

Sina Bakla, Beki, at Mars: Lived Experiences of Openly Gay Elementary Learners Across Decades and the Evolution of Gender and Development Programs in DepEd

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ABSTRACT

In the Philippines, the implementation of Gender and Development (GAD) policies has become a cornerstone in promoting inclusive education, yet the lived experiences of openly gay elementary learners reveal diverse realities across decades. This qualitative comparative study explored how GAD policies shaped the educational experiences, identities, and well-being of openly gay learners from the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s. Using in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study captured narratives from participants who lived through the evolution of GAD implementation in different time periods. Findings revealed three thematic trajectories: (1) Visibility and Silence in the 2000s, where acceptance was minimal and policies remained largely

unimplemented, leading to stigma and bullying; (2) Recognition and Resistance in the 2010s, marked by initial integration of GAD programs, anti-bullying measures, and heightened awareness, though prejudice persisted; and (3) Inclusion and Advocacy in the 2020s, where stronger DepEd directives and school-based GAD programs fostered greater protection, acceptance, and empowerment for openly gay learners. However, gaps in teacher training, parental engagement, and school-wide integration of GAD remain evident. The study concludes that while GAD has progressed from token acknowledgment to active advocacy, openly gay learners continue to face challenges in attaining full inclusion. It recommends sustained teacher professional development, comprehensive policy enforcement, and a whole-school approach to ensure that elementary schools are safe, equitable, and affirming spaces for all learners.

Keywords: *identity labels, challenges, coping mechanisms, inclusivity in education, cultural evolution, educational policies*

INTRODUCTION

The lived experiences of openly gay learners in Philippine elementary schools remain an under-explored but critically important area of inquiry, particularly as the Department of Education (DepEd) has gradually institutionalized Gender and Development (GAD) measures (DepEd, 2017; DepEd, 2013; DepEd, 2012). While national policy provides a formal framework for gender-responsive education, recent studies indicate a persistent gap between policy intent and on-the-ground realities: hostile or ambivalent school climates continue to disadvantage sexual-and-gender-diverse learners and undermine their

psychosocial and academic wellbeing (Kosciw et al., 2022; Pinaga, 2023). This study took these policy–practice tensions as its starting point, asking how GAD’s evolution over three decades (2000s, 2010s, 2020s) has been lived and felt by those who were students in each era.

There are practical and ethical reasons to conduct this research now. International and local evidence shows that LGBTQ+ youth face elevated risks to mental health and school safety where supportive structures are weak (The Trevor Project, 2024; GLSEN, 2022). In the Philippines, recent teacher-education and GAD-awareness projects point to uneven teacher readiness and inconsistent classroom application of gender-sensitive pedagogy (Cagang, 2023; Teach for Gender Equality Project, 2024). By foregrounding elementary learners’ voices across time, this study yields context-rich, historically situated data that can inform how DepEd’s GAD directives are translated into age-appropriate interventions, reporting mechanisms, and teacher development programs that actually protect young learners.

Despite growing scholarship on school climate and SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression), significant gaps remain. Much of the literature focuses on secondary and tertiary students or treats policy implementation as a snapshot rather than a historical process; few qualitative comparative studies center elementary-aged subjects nor compare experiences across policy eras (Pinaga, 2023; Kosciw et al., 2022). Moreover, existing local evaluations emphasize awareness levels but do not adequately link learners’ narratives to specific DepEd orders and school practices (DepEd DO 32, s. 2017; DepEd DO 63, s. 2012; DepEd DO 27, s. 2013). This study addressed those lacunae by combining decade-based lived narratives with policy tracing to reveal where protections work, where they falter, and why.

Ultimately, the study responded to both scholarly and policy needs: it contributes empirical, child-centered knowledge to the growing body of research on gender inclusion in education, and it offers actionable insights for DepEd stakeholders including school heads, GAD focal persons, guidance counselors, and teacher trainers on improving implementation fidelity and school-level supports. By documenting how openly gay learners in the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s experienced and negotiated schooling under shifting policy regimes, the research aimed to guide more targeted, evidence-based strategies that secure safer, more inclusive elementary learning environments for gender-diverse children.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological design, which sought to explore and describe the essence of lived experiences from the perspective of those who have directly encountered the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Rooted in Husserl’s philosophy, transcendental phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals perceive and make meaning of their experiences through conscious reflection. In the context of this study, it aimed to capture the authentic voices and personal journeys of openly gay elementary learners from different decades (the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s) as they navigated their school environments under the evolving implementation of the Department of Education’s Gender and Development (GAD) programs.

As a transcendental phenomenological inquiry, the study began with epoché, a process of setting aside personal biases, assumptions, and prior experiences of the researcher to approach the participants’ narratives with openness and neutrality. This allowed the researcher to listen to each story as it unfolded, without imposing judgments or preconceived meanings. Through in-depth interviews, participants were encouraged to recount their lived realities including their feelings, challenges, and acts of resilience within the school setting. Each account provided a window into how the social and institutional climate shaped their identity formation, self-expression, and sense of belonging.

The phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation stages followed, where significant statements and emerging meanings were identified, clustered, and synthesized to reveal the shared essence of experience across the three decades. This design was chosen because it honors the personal voice of the

participants while uncovering the deeper structures that define what it means to be an openly gay learner in different historical and educational contexts. By using transcendental phenomenology, the study transcended mere description as it sought to arrive at the core meaning of acceptance, struggle, and transformation as experienced by these learners, reflecting how GAD policies evolved within DepEd's educational landscape.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in selected public elementary school contexts within three schools divisions in Central Luzon, namely the Schools Division of Nueva Ecija, Schools Division of Pampanga, and Schools Division of Bulacan. These divisions served as the research locale because they provided diverse educational and sociocultural settings where the lived experiences of openly gay elementary learners could be meaningfully examined across different time periods.

The locale was considered appropriate for the study because public elementary schools are among the primary spaces where learners first encounter formal socialization, peer interaction, teacher influence, and institutional norms related to gender identity and expression. Since the study focused on openly gay individuals who experienced elementary schooling during the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s, the selected divisions offered suitable contexts for understanding how school environments, classroom relationships, peer acceptance or discrimination, and community attitudes shaped the participants' early identity formation.

A total of nine participants were drawn from the three identified schools divisions. Three participants came from the Schools Division of Nueva Ecija, three from the Schools Division of Pampanga, and three from the Schools Division of Bulacan. In each division, one participant represented the 2000s, one represented the 2010s, and one represented the 2020s. This distribution enabled the study to capture decade-based narratives while also considering differences in school culture and local community contexts across the three divisions.

The inclusion of participants from different decades allowed the research locale to reflect the changing landscape of Gender and Development (GAD) implementation in the Department of Education. The 2000s represented a period when awareness of gender diversity in elementary schools was still minimal and when openly gay learners often experienced silence, stigma, or limited institutional protection. The 2010s reflected a transitional period marked by the growing visibility of GAD programs, anti-bullying efforts, and initial gender-sensitivity initiatives. The 2020s represented a more recent context where gender-responsive policies and school-based GAD programs have become more visible, although challenges in full implementation remain.

Furthermore, the selection of Nueva Ecija, Pampanga, and Bulacan provided a broader regional perspective on how openly gay learners experienced acceptance, criticism, discrimination, and empowerment in Philippine elementary schools. These locations helped the researcher compare how educational policies, school climate, peer interactions, teacher responses, and societal norms evolved over time. Through these settings, the study was able to situate the participants' personal narratives within the larger movement of DepEd toward gender inclusivity and learner protection.

Sampling Technique

This study employed purposive sampling, a method suitable for phenomenological research where participants are selected based on their ability to provide rich, relevant, and meaningful insights about the phenomenon being studied. Three openly gay individuals were purposefully chosen, representing a specific decade - the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s. The selection was guided by the participants' lived experiences as openly gay learners during their elementary years, ensuring that each one could authentically share how school environments, peer interactions, and societal attitudes shaped their early identity formation. This approach allowed the researcher to capture not only individual narratives but also the evolving educational and cultural context surrounding gender identity across time.

The participants were identified through personal referrals and community connections, following ethical considerations such as voluntary participation and informed consent. Each respondent's story represented a distinct era in the Department of Education's journey toward gender inclusivity from the early years when awareness of gender diversity was minimal, to the more recent years when Gender and Development (GAD) programs became more visible in schools. By including three (3) participants from each decade, the study aimed to provide a comparative understanding of how policies, school culture, and societal norms have transformed over time. This sampling design ensured a balanced representation of experiences that could collectively reveal the evolution of acceptance, challenges, and empowerment among openly gay learners in Philippine elementary schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

How did openly gay elementary learners from the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s describe their lived experiences in the classroom and school environment?

The study revealed that the lived experiences of openly gay elementary learners across three decades reflected the gradual evolution of gender sensitivity and inclusivity within the Department of Education's (DepEd) system. Through thematic analysis, three major themes emerged: (1) Social Exclusion and Stigma in the Early Years, (2) Emerging Tolerance and Policy Awareness, and (3) Progressive Acceptance and Empowerment under GAD Implementation. These themes illustrate how openly gay learners navigated their identities amid shifting school climates and policies that either constrained or supported their personal and educational growth.

Theme 1: Social Exclusion and Stigma in the Early Years (2000s)

Participant A, who studied during the early 2000s, shared deeply painful memories of being mocked, humiliated, and ostracized for his gender expression. During that period, the Department of Education (DepEd) had not yet institutionalized Gender and Development (GAD) mechanisms, leaving schools without clear guidelines to protect learners from gender-based discrimination.

The participant vividly recalled, "*Tinatawag nila akong 'bakla' sa harap ng klase, at kahit umiiyak ako, parang normal lang sa kanila*" ("They called me 'gay' in front of the class, and even when I cried, they acted like it was normal").

This reflection encapsulates the prevailing school climate of the early 2000s—an environment where gender variance was often mocked and dismissed as mere classroom humor rather than recognized as a form of bullying or emotional abuse.

Participant D also reinforced this theme of exclusion and ridicule.

"*Ginagawang biro ng mga teacher. Tanda ko, lagi nila pinasisigaw sa akin yung 'Lalaki ako!' Tapos magtatawanan sila*" ("The teachers made it a joke. I remember they would make me shout, 'I'm a man!' and then everyone would laugh").

"*Yung mga kaklase ko, yung pagiging bakla ko ang pang-asar nila sa akin. Minsan kahit wala naman akong ginagawa, tatawagin nila akong bakla tapos magtatawanan*" ("My classmates used my being gay as their way of teasing me. Even when I did nothing, they would call me gay and laugh at me").

These statements mirror the findings of Manalastas (2019), who documented that LGBTQ+ youth in Philippine schools experienced high levels of bullying and identity-based shaming, often tolerated or perpetuated by authority figures. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) reported that LGBTQ+ learners in Southeast Asia frequently encounter verbal harassment and exclusion due to educators' lack of gender sensitivity and policy awareness.

The absence of institutional protection during this time reflects the gap that existed before DepEd formally introduced GAD-oriented frameworks. It was only in the following decade that DepEd began addressing gender disparities through policies such as DepEd Order No. 63, s. 2012, which required schools

to prepare GAD Plans and submit accomplishment reports, and DepEd Order No. 27, s. 2013, which mandated the establishment of GAD Focal Point Systems. These policies, however, came too late for learners in the early 2000s who grew up in an era when being “bakla” was treated as both spectacle and stigma.

From a developmental perspective, these early experiences of discrimination had profound implications on self-concept and academic participation. The humiliation faced by openly gay learners often translated into avoidance behaviors like skipping school activities, minimizing classroom participation, or internalizing shame to cope with rejection. As Kosciw et al. (2022) emphasized in their study on school climate, such experiences can lead to lowered academic engagement and emotional withdrawal, particularly when discrimination is normalized within the school structure itself. The accounts from Participant A and his peers thus underscore a historical reality: before DepEd’s GAD integration, elementary schools were not safe spaces for gender-diverse learners.

The 2000s represent a critical point of reflection for the Department of Education’s current initiatives. These narratives demonstrate why GAD policies such as DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017 or the Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy were necessary. This policy directly addresses issues of discrimination by mandating inclusive practices and capacity-building for teachers to ensure equitable treatment of all learners, regardless of gender identity or expression. The struggles of openly gay learners in the early 2000s became the foundation for these reforms, reminding educators today of the urgent need to sustain advocacy, awareness, and training to prevent the repetition of such exclusionary practices in classrooms.

Theme 2: Emerging Tolerance and Policy Awareness (2010s)

The 2010s ushered in a decade of transition for openly gay elementary learners, coinciding with the Department of Education’s (DepEd) growing recognition of gender inclusivity as a policy concern. Participant B, who attended school during this period, described the school environment as “*mas maayos na, pero may mga guro pa ring hindi sanay sa mga tulad namin*” (“better now, but there were still teachers who were not used to students like us”).

This statement reflects a partial shift in attitudes, where overt ridicule became less common but subtle forms of exclusion persisted. Compared to the overt discrimination of the early 2000s, this decade saw the beginnings of institutional acknowledgment through DepEd Order No. 63, s. 2012, which established the Gender and Development (GAD) Focal Point System, and DepEd Order No. 27, s. 2013, which mandated gender-responsive budgeting and planning. These policies signified an emerging awareness of inclusivity, yet implementation at the school level remained inconsistent and largely dependent on individual teachers’ beliefs and training.

Responses from Participant B illustrated this uneven progress.

He shared, “*Hindi na kami masyadong pinagtatawanan, pero may mga guro pa ring uncomfortable kapag nagsasayaw kami sa program*” (“We were no longer laughed at as much, but some teachers still felt uncomfortable when we danced during programs”).

“*Tinatawag pa rin at binibiro ako ng mga kaklase ko na beki pero kapag naririnig ni teacher, binabawal niya sila*” (“My classmates still called me ‘beki’ as a joke, but when the teacher heard them, she stopped them”).

These accounts reveal a growing sense of protection from some educators, though full acceptance was yet to be achieved. Teachers began to intervene in bullying incidents, a marked improvement from the 2000s, but emotional support and understanding of SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression) diversity were still limited.

This partial shift aligns with findings from Cagang (2023), who reported that while teachers were increasingly aware of gender sensitivity concepts, many lacked the confidence and knowledge to apply them effectively in daily classroom interactions. Similarly, Alviar-Martin and Espino (2020) emphasized that early implementation of GAD initiatives in Philippine schools was often “tokenistic,” limited to

compliance rather than genuine transformation of school culture. This echoes Participant B's experiences, where rules against bullying were present, yet heteronormative biases continued to shape interactions. The 2010s, therefore, represented a stage of conditional acceptance—a time when tolerance grew, but only within the bounds of traditional expectations.

In essence, the decade can be described as a period of “in-between,” neither fully discriminatory nor entirely inclusive. Schools began to acknowledge gender diversity through DepEd-led initiatives, but the absence of comprehensive SOGIE education and teacher preparedness prevented the full realization of these reforms. The learners' experiences during this era underscore the importance of moving beyond policy formation toward actual capacity-building and cultural transformation. As noted by UNESCO (2021), creating safe and inclusive learning spaces requires not only policy enforcement but also sustained teacher development and community engagement.

Theme 3: Progressive Acceptance and Empowerment under GAD Implementation (2020s)

By the 2020s, the experiences of openly gay elementary learners reflected a significant transformation in school culture—one that was more accepting, aware, and grounded in institutional support.

Participant C shared, “*Masaya ako kasi tanggap na ako ng mga classmates ko. Kapag may nagsasabi ng masama, pinagsasabihan na sila ng teacher*” (“I'm happy because my classmates accept me now. When someone says something hurtful, the teacher reprimands them”).

Unlike the earlier decades marked by stigma and silence, the 2020s showed a distinct culture of accountability and empathy within classrooms. This shift was largely influenced by DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017, otherwise known as the Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy, which mandates the creation of safe and inclusive spaces for all learners, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. It explicitly calls for the elimination of gender-based discrimination and promotes gender sensitivity training among teachers and school personnel. The participant's account demonstrates how policy enactment, when translated into concrete practices, can reshape everyday interactions in schools.

“*Lagi kong sinasabi ipapa-guidance ko sila. Nagsusumbong ako sa teacher kapag tinutukso ako*” (“I always say I'll report them to the guidance office. I tell the teacher when they tease me”) and “*May mga bully, pero binabawal na sila ng teacher. Maraming tumatawag sa akin ng Mars*” (“There are still bullies, but teachers now stop them. Many even call me ‘Mars’”) indicate that learners have become more confident in asserting their right to respect.

The emergence of the term “Mars,” a local expression of camaraderie among LGBTQ+ individuals which signifies not only social acceptance but also empowerment and identity affirmation within peer groups. Participant C's experiences suggest that the visibility and normalization of gender diversity in schools have grown stronger, supported by GAD initiatives and capacity-building efforts. DepEd Memorandum No. 114, s. 2022, further reinforces this movement by institutionalizing gender-responsive activities and integrating GAD principles into curricular and co-curricular programs.

These positive experiences align with global findings emphasizing the impact of inclusive education policies on learners' well-being. GLSEN's (2022) National School Climate Survey found that LGBTQ+ students in schools with comprehensive anti-bullying policies and gender-inclusive programs reported higher self-esteem and academic engagement. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) highlighted that consistent policy implementation coupled with teacher training results in safer learning environments for sexual and gender minorities. In the Philippine context, Salvaña (2023) noted that DepEd's integration of GAD principles in guidance services and school activities has begun to foster “safe zones” where learners can express themselves without fear of ridicule. These studies affirm that inclusivity, when institutionalized and actively practiced, nurtures a sense of belonging and psychological resilience among learners.

In essence, the 2020s represent a decade of progress and empowerment for gay elementary learners. While instances of teasing still occur, the difference lies in how teachers and peers respond—with awareness, intervention, and empathy. The evolving classroom culture demonstrates that the Gender-

Responsive Basic Education Policy is not merely a document but a lived framework shaping real experiences. As schools continue to internalize GAD values, the narrative of “Sina Bakla, Beki, at Mars” evolves from one of exclusion to one of empowerment and pride, reflecting both the progress of DepEd’s gender agenda and the growing maturity of Filipino educational spaces in embracing diversity.

What forms of criticism, discrimination, or acceptance did they encounter from their classmates, teachers, and school community?

Theme 4: Mockery and Verbal Bullying as Normalized Behavior (2000s)

The lived experiences of openly gay learners during the 2000s reveal a harsh school climate marked by exclusion, ridicule, and a lack of institutional protection.

Participant G recalled, “*Sa school, Sir, hindi ako isinasali sa mga larong panlalaki. Dati sa mga larong pisikalan kasi, panlalaki pa lahat iyon. Kapag sa mga babae naman ako sumasali, they call me names.*” (“In school, I wasn’t allowed to join boys’ games. They were too physical and meant for boys. When I joined the girls, they called me names.”) This testimony illustrates how rigid gender norms shaped daily school interactions, with sports and play becoming spaces of exclusion rather than inclusion.

Similarly, the participant added, “*Ayaw nila akong isali sa grupo nila kasi raw baka matalo sila*” (“They didn’t want me in their group because they said I might make them lose”). These experiences show how gender nonconformity was perceived as weakness, fostering rejection and mockery from peers.

Such verbal and physical bullying was often tolerated by adults, normalizing discrimination.

Participant A also recounted, “*Kapag nakikita nilang naglalaro ako kasama mga babae, magtatawanan na sila tapos pabiro nilang gagayahin mga kilos ko*” (“When they saw me playing with girls, they laughed and mimicked my gestures jokingly”). The teasing was constant and reinforced by silence from teachers who either ignored or trivialized the bullying.

The participant’s final statement, “*Naaalala ko, sa purok namin, tinatarget din nila ako ng pellet gun dati, kasi alam nilang kayang-kaya nila ako kapag pumalag ako*” (“I remember they used to shoot me with pellet guns in the neighborhood because they knew I couldn’t fight back”), reflects how the school environment failed to set boundaries, enabling a culture of impunity that extended even beyond the classroom.

These accounts align with UNESCO’s (2021) findings that in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines, LGBTQ+ students during the early 2000s frequently encountered physical violence, name-calling, and social isolation without teacher intervention. At that time, no DepEd policy specifically addressed gender-based discrimination. Gender and Development (GAD) structures had not yet been institutionalized, leaving schools guided by traditional gender expectations. The absence of policy protection meant that being “bakla” was often a stigma rather than an accepted identity.

This historical gap later motivated the issuance of DepEd Order No. 63, s. 2012, establishing the GAD Focal Point System in the Department of Education, which sought to address the gender-blind practices that characterized earlier decades. The 2000s, therefore, represented a period of systemic silence, where prejudice was viewed as part of school humor rather than a form of violence. Manalastas (2019) emphasizes that such experiences produce long-term effects on self-esteem and participation, often discouraging learners from engaging in class or extracurricular activities. Without a supportive environment, many gay learners in this period endured a cycle of invisibility and emotional harm, with limited recourse for justice or protection.

The experiences of Participants A and G mirror the lived realities of countless Filipino learners before the institutionalization of GAD principles in education. The normalization of mockery in schools during this era underscores how deeply gender stereotypes were embedded in social and educational systems. These early struggles provide the foundation for understanding how DepEd’s later GAD initiatives sought to transform schools from sites of exclusion into safe, inclusive spaces for all learners regardless of gender identity or expression.

Theme 5: Conditional Tolerance and Emerging Awareness (2010s)

During the 2010s, openly gay elementary learners began to experience a shift from outright rejection toward a form of conditional tolerance within the classroom and school community. While teasing and mockery persisted, there was a growing awareness among some teachers and peers of the importance of respect and acceptance. This decade reflected a period of transition where efforts to promote gender sensitivity were initiated but not yet fully internalized by school stakeholders.

Participant E shared, *“Tinutukso ako ng mga kaklase ko. Ginagaya-gaya nila kilos ko.”* (“My classmates tease me and imitate my gestures.”)

“Kapag inaaway nila ako at lumaban ako, tinatawag nila ako sa mga pangalan.” (“When they pick on me and I fight back, they call me names.”)

These narratives reveal that verbal bullying and gender-based teasing were still common experiences, but unlike in the 2000s, some level of teacher intervention was starting to emerge.

As participant H reflected, *“Laging sinasabi ng teacher ko dati na walang masama sa pagiging beki, pero kapag wala na ulit si teacher, magsisimula na naman sila.”* (“My teacher would always say there’s nothing wrong with being gay, but when the teacher leaves, the teasing starts again.”)

This shows that while teachers began to advocate for tolerance, enforcement and genuine behavioral change among students remained inconsistent.

This finding aligns with the transitional implementation of gender and development (GAD) initiatives during the early to mid-2010s. The Department of Education (DepEd) institutionalized GAD principles through policies such as DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017, or the Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy, which aimed to “eliminate gender bias and discrimination in schools.” However, prior to this formalization, GAD integration was limited and dependent on teacher advocacy or personal initiative (DepEd, 2017). The participants’ experiences reflect this fragmented awareness where teachers acknowledged the importance of inclusivity, but school systems lacked comprehensive mechanisms to ensure sustained implementation.

The coexistence of acceptance and subtle discrimination demonstrates what UNESCO (2018) terms as “partial inclusivity,” where schools express support for LGBTQ+ learners in principle but fail to address the deeper cultural and behavioral biases that persist in peer interactions. Studies by De Ocampo and Ferrer (2020) in the Philippine context affirm that although GAD programs have been introduced in many schools, “the lived realities of LGBTQ+ learners still involve ridicule and social exclusion, especially in informal spaces such as recess and group play.” The participants’ mention of being “sometimes included, sometimes not” mirrors this uneven social acceptance, suggesting that inclusion was often conditional that is granted only when it did not challenge heteronormative norms or peer comfort.

In essence, the 2010s signified an era of emerging awareness but limited transformation. Teachers began to act as protectors and advocates, echoing the intent of DepEd Memorandum No. 273, s. 2019, which calls for the integration of gender-responsive education free from bias. Yet, these policies were still finding ground in everyday classroom practice.

As participant E summarized through lived experience, the tolerance they received was fragile—*“Minsan isinasali nila ako sa mga laro nila, minsan naman ayaw nila”* (“Sometimes they include me in their games, other times they don’t”). This encapsulates the decade’s paradox: progress in language and advocacy, but slow evolution in actual acceptance and equality.

Theme 6: Acceptance, Empowerment, and Institutional Protection (2020s)

By the 2020s, the experiences of openly gay elementary learners reflected a noticeable transformation in how schools responded to issues of gender identity and inclusion. Participant C’s accounts reveal a shift from ridicule and passive tolerance to acceptance, empowerment, and institutional protection. Compared to earlier decades, this period highlights the stronger presence of school mechanisms and teacher interventions that safeguard learners from discrimination.

The participant shared, *“Binibiro nila ako, Sir, pero isinusumbong ko po sa teacher ko”* (“They tease me sometimes, Sir, but I report it to my teacher”). This response reflects not only a sense of self-advocacy but also the learner’s trust that the school will take appropriate action which is a form of empowerment absent in previous generations.

Moreover, the learner added, *“Lagi po sinasabi ni teacher na kapag niloko pa nila ako, isumbong ko sila”* (“My teacher always tells me that if they tease me again, I should report them”).

This shows the growing awareness and active stance of educators in protecting learners against bullying. Teachers are now taking on a more proactive role as allies and advocates of inclusivity, a direct reflection of institutionalized gender-responsive policies. Such interventions align with DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017 (Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy), which mandates that all schools provide a safe, inclusive, and gender-fair environment for learners regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression.

The learner’s mention of seeking help from guidance personnel, *“Sabi po ni Papa ipa-guidance daw po kay teacher para tumigil sila”* (“My father told me to report it to the teacher so they would stop”) illustrates the expanded involvement of both families and guidance offices in resolving gender-related issues, signaling a community-wide awareness of protection mechanisms.

The supportive role of teachers and the responsiveness of schools represent the tangible outcomes of the Department of Education’s continuing efforts to integrate Gender and Development (GAD) into basic education. As reiterated in DepEd Memorandum No. 273, s. 2019, schools are instructed to review instructional materials and classroom practices to ensure inclusivity and eliminate gender bias. Additionally, DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012 (Child Protection Policy) serves as a crucial legal foundation that empowers teachers and school officials to act decisively against any form of bullying or discrimination. These institutional supports have translated into more confident and empowered learners, as expressed by the participant:

“Pero marami po akong friends, konti lang po nangloloko. Tapos hindi po araw-araw. Sometimes lang po.” (“But I have many friends, only a few tease me, and not every day. Sometimes only.”)

This indicates a positive social climate where acceptance is no longer exceptional but increasingly normalized.

Similar findings were reported in the study of Cruz and Pineda (2023), which revealed that Filipino LGBTQ+ learners today experience “greater protection from school authorities and higher peer acceptance compared to previous decades.” Likewise, research by UNESCO (2022) on inclusive education in Southeast Asia emphasized that visible institutional policies and responsive teachers significantly reduce the occurrence of homophobic bullying. This transformation demonstrates that while discrimination has not been fully eradicated, the dominant school culture has shifted toward inclusivity, advocacy, and mutual respect. The presence of guidance counseling, teacher mediation, and parental engagement signifies an evolution from mere awareness to action marking the 2020s as a decade of empowerment for young gay learners under the Gender and Development (GAD) framework in DepEd.

How has the implementation of GAD programs and policies influenced the experiences and treatment of openly gay learners across these decades?

Theme 7: The Transformative Role of GAD Policies in Shaping School Experiences Across Decades

The evolution of openly gay learners’ experiences from the 2000s to the 2020s illustrates the growing impact of Gender and Development (GAD) policies in promoting inclusivity and equality within Philippine basic education. During the early 2000s, participants described their experiences as marked by exclusion and open ridicule, with minimal intervention from teachers or administrators. These accounts reflected the absence of structured policies addressing gender sensitivity in schools at that time.

As Participant G shared, *“Mas madalas akong mag-isa”* (“I was often alone”).

This narrative demonstrates how, in the absence of formal protection mechanisms, mockery and discrimination were normalized in the school culture. Studies such as that of Manalili (2019) confirmed that during this period, gender-based teasing and exclusion in Philippine schools often went unchecked due to limited awareness and lack of institutional frameworks supporting sexual diversity.

The 2010s, however, marked a turning point with the institutionalization of GAD Focal Point Systems and gender-responsive budgeting under DepEd Order No. 63, s. 2012 and DepEd Order No. 27, s. 2013.

Participant B reflected this period's mixed progress, saying, "May panunukso pa rin pero nag-iintervene na si Ma'am noon." ("There was still teasing, but Ma'am would already intervene back then.").

This statement reveals a partial cultural shift wherein teachers began advocating for respect and tolerance, yet school communities were still grappling with deep-seated biases. The same observation appeared in Cagang's (2023) research, which found that while DepEd's GAD policies had begun influencing teacher attitudes, implementation was inconsistent due to insufficient training and local adaptation. The decade thus represented a phase of conditional tolerance, where acceptance depended largely on teacher presence and policy enforcement rather than genuine social understanding.

By the 2020s, the environment for openly gay learners had become noticeably more inclusive and protected, signaling the maturing effect of DepEd's GAD framework.

Participant I stated, "*Masaya ako kasi tanggap na ako ng mga classmates ko. Kapag may nagsasabi ng masama, pinagsasabihan na sila ng teacher*" ("I'm happy because my classmates accept me now. When someone says something hurtful, the teacher reprimands them").

This transformation coincided with DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017, the Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy, which explicitly prohibits gender-based discrimination and requires schools to implement gender-fair education programs.

Learners are now more aware of their rights, as reflected in the participant's proactive stance: "Sinasabi ni teacher na magsumbong ako kapag binubully nila ako" ("My teacher tells me to report it whenever they bully me.").

This demonstrates empowerment rooted in institutional protection and awareness. As teachers began incorporating gender sensitivity into classroom management, teasing and bullying have shifted from being tolerated to being promptly addressed which is a significant departure from earlier decades.

The cumulative effect of GAD policies over time highlights how institutional structures can gradually influence attitudes and behaviors within school communities. This aligns with UNESCO's (2022) findings that sustained policy enforcement and teacher training reduce discriminatory behaviors and improve the psychological well-being of LGBTQ+ learners. Similarly, Rivera and Santos (2021) found that GAD-integrated school programs increased peer empathy and decreased instances of gender-based bullying in elementary settings. The integration of DepEd's child protection policies (DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012) with GAD initiatives created a more robust framework ensuring learners' safety and dignity. In essence, the lived experiences of gay learners across decades reveal that while prejudice may linger, the consistent implementation of GAD programs has cultivated a culture of empathy, accountability, and empowerment—transforming schools into more inclusive spaces aligned with DepEd's vision of "education for all."

What aspects of GAD implementation remain lacking or need strengthening to ensure a more inclusive and affirming environment for gender-diverse learners in elementary schools?

Theme 8: Lack of Clear Policy Guidelines and Defined Sanctions for Gender-Based Misconduct

Participant A, who experienced elementary life in the early 2000s, articulated the absence of clear and concrete guidelines regarding the protection of gender-diverse learners.

Participant A shared, "*Siguro, proper guidelines on what extent a certain action can be considered normal or punishable. Kasi parang wala pa rin akong nakikita, Doc, o naririnig, nababalitaan, na mayroon*

nang rules." ("Maybe there should be proper guidelines on what extent an action can be considered normal or punishable. Because I haven't seen, heard, or known of any concrete rules yet.")

This statement reveals a long-standing gap in the operationalization of GAD-related policies in schools—particularly in setting specific standards for identifying, addressing, and sanctioning gender-based bullying or discrimination.

Although DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017 (Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy) mandates the creation of safe and gender-fair learning environments, it provides broad directives that rely heavily on interpretation at the school level. The absence of explicit procedures and disciplinary measures often results in inconsistent implementation across institutions.

As Participant G added, *"Kung ilang chances ibibigay sa mga bully, or kung ano magiging kaparusahan nila. Or what is considered harmless and not."* ("How many chances are given to bullies, what their punishment should be, or what is considered harmless or not.") This reflects the ambiguity of policy enforcement in addressing gender-based misconduct among students, a concern echoed by UNESCO (2022), which found that while schools may adopt inclusive language, actual mechanisms for protection and accountability remain weak in practice.

This lack of operational clarity undermines the intent of GAD integration. Research by Estrada (2021) highlights that while DepEd has made strides toward gender inclusivity through capacity-building and curriculum integration, the absence of specific monitoring and evaluation tools often leaves GAD implementation symbolic rather than functional. Similarly, Bautista and Dela Cruz (2023) observed that schools struggle with defining the boundaries of acceptable gender expression and the disciplinary limits for students who commit SOGIE-based offenses. Consequently, learners like Participant A continue to experience vulnerability within school environments that lack explicit protection frameworks.

These findings suggest that to strengthen GAD implementation, DepEd must move beyond policy declaration toward concrete operationalization. The inclusion of detailed guidelines on disciplinary procedures, reporting mechanisms, and protection protocols especially for elementary learners would bridge the gap between policy and practice. Aligning with DepEd Memorandum No. 114, s. 2021, which reinforces child protection through a gender lens, future revisions of the GAD framework must ensure that inclusivity is not only taught but also enforced through consistent institutional action.

Theme 9: Inconsistent Enforcement and Weak Institutional Support Systems for GAD Implementation

Participant B, who studied during the 2010s, expressed awareness of GAD-related policies but questioned their enforcement and effectiveness.

Participant B shared, *"May rules na ba sir, parang yung ginagawa mo po sa amin noon na kapag may violation, pipirma? Aside doon meron na po ba yung si Principal po magpaparusa?"* ("Are there already rules, Sir, like what you used to do before when there's a violation, the student signs? Aside from that, is the principal allowed to give punishment?"). This response reflects a perception that while some rules exist, mechanisms for accountability and consistent policy application remain unclear.

The participant further suggested, *"Nagsuspend na rin po ba sa elem? Ganun po sana para rin makontrol yung mga bully."* ("Do they already suspend students in elementary? That could help control the bullies."). These remarks highlight the gap between policy intent and implementation—where GAD principles are recognized but not strongly enforced through structured disciplinary systems.

DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017, or the Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy, mandates the creation of safe and inclusive learning environments, but it does not explicitly outline disciplinary procedures for gender-based bullying or discrimination. Instead, implementation largely depends on the discretion of school heads and teachers, leading to inconsistencies across schools. Studies by Cagang (2023) and Tolentino (2021) observed that while teachers demonstrate increased awareness of gender sensitivity, many still lack training in conflict management and SOGIE-based intervention, resulting in limited follow-through when violations occur. Consequently, the GAD framework functions more as an awareness program than a system of accountability, weakening its impact on daily classroom realities.

Participant C, representing the 2020s, echoed similar concerns regarding awareness among learners, stating, “*Sana sabihin sa mga learners, Sir, kung ano mangyayari sa kanila kapag tinukso nila mga gay.*” (“I hope they tell the learners what will happen to them if they tease gay students.”).

This statement underscores a continuing gap in behavioral education and policy communication at the classroom level. While DepEd has institutionalized gender responsiveness through its Child Protection Policy (DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012), the actual dissemination and reinforcement of these policies among pupils remain limited.

As Participant C added, “*Maglagay ng guidance office, Sir.*” (“They should have a guidance office, Sir.”), the learner emphasized the need for accessible counseling and grievance mechanisms, which are often underdeveloped in small or rural elementary schools.

Research by UNESCO (2022) and Manalastas (2019) supports this observation, revealing that many schools in the Philippines lack designated safe spaces or personnel trained to handle gender-based issues, resulting in delayed or inadequate responses to bullying and discrimination. These findings imply that while the GAD framework has made progress in promoting inclusivity, structural and procedural gaps persist. Strengthening implementation requires not only policy awareness but also the establishment of monitoring systems, accountability protocols, and sufficient psychosocial support services. Aligning with DepEd Memorandum No. 114, s. 2021, schools must institutionalize consistent intervention processes and reinforce the visibility of guidance and GAD offices to ensure that inclusivity transcends policy rhetoric and becomes an everyday practice within the learning environment.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that while the Department of Education has made significant strides toward gender inclusivity, there are still evident gaps in the consistent and meaningful implementation of Gender and Development (GAD) initiatives. Across decades, the experiences of openly gay learners showed a gradual evolution from overt ridicule and exclusion in the early 2000s to increasing awareness and partial acceptance in the 2020s. This improvement is largely attributed to the introduction of GAD-focused policies and advocacy efforts such as DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2017, which emphasizes gender-responsive basic education. However, despite these policy advances, discrimination and subtle forms of bias continue to manifest in classrooms and peer interactions.

The findings further revealed that although teachers and school authorities today tend to intervene more in cases of bullying or gender-based ridicule, there remains an absence of clear and uniform disciplinary procedures. Participants shared that while teachers encourage reporting of bullying incidents, the consequences for such behavior are often unclear. This indicates a need for more concrete guidelines and school-level mechanisms to ensure that every learner—regardless of gender identity—is protected and supported. The absence or limited functionality of guidance offices in some elementary schools was also identified as a gap, leaving many learners without access to professional psychosocial support.

Another significant insight from the participants is the limited awareness among both teachers and learners about the existing GAD policies. Many participants expressed uncertainty about the rules governing gender-based bullying, as well as the extent of the school’s responsibility in handling these cases. This lack of clarity underscores the need for stronger dissemination and monitoring of DepEd’s GAD-related policies, including DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2012, also known as the Child Protection Policy. Furthermore, while there is an observable cultural shift toward tolerance, true inclusivity demands deliberate, continuous education and structural support within schools.

In conclusion, the study affirms that the implementation of GAD programs in schools has positively influenced the experiences of openly gay learners, but its impact remains uneven. Policies alone are not enough for what is required is a school culture that actively translates these policies into action through clear guidelines, consistent interventions, and genuine advocacy for equality.

To address these gaps, the study recommends several actions. First, schools should strengthen GAD policy awareness and capacity-building initiatives by regularly conducting orientations for both teachers and students. These sessions must clarify learners' rights, anti-bullying measures, and protection policies for gender-diverse students. Second, clear and consistent disciplinary guidelines for gender-based bullying should be established and strictly enforced to protect all learners. Third, the institutionalization of guidance and psychosocial support services should be prioritized to ensure that every elementary school has accessible and gender-sensitive counseling.

Additionally, integrating gender sensitivity into the curriculum and co-curricular activities is essential in shaping a culture of respect and empathy. Teachers must consciously use gender-fair language and examples, while school programs should highlight the importance of diversity and inclusion. Lastly, schools should strengthen their monitoring and evaluation of GAD implementation through regular assessments and learner feedback to ensure that policies are being practiced effectively.

Ultimately, this study concludes that fostering an inclusive and affirming learning environment for gender-diverse learners requires more than compliance with DepEd policies. It calls for empathy-driven leadership, consistent education, and collective commitment from all members of the school community to uphold equality, dignity, and respect for every learner.

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