Fostering Inclusivity: Understanding LGBTQ+ Experiences for Policy Recommendation

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Abstract

The study aims to identify the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students in Grade 11 and Grade 12 in one of the public schools in Rizal province related to their gender preferences to serve as foundation for policy recommendations that foster inclusivity. A qualitative research method was employed, utilizing snowball sampling to select the participants. The study is anchored in Meyer's Minority Stress Theory. An open-ended survey questionnaire and interviews were used in data collection and analysis. The findings highlight five key issues faced by LGBTQ+ students: verbal harassment and bullying, stereotyping, lack of safe space in comfort rooms, limited LGBTQ+ inclusive policies, and reluctance to report discrimination. The school currently has policies that adhere to promote inclusivity, such as allowing students to wear uniforms that align with their gender identity, permitting light make-up and accessories, cross-dressing and providing flexibility regarding hair length for students aged 18 and older, with a waiver for under 18. LGBTQ+ students expressed the need for comprehensive inclusive policies to ensure protection from bullying, harassment, and stereotyping. They also requested increased awareness of LGBTQ+ issues within the school community to foster respect and acceptance. There is also a desire for safe spaces in comfort rooms and supportive organizations. To address these concerns, it is recommended to create a clear Anti-Discriminatory Policy, construct comfort rooms that promote safety, create clubs for LGBTQ+ students, encourage respect for gender identity, and train staff on LGBTQ+ issues. This aligns with the Department of Education's call for a gender equal environment.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ experiences, inclusivity, policy, recommendation

Introduction

Sexual orientation and gender identity are diverse aspects of human identity that can vary from one individual to another. As part of a young person's development, they may explore their gender and sexual orientation. Some may be certain of their identity, while others may feel unsure. This exploration of one's identity is a normal and natural process of development. Unfortunately, LGBTQ+ individuals often face abuse, discrimination, and marginalization, not only from their communities but also within their own families. (United Nation, 2019).   In the Filipino context, traditional views about gender and sexuality can make this process even more difficult for LGBTQ+ students. According to Meyer's Minority Stress Theory (2003)**, i**ndividuals who belong to stigmatized groups experience additional stress from prejudice, discrimination, and social rejection. When left unaddressed, this minority stress can harm their mental health, well-being, and school performance.

Understanding LGBTQ+ students' experiences in schools are crucial because schools are important for their growth and development. Over the years, there have been gradual improvements in laws and policies aimed at protecting the rights of LGBTQ+ students in schools. In 2017, the Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines issued Order No. 32, which established the Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy. This policy promotes gender equality, equity, sensitivity, non-discrimination, and respect for human rights in both elementary and secondary schools across the country.   However, despite the existence of this DepEd order, implementation varies widely.

For instance, while some schools have integrated inclusive policies, others may lack specific guidelines or policies, leaving LGBTQ+ students vulnerable. The idea pointed out that the LGBTQ+ students already faced challenges in school but is more challenging when it comes to effective implementation of protective policies.   This is evident through the unavailability of clear and detailed guidelines on how these rules should be carried out. The lack of clarity may lead to inconsistencies in implementation that will create confusion among those responsible in rule enforcement. This scenario will create a gap that will undermine the protection for the LGBTQ+ students.

Then study emphasized that the absence of localized policies does not adequately address the issues faced by LGBTQ+ students in schools. Thus, crafting of localized policies, which should serve as a guide for school implementers is needed. However, in the case of some schools, clear and comprehensive policies are not available. This weakens the protection intended for LGBTQ+ students.

This study aims to understand the common issues and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students, with the view that this understanding will help school authorities develop policies that truly protect students' rights, ensure equality and non-discrimination, and foster inclusivity within the educational setting. By doing so, the school can help reduce minority stress, enhance students' well-being and academic success, and promote a culture of acceptance and respect.

Purpose of the research

The study aims to explore the experiences of LBGTQ+ students in school to identify their challenges to propose more inclusive policies ensuring a school environment that fosters inclusivity.

Literature Review

The United Nations (2019) has emphasized that LGBTQ+ students around the world often face bullying, harassment, and exclusion in schools. These experiences include verbal teasing, spreading rumors, social isolation, and even physical assault. Violence often happens in everyday school spaces like classrooms, restrooms, and playgrounds, but it can also appear in school policies, curricula, and teaching practices. Similarly, Kosciw, Clark, and Menard (2022) found that derogatory language is common in schools, with LGBTQ+ students frequently hearing homophobic and transphobic remarks from both peers and educators. Staff rarely intervene, leaving students feeling unsafe and hesitant to report incidents because of limited support from authorities. This shows that schools can sometimes become places of discrimination and harassment. Beyond peer harassment, discrimination is also institutionalized through restrictive school policies and practices.

According to the GLSEN report, LGBTQ+ students are often barred from using their chosen names and pronouns, denied access to facilities like restrooms and locker rooms aligned with their gender identity, and excluded from participating in sports. Murchison et al. (2019) and Povirk et al. (2022) add that such restrictions not only reinforce stigma but also increase the risk of sexual assault, particularly for transgender and nonbinary youth. The Movement Advancement Project (2024) also highlighted how restroom policies remain a critical site of exclusion and violence. Together, these findings underscore how institutional rules can amplify vulnerability rather than provide protection.

In the Philippine context, similar patterns emerge. Reports from the Commission on Human Rights (CHR, 2020) indicate that LGBTQ+ youth often experience bullying, harassment, and discrimination rooted in SOGIE stereotypes which has no difference from

the report of Human Rights Watch (2016, 2017) which documented Filipino LGBTQ+ students endure harassment, discriminatory school rules, and a lack of supportive resources. Despite the existence of policies intended to protect LGBTQ+ individuals—such as DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012 (Child Protection Policy), DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017 (Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy), Republic Act 11313 (Safe Spaces Act), and Republic Act 10627 (Anti-Bullying Act, the implementation remains uneven. While these measures mandate clear rules, interventions, counseling, parental involvement, and awareness programs, many students continue to feel unsafe, partly due to the absence of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law such as the long-debated SOGIE Equality Bill. These findings suggest that the Philippine experience reflects international concerns while underscoring gaps in policy enforcement.

Another significant issue is the underreporting of violence and discrimination. Tillewein et al. (2023) found that many LGBTQ+ students refrain from reporting abuse due to mistrust of authorities, fear of retaliation, and embarrassment. Weise et al. (2023) similarly noted that unsupportive campus climates and administrators' lack of competence further discourage reporting. This pattern is not only evident internationally but also resonates locally, where Filipino LGBTQ+ students often hesitate to seek redress due to weak accountability mechanisms (CHR, 2020). Without reliable reporting systems, schools risk normalizing violence and failing to provide meaningful protection.

The effects of these experiences are far-reaching. Studies by Gnan et al. (2019) show that abuse and lack of support increase risks of mental health issues and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ students. Mayo (2022) argues that teachers and administrators must actively change school practices and policies to improve outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth. Similarly, Anderson (2020) and Tran (2022) point out how rigid gender expectations and stigma can be dismantled through education and sensitivity training. Research by Lewis and Ericksen (2016) further demonstrates the importance of training programs for faculty and curriculum reforms to strengthen inclusivity, particularly for marginalized LGBTQ+ subgroups. Together, these studies highlight how violence, whether explicit or implicit, significantly undermines both academic achievement and personal well-being.

Despite these challenges, research consistently shows that inclusive resources improve outcomes for LGBTQ+ students. The GLSEN survey revealed that students with access to Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) reported stronger belonging and higher academic success, although only a third of schools offered such organizations. Similarly, supportive educators and visible inclusivity markers, such as Safe Space stickers, helped students feel safer, though institutional-level support remained inconsistent (Kosciw et al., 2022). Likewise, studies from the University of South Florida (2022) and Youth.gov have shown that LGBTQ+ youth with affirming communities report lower absenteeism, greater self-esteem, and

stronger school engagement compared to those without such support. These studies illustrate that even in unsupportive climates, targeted resources can mitigate negative effects.

The following literature review supports the idea that LGBTQ+ students experience various forms of discrimination and harassment. They do not receive equal rights, which highlights the absence of inclusivity in schools. Schools, as students' "second home," should take an active role in crafting localized policies that are anchored in existing regulations to address these issues. Addressing these gaps is crucial for advancing inclusive education and ensuring that LGBTQ+ students can fully enjoy their rights to safety, dignity, and equal participation in schooling.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Meyer's Minority Stress Theory, which explains that LGBTQ+ individuals face unique stressors such as stigma, prejudice, and discrimination that negatively affect their well-being. In the school setting, these stressors take the form of bullying, exclusion, restrictive policies, and the lack of safe spaces, all of which heighten minority stress for LGBTQ+ students. In the Philippine context, despite protective laws and DepEd policies, weak implementation and the absence of a national SOGIE Equality law leave many students vulnerable. However, supportive teachers, inclusive policies, and initiatives like student-led organizations can serve as protective factors that buffer the negative effects of minority stress and foster safer, more affirming school environments.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, following the guidelines set forth by John Creswell in his book "Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches" (4th ed., Creswell, 2014). This qualitative method was utilized to identify common issues and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students at the school, aiming to promote inclusivity through policy recommendations. The rationale for including these participants is based on their unique experiences as members of the LGBTQ+ students that contribute to understanding the broader challenges within the school environment.

Participants of the study

This study used purposive sampling**,** specifically targeting Grade 11 and Grade 12 students in one of the public schools in the province of Rizal who were identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community. The participants were chosen because of their lived experiences of discrimination and challenges related to their gender identity or sexual orientation within

the school setting. To reach more participants, the snowball sampling technique was applied, where initial respondents referred classmates or peers who belong to the LGBTQ+ community.

A total of thirty (30) participants were included. These are the participants who experienced challenges based on their sexual orientation.

Research instruments

The data was gathered through two main instruments. An Open-Ended Questionnaire was used that allowed participants to freely share their experiences and perceptions without being limited by fixed response choices. Further, unstructured interviews were employed to probe deeper into participants' answers from the questionnaires and clarify unclear responses. Since the interviews were conversational in nature, they gave students the freedom to express themselves naturally. There was no fixed guide, as the follow-up questions were based on students' written responses. The questionnaire utilized was validated by experts before use.

Data analysis

The study employed a step-by-step process to understand and interpret the students' experiences, using thematic analysis to identify patterns or themes in the data. The first step involved validating the questionnaires Next, the researchers read the questionnaires and interview notes several times to become familiar with the students' responses. Key phrases or sentences were then highlighted and assigned short labels; a process known as coding. Similar codes were grouped into larger ideas or themes, which were continuously checked and refined to ensure they accurately represented the students' experiences. Overlapping ideas were simplified into sub-themes and major themes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers triangulated the data by using questionnaires, interviews and informal observation.

Ethical consideration

To ensure compliance with ethical standards in research, the following measures were undertaken: Permission and Approval – The researchers first sought permission from the school principal before starting the study. Informed Consent – Students were told the purpose of the study, what their participation would involve, and that they could stop at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Only those who gave their consent were included. Confidentiality and Anonymity – To protect the privacy of students, no real names were used. Instead, codes

173

like *Participant 1, Participant 2* were written in transcripts and results. Personal information was never shared. Respect and Sensitivity – Since the topic can be very personal, interviews were done in a safe space where students could speak openly without judgment. The researchers made sure to listen carefully and respectfully. Data Security – All responses are kept in the researchers personal file with security.

Results and Discussion

The following are the summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations offered based on the results gathered.

Profile of the Respondents in terms of Gender and Age

The gathered data presents a profile of the participants in terms of gender and age within the LGBTQ+ community. A total of 68 participants were identified who belong to this group. However, since the focus of the study was on the difficulties faced by LGBTQ+ individuals to offer policies that foster inclusivity, participants were narrowed down to thirty (30) individuals. These are the students who were identified to face challenges related to their gender preference in the educational environment. The majority of the participants are identified as gay, which is composed of sixteen (16) individuals, followed by four (4) transgender, five (5) bisexual, four (4) lesbian, and one (1) queer participant.

In terms of age distribution, the majority of participants were 16 years old, with eleven (11) individuals in this age group. This was followed by ten (10) participants who were 17 years old, seven (7) participants who were 18 years old, and the least represented ages were 21 and 22, each having one participant.

Common issues and problems encountered by the participants within the school environment

Based on the responses from the participants there are five (5) major themes emerged. These are verbal harassment and bullying, stereotyping, lack of safe spaces particularly in the comfort room, absence of LGBTQ+ inclusive policies, and reluctance to report discrimination.

Verbal Harassment and Bullying

The majority of the participants reported frequent verbal abuse which includes derogatory words, cat calling and public humiliation due to their sexual orientation. Here are some of the notable responses of the participants. Participant 13 a gay recounted, "I was

174

catcalled by boys; I don't know them, but they called me 'you look like a horse' in the hallway and laughed afterward. I just ignored them, but they kept shouting even when I was far away." Similarly, Participant 19, bisexual, shared, *"I was catcalled, tuwing may nadaraan na grupo ng kalalakihan o kababaihan, ay tinatawag nila akong bakla dahil ini-expect nila ay straight ako dahil siguro sa aking katangkaran".* (Every time I pass an area with a group of boys and girls, they call me 'gay. This might be because they expect me to be straight since I am very tall). Participant 20, who was identified as Queer, noted, *"Whenever I pass the hallway, I always encounter a group of men and they are always laughing. I don't know if I am the reason but I feel humiliated every time I pass on them. They are laughing because of how I act feminine. I also noticed it that whenever there are gays or transwomen passed, they are doing the same thing. Some of them tease them in a sarcastic manner. I was also mocked as a queer they told me that I am not queer nor bi. I am a gay. I tried to explain what the difference is between those genders but they refuse to listen".* Such behaviors violate and the Safe Spaces Act (Republic Act 11313), which provide regulations against sexual harassment, including catcalling.

Moreover, Participant 1, gay, expressed, *"Sa tuwing dumadaan ako hallway, sinasabihan ako ng grupo ng mga boys na bakla!, 150! Ayusin mo ang mukha mu! kaya hindi ako matanggal ang face mask ko and na-o-offend ako."* (Every time I walk down the hallway, I receive negative remarks from groups of boys who I don't know, they called me 'gay' '150' 'Fix your face'!, that is the reason why I cannot remove my face mask and it offends me.) Participant 8, bisexual, stated, *"Nabubully ako kasi sinasabihan nila akong 'bakla' at wala raw akong kontribusyon sa Pilipinas pero hindi nila alam ang pagkakaiba ng bakla sa bisexual".* (I was bullied because they said I'm gay and have no contribution to the world but they don't know the difference between a gay and bisexual.) Similarly, participant 10, gay, shared, *"Tuwing nagrerecite ako sinasabihan ako ng kaklase ko na 'bida-bida', 'salot', pakiramdam ko ay ang liit-liit ko".* (Every time I recite, my classmate called me attention seeker and scourge of society, this makes me feel small.) Participant 9, bisexual, echoed these sentiments, stating, *"The inequality and judgment na tinatanggap namin ay nakakabahala".* (The inequality and judgment we face from others are quite disturbing.) Additionally, participant 30, gay, mentioned, *"Tinatawanan nila ako habang naglalakad at sinasabihan ng 150."* (I was laughed at while walking and they said '150') It refers to payment supposedly given by gays seeking sexual favors. When asked if they have often experienced the said event, majority of them expressed that they experienced the situations repeatedly.

The hostile school environment is also connected to bigger structural and policy problems. This is in connection with the international report of Kosciw, Clark, and Menard (2022) that found that LGBTQ+ students often hear homophobic and transphobic language not only from classmates but also from teachers, and that school staff do not always step in to stop it. Similarly, in the Philippines, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR, 2020) reported

that LGBTQ+ youth still face SOGIE-based discrimination even though policies such as the Child Protection Policy (DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012) and the Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy (DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017) exist. However, these rules are not always followed, and without a national anti-discrimination law like the SOGIE Equality Bill, many students continue to feel unsafe and unprotected. Human Rights Watch (2017) also showed that some school rules—such as forcing students to follow gendered uniforms, limiting hair length, and not providing inclusive facilities. These make LGBTQ+ students feel excluded and increase their stress.

Because of this, there is a need for school-based programs that strongly enforce anti-bullying rules and promote awareness for both students and teachers. Hillard et al. (2014) pointed out that LGBQ students face more harassment than straight students, which can lead to shame, anxiety, and depression. Day et al. (2018) also found that transgender youth are more likely to miss school, avoid classes, and develop negative feelings toward school because of bullying. Similarly, Youth.gov explains that unsafe and discriminatory environments can cause LGBTQ+ students to drop out, be absent more often, and suffer from low self-esteem. If these problems are not addressed, they can lead to long-term mental health issues like chronic anxiety and depression.

This agrees with Meyer's Minority Stress Theory, which explains that the constant discrimination LGBTQ+ students face (like being mocked, forced to follow strict dress codes, or not being accepted for who they are) creates both outside pressures and inside struggles. Many participants in this study shared feeling embarrassed, anxious, or unsafe in school, which shows how external stress, when not supported by fair policies and protection, becomes internal stress. Over time, these repeated experiences of rejection and exclusion can build up and harm their confidence, mental health, and overall well-being, just as Meyer's theory suggests.

Lack of Safe Spaces for Comfort Room

The Movement Advancement Project (2024) highlights that recent discussions surrounding LGBTQ equality have increasingly focused on the necessity of protecting transgender individuals from discrimination. One critical area where transgender people mostly encounter harassment, mistreatment, and even violence is in the public restrooms. This issue brings into line with findings from a study indicating that LGBTQ+ students face significant challenges when utilizing restrooms in schools. The study revealed that the lack of designated comfort rooms for LGBTQ+ students contributes to harm and discomfort.

A significant number of respondents expressed discomfort using gender school restrooms. To illustrate these challenges, the following are the noteworthy responses from participants Participant 24, a gay, reported, *"Una ay ang diskriminasyon sa CR. Gumagamit ako ng pambabaeng CR, kinukwestyon nila ako bakit daw ako ng C-CR sa pang babae eh may tite ka diba"*.(First is the discrimination I experience in the comfort room, I use the female comfort room, they question me, asking why I use it when I supposedly have male private part.) Participant 26, a transgender individual, shared their confusion regarding restroom use, stating, *"Nalilito ako kung anong CR ang gagamitin ko, I heard negative remarks from my fellow students gaya ng: 'hindi kami allowed sa boys comfort room pati ang sa girls'. Kaya saan kami mag-CR?".* (I get confused about which comfort room to use, I hear negative remarks from my fellow students, such as: 'We are not allowed to use the boys' comfort room nor the girls'. So where are we supposed to go?). Likewise, Participant 14, a gay, reported, *"Kapag mag-CR ako, hindi ko alam kung saan papasok kasi bawal kami pumasok sa pambabae, ayaw din naman kami papasukin sa lalaki kasi baka raw silipan namin sila".* (When I use the comfort room, I don't know where to enter. We are not allowed in the female comfort room, and they also don't want us to enter the male comfort room because they say we might peep on them.)

These stories show how something as simple as using the restroom becomes stressful and painful. In Meyer's theory, the negative comments and rules are the outside stressors. But what really hurts is how these experiences build up inside which makes students feel confused, unsafe, and even ashamed just for trying to meet a basic need. Their words show how the stress of being questioned or mocked does not stop at the restroom door. It follows them throughout the day, affecting their focus and confidence. Murchison et al. (2019) also found that when transgender and nonbinary students are restricted from using restrooms that match their identity, they face higher risks of harassment and even sexual assault. For example, their study reported that transgender girls who experienced restroom restrictions had a 2.49 times higher risk of victimization. This connects directly to what participants shared: when schools fail to provide safe spaces, students are left more exposed to harm and carry the heavy burden of stress every time they need to use the restroom.

Povirk et al. (2022) showed that restrooms can either make LGBTQ+ students feel safe and included or excluded and vulnerable, depending on how these spaces are designed. Their study at Lund University found that traditional restroom setups often reflect societal norms that make LGBTQ+ individuals feel labeled or unrepresented. In the Philippines, Abesamis and Alibudbud (2024) highlighted a case where a transgender woman was denied entry to a women's restroom, sparking national debate about identity rights and the need for inclusive policies. Custodio (2019) also reported that LGBTQ+ youth often feel unsafe not only in schools but also at home, in communities, and in public spaces, where harassment and weak enforcement of anti-bullying policies make them afraid to speak up.

Gender Role Stigma/Stereotyping

The Philippines is characterized by a strong religious influence that contributes to social stigma on gender roles. According to Earnshaw, V. A. et al. (2024), stigma is defined as the delineation of acceptable practices, expressions, and identities related to gender, which can lead to social repercussions for individuals who transgress these boundaries. Heterosexism exists within various social, cultural, religious, political and legal frameworks. It makes sexual and gender diversity less visible and valued. It only supports traditional gender roles as a universal standard.

The participants reported being pressured to conform with the traditional gender roles. Notable responses include Participant 5, a lesbian, who stated, *"Ang discrimination na naranasan ko as lesbian ay pinipilit akong magkagusto sa lalaki. I had a friend who introduced me to a guy. I couldn't say no to my friend. I felt discriminated kasi parang pinipilit nya akong maging babae and I think that is gender shaming".* (The discrimination I felt was forcing me to like the opposite sex, I had a friend who introduced me to a guy, I could not say no to my friend, but I felt discriminated against because she is forcing me to be a girl, and I think that is gender shaming.) Participant 16, who is identified as gay, remarked, *"Lagi ako sinasabihan na lalaki pa rin ako at hindi babae".*(I was always told that I am a man and not a girl.")Participant 18 indicated, "They always say that I should be a boy."

Additionally, Participant 23, also gay, shared, *"Ung feeling na awkward ang classmates ko sakin, tinatrato nila ako na parang hindi nila gusto kung ano ako siguro kasi hindi obvious na bakla ako, physically kasi masculine ako, hindi halata na bakla ako, pero ung kalooban ko e bakla talaga."* (I feel that my classmates are awkward around me, treating me as if they don't like who I am, maybe because it's not obvious that I'm gay. Physically, I look masculine, so it's not noticeable that I'm gay, but deep inside I truly am.) Participant 8, female bisexual, recounted *"Every time na lalabas kami ng girlfriend ko dati, jina-judge ako, kadiri daw kasi babae sa babae. Masama daw magmahal ng sariling babae. Makasalanan daw ako".* (Every time I went out with my girlfriend before, I was judged. They said it was disgusting because it was female-to-female. They told me that loving the same sex was wrong, and that I was a sinner.) Participant 25, bisexual, shared being told *"I was stereotype, they are saying na, saying ang tangkad mo, mag basket ball ka na lang."* (I was stereotype they are saying that such a waste of height, play basketball instead.) Finally Participant 28, a transgender noted, "*Ineexpect pa din nila akong gumawa ng pang lalaki gawain tulad ng pagbubuhat ng tables and chairs"* (They still expect me to do what men do, like lifting tables and chairs.)

The participant who shared experiences of being forced into heterosexual relationships, told to act according to their assigned sex at birth, judged for same-sex

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relationship, or expected to perform tasks based on stereotypes about masculinity. These reflect how heterosexism happens which makes sexual and gender diversity unseen, undervalued, and treated as something negative. This is in relation with Meyer's Minority Stress Theory which explains that the constant pressure to deny or change one's identity is a form of external discrimination, identified as distal stressor. This can turn into internal struggles like shame, fear, and self-doubt known as proximal stressors. For students, this does not only create emotional pain but also affects how they interact in school and with peers. This will leave them feeling unsafe and unwelcomed. This shows why schools must actively challenge gender-based stigma through awareness and education programs, as Anderson (2020) and Tran (2022) suggest, so the LGBTQ+ students can express themselves without fear of judgment or discrimination.

Unclear and Limited LGBTQ+ Inclusive Policies

Policies provide a clear framework for organizations to function effectively. They create consistent rules and regulations which allows organizations to work efficiently and effectively. According to Rethore (2025), a policy is a prearranged plan of action that outlines the framework for business strategies and goals. It acts as a connection between an organization's vision, values, and daily operations. Policies delineate essential activities and offer direction to decision-makers on how to address emerging issues.Without clearly defined policies, confusion may occur among organizational members. This condition is mainly manifested in policies concerning LGBTQ+ students, who have expressed being confused on the use of restrooms, queuing practices, and preferred forms of address.

Several notable responses illustrate this situation. Participant 22, who is identified as a lesbian, noted, *"Walang malinaw na instructions; nalilito ako pag napapapila, hindi naman ako sigurado kung pwede ako pumila sa boys."* (There are no clear instructions; I am confused when told to fall in line, as I am unsure if I can line up with the boys.) Similarly, Participant 30, a gay student, stated, *"Sana may malinaw na policy ang school na nakalagay kung pano ako ia-address base sa gender ko, mas gusto ko na Miss ang tawag sakin kesa Mr".* (I hope there is a clear policy that I will be addressed according to my gender, I would prefer to be called Miss rather than Mr.) Meanwhile, Participant 6, also a gay student, expressed feelings of discrimination regarding restroom usage: *"Sana i-allow na ang gays sa girls restroom, sana ilagay ito bilang policy para informed na din ang iba na pwede na at hindi na kami kinukwestyon lagi."* (I wish that gay students were allowed to use the girls' restroom, and I hope this can be included in the school policy so that others will be informed and will not question us anymore.) Participant 29 added, *"Sana lahat ng policies na concern kaming mga LGBTQ ay malinaw at naibabahagi sa lahat".* (I hope that all policies concerning LGBTQ+ students are clearly communicated so that everyone is informed.)

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The shared experiences of the participants which are repeated can lead to confusion affecting their mental health and their capability to feel welcome or accepted in school. This is in relation with Meyer's Minority Stress Theory that helps explain the challenges reflected in the participants' experiences. Their confusion about restrooms, queuing practices, and how they are addressed shows the presence of distal stressors. This refers to the external pressures created by unclear and non-inclusive policies. These stressors can evolve into proximal stressors, such as anxiety, fear of judgment, and the constant need to monitor their actions to avoid discrimination. This means that simple actions like lining up or how they are addressed in the classroom can become a stressful experience. Thus, adding unnecessary emotional load to LGBTQ+ students.

Moreover, their experiences only suggest that policies addressing these issues must be explicitly stated in school manuals to ensure that students and teachers will be well-informed and aware. Providing clear guidelines will help LGBTQ+ students feel accepted and equal to their peers. However, the researchers observed that although there are local policies available intended for these students, it is not properly written or documented which may cause confusion for proper implementation. Human Rights Watch (2017) reported a 68 pages report on "Just Let us BE": Discrimination Against LGBT Students in the Philippines. It emphasized the array of abuses LGBT students received through harassment, discriminatory policies and practices, and the absence of supportive resources which weaken their right to education.

Reluctance to Report Discrimination

Despite experiencing harassment, the majority of the participants were hesitant to report incidents. Reasons included fear of retaliation, lack of trust to authority figures and normalization of mistreatment. The school's Guidance Counselor confirmed that cases often go unreported.

"The following are the shared experiences of the participants. Participant 1, identified as gay, stated, "I did not report it because I don't like to escalate things." Similarly, Participant 2, also gay, shared, *"Ayoko na mag report, hinahayaan ko nalang."* (I did not want to report; I just let it pass.) Contrariwise, Participant 4, who is identified as bisexual, reported, *"Naireport ko, pero nagtuturo sila ng iba. Ayaw nila aminin ang wrong doings nila".* (I reported, however, they were pointing fingers at somebody else. They do not want to admit their wrongdoings.) Additionally, Participant 10, also bisexual, expressed fear about the consequences of reporting, stating, *"Hindi na ako nag sumbong, natatakot ako baka gawan nila ako ng masama".* (I did not report because I am afraid that they might do something bad to me.) Meanwhile, Participant 23, gay, shared that *"Hindi ako komportable mag kwento tungkol sakin sa mga teacher".* (I am not comfortable to share what is happening to me to teachers." Moreover, Participant

25, bisexual said that "Nasasaktan ako sa mga salita nila sinasabi sakin, sa aming mga LGBTQ, nagiging open minded na lang ako, ako ung mas nakakaintindi, hinahayan ko nalang". (I am hurt by the words they say to me and to us in the LGBTQ+ community. I just choose to be open-minded; I try to be more understanding and let it pass.) Majority provided similar responses. They thought they would be labelled as 'too dramatic" and they thought that they could handle things.

Based on the responses, it is clearly seen that the humiliation they received is normalized, the participants hesitate to confront the issues since they believe that things will pass. Some of these may be attributed to the lack of support system from school, and fear of being judged. Further, these responses show the complex emotions and struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals when discerning whether to report harassment and bullying in their environments.

Meanwhile, the experiences of the participants can be explained by Meyer's Minority Stress Theory. The harassment and bullying the students experience are distal stressors which are the external forms of prejudice and discrimination. Over time, these external pressures lead to proximal stressors, which can be clearly seen in their statements: fear of retaliation from Participant 10, mistrust of authority from Participant 23, and avoidance or self-silencing from Participants 1 and 2. Even when they choose to "just let it pass" from Participant 25, it reflects how discrimination has been normalized. These events pushed them to keep the stress rather than confront it.

This cycle of external and internal stress leaves students feeling isolated and unsupported, discouraging them from reporting incidents. A study by Tillewein et al. (2023) found that many LGBTQ+ students do not report abuse due to mistrust in support services and fear of embarrassment. Their research highlights the rampant occurrence of violence against LGBTQ+ students and the significant refusal of reporting of these incidents. This emphasized the schools to draft policies that will encourage them to report these incidents, further safe reporting systems should be made to create safe spaces. Similarly, Weise et al. (2023) noted that past studies have shown underreporting of abuse among LGBTQ+ students, often due to factors such as campus policies, the overall campus climate, and administrators' lack of competence in handling such cases. To address this, it is crucial to improve policies and communication strategies to ensure that students feel heard, supported, and validated when they experience violence.

LUKAD: An Online Journal of Pedagogy

Local policies and rules implemented by the school related to LGBTQ+ students

The participants were asked to identify existing local policies that support LGBTQ+ students. The majority of responses highlighted several key policies. Firstly, there is a provision allowing LGBTQ+ students to wear uniforms that align with their gender identity. Secondly, students are permitted to wear light makeup. Thirdly, there is flexibility regarding hair length, allowing students to choose short or long hairstyles based on their gender identity. These are all under the provision that a waiver is signed by parents for those under 18 years old. However, one participant expressed a lack of awareness regarding these policies.

Here are some of the significant responses of the participants. Participant 4, who is identified as bisexual, stated, *"Hindi ako knowledgeable sa policy ng school para sa LGBTQ+"*. (I am not yet knowledgeable about the school's LGBTQ+ policies in school.) Participant 5, a lesbian, expressed the importance of allowing individuals to dress according to their gender identity and to use the correct pronouns associated with their gender. Another participant, Participant 6, who is identified as gay, mentioned, *"Allowed na kami magsuot ng pang babaeng uniform"*. (There is a permission for students to wear female uniforms.) Moreover, Participant 9, also bisexual, noted, *"Meron pong permit for LGBTQ para ma express namin ang aming sarili; para ito sa mga below 18 years old"*. (There is a permit needed for the LGBTQ+ that want to express themselves; it is for those below 18 years old.) Participant 13, identifying as gay, said, *"Pwede na kami mag lagay ng make-up, wag lang makapal, dapat light lang tska pwede na din magpahaba ng buhok basta may waiver"*. (We are allowed to use light make-up and have long hair as long as we have an LGBTQ+ waiver.) Lastly, Participant 19, who is identified as gay, shared that students are allowed to have either long or short hair depending on their gender identity.

These findings indicate a growing recognition of the need for inclusivity and support for LGBTQ+ students within local policies. However, the lack of awareness among some participants suggests that further education and outreach are necessary to ensure that all students are informed of their rights and available support systems. Similarly, the researchers observed that these existing policies are not properly documented and disseminated, opening opportunities for confusion and improper rule implementation. The implications of this feedback highlight the importance of education and communication regarding LGBTQ+ rights and policies within the school environment to foster an inclusive atmosphere for all students.

Meyer's Minority Stress Theory helps explain why the lack of awareness, weak communication, and inconsistent implementation of policies can be harmful. When students are unsure of their rights or face uncertainty about whether policies will protect them, they experience additional stress beyond everyday academic pressures. These external stressors,

LUKAD: An Online Journal of Pedagogy

such as discrimination, invisibility, or exclusion, can create internal struggles like anxiety, self-doubt, or fear of expressing one's identity. The participants' responses show that while supportive policies exist, they are not fully effective without proper dissemination and advocacy. This reflects Meyer's idea that minority stress is not just caused by overt discrimination, but also by unclear systems and structures that leave LGBTQ+ students vulnerable. Strengthening policy communication and ensuring staff are trained to implement them fairly can reduce this stress and promote a safer, more inclusive school environment.

The research would like to point out the need in educating school staff on how to effectively handle issues involving LGBTQ+ students. By equipping teachers and school personnel with the necessary knowledge, they can become advocates and effective voices for LGBTQ+ students. This understanding will encourage students to be more open about the challenges they face within the school environment. Consequently, addressing these issues can lead to a more inclusive and understanding atmosphere, allowing for better support and resolution of the problems that LGBTQ+ students encounter. Lewis and Ericksen (2016) found that African American LGBTQ students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) often experience bullying. Their study recommends that faculty undergo sensitivity training led by administrators to foster a more inclusive environment. Additionally, they suggest implementing a curriculum designed to provide training for both faculty and LGBTQ students, enhancing the support system available to these students.

Policies should be included in catering the needs of LGBTQ+ SHS students

To foster inclusivity, participants were asked what policies should be included to address their needs as LGBTQ+ students in school. Allowing them to be part of policy-making can facilitate easy revisions of the school handbook, promoting inclusive education. These ideas focused on creating policies that clearly stipulate how students will be protected from bullying, harassment, and discrimination. Additionally, participants expressed the desire for the school to raise awareness about LGBTQ+ issues. These covers providing safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students thru building of comfort rooms intended for their community, supportive organizations and school staff.

Here are some of the notable answers from the participants. Participant 1, who is identified as bisexual, stated, "*Sana mas open ang school para sa mga tulad naming*". (I wish that school will be more open towards LGBTQ+ students.) Participant 5, a lesbian, suggested, *"Isama sana sa policy ng school kung pano kami ia-address base sa aming gender and sana inormalize na kasama kami sa iba't-ibang school occasions".* (I hope the school includes in its policy how we will be addressed based on our gender, and I also hope that it will be normalized for us to be included in various school occasions.) Participant 6, who is gay, emphasized the need for

raising awareness, stating, *"Dapat maturuan ang mga estudyante kung pano irespeto kaming mga LGBTQ+ sa paaralan."* Students should be educated on how to respect the LGBTQ+ in school. Participant 10, also gay, asserted, "Equality is the answer."

Furthermore, Participant 13, who is identified as gay, highlighted the importance of clear guidelines regarding restroom usage: *"Madami dapat isama sa policy ng school, pero para sakin, ang pinaka mahalaga ay i-clarify ang rules sa pag gamit ng restroom. Tsaka, i-clarify ang rules san pipila sa linya ang mga LGBTQ+. Gaya ko, I consider myself a girl, pero tuwing pipila ako sa girls, sinasabi ng classmates ko, 'bakla ka, hindi ka babae. "* (There are many things that should be included in the school policy, but for me, the most important is to clarify the rules on restroom use. It is also important to clarify the rules on where LGBTQ+ students should line up. For example, I consider myself a girl, but every time I queue in the girls' line, my classmates tell me, 'You are gay, you are not a girl'.) Similarly, Participant 14, also gay, echoed this sentiment, stating, *"Para sakin, dapat magbigay ng malinaw na policy sa paggamit ng comfort rooms para sa mga LGBTQ+ students, kasi hanggang ngayon wala pa din comfort room para sa amin binibigay ang school."* (For me, the school should provide a clear policy on the use of comfort rooms for LGBTQ+ students because until now the school does not provide comfort rooms for us.)

Likewise, Participant 15, who is transgender, suggested, *"Magkaroon ng seminar para sa lahat ng student tungkol sa mga LGBTQ+ para matutunan nila kami irespeto at magkaroon ng programa na anti-discrimination."* (Provide a seminar for all students that allows them to understand the LGBTQ+, so they can learn to respect us, and also create a program for anti-discrimination." Lastly, Participant 22, a lesbian, recommended, *"Magkaroon ng LGBTQ+ support groups tulad ng clubs o mga organization".* (Provide LGBTQ+ support groups like clubs or organizations.) Meanwhile, Participant 27, gay, "Provide comprehensive sensitivity training." Participant 26, transgender , *"Sana magkaroon ng malinaw ng policy na magproprotect samin from bullying, hindi lang para samin, pati na din sa LGBTQ teachers".* (I hope for a clear policy to protect LGBTQ+ students from bullying, not only for students but also for LGBTQ+ teachers as well.) To clarify the report, the researcher conducted follow-up questions to participant 26. It was revealed that there are students who talked behind the back of LGBTQ+ teachers as well, giving bad and demeaning remarks.

Meyer's Minority Stress Theory further explains why the concerns of the participants are deeply important. The lack of safe spaces, unclear restroom policies, and experiences of bullying create additional stressors for LGBTQ+ students. These external pressures such as harassment, exclusion, and the absence of protective policies can lead to internal struggles like developing negative feelings towards self and other mental health issues like anxiety. Meyer emphasizes that minority stress results from an unsupportive environment rather than from one's identity itself. The responses of the participants reflect this reality. This only shows that

clearer policies, awareness programs, and support systems are essential in reducing stress and fostering a safer and more affirming school climate.

The insights gathered by the researcher highlighted the call for policies that will ensure the safety and promote inclusive school for all LGBTQ+ students. Cardinal H. (2021) highlights that when schools provide strong social support, LGBTQ youth feel safer, develop a stronger sense of belonging, and see improvements in both their health and academic performance. Safe spaces can take many forms, including classrooms, administrative offices, and clubs for the LGBTQ+, all of which help create a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides important insights into the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students, the existing school policies that support them, and the additional measures they believe are necessary for a more inclusive community.

1. LGBTQ+ students continue to face discrimination in the form of verbal harassment, bullying, and stereotyping. The lack of safe spaces especially around comfort room access along with unclear and limited LGBTQ+ policies and hesitancy to report discrimination, reflects the external stressors described in Meyer's Minority Stress Theory. These stressors create additional burdens on LGBTQ+ youth, leading to feelings of fear, and exclusion.

2. While there are current policies that allow some freedom of expression, such as wearing light makeup, choosing hairstyles that match gender identity, and the option to wear female uniforms, these remain limited and do not fully address the structural sources of minority stress.

3. To reduce these stressors and promote inclusivity, students strongly advocate for a clear anti-discrimination policy, equal access to comfort rooms, respect for gender identity in both queuing and recognition, and opportunities to join school programs. They also call for awareness campaigns, sensitivity seminars, and the establishment of support groups or organizations. As Meyer emphasizes, reducing external stress through supportive policies and affirming environments can lower minority stress, improve well-being, and allow LGBTQ+ students to prosper both in their academic and social aspects.

LUKAD: An Online Journal of Pedagogy

Recommendations

From the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations were endorsed:

1. *Establishment of an Anti-Discrimination Policy and Procedure*. The school should draft a clear anti-discrimination policy that prohibits bullying, harassment, and unfair treatment based on sexual orientation or gender identity. To encourage reporting, a drop box or other safe reporting system should be provided. Signages and posters in classrooms and hallways must also be displayed to remind students of this policy. The guidance counselor should serve as the focal person in addressing cases and providing support.

2. *Improve Restroom Accessibility*. The school, with the help of the LGU or GPTA stakeholders, should work toward creating gender-neutral comfort rooms. Since public schools often face budget limitations, a clear protocol should be made allowing LGBTQ+ students to use the restroom where they feel most comfortable. Teachers and the student government should help monitor the proper implementation of these rules to ensure fairness and prevent discrimination.

3. *Increase Awareness and Sensitivity Training*. To strengthen inclusivity, policies should be regularly discussed during flag ceremonies or school assemblies. Resource speakers can be invited to help teachers, administrators, and students understand issues concerning LGBTQ+ rights, gender diversity, and bystander intervention. The guidance office should also provide counseling services and support groups to assist LGBTQ+ students who may be facing unique challenges.

4. *Clubs and Organizations*. The school should allow the formation of clubs or student groups that support LGBTQ+ students. These groups can partner with the student government to help monitor the implementation of anti-discrimination policies. They can also work with teachers and administrators to develop inclusive programs and activities that promote respect and acceptance for all genders.

5. *Strengthen Communication of Existing Policies*. School policies should be written in student-friendly language in the handbook or manual for clearer understanding. These policies must be explained during student orientation and reinforced in class discussions. The school can also prepare short videos on student rights and post them on the school's Facebook page. Posters should be placed in classrooms and hallways, and students should be properly informed about the availability of the drop box and counseling services.

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