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Unmasking bias: Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Gender Neutral Uniforms

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Abstract

Holistic development of students is possible in safe inclusive classrooms where schools play a major role in making every child feel accepted. Gender non-conforming children often face discrimination and harassment in educational settings due to differences between their gender expression and assigned sex at birth. Traditional school uniforms emphasize fixed gender norms that may affect the mental health of the students. For students whose gender expression doesn't match the assigned attire, they may feel discomfort and may be more vulnerable to bullying.

The National Education Policy (2020) recommends that teachers need to create safe inclusive classrooms for such children ensuring freedom of gender expression in behaviour, mannerisms and attire. Gender neutral uniforms help children to be comfortable and free from bullying and discrimination. Teacher perspectives regarding gender-neutral uniforms are significant as it directly impacts the policy decisions in addition to shaping the school culture.

This qualitative exploratory study examines pre-service teacher's perceptions about gender- neutral uniforms as a part of inclusive classrooms. It aims to give a deeper insight on pre- service teacher's thoughts about gender inclusivity and their ability for supporting the unique identity of each and every child. The findings of the study set implications for teachers, school administrators, and Policymakers, thereby advocating inclusive practices and laying a strong foundation for encouraging acceptance as well as respect for all the children

Keywords: gender-neutral uniforms, gender expression, safe inclusive classrooms.

Introduction:

"In diversity there is beauty and there is strength." – Maya Angelou

India is a country of rich diversities in terms of languages ,castes ,religions ,ethnicity .We have accepted diversity in many forms .While the nation has embraced diversities, still complete acceptance of all genders and sexual diversities need to be improved. The National Education Policy (2020) recommends gender inclusion however it provides limited focus on children with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. In the Indian context , transgender persons have a rich historical presence in Hindu mythology, Vedic literature lend cultural traditions as Tiritiya Prakriti (third nature).However ,colonial legacies and social stigma have pushed this community towards marginalisation. The supreme court judgment was a landmark in NALSA vs Union of India (2014) which entitled the transgender person right to self-identified gender there by further calling for non-discrimination and inclusion .However, the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act, 2026 has intensified societal and legal debates on self-identification and gender rights. While this act intends to refine legal recognition processes, there are debates on restricting self-determination and introduction of compulsory medical certification thereby emphasizing the need for inclusive practices in education even more critical.

Igual (2024) stressed on the importance of the role of a teacher towards creating an accepting climate for all children. Here the article focussed on the case of harassment and discrimination faced by a child through his own teacher only because the 12 year old child chose to express gender identity in a non-conforming way. The child finally committed suicide. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (2023) recommends gender-neutral uniforms in schools as one of the recommendations keeping in mind the safety of non-binary children in the formal schooling process. This clearly discriminates between children of diverse sexual orientation and the heterosexual children. We need a school which creates a safe classroom for all children irrespective of their genders and sexual orientation.

Rationale of the study:

The issue of addressing gender stereotypes and prejudices prevalent in educational settings requires urgent attention. Cases of suicides due to bullying such as that of Aarav Malhotra from DPS, Faridabad highlight urgent need for schools to accommodate children of diverse sexuality and genders through policy changes. Importantly, inclusivity must be developed as a major value among pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers need to promote acceptance, equity and respect for diversities existing in the classrooms as they are the future educators who would be creating a safe inclusive environment for all the learners. Their biases towards these diversities need to be cross examined and addressed.

In 2018, Valayanchirangara government Lower Primary School introduced gender neutral uniforms so as to promote gender justice and to give freedom of movement for primary children specially the girl children. Similarly in 2022, the gender neutral uniforms were introduced at Aditya Birla World Academy along with rainbow club to help the gender non-conforming and questioning students.

Schools need to create an environment where each child is accepted and respected for diversity. This is possible through school teachers. So the present study aims to check whether the pre-service teachers are aware of gender neutral uniforms and its need in today's Indian context.

Theoretical framework:

The study is guided by Meyer's Minority Stress Theory (2003). It explains stress faced by the minorities or vulnerable groups of the society. The discrimination faced by them on the basis of caste, class, gender, sexual orientation, race, ability, etc. The queer children face internal and external stressors that include bullying, rejection, internalised homophobia/ transphobia faced by non-binary or trans youth. This can further lead to social isolation, reduced self-esteem and mental health issues. Hence a solution comes into picture that is the introduction of gender neutral uniforms in the school which further lead to various positive outcomes in the child's life. Such uniforms reduce discrimination, increase self-esteem and promote greater self-acceptance within them.



Fig 1 :Minority stress model by Meyer (2003)

Literature review:

Booneiam (2019) argues that members of the LGBTQ community continue to face marginalisation, bias and unrealistic expectations rooted in heteronormative and gender binary school systems. These challenges are further intensified by everyday practices such as seating arrangements, dress codes and classroom dynamics. The present study strongly supports this view and asserts that schools must proactively develop policies and inclusive environments to achieve genuine equity for all the students.

Building on this, Goehring & Whitting (2017) proposed that the educators and students needed to empathise with transgender students so that they feel more comfortable and affirmed in their identities.

Potvin (2023) extends this critique by demonstrating how school dress codes and uniforms often normalise homophobic and transphobic practices. Importantly; the researcher highlights that teachers themselves can inadvertently perpetuate

inequality and discrimination. Keeping this in mind, the current study recommends that teachers should engage in mutual vulnerability, pedagogical discomfort & ethical reflection. Complementing the perspectives, Raj (2022) claimed that gender gaps and inequalities can be tackled by introducing gender neutral uniforms right from a young age.

Overall the review of literature clearly establishes that schools need to foster a progressive and inclusive culture. Srivastava & Dudeja (2020) recommend that the state and schools are responsible for this transformation which can only be achieved through a thorough understanding of the life of a queer child within heteronormative identities.

Tuli (2021) further stresses the need for clear understanding of what constitutes a gender neutral uniform in a predominantly heteronormative society. The researcher asserts that true inclusivity needs offering options of wearing a skirt for gender expression of female identifying students while ensuring the uniform policy is accessible and affirming for all students regardless of gender identity.

In light of above research studies the present research study strongly presents the pressing need to analyse pre service teachers' understanding of gender neutral uniforms. This inquiry must particularly focus on the importance of inclusive practices and the vital role of educators in bringing in equity in schools.

Objectives:

- To study the perceptions of pre-service teachers towards gender neutral uniforms.
- To study the perceived need of pre service teachers towards implementing gender neutral uniforms in schools

Research questions:

RQ1.What are the perceptions of pre-service teachers towards the concept of gender neutral uniforms?

RQ 2. What is the perceived need for implementing gender neutral uniforms in schools in India?

Methodology:

The present research adopts a qualitative exploratory one-shot case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of pre-service teacher's perceptions about gender neutral uniforms and its need. Twelve pre-service teachers pursuing BED program were selected through purposive and convenient sampling. A two-hour workshop was conducted in the online mode through the zoom platform. Pre service teachers were oriented about the concept of gender and sex. They were also asked to sketch gender neutral uniforms based on their understanding regarding the term. Finally they also explained their own design.

Data collection:

The data was collected in the form of hand drawn sketches of gender neutral uniforms. To add to this each participant explained the designs. The procedure of conducting this study and collecting the data was as follows:

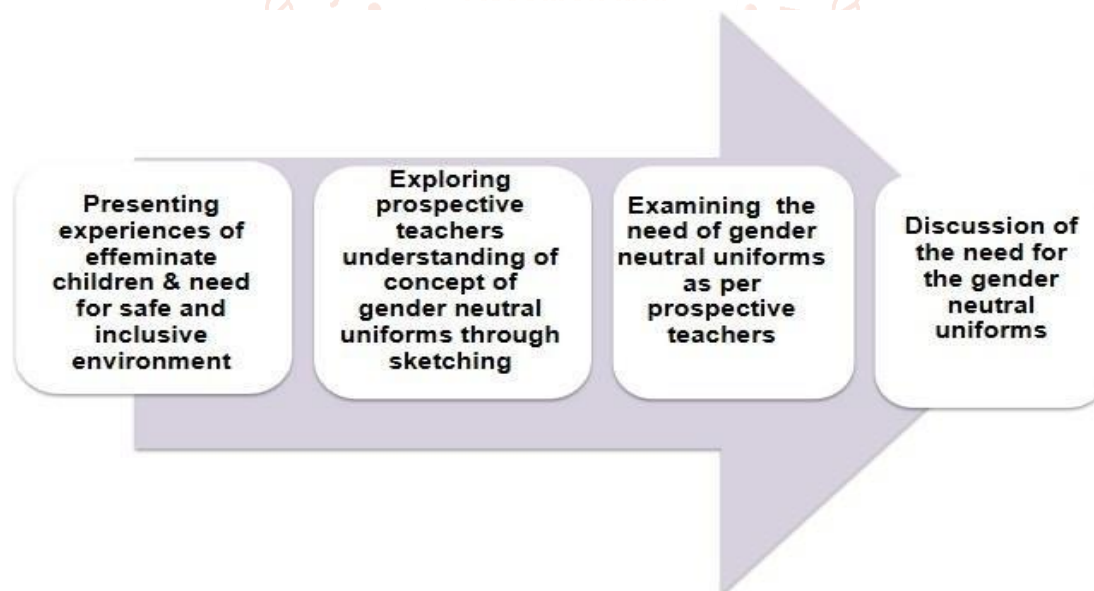


Fig 2: Phases of the study

Data analysis:

Data was analysed using multimodal thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, combining visual and verbal data to interpret the participant responses .The verbal data and the visual data together helped to have a rich understanding of participant perceptions about gender neutral uniform and its need .Focus of the visual data was on design features, patterns, clothing items, colours expressed as gender neutral. Verbal explanation comprised of words related to comfort, inclusivity, gender norms etc. Each sketch was matched to the verbal explanation to interpret the sketch without any bias.

RQ1.What is the perception of pre-service teachers towards the concept of gender neutral uniforms?

The pre-service teachers sketches were analysed .The drawings and explanation revealed three major themes namely challenging gender norms, functionality and comfort, inclusivity and flexibility.

Functionality & Comfort:

Most participants designed uniforms by giving importance to practicality and ease of movement. The artefact of some of these participants showed that gender neutrality will be achieved if the focus areas are functionality and comfort. Common features were loose fitting cloth pockets and neutral colours such as grey, teal and olive green.



Fig 3: Sketch of gender neutral uniform by participant 1 & 3

For example participant 1 focussed on customisable collars and multiple upper garment options for personal expression while maintaining a neutral grey. Participant 3 focused on a simple collared T Shirt with trousers, emphasizing comfort and institutional identity without gendered elements.

Flexibility & Inclusivity:

Some other participants viewed gender-neutral uniforms are those which accommodate different body types as well as the varied gender expressions. These participants projected the need for providing choice and adaptableness rather than a fixed single rigid design.



Fig 4: Sketch of gender neutral uniform by participant 6

For example the Participant 6 focussed on gender-neutral vibrant colours with loose attires to depict inclusivity and respect for individual choice. The stress was to create such a design that accepts diverse body types as well as personal preferences.

Redefining gender norms:

Some of the participants drew sketches where traditional gender norms were challenged by blending feminine and masculine elements.

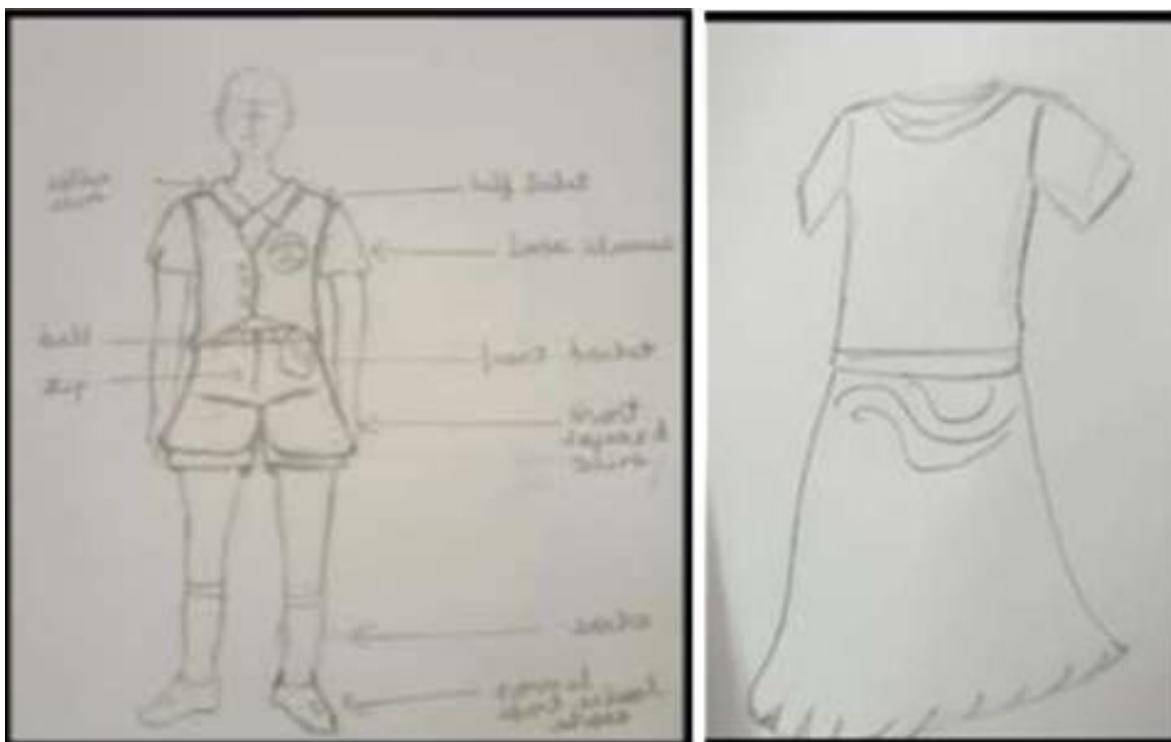


Fig 5: Sketch of gender neutral uniform by participant 2 and participant 4

For example participant 2 designed a pleated shorts-skirt hybrid that merged the look of a skirt having the functionality of shorts. Additionally another Participant 4 intentionally selected a skirt with a curved design at the belly so as to signify gender fluidity. It aimed to stress that the concept of gender-neutral uniforms may include feminine clothing elements to break the usual expectations of neutral attires.

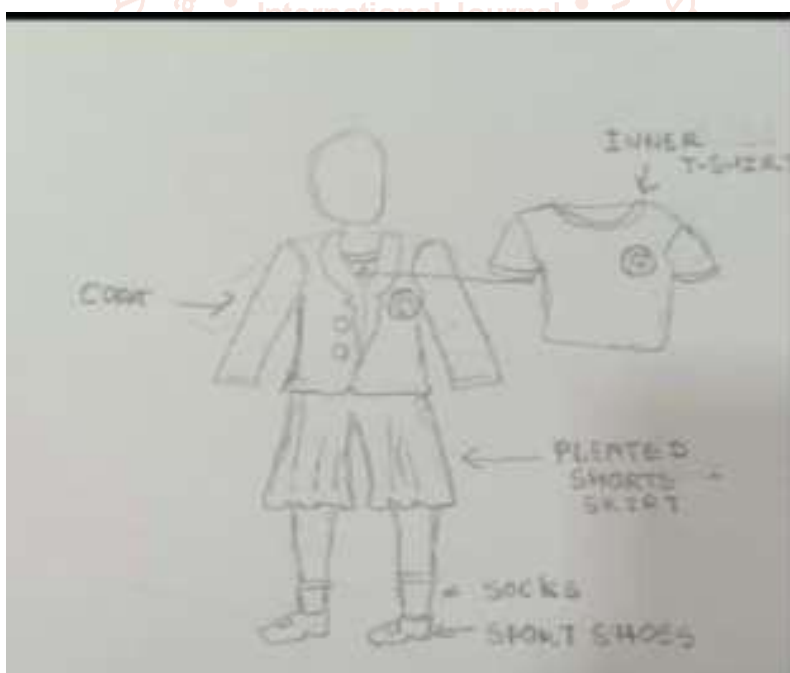


Fig 6: Sketch of gender neutral uniform by participant 5

Participant 5 used a pleated skirt-shorts design to promote fluidity and comfort. The design was a hybrid kind of uniform with pleated shorts skirt along with the formal coat, inner t-shirt sports shoes creating a balanced silhouette which is school appropriate and movement friendly.

To conclude the perceptions of pre-service teachers stressed on gender-neutral uniforms as being more inclusive, practical and something that gave a feeling of liberation from the traditional gender binary system. The costume sketches expressed the need for comfort, individual choices, and addressing stereotypes through the gender fluid attires in addition to the neutral aesthetics. Thus the sketches point towards the preservice teacher's openness and level of awareness regarding gender-inclusive school practices.

RQ2.What is the perceived need for implementing gender neutral uniforms in schools in India?

The transcripts of the pre service teachers were analysed to find the below mentioned codes and themes

Themes	Codes	Responses
Looking for Safe and accepting climate	Inclusivity and Tolerance	"Gender neutral uniforms helps to accept the people of different genders & fosters inclusion from school level, reduces incidents of teasing and achieves equality for all .Actually it makes people more open minded."
	Bullying Prevention	"Gender neutral uniform can reduce the cases of bullying and it creates a more welcoming environment within the student community. That's how I perceive it."
Questioning traditional gender norms	Empowering through inclusive attire	"The layered skirt with inner shorts safeguards is a kind of gender neutral uniform which helps for bringing comfort and confidence for all students, permits them to run, sit, and engage in activities without fear, indicating equality across genders."
	Symbolizing strength and liberation	"I gave her this uniform because this uniform can go with boys also as well as with any gender also and this way there will be no gender inequality which could
		be easily revealed by the skirt. I have given this especially to clarify that she can be bossy too like a boy if needed."
Embracing Diversity	Accommodating both Masculinity and Femininity	"This design, blending components of masculine and feminine outfits, admits the existence of diverse genders and highlights that every gender is equal & matters."
	Breaking Stereotypes	"The idea behind showcasing this type of school uniform is it breaks the outdated prejudices of always having a pant as a symbol creating identity of a patriarchal power"
	Fluidity and Flexibility	"Gender neutral uniforms may follow fluidity .There's a curve in my sketch ,you may find on the waist side of the skirt which signifies the fluidity of the uniform, it justifies that the skirt is flexible and gender free as like the curve of which shape is free."
Celebrating Individual expression	Liberating	"This gender-neutral uniform design is a celebration of individuality, comfort, and inclusivity. It opposes historical norms set by traditional patriarchal society"
	Comfort and Self Expression	It is intentionally designed to be comfortable for all, eliminating distinctions between what might be considered a 'shirt for boys' or a 'shirt for girls.' The loose fit allows for comfort, freedom of movement, and a break from the constraints of traditionally gendered attire."
	Individuality	"This gender-neutral uniform design is a celebration of individuality. Every person is importance their choice is also important .The colours chosen for each element are intentional representing a embracing a spectrum of possibilities."

Table 1-Analysis of pre service teacher's responses related to the perceived need for gender neutral uniforms.

From the above table we can see that the pre service teachers are prepared to understand the need for gender neutral uniform as the transcripts of pre service teachers pointed out that gender neutral uniform is needed for fostering a safe and accepting climate or for through questioning of traditional gender norms and embracing diversity. This approach also celebrates individual expression and supports the implementation of gender neutral uniforms.

Conclusion: Pre-service teachers in the present study demonstrated openness and awareness regarding gender neutral uniforms. They perceived the gender neutral uniforms as a practical and symbolic step towards creating an equitable environment that accepts and respects every child's gender identity. The participants consistently viewed gender neutral uniforms as tools that reduce minority stress (Meyer, 2003), enhance self-esteem and promote psychological safety in classrooms. Research has

proved that such uniforms allow students to express themselves freely without the constraints of traditional gender costumes, thereby leading to improved self-esteem, confidence, comfort & academic engagement. By challenging heteronormative dress codes, gender neutral uniforms help dismantle power hierarchies and foster a culture of true inclusion. Schools need to focus on gender neutral uniforms as dress codes are expected to allow freedom to students so that they feel it's a safe environment and the individuality is not restricted (Human Rights Campaign, 2017)

Ultimately, the move towards gender-neutral uniforms is not just a matter of clothing policy, but a reflection of progressive educational values that prioritize the respect, comfort, and individuality of every student. This study contributes to the growing discourse on inclusive education by highlighting pre-service teachers' readiness to support such changes.

Limitations:

- The study was limited to one college in Mumbai, findings cannot be generalised.
- Sample size was small (only 12 pre service teachers)
- As a controversial topic, responses may reflect social desirability bias.
- It could be a study which could be extended to see how the views might evolve with experience or exposure to diverse classroom setting. It could also help teacher educators to plan an effective training component.
- The present study only focused on uniforms and did not include student perspectives or any other element of inclusive education.

Recommendations of the study:

For teachers

- Design inclusive curriculum with activities focusing on gender neutral clothing.
- Participate in gender sensitisation training sessions.
- Create a supportive classroom environment where all students are comfortable expressing their identities, reinforcing the acceptance of gender neutral uniforms.

For administrators

- Engaging students in uniform policy planning for dress codes and uniforms.
- Conduct regular gender sensitization programs.
- Implement a zero tolerance policy against bullying in schools.

For students

- Foster an inclusive peer culture that respects and supports individual choices regarding uniform options.
- Participate in school governance and uniform school policy making.
- Participate in art or content writing project on gender neutral uniforms.

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