciplinary strategies to improve cooperation and understanding among schools, family members, and social service agencies about the experiences of LGBT youth in foster care. Researchers and school counselors will identify needs and gaps in services and provide momentum for policy gains that benefit LGBT youth in foster care with increased visibility and recognition.

When studying a novel with a gay character, Dinkins and Englert (2015) looked at how the heteronormative nature of one middle school setting and classroom atmosphere influences LGBTQ students' feelings of safety, encouragement, and learning. Snapp et al. (2015) revealed that an inclusive curriculum for LGBTQ was most often taught in humanities and social sciences as a stand-alone lesson. Thus, rarely met the standards of social justice in education.

Negative school environments have a negative impact on LGBTQ students' academic performance and ambitions, contributing to higher absenteeism, lower educational expectations, and lower grade point averages, to name a few examples (Kosciw et al., 2016; Wimberly, Wilkinson, & Pearson, 2015). Students who encountered higher levels of victimization based on their sexual identity and gender expression had a slightly lower recorded grade point average (GPA) than students who experienced less abuse and attack (2.9 vs. 3.3)." (Kosciw and colleagues, 2016, p. 45) and LGBTQ students victimized more often for their sexual identity or gender expression than those victimized less frequently. Thus, not only is the victimization of one section of the student body concerning the moral imperative of ensuring healthy learning environments for all students, but it also concerns because it directly impacts these students' learning and educational outcomes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is conducted to describe the life experiences of LGBTQ+ students in secondary school and to develop a positive and inclusive environment inside the classroom which can shed light on:

1. Thoughts about discrimination and bullying among LGBTQ+ students happening in schools.
2. How to encourage teachers, parents, and students to support LGBTQ+ students in their studies.
3. School policy/provision to impose/change/enhance a positive school environment with LGBTQ+ students.
4. Issues, gaps, and concerns of LGBTQ+ students that need to be considered.

This study aimed to provide a framework of LGBTQ+ Inclusivity curriculum that schools and teachers can use to create a safe, positive, and inclusive classroom environment for LGBTQ+ students.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study primarily aimed to describe the individual experiences of LGBTQ+ students in secondary school. A qualitative phenomenological study was employed to capture the participants' lived experience, obtain a thorough understanding of the phenomenon (Colazzi, 1978), and provide an improved conceptualization to construct a framework to guide teachers in developing a positive environment for LGBTQ+ students.

2.2 Participants of the Study

Eleven participants were identified using the purposive sampling technique. The selection criteria for sampling were as follows: (1) they must identify themselves as LGBTQ+ students, (2) must be 18 years old and above, and (3) a bonafide student at the school. Therefore, the sample size was eleven (n=11) LGBTQ+ students in Cebu City, Philippines. A semi-structured interview was used in the study consisting of two parts – Part A. demographic information and Part B. semi-structured questions. The interview guide was constructed in three versions: English, Filipino, and Cebuano version as deemed appropriate.

2.3 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through a semi-structured interview with eleven (11) high school students in Cebu City, Philippines. Marton and Booth (1997) recommend the interview as the preferred data collection tool in phenomenographic research because interviews provide flexibility in probing for clarification and gathering sufficient detail to develop a detailed description of participant perceptions. Students completed a 10–20-minute in-depth interview in which they were asked to describe their experiences in school as an LGBTQ+ students and how they can help the school create a positive and inclusive school environment. In addition, all the participants were briefed about the study, and written informed consents were solicited for their participation and audio recorders to record the interview more accurately.

2.4 Data Analysis

A modified Colaizzi’s seven-step method was used for data analysis. It is an iterative refinement process to ensure no detail of the phenomenon is missed (Colaizzi, 1978). The interviews were transcribed, and transcriptions were read twice to determine themes and subthemes. Conventional content analysis, an inductive approach, was utilized. For the inductive analysis process, first words, phrases, and sentences were compared, and meaningful units that show patterns were identified. Then, open coding was used, concepts were determined, and subthemes were created and defined. Next, relationships between subthemes were assessed by using tables and diagrams to indicate conceptual patterns. Finally, themes were formulated through line-by-line coding and integration of sub-themes through constant comparison, modification, and analysis of concepts. Findings were discussed with a group of experts to ensure adequate analysis and interpretation of the data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

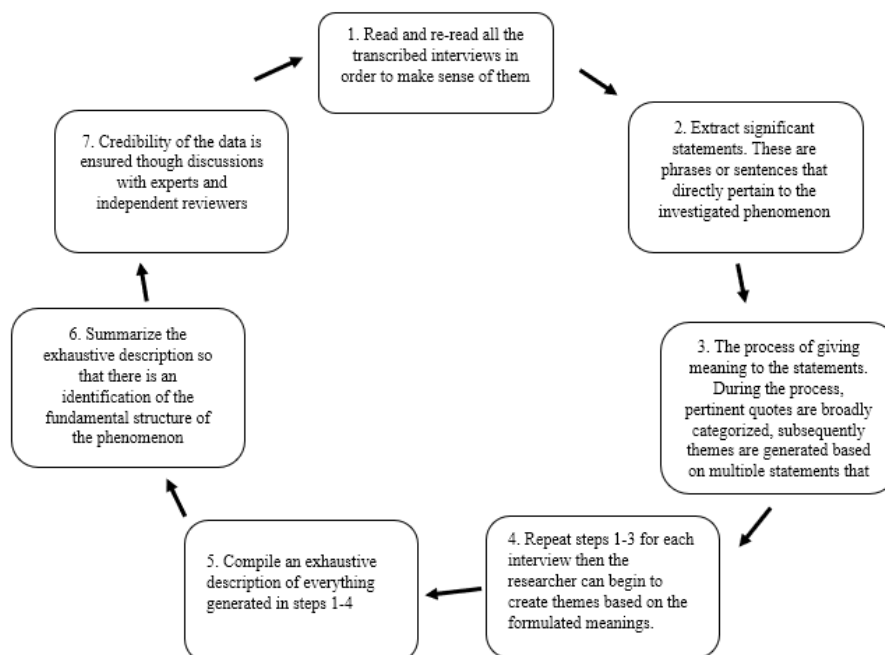


FIGURE 1. A modified Colaizzi’s seven-step method for data analysis.

2.5 Rigor and Trustworthiness

In the study, the participants were determined through the inclusion criteria to narrate their experiences in taking up research to ensure consistency and credibility. For authenticity, findings were reviewed, and essentiality was established to the problem set by the problem. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were used to ensure the qualitative data was trustworthy (Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, & Casey, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After conducting the interviews, the researcher transcribed voice recordings to improve the data's credibility. When the researcher found expression confusing or could not understand, participants will be called and will be requested to confirm what they want to express. Then, the data will be coded, and themes will be drafted. The subthemes and their relationships with the data were explored many times by the researcher. Finally, the sub-themes were combined to form themes. Regarding data conformability, the emerging trends will be submitted to the participants, who will be asked to provide input about what they will say during the interviews to accurately recount their experiences.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Strict confidentiality was assured to the participants who were specified through the informed consent form. Adhering to the ethical principles during the conduct of the entire study was also observed. The informed consent was given before the interview began. They were asked to volunteer for the study understanding all the rights of withdrawal and refusal. Any personal information like names, telephone/cellphone numbers, and address or direct identity obtained during this study that could identify the participants was kept strictly confidential

3. FINDINGS

The goal of this study is to describe the experiences of the LGBTQ+ students and how they can help the school to create a positive and inclusive environment for them. Series of codes were utilized to mark emphasis on key points from the text as the product of transcribed audit trails. Grouping of similar codes was done to ensure workability and functionality that gave rise to the emerging categories.

Themes

Eliciting accurate description of the participants' experiences was done by asking the appropriate questions. This focused on the identifying the main essence of central theme that expands knowledge. At descriptive analysis of transcripts revealed four (4) major themes which characterized the participants' responses: (1) impact of discrimination and bullying in studies; (2) support, respect, and acceptance; (3) creation of LGBTQ+ students' bodies; and (4) inclusivity of LGBTQ+ students in the curriculum. These themes labeled using direct quotations from the participants; this was done to express the original idea conveyed by the participants.

Theme 1 Impact of Discrimination and Bullying in Studies

LGBTQ+ students have faced discrimination and bullying based on what they perceived in terms of gender expression and sexual orientation. Bullying puts students at higher risk for depression and can affect even their academic performance.

"There were instances that I was bullied because of my gender preference. They will call me gay, but I am not ashamed of myself because that is who I am and what I am. Self-acceptance is the key." (P1)

"It hurts me a lot with someone call me gay, no education at all. I am human and I can still be hurt." (P2)

"My experience as part of the LGBTQ+ is that I always get bullied by my fellow students in the campus. I feel like I do not belong in this world." (P3)

"Some students will not respect you because of your gender preference. If they will respect me then in return, I will respect them as well." (P4)

"Being a LGBTQ student studying in high school, people will judge you for your physical appearance and for who you are." (P5)

"I experienced being bullied by my classmates. They will call me gay and make fun of my gender preference. But they take it as a joke which is fine with me." (P6)

Though, LGBTQ+ students performed in schools both in academics and non-academics. They are still bullied by their classmates due to their gender preferences. These instances can be observed inside and outside of the school.

"Sometimes, I am discriminated, and they make fun of me. They will say that I'm not good at school and I'm only focusing in making myself beautiful, but it is okay with me because I make sure that I focus on my studies and my close friends accepted me for who I am." (P9)

Theme 2 Support, Respect and Acceptance

For LGBTQ+ students, they found an ally in the classroom that support, respect, and accept them for who they are and what they are and stands up for their rights. They make a significant contribution towards the LGBTQ+ students in their studies. They demonstrate that LGBTQ+ people are not alone as they work to improve school climate, and to take a stand in places where it might not be safe for LGBTQ+ people to be out or visible.

"It is okay to be gay as long as you are being respected by the people around you. If there is acceptance for LGBTQ+ students, we will not be discriminated, and we can focus on our studies." (P1)

"I need support so that I can finish my studies." (P3)

"I never experience being discriminated because of my gender preference because my classmates supported and respected me." (P4)

"Others will appreciate LGBTQ+ students because they have a rare talent that others do not have." (P5)

"My classmates accepted me for who I am. Inside the classroom, we are like family. They became my brothers and sisters. Whatever their approach towards me, I accept it." (P6)

"Some of classmates became my allies because I can do some things that some people cannot." (P7)

"I did not experience any discrimination because everybody loves me and accepts me." (P8)

"I will ask my classmates and teachers to accept me for who I am and what I am because it can improve my academic performance because I am motivated. Respect begets respect." (P9)

"They should trust us so that it can boost our confidence. If they accept me, my academic performance will improve." (P10)

Theme 3 Creation of LGBTQ+ Students' Bodies

School groups, whether they represent the entire LGBTQ+ community or a subset of it, can be an invaluable support group for LGBTQ+ students. Teachers may help their students develop leadership skills by acting as mentors, counselors, or supporters for various organizations. From middle school to college, this segment highlights popular LGBTQ+ student organizations.

"In our school, there are lots of club like Science, Mathematics, English, etc. but no club for the LGBTQ+ students. It is necessary to have a club like Gay-Straight Alliances to empower us to be an advocate to fight equal rights, school safety, and positive classroom climate." (P1)

"First, there should be an exclusive comfort room for LGBTQ+ together for the security. During classes, the teacher should inform or raise awareness to students about the LGBTQ+ students. There should know to their selves that it is not right to discriminate or bully students." (P3)

"It is necessary to have groups for us. My classmate will respect me inside the classroom because they are aware of my rights because we have this kind of club." (P4)

"A creation of LGBTQ+ club is necessary for the students for those who have identified LGBTQ+ students so that they will know their rights and privileges." (P9)

"There should be LGBTQ+ clubs or organization to attain gender equality. The school should also support this club for the safety and positive environment for us LGBTQ+ students." (P10)

"There should be a rule is school where there is no discrimination for LGBTQ+ students and there is acceptance. It can also be possible to have club or organization so that we can express ourselves." (P11)

Theme 4 Inclusivity of LGBTQ+ Students in the Curriculum

Many young people who identify as LGBTQ+, or same sex attracted, gender diverse, or living with an intersex variation, have a right to feel safe at school. It is important to understand the significance of LGBTQ+ students' inclusion in the curriculum. Students of all sexual orientations and gender identities benefit from LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula in many ways: LGBTQ+ students receive affirmation of their experiences, sexual orientations, and gender identities, as well as a safe space to share their viewpoints and values.

"If there is a policy that the school will impose for the LGBTQ+ students, it should be the proper haircut and uniform because proper haircut is not part of your studies. If you're a LGBTQ+ student, you want to express and explore for who you are and what you are just like the straight students. There should be a freedom and a chance for them to express their selves. Include the LGBTQ+ in the planning and making of the school curriculum for the improvement of their academic freedom." (P5)

"They should accept and include us in the class. There should be class for the awareness of gender stereotypes and different gender preferences. These should be included in the curriculum so that the students will be united and there will be no discrimination and bullying that will happen to us." (P6)

"I will respect the rules and regulations of the school and inside the classroom, but the teacher should acknowledge our presence. If my teacher, classmate, and the school administration will support, acknowledge, and include us in the curriculum, it would create a safe environment for us LGBTQ+ students. There should be a stop bullying sign inside the classroom as well. We will support the rules of the school." (P7)

"If there is a presence LGBTQ+ students in school, there should be rules and regulations for them so avoid discrimination and bullying. It should be implemented across the curriculum and students, teachers, and administration should know about it. If we are being accepted or conformed by everybody then it would a great opportunity to us to showcase ourselves. It is a very nice experience for us" (P8).

"They should trust us so that it can boost our confidence. If they will accept me or us and my academic performance will improve." (P10)

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Despite the effort of the teachers and the school, bullying and discrimination remain a widespread issue among LGBTQ+ students in high school. This puts students at higher risk for depression and can affect even their academic performance. The result of the study suggested that wthey found a supporter in the classroom who fights up for their rights and supports, respects, and accepts them for who and what they are it can help to reduce or eliminate discrimination and bullying. These allies demonstrate that LGBTQ+ students are not alone. This research investigates the situation of the students and how these students can help develop a positive and inclusive environment for them. This can help to promote intervention to the LGBTQ+ students. Future studies could look at other factors that may influence the result, evaluate the results of this study in various communities and investigate the efficacy of unique youth-led anti-bullying initiatives. A mixed method can be employed to understand discrepancies between quantitative and qualitative findings. Reflects the participants' viewpoints, gives study participants a voice and ensures that study results are based on their experiences.

Students who identify as LGBTQ+ are often marginalized. The increasing number of students who identified themselves as LGBTQ+ students are often marginalized and isolated. These students expect that their needs must be met and understood to be part of the curriculum. However, schools are not prepared to fulfill their need and scrambled to provide a positive and inclusive environment.

The school and the other stakeholders must learn gender and development policies and practices to address the needs of LGBTQ+ students. In addition, it is important to understand the importance of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in the curriculum. These can help them receive validation of their experiences, backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender identities, as well as a safe environment to share their perspectives and values.

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