

# Lived Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Students in Coping with Gender and School Policies Challenges

Jennell M. Marasigan

Laguna State Polytechnic University Sta. Cruz Laguna 4009 PHILIPPINES

Email address: julierosemendoza002@gmail.com

**Abstract**— *In an educational environment where inclusivity remains a growing concern, students who identify as LGBTQIA+ often face a unique challenge related to their gender identity and expression. Understanding the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students is necessary to ensure schools become nurturing spaces for identity formation and student well-being. The research specifically aimed to address the following question: How do LGBTQIA+ students experience life in relation to their gender identity and expression? What challenges do they face concerning school policies, particularly those affecting gender responsiveness? What coping mechanisms do they employ to manage these challenges? and What policy interventions can be proposed based on the findings of the study? This research employed a qualitative design using a transcendental phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of seven LGBTQIA+ junior high school students selected through snowball sampling. One-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to allow participants to narrate their experiences. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis to extract meaningful patterns and insights related to gender identity, school policies, and coping strategies. Seven major themes emerged from the interviews: Awareness of Gender Identity, Gender Expression in School, Gender Identity Challenges, Restrictive School Policies, Inclusive and Affirming School Policies, Hiding or Altering Gender Expression, and Coping Strategies for Gender Identity Challenges. The findings showed that while participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, institutional barriers, and societal expectations often hindered their journey toward self-acceptance. Their lived narratives reflect the personal toll of exclusionary practices and the decisive role of support systems in fostering resilience. Students revealed that validation from peers, understanding teachers, and opportunities for expression helped them cope with discrimination and marginalization. The study recommends that schools revise existing policies to make them more gender-responsive, ensure inclusive practices that affirm all gender identities, and provide safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ students. It also encourages the implementation of gender sensitivity training for school personnel and the integration of SOGIES topics into classroom discussions. Future research may expand this work by including different educational settings, age groups, and geographic locations to further understand the experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners in the Philippine context.*

**Keywords**— *LGBTQIA+, gender, school policies, challenges, lived experiences*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The educational institution upholds the core principle of equality. The principle of equality in education ensures that all students have equal access to resources, academic opportunities, and extracurricular activities, promoting fairness in all aspects of institutional life. It includes

eliminating barriers that may hinder the participation of marginalized groups, such as gender, socioeconomic status, or sexual orientation and involves the development of policies that promote inclusivity and equity. Upholding this principle also means that the institution actively works to address and rectify historical inequities and systemic biases, ensuring that all members of the educational community can thrive academically, socially, and professionally.

In today's global environment, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youngsters confront a lot of obstacles. LGBTQ youngsters frequently encounter social injustice in addition to a wide variety of viewpoints, societal expectations, and individual growth. In many parts of the world, continued discrimination and punishment occurs against LGBTQ individuals and the lack of legal protection is an extra burden for young people in an already oppressive environment. (Jones et al., 2020)

The pursuit of equality in educational institutions often centers around ensuring that every student, regardless of background, has access to quality education. For LGBTQIA students, this pursuit often entails confronting unique barriers rooted in both societal norms and institutional policies. In the context of gender equality, LGBTQIA students continue to face difficulties due to institutional policies that do not fully recognize their identities. Studies show that these students often encounter bullying, discrimination, and exclusion, leading to negative academic outcomes and emotional distress. (Abesamis, L. E., & Siddayao, K., 2021).

In the Philippines, the legal framework safeguards the right to education and equality for all citizens, as outlined in the 1987 Constitution and reinforced by laws such as the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 (RA 10627). Article II, Section 11 of the 1987 Philippine constitution recognizes that "the State values the dignity of every human person and guarantees full respect for human rights." This provision is the cornerstone of protection against discrimination, including based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Additionally, Section 1 of Article XIV requires the State to "protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels." This includes the right of LGBTQIA+ students to access education without facing discrimination or policies that marginalize their gender identity. Furthermore, the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 (RA 10627) firmly requires schools to create policies that prevent and address bullying, including those targeting students based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Despite the existence of inclusive policies, critics argue that schools continue to perpetuate heteronormative standards, often neglecting the needs of LGBTQIA students. This study employs a micro-to-macro approach to analyze the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students comprehensively. It begins by digging into personal narratives, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how these students navigate and cope with challenges related to their identities.

The study sought to provide insights into how educational institutions can foster truly inclusive environments. Analyzing both the challenges and coping mechanisms of LGBTQIA+ students, it contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and education in the Philippines, building upon existing literature while offering new perspectives.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Problem/s which were addressed by the research

This study intended to shed light on how these students managed these challenges and to what extent these experiences impacted their educational journey and overall well-being. The results of this research served to inform school communities and policymakers about the struggles faced by LGBTQIA+ community and highlight areas where greater support and inclusivity can be fostered. Specifically, this study aimed to fulfill the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in coping with challenges in connection with their:
  - 1.1 Gender
    - 1.1.1 Gender Identity
    - 1.1.2 Gender Expression
  - 1.2 School Policies
    - 1.2.1 Gender-Responsiveness
2. What coping mechanisms do LGBTQIA+ students use to address the challenges they face?
3. What factors shape how LGBTQIA+ students experience and cope with the above-mentioned challenges?
4. What policy reforms or interventions can be proposed based on the study’s findings to support LGBTQIA+ students in coping with gender-related and school policy challenges?

II. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative design using a transcendental phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of seven LGBTQIA+ junior high school students selected through snowball sampling. One-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to allow participants to narrate their experiences. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis to extract meaningful patterns and insights related to gender identity, school policies, and coping strategies. Seven major themes emerged from the interviews: Awareness of Gender Identity, Gender Expression in School, Gender Identity Challenges, Restrictive School Policies, Inclusive and Affirming School Policies, Hiding or Altering Gender Expression, and Coping Strategies for Gender Identity Challenges.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis of the interview data are presented in this chapter. The themes identified within the data included (a) Awareness of Gender Identity, (b) Gender Expression in School, (c) Gender Identity Challenges, (d) Restrictive School Policies, (e) Inclusive and Affirming School Policies, (f) Hiding or Altering Gender Expression, (g) Hiding or Altering Gender Expression, (h) Coping Strategies for Gender Identity Challenges, and (i) Support Systems for Gender-Related Challenges.

The research objectives for this study were (1) to determine the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in coping with school policies, (2) to ascertain different coping mechanisms for these challenges, and (3) to propose achievable policy reformation or intervention based on the findings of this study. These objectives led the researcher to develop interview questions about participants’ experiences in coping and how they described their experiences.

Theme Clustering

As every significant statement is initially treated as possessing equal value, this next step deletes those statements irrelevant to the topic and others that are repeated or overlapping. The horizons or textual meanings are represented by the statements that follow. The researcher meticulously analyzes the identified important statements and then groups them into themes (Moustakas, 1994).

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Theme 1: Awareness of Gender Identity	Early realization of Gender Identity and Self-awareness
Theme 2: Gender Expression in School	Fluid Gender Expression
Theme 3: Gender Identity Challenges	Fear of Judgment and Bullying and Discrimination
Theme 4: Restrictive School Policies	Prohibition of Cross-Dressing and Haircut Policies
Theme 5: Inclusive and Affirming School Policies	Allowance of Cross-Dressing and Haircut Policy Reforms
Theme 6: Hiding or Altering Gender Expression	Pressure to Conform and Emotional Toll of Discrimination and Bullying
Theme 7: Coping Strategies for Gender Identity Challenges	Resilient Self-Affirmation and Emotional Detachment
Theme 8: Support Systems for Gender-Related Challenges	Peer Support and Teachers and Institutional Support

1. Can you describe how you personally identify in terms of gender? How long have you been aware of your gender identity? (Kaya mo bang ipaliwanag kung paano mo kinikilala ang iyong sarili batay sa kasarian (gender)? Gaano katagal mo nang alam ang iyong kasarian (gender identity)?)

Theme 1: Awareness of Gender Identity

The theme, “Awareness of Gender Identity” explores how individuals recognize, identify, and define their gender identity. It explores the person’s process of realizing and discovering their gender identity. It includes two subordinate themes: Early realization of Gender Identity and Self-awareness.

The subtheme Early realization of Gender Identity focuses on individuals who realized their gender identity in early life. Some participants noted that they identified their gender

identity as early as elementary or preschool school. Their awareness frequently resulted from personal expression.

Participant 2 (Bisexual) and Participant 3 (Transgender) became aware in Grade 4

"Ang pagiging bisexual ko po ay nakilala ko at napansin ko noong ako po ay Grade 4. Nahalata ko po sa aking kilos o galaw."

Likewise, Participant 5 (Transgender 2)

"Kinikilala ko po ang aking sarili bilang transgender at nung kinder pa lang po alam ko na pong hindi po ako lalaki."

Others had later realizations, often influenced by attraction and self-reflection. In terms of gender identity, self-awareness is the capacity of an individual to examine their thoughts, feelings, and experiences to understand their gender.

In contrast to early realization, which frequently occurs on its own throughout childhood, self-awareness might emerge more gradually because of reflection and individual experiences. Some participants in the study shared that they became more aware of their gender identity during puberty, as they started to question their attraction, behavior, and sense of self.

Participant 1 (Lesbian 1):

"Ako po ay isang lesbian kasi po may girlfriend na po ako since I turned 11 po. Parang na-attract na po ako sa same gender ko po."

Lastly, Participants 7 (Gay):

"P7: Opo. Kaya ko pong kilalanin ang-ang aking kasarian sa pamamagitan po ng kung sino po ang aking nagugustuhan. At 'yon po ay ang lalaki po ang aking nagugustuhan."

Participants' stories show that gender identity changes throughout time and is not always immediately clear at first.

The seven participants' responses highlight the diverse experiences of LGBTQIA+ people in identifying and accepting their gender identity. Gender identity formation begins at an early age and is influenced by personal experiences, romantic attractions, societal norms, and peer interactions. Newcomb et al. (2019) highlighted that LGBTQIA+ adolescents undergo a complex identity formation process, often negotiating between internal experiences and societal expectations. Bautista-Fryer (2023) emphasized that a supportive environment significantly impacts the successful navigation of gender identity challenges, reinforcing autonomy and mental well-being.

Furthermore, Medico et al. (2020) identified three pathways for transgender youth: early affirmation, silent childhood tension, and realization a puberty, showing the complexity of gender identity development. In addition, puberty represents a significant period for the realization of gender identity.

2. How do you express your gender at school (e.g., through clothing, behavior, or mannerisms)? (Paano mo ipinapahayag ang iyong kasarian sa paaralan? (hal. sa pananamit, ugali, o kagawian.

Theme 2: Gender Expression in School

In the school setting, gender expression plays a crucial role in identity assertion. The theme Gender Expression in School is associated with: Fluid Gender Expression.

Fluid gender expression refers to the ability of individuals to shift between different forms of gender presentation depending on external influences or personal comfort. Some participants in the study expressed their gender freely through clothing, mannerisms, and speech.

Participants 2, 3, 4, and 7, actively express their gender identity through clothes and behavior.

Participant 2 (Bisexual) shared,

"Sa pananamit din po."

Similarly, Participant 3 (Transgender),

"Bilang trans po, sa pananamit po at sa kagawian po."

Participant 4 (Lesbian):

"I make it obvious po para hindi ako ma-mistaken for a straight woman."

Likewise, Participant 7 (Gay)

"Sa pamamagitan po ng aking pagkilos at pananalita"

An important part of identity that comes through attire, conduct, and demeanor is gender expression. In this study, participants shared how they express their gender within the school setting, revealing varying levels of openness and self-expression.

The responses obtained from the participants highlight the many ways in which people convey their gender identity in the school setting. Gender expressions and gender identity vary based on personal comfort, societal norms, and school policies.

Joyce (2015) emphasized that sexual minority youth often experience lower levels of school connectedness due to barriers to self-expression. Similarly, Marraccini et al. (2022) highlighted that cultural norms strongly influence how students navigate gender identity, with restrictive environments leading to internalized struggles and identity suppression. Gender expression is a crucial part of identity, yet many LGBTQIA+ students face restrictions in school environments.

Their answers highlight the significance of gender expression as a way of exerting identity and visibility in the school environment. Research has shown that clothing and self-presentation are not only vital aspects of individual identity formation but also play significant roles in gender expression among students. As highlighted by (Anderson, 2020), LGBTQIA+ individuals often challenge the idea of sexual orientation as an "invisible" identity by making choices in how they present themselves. Clothing and behavior, as a form of self-expression, allow individuals to communicate who they really are.

According to Marquez et al. (2024), people construct their unique styles in order to navigate the gender spectrum and oppose societal gender standards. Clothing serves as a powerful means of resistance through public acts of gender expression. In this context, behavior, self-presentation, and clothing allow LGBTQIA+ students to actively resist societal norms and pressure and create a space for their authentic self.

3. Have you faced any challenges in expressing or identifying with your gender within the school environment? Can you share specific examples? (May mga pagsubok ka na bang hinang patungkol sa pagpapahayag o pagkikilala sa iyong kasarian sa loob ng paaralan? Maaari ka bang magbigay ng tiyak na halimbawa?)

**Theme 3: Gender Identity Challenges**

In the theme of Gender Identity Challenges, the subordinate themes are Fear of Judgement and Bullying and Discrimination. These themes highlight the challenges LGBTQIA+ students face in expressing their gender identity within the school environment. Fear of being judged is often fueled by societal norms and peer expectations, leading some students to hide or alter their gender expression to avoid attention.

Furthermore, experiences with bullying and discrimination further hinder their capacity to freely present themselves, as verbal harassment, exclusion, and school restrictions create an unwelcome environment for gender-diverse students.

While some participants expressed confidence in their gender identity, others encountered significant challenges expressing themselves freely due to societal norms, school policies, and peers. Participant 1 (Lesbian) stated that they do not publicly show their gender identity due to a lack of acceptance from other students.

“... Yung iba dito hindi po open sa same-gender relationship, kaya hindi din po ako nagsasabi sa iba.”

This response shows a prevalent fear of judgment and exclusion that keeps some LGBTQIA+ students from openly expressing themselves. The existence of heteronormative attitudes in school environments makes it difficult for students to communicate their relationships and gender identity.

In subordinate two, many participants recounted experiences of discrimination and bullying based on their gender expression and identity. Participant 2 (Bisexual) shared how they have been bullied due to their clothing preferences.

“Tulad po ng pambully po sa akin. Di po maiiwasan. Binully po yung kasuotan ko.”

Similarly, Participants 3, 6, and 7 described how school policies and social beliefs contributed to discrimination:

Participant 3 (Transgender) “

Kasi dun sa unang school ko pong pinapasukan, hindi pa po allow yung cross-dressing. Then mahaba po yung buhok ko, tas ang suot ko pang-lalake pag papasok po ako, tas awasan, sasabihan po akong tomboy, ganon”

Participant 6 (Transgender):

“Yes po, this is discriminations.

Participants 7 (Gay):

“Ang pangbully po sa akin o ang pagdiscrimination po sa aking kasarian.”

These responses reveal that bullying and discrimination remain a common problem, affecting students’ self-esteem and mental health.

The participants’ responses provide insight into the challenges LGBTQIA+ students face when expressing their gender in a school environment. It shows the restrictive nature of school policies on gender expression, which often dictate

how students should present themselves based on traditional gender norms. As they conformed to gendered dress codes that did not align with their identity, the participants faced social discrimination, bullying, and misgendering. Discrimination and bullying remain persistent issues for LGBTQIA+ students. Reyes et al. (2019) identified that LGBTQ students who experienced discrimination reported increased feelings of loneliness, rejection, and distress, impacting their emotional well-being. Thoreson (2023) further discussed the prevalence of bullying in Philippine schools, where harassment often limits LGBTQIA+ students' academic and social development.

A Human Rights Watch (2017) report titled "Just Let Us Be: Discrimination Against LGBT Students in the Philippines" provides significant evidence of the systemic discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ students in educational institutions. The report talks about cases of bullying, school-imposed dress codes, and a lack of institutional support. These examples support the study's conclusion that restrictive policies and societal biases hurt LGBTQIA+ students' school experiences and emotional well-being. It shows that LGBTQ students face significant bullying and discrimination in educational settings, experiencing verbal harassment, physical intimidation, and social exclusion (Castillo, 2024).

Schools are supposed to be places for learning, growth, and social development, but for many LGBTQIA+ students, they have become places of fear and exclusion. These negative experiences are often caused by rigid gender norms that dictate acceptable ways of dressing, speaking, and behaving, posing challenges for students whose gender expression does not align to societal expectations.

One of the most significant concerns and issues for LGBTQIA+ students face is the policing of their gender expression. Many schools have strict dress code and grooming policies that disproportionately affect transgender and nonbinary students, preventing them from expressing their gender identity freely.

These experiences can lead to severe psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, and lowered self-confidence, as well as academic challenges such as concentration issues. Transgender students report specific forms of bullying, including deadnaming and misgendering, while LGBTQ students of color face additional discrimination based on race/ethnicity.

4. Have you encountered any specific school policies that you felt hindered your ability to express your gender identity or expression freely? Could you share an example? (Nakatagpo ka na ba ng anumang patakaran sa paaralan na para sayo ay nakapigil sa iyong kalayaang ipahayag ang iyong kasarian (gender identity of expression)? Maaari ka bang magbigay ng halimbawa?)

**Themes: Restrictive School Policies**

The subordinate themes under Restrictive School Policies are Prohibition of Cross-Dressing and Haircut Policies. These themes highlight the institutional barriers that limit LGBTQIA+ students’ ability to express their gender identity at school.

The restriction on cross-dressing enforces restrictive gender norms, preventing students from wearing clothing that align with their identity.

Participants 2 (Bisexual):

"Ah ano po, pagsusuo po ng uniform. Ano po, yung pagsuo ko po ng uniform sa ano, pagsusuo ko po ng uniform ay nakakapigil sa aking pagpapakita po ng aking kasarian. Uniform po ng pambabae."

Participants 3 (Transgender):

"Yun po, yung hindi po pagpayag na mag-crossdressing po ako."

Participants 7 (Gay):

Bawal pong magsuot ng pambabaeng suot yung mga bakla

These responses emphasize how uniform policies enforce traditional gender norms, making it difficult for LGBTQIA+ students to dress in ways that reflect their identities.

Similarly, haircut policies enforce conformity, often pressuring students to conform to traditional gender expectations, which may have a negative impact with their confidence.

Participants 5 (Transgender):

Sa dati ko pong paaralan ay pinapaputol po nila yung buhok ko.

Participants 6 (Transgender):

"Napilitan po kami magpaputol ng buhok upang makaakyat sa inaasam naming entablado."

These remarks show how strict haircut policies for LGBTQIA+ students comply to gender expectations, which often affecting their confidence and sense of self-expression. School policies may even pressure students to hide their identities for fear of exclusion or punishment.

School policies play a crucial role in shaping students' experiences, particularly for LGBTQIA+ individuals who seek to express their gender identity freely. When asked whether they encountered any specific school policies that hindered their ability to express their gender identity, the participants provided varying perspectives, reflecting both acceptance and restrictions within their school environment. The answers show that school policies play a crucial role in promoting and shaping the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students, whether by cultivating an inclusive environment or by imposing restrictions that hinder gender expression.

The participants' answers highlight both acceptance and barriers within school. Greytak et al. (n.d.) noted that transgender students face discrimination due to dress code policies and lack of school support. The DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017, also known as the Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy, aims to address these issues by embedding principles of gender equality and non-discrimination and seeks to create a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students, including transgender and gender-diverse individuals. The policy mandates the elimination of gender-based discrimination in schools by promoting gender-sensitive policies and practices, such as allowing students to express their gender identity through school uniforms and haircuts. It also supports institutions that provide protection for

LGBTQIA+ students, ensuring that school personnel are trained to address gender-related concerns effectively.

Furthermore, Hollo (2019), in the study "From Gender-Based to Gender-Neutral Dress Codes: How Rethinking the Concepts of Gender and Gender Identity Can Help in Creating an Inclusive Environment at Higher Education Institutions", discusses the importance of gender-neutral dress codes in fostering inclusivity in educational settings. The research underscores how rigid dress policies contribute to the marginalization of gender-diverse individuals and argues for the adoption of inclusive policies that respect students' gender identities. This aligns with the findings of this study, which highlights the restrictive impact of traditional uniform policies on LGBTQIA+ students.

LGBTQIA+ often must deal with negative or hostile school environments, one major factor contributing to this issue is that some schools have strict school policies that impose rigid gender norms that make it hard for LGBTQ students to easily show who they are.

Among these restrictive policies, the prohibition of cross-dressing and strict haircut regulations stand out as significant sources of discrimination that negatively impact students' mental health and academic performance. One urgent problem that disproportionately impacts LGBTQIA+ Students – especially transgender and gender non-conforming students is the prohibition of cross dressing within school campuses. Dress codes in many schools prohibit students from aligning their attire with their gender identity. Discrimination results from this restriction, which also causes emotional distress and lowers students' self-esteem. Such regulations have adverse effects on students' mental health, leading to anxiety, and a decline in academic performance, Operaio and Rapada (2024).

Similarly, haircut policies in schools play a major factor in promoting gender conformity. For transgender individuals, hair is more than just an appearance—it is an essential form of self-expression. However, many schools enforce strict haircut policies, requiring students to maintain their hairstyles in accordance with the sex they were born with. These regulations are emotionally damaging because they convey the idea that transgender identities are invalid.

In 2020, the Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP) highlights the connection between discrimination and mental health struggles among LGBTQ individuals. The continued enforcement of policies that prohibit cross-dressing and restrict haircuts perpetuate prejudice and stigma, which eventually harm students' well-being and limit their opportunities for academic success.

5. What aspects of current school policies do you perceive as supportive? (Anong mga aspekto ng kasalukuyang patakaran sa paaralan ang nakikita mong sumusuporta sa iyo?)

Theme 5: Inclusive and Affirming School Policies

The superordinate theme includes two subordinates: Allowance of cross-dressing and Haircut Policy reforms. These themes demonstrate how progressive policies can positively impact and benefit the LGBTQIA+ students by giving them more freedom to express who they really are.

Inclusive school policies that allow cross-dressing are vital in fostering a safe and affirming environment for LGBTQIA+

students. When schools adopt gender-affirming policies, students feel more comfortable expressing their true selves, which reduces feelings of isolation and distress. Participants 2, Participant 3, and Participant 5 emphasized how supportive gender expression policies improve their general well-being and sense of belonging.

Participants 2 (Bisexual):

"Yung pumapayag po sila kahit transgender ka or what. Pumapayag po silang magsuot ka ng crossdressing. Dun ko po nakikita ang suporta nila.

Participants 3 (Transgender):

"Yung pag-allow po ng crossdressing po. Yung nag-aallow na po sila ng mahabang buhok sa mga trans, sa gay po."

Participants 5 (Transgender):

"P'wede po yung mahaba 'yung buhok at pwede mag suot ng pambabae"

These testimonies highlight how policies that support gender expression contribute to a school culture that values diversity and promotes inclusiveness. Schools that acknowledge and respect students' gender identity help to create a learning environment in which LGBTQIA+ students feel validated and empowered.

Another sub theme that emerged was the Haircut Policy Reforms, Supportive school policies that allow students to grow their hair according to their gender identity and provide an inclusive environment. Several participants shared how evolving school policies regarding hair length positively influenced their gender expression. Participant 6 and Participant 7 described how past restrictions compelled them to keep their hair short, which limited their ability to portray themselves in a way that was aligned with their identity.

However, their recent school has allowed them to express their gender more freely through their hairstyle.

Participants 6 (Transgender):

"Yung hindi po tulad dati na kailangan bawat pasok po namin is nakaipit po kaming buhok at tinatago po yung buhok namin."

Participants 7 (Gay):

"Pu-wede pong magpahaba ng mga buhok."

These responses emphasize the importance of inclusive haircut policies in supporting students, gender identities.

The findings of this study emphasize how crucial supportive school policies are to create a learning environment that accommodates the diverse identities of students, especially those of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Marraccini et al. (2022) highlighted the students from cultural backgrounds that traditionally reject non-cisgender, and non-heterosexual identities often face additional problems. This process includes overcoming homophobia and engaging in LGBTQIA+ activities. Without institutional support, these students may struggle with self-acceptance and suffer from psychological distress.

Furthermore, policies that allow gender-affirming self-expression such as flexibility in haircut regulations and allowance of cross-dressing, serve as crucial mechanisms in fostering emotional wellbeing and promoting identity development. The Department of Education introduced the

Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy (DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017) in response to the demand for an inclusive learning environment, its goal is to include gender sensitivity in all aspects of basic education. According to this policy, schools must establish safe, non-discriminatory environments where all students, regardless of gender identity or expression, are treated with dignity and respect. This is in line with the need for school policies that allow and support gender-affirming practices, such as hairstyle choices and clothing preferences, to ensure that LGBTQIA+ students feel safe, valued and empowered and do not face barriers in their academic journey. By embracing inclusivity schools can ensure that all students – regardless of gender identity – have equal opportunity to learn and grow.

6. Have you ever had to hide or alter your gender expression or identity to avoid discrimination or bullying? How did that make you feel? (Naranasan mo na bang itago o baguhin ang iyong gender expression o identity para makaiwas sa diskriminasyon at pambu-bully? Ano ang naramdaman mo noon?)

Theme 6: Hiding or Altering Gender Expression

The superordinate theme, Hiding or Altering Gender Expression, encompasses two subordinate themes: Pressure to Conform and Emotional Toll of Discrimination and Bullying. These themes highlight the challenging circumstances of LGBTQIA+ students' experience, as they feel pressured to hide change their gender expression to fit to societal norms and avoid negative repercussions.

Many students experience immense pressure to fit in with traditional gender expectations, fearing that deviating from these norms could be the target of bullying, exclusion, or discrimination. Societal expectations and school norms force other students to suppress their authentic selves, which causes emotional distress and identity struggles. Participants share their personal experiences of overcoming these challenges within the school environment.

On a subordinate theme, Pressure to conform, many LGBTQIA+ students alter their gender expression to align to social expectation and prevent discrimination.

P1: "Sabi nila tomboy daw po ako tas ang ganda-ganda ko daw po tas babae gusto ko"

Likewise, Participant 2 (P2) and Participant 5 (P5) describe experiencing bullying that resulted in self-doubt and emotional distress.

Participants 2 (Bisexual):

"Naranasan ko na po dahil sa pangbubully."

Participants 5 (Transgender):

Naranasan ko pong baguhin ang aking identity para po makaiwas sa diskriminasyon...

Their testimonies show how strict gender norms force LGBTQIA+ students to often be forced into silence due to fear of rejection, bullying, or exclusion. Instead of being spaces of learning and growth, schools can become sites of internal conflict, as they struggle to separate who they really are from the identities they believe they need to adopt to fit in.

The impact of discrimination and bullying is evident in the participants' responses. Subordinate Theme 2: Emotional Toll

of Discrimination and Bullying highlights how LGBTQIA+ students suffer from emotional distress.

For example, Participant 1 expressed deep sadness when confronted with derogatory remarks about their gender expression

“Syempre po malulungkot po ako.”

Similarly, Participant 2 (P2) described how bullying made them feel upset

“Naranasan ko na po dahil sa pangbully. Doon po ako napanghinaan ng loob o nasasaktan.”

Participants 5 (Transgender): further highlighted that it makes them reluctant to express their true gender identity.

“Dahil dito nalulungkot dito nalulungkot po ako at nahihya po”

Even participants 3 (Transgender) illustrates the discomfort “Parang nasasaktan... nasasaktan po.”

These testimonies demonstrate how discrimination and bullying can inflict emotional wounds, leaving LGBTQIA+ students struggling with pain. Based on the findings, LGBTQIA+ students are significantly impacted by both prejudice and subtle pressures to conform to traditional societal and school norms. These pressures manifest in several ways—through bullying, derogatory remarks, and strict school policies—which in turn create an environment of emotional distress and self-doubt among students.

LGBTQIA+ students often feel pressure to conform to societal expectations and school norms to avoid discrimination or bullying. When asked if they had ever hidden or altered their gender expression due to fear of discrimination, participants shared their stories of feeling pressured to suppress their identity, which resulted in emotional distress and internal struggles.

The responses from LGBTQIA+ students indicate that many feel pressured to conform to school norms to avoid discrimination and bullying. In addition, the findings highlight how restrictive societal standards and bullying push LGBTQIA+ students to change or repress their gender expression, leading to emotional distress and self-doubt. School plays a crucial role in fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment. LGBTQIA+ students indicate that many feel pressure to conform to school norms to avoid bullying and discrimination. Reyes et al. (2019), found that discrimination significantly impacts LGBTQIA+ students, leading to feelings of rejection, discomfort, and loneliness. These negative experiences lead to emotional distress and impact on their self-identity and well-being.

Moreover, the study highlights that restrictive school environments push LGBTQIA+ students to alter or repress their gender identity and expression. Newcomb et al. (2019) emphasized that LGBTQIA+ adolescents encounter specific challenges in identity formation and development and may experience role confusion when they are denied the freedom to explore their identity.

According to the participants, the constant invalidation of their gender identities led to deep-seated feelings of sadness, isolation, and a diminished sense of self-worth. For many, the experience of being forced to revert to a gender expression

does not accurately represent who they truly resulted in internal conflicts and a persistent struggle and self-acceptance.

The emotional toll of having to hide or alter their true identities not only affects their mental health but also disrupts their academic performance and personal development. This dual burden of external discrimination and pressure to conform creates a cycle where the fear of reflections forces LGBTQIA+ students to silence their voices, which feeds the stigmas that marginalize them.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that these negative experiences are indicative of larger systematic problems in educational settings. Rigid dress codes, haircut policies, and lack of supportive school cultures, contribute to an atmosphere where LGBTQIA+ students feel compelled to compromise their identities to gain acceptance and avoid further marginalization. The combined impact of discrimination and the pressure to conform not only leads to acute emotional stress and self-doubt among LGBTQIA+ students but also hinder their general wellbeing and academic performance.

Lastly, according to Minority Stress Theory, LGBTQIA+ students experience chronic stress because of ongoing exposure to discrimination and invalidation, which is evident in the restrictive regulations and social expectations. This stress and experience can negatively impact their mental health and hinder academic performance.

7. What strategies or coping mechanisms have you used to handle any challenges you’ve encountered related to gender identity and expression in school? (Anong mga estratehiya o coping mechanism ang ginamit mo upang malampasan ang mga hamon na iyong kinaharap patungkol sa gender identity at expression sa paaralan?)

Theme 7: Coping Mechanism

LGBTQIA+ students employ a variety of strategies to navigate the challenges associated with expressing their gender identities in school environments often marked by discrimination and bullying. These Coping Mechanisms reflect both active efforts to validate their identities and more passive strategies to lessen emotional harm. Two subordinate themes emerge from the data: Resilient Self-Affirmation and Emotional Detachment

Participants emphasize how crucial it is to embrace oneself as the starting point for overcoming prejudice. They develop an internal resilience that enables them to resist harmful external pressures by accepting who they really are.

For instance, Participant 1 (Lesbian) highlighted self-acceptance as crucial:

“Acceptance po sa sarili ko kasi ayon po ang gusto at hindi ko na lang po pinapansin ang iba”

Similarly, Participant 2 and 6 emphasized inner strength and perseverance as key elements in conquering bullying.

Participants 2 (Bisexual): “Umm ano po, lakas ng loob po. Kung wala ka pong lakas ng loob na ipakita kung sino ka, lagi kang matutukso.”

Participants 6 (Transgender): Minomotivate ko po yung sarili ko na mas i-show ko pa po yung confident nila.”

The experiences of the participants highlight how crucial self-acceptance is as the foundation of overcoming discrimination and prejudice. Their stories demonstrate how accepting one's own self develops inner resilience, enabling individuals to face societal challenges with confidence and strength. By acknowledging and accepting who they are they get a sense of empowerment which enables them to reject harmful external pressures and negative societal judgment.

In contrast to active strategies, several participants adopt emotional detachment as a means of coping with bullying and discrimination. This strategy aims to protect oneself from more emotional harm by ignoring derogatory comments. Participant 3 (Transgender) described their experience of disengaging from negative comments.

"Ano po ahm, hindi ko na lang po sila pinapansin kumbaga parang pasok na lang po sa isang tenga ko tas lalabas na lang po sa kabila ganon."

Similarly, Participant 5 shared their approach to avoiding conflict by ignoring bullying remarks.

"Hindi ko na lang pinapansin po minsan pag may nang bubully para hindi na lang po lumala pag inaasar nila ako."

Meanwhile, participant 7 (Gay) acknowledged the emotional toll of discrimination but chose to remain silent to prevent further conflict.

Parang nasasaktan... nasasaktan po in addition, Natahimik na lang po ako para po wala pong gulo na maganap.

These responses highlight that emotional detachment serves as a self-protective mechanism, enabling LGBTQIA+ students to protect themselves from more emotional suffering by acting as a self-defense strategy. By ignoring discriminatory remarks, they attempt to maintain emotional stability and avoid conflicts.

The findings indicate that LGBTQIA+ students deal with issues pertaining to gender identity and expression in the school by using both emotional detachment and resilient self-affirmation as coping strategies supporting Meyer's (2023) assertion that Minority stress leads to both adaptive and defensive responses. Some students take stance by emotionally distancing themselves, while others actively affirm their identities through confidence and self-acceptance.

These strategies show the variety of ways LGBTQIA+ students deal with bullying and discrimination in the school environment. This highlights how the participant's deliberate dismissal of external negativity has become an adaptive coping mechanism, allowing them to turn their focus towards building self-resilience and motivation. LGBTQIA+ students face homophobia, stigmatization, and discrimination, which can result in mental health issues such as a sense of safety, low self-esteem, and lack of belonging.

In addition, Del Carmen Pérez Fuentes et al. (2020) emphasized resilience as a protective factor, enabling LGBTQIA+ youth to maintain mental well-being despite external challenges. Ultimately, the findings contribute to the broader discourse on LGBTQIA+ experiences in educational settings, emphasizing both the resilience of these students and the ongoing structural and social barriers they face.

8. Are there any support systems (friends, teachers, or groups) within the school that have helped you cope with gender-related challenges? How have they been supportive? (Mayroon bang mga suportang sistema (mga kaibigan, guro, o grupo) sa loob ng paaralan na nakatulong sa iyo sa pagharap sa mga hamon na may kaugnayan sa iyong kasarian? Paano sila naging suportado?)

Theme 8: Support System

LGBTQIA+ students face gender-related challenges in school, making support systems crucial for their emotional well-being, self-confidence, and sense of belonging. Participants emphasized the role of peer groups, teachers, and friends in creating a safe and inclusive environment that helps them navigate these challenges. The responses highlighted two keyways in which support systems contribute to LGBTQIA+ students' well-being: Peer Support and Teachers and School support. Peer groups provide emotional support and a sense of community, while inclusive school policies and teacher support help affirm gender identity and foster self-confidence. Subtheme 1: Peer Support. Peers play a crucial role in LGBTQIA+ students' lives, offering emotional support, acceptance, and advice. Having friends who share similar experiences fosters a sense of belonging and provides a safe space for self-expression.

Participant 1 (Lesbian):

"Yes po, dahil iba po sa mga kaibigan ko part din po ng LGBT. Na-accept naman po nila, di naman po nila masyado pinapansin."

Participant 3 (Transgender):

"Ayon po uhm, meron naman po mga teachers, grupo at tyaka mga friends ko na nakatulong sakín na pag-boost po ng confidence ko tapos sa pag-suporta po nila."

Participant 6 (Transgender):

"Opo, mayroon po akong kaibigan na sumuporta po sa akin dahil siya lang po ang nakakapag-usap ko po sa paaralan."

The findings highlight the crucial role of peer support in fostering a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQIA+ students in schools. Participants emphasized how friendships with individuals who share similar experiences contribute significantly to their emotional well-being, confidence, and overall sense of belonging. Having accepted and supportive peers allows them to express their gender identity more freely without fear of judgment or discrimination.

Subtheme 2: Teachers and Institutional Support Teachers and school policies that allow gender expression help create an inclusive learning environment, boosting LGBTQIA+ students' confidence and well-being.

Participant 2 (Bisexual):

"Naging suportado po 'yung mga kaibigan ko sa paaralan kasi isa rin po silang member ng LGBTQ. She also added teachers are also supportive. Umm yung nga po yung... pinapayagan pong mag crossdressing ganon."

The responses illustrate the importance of peer and teacher support in helping LGBTQIA+ students cope with gender-related challenges. By fostering an inclusive environment,

schools can empower students to express themselves confidently and without fear of discrimination.

The findings of this study highlight the interplay of identity, environment, and stress in shaping the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students as they navigate gender-related challenges within school settings. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) underscores how these students develop a sense of belonging by categorizing themselves within a marginalized community. This categorization fosters resilience and self-esteem but simultaneously exposes them to exclusion and discrimination due to heteronormative school policies (Pearson & Wilkinson, 2018). The process of social comparison further exacerbates their marginalization, as students recognize the disparities between their lived experiences and the dominant cultural norms, often leading to advocacy for more inclusive policies (ASP, 2021).

LGBTQIA+ students need support systems to help them deal with gender-related challenges in the classroom. The participants emphasized the importance of peer groups, teachers, and friends in creating a safe and inclusive environment that boosts their self-esteem

The answers show that support systems within schools—such as peer groups, teachers, and friends—are essential in helping LGBTQIA+ students cope with gender-related challenges. Participants noted that having LGBTQIA+ friends provides an immediate sense of acceptance and belonging. Russell et al. (2011) found that supportive peer networks can strengthen resilience and elevate self-esteem.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides further insight into how the different layers of a student's environment influence their experiences. At the microsystem level, interactions with peers, teachers, and family members play a crucial role in shaping their self-perception and well-being. Schools that fail to implement inclusive policies contribute to a hostile learning environment, which negatively impacts LGBTQIA+ students' mental health and academic engagement (Massucco, 2021). The mesosystem, consisting of interactions between family, school, and peer groups, can either provide crucial support or amplify discrimination. A supportive mesosystem, such as engaged parents or LGBTQIA+ student organizations, significantly buffers the negative effects of exclusionary policies. At the macrosystem level, societal norms and legal frameworks reinforce either inclusion or systematic marginalization, emphasizing the need for institutional reform to create affirming educational spaces.

Additionally, Meyer's Minority Stress Theory (2003) highlights how persistent external and internal stressors disproportionately affect LGBTQIA+ students. Experiences of discrimination, social rejection, and restrictive policies contribute to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and academic struggles.

The heightened risk of mental health challenges among LGBTQIA+ youth, as noted by Savin-Williams (2020), underscores the urgent need for interventions that address the compounded effects of minority stress. However, findings also point to the critical role of coping mechanisms, including

strong peer networks, inclusive school environments, and advocacy efforts, in mitigating these adverse effects (Russell et al., 2019). Supportive policies and the presence of affirming educators can significantly reduce the impact of minority stress, reinforcing the importance of proactive institutional measures.

Moreover, participants described positive interactions with teachers, such as the permission to cross-dress that foster an inclusive atmosphere. According to Joyce (2015), the importance of strong student-teacher relationships fosters emotional wellbeing and academic success. Using adaptive coping strategies, such as ignoring hurtful comments as suggested by peers, is also in line with Wadsworth's (2015) research that strong support networks are necessary to lessen the effects of discrimination.

By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how LGBTQIA+ students cope with gender and school policy challenges. The intersection of identity formation, environmental influences, and minority stress emphasizes the need for a multidimensional support system within educational institutions. Schools must actively implement policies that affirm diverse gender identities, foster safe and inclusive learning environments, and equip educators with the knowledge to support LGBTQIA+ students effectively. Addressing these systemic challenges is essential in ensuring that LGBTQIA+ students not only survive but thrive within academic institutions, reinforcing the broader goal of creating equitable and affirming educational spaces.  
Potential initiatives and Proposed activities

Schools play a crucial role in fostering inclusivity, and implementing initiatives that promote acceptance can significantly improve the wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ students. Key strategies to ensure a more inclusive learning environment include Gender Sensitivity Training for teachers, Strengthening Anti-discrimination Policies, Flexible Uniform Guidelines and Allowing of Haircut, and encouraging Inclusive Student-Led Activities and Clubs.

One of the most critical steps in promoting an inclusive school environment is Gender Sensitivity Training for Teachers. Many educators may unintentionally contribute to discrimination due to a lack of awareness about LGBTQIA+ issues. It is essential to train teachers and staff to respond to bullying and harassment. In addition, providing training on gender identity and educating teachers about the concepts of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE), schools can ensure that educators foster an environment where all students feel appreciated and respected. Integrating discussions on LGBTQIA+ topics into curriculum can help students understand gender diversity and break down negative stereotypes. Lessons on human rights, equality, and importance of inclusivity can be included in subjects such as social studies and health education. By normalizing discussions about LGBTQIA+ issues, schools can create and promote a culture of acceptance and embrace diversity and inclusion.

Program Enhancement Plan for Gender Sensitivity and LGBTQIA+ Inclusion			
Title:	Program Enhancement Plan for Gender Sensitivity and LGBTQIA+ Inclusion		
Activities	Goals and Objectives	Person Responsible	Expected Outcome
<b>Gender Sensitivity Training for Teachers and Staff</b>	To educate teachers and staff on gender diversity, inclusive language, and the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ students.	School Faculty, Resource speakers, training modules, and venue	Educators and staff will develop a deeper understanding of gender inclusivity to ensure LGBTQIA+ students receive fair treatment and support.
<b>Strengthening Anti-Discrimination Policies and Orientation on Bullying</b>	To establish clear, enforceable policies that protect LGBTQIA+ students from discrimination, bullying, and harassment.	School Administration, Policy review team, legal consultation, and DepEd guidelines.	Policies will be effectively enforced, ensuring LGBTQIA+ students feel protected and empowered to report discrimination without fear of retaliation.
<b>Flexible Uniform Guidelines and Allowing of Haircut Choices</b>	To allow students to express their gender identity freely through clothing and hairstyles without fear of judgment or punishment.	School Administration, Policy review team, student consultations.	Students will have the freedom to wear uniforms and choose hairstyles that align with their gender identity, promoting inclusivity and self-expression.
<b>Encouraging Inclusive Student-Led Activities and Clubs</b>	To provide LGBTQIA+ students with a platform for peer support, awareness campaigns, and advocacy.	Student Council and Faculty	Student-led organizations will promote inclusivity through events, forums, and awareness campaigns, fostering a culture of respect and reducing stigma

Another critical stem is Strengthening Anti-discrimination Policies. Although many schools have existing anti-discriminations policies, these rules are frequently not properly implemented, leaving LGBTQIA+ students vulnerable to maltreatment. Strengthening these policies entails ensuring that explicit guidelines are in place regarding disciplinary measures for discrimination and that awareness campaigns educate students and school personnel on these policies. Schools must actively monitor and enforce these measures to create a safe learning environment.

In addition, schools may actively conduct orientations on anti-LGBTQIA+ bullying to educate students and teachers on the significance of creating an inclusive and respectful atmosphere. These orientations aim to raise awareness, prevent discrimination, and empower individuals to become allies in the fight against bullying.

This orientation serves to educate everyone on the different forms of bullying that LGBTQIA+ students experience. Numerous incidents arose from ignorance or misconceptions about gender identity and sexual orientation by providing precise information. It helps to dismantle stereotypes, challenge prejudice and emphasize the harmful impact of bullying and discrimination on LGBTQIA+ students. When LGBTQIA+ students feel that their school actively protects them, they are more likely to feel secure and supported.

Another recommendation is the Flexible Uniform Guidelines and Allowing of Haircut. Strict uniform and haircut policies that prohibit gender expression are another major problem LGBTQIA+ students must deal with. For transgender and non-binary students, they are required to wear uniforms based on their assigned sex at birth, which can be

distressing for them. Schools must adopt and implement flexible uniform policies that let students wear clothes that reflect their gender identity.

Similarly, allowing students to adopt haircuts of their preference, regardless of gender, promotes self-expression and inclusion. Strict haircut policies that dictate different styles for male and female students often fail to accommodate transgender and non-binary students. By implementing more adaptable policies, schools acknowledge the importance of personal expression and gender identity, fostering a sense of validation and acceptance among students.

Finally, schools may encourage Students-led LGBTQIA+ Initiatives and Clubs. Empowering students to lead LGBTQIA+ students and clubs fosters and cultivates a sense of agency and accountability in fostering a more inclusive educational environment. These student-led groups offer platforms for LGBTQIA+ students and allies to advocate for their rights, raise awareness, and promote acceptance through various activities. LGBTQIA+ clubs can organize educational campaigns, pride events, and advocacy initiatives and programs that help students, teachers, and parents understand LGBTQIA+ issues. By actively promoting inclusion, students may influence school policy, advocate for essential improvements, and ensure that LGBTQIA+ voices are heard.

Schools should support these student-led initiatives by providing resources, and a platform to disseminate their advocacy endeavors. When students can lead these efforts, it creates a more empowered and supportive school community.

#### IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conducting this study has been a profound and enlightening experience that reinforces the importance of

inclusive education and equal rights for all students regardless of gender identity. Learning about the experiences of LGBTQIA+ gave me a better understanding of the challenges they face in the educational system that fail to recognize their identities.

One of the most striking realizations from this research was the resilience and strength shown by LGBTQIA+ students despite the exclusion, bullying, and discrimination they face. The strength of self-acceptance and support from others is shown by their capacity to seek support, assert their identities, and stand up for themselves.

Furthermore, this highlighted the gaps in existing school policies that need urgent attention. There is still more to be done to make the school environment safe, welcoming, and respectful of gender diversity. To end the cycle of discrimination, it is vital that families, schools, and administrators all play a part in promoting acceptance and understanding.

As a researcher, this study work had deepened my understanding and dedication to gender equity. Additionally, it had strengthened my conviction that school ought to be a place of empowerment rather than exclusion. To create a more inclusive and equitable education system, I hope that this research can provide the basis for further foundation and initiatives.

By amplifying the voices of LGBTQIA+ students and shedding light on their lived experiences, this study aimed to make a significant contribution to change—one that foster equality, respect and dignity for all students.

Based on the emerging themes from the study, the researcher developed the following set of recommendations.

LGBTQIA+ members may embrace their identities with confidence by building support networks, seeking guidance, and promoting self-acceptance and inclusivity.

The Department of Education (DepEd), Local Government Units (LGUs), and LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups may work together to establish policies that support gender inclusion in schools by implementing initiatives such as Gender Sensitivity Training for teachers, Strengthening Anti-Discrimination Policies, Flexible Uniform Guidelines and Allowing of Haircut and Encouraging Inclusive Student-Led Activities and Clubs. These measures aim to foster a safe, respectful, and affirming environment for all learners, regardless of gender identity or expression.

Teachers may contribute to the development of a learning environment where all students, regardless of gender identity or expression, feel appreciated and respected by promoting gender-responsive education.

Families of LGBTQIA+ students, may encourage to provide their children emotional support and acceptance. Their positive relationships with their families greatly influence LGBTQIA+ individual self-worth and mental health.

For future researchers, they may expand the study’s scope considering that although it initially involved seven (7) LGBTQIA+ student participants, broader participation across different schools could provide a more comprehensive understanding of LGBTQIA+ students’ experiences.

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