

The Lived Experiences of LGBTQ Physical Education Teachers: A Phenomenological Inquiry

Reyman B. Menesis

Polytechnic University of the Philippines, College of Education - Graduate School, Sta. Mesa, Manila, Philippines

reyman.menesis@deped.gov.ph

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of LGBTQ Physical Education (PE) teachers in selected public junior high schools in Taguig City and examined how they made sense of identity expression, school treatment, well-being, and professional practice. A qualitative design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed. Eight self-identified LGBTQ PE teachers were purposively selected from four public secondary schools and participated in semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed idiographically through familiarization, line-by-line coding, theme generation, interpretation, and validation across cases. The findings revealed varied identity practices, including open disclosure, selective disclosure, behavioral adjustment, and

professional boundary management. Participants described both affirming and difficult experiences with students, colleagues, and administrators, including respectful relationships and support alongside perceived scrutiny, higher professional expectations, cautious interactions, and occasional social distance. Compared with heterosexual counterparts, some participants reported greater self-monitoring, boundary-setting, and efforts to protect professional credibility. These experiences shaped well-being through resilience, professional growth, relational validation, emotional labor, and temporary distress. Participants also linked their lived experiences with more inclusive PE practices centered on fairness, equitable participation, respect, and reduced gender stereotyping. The study concludes that LGBTQ PE teachers' experiences are context-dependent rather than uniformly positive or negative and that inclusive school climates, responsive leadership, professional ethics, and accessible support mechanisms can strengthen teacher well-being and equitable educational practice.

Keywords: *LGBTQ educators, physical education, lived experiences, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, inclusive pedagogy, school climate*

INTRODUCTION

The rights and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual- and gender-minority individuals have received increasing attention in education because schools can function as both supportive and exclusionary institutions. UNESCO (2016) emphasized that education systems should be safe, equitable, and inclusive and should prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. In the Philippines, broader evidence has likewise documented continuing stigma and unequal treatment despite relatively high levels of social acceptance (United Nations Development Programme & United States Agency for International Development [UNDP & USAID], 2014).

For LGBTQ teachers, identity is negotiated within professional norms, institutional expectations, relationships, and school culture. Teachers may be open about identity, selectively disclose it, or manage boundaries between personal and professional life (Laplane, 2023; Llewellyn, 2023; Simons et al., 2021). Such

decisions are particularly consequential when educators perceive scrutiny or when heteronormative expectations shape professional credibility, relationships, and safety.

Physical Education is a particularly relevant setting because bodies, movement, physical proximity, grouping, performance, and gender norms are highly visible. Research has identified heteronormative assumptions, gendered grouping, and challenges involving sexual and gender diversity in PE (Berg & Kokkonen, 2021; Müller & Böhlke, 2023a, 2023b). LGBTQ PE teachers may therefore encounter professional circumstances that differ from those experienced in less visibly gendered subject areas.

Philippine policy provides an institutional basis for gender-responsive education through DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017. However, policy adoption alone does not explain how LGBTQ teachers experience identity, treatment, well-being, and professional practice in specific school settings. The source thesis identified a local research gap: no reviewed Philippine IPA study had examined these interrelated experiences specifically among LGBTQ PE teachers in public junior high schools.

Accordingly, this study explored how eight self-identified LGBTQ PE teachers in selected public junior high schools in Taguig City made sense of their gender identity and expression, treatment by students, colleagues, and administrators, perceived differences from heterosexual counterparts, implications for personal and professional well-being, and influence on pedagogical practices and professional roles. The inquiry was intended to generate context-sensitive evidence for inclusive education, teacher well-being, professional ethics, responsive leadership, and gender-sensitive PE practice.

Literature Review

Gender Identity, Performativity, and Professional Boundary Management

Butler's (1988) Gender Performativity Theory frames gender as enacted through repeated social acts rather than as a fixed professional attribute. In school settings, this perspective helps explain why identity expression may vary by audience, context, and perceived risk. LGBTQ teachers may adapt language, behavior, dress, disclosure, and interpersonal boundaries as they negotiate professional expectations and personal authenticity.

Recent studies show that such negotiation is rarely uniform. Laplante (2023) described the intersection of personal and professional identity among queer teachers, while Llewellyn (2023) showed that LGB teacher identities can operate simultaneously as professional, personal, and political identities. Simons et al. (2021) similarly found variation in workplace openness among lesbian, gay, and bisexual educators. These studies support an analytic focus on both open disclosure and strategic concealment or selective disclosure.

Philippine evidence also presents LGBTQ educators as professionally committed and adaptive, but local accounts can understate emotional labor and identity management. Wright and Villaflor (2019) documented resilience among Filipino gay teachers, while Añonuevo and Digo (2023) described professional roles and identities among gay and bisexual teachers. The present study extends this literature by examining how identity expression is interpreted within the distinct context of PE.

Gendered Physical Education and LGBTQ Teaching

Physical Education is commonly described as a gendered learning area because movement, bodies, physical contact, grouping practices, and performance are often organized through binary assumptions. Berg and Kokkonen (2021) documented the interaction between heteronormativity and queering in PE, while Clark et al. (2023) showed how gender can be reproduced through curriculum enactment. These conditions make PE a setting in which identity and professional visibility may be intensified.

Teacher preparation and curriculum design can either reproduce or challenge these patterns. Guerrero and Puerta (2023) emphasized inclusive PE and teacher training as mechanisms for advancing gender equality. Makrooni et al. (2025) further showed that teachers' understandings of gender in PE are shaped by culture, curriculum, and pedagogical flexibility, indicating that inclusive practice requires more than formal policy.

The relevance of these issues is reinforced by research on transgender and non-binary learners. Wilkinson and Penney (2025) identified distress and exclusion associated with gendered grouping and curriculum provision. Although their focus was students, the findings demonstrate why teachers' decisions about grouping, participation, language, and activity design can directly shape the inclusivity of PE environments.

School Treatment, Climate, and Well-Being

LGBTQ teachers' workplace experiences are influenced by leadership, colleagues, students, institutional policies, and the broader school climate. Brett (2022) described both opportunities and challenges associated with being a visible LGBTQ teacher, while Hart and Hart (2021) documented disclosure decisions, heteronormativity, and uneven school-climate support among transgender teachers. O'Brien (2024) likewise highlighted the importance of leadership, peer relationships, and professional support.

School context also influences whether teachers experience acceptance, neutrality, scrutiny, or social distance. España-Delgado and Viáfara-González (2025) showed that workplace experiences may be affected by school type, stakeholder beliefs, and institutional relationships. Venketsamy et al. (2024) further documented discrimination in teachers' workplace experiences, emphasizing that formal inclusion does not guarantee consistently affirming practice.

These conditions have implications for well-being. Caldwell et al. (2022) linked discrimination with psychological distress among LGBTQ people, while Cech and Waidunas (2021) documented professional devaluation, harassment, and health challenges in workplaces. Mogotsi et al. (2024) similarly emphasized the psychosocial effects of stigma and discrimination. Together, these studies support examining well-being as relational and institutional as well as individual.

Queer Theory, Inclusive Pedagogy, and Professional Practice

Queer Theory provides a lens for examining how institutional norms privilege heterosexuality and binary gender and how educators may challenge these assumptions. Lisahunter (2017) positioned queer theory as a tool for questioning gender and sexuality norms in health and physical education, while Neto (2018) emphasized inclusive teaching that disrupts normalized assumptions rather than merely adding diversity as a peripheral topic.

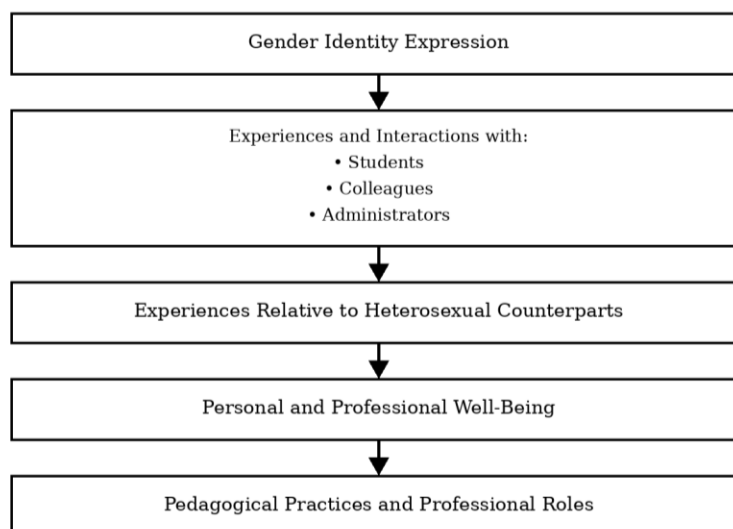
Pedagogical decisions by LGBTQ educators can also be shaped by professional risk and school climate. Cui (2022) found that closeted gay academics used context-sensitive strategies when addressing queer issues. In PE, Martínez-Merino et al. (2024) showed that teachers responded differently to homophobic language, ranging from avoidance to direct confrontation and educative response. These findings underscore the importance of context when interpreting inclusive pedagogy.

Local evidence suggests that queer educators may translate lived experience into creative and inclusive practice. Fajilan et al. (2025) described innovative teaching strategies among queer teachers, while Brown (2025) argued that queer visibility can itself carry pedagogical potential and professional risk. The present study therefore examined not only how participants were treated but also how their experiences informed fairness, participation, classroom boundaries, and sensitivity to diversity.

The study was theoretically guided by Butler's Gender Performativity Theory and Queer Theory. Gender Performativity supported interpretation of disclosure, self-presentation, behavioral adjustment, and boundary management, while Queer Theory supported interpretation of heteronormative expectations, institutional power, acceptance, scrutiny, and professional belonging. These lenses were used interpretively and did not assume that all LGBTQ participants experienced school life in the same way.

Figure 1. *Conceptual Paradigm of LGBTQ PE Teachers' Lived Experiences*

Conceptual Paradigm of LGBTQ PE Teachers' Lived Experiences



METHODS

Research Design

The study used a qualitative research design employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA was selected because the study sought to examine how participants interpreted and made meaning of significant experiences rather than merely describe events. The approach was grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography and involved detailed within-case analysis before cross-case pattern development (Smith et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The broader qualitative orientation was consistent with the interpretive approach described by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Research Locale

The study was conducted in selected public secondary schools in the Enlisted Men's Barrio (EMBO) area of Taguig City, specifically Benigno "Ninoy" S. Aquino High School, Tibagan High School, Fort Bonifacio High School, and Pitogo High School. These schools provided the context in which the participating LGBTQ PE teachers carried out their professional roles.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Eight self-identified LGBTQ PE teachers participated in the study: one lesbian, three gay teachers, one non-binary teacher, two bisexual teachers, and one transgender teacher. Purposive sampling was used to recruit a small, information-rich, and relatively homogeneous IPA sample. Participants were Licensed Professional Teachers, currently teaching PE at the junior high school level, self-identified as members of the LGBTQ community, provided informed consent, and had at least two years of public-school teaching experience in Taguig City.

Research Instrument

The primary instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide based on the research questions, IPA principles, and literature on LGBTQ educators. Questions covered professional background, gender identity and disclosure, interactions with students, colleagues, and administrators, perceived comparison with

heterosexual counterparts, well-being, and pedagogical practices. Follow-up prompts were used to encourage clarification and deeper reflection.

The interview guide underwent content validation by six experts from educational management, instructional systems and resources management, language and literature, technology education, and LGBTQ-related educational research. Language experts also reviewed clarity, appropriateness, and comprehensibility, after which wording and question sequence were refined.

Data Gathering Procedure

Potential participants were identified through professional networks and approached individually and discreetly. The purpose, voluntary nature, confidentiality protections, and participant rights were explained before informed consent. Semi-structured interviews were conducted onsite or online according to participant comfort and availability and generally lasted about 45 minutes to one hour. With explicit permission, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Participants were offered transcript review and opportunities to clarify statements. Filipino excerpts used in the findings were translated into English by the researcher and checked against the original transcript for meaning.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through IPA. The researcher first transcribed and repeatedly read each account for familiarization, then conducted line-by-line coding of significant statements, perceptions, emotions, and meanings. Related codes were clustered into emergent themes within individual cases before patterns, similarities, and differences were examined across cases. Interpretation moved between the participants' accounts, reflexive notes, and the study's theoretical lenses. Credibility was strengthened through transcript validation, reflexive notes, collaborative review of coding and themes, and an audit trail.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance was granted by the Polytechnic University of the Philippines University Research Ethics Committee under Protocol Code UREC-2025-0301. Participation was voluntary and based on written informed consent. Participants could withdraw without penalty. A distress protocol provided access to a licensed mental health professional when needed. Pseudonyms or participant codes protected identity, digital files were password-protected, printed records were securely stored, and data were scheduled for destruction after the three-year retention period specified in the consent procedures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Summary of Emergent Themes Across the Five Research Questions

Research Focus	Emergent Themes	Representative Participants
Gender identity and expression	Open Identity Disclosure and Self-Acceptance; Selective Identity Disclosure and Professional Boundaries; Gender Performance and Behavioral Adjustments; Professional Boundary Management	A, B, C, D, E, F, G
Treatment by students, colleagues, and administrators	Perceived Workplace Scrutiny and Professional Challenges; Student Acceptance and Positive Relationships; Administrative and Institutional Support; Professional Relationships with Occasional Social Distance	B, C, D, E, F, H
Perceived differences from heterosexual counterparts	Careful Student Interactions / Boundary Setting; Credibility Protection and Strategic Professionalism	B, C, E, F, G
Personal and professional well-being	Resilience and Professional Growth; Emotional Labor and Relational Validation	A, C, D, F, H
Pedagogical practices and professional roles	Identity-Driven Teaching Philosophy; Inclusive Pedagogical Practice	A, B, D, E, F, H

Gender Identity and Expression Within the School Setting

Four themes described how participants negotiated identity at work: Open Identity Disclosure and Self-Acceptance, Selective Identity Disclosure and Professional Boundaries, Gender Performance and Behavioral Adjustments, and Professional Boundary Management. Some participants described open and confident identity expression, whereas others adjusted disclosure depending on audience, context, and perceived professional risk. Faculty A openly identified as transgender, while Faculty C emphasized self-acceptance and openness. In contrast, Faculty B, D, and F described selective disclosure, and several participants reported adjusting tone, authority, or social distance to reduce the likelihood of misunderstanding.

Faculty B explained, "Depending on who I am talking to, I sometimes adjust my behavior and the way I speak."

These accounts show that identity expression was not a single continuum from closeted to open; rather, it was actively negotiated. The finding is compatible with Gender Performativity Theory, which emphasizes context-dependent enactment (Butler, 1988), and with studies showing selective disclosure and separation of personal and professional identity among queer educators (Laplante, 2023; Llewellyn, 2023). The participants' narratives also extend earlier work by demonstrating how PE-specific visibility and professional boundary concerns shaped day-to-day self-presentation.

Treatment Received from Students, Colleagues, and Administrators

Participants reported both affirming and difficult experiences. Four themes emerged: Perceived Workplace Scrutiny and Professional Challenges, Student Acceptance and Positive Relationships, Administrative and Institutional Support, and Professional Relationships with Occasional Social Distance. Several participants described respectful treatment by students and professional treatment by administrators. Others perceived indirect judgment, higher expectations, inappropriate comments, or social distance even when overt discrimination was absent.

Faculty C stated, "The administration treats me professionally," while Faculty B observed that colleagues could be professional yet still show "a certain distance."

The variation is consistent with research showing that LGBTQ teachers' experiences depend substantially on school climate, leadership, and peer relationships (Brett, 2022; O'Brien, 2024). It also supports the distinction between non-discrimination and active inclusion: neutral or formally professional treatment may reduce overt harm but does not necessarily provide explicit affirmation or support. This nuance parallels evidence that workplace acceptance can coexist with heteronormative expectations and uneven institutional support (Hart & Hart, 2021; Venkatesamy et al., 2024).

Perceived Differences from Heterosexual Counterparts

Participants' comparisons with heterosexual colleagues were captured by two themes: Careful Student Interactions / Boundary Setting and Credibility Protection and Strategic Professionalism. Some teachers described increased awareness of physical proximity, language, and student interaction, particularly during PE activities. Others felt they needed to demonstrate greater knowledge, professionalism, or restraint to avoid negative interpretations and protect credibility.

Faculty E said, "I am extra cautious, especially during physical activities."

These experiences point to additional self-monitoring that participants perceived as connected with LGBTQ identity. Similar workplace mechanisms have been documented in research on disclosure, scrutiny, and professional devaluation (Cech & Waidzun, 2021; Hart & Hart, 2021). In PE, where touch, movement, demonstrations, and supervision are routine, this monitoring may become especially salient. The finding therefore reinforces the importance of equitable professional expectations and clear institutional norms that protect both teachers and students.

Implications for Personal and Professional Well-Being

Two themes described well-being: Resilience and Professional Growth, and Emotional Labor and Relational Validation. Participants reported that supportive colleagues, student appreciation, professional recognition, and acceptance could strengthen confidence, motivation, resilience, and professional growth. At the same time, perceived scrutiny, inappropriate comments, uncertainty about others' judgments, and sustained self-monitoring sometimes produced discomfort, stress, or emotional labor.

Faculty F reflected, "I have become stronger because of my experiences," but also noted feeling better when the environment was supportive.

The findings demonstrate that well-being was not explained only by personal resilience. Instead, it was closely tied to relationships and school context. This aligns with evidence linking discriminatory experiences with psychological distress (Caldwell et al., 2022) and with research emphasizing broader institutional and social conditions in LGBTQ well-being (Mogotsi et al., 2024). The accounts therefore support school-based approaches that combine individual support with improvements in climate, leadership, and professional relationships.

Influence on Pedagogical Practices and Professional Roles

Participants described two themes connecting lived experience with teaching: Identity-Driven Teaching Philosophy and Inclusive Pedagogical Practice. Their accounts emphasized empathy for students who felt different or excluded, equitable opportunities to participate, respect for gender expression, reduced reliance on binary grouping, and conscious modeling of fairness and respect. These practices were presented as professional commitments rather than as a uniform style shared by all participants.

Faculty B stated, "As much as possible, I make sure that everybody is given equal opportunities."

The finding supports literature advocating gender-responsive and inclusive PE pedagogy (Guerrero & Puerta, 2023; Lisahunter, 2017). It is also consistent with local evidence that queer educators may use creative and inclusive approaches shaped partly by lived experience (Fajilan et al., 2025). At the same time, the narratives maintained professional boundaries and contextual adaptation, supporting Brown's (2025) observation that queer visibility can hold both pedagogical potential and professional risk.

CONCLUSION

The lived experiences of LGBTQ PE teachers in the selected Taguig City public schools were diverse and context-dependent. Participants negotiated identity through open disclosure, selective disclosure, behavioral adjustment, and professional boundary management. They generally described professional or respectful interactions in school, but some also experienced perceived scrutiny, higher expectations, cautious relationships, and occasional social distance.

Compared with heterosexual counterparts, several participants believed they needed greater self-monitoring and more deliberate boundary-setting to prevent misunderstanding and protect professional credibility. Their experiences affected well-being in both supportive and difficult ways, producing resilience, professional growth, and relational validation alongside emotional labor and temporary distress. These lived experiences also informed pedagogical commitments to fairness, empathy, equitable participation, respect for diversity, and reduced gender stereotyping. Overall, the study shows that inclusive school climate, responsive leadership, clear professional ethics, and accessible support mechanisms are important conditions for strengthening both teacher well-being and equitable PE practice.

Recommendation

School heads, principals, and Gender and Development focal persons should strengthen confidential and voluntary support practices that allow respectful identity expression while protecting privacy and professional

boundaries. School-climate surveys and confidential feedback mechanisms may be used to monitor whether teachers experience respect, safety, and equitable treatment.

Schools should strengthen gender-responsive workplace and education programs for teaching, non-teaching, and student communities. Professional learning should address respectful communication, stereotyping and microaggressions, professional ethics, and equitable treatment regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

School administrators and human-resource offices should periodically review policies, evaluation practices, and supervisory expectations to ensure that professional standards are applied equitably and do not create unnecessary identity-based scrutiny or additional self-monitoring.

Guidance offices, human-resource units, school leaders, and GAD focal persons should provide confidential counseling, peer support, mentoring, and referral options for teachers experiencing workplace stress. Participation should remain voluntary and should not require public disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity.

PE coordinators, curriculum planners, and teacher-education providers should integrate gender-responsive and inclusive PE strategies into curriculum planning and professional development, including equitable participation, respectful classroom relationships, non-stereotypical grouping and teaching approaches, and appropriate professional boundaries. Future research may extend the inquiry across regions, school types, identities, and disciplines while retaining attention to context and divergent experience.

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