

Zeroing on Lesbians' Preservice Teacher Education Experiences: A Case Study

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Abstract

Every student has the right to a positive educational experience where they can learn and grow. However, preservice teachers who identify themselves as LGBTQ+ may find their schools hostile and unwelcoming. This case study aimed to understand the perspectives and experiences of five lesbian students enrolled in varied education degree programs from the three public higher education institutions in Leyte, Philippines. A researcher-made interview questionnaire was used to collect the data analyzed through content and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that most participants reached the age of puberty before they became aware of their sexual orientation. The findings also demonstrated that participants' sexual orientation did not influence the degree program they decided to pursue although becoming a teacher was not part of their life game plan. In addition, some participants tend to have a passive approach amidst the negative experiences in school and were given the message that acceptance is reliant on adherence to certain university norms and stereotypes. The study recommends the creation of a learning environment that supports anti-oppressive education, thereby eradicating heteronormative prejudice.

Keywords: preservice education; heteronormativity; homosexuality; lesbian education students; LGBTQ+

1. Introduction

Every student has the right to feel respected, involved, and secure in their educational setting. Students identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) may find themselves in an unwelcoming and isolated atmosphere in school.

Schools are in charge of providing an atmosphere where LGBTQ students can succeed academically, physically, and emotionally in their social relationships. However, due to unsupportive classmates, staff, and policies, LGBTQ students are more likely to report feeling uneasy or unwelcome in school (Colvin et al., 2019). LGBTQ adolescents are also found to perform worse academically and in terms of their emotional and physical health than their straight peers (Snapp et al., 2015).

A diverse strategy and commitment of administrators and faculty are needed to improve the educational experience of LGBTQ students. By clearly addressing LGBTQ-related topics, integrating LGBTQ-inclusive curricula will undermine the pervasive heteronormative culture in schools. As suggested in several studies, academic achievement, excellent staff morale and productivity, and better social-emotional health are all linked to a pleasant school climate (Day et al., 2019; Manitoba Education, 2013). LGBT kids also have the right to be treated with respect in the classroom and to see representations of themselves in the curriculum (Prescott, 2019). According to Añonuevo and Digo's study from 2023, ongoing efforts toward equality and justice in sexual orientation diversity are urgently needed to address this and other gender-related challenges. These efforts will help both LBGT instructors and their students.

1.1. Review of Related Literature

When LGBT educators reveal their gender identity, they face abuse and acceptance. The same scenario applies to preservice education students. Connell (2014) notes that breaking out from one's shell can be challenging due to the possibility of prejudice from one's environment. Most educational institutions are found wanting in these three areas: safe places for LGTBQ students who feel intimidated or who want more information on LGTBQ problems, LGTBQ-inclusive vocabulary in the curriculum, and inclusion of LGTBQ experience in courses. When LGBT people are not shown in school curricula, structures, or rules, they are stigmatized and left out. When schools fail to take significant action against the oppressive, exclusionary, and discriminatory environment that affects LGTBQ students, heteronormative culture persists (Steck & Perry, 2018). For LGTBQ students to have schools that are safe, welcoming, and free of harassment and violence, the whole school needs to work towards change (Cardinal, 2021).

To learn how sexual and gender minority students fare academically, a national survey on Canadian high school students was done (Egale, 2021). Students who attended schools with Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) responded more positively to questions regarding whether or not their school supported the LGTBQ community, whether or not they felt comfortable discussing their sexual orientation or gender identity with peers, and whether or not they felt homophobia was decreasing on their campuses (Egale, 2021). Like GSAs, safe domains are spaces where all students are accepted and where they may work to better their emotional and physical well-being.

Still, most LGTBQ groups or lesbian or gay men reported to have experienced discrimination and isolation (Evans et al., 2017). Most of those who took part in the study believed that internalized homophobia was the single most detrimental factor to their participation in and sense of respect for the LGTBQ community. Fraternities, sororities, and churches accounted for the largest share of reports of exclusion and discrimination by members of the straight community.

Furthermore, purposeful LGTBQ inclusion will necessitate the removal of stereotypes about providing support for LGTBQ students. Teaching about the gay civil rights struggle is not enough to empower LGTBQ students, especially when that movement sometimes faces opposition from religious groups (Prescott, 2020). In addition, McKenzie-Bassant (2007) questions the idea that "coming out" is a vital part of inclusive pedagogy as the only way to fight heterosexist hegemony while working toward greater inclusivity in formal educational institutions.

In the Philippines, although all Filipinos have the right to an education, young LGTBQ+ Filipinos experience discrimination and embarrassment in the classroom (Lalu, 2020). In addition, the study by Tang and Poudel (2018) found that LGTB students in the Philippines face mental health issues, religious prejudice, and living in a slowly progressing society without legal protection. Some schools have policies that say students can be expelled for being queer. Lesbian and homosexual educators faced severe bias and harassment due to ineffective policymaking and enforcement.

In a study by Bishop et al. (2010), it was found that marginalization is tolerated and encouraged in many public institutions of higher learning. Even though being honest with their students might improve their teaching, many educators are still reluctant to do so (DeJean, 2004). According to Rudoe (2010), homophobia and heterosexism remain as problems in today's educational institutions. To navigate the classroom's public/private divide and power dynamics, lesbian educators place a premium on their sense of professionalism and "good teacher" identities. Although these educators do not report any instance of harassment or abuse, they do believe that significant changes must be made before the school can be considered safe for discussions of lesbian and homosexual identities.

On the other hand, the study of Hernandez et al. (2021) found that women and gay respondents have high levels of self-esteem and psychological well-being. The study suggested that a person's mental health would improve if they were more likely to see themselves positively. This would make it simpler for them to live their life purposefully, make decisions independently, and form meaningful bonds with those around

them. Equally important is Rodillas' (2019) findings that LGBT students want institutional policies and initiatives that cater to their holistic requirements. Campaigns against bullying, peer guidance, and mentoring, seminars on sexual and gender issues, group formation, health care and HIV/AIDS education, access, spiritual and preventative measures are all things they feel are necessary to ensure they can exercise their rights.

Nevertheless, while there is ample literature on the prejudice and the challenges educators and students face as members of the LGBTQ community in educational settings, there is a dearth of empirical studies on lesbian education students. Hence, the conduct of this case study.

1.2. Research Objective

This case study examined the different perceptions of lesbian education students towards their degree and sexual orientation and their experiences as preservice teachers in public higher education institutions.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study was based on the tenet of the queer theory. Given that the basis of the current study was the idea that educational heteronormativity needed to be challenged, queer theory offered an appropriate theoretical framework for the data analysis. The queer theory aims to disrupt and challenge heteronormative and normative patterns of conduct because classrooms and schools are never neutral environments (Britzman, 2012; Friend, 1998; Meyer, 2012). This study anticipates lesbian education students to give voice to people who have previously been silenced in educational institutions due to the historical prevalence of a dominant culture of heteronormativity.

3. Methodology

The descriptive case study design was used in the study. Five lesbian students enrolled in varied educational programs (elementary and secondary education degree programs) in three public higher education institutions in Leyte, Philippines were purposively chosen as participants in the study as they fit the inclusion criteria initially set to be part of the case studied. A researcher-made interview questionnaire was utilized in gathering the data which was thematically analyzed thereafter. Pictures and screenshots were requested from the participants to support their narratives. Data saturation was likewise considered in determining the number of participants and the extent and depth of the interview conducted. The participants were first requested to sign an Informed Consent Form to signify their willingness to participate in this study. The study procedure was explained to them as well as their right to withdraw anytime and to have the confidentiality of data and information they shared maintained.

4. Findings and Discussion

The participants revealed their various perceptions, experiences, and challenges encountered as education students.

Discovery of Sexual Orientation

Majority of the participants realized their sexual orientation during their adolescence. Meanwhile, one participant discovered her sexual orientation at a very young age. Below are snippets from the interview:

"Ahh, so, ahem, actually, I can't remember, ahh, what particular age that was, but definitely, that was during my junior high school years when, like, I started to realize that I'm more attracted to someone with the same sex." [R1]

"When I was 18 years old." [R2]

"Senior high year. I have this lesbian friend also and I think she has influenced me to be one." [R4]

"Ever since I was a child." [R3]

Most participants displayed their desired behavior freely to those around them and allowed them to discover for themselves. Some found it helpful to share to their peers about their sexual orientation.

"I did not tell anyone about it. I just expressed myself the way I wanted." [R1]

"My best friend was the first person with whom I shared these bits about me. She was shocked after knowing that I am a lesbian." [R2]

Teaching Course Motivation

The participants claimed that their sexual orientation has nothing to do with their academic pursuit, that being lesbians was never taken in to consideration when they decided to get a teaching degree. Some of the participants enrolled in an education program because they voluntarily wanted to while some were influenced by their parents or other relatives who are in the teaching field. However, it is worth noting that not one among the participants shared about an innate desire and passion to be a teacher.

One reason shared by a participant was to get a teaching degree as a stepping board to be able to take the Criminology Board Exam. The participant shared:

"I just chose this program because of my plan to take an examination for Criminology. You know, you just need a degree, then after that you can take an exam for you to become a police officer someday." [R5]

Some participants regretted their choice of a degree program, though. A participant shared the following sentiment:

"I am regretting [laughs] this course. I realized that this program is not for me." [R2]

Pre-conceived Feelings of Isolation and Discrimination

The majority of participants stated that they had encountered several challenges in their respective universities which they kind of expected. They felt intermittent acts of discrimination and exclusiveness. These are some snippets from their interview.

"I still feel a gap between myself and my female classmates. I still feel like...kuan I don't belong to the girl's group, or even any group in the classroom because I am a lesbian." [R3]

"Sometimes, some students discriminate me for being a lesbian. It is difficult especially when it comes to choosing a partner for a project or class groupings. I sometimes do not have a partner or at times, I'm the last to be chosen to be a part of a particular group" [R4]

Dress Code Woes

Some participants claimed they have difficulty expressing themselves because of the prescribed school uniform and current institutional policies that do not allow them to express themselves freely.

One of the mentioned experiences was the restriction of cross-dressing. The participant shared:

"Currently, our school is not that gender-sensitive. Though we welcome all sexual orientations, it's still prohibited to do cross-dressing to express oneself. Anyway, the school uniform has nothing to do with your academic performance. I figured that it is imposed to attain a certain degree of decency so

in that sense I feel that, somehow, we are not fully accepted as lesbian students here." [R1]

The participants unanimously agree that their choice of clothes have nothing to do with academic success. However, they cannot do otherwise but follow the institutions' policies and regulations. This "archaic" policy led to their belief that the administration is not entirely welcoming of lesbians and other LGBTQ+ members.

Prejudice from Peers and Teachers

The participants hold professors and the administrative staff in high respect; nonetheless, even in an open-minded environment, some of them have faced prejudice and insults from these more knowledgeable individuals in the institution. Below is an interview snippet of a participant:

"Ahm, I have this kind of professor who is very strict when it comes to haircuts, lipstick, the neatness of your hair, especially for girls, and even the way you act during his class. I can still remember the words he told me that day. I was very traumatized from then on and is now afraid to enter his class every time. He also insulted my haircut but I didn't say anything because I respect him. But yeah, that was a very embarrassing moment for me. But, you know, we have to move on (laughs)." [R2]

Uttered unpleasant words against some of the participants in their interactions with others in school have also affected their self-esteem and confidence. One participant expressed the following sentiment:

"Speaking of that appearance, there was a time last week... we had our teaching demonstration and my attention was called. My professor called me and said "Oh, no, you can't do that. You wear [laugh] lipstick [laugh]" and yes. Nag-lipstick ako [I put lipstick on], but I was really grossed out. I became conscious and my confidence and performance plummeted. I'm not really used to it. I don't even wear makeup." [R1]

Some participants, on the other hand, do not have negative interactions with their peers or teachers. They shared that their sexual orientation was respected by their peers and teachers in class.

Passivity and a Culture of Apathy

Some participants indicated that they view some of their interactions with their classmates to be customary such as their constant teasing because of certain actions and preferences they have. One participant stated that she expected these words to be hurled at her and saw it as a typical conversation with them. Notwithstanding this statement, one of the participants shared:

"I really don't take it seriously and most of the time I let them be. I'm too used to it to care anymore. Before, there's a part of me that would somehow feel offended and a bit hurt whenever I hear them teasing me for my choices and actions." [R5]

From the answers given, it is clear that the school should be a key player in supporting gender equality, diversity, and social equality. According to Day et al. (2019) and Manitoba Education (2013), a positive school environment is connected to critical school success indicators such as academic performance, good staff morale and productivity, and overall better social-emotional health. This association holds for students as well as for staff members.

Many participants revealed that they were aware of their sexual orientations throughout their adolescence. Most individuals just freely exposed their sexual orientation to others while some shared it privately with their peers first. Connell (2014) notes that coming out of one's shell is difficult because of the risk of being misunderstood.

Some participants, likewise, admitted experiencing discrimination in their institutions. Some of them experience taunts from their teachers and classmates. Additionally, they were obliged to follow institutional

policies inhibiting their self-expression despite their objection. These problems align with Colvin et al.'s (2019) findings that LGBT students are more likely to report feeling uneasy or unwelcome in school due to hostile peers, staff, and policies. Notably, they even accuse institutions to be gender insensitive because of their plight and specific experiences which are somehow tangentially off to the true meaning of gender sensitivity.

Included in the issues faced by the participants are exclusion and discrimination. Some have remarked that they have difficulty expressing themselves due to the mandatory school uniform and university requirements. A few participants stated that they felt excluded from groups in their classrooms or school. These problems lend credence to the findings of Steck and Perry (2018) which state that the majority of schools do not take into account the LGBTQ experience in instruction and do not provide safe spaces for LGBTQ students who may feel threatened. As a result, LGBT students who lack representation in school curricula, structures, or policies face stigma and exclusion.

Regarding how they deal with the circumstance, some participants tend to have a passive approach amidst the negative experiences they had. They do not even view the mockery against their sexual orientation and their preferences as bullying. Some of them asserted that it was expected and thus, developed a culture of indifference to cope. However, some of the participants thought it was normal but upsetting. For LGBTQ students to feel secure and accepted at school, there must be a school-wide initiative and commitment in making reasonable changes (Cardinal, 2021).

5. Implication

The participants expressed some negative experiences from classmates and even teachers in public higher education institutions. The passivity and apathy developed from these experiences may be due to their disinterest to become a teacher in the future and may have had an impact on why few lesbians choose to stay in the teaching field. These lesbian education students were given the message that acceptance is reliant on adherence to certain university norms and stereotypes. Regarding the school atmosphere, the findings imply a need for reformulation and familiarization with the experiences of the LGBTQ people in general. LGBTQ+ instructors may need to actively create a learning environment that supports queer pedagogy and anti-oppressive education, necessitating reflection on their practices, attitudes, and values which may contain heteronormative prejudice. Regarding LGBTQ acceptance in Filipino culture, the findings suggest that the focus should move from gender binaries to the introduction of sexual diversity in the curriculum.

6. Recommendations

There is a need for administrators and teachers to know more about the gender and sexual stereotypes to make their schools safe for LGBTQ+ students, particularly lesbian education students. They may do these things by getting new information and by getting to know the experiences of LGBTQ people through different learning tools and programs.

Schools may give LGBTQ students and teachers a safe place to discuss and work through their experiences. This may help these students and teachers better adapt to changes in society and social norms.

Further investigation may be done to find ways on how to deal with gender and sexuality diversity in schools. Expanding the participant pool could also further the research.

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