

## On Schools' Safe Spaces: A Review of Gender-Responsive Basic Education in the Schools Division Office of Imus City



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**ABSTRACT:** This research investigates the implementation of the Safe Spaces Act (Republic Act No. 11313) in the public elementary and secondary schools of the Schools Division Office of Imus City. The study evaluates the extent of gender-responsive policy implementation in educational institutions, emphasizing the dissemination of policy information and the strategies employed to create a safe and inclusive environment for all students. Using a qualitative research design, the study employs thematic analysis to interpret the data collected from interviews with Gender and Development (GAD) focal persons. Key findings indicate that while integration into curricula, printed materials, and online platforms are common dissemination methods, there are significant challenges such as insufficient budget, lack of knowledge, and cultural resistance. The study highlights the necessity for cultural reform, adequate resources, and enhanced critical reasoning among stakeholders to ensure the effective implementation of the Safe Spaces Act. Recommendations include the extension of the study to other divisions, the incorporation of quantitative methods for broader validation, and policy improvements to foster a more inclusive educational environment. The ultimate goal is to safeguard learners' rights and promote gender equality within the school system.

**KEYWORDS:** Safe Spaces Act, Gender-Responsive Education, Public Schools, Policy Implementation, Thematic Analysis

### I. INTRODUCTION

A safe space is a place that is free from discrimination, harassment, and judgment. These spaces are often seen in schools as a way to protect students from the usual bullying and discrimination. Safe spaces in schools are a vital part of creating gender equality and protecting students from discrimination. All students have the right to feel included, respected, and safe in a school environment (Cardinal, 2021, p.17). Positive school climates provide an ideal learning environment where learners feel safe and encouraged, performed better in their academic performance, improved relationships with classmates and staff, and general well-being.

It is noteworthy that school success indicators like academic achievement, strong staff and teaching morale, and overall improved social-emotional wellness are all correlated with positive school atmosphere (Day, Fish, et al., 2019; Cardinal, 2021). Inversely, there is an increasing corpus of research on the harm that heteronormative school cultures and disparities linked to sexual and gender minorities cause to LGTBQ people. For instance, compared to heterosexual youth, LGTBQ youth are substantially more likely to experience peer victimization, sexuality-based discrimination, and harassment (Colvin et al., 2019; Hatchel et al., 2019; Steck & Perry, 2018; Cardinal, 2021). Different studies show the benefits and even the demand for more inclusive and gender-sensitive learning spaces in educational institutions.

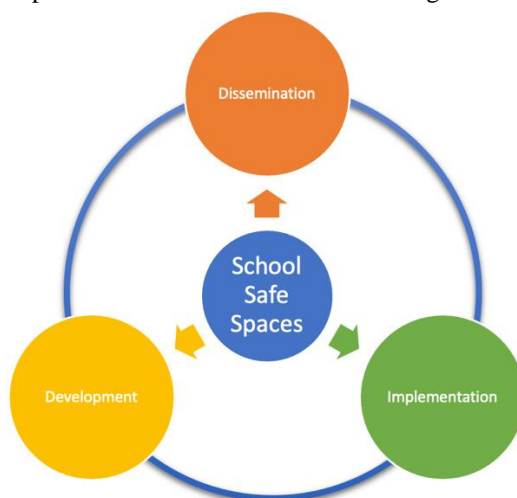
On July 23, 2018, Republic Act No. 11313, also known as Safe Spaces Act, was enacted and promulgated by the Philippines government. This is an "Act Defining Gender-Based Sexual Harassment in Streets, Public Spaces, Online, Workplaces, and Educational or Training Institutions, Providing Protective Measures and Prescribing Penalties Therefor". The Act states that "It is the policy of the State to value the dignity of every human person and guarantee full respect for human rights. It is likewise the policy of the State to recognize the role of women in nation-building and ensure the fundamental equality before the law of women and men. The State also recognizes that both men and women must have equality, security and safety not only in private, but also on the streets, public spaces, online, workplaces and educational and training institutions." Hence, this includes schools and all academic institutions. This is further supported and reinforced by the Department of Education through its DepEd in its "Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy" (DepEd Order No 32, s.2017) and reiterated through the Memorandum from the Office of the Undersecretary for Governance and Field Operations No. 2022-02-0153 for strict implementation. The adamant adoption of the Rights-Based Education (RBE) Framework for Philippine Basic Education highlights the obligation of schools, learning centers, and offices to uphold and actively promote the complete range of children's rights. This is a major stride by the government and education sector towards the promotion of gender equality.

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Safe spaces act in schools is an important initiative that is taken by the government to ensure that students do not face discrimination on the basis of their gender. The safe school environment is very important for learners as it helps them grow up to be healthy adults. It is also important for teachers, other school personnel and the school community because they have a commitment to provide a healthy and enabling learning environment for all the learners in their care. Under Section 25 of the RA 11313, The Department of Education (DepEd), [together with] the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) shall conduct regular spontaneous inspections to ensure compliance of school heads with their obligations under this Act. Hence, this research paper intends to qualitatively analyze the extent of implementation of safe spaces in schools, as well as the vulnerabilities or development areas in the implementation of the policy.

### A. Conceptual Framework

Based on Article V of the Republic Act 11313 or the Safe Spaces Act, educational institutions are mandated to enact and implement a gender-responsive learning environment. The gender-responsive conceptual markers of this policy consists dissemination of policy information to key stakeholders, the implementation strategies of the policy, and potential vulnerabilities or development areas to promote gender-responsiveness in schools. The following is the conceptual framework of this research:



**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for School Safe Spaces.**

The figure above portrays the three (3) aspects considered in the assessment of the extent of implementation of the Safe Spaces Act in schools. From dissemination up to areas of development or vulnerabilities, these three (3) components are assessed.

### B. Research Questions

The primary purpose of this research was to assess the implementation and vulnerabilities of the Article V of RA 11313 or the Safe Spaces Act of 2018 in public schools in a division, and correspondingly, recommend a policy improvement.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the extent of implementation of the Safe Spaces Act in all public elementary and secondary schools in the division, in terms of:
  - a. Dissemination of policy information, and
  - c. Implementation strategies of policy?
2. Are there sources of school vulnerabilities or development areas in the implementation of the Safe Spaces Act in schools?

### C. Significance of the Study

The primary relevance of this study is to ascertain the extent of gender-responsive policy implementation in schools as precursory data and review, as well as to provide a point of departure for improvement and further development. The result of this research could serve as a reference for policy recommendation and identification of areas of vulnerability of implementation. This could also serve as training needs assessment (TNA) for capacity development programs for schools with lesser than expected implementation of the Safe Spaces Act.

This research served as a precursory review for an extensive and encompassing review of the Republic Act 11313 implementation in the entire country and the mandate of the Department of Education is ensuring that schools are safe spaces for learners, and promotes gender-sensitivity, inclusion and responsiveness. The findings of this research will benefit succeeding researchers on building on the baseline information, further inquiry and potential policy improvements on the implementation of a gender-responsive policy for all the schools in the country.

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The ultimate relevance of this study ascertained and promoted the full scale implementation of the Safe Spaces Act and allow all learners to benefit from it, i.e., to be able to learn in a safe learning and child-friendly environment. This is part of the mandate and quality policy statement of the Department of Education. It is but fit to assess the extent of this implementation and whether key stakeholders are committed in its realization.

### **D. Scope and Limitation**

The study covered only the gender-responsive policy implementation of the safe spaces act. This consist of the four aspects of implementation, dissemination, and vulnerabilities or development areas. This is limited to public educational institution under the basic education category. This research consists of the safe spaces review based on gender-based harassment or discrimination. It has not discuss other LGBTQ+ or gender-related issues. Finally, it tackles gender-responsive and inclusive approaches and implementation in an educational institution setting.

## **II. METHOD**

### **A. Research Design**

This research used a qualitative research method. In particular, a basic descriptive qualitative research design which utilizes Thematic Analysis in the analysis and discussion of data was employed. Thematic analysis is a research method for assessing qualitative data. Usually, it refers to and analyzes a collection of texts, such an interview or a transcript. The intent of which is to find common themes—topics, concepts, and patterns of meaning that recur. The researcher closely examines and carefully analyzes the data (Caulfield, 2019). This design is appropriate for the study because it ascertains the extent of implementation and determine vulnerabilities/improvement areas of the safe spaces policy implementation in public schools in a division. This research design serves as a precursor review in identifying the common themes and concepts in the extent of implementation of the safe spaces policy.

### **B. Research Locale**

The locale of the research study identified by the proponent is the schools division office of Imus City in Cavite. It is considered as an urbanized city in the heart of Cavite. This consists of 35 public elementary and secondary schools. The locale was selected as the pilot division to assess the implementation of the policy for review. This locale aptly suits the study due to the existing cases and incidents of child/student-related abuses and gender-related discrimination.

### **C. Participants of the Study**

The participants of this study consists of the Gender and Development Focal persons in every public elementary and secondary school in the Schools Division Office of Imus City. All thirty-five (35) school GAD focal persons were invited and involved in the study. Purposive sampling was used in the identification of the appropriate participants in the study. The GAD Focal persons are the right and knowledgeable persons to assess and answer the questions pertaining to the school's implementation of the Safe Spaces Act. After the identification of the participants, census or total enumeration was used as sampling technique to ensure that all GAD focal persons of the target schools are included.

### **D. Data Collection and Research Ethics**

The study used data gathering procedure in the acquisition of relevant information to address the objectives of the study. The researcher utilized survey-interview approach. A validated online google form questionnaire was used to gather information from the Gender and Development Focal persons of each public school. This questionnaire was validated by the division Gender and Development focal person and practitioners. Once the validated questionnaire was approved, request letter to the Schools Division Superintendent shall be forwarded to secure permission in the conduct of the study. An invitation letter and informed consent were also secured from the participants. The participants were assured of their rights, i.e., confidentiality of information, anonymity of identity, beneficence, non-maleficence, and security of data.

### **E. Data Analysis**

For the data analysis, this study applied thematic analysis. Thematic analysis It is a technique for describing data, but it also involves interpretation while choosing codes and creating themes. The first step in thematic analysis' process is becoming familiar with the entire data set, which entails repeated and active reading through of the data (Braun & Clarke 2006, as cited in Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The next step is to start making notes on any potential data items of interest, queries, relationships between data items, and other early concepts. This marks the start of the coding process. Instead of themes, this stage generates codes. In the third stage, the coded and compiled data extracts are examined to identify any prospective themes that may be of greater significance. After these, the researcher reviews the themes to better reflect and capture the information. Once the themes have been established, the analysis and interpretation ensues.

### **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **1.1. Extent of implementation of the Safe Spaces Act in all public elementary and secondary schools in the division, in terms of dissemination of policy information**

The initial critical part of every policy in its implementation is the dissemination and communication to its key stakeholders and intended recipients. In Article V of the Safe Spaces Act, the intended implementers of this section are the educational institution. Dissemination of policies make take various forms or modes, and schools do not differ. Here are the three major thematic areas borne from the interview of the GAD Focal person of schools with reference to the dissemination of policy information:

##### **a. Theme 1: Incorporation and Integration to Curricula**

Lesson integration has been the premium mode of dissemination of safe spaces policy for schools. This ensures policy are included in the curricula. As stated by two participants (S25, S33), the integration of safe spaces in the lesson and discussion of all subject areas are an evident dissemination practice:

S25: "Safe Spaces Act are integrated in the discussion of the related subjects."

Integrating gender-responsive, gender-sensitive and inclusive curricula promotes awareness to learners and also challenges a heteronormative culture in schools by explicitly discussing gender issues. Incorporating information about the gender identity and discrimination into the curriculum gives all students the opportunity for insight into the experiences of LGBTQ individuals, and facilitates a more inclusive school climate that celebrates diversity (Cardinal, 2021). It is important for LGBTQ students to see themselves represented in the curriculum and respected in the classroom (Prescott, 2019). All students get the chance to gain understanding into the experiences of people by having materials about the community included in the curriculum. This also helps to create a more accepting environment at school where diversity is valued.

##### **b. Theme 2: Printed and Posted within the Premises**

The next best things and which is more ostensibly visible is that policy materials are disseminated through posting and printed copies in the jurisdiction of the school and its community. Several participants cited numerous places where safe spaces policies, memoranda, and information are shared and posted. To name a few, they are posted in the schools' bulletin boards, school entrance and exit, classrooms, offices, such as GAD, Guidance, Principal's and Teachers' offices, and hallways. Printed formats are the many media which include tarpaulins, flyers, and pamphlets. For some participants, it is not merely passive printed copies but a point of discussion and sharing for parents and students to learn.

S3: "Printed copies like flyers downloaded from the website of PWC and distributed to school personnel and selected students during GAD school activities. Posted information in the group chat."

The provision of safe spaces in schools through physical structures and materials come to symbolize the desired social connection among students, providing the basis for both a physical and metaphorical community of learners. The safe space is constructed as a comfortable space through which to break down the isolation of individual students and allow them to express their individuality (Barrett, 2020). It is thought that safe spaces encourage improved student performance and learning outcomes.

##### **c. Theme 3. Online Platforms**

As the dawn of the 'Internet of Things', online platforms have been staple venues for information dissemination and presence. Social Media has been the number one source and platform for information sharing. Even schools have their own website and social media pages nowadays. One of the participants cited that their means of dissemination of the policy are "Through social media posts and school Facebook page".

However, in the study of Cetinkaya (2019), the author found out find out positive and negative aspects of the usage of social networking services in the management of schools. The author cited that Facebook accounts were used "in the promotion of schools and making the school announcements". It was found that such accounts were mostly used for the promotion of the schools and making announcements. However, it was observed in the study that all of the Facebook accounts which were used actively in the promotion of the school and announcements in the past were deactivated later.

#### **1.2. Extent of implementation of the Safe Spaces Act in all public elementary and secondary schools in the division, in terms of implementation strategies of policy**

The deployment of different strategies to ensure that safe spaces policies are cascaded is crucial to the success of the implementation of any policy. The peculiarity of every school and their culture matters on how diverse ways and approaches in policy implementation are being used. Here are some of the implementation strategy themes:

##### **a. Theme 1: School Affairs as Potent Medium**

The school calendar consists of voluminous school activities, festivities, events and conference. Much of the participants underscored the proliferation of safe spaces implementation through the various school events. These have been a potent medium for strategic implementation of the safe spaces policy. Several participants enumerated the following as their medium for implementation: conferences, seminars, faculty or department meetings, Learning Action Cells (LAC) sessions, capacity building,

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campaigns, orientations and general assemblies. One participant even expounded that “by providing orientation in school and a hardcopy of the existing school policy signed by students and their parents or guardian”, they are involved and engaged. “We shared information with academic staff, non-academic staff PTA officers and learners.” They take advantage of the gathering to orient, discuss and engage each other to partake in the promotion and implementation of the safe spaces act in their schools.

### **b. Theme 2: Visibility and Access for Advocacy**

The second implementation technique GAD focal persons used is to increase the resources and materials available, visible and accessible for the stakeholders. Development of materials, posting, conduct of events and invitation of resource speakers are among the popular and effective strategies to increase involvement, visibility and access to materials and, ultimately, implementation.

S3: “Our school always conduct a GAD seminar with our invited guest speakers”.

Gender and Development seminars are avenues for teachers and personnel to broaden their horizon and widen their access to information through the presence of different resource and expert speakers and consultant. Gaining access to these information may lead to increase participation and awareness. It is also important to note that GAD Corners in classrooms are also established and symposium and campaigns are launched. As one of the participants shared:

S13: “Having a symposium in the school and providing a copy of different acts to teachers so that they relay it to their students.”

It is great to start with building a display with the resources you have (Gay-Milliken & DiScala, 2020). This is the relevance of visibility and access. It is not enough that pamphlets and brochures are printed, it must be made accessible and visible for learners and school stakeholders to use. Educating them through the materials is the other side of the task. Greater involvement only happens when clear understanding of codes and policies takes place. Precursory to these is the presence and visibility of resources, materials and advocates. Making each parent, each teacher and each stakeholder an advocate already means a lot in the implementation. The best visual aid and resource material is a willing and passionate advocate for safe spaces.

## **2. Sources of vulnerabilities or development areas in the implementation of Article V of RA 11313 (Safe Spaces Act) in schools**

Every policy will always have areas for improvement and further development. In the case of the safe spaces act, the policy is still new and the extent of implementation is being measured. However, in the course of interview and analysis, several participants already identified certain vulnerabilities and development areas for the policy. The succeeding themes reflect the vulnerabilities and development areas: Cultural Reform, Crucial Resources, and Critical Reasoning.

### **a. Cultural Reform**

The first ground for effective implementation is fertile insemination of ideas and investment of good cultural practices and beliefs. A community who are gender-responsive and inclusive do not happen overnight. These values are embedded and undergone honing and culturing upbringing. Same with this case. Few, but significant, participants recognize the need for cultural and paradigm improvement in the adoption of safe spaces in schools. S22 pinpointed “parents culture and students’ perspective” as areas of development and at the same time vulnerability of the school. This was concurred by two other participants, viz., S24 and S29. They identified school and community culture as crucial areas for safe spaces implementation in schools to succeed.

In the implementation of the Safe Spaces Act, it must be coupled with school or campus culture reforms. Campus culture can be defined as “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institution of higher education” (Museus & Jayakumar 2012, as cited by Hailu, Collins, & Stanton, 2018).

### **b. Crucial Resources**

Support to resources is like a fuel to every motorized vehicle. The implementation of policies will always entail deployment of crucial resources. To wit, resources are not limited to material or physical resources alone. Resources encompass time, money, materials, machineries, mechanisms, and human resource. All of these are essential in the overall roll-out of the policy. One of the participants highlighted the financial component of resources needed:

S1: “I think the an insufficient budget for the dissemination of the program.”

Resource management and provision are crucial in creating positive school climates and safe spaces. This is supported by the study of Cardinal (2021) and Hailu, Collins and Stanton (2018). Positive school climate and cultural improvement necessitate that resource such as human resources, educators, time and mechanisms are invested, placed, and deployed in order to enact the policies. Likewise, budget for facilities, infrastructure, and production of materials, learning resources, modules, flyers, pamphlets, posters and the like must also be funded.



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### c. Critical Reasoning

Lack of information and awareness can be impeding factors or elements in the full implementation of the safe spaces act. As cited by three of the participants, S16, S30, and S17, all of them indicated that “lack of knowledge, information and awareness” are vulnerable areas for the implementation of safe spaces in schools. True, indeed. What we do know mystifies us and, at times, encumbers us to progress. Cultural reform and crucial resources must be combined with critical reasoning so that bigotry, gullibility and prejudice may be dissipated and promote gender-sensitivity and inclusion.

One way to dispel ignorance and incapacity is to subject our personnel to professional development and capacity building programs. Professional development programs enable educators to gain the necessary knowledge, awareness, and skill to deliver appropriate services and instill gender-responsive competencies (Cardinal, 2021).

### IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It may be considered as an interminable contention among academicians and educators that safety is a fundamental and essential component in facilitating student learning. Nonetheless, this study exhibits that although part of the mandate and policy of the institution, the implementation of safe spaces in schools was found to be critical and crucial from dissemination, implementation and development, especially in promoting a school culture and gender-responsive atmosphere. Creating schools that are safe and inclusive, free of harassment and violence for all students, takes a whole school approach and commitment to positive change (Cardinal, 2021, p.20). As the old proverb goes, it takes a village to raise a child, the entire school community have a moral and social responsibility to educate, protect, and care for all learners and free them from discrimination and harassment.

The researcher, therefore, recommends the extension of the current study to include other parameters or variables in order to increase its scope and applicability. A quantitative study may be sought to validate the results of this qualitative research. Likewise, variables which include child protection, violence, disaster and risk reduction, and peace-zones may also be ventured as part of the wider understanding of the term safe spaces. All of these are learner-centered approaches to improve our schools and definitely regard them as safe spaces.

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