

# Navigating College with Disability and Identity: A Narrative Inquiry on the Lived Experiences of an LGBTQIA+ Student with a Limb Impairment

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## ABSTRACT

*This qualitative research investigates the real-life experiences of a college student who identifies as both LGBTQIA+ and a person with a limb impairment. The study was conducted in Magsaysay College a community college in the Philippines using narrative inquiry, with Riessman's (2008) Thematic Narrative Analysis guiding the process. The goal was to understand how the participant manages daily college life, builds their identity, and deals with challenges related to both disability and gender identity. Information was gathered through a personal interview and supported by field notes and observations. From the participant's story, several important themes came out: emotional strength, discrimination, difficulty with physical access, rejection by peers, family struggles, and the strong desire to be treated equally, not differently. The participant shared how they stay motivated despite judgment from others and explained that they don't want special treatment, just fairness and understanding. What makes this study different is that it focuses on two identities at the same time, being LGBTQIA+ and having a disability, something not often explored in research, especially in the Philippine setting. The findings highlight the need for schools to improve accessibility, train teachers and staff on inclusion, and build systems that respect every student's identity. This study hopes to give voice to students with similar experiences and encourage schools to create safer, more welcoming spaces where everyone has the chance to succeed and feel like they belong.*

## KEYWORDS

*LGBTQIA+; disability; narrative inquiry; qualitative study; inclusive education*

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education, as emphasized by UNESCO (2020), promotes equal learning opportunities for all students, including those from marginalized groups. However, research by Crenshaw (1989) and Puar (2012) shows that students who have overlapping identities—such as being LGBTQIA+ and having a disability—face unique challenges that are often overlooked in traditional school systems. These students often experience exclusion through physical barriers, lack of visibility, and social stigma. In many Asian countries, Tan and Lim (2021) explained that cultural conservatism and rigid social norms make it difficult to fully support both LGBTQIA+ individuals and persons with disabilities. Policies promoting inclusion often exist, but they are not always implemented effectively in classrooms.

In the Philippine context, laws such as the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (RA 7277) and various anti-discrimination measures aim to protect marginalized groups, yet

implementation remains uneven. Studies by Manalastas and Torre (2016) revealed that most research focuses only on disability or LGBTQIA+ issues separately, not on their intersection. This lack of intersectional focus is more evident in community colleges, where institutions face limits in funding, infrastructure, and inclusive policy enforcement. At Magsaysay College, for instance, general non-discrimination policies exist, but few programs specifically address the needs of students facing both gender-based and disability-related discrimination (Miller et al., 2019; Budge et al., 2020). Facilities are often not fully accessible, and staff are not adequately trained to handle the complex needs of such students.

To help fill this gap, the present study used Riessman's (2008) *Thematic Narrative Analysis* to explore the story of a student at Magsaysay College who identified as both LGBTQIA+ and a person with a limb impairment. Through this approach, the research examined how the participant experienced identity formation, discrimination, accessibility barriers, and resilience in the school environment. The findings aimed to inform better institutional policies and practices for inclusion in community colleges. By sharing this narrative, the study seeks to raise awareness among educators, strengthen student support systems, and encourage more local and regional research on the intersection of gender and disability in higher education.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative research design through narrative inquiry to understand the life experience of an LGBTQIA+ student with a limb impairment at Magsaysay College. Narrative inquiry, as explained by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Riessman (2008), is suitable for research that focuses on personal stories and how people give meaning to their experiences. This method helped the researcher learn how gender identity and disability shaped the participant's daily life and interactions in school.

According to Ford (2020), narrative inquiry helps researchers see the world from the participant's view and understand how culture and society affect their identity. In this study, it allowed the participant to share personal experiences in a comfortable and open space. The method focused not only on what happened, but also on how the participant made sense of those experiences.

### **Research Participant**

The study involved one participant, a second-year irregular student at Magsaysay College, a public community college in Northern Philippines. The participant identified as a gay male with a limb impairment that affected walking but did not require a crutch. He was 20 years old, came from a low-income family, and lived in a nearby rural town.

He was open about his gender identity, which brought both positive and negative experiences. He shared that he was bullied before because of his gender and disability but stayed motivated to continue studying.

The participant was chosen on purpose because his situation—being both LGBTQIA+ and physically disabled—fit the goal of the study. His story gave valuable insights into how students with multiple challenges experience school life.

### **Data Sources**

The study used three main data sources:

1. Interviews – Three semi-structured interviews were done where the participant shared personal stories about academics, social life, challenges, and discrimination.

2. Personal writings – Journals or reflections (if available) were reviewed to support the interviews.
3. Field notes – The researcher wrote notes about the participant’s emotions, tone, and non-verbal behavior during the interviews.

These data were used to understand how disability and gender identity affect the student’s experiences.

### **Data Collection**

The main data came from three interviews, each lasting about 50–60 minutes. The meetings were done face-to-face in a private space chosen by the participant. The interviews had open-ended questions that encouraged free sharing of thoughts about school life, identity, and support systems.

If available, the participant’s written reflections were added to give more details about his story. The researcher also made field notes to record what was seen and felt during the interviews. These helped interpret meaning beyond spoken words (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

After collecting the data, all interviews were transcribed and reviewed carefully. The researcher followed Riessman’s (2008) method of thematic narrative analysis, which looks for patterns and themes in the story. The goal was to keep the participant’s story whole and meaningful, showing emotions, sequence, and context.

To check accuracy, the participant reviewed the transcript and confirmed that the story reflected his experiences correctly (member checking). The researcher then identified key themes such as identity, discrimination, resilience, and inclusion. A pseudonym was used to protect the participant’s privacy.

### **Trustworthiness**

The study followed Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) four criteria for trustworthiness:

- Credibility – The story truly represents the participant’s experience.
- Dependability – The process was clear and consistent.
- Confirmability – The results came from real data, not researcher bias.
- Transferability – The findings may apply to similar students or schools.

These steps helped ensure that the study was valid and reliable.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher acted as the main instrument for gathering and analyzing data. She led the interviews, took notes, and interpreted the results. To stay neutral, the researcher reflected on her own views and avoided inserting bias. The participant’s consent and privacy were always respected.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study followed strict ethical guidelines. Approval was obtained from Magsaysay College and the University of the Immaculate Conception before the study started. The participant was informed about the study’s purpose and gave written consent.

All information was kept confidential using pseudonyms. The participant was free to stop at any time. Interviews were done privately and respectfully. If emotional distress occurred,

counseling support was available. All collected data were stored securely and deleted after the research ended.

These ethical practices ensured that the participant's safety, dignity, and rights were fully protected.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Lived Experiences of an LGBTQIA+ Student with a Limb Impairment***

This study explored the story of Mia, an LGBTQIA+ college student with a limb impairment, to understand how she navigated discrimination, access barriers, emotional coping, and resilience. Four main themes emerged: discrimination, difficulty in access and mobility, coping mechanisms, and resilience and determination.

#### ***Experiences of Discrimination***

Mia's journey showed that discrimination still existed in both visible and subtle ways. In high school, she was mocked for being gay and having a limp, which affected her self-esteem. In college, the discrimination became quieter—through stares and exclusion—but continued to cause discomfort. These findings supported Kosciw et al. (2020) and Seelman (2019), who noted that LGBTQIA+ students with disabilities often experience combined stigma that affects confidence and belonging. While Mia no longer faced open bullying, social judgment remained a silent barrier, showing that acceptance policies alone are not enough without social awareness.

#### ***Access and Mobility***

Mia also struggled with transportation and inaccessible buildings. Moving between distant classrooms and climbing multiple flights of stairs caused fatigue, yet she rarely asked for help. This aligned with Pfeiffer (2021) and Titchkosky (2020), who explained that many educational infrastructures remain built for able-bodied students. Instead of demanding change, Mia chose endurance, representing a quiet form of resistance that emphasized independence and perseverance.

#### ***Coping Mechanisms***

Mia coped with discrimination and hardship by staying silent and focusing on her goals. "I just ignore it because I know who I am," she said. This coping strategy—emotional endurance and self-control—was consistent with Shipherd et al. (2019) and Nadal et al. (2018), who found that LGBTQIA+ individuals often internalize resilience when institutional support is lacking. Though not an ideal long-term strategy, her self-reliance allowed her to maintain stability and academic focus.

#### ***Resilience and Determination***

Mia's resilience grew from understanding her dual identity as LGBTQIA+ and a person with a disability. Instead of viewing these as weaknesses, she used them as motivation to succeed academically. Her determination to finish college reflected findings from Singh et al. (2021), showing that intersectional challenges can inspire persistence and self-belief. Despite social and physical barriers, Mia's strength was rooted in proving that marginalized identities can coexist with success.

### ***Key Turning Points and Identity Formation***

Three key experiences shaped Mia's college journey: inspiration from role models, family and financial struggles, and peer rejection.

#### ***Role Models and Inspiration***

Seeing other students and teachers succeed despite disability or being LGBTQIA+ motivated Mia to continue studying. Local role models, especially successful LGBTQIA+ instructors, became proof that identity did not limit achievement. This echoed Woodford et al. (2018), who noted that representation fosters resilience and academic motivation.

#### ***Family Dynamics and Financial Strain***

While Mia's mother offered emotional support, her father's financial complaints caused stress. Still, she chose to understand his priorities and continued studying with help from her sister. This reflected Snapp et al. (2019), who found that mixed family support often increased emotional pressure but also built independence and maturity.

#### ***Peer Rejection and Homophobia***

Some classmates refused to partner with Mia in activities, reflecting lingering stigma. She chose not to confront them but hoped for more understanding. Similar to Kosciw et al. (2020), this showed how quiet exclusion continues even in inclusive schools, influencing self-esteem and belonging. Mia's calm response demonstrated her ability to prioritize learning over prejudice.

### ***Construction of Self within Disability, Gender, and College Culture***

Two themes emerged regarding self-concept: desire for equality and pursuit of normalcy.

#### ***Desire for Equality***

Mia emphasized fairness over special treatment. She wanted to be seen as equal, not pitied. This reflected Seelman (2019), who argued that real inclusion means respect, not preference. For Mia, equality was about shared dignity, not privilege.

#### ***Pursuit of Normalcy and Inclusion***

Rather than seeking attention or accommodation, Mia wanted to be treated "just like everyone else." Her wish for normalcy reflected an emotional view of inclusion—belonging without being singled out. As Meyer (2019) noted, inclusion should focus not only on structure but also on emotional acceptance and belonging.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study highlighted critical areas for improvement in higher education institutions to support LGBTQIA+ students with disabilities. It can be implied that while some structural advancements have been made toward inclusion, significant gaps remained in fostering true social and emotional integration for students navigating multiple marginalized identities.

First, the persistence of subtle discrimination emphasized the need for educational institutions to go beyond anti-discrimination policies and promote active, campus-wide initiatives fostering awareness, acceptance, and sensitivity toward LGBTQIA+ students with disabilities. Programs should prioritize not only punitive responses to overt discrimination

but also proactive cultivation of inclusive campus climates where microaggressions are addressed and challenged through education and dialogue.

Second, infrastructure and accessibility remained pressing issues. Although physical structures may meet minimal accessibility standards, institutions must critically assess whether their facilities genuinely meet the day-to-day needs of students with mobility impairments. Frequent audits of campus accessibility, student feedback mechanisms, and the integration of universal design principles into new construction and renovation projects are essential steps toward mitigating physical barriers.

Third, emotional resilience was shown to be a critical but often solitary coping mechanism. Institutions must recognize that resilience should not replace systemic support. Counseling centers, peer support groups, and mentorship programs specifically designed for students with intersecting marginalized identities must be strengthened and made highly visible to students from the outset of their academic journey.

Finally, educational practices should shift toward individualized inclusion strategies. Not all marginalized students desire special treatment; some, like the participant in this study, wished simply to be treated normally. Educators and administrators should receive regular training on how to provide equitable support that respects individual preferences for inclusion without inadvertently reinforcing stigma or otherness.

Ultimately, creating genuinely inclusive educational environments requires a sustained commitment to structural change, social transformation, and personalized support that affirm and empower LGBTQIA+ students with disabilities.

### **Recommendations**

This study was limited to the lived experiences of a single LGBTQIA+ college student with a physical disability, which provided deep but individualized insights. Thus, it is recommended that future researchers expand the scope by including multiple participants to allow broader representation of LGBTQIA+ students with disabilities across different institutions and settings.

Future research may employ mixed methods designs to capture both the rich, personal narratives and quantifiable data on institutional practices, levels of discrimination, and support systems. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between personal resilience and institutional structures.

Moreover, future studies may explore comparative research across educational levels, such as experiences of LGBTQIA+ students with disabilities in senior high school, undergraduate, and postgraduate education. This comparison may reveal developmental differences in coping strategies, identity formation, and institutional challenges.

It is also recommended that subsequent research explore specific intersections of identity beyond limb impairment and LGBTQIA+ status. Future studies could investigate students with sensory impairments, neurodiverse conditions, or chronic illnesses within the LGBTQIA+ community, to capture how different types of disabilities intersect with gender and sexual identities.

Finally, future research should investigate institutional practices and policy implementations aimed at promoting inclusion. Studies may examine the effectiveness of current anti-discrimination policies, physical accessibility standards, mental health services, and peer support programs from the perspective of LGBTQIA+ students with disabilities.

Through broader participant bases and varied methodological approaches, future researchers can deepen understanding and contribute to building more inclusive, responsive, and empowering educational environments for all students.

Concluding Remarks

The results of this study offered clear evidence that navigating college life as an LGBTQIA+ student with a physical disability is a profound journey shaped by resilience, strength, and silent perseverance. It goes beyond the usual student experience; it is a testament to how marginalized identities intersect and intensify the challenges faced in higher education. Students like the participant in this study are unsung heroes who push through systemic barriers and personal struggles with the hope of achieving a fair and dignified place in society.

My research journey was both challenging and transformative. Throughout the process, I gained invaluable insights and significantly strengthened my research competencies. The most difficult aspect was the data-gathering phase, particularly establishing a deep sense of trust with the participant and ensuring ethical sensitivity when discussing their lived experiences. Despite the emotional weight of the interviews, the participant's openness and strength deeply inspired me and validated the importance of giving voice to those often unheard.

The in-depth conversations allowed me to witness the participant's silent battles against discrimination, mobility challenges, and emotional struggles. Their resilience, grounded in a desire for equality and normalcy, taught me that strength often lies in enduring without complaint, in pushing forward even when the world remains indifferent or judgmental. These narratives not only broadened my academic perspective but also reinforced my commitment to advocating for a more inclusive and compassionate educational environment.

Throughout this journey, I also realized the systemic gaps that still exist in educational institutions regarding accessibility, inclusion, and emotional support for LGBTQIA+ students with disabilities. While the participant demonstrated immense personal strength, it is important to acknowledge that not every student will have the same internal resources, and therefore, institutions must build systems that genuinely support and empower marginalized students.

Ultimately, this study did not just add to my academic knowledge, it transformed my worldview. It reaffirmed the urgent need for continued advocacy, inclusive practices, and equitable support structures in higher education. This research stands as a humble yet powerful contribution towards creating learning spaces where every student, regardless of ability or identity, can thrive with dignity, respect, and belonging.

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