

Issues Related to Lesbian and Gay Students' Experiences: Implications to the Promotion of Gender-Safe Spaces

John Paul D. Reloj



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Abstract

Harassment based on sexual orientation still happens in many schools. This study investigated the diverse issues and experiences of lesbians and gays as viewed by both heterosexual and lesbian and gay groups based on the data from a mixed-method study. The participants of this study were students from an external campus of a state university, involving 281 heterosexual and 40 lesbian and gay students. The participants were selected using the snowballing method. The researcher employed a structured questionnaire, focus group discussions, and observations. Using descriptive techniques and thematic analysis, the researcher found that most lesbians and gays who participated in this study received equal treatment from teachers and staff, and the activities of the campus promoted safe spaces for lesbian and gay students. On the other hand, other students encountered problems such as peer rejection and homophobic remarks, as well as parental rejection expressed in different ways. As a coping technique and coming-out process, they skipped school and joined groups that offered support. The findings imply that fostering gender-safe spaces should be integral to a student development program.

Keywords

safe spaces, lesbians and gay, inclusive student development program

Corresponding Author:

John Paul D. Reloj
Palawan State University
Puerto Princesa City 5300
Palawan, Philippines
Email: jpreloj@psu.palawan.edu.ph

Greece – 48%, Cyprus – 56%, Lithuania – 61%, felt discriminated against based on sexual orientation (Kiapoka, 2020).

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is present even in school settings. Russel (2011) reported that LGBT youth are not inherently at risk – the environments they grow up in are the problem. The author asserted the risk of homophobia in schools. His finding affirmed the study of Evans et al. (2017), as cited in Ferrer et al. (2021), who stated that lesbians and gays are often at high risk of violence. In contrast, discrimination, isolation, and avoidance are the extraordinary experiences of gay students on campus. The study of Russel and Horn (2016) reiterated that harassment based on one's actual or perceived social identity, such as sexual orientation, remains a prominent concern in many schools. Homophobic harassment is the most common harassment evident in schools, which may even result in more negative treatment. In the study conducted by Kiapoka (2020), about one in seven children had been subjected to some form of physical harassment and/or physical violence because of their sexual orientation (14.6%), gender (12.6%), and/or gender expression (19.3%).

1. Introduction

What causes a person to have a particular sexual orientation? Scientists disagree on the exact reasons why someone acquires a heterosexual, gay, or lesbian inclination. Many people believe that both nature and nurture play important roles and that most people have little or no control over their sexual orientation (American Psychological Association [APA], 2008). Children who were born males but are sexually attracted to the same sex as theirs often self-identify as gays. Children who were born as females and are sexually attracted to females are self-identified as lesbians according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). People with the said sexual orientations are often mentioned as members of the LGBT group.

According to American Psychological Association (APA, n.d.), LGBTQ is shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. It also refers to an individual's sense of personal and social identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions and behaviors. Ferrer et al. (2021) stated that these people are at high risk of violence. In the study of Michael and Kleden (2018, as cited in Neviyarni et al., 2020), 89.3% of Indonesian people who were members of the LGBT community suffered from violence because of their sexual identity. According to LGBT Survey in the EU, around half of participants in all three countries, namely,

Nevertheless, it does not mean that the school is completely not safe for lesbians and gays because, beyond teaching and some academic requirements, schools can foster the development of student's social and personal well-being. Thus, students are taught relevant knowledge and skills through their courses to improve their personal and emotional capacities and overall well-being. However, just like any other school on the campus where this study was conducted, lesbian and gay students still experienced problems and issues related to homophobic remarks and unfair treatment made by other students and, on a few occasions, other teachers, and staff.



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This finding is related to the study of Hafford-Letchfield et al. (2016), which tried to know teachers' reactions to homo-transphobic bullying. They found that teachers joined in the mockery, rather than taking a stand against the bullying. Similarly, teachers seemed unwilling to help lesbian and gay students. In the cases in which some teachers attempted to take anti-homophobic and anti-transphobic actions, these usually led to confrontations between teachers and students (Kiapoka, 2020).

Furthermore, verbal harassment among lesbians and gays, as expounded in the study of Pizmony-Levy and Kosciw (2016), had been the most common form of discouragement in schools: almost half of the U.S. lesbian and gay students (46.4%) were verbally harassed often, and lesbian and gay students were more vulnerable to school violence. According to the EU LGBT survey (2013), more than eight in 10 of all respondents in each LGBT group witnessed negative comments to a schoolmate who was perceived to be LGBT. According to the Colour Youth Greek National School Climate Survey, one in three children received some form of verbal harassment due to their sexual orientation (32%), gender (31.1%), and/or gender expression (50.3%) (Kiapoka, 2020).

In the Philippines, LGBT people continue to face violence and discrimination. This discrimination is manifested in the form of bullying and harassment directed toward young LGBT people from various organizations, including families, schools, and communities (Psychological Association of the Philippines [PAP], 2011, as cited in Ferrer et al., 2021). Religious affiliations, cultural norms, and family expectations are the dominant elements that influence gay individuals in dealing with their sexuality in a typical Filipino setting of a conservative and traditional family (Nadal & Corpus, 2013, as cited in Ferrer et al., 2021).

During the 106th session of the human rights committee for the fourth periodic review of the Philippines, the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) submitted a report to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee. The said Commission asserted that police raids on LGBT venues occurred regularly without warrants. During these raids, police unlawfully detained individuals and then verbally abused and extorted money from them (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission [IGLHRC], 2011). These violations were unlawful; thus, those police faced charges according to the provision of the Revised Penal Code. However, the provision does not clearly define the conduct for which it is required. This results in disproportionate and discriminatory applications against lesbian and gay individuals. There have been bills that were lobbied to pass in Congress, such as the Anti-Discrimination Bill, which was introduced in 2000 but still has not been passed after 12 years. Hence, the Philippines still does not have anti-discrimination legislation up to this date.

Issues of discrimination encountered by lesbians and gays are still common in schools in the Philippines. Casey and Levesque (2018), as cited by Ferrer et al. (2021), stated that some gay college students experienced discrimination. Ferrer et al. (2021) showed that two out of 10 participants shared their stories of discrimination at school and in society. One of the participants verbally experienced discrimination because of gender. The prejudices and

discrimination against lesbians and gays can cause suppression and changing identities and expressions, including immediate consequences such as fear, sadness, alienation, anger, and internalized stigma (PAP, 2011).

Several mental health professionals through the Psychological Association of the Philippines (2011) agreed that to eliminate stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and violence against lesbians and gays, there is a need to repeal discriminatory laws and policies and support the passage of legislation at the local and national levels that protect the rights and promote the welfare of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions, even in schools. Mental health professionals consider teachers' role central to the prevention of discrimination and gender-based violence in the school environment.

Therefore, schools that are expected to provide a place of hope for proper education among the youth must step forward to create policies and programs that promote safe spaces for lesbians and gays. Why? The number of lesbians and gays is dramatically increasing. Neviyami et al. (2020) cited three recent studies that show the number of lesbians and gays in different countries, that is, data from the Integrated Household Survey (IHS) in England in 2020. One percent of adults, or 481,000 people identified themselves as gays or lesbians. A survey in the United States also revealed that 3.5% of adults in the United States identified their sexuality as lesbian and gay. In the Philippines, there are 50 LGBT organizations actively participating in discussions on the human rights of LGBT people (UNDP, USAID, 2014). On the external campus of a state university where the present study was conducted, among 1267 students in 2018, 2.5% of the total population of the campus perceived themselves as lesbians or gays.

In the study of Ncanana and Ige (2014), it was reported that the number of gay and lesbian students had been steadily increasing over the last three years, with new students identifying as homosexual or lesbian every year. This highlights the need to increase awareness among the gay and lesbian community, as well as the public, about the human rights violations experienced by homosexuals and lesbians at the university. Prejudice, bullying, and cruelty toward lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people (LGBT people) are still rampant in society and tertiary institutions. While the primary fear of lesbian and gay parents (and parents with lesbian and gay children) is that their children will be bullied in school, their second concern is a lack of an inclusive curriculum (Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016). This involves encouraging respect for everyone and supporting a student's capacity to empathize, connect, and cooperate with diverse peers. All students, especially lesbians and gays, need to see themselves reflected in their curriculum. As a result, inclusive curricula can have a big influence. Gay students, for example, report feeling safer, missing school less frequently, and feeling more connected to their schools where an inclusive curriculum is used; they also report feeling more accepted by their peers. (Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016).

However, just a few previous studies have investigated the circumstances and characteristics of schools that foster negative attitudes and behaviors toward lesbian and homosexual students (Russell & Horn, 2016). Taking this into account, the researcher of the current study hopes to learn more about lesbians' and gays' experiences, which will serve



as a foundation for developing various interventions to establish a safe space for them. Educators can help by creating an environment where contentious ideas can be discussed respectfully, openly, and honestly. Safe space is a term used to describe these discursive contexts (Arao & Clemens, 2013, as cited in Ghemmour, 2022). As a result, another study recommended safe space training. Safe space training is an educational program aimed at equipping straight, cisgender allies with the fundamental knowledge and skills needed to help LGBT people. This improves attitudes towards creating a safe space (Gacita et al., 2017).

Given the foregoing, this study aimed to identify the issues regarding academic and school performance, school activities and organization, and challenges faced by gay and lesbian college students. It also aimed to determine the coping mechanisms, the coming out process, and participants' recommendations for safe spaces.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The mixed-method evaluation was used in this study. It has been referenced as "empirical research that involves the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data" (Allan, n.d., Slide 4, as cited in Almalki, 2016). Greene et al. (2005, as cited in Abma, 2005) stated that combining various methods leads to a better, more comprehensive, and more insightful understanding. In this study, the quantitative methods used were the survey questionnaire and classroom observation since they used numerical measurement to infer. Specifically, in the questionnaire, the questions were grouped according to the profile of the respondents and the issues that confront promoting safe spaces for lesbian and gay students on campus. Afterward, visits were made to the classrooms to observe selected classes and activities to verify the gathered data and obtain further information. This study also used the qualitative method through focus group discussion (FGD), which primarily gathered information from the group of heterosexual students and lesbian and gay students regarding the issues related to the promotion of safe spaces. This also verified the gathered data from the questionnaire and group observation. The study was conducted before the pandemic when face-to-face classes were held.

2.2. Research Participants

The participants for this study were heterosexual, lesbian, and gay students enrolled in the second semester of the school year 2015 to 2016 at the external campus of a state university. Using Slovin's Formula, the researcher distributed questionnaires to 321 students, representing a sample size of 20% of the total population of 1603 students. Utilizing a snowballing approach, the researcher administered questionnaires to the participants consisting of 40 lesbian and gay students and 281 heterosexual students.

2.3. Instruments

The researcher used the following methods in the study: survey questionnaire, focus group discussion, and observation.

2.3.1. Survey Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into two parts: the first part was composed of the personal profile of the respondents that included age, gender preference, program, and year level for both the heterosexual and lesbian and gay students. The second part covered three areas of concern to elucidate the issues: academic and school performance, school activities and organization, and challenges faced by lesbians and gays.

As regards academic and school performance, five statements were included (e.g., *Lesbian and gay students excel academically in their courses when they perceive classrooms as being a safe space; Lesbian and gay students are treated equally by teachers or staff*). There were also five statements for school activities and organizations (e.g., *School activities on the campus provide a safe space for lesbian and gay students; Lesbian and gay students' organizations are acceptable to the campus*). The third area, which focused on the challenges of gay and lesbian college students, included seven statements (e.g., *Heterosexual students prefer a lesbian or a gay student to be a leader; Heterosexual students are comfortable with lesbian and gay students*).

To answer the second part of the questionnaire, a five-point scale was used: 5 (Strongly Agree), 4 (Agree), 3 (Neutral), 2 (Disagree), and 1 (Strongly Disagree). The survey questionnaire was researcher-made and was validated by several professionals, researchers, and guidance counselors.

2.3.2. Focus Group Discussion

Initially, the researcher sent a letter to selected participants for the focus group discussions (FGDs) indicating the objectives of the FGD, the risks and benefits of participating in the study, the time, and the venue. The participants were grouped according to their preferred gender, i.e., heterosexuals, lesbians, and gays. Their real names were not used in the data. Instead, they were coded as "hetero-participant 1, lesbian or gay participant 1, etc.". In the FGD for heterosexual students (with eight participants), the researcher presented the survey questionnaire results where participants discussed other issues to confirm or elaborate on the results. Similar procedures were conducted in the FGD for lesbians and gays (with 12 participants). In addition, they discussed other concerns and issues based on their observations and experiences with faculty and other students and eventually proposed some programs and interventions.

2.3.3. Observation

The researcher selected five classes to be observed where there were at least four lesbian and gay students, according to the observation and recommendation of the instructors. During the observation, the researcher used two sets of checklists. The first set was given to the course instructors to observe the behavior of the heterosexual, lesbian, and gay students in their classrooms. The second set included additional indicators to be observed, which focused on the behavior of the instructors toward their lesbian and gay students.

The first set specified six behaviors that were given attention during the classroom observation (e.g., *The heterosexual students respect the ideas and opinions of the lesbian and gay classmates during the class discussion; The heterosexual students respect a lesbian or gay classmate*

being their leader during classroom activities; The heterosexual students respond with consideration whenever lesbian and gay issues are raised in the discussion). The observers were asked to check the corresponding box indicating that the behavior was “observed” or “not observed”. The researcher was present in the classroom; however, the instructors only knew the intention of classroom observation.

The second set of checklists included five indicators of behaviors displayed by instructors (e.g., *The teacher has favoritism toward lesbian and gay students; The teacher includes information about lesbians and gays who made significant contributions in the past; The teacher discusses current events, including lesbians and gays' issues; The teacher uses examples of lesbians and gays in lectures and discussions*). This set was used by the researcher only to observe the instructors.

2.4. Research Procedure

The researcher asked permission from the director of the campus, through the campus research coordinator, to conduct a survey. The research study started upon approval. Similar requests were also made for the selected heterosexual, lesbian, and gay students while emphasizing the strict confidentiality of the data. As for the distribution of the survey questionnaire, the researcher considered the class schedules of the students and instructors. The researcher used the snowball approach to identify the gender preference of the respondents before the questionnaire was given, and their answer in some parts of the profile in the questionnaire affirmed their gender preference. The same procedure was used for lesbian and gay students. Further, those who did not check any from the gender preference might be considered “missing”. To verify the data, the researcher conducted classroom observations. Classes with at least four members of lesbians or gays were considered for observation. A checklist was used in the observation. Finally, the researcher conducted separate focus group discussions with the selected groups of lesbian and gay students and heterosexual students using the results of the above-mentioned questionnaires. Before the discussion, the researcher explained the objectives, risks, and benefits of participating in the study while emphasizing the strict confidentiality of the data. Data gathered were analyzed, and themes were generated to come up with a Student Development Program (SDP).

2.5. Data Analysis

2.5.1. Quantitative Data

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics like frequency, percentage, mean, and interpretation. Frequency and percentages were applied to describe the community's acceptance of lesbian and gay students and the support for the input programs and services related to promoting safe spaces for them. Mean was used to determine the centrality of the data in the problem of heterosexism and the support to the lesbian and gay students' concerns in the school setting. The weighted mean was used to convert the quantitative data to a qualitative

one. Data in observation were analyzed using frequency and rank.

2.5.2. Qualitative Data

The data gathered from the FGD with heterosexuals, lesbians, and gays were coded to generate themes through thematic analysis. The qualitative data in FGD were described and analyzed through content analysis.

2.6. Ethical issues

The researcher considered the ethical issues of the study by assuring the utmost confidentiality of the participants and the data provided in the questionnaire and focus group discussions. The researcher used pseudo-names for participants, such as hetero-participant 1, gay-participant 1, etc. The researcher secured the questionnaires, and only the researcher could access them. During the focus group discussions, the researcher explained the objectives, risks, and benefits of participating in the study. In addition, participants were informed that if any of them wished to withdraw their participation, their data would be deleted and would not be included in the research report.

3. Results

This section discusses the issues related to the promotion of safe spaces for lesbian and gay students as perceived by both heterosexual and lesbian and gay students in terms of the following: academic and school performance, school activities and organization, and challenges faced by gay and lesbian college students. For the presentation of the data, mean and overall mean were utilized. Further, in the qualitative results, themes are used to present the data. Themes are categorized as challenges encountered and participants' recommendations for safe spaces.

3.1. Issues Related to Academic and School Performance

Table 1 shows the mean and interpretations of the indicators observed in terms of the academic and school performance of the heterosexual respondents compared with that of the lesbian and gay groups. The heterosexual ($\bar{x}=3.92$) and lesbian and gay groups ($\bar{x}=3.96$) agreed that teachers and staff treated lesbian and gay students equally and that having a safe classroom space could help them excel academically in their courses. Moreover, instructors had no prejudices against lesbians and gay students.

The current finding is in coherence with the study of Pearce and Cumming-Potvin (2017), who conveyed the teachers' perception of an increased acceptance by their peers of those students who were openly exploring their sexuality and of greater ‘tolerance’ of students with diverse sexualities. The findings of Aguirre et al. (2020) also reported that 66% of teachers answered that they respected the students' decisions and addressed them according to their choice (being a boy who wants to be treated as a girl or vice versa). The school's culture where teachers treat well lesbians and gays can lead to greater acceptance and openness.



Table 1
Observed Indicators along with Academics and School Performances

Observed Indicators	Mean	
	Hetero Group	Lesbian & Gays Group
1 Lesbian and gay students are treated equally by teachers or staff.	3.92	3.96
2 Lesbian and gay students excelled academically in their courses when they perceived classrooms as safe space.	3.68	3.92
3 The current pedagogy or methods in the teaching of instructors provide safe space to lesbian and gay students.	3.35	3.27
4 Lesbians and gays are bullied during class discussions.	2.86	2.98
5 Instructors have prejudices against lesbian and gay students, resulting in having low grades.	2.36	2.54

Legend: Strongly Agree (4.01-5.00), Agree (3.41-4.20), Neutral (6.21-3.40), Disagree (1.81-2.60) Strongly Disagree (1.00-1.80)

3.2. Issues Related to School Activities and Organization

Table 2 presents the observed indicators' results in school activities and organization as perceived by heterosexual, lesbian, and gay respondents. Among the observed indicators, item 1 got the highest mean. The heterosexual ($\bar{x}$ =3.71) and lesbians and gays ($\bar{x}$ =3.58) agreed that an organization for lesbian and gay students was acceptable on the campus. This implies that lesbian and gay students were allowed to create their own organizations.

However, both groups, the heterosexual ($\bar{x}$ =2.29) and lesbian and gay groups ($\bar{x}$ =2.56) disagreed that there were activities and seminars that focused on the welfare of lesbian and gay students. This implies that the activities intended for lesbian and gay students on the campus were lacking. The 2016 to 2019 accomplishment reports submitted by the Gender and Development (GAD) coordinator of the campus where this study was conducted showed that most of the programs and activities implemented focused mostly on women's empowerment, women's laws, and men's gender studies.

The findings of the current study are consistent with the study of Santos and De Jesus (2020). In their study, lesbians and gay students strongly believed that they were unable to participate in school activities. This means that being a lesbian or gay student did not prevent them from participating in school activities. However, some challenges of lesbians and gays may be addressed if there are activities and seminars for the welfare of lesbian and gay students. Moreover, the current findings also suggest the creation of an organization for lesbians and gays. The school-based organizations can be a place for lesbian and gay youth to spend time with peers and may increase social support for sexual minority youth (Jordan, 2000, as cited in Heck et al., 2011).

Table 2
Observed Indicators Along with School Activities and Organization

Observed Indicators	Mean	
	Hetero Group	Lesbian & Gays Group
1 Lesbian and gay students' organization is acceptable in the campus.	3.71	3.58

Table 2 cont.

Observed Indicators	Mean	
2 School activities on the campus provide safe spaces for lesbian and gay students.	3.27	3.14
3 There are school activities that discriminate against the role of lesbian and gay students.	2.64	2.78
4 Lesbian and gay students have limited opportunities to join school activities and programs.	2.58	2.74
5 There are activities and seminars for the welfare of lesbian and gay students.	2.29	2.56

Legend: Strongly Agree (4.21-5.00), Agree (3.41-4.20), Neutral (2.61-3.40) Disagree (1.81-2.60), Strongly Disagree (1.00-1.80)

3.3. Observed Indicator Along Propriety

Table 3 shows different indicators regarding the challenges faced by lesbian and gay students. Both groups agreed that having a safe school environment could help lesbians and gays grow socially and that heterosexual students were comfortable with them.

The current findings affirm that lesbian and gay adolescents benefit from inclusive school practices. This is consistent with O'Shaughnessy's (2004, as cited in Russel, 2011) study, which found that students felt safer at school and reported less anti-LGBT harassment when their schools had inclusive policies. Furthermore, children who reported inclusive policies were more likely to identify various resilience aspects, including having a voice to contribute at school and feeling cared for by adults and instructors. Moreover, according to the 2007 National School Climate Survey, students who attended schools with comprehensive safe school policies reported less hostile and more supportive environments: they heard fewer homophobic remarks, experienced less victimization or bullying, and had more teacher intervention when the harassment occurred (Greytak et al., 2009). Finally, students who attended schools with comprehensive policies reported fewer suicide attempts (Goodenow et al., 2006, as cited in Russell, 2011).

Table 3
Observed Indicator Along Propriety

Observed Indicators	Mean	
	Hetero Group	Lesbian & Gays Group
1 Lesbian and gay students grow socially when they perceive the school community as a safe space for them.	3.68	3.80
2 Heterosexual students are comfortable with lesbian and gay students.	3.53	3.67
3 Heterosexual students prefer a lesbian or a gay student to be a leader.	3.41	3.38
4 Groups of heterosexual students call lesbian or gay student names.	3.13	3.12
5 A bullied lesbian or gay student withdraws from classes.	3.11	3.08
6 Lesbian and gay students who feel unwanted by their peers of the same sex may commit tardiness and absenteeism.	2.98	2.80
7 My lesbian and gay classmates hesitate to come out for fear of meeting prejudices and discrimination.	2.93	2.74

Legend: Strongly Agree (4.21-5.00), Agree (3.41-4.20), Neutral (2.61-3.40) Disagree (1.81-2.60), Strongly Disagree (1.00-1.80)

3.4 Challenges Encountered

Lesbians and gays had unpleasant encounters with their classmates, instructors, and staff, according to both groups of participants (heterosexual and lesbian and gay students). They heard homophobic comments from their instructors, staff, and some of their classmates. They also claimed that there were no school-based support groups or programs. They were unsure where to turn because their families were unsupportive of their sexual orientations, gender identities, and manifestations; hence the different challenges encountered by the lesbians and gays within and outside the campus.

3.4.1. Homophobic Remarks

Upon analysis of participants' descriptions, some gay students heard teachers being insensitive to lesbians and gays in classroom discussions. Renn (2000) explained that students told of occasions when faculty made derogatory jokes. In the present study, most participants shared their stories or experiences regarding their teachers' remarks during classroom discussions. The participants said that, during class discussions, instructors used examples that made homosexuals and gays uncomfortable.

Kasi pag nagbibigay sila ng examples tungkol sa mga bading, lalo na yong mga instructor na lalaki, sa kanila parang nakakatawa. Kunwari natatawa na rin kami, pero sa loob-loob ay nasasaktan kami. [Because when they give examples about homosexuals, especially the male instructors, to them it seems funny. We pretend to laugh too, but inwardly we are hurt] - Gay Participant 1

One gay participant added that he also experienced from a staff member some homophobic remarks before his clearance was signed.

Nakaraan naka-experience ako nyan (homophobic remarks) eh. Parang bago ka mapipirmahan ng clearance, kailangan niya muna na insultuhin ang pagkatao mo... katulad ng "150 muna, presyong alaga lang. lang." [I experienced that before (homophobic remarks). Before my clearance was signed, it was like he needed to insult me first like "150 first, for a pet price. Just kidding"] - Gay Participant 7

Another gay participant experienced bullying from a staff member.

Nagkaroon lang ng mga pang-aasar sa amin ng isang staff. Kagaya ng "gays are animals too". [One staff member teased us like "gays are animals too."] - Gay Participant 12

Gay participants even shared some names being called to them by their peers:

Akin, "chaka ka." [Mine, "ugly."] - Gay Participant 3

Akin, "baklang itim." [Mine, "black gay."] - Gay Participant 5

"Bitukon" minsan. ["Big tummy", sometimes.] - Gay Participant 2

According to gay participants, they just laughed whenever they were called such names.

However, some gay participants heard that some students and teachers used the words 'gay' or 'lesbian' in a negative way.

Narinig ko yung magbabarkada, sabi nila "... para kang bakla, ang hina mo naman". Totoo, kahit mga instructors minsan, narinig ko "bakla lang ang umiiyak." [I heard a group of friends, they said... you look gay, you're weak. It's true that even instructors sometimes, I heard them say "only gays cry."] - Gay Participant 6

A participant also said that a gay student was questioned unconstructively when trying to join a pageant.

Dati, sir, mayroong gustong sumali (in a pageant as Mr. Intramural) na bisexual. Kaso ang tanong sa kanya, "Bakit ka sasali? Alam mong bakla ka. Maya sabihin nila nagdadaya tayo." So hindi napasali yon. [There was a bisexual who wanted to join (in a pageant as Mr. Intramural); but they questioned him, "Why would you join? You know you're gay. They might accuse us of cheating." So, he was not allowed to join.] - Hetero Participant 3

Another participant said that a gay student could not participate in the pageant for Mr. Intramurals unless he concealed his real gender identity.

Mr. Intrams, kailangang "totoong" lalaki lang. Kung maglilihis lang o makakapasok man, paratag lang. At yun talaga na tinatago nila ang sarili nila. [In Mr. Intramural competitions, the participants must be 'real' men. If they hide their gay identity, only then they can participate. And that's really what they're doing.] Hetero Participant 1

This was confirmed by other heterosexual participants when asked if they were in favor of lesbians and gays expressing their gender through crossdressing or the wearing of clothes designed for the opposite sex.

Masagwa man kasi bakla sila eh. [Not appropriate, because they are gay.] - Hetero Participant 5

Ayoko yung bakla na maglaladlad. Nireespeto ko yung bakla, pero kung maglaladlad. [I don't want gays to crossdress. I respect gays, but if they cross-dress, I don't like it.] - Hetero Participant 7

The current findings are in coherence with the study of Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2014), who reported that lesbian and gay students were forced to behave as heterosexuals.

Hearing homophobic remarks at school was a common occurrence. In the United States, nearly three-quarters (72.2%) of respondents said they frequently heard



the word gay used in a negative way (such as “That’s so gay” or “You’re so gay”), and slightly more than two-fifths (44.8%) heard other types of homophobic remarks such as “faggot,” “dyke,” or “queer” used in a negative manner (Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016).

In the Philippines, according to Ferrer et al. (2021), most respondents suffer from verbal bullying by mocking or making fun of them, and six out of 10 of them suffer from classmates’ or schoolmates’ discrimination by teasing or making fun of them. Sometimes, they feel left out or out of place just because they are gay.

3.4.3. Lack of Support from the Family

The difficulty of coming out emerges because of fear of rejection and punishment from the parents. This affirms the study of Roe (2016) that parents’ initial reactions are most often not positive; however, coming out is necessary, and lesbian and gay youth want explicit support from parents and family members. The descriptions of the participants in the current study revealed otherwise.

The participants said that sometimes the reason for not coming out is the family:

Minsan, sir personal reason talaga nila ay dahil sa pamilya. Hindi naman sa environment nila. [“Sometimes, sir, their personal reason is because of family. Not in their environment.”]
- Lesbian Participant 8

They were concerned that some of their parents’ friends would criticize them for coming out.

Kasi sasabihin sa pamilya natin, may “anak ka palang ganito. [“Because our family will be told, “you have a child like this.”]
- Lesbian Participant 6

One gay participant shared his experience with his father when his friends made remarks about him being gay. His father was really upset and disciplined him to become a real man.

Kasi minsan... once na may anak ka na beki lalo na sa part ng tatay ko, magkakabarkada yan, sasabihin sa kanya “anak mo beki”, at napakasakit yon. So talagang im’ mold nya ako para maging tunay na lalaki. So madalas, sinasaktan niya ako para maging tunay na lalaki. [Because sometimes... once you have a gay child, especially on the part of my father, of course he has many friends, they will say “your child is gay”, and it will be very painful to him. So, he hurts me physically to be a real man.] - Gay Participant 1

Participants reported that a student was beaten at home when his father learned that he was gay.

May kapitbahay tayo di ba? Nung nalaman ng tatay niya na gay siya, nagalit talaga. [We had a neighbor, right? When his father found out that he was gay, he was really angry.] - Hetero Participant 3

Oo, tapos pag-uwi nya pinalo siya. [Yes, then when he came home, his father beat him.] - Hetero Participant 4

3.4.4. Lack of Support Programs for Lesbians and Gays

Grossman et al. (2009) asserted that schools must be safe and exhibit supportive learning environments. These included the need for policies and rules, peer education, planned educational activities, and in-service training for school personnel about lesbian and gay youth to create inclusive school communities. Five participants said that the school did not have programs that support lesbians and gays. The participants claimed that there were no support programs for lesbians and gays, and lesbian and gay topics were not even addressed in the subjects:

Wala pa naman talagang (matibay at tuloy-tuloy na) support programs para sa mga lesbian and gay dito sa campus. Kahit sa mga subjects natin di ba, wala naman naituturo tungkol sa lesbian and gay. [There really aren’t any (strong and consistent) support programs for lesbian and gay people. Even in our subjects, no issues are taught about lesbian and gay people.] - Gay Participant 3

One participant also said that outside of school, there were events for lesbians and gays, but she had not come across any support programs for lesbians and gays on campus.

Sa labas ng campus, tingin ko may mga activities para sa kanila, pero dito, wala naman kaming nae-encounter. [Outside the campus, I think there are activities for them, but here, we haven’t encountered anything.] - Hetero Participant 7

The GAD Office’s accomplishment reports from 2017 to 2019 did not reflect support programs or activities for lesbian and gay students, thus confirming the foregoing findings. Most of the programs and activities implemented were connected to women’s empowerment, women’s laws, and men’s gender studies. Indeed, it was very difficult on the part of those students going through identity issues. What made the matter worse was their inability to understand their issues because there was insufficient guidance from the teachers and school through its curriculum and support programs. The participants’ descriptions are consistent with the study of Lopez and Chims (2010), who stated that the discussion of gay and lesbian student issues in the literature on college teaching had been almost non-existent. At the University of Massachusetts, a clear majority of those surveyed said that they did not feel safe disclosing their sexual identity in class, did not find that gay, lesbian, or bisexual topics were dealt with adequately in class or academic programs, did not feel that there were appropriate library resources, and felt that faculty did not support research on gay, lesbian, and bisexual topic (Yeskel, 1991).

The abovementioned challenges and the difficulty of coming out made lesbians and gays think of alternative ways to deal with such stressful situations; hence their coping mechanisms and coming out process.

3.5. Coping Mechanisms and Coming Out Process

Some techniques emerged as part of the revelation process of the sexual identity of lesbians and gays. In a qualitative study on the coping mechanisms and coming out process of gay college students in a fraternity, the first is the member–

specific strategy, in which gays initially expose themselves to a group member who is closest to them and with whom they have the deepest friendship bond (Trump, 2003, as cited in Ferrer et al., 2021). This is similar to the study of Grossman et al. (2009), who asserted that lesbians and gays escaped and avoided stressors by distancing themselves from school, thereby involving themselves in the gay community or other homosexual peer groups that offer support that is especially needed during the coming-out period. Because no one will support and guide them in coming out, they tend to look for groups and places that will make them feel safe and motivated to do things they want without judgment and prejudices.

The participants of the current study affirmed the said finding. According to a gay participant, his friend disliked going to school; thus, instead of going to school, he worked at the parlor:

*Hindi niya talaga feel na safe siya sa school...
So instead na pumasok kami sa school, sa kanya nag sa 'sideline sya sa bayan ng parlor.
[He didn't really feel that he is safe at school...
So instead of going to school, he worked in beauty parlors.]*- Gay Participant 1

In the study of Santos and De Jesus (2020), respondents who identified themselves as lesbians or gays skipped school to avoid being bullied. There were 33.3% of lesbian and gay students in the United States who reported skipping a day of school. Similarly, 16.5% of lesbian and gay students in Israel disclosed skipping a day of school. This suggests that a bad school climate was linked to lesbian and gay students' absenteeism. Furthermore, being exposed to homophobic slurs regularly raised the chance of absenteeism (Pizmony-Levy & Kosciw, 2016).

Another gay participant admitted that he used to skip school and spend time outside with his gay friends, who helped him develop his gender identity and expressions.

Hindi alam ng family ko na hindi na ako pumapasok sa school... sa labas ko na lang nadevelop na ganito pala ako (gay). [My family doesn't know that I don't go to school anymore... I just developed (my gender identity) outside.]- Gay Participant 7

Another gay participant also said that he would rather join the company of those who like him, instead of getting stressed by people who keep on judging his identity.

Kasi alam mo naranasan ko to. Kasi nagsama ako sa criminology sa Taytay, syempre mga true friend ko yan. Alam mo ba, pag kasama nila ako don, mas masaya ako at alam ko na masaya din sila, kasi nagpapasaya yong baka diyan mas gumaganda ang bonding ninyo. Kesi sa iba na pagtatawanan lang ako, ka-stress. [I actually have experienced this. I went to Taytay with my friends from the criminology program. Of course, they are my true friends. You know, when I am with them, I am happier, and I know they're happy, too, because gays can make the group happy. Being with my friends is better compared with others who just laugh at me. That is stressful.]- Gay Participant 5

The coping mechanisms and coming out process of college lesbian and gay students are part of their adjustments to somewhat stressful situations. However, the school can create a more accepting environment regardless of gender and sexual orientation. Thus, the participants recommended some actions and programs for safe spaces.

3.5. Participants' Recommendations for Safe Spaces

Lesbian and gay students can do well in some school activities, from the preparation to the actual competition – indoor and outdoor games. They are flexible and competitive in many programs and activities. The statements and descriptions of the participants affirmed that the schools have the potential to promote gender-safe spaces, that is, by encouraging the participation of lesbians and gays in school activities without fear of homophobic remarks, integrating gender studies in the curriculum, and promoting gender equality in the classroom.

3.6.1. Joining School Activities Without Fear of Homophobic Remarks

Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2014) proposed that programs for social behavior change should focus on advocacy, education, and support to ensure equal access of all qualifying students to university activities, including sports and recreation, without discrimination. The descriptions of some heterosexual participants and lesbians and gays affirmed the aforementioned study. A heterosexual participant said that she had a gay classmate who was extremely adaptable and competitive in a variety of sports, even if it was a manly sport, and he excelled in them; therefore, it was unfair when they received some homophobic remarks even before they could show their skills in sports and other activities.

May klasmeyt kami na bakla. Flexible po siya. Marunong siya sa larong panlahi at sa volleyball malakas po siyang maglaro. Kasi kaya niyang gawin yung panglalaki kahit bakla siya. Mas magaling pa nga sila. [We have a classmate who is gay. He is flexible. He knows how to play traditional Filipino games and he plays volleyball well. And he can do what men can actually do even if he is gay. They are even better.]- Hetero Participant 3

This was supported by another participant when he said

Kami, sir, may nakalaro (gay), pero malakas. Kuya ko pala, gay talaga siya. Lakas maglaro ng basketball yon. Six-footer kasi, sir. [We played against a gay who played well. My older brother is gay. He is good at playing basketball. He is six-footer.] - Hetero Participant 6

Nevertheless, homophobic remarks were still common, as observed by some participants.

Kaso minsan, lalo na sa basketball, minsan nasabihan ang isang ano (gay), ng kasamahan namin na "wag na pasalihin baka matalo tayo, lambot eh." [Sometimes, especially in basketball, our colleague once said, 'don't let him



(referring to a gay player) in or we will lose; he is a wimp.] - Hetero Participant 6

Gay participants confirmed that they were extremely competitive in a variety of sports, including pageants.

Kasi, sir, karamihan sa amin pagdating sa ibang activities, competitive talaga kami, o kahit sa mga beauty pageant na yan. [Because, sir, most of us when it comes to other activities, we are competitive, or even in those beauty pageants.] - Gay Participant 11

Gay participants also argued that leaders who are said to be “real” men do not do women’s work, but gays are more adaptable. They can multitask and do well on projects regardless of gender.

Kasi di ba, sir, may mga leaders kasi na sabihin man natin sila na mga hetero o mga tunay, minsan kasi hindi nila kayang gawin ang obligasyon nila kasi pag lalaki, panlalaki lang, pag babae, pambabae lang. Kami naman mga bakla multi-tasking kami. Kaya nga di ba kami mapababae o mapalalaki ay magagawa. [Because, sir, there are leaders because whether hetero or real men, sometimes they can’t do their obligations because they are ‘men’ and they can only do tasks intended for ‘men’. Same for women. But in our part, we are gays, and we are multi-tasking, that’s why we can do the work of a man or a woman.] - Gay Participant 1

Talking about leadership, on the campus where the study was conducted, the President of the Student Government Organization (SGO) was gay. He was elected not because of his sexual preference but because of his performance.

SGO president natin si MK (not his real name) ... Ayos din naman sya mag-lead. Kaya siya binoto, di ba? Tsaka kung baga nae-express din nila ang personality nila at skills na rin sa mga tasks na binibigay sa kanila, katulad ng sa acquaintance party o sa intramural. Magaling siya sa decoration. [Our SGO president is MK (not his real name) ... He is also good at taking the lead. So, he was voted, right? Certainly, they can also express their personality and skills in the tasks given to them, such as at an acquaintance party or intramural. He is good at decorations.] - Hetero Participant 4

3.6.2. Integrating Gender Studies in the Curriculum

The school management has a central role in establishing a gender-responsive environment, especially in a classroom setting. They are responsible for understanding what is happening in the school and taking a proactive role in bringing about positive change (UNESCO Bangkok Office, n.d.). The participants suggested that if there were programs designed specifically for them (lesbian and gay students), they would be prouder of themselves and have higher self-esteem.

Mas mabuti if may mga programs para sa amin. Alam mo yung pride ng lesbian and gay mas gusto namin, mas high, yung tingin namin mas standard. [It is better if there are programs for us. You know our pride as lesbian and gay people if

there are programs, we will feel ‘high’ or with a standard.] - Lesbian Participant 4

The participants also expressed that they wanted the inclusion of the discussion of issues about gays and lesbians, as well as seminars and programs.

Kahit sa mga subjects natin di ba, wala naman naituturo tungkol sa lesbian and gay. [Even in our subjects, no issues are taught about lesbian and gay people.] - Gay Participant 3

Oo nga no, sana may mga seminars tungkol sa amin... para sa amin. Para maintindihan din namin yung sarili namin. Pero seryoso, para alam namin kung paano namin susuportahan ang katulad namin. [Yes, I hope there are seminars about us... for us. So that we can also understand ourselves. But seriously, so that we will know how we will support one another.] - Gay Participant 6

Programs for lesbians and gays, especially the gays. *Sila talaga yong kawawa. Maa-appreciate namin kung may pa-seminar para sa amin [hetero groups], para maging bukas yung isip namin tungkol sa kanila.* [Programs for lesbians and gays, especially the gays. They are really unfortunate. We would appreciate it if there were more seminars for us (hetero group) so that we can be open-minded about them.] - Hetero Participant 2

The current study’s findings agree with the study of Tshilongo and Rothmann (2019), who reported that the participants noted that a classroom as a safe space might be created by educating other students about the history, lives, and experiences of gay and lesbian people. Kintner-Duffy (2012), on the other hand, stated that the participants in his study were able to express the importance of being encouraged to use curriculum materials that included lesbian and gay families in the classroom. This experience helped the students understand the social construction of stories regarding sexuality.

3.6.3. Promoting Gender Equality in the Classroom

Furthermore, for the students to feel motivated and thrive in society and schools, they must receive physical and emotional support from all the relevant stakeholders. (Ioverno et al., 2016, as cited by Hanimoğlu, 2019). In the survey data, “individuals have favorable attitudes toward lesbians and gay men as people, liking them as friends” (Manalastas, 2005, p2).

In this connection, some participants stated that they had not experienced any bullying from heterosexual instructors or staff.

Hindi naman po namin na-experience na binully kami ng mga teachers at staff. [We have not experienced being bullied by teachers and staff.] - Gay Participant 2

Hindi naman lahat ng instructors ay bully. [Not all instructors are bullies.] - Gay Participant 5

Lesbians and gays become more confident and prouder of themselves because of having a safe environment. They

are even encouraged to participate in and excel in sporting events.

Pasok din naman tayo sa athletics. Joining activities ay hindi naman limited. I am proud to be a gay athlete. Lagi ako sinasali simula elementary hanggang college. [We also go into athletics. Joining activities is not limited. I am proud to be a gay athlete. I was always involved from elementary to college. - Gay Participant 9

Two Research Center surveys found that society has become more accepting of gays and lesbians (Drake, 2013). Teachers, on the other hand, play an important role in ensuring that every girl and boy, including lesbian and gay, obtains proper education. They also should ensure that all elements of education are non-discriminatory, including guaranteeing gender equality in the classroom. As a result, it is necessary to assess teachers' ability to advocate and practice gender equality. On the campus where the study was conducted, the researcher observed that teachers were very considerate of the opinions of lesbians and gays, specifically on the topic of same-sex marriage and relationships. Teachers also mentioned in some of their lectures different success stories of lesbians and gays in the country. When the teachers discussed these topics, the lesbians and gays paid attention consistently.

If lesbians and gays perceive that there is constant support from the school community, it can reduce stereotyping and misconceptions and can help others develop a more accepting viewpoint. Thus, schools can develop procedures and activities that foster a peaceful atmosphere for all students, including lesbians and gays (Russell et al., 2016, as cited in Hanimoglu, 2019).

4. Conclusions

The findings of this study were interpreted within the limitations of mixed-method research to emphasize the experiences and challenges related to the promotion of gender-safe spaces for lesbian and gay students. Heterosexual, lesbian, and gay students took part in the study. Academic and school performance, school activities and organization, and challenges of lesbian and gay students were among the key areas covered in the survey. Significant themes emerged as the data gathered through discussions were further analyzed. These were coping mechanisms, the coming out process, and participants' recommendations for safe spaces. These major themes were then subdivided into sub-themes presented in the preceding section.

Even though lesbians and gays were frequently targeted for discrimination, bullying, and other homophobic remarks, they also had positive experiences on and off campus. According to them, the instructors and staff members treated them equally. Lesbians and gays were welcome to participate in school events, and they could even form an LGBT organization. Heterosexual students also stated that they were comfortable in the company of lesbians and gays, enabling them to lead their group. However, it is of major importance that instructors and staff receive training on lesbian and gay students' difficulties to provide a safe, loving, and supportive environment for them (Kiapoka, 2020).

Such opposing emotions were addressed in depth through group discussions and observations, which led to a consideration of further issues associated with being gay or lesbian. According to them, heterosexual students made fun of gay students by calling them names. This is consistent with a prior study, which indicated that most respondents were subjected to verbal bullying by mocking or making fun of them (Ferrer et al., 2021). They also noticed that some gay students who had been bullied based on their sexual expressions had dropped out of school. Moreover, in the present study, activities intended for lesbians and gays were lacking.

Lesbians and gays endured numerous difficulties simply because they were homosexuals. They had some unpleasant experiences, including homophobic remarks from classmates, instructors, and staff. They also reported that there were no school-based support groups or programs on campus and that coming out was extremely difficult for them. Coming out was tough for them because they feared rejection from their classmates and punishment from their parents. Their families, they claimed, were not accepting of their sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions. As a result, lesbians and gays revealed their sexual orientation to a group member who was closest to them and with whom they had the strongest friendship bond. Some of them skipped classes and avoided stressors by distancing from school and getting involved in the gay community or other homosexual peer organizations that provided support during the coming-out process. The current findings are in line with previous research, which found that it was difficult for lesbians and gays to reveal their sexuality and be accepted in society, but that they always had the courage to deal with the situation thanks to their friends (Katz-Wise et al., 2016, as cited in Ferrer et al., 2021).

College lesbian and gay students' coping techniques and coming out processes are part of their unique adjustments to difficult situations. However, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, the school can promote a more welcoming environment. Thus, the participants suggested several measures and strategies for creating safe spaces.

The suggestions or recommendations contribute to the advocacy of promoting gender equality in education. Schools in certain education systems are given the authority to develop policies following national criteria. When this occurs, school policies should include a proclamation of gender equality, a clear statement against gender-based discrimination, and a zero-tolerance policy for violence (UNESCO Bangkok Office, n.d.). For this reason, gender-safe spaces can be promoted in schools by initially normalizing the participation of lesbians and gays in school activities without fear of homophobic remarks. The participants' descriptions revealed that lesbian and gay students are adaptive and competitive in some sports and other school activities; nonetheless, it is unfair to subject them to homophobic remarks before they can demonstrate their abilities and capabilities.

Lesbian and gay students reported that gender-safe environments in programs could help them be more self-assured and prouder of themselves. They also expressed a desire for the conduct of seminars and the inclusion of gender studies in the curriculum, to help them understand their sexuality and educate them on how to support their homosexual classmates. Heterosexual students could also



benefit from attending seminars and learning from the course Gender Studies, which teaches them how to assist lesbians and gays. The current findings are consistent with the argument that LGBT curricular inclusion could promote the well-being of LGBT students (Lipkin, 1999, as cited in Russell, 2011). Gender studies in the curriculum ensure that all areas of education are non-discriminatory, including gender equality in the classroom.

If lesbian and gay students believe that their school community is always behind them, stereotypes and preconceptions can be reduced, and others can acquire a more welcoming mindset. As a result, schools may create policies and programs that promote a peaceful environment for all students regardless of sexual orientation.

While gays' experiences are undeniably mixed, one thing that stands out is the prevalence of positivism that pushes them to accept their sexual orientation. Some gay students stated that they have not been bullied by heterosexual instructors or staff and that not all teachers are bullies; they were even encouraged to engage in and excel in sporting activities, making them happy to be gay athletes. They believed society has become more accepting of gays and lesbians. Teachers play a crucial role in ensuring that all students, including lesbians and gays, receive an adequate education. Further, the school administration is critical in achieving gender equality, particularly in the classroom. They are responsible for being aware of what is happening in the school and being proactive in effecting positive change.

5. Conclusion

The current study aimed to comprehend the experiences of college lesbian and gay students within the limitations of mixed-methods research. This study identified the issues specifically in terms of academic and school performance, school activities, and organization, and challenges faced by lesbian and gay students concerning the promotion of safe spaces for them. Furthermore, this study determined the challenges, coping mechanisms, coming out process, and participants' recommendations for safe spaces. Participants in the study were students from an external campus of a state university, consisting of 281 heterosexuals and 40 lesbian and gay students. Participants were randomly selected using the snowball method. Researchers used structured questionnaires, focus group discussions, and observations.

The results of the survey showed several issues but most of which turned out to be positive experiences for lesbians and gays. Thus, although the researcher attempted to outline problems and concerns among lesbians and gays, the current findings in the survey proved otherwise. As observed by both groups, lesbians, and gays were treated equally by instructors and staff, and they could achieve academically in their courses because of the safe classroom environment. They were also allowed to create their organization and participate freely in the school activities on campus.

However, findings in group discussions revealed that other students still faced certain obstacles. Some lesbians and gays were subjected to homophobic slurs in the classroom. For instance, instructors making unconstructive examples about lesbians and gays caused some students to laugh but made the lesbians and gays uncomfortable. These experiences made them skip school and involve themselves in gay groups that offered support, especially during the coming-out period. This was part of their coping mechanism and coming-out process because support programs were also

lacking for students whose families were opposed to their sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions.

These led to a realization that the student development programs must be updated consistently and, if necessary, revised to ensure that the programs and activities, including the policies, consistently promote safe spaces for all students regardless of preferred gender. Indeed, schools can help support lesbian and gay families by fostering an atmosphere where students and staff understand and respect differences. Learning about diversity can decrease prejudice and prepare children to live in a multicultural society. It can reduce stereotyping and misconceptions and help others develop a more accepting viewpoint.

It is therefore suggested that concerned units, such as the GAD office, devise and implement an inclusive student development program to achieve this goal. The establishment of policies and practices, specifically in normalizing the participation of lesbians and gays in all school activities without fear of homophobic remarks, the development of an inclusive curriculum as part of gender mainstreaming, seminars in understanding lesbian and gay youth, and support groups for lesbians and gays must all be part of the student development program.

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About the Author

John Paul D. Reloj teaches social science courses at Palawan State University. He is a graduate of AB Philosophy and MAEd in Guidance and Counselling. He is a registered guidance counselor completing his Ph.D. in Educational Management.