

Gendered Experiences in Physical Education: A Phenomenological Study of Male and Female Students' Participation, Confidence, and Inclusion

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Abstract: Physical Education (PE) serves as an important educational setting where students develop physical competence, social skills, and self-confidence. However, gender-related experiences continue to influence students' participation and engagement in PE classes. This study explored the lived experiences of male and female students in Physical Education classes and examined how gender shapes participation, confidence, perceived gender roles, challenges, teaching practices, and inclusivity. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with ten (10) college students, consisting of five males and five females enrolled in Physical Education courses. Interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Five major themes emerged: (1) Participation and Confidence, influenced by perceived physical differences, gender stereotypes, and social support; (2) Gender Roles, characterized by traditional expectations, changing perspectives, and gender-related stereotypes; (3) Challenges Unique to Each Gender, including physical endurance limitations, discrimination, peer pressure, and social judgment; (4) Teaching Practices and Inclusivity, highlighting the influence of teacher behavior, motivation, and fairness; and (5) PE Activities that Promote Inclusivity, emphasizing teamwork, cooperation, and mixed-gender participation. The findings indicate that gender stereotypes and societal expectations continue to affect students' experiences in PE classes. However, inclusive teaching approaches, supportive peer relationships, and equitable learning opportunities contribute significantly to students' confidence, participation, and sense of belonging. The study recommends the implementation of gender-responsive pedagogical strategies to foster more inclusive and equitable Physical Education environments.

Keywords: Physical Education, gender, lived experiences, inclusivity, participation, confidence, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Physical Education (PE) plays a crucial role in promoting physical activity, social development, psychological well-being, and lifelong healthy lifestyles among students. Beyond physical fitness, PE provides opportunities for learners to develop confidence, teamwork, leadership, and social interaction skills. However, students' experiences in PE are often shaped by gender-related expectations and social norms that influence participation, engagement, and perceived competence.

Gender has long been recognized as a significant factor affecting students' experiences in educational and sporting environments. Traditional gender norms frequently position males as naturally athletic, competitive,

and physically capable, while females are often perceived as less competent in physically demanding activities (Knowlton & Newland, 2024). Such perceptions contribute to unequal participation opportunities and may negatively affect students' confidence and willingness to engage in PE activities.

Within the Philippine context, gender-related challenges remain evident in educational and sporting environments. Santos (2026b), in his study on gender equity in higher education PE, emphasized that traditional gender expectations continue to shape students' participation patterns and experiences in Physical Education classes. Similarly, Martin and Santos (2015) found that psychological and social barriers significantly influence students' engagement in physical activities, highlighting the role of environmental and interpersonal factors in shaping participation behaviors.

Previous research has demonstrated that motivation, self-confidence, and social support are important determinants of physical activity participation among college students (Martin et al., 2016; Martin, Santos, & Tubera, 2017). Students who perceive supportive learning environments are more likely to participate actively and develop positive attitudes toward physical activity. Furthermore, participative coaching and supportive instructional practices have been shown to enhance self-confidence and self-efficacy among student-athletes (Pestaño et al., 2025).

Recent studies have also suggested that perceptions of physical competence significantly influence students' engagement in PE activities. Santos et al. (2022) reported that perceived physical competence affects students' willingness to participate in skill-based activities, while Santos (2026a) emphasized the importance of positive physical experiences in promoting engagement, controlled aggression and healthy behaviors.

Despite increasing attention to gender issues in Physical Education, much of the existing literature relies on quantitative approaches that may not fully capture students' lived experiences. There remains limited qualitative research exploring how male and female students personally experience participation, confidence, gender roles, challenges, and inclusivity within PE classes, particularly in the Philippine setting.

Guided by experiential learning perspectives, this study explores the lived experiences of male and female students in Physical Education classes. Specifically, it examines how gender influences participation and confidence, perceptions of gender roles, challenges encountered in PE, teaching practices that foster inclusion, and PE activities that promote equitable participation among students.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of male and female students in Physical Education classes. Phenomenology seeks to examine how individuals perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences regarding a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to capture students' personal experiences and perceptions regarding gender-related participation, confidence, challenges, and inclusivity in PE settings.

Participants

The participants consisted of ten (10) college students currently enrolled in Physical Education courses at a higher education institution in the Philippines. The sample included five (5) male students and five (5) female students.

Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information regarding their experiences in Physical Education classes. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled in PE courses and willing to share their experiences related to gender and participation in physical activities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. An interview guide containing open-ended

questions was developed to explore participants' experiences related to participation, confidence, gender roles, challenges, teaching practices, and inclusivity in PE classes. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection. Follow-up probing questions were used when necessary to obtain deeper insights and clarify responses.

Data Analysis

The study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework:

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Interview transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to identify meaningful patterns and recurring concepts. Codes were grouped into categories and eventually organized into overarching themes that represented the participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of responses, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participant anonymity was protected through the use of pseudonyms and participant codes (e.g., P1, P2). All interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by the researchers. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for educational research and respected the dignity, privacy, and welfare of all participants.

3. Results and Discussion

Participation and confidence

Theme 1: Perceived Physical Differences Affect Participation

Both genders perceived Physical differences such as strength and endurance are the factors affecting their confidence and participation.

"In tug of war, if one side is composed of girls and the other side is composed of boys, there is a difference in strength..." P1

"If the activity in PE is heavy duty, we men can be more confident. On the other hand, if women are less physical than men, they may choose not to participate due to a lack of confidence." P3

The findings suggest that confidence in PE participation is strongly influenced by perceived competence and social support. This observation aligns with Martin et al. (2016), who found that motivation significantly predicts physical activity participation among Filipino college students. Students who perceive themselves as competent and supported are more likely to engage actively in physical activities. Similarly, Santos et al. (2022) reported that perceived physical competence contributes positively to students' willingness to participate in movement-based activities.

Theme 2: Gender Stereotypes Shape Confidence

The students emphasized that peer-generated stereotypes significantly influence their confidence, participation, and engagement in PE activities.

"I think confidence in participating in PE activities is affected because society often sees women as weak." P5

"Because there are times when I feel shy or afraid of being judged based on my performance in PE activities." P8

Based on their responses they highlight that stereotyping is the main issue influencing their confidence and involvement in physical education programs, according to some of the respondents. Additionally, some students decide not to engage out of fear of being judged to shield themselves from criticism from others. These findings are consistent with previous research on gender stereotypes in sport and exercise. The systematic review found that gender stereotype beliefs are closely associated with participation in sports and physical activities. While the relationship between stereotypes and performance was mixed, stereotype beliefs were consistently linked to participation. Therefore, the present findings support the existing literature by demonstrating that peer-generated stereotypes and fear of judgment can negatively affect students' confidence and engagement in PE activities. (Manalad et al., 2026).

Theme 3: *Exposure and Support Enhance Participation and Confidence*

In this part, some students stated that exposure to sports and the support they receive from their teacher and classmates can positively influence their confidence in participating in PE activities.

"If classmates and teachers are supportive, everyone becomes more confident and comfortable, regardless of gender." P4

"Male students tend to be more confident and engaged in traditionally male-dominated sports like basketball and baseball... female students tend to be more active and expressive in activities like dancing and volleyball, where they feel a greater sense of belonging and competence." P7

The role of teacher and peer support identified in this study echoes the findings of Pestaño et al. (2025), which demonstrated that supportive coaching practices significantly enhance self-confidence and self-efficacy among student-athletes. Positive social environments may therefore serve as protective factors against gender-related insecurities in PE settings.

Gender Roles

Theme 1: *Traditional Expectations and Responsibilities*

These explains how society often assigns different roles and responsibilities to the students in sports and physical activities. These expectations are usually based on their beliefs, physical strength, behaviour, and abilities.

"The boys are usually the ones who play, while the girls cheer to motivate them. They support the boys by giving them water and towels." P6

"Of course, in basketball, there are leagues where women's basketball is played. And in volleyball, women's volleyball is played. That's why you can't say that one activity is only for men and one activity is only for women." P2

These statement shows that traditional gender roles in sports continue exist in society, where males are often expected to participate in physically demanding and competitive activities, while females are commonly expected to take supportive, less active, or less physical intense roles. These findings are consistent with prior study, which discovered that gendered norms and expectations have historically affected involvement in sports and physical activity. (Antalan, 2026). The study found that young people are frequently confined by traditional notions that identify masculinity with athleticism and aggressiveness, whereas femininity is associated with less active or supportive responsibilities.

Theme 2: *Gender Equality and Changing Roles*

The students are beginning to recognize for the students that the sports and physical activities should not be limited based on their gender.

"Every student, regardless of gender, deserves an equal opportunity to participate in any sport they choose." P7

"As long as you believe you can do it, then just go for it." P5

This statement is becoming more open to gender equality of students in sports and believe that abilities, interests, and confidence are more important than gender when participating in different activities. Their response was supported by recent study of (Işıkğöz et al., 2025) the study highlighted that gender equality is a powerful catalyst for the promotion of equal rights and equitable resources for all genders, boldly challenging and destroying established social norms.

Theme 3: *Challenges and Stereotypes in Gender Roles*

Challenges and stereotypes in PE classes or activities are the primary effect on how they play their roles in sports.

"Many students believe that some sports are only "for boys" while others are only "for girls."

P8

"I think it's because girls and boys have different physical abilities when it comes to exercise. That's why, in some exercises, girls are often given a shorter time compared to boys." P9

This shows that traditional beliefs about what males and females can or should do in sports still affect students' opinions, attitudes, and expectations regarding different sports roles and activities. These findings are having a relation in some study such as (Hextrum et al., 2024). It stated that girls participating in the study perceived themselves as athletically equal to their male peers and called themselves "athletic" and "competitive." However, the primary factors impacting the girls' participation in and attitude toward PE and competitive sports were the girls' perceptions of what constitutes a safe environment and what constitutes a safe sport Challenges that unique to each gender

Theme 1: *Physical Endurance and Performance Expectations*

Low physical endurance is one of the common challenges students experience in PE classes, especially during physically demanding activities such as jogging and intensive exercises. The participants also emphasized how physical limitations and gender-related differences affect their performance, while still recognizing the need to persevere despite exhaustion and difficulty to improve and meet academic.

"As a female, endurance is really one of my challenges, especially in activities like jogging. That is where I usually struggle." (P1)

"Maybe it's because girls tend to get tired more quickly." (P9)

"For me, there are exercises that are difficult, and you really need to push through even when you are struggling." (P6)

"One of the most significant challenges I personally faced in PE class is my low physical endurance." (P7)

The challenges associated with endurance and physical performance may reflect broader concerns regarding physical fitness levels among students. Martin et al. (2023) found that structured physical activity programs contribute positively to improvements in physical fitness indicators, suggesting the importance of progressive and differentiated PE instruction.

Theme 2: *Gender Stereotypes in Physical Education*

Gender stereotypes and discrimination continue to be significant issues in physical education classes, negatively affecting both male and female students' confidence and involvement in specific exercises. Participants emphasized that societal expectations, mocking, and gender bias often discourage students from freely participating in sports and activities that are regarded as exclusively for one gender.

"There are professors who believe that there is one activity that is only for men. For example, in athletics, in relays, only men are allowed to run, and women are not allowed to compete. Because they think that only men are good at running. It's like they have a gender bias." (P2)

"I think they experience the same challenges, and one of those is discrimination or being teased when they want to do a certain activity or other activities." (P5)

"The challenges that differ for each gender may include discrimination, lack of confidence, peer pressure, and stereotypes. For example, some girls experience being underestimated in competitive sports, while some boys are afraid of being judged when participating in activities that are not commonly associated with males." (P8)

The responses show that gender stereotypes in Physical Education influence how students are treated and expected to perform in certain activities. Both male and female students experienced discrimination, pressure, and judgment based on beliefs about which activities are more suitable for their gender. This supports the findings of the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data indicate that the attitudes and actions of many PE teachers continue to reflect gender stereotyping, with marked tendencies for male PE teachers to perceive dance as a 'female-appropriate' activity and female PE teachers to perceive outdoor education as a 'male-

appropriate' activity. (Ngolo, 2024)

Theme 3: Peer Pressure and Social Judgment

Peer pressure and social judgment refer to how classmates or peers can impact an individual's behaviour, decisions, and confidence. Peer pressure arises when pupils feel driven to adhere to their peers' expectations or actions, typically to achieve acceptance or avoid criticism.

"If your gender is supposedly better at something, of course, people will expect you to handle it better than the other gender because that's where you excel." P3

"We also sometimes feel pressure because we are always compared to others, but for us it's not a big deal; it's like we just did it as a lesson." P4

"In activities like dancing, I tend to excel, so I am always the one asked to lead even when I no longer want to. Because of that, I sometimes feel pressured." P1

"I was hesitant because my team might blame me if we lose, but through those challenges I learned to trust myself and not immediately think negatively." P10

The responses show that peer pressure and social judgment affect students' confidence and participation in PE activities. Expectations from classmates, comparisons, and fear of criticism or failure often create pressure, especially when students are expected to perform well or take leadership roles. This supports the finding that peer pressure and social judgment affect students' confidence and participation in PE activities, explaining that students who fear negative evaluation from their peers are more likely to experience anxiety and reduced willingness to participate in physical activities, especially when they feel they are being observed, compared, or judged by others (Senne, 2016).

Teaching Practices

Theme 1: Teacher Favoritism and Unequal Treatment

Students shared experiences that suggested some teachers show favoritism toward certain learners, which affects students' comfort and participation in Physical Education classes.

"Sometimes, there are teachers whose way of teaching is that they are closer to certain students. When that happens, we just try not to draw too much attention to ourselves so that they will treat everyone equally." P9

This response indicates that perceived unequal treatment may discourage students from actively participating and expressing themselves during class activities. These findings demonstrate that teacher behavior influences students' sense of fairness, belonging, and confidence in PE classes. This supports the study of Metz et al. (2026), which emphasized that teachers play an important role in shaping students' experiences in Physical Education because the classroom climate and teaching approach can either encourage or discourage participation among students. Perceived favoritism may negatively affect students' comfort, confidence, and willingness to engage in class activities.

Theme 2: Active and Engaging Teaching Increases Student Participation

Many students emphasized the importance of having enthusiastic and motivating teachers in Physical Education classes. Respondents explained that teachers who actively encourage students and create an energetic learning environment help increase confidence and participation.

"It depends on how the instructor boosts the students' confidence and whether they give advice that helps students accomplish the activity." P5

"When the teacher is good and very lively in teaching, discrimination disappears. "You would enjoy the class more when the teacher is lively." P6

"We also prefer teachers who are active because it motivates us more to do the exercises they ask us to perform." P9

These statements suggest that positive teaching approaches make PE classes more enjoyable and inclusive while encouraging students to participate actively regardless of gender or ability. This finding supports the study of Hextrum et al. (2024), which emphasized that positive and supportive teaching strategies increase

students' motivation, enjoyment, and engagement in Physical Education classes. Enthusiastic and encouraging teachers help students feel more confident, motivated, and included during activities.

Theme 3: *Inclusive Teaching Practices Promote Comfort and Confidence*

Students also highlighted the significance of inclusive teaching practices in creating a supportive learning environment. Several respondents noted that teachers who provide equal opportunities, avoid gender bias, and adjust activities according to students' needs help learners feel more comfortable and confident.

"When the teacher openly gives considerations, such as offering different options or adjustments, I think the class becomes more comfortable." P1

"They don't have a gender bias. They have gender equality." P2 *"If you want to wear female swimwear, that's up to you."*

"So, I observed that he is inclusive in teaching us." P3

"Inclusive teaching has a big impact, especially if the teacher is fair and encouraging." P4 *"When teachers are fair and supportive, students become more encouraged to participate."* P8

"If the teacher is fair and values effort rather than just winning, their fear also decreases." P10

The findings support Pascuals' (2026) argument that gender-responsive PE practices are essential for fostering equitable learning experiences in higher education. Inclusive instructional approaches and facilities not only reduce barriers associated with gender stereotypes but also encourage active participation and positive learning outcomes among diverse student populations.

Teaching practices

Theme 1: *Teacher Favouritism and Unequal Treatment*

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Theme 2: *Active and Engaging Teaching Increases Student Participation*

Emphasizing the value of enthusiastic and encouraging teachers in Physical Education programs boosts confidence and involvement.

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Theme 3: *Inclusive Teaching Practices Promote Comfort and Confidence*

Inclusive teaching practices in creating a supportive learning environment help learners feel more comfortable and confident.

"They don't have a gender bias. They have gender equality." P2 *"If you want to wear female swimwear, that's*

up to you." P3

"The use of mixed-gender activities, equal opportunities, and positive encouragement help students feel more comfortable." P8

"If the teacher is fair and values effort rather than just winning, their fear also decreases." P10

These responses indicate that inclusive teaching approaches reduce students' fear of judgment, strengthen their confidence, and help them feel respected regardless of gender, ability, or identity. This supports the study of Pascual (2026), which explained that inclusive PE practices, such as fairness, equal opportunities, and sensitivity to students' diverse needs, create a safer and more welcoming learning environment. Inclusive teaching strategies encourage participation and help students develop a stronger sense of belonging and confidence in Physical Education classes.

PE Activities Promote Inclusivity

Theme 1: Mixed-Gender Participation Promotes Equality and Fairness

Inclusivity is fostered when males and females participate together in PE activities. Mixed-gender groupings encourage equal treatment, fairness, and the recognition that abilities are not determined by gender.

"If girls and boys evenly distributed in groupings helps create fairness and inclusivity." P1 "Mixed women and men in one activity, in one sport." P2

"Mixed-gender activities encouraged us to see each other not as competitors defined by gender, but as teammates with unique strengths." P7

The students emphasize that PE activities encourage inclusivity if the instructor or coach distributes the male and female equally, because this technique allows students to establish teamwork and togetherness by sharing their strengths and playing as one. These results are consistent with previous research on gender-inclusive physical education. (Manalad et al., 2026). It also highlighted peer interactions and instructor practices as significant influences on student engagement in PE.

Theme 2: Teamwork and Cooperation Strengthen Inclusion

Participants described PE as a space where teamwork, cooperation, communication, and mutual support help break down gender barriers. Through working together, students learn to appreciate each other's abilities and develop stronger relationships regardless of gender.

"We've become inclusive and help each other teach one another." P3 "Everyone learns to cooperate and work together as a team." P4

"They are also able to build friendships and teamwork while doing the activities." P5

"Students learn teamwork, respect for their teammates, and cooperation regardless of gender." P8

P8

"They learn to socialize, communicate, and respect the abilities of each student." P10

The students' responses show that physical education lessons encourage inclusivity, teamwork, and cooperation. Overall, physical education not only helps students acquire physical skills, but it also encourages social interaction, collaboration, and mutual respect. This finding is supported by Antalan (2026), who found that teamwork and cooperative activities in Physical Education promote social inclusion by encouraging students to work together, support their peers, and actively involve all members in group tasks. Their study suggests that collaborative experiences in PE help students develop a stronger sense of belonging and acceptance within the class.

Theme 3: Inclusive Experiences Through PE Activities

Students highlighted that facing challenges together and participating in various PE activities help create an environment where everyone feels accepted.

"It is about the struggles. After activities, we always say how hard they were..." P6

"Not everyone is good at everything, but in PE class, people can try different activities without judgment." P9

"Because of all the difficulties we face, we tend to disregard gender." P3

"When a female student excels in an activity typically associated with males, or when a male student thrives in

a dance routine, it sends a powerful message that ability is not determined by gender." P7

The responses indicate that shared challenges and difficulties in Physical Education allow students to focus on effort and engagement rather than gender inequalities. They also emphasized that abilities are not gender-based, since students can achieve in a variety of activities despite stereotypes, promoting equality, confidence, and mutual respect among classmates. Key findings highlight the importance of inclusive practices in fostering a supportive and equitable learning environment where students of all genders feel valued and motivated. It also addresses barriers to engagement, such as gender stereotypes, lack of representation, and discriminatory practices. (Roque et al., 2026).

4. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that gender continues to influence students' experiences in Physical Education classes through perceptions of physical ability, social expectations, stereotypes, and participation opportunities. While traditional gender norms remain evident in some PE contexts, students increasingly recognize the value of equality, inclusivity, and mutual respect in sports and physical activities. Supportive teachers, inclusive instructional practices, and collaborative learning environments emerged as important factors that enhance students' confidence, participation, and sense of belonging. Mixed-gender activities, teamwork, and positive peer interactions help reduce gender barriers and encourage students to appreciate individual abilities rather than gender-based assumptions. Overall, the study highlights the need for gender-responsive and inclusive Physical Education programs that provide equitable opportunities for all students. Creating supportive PE environments can contribute not only to improved participation and confidence but also to the development of respect, cooperation, and social inclusion among learners.

5. Recommendation

Based on the findings, Physical Education teachers should adopt gender-sensitive and inclusive teaching strategies that provide equal opportunities for all students to participate, develop skills, and demonstrate their abilities. Creating a supportive and non-discriminatory classroom environment through positive encouragement from teachers and peers can enhance students' confidence and engagement. Schools should also implement awareness programs that challenge traditional gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in sports and physical activities. Furthermore, incorporating mixed-gender and cooperative activities can foster teamwork, mutual respect, and inclusivity among students. Future research should explore the effectiveness of gender-inclusive practices in PE using larger and more diverse samples across different educational settings to further strengthen understanding of students' gendered experiences.

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