

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF GENDER STUDIES

Volume 2, Issue 1, January - June 2026

VOICES OF LGBTQIA+ LEARNERS ON GENDER SENSITIVITY IN STAKEHOLDER INTERACTION

Joeza A. Aquino

Philippine Normal University, Cainta Senior High School – DepEd Rizal, Philippines
aquinojoeza@gmail.com

Ellen Joy S. Miras

Marikina Polytechnic College, Philippines

Corresponding Author

Joeza A. Aquino

Philippine Normal University, Cainta Senior High School – DepEd Rizal, Philippines

Date of Submission:

January 8, 2026

Date of Acceptance:

March 10, 2026

Date of Publication:

June 30, 2026

ABSTRACT

Gender sensitivity in education is often discussed in terms of awareness, yet it remains underexamined as a relational and interactional construct within everyday school settings. This study examines how LGBTQIA+ learners understand and experience gender sensitivity through their interactions with classmates, teachers, and school staff. Using a phenomenological research design, the study explores the meanings learners attach to their lived experiences through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. Findings reveal that gender sensitivity is constructed through everyday encounters shaped by respect, inclusion, and recognition. Participants described both affirming interactions that foster belonging and instances of restriction linked to institutional practices and peer behavior. These experiences show that gender sensitivity is not a fixed condition but an evolving, relational process, offering insights for developing context-responsive school practices and professional learning initiatives.

Keywords: *gender sensitivity, LGBTQIA+ learners, school stakeholder interactions*

INTRODUCTION

Gender continues to be a contested social construct, particularly for individuals whose identities and expressions do not conform to dominant norms. Despite increasing societal efforts to promote inclusivity, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals continue to experience discrimination and marginalization in their everyday lives (Whitman et al., 2007). Moreover, these challenges extend beyond broader social spaces and are also evident within educational institutions. Hernandez and Torres (2023) note that LGBT students encounter various forms of discrimination in schools and universities—reflecting a long-standing struggle for acceptance and equality within academic environments. Taken together, these persistent

experiences of exclusion indicate that concerns surrounding gender sensitivity in education extend beyond local or institutional boundaries and have become a matter of international concern.

Recognizing that inequalities persist across social institutions, the United Nations articulated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a shared framework for advancing inclusive and equitable development. Malik et al. (2020) emphasize that the SDGs are grounded in empowerment, signaling a shift away from development approaches focused solely on economic growth toward those that enable individuals and communities to meaningfully participate in decisions affecting their lives. Within this agenda, concerns related to quality education and gender equality—articulated through SDG 4 and SDG 5—are closely intertwined, particularly in educational settings. However, Asadullah et al. (2024) point to the presence of “hidden inequality,” noting that indicators associated with SDG 4 provide limited recognition of gender inequality in educational production and offer only broad guidance for addressing gender-based disparities in practice. Consequently, this gap underscores the importance of examining how global commitments on education and gender are translated into concrete actions within specific educational contexts.

The Philippines has established a relatively strong framework of national legislation aimed at advancing gender equality across sectors, including education (Brosas et al., 2025). In line with these commitments, Alcazaren and Labor (2025) observe that initiatives under the Gender and Development (GAD) framework have been implemented within the educational system through collaborations involving the Philippine Commission on Women and UNESCO. These initiatives aim to revise curricula and instructional materials, promote gender-responsive teaching practices, and develop educators and school leaders who are attentive to gender-related concerns. However, Dungog and Aclao (2025) note that Philippine studies consistently reveal gaps between national-level GAD policy expectations and the realities of implementation in schools. Thus, despite national commitments and policy-driven efforts, existing research continues to point to disjunctions between gender-related intentions and how gender sensitivity is understood, enacted, and experienced within everyday school interactions.

In this context, clarifying how gender sensitivity is conceptualized in educational research becomes necessary. UNESCO emphasizes that education must move beyond awareness-raising toward gender-responsive and inclusive practices that actively address discrimination and exclusion. Drawing from UNESCO’s policy frameworks, gender sensitivity may be understood as an institutional and interpersonal capacity to recognize diverse gender identities, demonstrate respect toward these differences, and respond in ways that prevent discrimination and exclusion within school environments (UNESCO, 2016; UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO, 2019). Likewise, this understanding aligns with studies that associate gender sensitivity with the promotion of respect, awareness, and consideration for individuals’ gender identities and sexual orientations in everyday interactions (Lopez & Andal, 2024; Goel, 2023). Nevertheless, much of the existing literature has focused more heavily on gender awareness, attitudes, or role perceptions—leaving gender sensitivity, particularly as a relational and interactional construct within school settings, comparatively underexamined.

Gender sensitivity develops through ongoing learning and reflection shaped by everyday interactions. Steinweg et al. (2023) emphasize that this process requires individuals to critically examine their social and academic positioning and associated privileges. Despite policy efforts and expanding scholarly discussions on gender sensitivity in education, research that centers the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners remains limited—particularly in relation to how gender sensitivity is enacted in daily school interactions. Addressing this gap, the present phenomenological study foregrounds the voices of LGBTQIA+ learners to examine how gender sensitivity is understood and experienced through their interactions with teachers, school staff, and peers. Ultimately, the findings of this study may serve as a basis for evidence-based action planning, particularly in the development of school-level interventions and professional learning initiatives that aim to strengthen gender sensitivity within school communities.

Understanding gender sensitivity requires attention not only to institutional policies and frameworks but also to the meanings learners construct through their daily interactions within school spaces. Examining these lived experiences offers a more nuanced view of how respect, inclusion, and recognition are negotiated in practice, particularly among LGBTQIA+ learners whose perspectives remain underrepresented in educational research. This focus on everyday interactions allows the study to surface shared meanings that may inform more responsive and context-sensitive educational practices.

Guided by the need to understand how gender sensitivity is experienced and constructed through everyday school interactions, this study is anchored on the following research questions: (1) How do LGBTQIA+ learners describe their lived experiences of gender sensitivity in their interactions with classmates, teachers, and school staff? (2) How do interactions with school stakeholders shape LGBTQIA+ learners' understanding of gender sensitivity within the school context? and (3) What shared voices and meanings emerge from LGBTQIA+ learners regarding respect, inclusion, and recognition as experienced in their interactions with school stakeholders?

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Stakeholder Theory and Recognition Theory to frame gender sensitivity as a relational and institutionally situated phenomenon shaped through everyday school interactions. Taken together, these perspectives allow the study to move beyond policy abstractions and toward an examination of how gender sensitivity is enacted and experienced within the school environment.

To begin with, Stakeholder Theory conceptualizes institutions as systems influenced by the interactions and interests of interdependent actors whose relationships shape ethical and organizational outcomes (Harrison et al., 2010). In educational settings, this perspective foregrounds the roles of learners, teachers, and school personnel as active participants in shaping school culture. As Mainardes et al. (2012) explain, stakeholder engagement involves identifying relevant actors, recognizing their needs and interests, and sustaining relationships aligned with institutional goals. Moreover, Harrison et al. (2010) emphasize that ethical practice entails attending to stakeholders' interests and well-being. Viewed in this way, gender sensitivity

emerges through relational processes rather than being reduced to an individual attribute or policy mandate.

However, while Stakeholder Theory clarifies the institutional and relational dynamics at play, Recognition Theory brings attention to how these interactions are experienced at the level of the individual. Honneth (1995) posits that identities and self-relations are shaped through processes of recognition and misrecognition within interpersonal and institutional contexts. Within this framework, respect refers to being treated as a legitimate moral subject, identity is understood as a socially constituted sense of self, and inclusion denotes meaningful participation within a social environment (Thompson, 2006; McQueen, 2017). Conversely, experiences of misrecognition, such as marginalization or exclusion, undermine these dimensions and shape how individuals experience institutions like schools (Schweiger, 2024). Consequently, gender sensitivity may be understood as something learners come to know and interpret through everyday encounters that affirm—or deny—their dignity and belonging.

Taken together, these theoretical lenses orient the study toward a practice-informed contribution rather than a prescriptive solution. Consequently, Dungog and Aclao (2025) underscore the need to strengthen institutional capacity, stakeholder participation, and representation within Gender and Development governance in education, particularly by embedding gender equality and LGBTQIA+ inclusion in INSET programs, leadership development initiatives, and continuing professional training. Thus, insights generated from LGBTQIA+ learners' lived experiences may inform the development of a context-responsive INSET training guide that supports educators and school leaders in cultivating gender sensitivity through reflective practice, inclusive engagement, and sustained professional learning.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design, which focuses on understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of the individuals experiencing them. It emphasizes depth, richness of context, and participants' voices by exploring the what, why, when, where, who, and how of social phenomena through flexible and open-ended methods, while valuing subjectivity and reflexivity as sources of insight (Lim, 2024). This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how gender sensitivity is perceived and experienced by LGBT students towards gender sensitivity in school stakeholder interactions.

The study utilizes the phenomenological research method which focuses on understanding the meaning of lived experience from the perspective of the individual. By utilizing this method, it aims to illuminate the specific and to challenge structural or normative assumptions by revealing the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals (McLeod, 2024). Phenomenology is an appropriate approach for this study as it focuses on understanding and describing individual's lived experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. In line with this, this study seeks to explore how LGBT learners understand, experience, and interpret gender sensitivity based on their interactions with school stakeholders, this method allows the researchers to gather these experiences directly from the participant's perspectives.

Participants and/or other Sources of Data and Information

The population consists of senior high school students at Cainta Senior High School who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. The study uses purposive sampling, also known as judgmental or selective sampling, it is a widely used non-probability technique that is integral to qualitative and mixed methods research for its focus on detailed and contextual understanding. This sampling method is defined as the intentional selection of specific units (such as individuals, cases, or events) based on their relevance to the research question, enables the researchers to gain deep insights into complex phenomena (Tajik, 2024). Thus, this approach allows the researchers to gather firsthand accounts from LGBT learners who are comfortable sharing their experiences regarding gender sensitivity.

Eight participants were included in the study. Qualitative studies typically employ smaller samples than quantitative studies, as they value the richness and depth of data rather than the sheer number of participants (Braun, 2013). In addition, (Creswell, 2013) also claims that a reasonable sample size for a phenomenological study may range from 3 to 25 participants. Therefore, the inclusion of eight participants is sufficient to generate meaningful themes and capture the core experiences of LGBT learners regarding gender sensitivity among school stakeholders.

Participants were assigned anonymously to hide their identities. The assigned codes were as follows: Lesbian 1 – Learner A; Lesbian 2 – Learner B; Lesbian 3 – Learner C; Gay – Learner D; Bisexual (Male) – Learner E; Bisexual (Female) – Learner F; Transgender 1 (Transwoman) – Learner G; and Transgender 2 (Transwoman) – Learner H. The use of pseudonyms is essential to ensure participant's confidentiality.

Data Gathering Methods

As the study foregrounds how learners give meaning to their lived school experiences, it required a data collection approach that allowed participants' voices to emerge without rigid constraint. Thus, semi-structured interviews were employed to sustain a dialogic exchange in which guiding questions could shift in response to participants' narratives, enabling the researcher to probe meanings as they unfolded (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The data gathering procedure will be carried out in three major phases: before, during, and after data collection. Prior the conduct of the study, the researchers will secure approval from the research locale and prepare consent that explain the purpose of the study. A semi-structured interview guide will be developed and subjected to expert validation to ensure content relevance and clarity. The selected participants will be oriented about the objectives of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any time.

During the data gathering, the researcher will facilitate the sessions in a respectful manner, encouraging participants to openly share their perspectives and experiences regarding gender sensitivity based on their interactions with school stakeholders. Follow up questions will be used when necessary for clearer responses. The interviews will be audio recorded with permission from the participants. The researcher will remain sensitive to participant's emotions. After the data gathering process, audio recordings from all interviews will be transcribed and reviewed.

The participants will remain anonymous to protect their identities. The transcribed data will be organized, coded, and prepared for thematic analysis according to emerging patterns regarding gender sensitivity in stakeholder interactions. Finally, the collected data will be subjected to a thematic analysis to systematically identify and interpret emerging patterns and themes related to the study.

Data Analysis Plan

The data gathered from the participants will be analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses will be transcribed from audio recording into a written text. Thematic analysis (TA) is one of the most widely utilized methods for analyzing qualitative data, offering a structured yet flexible framework for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within datasets (Ahmed, 2025). First, the transcripts of the interviews and focus group discussion were examined to gain comprehensive understanding of the participants' perception and experiences. Emerging categories were distinguished into themes that represent the core topics, perspectives, and experiences of LGBT learners on gender sensitivity in school stakeholders' interactions. Then, answers will be categorized in common themes. The findings will then be interpreted with existing researches to establish connections, similarities, and differences. To ensure credibility and accuracy, the data will be reviewed carefully to consider different perspectives and avoid biases.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lived Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Learners on Gender Sensitivity in School-Based Interactions with Classmates, Teachers, and School Staff

Gender Sensitivity as Respectful Recognition

Participants described gender sensitivity as respect for gender identity, recognition to preferred gender identities, and creation of safe spaces where learners could express themselves without discrimination. Based on the responses, gender sensitivity is about sense of belonging, safety, and engagement in school.

Participants mentioned that being treated with respect for their gender preference by their classmates, teachers, and school staff was significant to their experiences. Learner C emphasized that "gender sensitivity means respecting everyone's gender identity without judgement." Learner A similarly said that "marami po kasing katulad ko dito sa school...parang normal lang po sa kanila" [there are many like me here at school...it's like normal for them]. Likewise, Learner G mentioned that "'yung gender sensitivity para sa'kin 'yung kailangan nila ng respect para sa'ming mga transgender" [for me, gender sensitivity means they need to respect us transgender students]. These responses reveal that respect is essential to the perception of the learners on gender sensitivity. Respect comprises recognizing diverse preferences in expression without discrimination.

In addition, learners associated gender sensitivity with emotional security that allows them to express themselves without fears of discrimination. Learner A shared that gender sensitivity is a safe space for LGBTQIA+ community. In connection, Learner C said that "so far...maganda naman

'yung experience ko sa school; marami po akong natutuhan hindi lang sa academics but also sa life lessons at pakikisama sa iba" [So far... my experience at school has been good; I have learned a lot not only in academics but also in life lessons and interacting with others]. Learner H also added, "Siguro, I think 'yung overall experience ko po sa school is yung maganda pong pakikipagtungo ng mga teachers. We are respected po, kaming mga transgender din po" [I think my overall experience at school is the good behavior and approach of the teachers... we transgender students are also respected]. These answers specify that emotional safety is essential to learners' perception of gender sensitivity.

In terms of fair treatment, responses also highlighted institutional practices as one of the components of gender sensitivity. Learner C shared his/her experience regarding institutional rules about school uniform, "Minsan nasisita lalo't na akala po kasi nila na lalaki ako... pero open-minded naman po sila kapag nage-explain ako, tas pinapapasok naman po nila" [Sometimes I get reprimanded because they think I'm male... but they are open-minded when I explain, and they still allow me to enter]. In the same way, Learner E mentioned his/her experience in classroom performance task, "meron po yung last year, may groupings na nangyari... ayaw po nila akong i-belong doon sa group kasi nga po ganito yung preference ko... ayaw nila sa'kin kasi puro boys po sila" [Last year, there was a grouping activity... they didn't want to include me in the group because of my preferences... they didn't want me because they were all boys]. These responses reveal that fairness and equity affects learners' experiences of inclusion.

This theme illustrates that LGBTQIA+ learners perceived gender sensitivity as composed of respect, safety, and equity. Students deserve safe schools. Russell (2021) mentioned that institution must provide access to information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (SOGIE), including curricula that is SOGIE-inclusive, provides students with resources, support, and inclusion, eating school climate. Similarly, emotional safety affects learners' perception of gender sensitivity. Emotional safety is considered a defining component of a positive learning environment and is related to psychological well-being, and positive academic and social outcomes. In schools, emotional safety is developed through supportive relationships; being valued and treated with respect; and clear boundaries and support for students to achieve their potential academically, socially and personally (Mander, 2020). Lastly, fairness and equity affect learners' experience of inclusion. Schools can build public confidence by reflecting the principles of equity, inclusion, and fairness in their policies and practices. an inclusive learning environment could foster empathy among students, understanding of their diverse needs, and preferential allocation of resources for minorities, which could increase horizontal trust among groups (Komatsu, 2024).

Conditional Acceptance within Peer Interactions

Peer acceptance was regularly mentioned by participants to be conditional and highly reliant on social acquaintance or proximity to others. Close friends who were more sensitive and supportive of their gender identity frequently showed learners respect and validation. However, there were times when classmates outside of these groups showed insensitivity by making fun of, mocking, or excluding students based on their sexual orientation or gender expression. The idea that peer acceptance in schools varies based on social dynamics, awareness, and individual prejudices is

emphasized by this theme. LGBTQIA+ students' emotional experiences, sense of belonging, and involvement in class and school activities can all be influenced by this kind of conditional affirmation.

Learner A shared “Yung close friends ko wala naman silang nasasabi about me... hindi rin po sila nag jo-joke tungkol sa akin kasi sensitive po sila” [My close friends don't say anything about me... they also don't joke about me because they are sensitive]. In contrast, Learner C answered “May times na I feel they were sensitive... pero minsan may insensitive jokes na nakaka-affect sa aking mental health” [There are times I feel respected and considered... but sometimes insensitive jokes affect my mental health]. Relatedly, Learner E mentioned “Meron po 'yung last year, may groupings na nangyari... ayaw po nila akong i-belong doon sa group kasi nga po ganito 'yung preference ko” [Last year, there was a group activity... they didn't want to include me because of my preferences].

These responses highlight the contradictory character of peer connections and a climate of conditional affirmation. The idea of microaggressions in social situations is reflected in conditional acceptance. According to Sue (2007) or behavioral slights that send hostile, disparaging, or unfavorable messages to marginalized groups. Jokes and exclusion can have a detrimental impact on LGBTQIA+ students' mental health, self-esteem, and sense of safety in schools, even if they appear to be minimal (Russell, 2021). Gender identity formation is a critical aspect of personal development, especially in educational settings. Schools serve as important environments where students learn about themselves and their relationship to the broader society, including gender roles and expectations (Goehring, 2017).

Teacher's Responses to Gender Diversity

Participants described teachers as highly influential in shaping their experiences of gender sensitivity in school. Teachers seemed to play two roles. They could act as sources of affirmation, validating students' identities and creating emotional safety, or as agents of constraint, reinforcing traditional expectations through corrective or disapproving remarks. This duality shows the role of teachers within schools. As authority figures, teachers not only help with learning but also model social norms and control acceptable behavior. Therefore, their reactions to LGBTQIA+ students hold significant emotional and symbolic weight. This influences students' sense of belonging, self-worth, and academic engagement.

Teachers were characterized by a number of participants as being accepting, courteous, and encouraging of their gender identity or expression. In the classroom, these affirming actions facilitated a sense of security, ease, and acceptance.

Learner C shared “some teachers are open-minded and supportive which makes me feel safe and comfortable.” Similarly, Learner H mentioned “siguro, I think 'yung overall experience ko po sa school is yung maganda pong pakikipag-tungo ng mga teachers... we have respected po sa'ming mga transgender din po” [I think my overall experience at school is the good way teachers treat us... we transgender students are respected]. Lastly, Learner G emphasized “mas magaganahan po ako pumasok dahil po sa mga pinapakita po nilang respect po samin” [I feel more motivated to attend school because of the respect they show us].

These claims demonstrate how teacher affirmation actively fosters motivation and engagement rather than just preventing harm. Students report being more inclined to attend class and participate academically when teachers treat them with respect. Teachers who provide social support to students show that they care for students' emotional-needs and well-being, which mainly contributes to students' sense of relatedness at school. Teacher support can thus promote positive behavior in school and may therefore be a relevant factor for improving the educational experiences of disadvantaged students (Bussemakers, 2023).

In contrast, participants recounted instances in which teachers made traditional or corrective comments that subtly controlled gender expression, despite the majority of positive experiences. Learner A disclosed, "Sinabi niya tigilan ko daw 'yan kasi 'ang ganda mong babae tapos ganun' [She told me to stop that because 'you're a beautiful girl, and yet you're like that]. This response suggests that traditional norms of appearance and behavior should define femininity. Although presented as praise, the comment also undermines those who express their gender in non-traditional ways. In addition, Learner H mentioned "meron po na mga teacher na nagre-respeto sa hair ko at sa kasuotan ko, pero meron naman pong mga teacher na... hindi nire-respeto yung gender namin, minsan dahil sa religious" [There are teachers who respect my hair and clothing, but there are also some who do not respect our gender, sometimes because of religious beliefs].

Corrective or traditional remarks communicate limits on acceptable gender expression. These interactions may not always seem like open discrimination, but they indicate that non-conforming identities need regulation or change. This situation reflects wider societal tensions around gender diversity. Schools exist within cultural systems where heteronormativity is still prevalent. So, without organized intervention, individual teachers' personal beliefs may unevenly affect students' experiences. Research shows that thorough professional development in gender diversity can significantly improve teacher inclusivity and student outcomes (Greytak, 2013). Training that encourages reflective practice, inclusive language, and critical examination of gender norms can help reduce unintentional harm.

School Influences on Gender Sensitivity

In addition to their peer and teacher experiences, participants emphasized that interactions with the school staff and institutional rule enforcement, specifically of dress codes and appearance, impacted their experiences of gender sensitivity at school. Unlike interaction in classroom settings, which emphasizes entry points to authority (e.g., school gates, hallways, discipline posts) and where policies are inscribed visibly. Participants' stories seemed to highlight organizational practices as strong inclusion/exclusion mechanisms. And even among understanding staffers, some enforced policies in ways that called trans students' gender into question or perpetuated the idea of a standard way students should look or act.

Some participants noted staff were open-minded and would listen if students discussed identity to them. These acts of accommodation imparted the experience with a sense of fairness.

Learner C stated that "They are open-minded *naman po kasi kapag nag-e-explain ako, tapos pinapapasok naman po nila*" [They are open-minded when I explain, and they allow me to enter].

This quotation demonstrates how acceptance was frequently negotiated through explanation. Although staff had challenged the student initially, their openness to listening led to a sense of fairness and belonging. Learner C added, “*Okay naman po yung ibang staff, wala naman po silang sinasabi kapag maayos na ako nakakapag-usap*” [There are some staff who are okay; they don’t say anything when I talk to them nicely]. These responses show that dialogue with respect can ease tension. But the necessity of providing such justification that recognition was not automatic but depended on student explanation.

Others, however, reported experiences in which their physical appearance (including hairstyle and clothing) or gender presentation was deemed doubtful or suspicious. Learner G shared: “*tinanong din po ako nung guard kung babae raw po ba ako bakit ganun daw po*” [The guard asked me if I am really a girl and why do I look like this]. This is a statement disguised as an inquiry into gender identity based on how people look. Yet another participant had several dress code regulations described:

Learner H: *Minsan po sinasaway po nila kung ano po yung dress ko... minsan naa-harang pa rin po ako para malista yung pangalan ko.* [Sometimes they scold me for my attire...sometimes even now I’m detained that they may recite my name.]

This narrative reveals that one of the institutional rules (namely dress codes) are used to enforce gender norms. And even for these students, enforcement practices can be rooted in binary norms. (Meyer, 2018). Strictly gendered rules disproportionately trip up transgender and gender-nonconforming students.

Moreover, several participants described teachers as respectful or supportive of gender identity/expression. Learner C mentioned: “*Maganda pong pakikipag-tungo ng mga teachers... we are respected po saming mga transgender din po* [The teachers treat us well... we transgender students are also respected].

These accounts illustrate how such positive feedback may serve to make learning environments safer. Support from educators is one of the greatest buffers of risk for LGBTQ youth (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013). School personnel who are supportive are linked with decreased bullying and better educational outcomes, along with greater school connectedness (Kosciw et al., 2020). Consistent with Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), supportive teachers serve to reduce the impact of external stressors accompanying stigma and discrimination. Through affirming the identity of students, teachers buffer against some of the negative psychological consequences of marginalization and foster resilience.

Influence of School Stakeholder Interactions on LGBTQIA+ Learners

Learners’ Inclusion and Exclusion in School Environments

Learners’ narratives show that inclusion and exclusion in school settings are fundamental to their experiences of understanding gender sensitivity. Inclusion was not only characterized as acceptance among peers, but also involvement in school work, programs and peer interaction without any prejudice or isolation. However, exclusion was enacted through social isolation, lack

of participation and structural barriers which prevented learners from participating fully in school life. These divergent experiences also illustrate how organizational modes and peer behaviors of including-a whole contribute to LGBTQIA+ students perceived belonging.

Inclusion means for participants to be themselves in school and not their identities be questioned, but noticed Participants explained that inclusion was felt when they were able to join genuinely fellow students in school activities. For instance, Learner C shared that she felt included within her close peer group, stating: *“Mas included ako sa close friends ko sa bigger groups... minsan naman conscious ako pagdating sa ganyang sitwasyon”* [I feel more included with my close friends than in bigger groups... although sometimes I still feel conscious in those situations]. This response suggests that inclusion is relational in trusted peer networks, but larger social contexts can still provoke self-awareness. Likewise, Learner E explained that the school-hosted events helped create a sense of belonging: *“Pinayagan po yung iba na LGBTQIA+ members na mag cross dress... binigyan po kami ng time para ipakita yung expression po na nararamdaman namin”* [Some LGBTQIA+ members were allowed to cross-dress... we were given time to show the expression that we feel]. Learner G furtherly explained: *“Sobrang saya po namin kapag may mga assembly... mas nailalabas po namin yung perspective po kung ano yung dapat naming ilabas”* [We feel very happy during assemblies... we are able to express what we really want to show].

These narratives also indicate that inclusion operates as much at the interpersonal level (through supportive peers) as it does at an institutional level. Social support consisted of seven social support systems (family, curriculum, family, peers, school policies, GSAs and programs, and school climate) that are positively associated with the promotion of positive socioemotional, behavioral, and educational outcomes for LGBTQ youth (Leung, 2022).

In contrast, exclusion was mentioned by Learner D and was linked to structural restrictions and participation in activities: *“Sa groupings... gusto ko po siyang sabihin sa teacher namin... pero hindi ko na po sinabi”* [during group work, I wanted to tell our teacher, but I did not]. While Learner H shared barriers such limited restroom access: *“Meron parin po kaming nae-experience pag nag-cr po kami sa pang-babae... boys lang po nakakapasok dun”* [We still experience issues when we use the girls’ restroom... only boys are allowed to enter there]. This restriction illustrates institutional structures can emphasize exclusion.

Overall, the results suggest that learners’ engagement in school is essential for their perceptions concerning gender sensitivity. Inclusion makes the learner feel belongingness and can contribute authentically; being excluded, because of some social or structural pressure, means that stakeholder’s engagement is always partial. Based on an article by Sanders (2013), many LGBTQ young people today feel strong as they do not hate stop them. Hence, it is crucial for them to see role models who faced tough times but stayed strong. By having self-confidence and finding inspiration in resilient role models, LGBTQ youth can navigate challenges, pursue their dreams, and ultimately shape a more inclusive and promising future for themselves and others. These findings point to the importance of systems-level policies and proactive stakeholder outreach efforts in order to ensure that all students feel equally included and affirmed within their educational institutions.

Comfort and Safety in Self-Expression

The results demonstrate that the experience of school has a profound impact on how comfortable LGBTQIA+ students feel to be who they are. What participants tell me is that safe space occurs in a context of supportive peers, affirming teachers and open-ended institutional approaches that make it possible for learners to present themselves. On the other hand, more restrictive policies and structural barriers lead to warning language, self-censorship, and dampened communication in some cases.

Positive school experiences were universally associated with feelings of safety and affirmation. Learner C described his/her experience in school environment as welcoming and supportive since *“Sobrang welcome naman din po ako... safe po ako mag-express ng sarili ko”* [I feel so welcomed too... I am safe to express myself]. This statement illustrates a strong sense of belonging and psychological security, showing that inclusive interpersonal dynamics develop authentic self-expression. Similarly, Learner D shared the role of equality-oriented messaging within the school: *“Nakaka-feel po talaga ako ng comfortable feeling... tinuturo na din po yung pagka pantay-pantay ng trato sa amin”* [I truly feel comfortable... we are being taught that everyone should be treated equally].

The explicit message of equality seems to boost students' sense that the institution is on their side and therefore feels safer for them to share their identity. These narratives demonstrate the importance of relational affirmation (both from peers and from teachers) as well as formal teaching on equality in school climates. Research shows that global progress in LGBTQ+ rights, Filipino LGBTQ+ students persistently encounter considerable obstacles pertaining to discrimination, bullying, and exclusion within educational environments. There is still a necessity for more extensive national regulations and uniform enforcement to ensure secure and inclusive environments for all LGBTQ+ students in the Philippines (Sinogbohan, 2024).

However, not all school-related experiences fostered comfort. A few respondents mentioned how they had to be careful about what and how to say because of institutional demands or cultural context. Learner C explained: *“Mas careful akong mag express ng sarili ko... kung required po na magsuot ng uniform... hindi po ako comfy mag suot ng mga dresses”* [I am more careful in expressing myself... if I am required to wear a uniform... I am not comfortable wearing dresses]. This account indicates how gender infused uniform policies might inadvertently restrict genuine expression by letting students to conform to an ideal norm. Relatedly, Learner H shared his/her experiences when they were asked about situations, they have felt most included or excluded that results to restrictions on restroom access as limiting their ability to feel fully comfortable in school: *“Meron parin po kaming nae-experience pag nagc-cr po kami sa pang-babae”* [We still experience issues when we use the girls' restroom]. In these brief statements, this shows an ongoing structural issue that impact learners' feelings of safety and validation.

The findings illustrate that comfort and safety in self-expression is influenced by both interpersonal dynamics and institutional-level factors. By validating peers, educators, and non-discriminatory policies by which individuals both bring their truths to bear in the world and gain confidence in them, mistrust of others occurs when students experience restrictive gendered

dress codes or allocate to only a few students access to safe bathroom facilities. The results highlight the need for broad school-level gender-sensitive policies and practices that go beyond token inclusion to establish structural affirmation. Balancing relational advocacy and institutional equity is critical for fostering genuine self-advocacy and psychological safety among LGBTQIA+ learners. Students deserve safe schools. Research-based strategies promote safety for LGBTQ and all students: 1) Explicit anti-bullying policies; 2) Teacher professional development; 3) Gender-Sexuality Alliances; 4) Inclusive curricula & spaces (Russel, 2021).

Gender Sensitivity Awareness in Peer Interactions

Findings reveal that peer communication is one of the primary contexts through which participants construct and resist their knowledge of gender-appropriate behaviors in schools. Classmates were repeatedly named as key agents in the socialization of respect, acceptance, and appropriate social behavior. During frequent social interactions, peers come to function not only as friendship partners, but also as influential socializing agents for the demonstration, reinforcement and sometimes opposition of norms concerning gender and sexual diversity.

Participants shared that positive peer interactions raised awareness of the significance of respect and inclusiveness. Learner 3 expressed the effect of social interaction on her awareness of gender sensitivity: “*Malaki kasi impact ng interaction sa pag-intindi ko sa importance ng respect and awareness*” [Interactions have a big impact on my understanding of the importance of respect and awareness]. This comment highlights what is relational about gender sensitivity – an awareness which is not only learned from taught information but also emerged in actual social life. Daily interactions with peers influence students’ opinions of what qualifies as respect or ridicule. Similarly, Learner A mentioned how being approached by classmates for assistance signaled acceptance and normalcy: “*Mostly sa mga kaklase ko, sa akin sila nag-a-ask ng help... dun lang po malalaman ko na ok lang*” [Most of my classmates ask me for help... that’s when I realize that it’s okay and I am accepted]. This illustrates that search behavior reinforces the learners’ feelings of competence and belonging, as the search for academic help is a form of social validation. These findings show the ways that peer endorsement can affirm identity and minimize perceived stigma. Thus, inclusion comes to be not only declared verbally or through spoken words of acceptance but is accomplished every day collaboratively. Learner D also highlighted the importance of peer behavior in feeling comfortable and safe since “*Nakaka-feel po talaga ako ng comfortable feeling... sa loob mismo yung pagka-respect kahit nasa public*” [I truly feel comfortable... the respect I receive is evident even in public settings].

These accounts reveal the significance of showing respect, on a consistent basis and in private as well as public spaces, to create a sense of security in that inclusivity. Visible respectful behavior shared spaces help establish norms of non-discrimination and gender sensitivity. A recent meta-analysis on supportive school strategies for sexually and gender diverse students found that LGBTQ+–specific school interventions (including peer interactions and anti-bullying measures) are strongly associated with increased feelings of safety among learners. These findings indicate that school practices that promote respect and reduce victimization help create an environment where students feel secure and included, which is foundational for gender sensitivity (Vliet, 2025). Overall, the findings show that peers are social mirrors and informal educators. By the nature of

daily engagement, peers demonstrate appropriate behavior, affirm identities, and help to form students' understanding of gender inclusivity. These results highlight the value of promoting peer-led inclusivity efforts and cooperative classroom practices for enhancing gender-responsive school climates.

Role of Teachers and School Staff

The findings show that teachers and school personnel function as central institutional work to in shaping the experiences of gender sensitivity for LGBTQIA+ students. The level of institution's responsiveness, knowledge and actual enacting inclusive practices plays an important role in whether students feel that the school's affirmation or tolerance towards them.

The statements of participants suggest that educators mediate between policy and practice, translating gender-awareness from the domain of 'principles' to their daily experiences in schools. Several participants described intervention applied by the teacher as it fosters safety and awareness. Learner A explained: "*Kapag may mga reklam-reklamo po kami... teacher po yung magta-take po agad ng action... ira-raise niya awareness sa school*" [Whenever we have complaints... the teacher immediately takes action... and raises awareness in the school]. The response demonstrates institutional accountability and promotes the ideal unacceptable discriminations. By addressing concerns while giving awareness to the students, educators are building a learning environment in which respect is held to be publicly upheld. Several participants explained the role of teachers in administering fair treatment and how institutional follow-through strengthens learners' perception of authenticity in school initiatives:

Learner D: *Tinuturo na din po yung pagka pantay-pantay ng trato sa amin.* [We are also being taught that everyone should be treated equally.]

Learner F: *Safe po ako dun dahil may freedom po kami na magpahaba ng buhok... na implementation po nila yung gender equality na ginagawa po nila sa seminar.* [I feel safe there because we have the freedom to grow our hair long... they implemented the gender equality practices discussed in the seminar.]

Learner G: *Sobrang saya po namin kapag may mga assembly... [We feel very happy whenever there are assemblies...]*

These accounts demonstrate that there are three key ways in which teachers and staff impact gender sensitivity: (1) by intervening in discriminatory incidents; (2) through formal teachings and the reinforcement of norms of equality; and (3) by enacting policies for affirming gender. Relatedly, being relatively unaware or perceiving a lack of response may diminish learners' perception of institutional support.

These results are related with recent studies that have emphasized that teacher responsiveness and professional development are key components of inclusive school climates. Research indicates that the presence of trained and supportive staff in schools is associated with perceptions of safety and belonging for LGBTQIA+ students. In addition, research shows that LGBTQ school-based research and interventions may pose significant challenges but schools are

a key setting for both to be done. Evaluations of programs and awareness raising campaigns that focus explicitly on creating respectful and welcoming schools for LGBTQ students are needed. The working group also highlighted work being done on the relationship between school resources and policies and the wellbeing of LGBTQ students in schools. In general, having more LGBTQ-related resources on campus and anti-bullying policies appears to be linked to better health and academic outcomes for LGBTQ students (Kosciw, 2019).

Shared Voices and Meanings From LGBTQIA+ Learners Regarding Respect, Inclusion, And Recognition as Experienced in Their Interactions with School Stakeholders

Respect versus Disrespect

In their accounts of everyday school life, LGBTQIA+ learners frequently referred to moments that made them feel either respected or disrespected. These interactions—often subtle and routine—shaped how learners perceived gender sensitivity within the school environment. Participants described both affirming encounters that conveyed respect and negative experiences that signaled disrespect in their daily school interactions.

Respect for the participants largely centered on the absence of comments or intrusive attention toward their sexual orientation. Learner A referred to feeling respected “*kapag wala po silang masasabi*” [if they don’t have anything to say], while Learner B similarly shared that respect was experienced “*kapag hindi sila nagtatanong*” [if they are not asking questions] about their orientation. In this sense, respect was associated with being left unquestioned and unremarked upon in everyday interactions. Relatedly, Learner G and Learner C described respect in terms of positive treatment that allowed for self-expression and acknowledgment. For Learner G, this meant having the freedom to “*express yung sarili ko, like nakakapagsuot po ako ng... pambabae then nakakapagpahaba po ako ng buhok*” [express myself, like I can wear feminine clothes and grow my hair long], while Learner C emphasized feeling respected “*kapag pinapakinggan ako*” [when they are being heard].

In contrast, experiences of disrespect emerged as direct opposites of these affirming encounters and were often linked to bullying and discrimination. Learner A recounted how classmates attempted to “*point-out yung about sa sexual orientation ko po*” [point out my sexual orientation] through jokes. Similar experiences were shared by Learner G, who noted that such remarks extended to them and their friends while they were “*naglalakad sa may hallway... kamukha raw po namin yung basketball player na ‘yun sa social media po*” [walking in the hallway... they said we looked like a basketball player on social media]. Experiences of disrespect also manifested in academic contexts. Learner E shared that during group activities, they experienced unfair treatment but chose not to report it, explaining, “*sa groupings nga po gusto ko po siyang sabihin sa teacher namin na ginaganito po nila ako pero hindi ko na po sinabi*” [during group work, I wanted to tell our teacher that they were treating me this way, but I did not tell them].

Respect and disrespect, as narrated by the participants, emerged not merely as abstract values but as meanings constructed through lived school encounters. Talmy (2009) suggests that in educational spaces, respect functions as a relational practice through which individuals make sense of acceptable presence and interaction. From an ethical standpoint, respect has been

understood as a moral orientation that guides how individuals relate to others—particularly those perceived as different—thereby sustaining humane and cooperative social relations (Malti et al., 2020). Conversely, Shwalb and Shwalb (2006) note that experiences of disrespect, though often overlooked in research, are felt as relational ruptures that give rise to incivility and social distance. Within the Philippine context, participants commonly associated respect with the absence of intrusive comments about their identity. This understanding aligns with culturally grounded practices of politeness and restraint in Filipino communication, where indirectness and silence are experienced as forms of consideration (Geranco, 2024; Lasan, 2016). When joking and teasing surfaced in participants’ accounts, these were experienced not as neutral humor but as moments that subtly questioned their legitimacy within peer spaces. Such practices, while often normalized in peer interactions, have similarly been shown to function as covert forms of discrimination with potentially harmful psychological effects (Douglass et al., 2016).

Recognition Versus Lack of Recognition

The learners also spoke about moments when they felt either recognized or left unrecognized by others in the school community. Recognition was described as being affirmed for one’s strengths, trusted in interactions, or treated as an ordinary member of the class, while lack of recognition was associated with being unnoticed or unknown—particularly in relation to one’s gender identity. Notably, one learner recounted deliberately keeping their identity hidden, framing non-recognition as part of their everyday school experience.

Recognition for the LGBTQIA+ learners was largely grounded in everyday interactions with peers. Learner D shared that inclusion in group activities was sometimes tied to perceptions of competence, recalling how classmates would say, *“isama natin yan kasi...magaling siya, kasi gay”* [include them because they are remarkable...because they’re gay]. Similarly, Learner G and Learner F described experiences of *“pakikisama”* [fellowship], characterizing their peer relationships as *“sobrang ganda po ng pakikisama po nila sa’min”* [extremely positive fellowship with us]. For Learner C, recognition was expressed through the validation of personal experiences—particularly moments of being accepted and listened to during interactions. In contrast, recognition for Learner F was framed primarily around physical appearance, as others remarked that they were *“maganda kahit bisexual”* [beautiful despite being bisexual], suggesting a form of validation that was conditional rather than relational.

Experiences of lack of recognition, on the other hand, revealed instances of misrepresentation, uncertainty, and being overlooked within school spaces. Learner E recounted how peers initially assumed they were Learner D because of their voice, noting that the misunderstanding was later resolved after explanation and that *“naintindihan naman na po nila”* [they eventually understood]. Learner F described uncertainty and discomfort when navigating school restrooms, explaining, *“di po namin alam kung saan kami papasok”* [we don’t know which restroom to enter], as they encountered questioning looks and remarks from both cisgender women and men. These accounts illustrate how lack of recognition extended beyond interpersonal encounters and into institutional spaces that required learners to position themselves within rigid gender norms.

A particularly notable account emerged from Learner B, who described deliberately choosing non-recognition as a form of self-protection. Rather than seeking acknowledgment, they expressed a preference to remain unnoticed in school spaces due to fear of judgment. This stance became evident in the following exchange during the interview:

Interviewer: May *mga* experiences *ka ba dito sa school na feeling mo napapansin ka—* positively—*dahil sa gender orientation or hindi ka napapansin?* [Do you have experiences here in school where you feel you are recognized—positively—because of your gender orientation, or are you not recognized?]

Learner B: *Hindi ako napapansin.* [I am not recognized.]

Interviewer: And *ano yung nararamdaman nung hindi ka napapansin?* [And what do you feel when you are not recognized?]

Learner B: *Ok lang po.* [I feel just okay.]

Interviewer: *Pero kapag napansin ka, feeling mo dun ka na maju-judge?* [But when you are recognized, do you feel that's when you'll be judged?]

Learner B: *Opo.* [Yes.]

Interviewer: *Kaya ang pinipili mo?* [That's why you choose to?]

Learner B: *Itago po... Ayoko po ng judgement, Ma'am.* [Hide it. I don't like judgment, Ma'am.]

This account illustrates how remaining unrecognized was not experienced as absence or loss but as a deliberate strategy shaped by perceived risks within the school environment. As Learner B explained, their gender identity was “*hindi halata sa'kin na kasali po ako dun... kasi pambabae lahat talaga*” [unnoticeable that I am included there... because I am mostly feminine], framing non-recognition as a means of navigating school life without attracting unwanted attention.

Experiences of recognition and lack of recognition were articulated by participants as shaping how their identities were affirmed, misunderstood, or deliberately kept unseen in everyday school life. Recognition emerged in moments when learners felt valued for their contributions, trusted in peer interactions, or affirmed through acceptance and validation. In this sense, recognition may be understood as a relational process through which one's identity and moral standing are affirmed within social interactions, as described in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2019). In contrast, misrecognition surfaced when learners were misinterpreted, rendered uncertain about where they belonged, or made to navigate school spaces that did not readily accommodate their identities. Reggiani et al. (2023) similarly observe that heteronormative institutions often render LGBTQIA+ individuals visible without providing meaningful or sustaining forms of support. Moreover, for some participants—particularly those who chose to conceal their identity—remaining unrecognized was narrated as an intentional and

protective response shaped by anticipated judgment rather than a mere absence of acknowledgment. Comparable patterns of cautious disclosure have been documented among LGBTQIA+ individuals who continually weigh the risks of visibility in stigmatizing environments, where judgment and everyday microaggressions inform decisions about self-disclosure (Beagan et al., 2022).

Inclusion in the School Setting

Inclusion in school was described by the learners as a sense of belonging shaped by both everyday interactions and institutional practices. Participants commonly linked feelings of inclusion to the presence of school programs, seminars, and assemblies that addressed gender-related awareness and topics connected to LGBTQIA+ identities. These initiatives were perceived as contributing to an environment where discussions of gender diversity were more visible within the school, influencing how learners positioned themselves within the broader school community.

Across the learners' accounts, school programs and initiatives related to gender awareness consistently emerged as salient markers of inclusion, often appearing as immediate responses when participants were asked about inclusive practices. One initiative frequently mentioned was the school's allowance of cross-dressing, which Learner A affirmed by stating, "*katulad na lang po sa cross dressing po, allowed po kami*" [like with cross-dressing, we are allowed to do so]. In relation to school programs and assemblies, Learner F described feeling surprised upon realizing shared presence, noting that they were "*na-shock din ako marami pala din po pala kami*" [shocked that we are apparently many]. Similarly, Learner G shared that these activities created opportunities to "*makapag-bonding... magtawanan... mas na-express kung dapat ipakita namin*" [bond... laugh... and better express what we have to show], while Learner F described the initiatives as "*magand para mas mapahalagahan po yung bawat isa*" [good to value each other more].

The learners' accounts suggest that inclusion in school is experienced not simply through individual acceptance but through institutional practices that signal acknowledgment and participation within the wider school community. From a recognition perspective, such practices matter because they position learners as legitimate members of the school, whose identities and experiences are worthy of institutional response. Relatedly, The Scottish Government (2024) describes inclusion as a whole-school approach—one that involves sustained professional learning for educators, clear policies, and consistent mechanisms for addressing discrimination. Likewise, Sánchez-Torrejón and Machín Álvarez (2025) argue that inclusive educational environments require collective and cooperative efforts that affirm sex–gender diversity as a condition for dignified participation in school life. Research on LGBT-inclusive school climates further supports this view, showing that supportive staff, inclusive curricula, and anti-bullying policies are associated with stronger feelings of belonging and safer school environments for LGBTQIA+ students (McBrien et al., 2022). However, when read alongside the learners' narratives, these findings also suggest that while school programs and assemblies contribute to inclusion by increasing visibility, recognition remains uneven when such efforts are not consistently reflected in everyday school practices.

Image of a Gender-Sensitive School

This sub-theme captures the learners' articulated image of a gender-sensitive school as shaped by their everyday experiences within the school environment. Participants spoke about specific changes and initiatives they hoped the school would pursue, reflecting not only desired actions but also how they understood gender sensitivity in practice. Collectively, these accounts illustrate the ways learners described what a gender-sensitive school looks like from their perspective, based on what they had encountered and what they felt was still lacking.

The learners articulated a shared call for change directed toward school stakeholders, emphasizing the need for fair and respectful treatment in everyday interactions. Learner A highlighted the need for a broader perspective among stakeholders, stating that "*kailangan mas magkaroon po sila ng mas malawak na mindset*" [they need to have a broader understanding], while Learner B pointed to difficulties in being taken seriously, noting that "*hindi kasi sila naniniwala agad*" [they do not believe immediately]. For Learner E, a gender-sensitive school was associated with being treated properly and equally, emphasizing that "*kailangan matrato po tayo ng tama... parang pantay-pantay*" [we need to be treated properly... as equals]. Similarly, Learner G framed change as no longer being singled out for identity, expressing that stakeholders should no longer "*pinapansin yung pagkatao po namin*" [pick on who we are].

Beyond interpersonal and programmatic changes, there is also a notion of inclusion through visible and material features of the school environment. One participant described how physical symbols within the school space could shape feelings of freedom and belonging from the moment one enters the campus.

Learner D: *Makulay yung may mga nakasabit na may iba't ibang kulay na may kasamang rainbow. Para unang hakbang mo pa lang sa gate, parang free ka na. Meron ka ng freedom.* [There are colorful hangings with different colors, including a rainbow. So that from your very first step at the gate, it already feels like you are free. You already have freedom.]

Beyond visible symbols, participants also emphasized the need for broader stakeholder inclusion in school initiatives, particularly seminars and programs. They observed that such activities were often attended only by members of the LGBTQIA+ community, even though they believed these initiatives would be more impactful if extended to others. This concern is evident in the following accounts:

Learner A: *Kasi nagkaroon po ng symposium tapos mga LGBT lang po yung nagpunta nun. Wala pong mga straight. Feel ko para sa kanila po talaga dapat yung ganun kasi hindi po talaga sila yung open-minded.* [There was a symposium, but only LGBT people attended. There were no straight students. I feel like those activities should really be for them because they are not open-minded.]

Learner C: *Dapat yung iba po medyo maging open-minded pagdating sa mga LGBTQ.* [Others should be more open-minded when it comes to LGBTQ people.]

Learner F: *Hindi lang straight, lahat po ng nasa school dapat po matutunan po nila 'yon kasi po para malaman po nila kung ano po yung gender equality po na pinaglalaman ng LGBTQ.* [Not only straight people—everyone in the school should learn about it so they can understand the gender equality that LGBTQ people are advocating for.]

The call for change articulated by the learners aligns closely with how they themselves define a gender-sensitive school—one that allows expression, sustains everyday respect, and provides spaces where they can exist comfortably. This understanding is clearly captured in the following accounts:

Learner A: We are feel to express *po yung sarili namin.* [We are free to express ourselves.]

Learner F: *Syempre sa pang araw-araw, yung respect po ng bawat isa.* [Of course, in everyday life, it's the respect of each person.]

Learner D: *Mabigyan kami, lalo na po yung mga part ng LGBTQIA+, na maipakita po talaga namin kung saan kami mas masaya.* [That we are given the chance, especially those who are part of the LGBTQIA+, to really show where we are happiest.]

The learners' calls for broader understanding, everyday respect, and visible affirmation reflect how gender sensitivity was experienced through ordinary school interactions rather than through formal policy alone. Moreover, gender sensitivity was asserted in their accounts as a relational responsibility—one that requires empathy and concrete shifts in how individuals think about and treat others in daily school life. This framing converges with Sahay's (2023) view of gender sensitization as a process that challenges taken-for-granted beliefs and invites critical self-reflection. Likewise, participants emphasized interaction and communication that allow room for learning amid uncertainty and difference. Steinweg et al. (2023) similarly contend that gender-sensitive environments must recognize complexity and cultivate tolerance for mistakes as a guiding principle. Finally, the learners' insistence that initiatives extend beyond the LGBTQIA+ community positions inclusion as a shared institutional obligation—one that requires the participation of all stakeholders across roles and age groups (Hernandez & Torres, 2023; Brosas et al., 2025). This emphasis resonates with calls for GAD initiatives to move toward gender-transformative approaches rather than remain symbolic or segmented (Salagubang & Abelgas, 2020). Their accounts center recognition, and gender sensitivity is constructed through everyday acts of being seen and respected. Through the learners' voices, a gender-sensitive school is revealed not through isolated programs alone but through how inclusivity and respect are lived and sustained in everyday school life.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings discussed in the preceding sections, the researchers were able to draw the following conclusions: (1) LGBTQIA+ learners described their lived experiences of gender sensitivity as emerging through everyday interactions with classmates, teachers, and school staff. These encounters were shaped by moments of respect and acceptance, as well as instances of restriction or discomfort linked to institutional practices and peer behavior. As such, gender

sensitivity was experienced as something felt and negotiated in daily school life rather than as a fixed or uniform condition. (2) Learners' understanding of gender sensitivity developed through their interactions with school stakeholders, particularly in how these figures responded to their identities, concerns, and expressions. Supportive and respectful engagements reinforced a sense of inclusion, while inconsistent responses or limited accommodations shaped more cautious and guarded understandings. These interactions gradually informed how learners interpreted what gender sensitivity meant within the school context. (3) Across their accounts, shared meanings of respect, inclusion, and recognition emerged as central to how learners made sense of their school experiences. Respect was often associated with being left free from judgment, inclusion with being allowed to participate fully, and recognition with being seen and valued as ordinary members of the school community. Their collective voices reveal that gender sensitivity takes form through everyday acts that affirm belonging and acknowledge identity.

In light of the foregoing findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed to further strengthen gender sensitivity within the school context: (1) Schools are encouraged to further strengthen initiatives that raise students' awareness of school policies and guidelines related to LGBTQIA+ discrimination and gender sensitivity, ensuring that these are clearly communicated and consistently implemented. (2) Schools are encouraged to integrate LGBTQIA+ gender sensitivity training into their In-Service Training (INSET) programs to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills, who may then serve as resource persons in extending capacity-building activities to students and non-teaching personnel to promote a shared understanding of gender sensitivity across the school community. (3) Future studies may employ quantitative research designs to measure the prevalence and intensity of both positive and negative experiences of LGBTQIA+ learners, allowing for comparative analysis and clearer determination of patterns related to gender sensitivity in school settings. (4) Finally, the present study may be used as a reference or related literature for future researchers who wish to examine gender sensitivity, inclusion, and LGBTQIA+ experiences within educational settings.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2025). Using thematic analysis in qualitative research. *Global Media and Communication*, Article 100198. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.glmedi.2025.100198>
- Alcazaren, H. K., & Labor, J. (2025). Queering the classrooms: Filipino teachers' perspectives and practices of queer pedagogy. *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 25(3), 105–120.
- Asadullah, M. N., Webb, A., & Khandker, I. M. (2024). SDG 4 mid-point challenge: Fixing the broken interlinkages between education and gender equality. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 106, 103015. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2024.103015>
- Beagan, B., Bizzeth, R., Pride, T., & Sibbald, K. (2022). LGBTQ+ identity concealment and disclosure within the heteronormative health professions: "Do I? Do I not? And what are the potential consequences?". *SMM – Qualitative Research in Health*, 2, 100114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2022.100114>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage Publications.
- Brosas, K. A., Asoy, H. A., Peligrina, H. C., & Villa, E. B. (2025). *Iba si Eba: An assessment of the gender and development (GAD) program as a basis for improvement*. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*, 6(2), 655–684. <https://doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.06.02.19>
- Bussemakers, C. (2023, February 13). *Teacher support as a protective factor? The role of teacher support for reducing disproportionality in problematic behavior at school*. *SAGE Journals*.
- Cavarra, R., Pepping, C., & Anderson, J. (2025). How social support affirms identity in LGBTQ adults: A qualitative exploration. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 22, 1993–2008. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-025-01095-7>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Douglass, S., Mirpuri, S., English, D., & Yip, T. (2016). They were just making jokes: Ethnic/racial teasing and discrimination among adolescents. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 22(1), 69–82. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000041>
- Dungog, M. J., & Aclao, J. (2025). A policy analysis of inclusive leadership and LGBTQ+ teacher inclusion in the Philippine context. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management*, 13(12), 4487–4495. <https://doi.org/10.18535/ijrm/v13i12.el03>
- Geranco, D. (2024). A descriptive study on Filipino language politeness in high school students' interaction. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies*, 6(12), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.32996/jhsss.2024.6.12.1>
- Goehring, C., & AMS. (2017). *Gender diversity and inclusivity in the classroom*.
- Goel, R. (2023). Role of education in gender sensitization. *International Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 17(1), 17–29.
- Greytak, E. A. (2013). *The benefits of LGBT-related school resources for transgender youth*. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 10(1–2), 45–63. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ994929>
- Harrison, J. S., Bosse, D. A., & Phillips, R. A. (2010). Managing for stakeholders, stakeholder utility functions, and competitive advantage. *Strategic Management Journal*, 31(1), 58–74. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.801>
- Harrison, J. S., Freeman, R. E., & Abreu, M. C. (2015). Stakeholder theory as an ethical approach to effective management: Applying the theory to multiple contexts. *Revista Brasileira de Gestão de Negócios*, 17(55), 858–869. <https://doi.org/10.7819/rbgn.v17i55.2647>

- Hernandez, J., & Torres, L. (2023). Promoting LGBT inclusion in education: The role of school policies and implementation. *SAGE Science Review of Educational Technology*, 12–22.
- Honneth, A. (1995). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Polity Press.
- Isser, M. (2019). Recognition. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/recognition/>
- Komatsu, T. (2024). Respecting equity, inclusiveness, and fairness. In *Equity, diversity, and inclusion in education*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-6519-9_5
- Kosciw, J. G., Palmer, N. A., Kull, R. M., & Greytak, E. A. (2019). *Strengthening our schools to promote resilience*. *LGBT Health*, 6(4), 201–210. <https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2018.0109>
- Lasan, I. (2016). *EFL learners' perceptions of (in)formality: Address forms in interaction with other (in)formal register markers* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Toronto.
- Leung, E., Wong, J., & Pang, I. (2022). Social support in schools and related outcomes for LGBTQ youth: A scoping review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(22), Article 14878. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9662773/>
- Lim, W. (2024). What is qualitative research? An overview and guidelines. *Qualitative Research Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>
- Lopez, M., & Andal, E. (2024). Gender-responsive pedagogy and attitudes toward sensitivity in basic education. *TWIST*, 19(3), 583–588.
- Mainardes, E. W., Alves, H., & Raposo, M. (2012). A model for stakeholder classification and stakeholder relationships. *Management Decision*, 50(10), 1861–1879. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00251741211279648>
- Malik, A., Abrar, D., Khan, N. A., & Alhussami, A. (2025). Sustainable development goals: Students' perceptions of quality education, gender equality, and sustainability. *Discover Sustainability*, 6, 410. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-025-01288-5>
- Malti, T., Peplak, J., & Zuffianò, A. (2020). The development of respect in children and adolescents. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 85(3), 7–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mono.12417>
- Mander, D. (2020). Building emotional safety for students in school environments: Challenges and opportunities. In *Student wellbeing and mental health*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-3959-6_12

- McBrien, J., Rutigliano, A., & Sticca, A. (2022). The inclusion of LGBTQI+ students across education systems: An overview. *OECD Education Working Papers*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/91775206-en>
- McLeod, S. (2024). *Phenomenology in qualitative research*. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/381926205_Phenomenology_In_Qualitative_Research
- McQueen, P. (2017). Recognition, respect, and the moral foundations of democratic citizenship. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 20(4), 407–425. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2015.1045482>
- Meyer, E. J. (2018). Can policies help schools affirm gender diversity? A policy archaeology of transgender-inclusive policies in California schools. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(6), 694–708. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2018.1483490>
- Omurov, N. (2017). Identity disclosure as a securityscape for LGBT people. *Psychology in Russia: State of the Art*, 10, 38–52. <https://doi.org/10.11621/pir.2017.0205>
- Reggiani, M., Gagnon, J. D., & Lunn, R. J. (2023). LGBT+ academics' and PhD students' experiences of visibility in STEM: More than raising the rainbow flag. *Higher Education*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-00993-2>
- Russell, S. T., Pollitt, A. M., Li, G., & Grossman, A. H. (2021). Promoting school safety for LGBTQ and all students. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 69(5), 708–714. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8454913/>
- Russell, S. T., Pollitt, A. M., Li, G., & Grossman, A. H. (2021). Promoting school safety for LGBTQ and all students. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 69(5), 708–714. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8454913/>
- Sahay, A. (2023). Gender equity and sensitization: A review. *International Journal of Educational Research and Development*, 5(1), 19–23.
- Salagubang, M. M., & Abelgas, F. (2020). Women and gender in development: An analysis of gender and development (GAD) programs and fund utilization of Quezon and Pasig cities. *Luz y Saber*, 14(1–2), 7–22.
- Sánchez-Torrejón, B., & Machín Álvarez, M. (2025). The educational community and the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ students: Towards a rainbow school free from LGBTIQphobia. *Education Sciences*, 15(8), Article 971. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15080971>
- Sanders, A. (2013). *Gay and lesbian literature in the classroom: Can gay themes overcome heteronormativity?* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269804235>

- Schweiger, G. (2024). Honneth's theory of recognition and material poverty. *Social Sciences*, 13(9), Article 441. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13090441>
- Shwalb, D. W., & Shwalb, B. J. (2006). Research and theory on respect and disrespect: Catching up with the public and practitioners. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 114, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.171>
- Sinogbohan, D. (2024). *Establishing safe spaces: Analyzing methods to improve LGBTQ+ acceptance in public schools*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/387306219>
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2007). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 53–80). Sage Publications.
- Steinweg, N., Roland, L., & Schumacher, T. (2023). *Guidelines for gender sensitivity measures in academia*. Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences.
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271>
- Tajik, O. (2024). *Purposive sampling*. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/391849280_Purposive_Sampling
- Talmy, S. (2009). A very important lesson: Respect and the socialization of order(s) in high school ESL. *Linguistics and Education*, 20(3), 235–253. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2008.10.002>
- The Scottish Government. (2024). *LGBT inclusive education: Guidance*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/guidance-lgbt-inclusive-education/>
- Thompson, S. (2006). The political theory of recognition: A critical introduction. *Constellations*, 13(1), 13–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8675.2006.00419.x>
- Turpin, R., Dangerfield, D. T., Oke, T., Thorpe, R. J., Jr., & Hickson, D. (2025). Psychometric validation of the connectedness to the LGBT community scale among Black sexual minority men living with HIV. *Journal of Community Health*, 50, 63–70. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-024-01392-z>
- UNESCO. (2016). *Global education monitoring report: Education for people and planet*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2017). *A guide for gender equality in teacher education policy and practices*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2019). *Behind the numbers: Ending school violence and bullying*. UNESCO.

Vliet, R. van, & Smith, J. A. (2025). Supportive school strategies for sexually and gender diverse students: A meta-analysis of associations with bullying-victimization experiences and feelings of school safety. *Educational Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2025.100689>

Whitman, J. S., Horn, S. S., & Boyd, C. J. (2007). Activism in the schools: Providing LGBTQ-affirmative training to school counselors. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 11(3–4), 143–154. https://doi.org/10.1300/J236v11n03_08