

## **PIONEERING CHANGE: UNDERSTANDING TEACHERS' JOURNEY TOWARDS CREATING SAFE LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS**

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### **Abstract:**

India has rich cultural traditions which is deeply ingrained in the fabric of the society. Under this cultural mosaic we now come across the discourses of existence of LGBTQ+ community. In the heteronormative society, the target of achieving peaceful co-existence for people of all genders and diversities is a challenging task. We need to sow the seeds of developing empathy and tolerance for everyone right from a very young age. The mission of fostering LGBTQ+ inclusion needs to be initiated through sensitization of teachers towards people of all genders and sexuality. One of the most significant factors could be to bring LGBTQ+ inclusive content in classroom and let children express their opinions in these discussions. However the discussions of gender and sexual orientation needs to be comfortable topic for both students and teachers. Hence the main task here is to convince the pre-service teacher about the urgent need for designing and implementing a contextual LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum in our classrooms. The present qualitative study is a one shot case study which aims to understand the teacher experiences in transacting LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. The analysis of responses will help to give implications to stake holders for creating a safe LGBTQ+ inclusive classroom.

**Keywords:** *Heteronormative, LGBTQ+ Inclusion, Sexual Orientation, Contextual LGBTQ+ Inclusive Curriculum.*

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### **Introduction:**

LGBTQ+ community faces a lot of violence. We have witnessed the Orlando shooting case which occurred in June 2016 and it pointed out towards the hate killings by an Afghan-American assailant who straight away shot the gay people in a nightclub Pulse. During pandemic, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) recorded 236 crimes against transgender persons in India (Chakrapani, 2023) The article mentioned that in 2023, the NCRB reported that in 19 metropolitan cities there were no suicides in the transgender community however Dalit-trans activist Grace Banu mentioned in the online article that 29 trans people were murdered or committed suicide in Tamilnadu in 2022. Similar kind of harassment is faced by LGBTQ+ children as well. Sindwani (2019) mentioned that nearly 70% of the LGBTQ+ students in India are bullied and they face severe mental health issues like anxiety and depression. One third of the students who face physical bullying further discontinue school. 43% of the students faced sexual harassment in primary schools because of sexual orientation and gender identity that do not belong to heteronormative society. These figures are alarming and they point towards the need for addressing the LGBTQ+ bullying at school. Teachers are responsible for creating a safe inclusive classroom for every child where each one grows to the maximum extent. Teachers need to accept that there are children with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and each one has the right to be safe at school. The teacher need to develop values of respect and empathy in students. It is possible through a carefully planned contextual LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. This clearly points towards role of teacher training institution in

training teachers for LGBTQ+ inclusive classrooms. Once designed do the teachers have the ability to transact the curriculum with confidence. The present study aims to explore the experiences of pre service teachers towards transacting LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum.

### **Theoretical underpinnings of the study:**

The present study focuses on the experiences of pre service teachers in transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. This can be found by exploring the confidence level of teachers in transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. To understand the experiences of the pre service teachers we have to view it through the lens of Paulo Freire Critical Pedagogy which lays emphasis on questioning the norms of the heteronormative society along with the power structure. For this the teachers are to be trained at the teacher education colleges to critically examine the systemic barriers which marginalize the LGBTQ+ students .Thus this framework is a guide for encouraging teachers to be pro-active in promoting social justice in the classrooms. Apart from this the present study expects us to view the teacher confidence of transacting LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum through the lens of theory of Intersectionality. The intersectionality theory guides us to understand why a teacher in spite of the exposure of LGBTQ+ inclusive teacher training module perceive difficulties in implementing the LGBTQ+ inclusive instructional materials. Understanding the identity of the teachers would help us to relate it to the confidence in transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. This will guide the researcher to give recommendations to teacher practice and create more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

### **Literature review:**

Goldstein-Schultz (2022) conducted a study based on teachers' experiences with LGBTQ+ instruction in addition to school related environment changes with reference to LGBTQ+ issues. Here the researcher focused on the variables like teachers' attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals, self-perceived knowledge, comfort levels with the LGBTQ+ topics and administrative support and teacher preparation along with supports and barriers to instruction. Also the researcher aimed to study teachers' pre-service & in-service training experiences. Clearly, the researcher uncovers the finding that teachers' comfort level, self-perceived knowledge as well as preparation levels to teach LGBTQ+ issues depends on the pre-service and in-service training experiences and the school location. More importantly, the findings indicated the need for new teachers to be trained for transacting LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom and school environment. Thus the role of teacher training institutions towards providing training to in service and pre service teachers towards transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum is significant. There may be many factors that decide comfort level of a teacher in transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum.

Schneider & Dimito (2008) conducted a study to understand the school experiences of teachers and administrators which included LGBTQ+ teachers. The researchers used questionnaire to assess their comfort in addressing LGBTQ+ issues, awareness of LGBTQ+ harassment, & experiences in anti-LGBTQ+ harassment at school. The researchers proposed that the social context is a major factor which affects the comfort level of a teacher transacting LGBTQ+ topics in class. In Canada the concept of sexual orientation is given due place in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as an essential part of constitution. Due to this the school district had anti-

LGBTQ+ harassment policy, a factor because of which the teachers felt comfortable and protected. More importantly, the researchers mentioned that though a conservative, fundamentalist political movement lies in Canada, the separation of religion from education & other social issues is a major feature in Canadian political landscape. To conclude Schneider & Dimito (2008) confirmed that the heterosexual as well as LGBTQ+ teachers perceived awareness of harassment, level of activity along with perceived support as few of the barriers. Undoubtedly, there is a need for teachers to be aware of experiences of the LGBTQ+ students as well as being active in addressing the issues.

In another study, Page (2017) aims to examine the level of comfort of English language arts teachers' in transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. The researcher argues that the LGBTQ+ students who face unfair treatment at school become unwilling to pursue further education of post-secondary education. Two in five students from the LGBTQ+ community received in-school or out-of-school suspension as well as detention (GLSEN report, 2016) The report stresses towards importance of restorative practices instead of punitive measures for intervening in cases of bullying. This leaves no doubt for teacher education colleges in understanding their role towards training teachers for creating safe welcoming classrooms.

Page (2017) aims to examine teacher response towards queer-inclusive curriculum in addition to the level of comfort in dealing with queer inclusive curriculum. The researcher also aims to assess the teacher awareness related to queer inclusive resources. The researcher argued that the English Language Arts teachers did not implement the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum even though they were found to have high level of comfort in discussing LGBTQ+ issues and transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. Now here the study makes a significant contribution as it makes the teachers realize that only being comfortable is not useful. Taking the right action is more important. To sum up the researcher suggested that teachers can be trained using free online workshops to train for designing LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. Also teachers in rural schools could be given education opportunities to train for responding to challenging texts and curriculum selection in addition to making them aware about gender identity as well as sexual orientation. The study clearly points towards a significant goal of trying out ways to reduce teacher's fear and discomfort in transacting LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum and work on their efficacy.

Meyer et al. (2023) mentioned that there are multiple forms of oppressions in the classrooms specifically with reference to gender identity and sexual orientation. Teachers can address the oppressions through a carefully designed curriculum. Thus the researcher aims to study how the Canadian elementary educators include the LGBTQ+ contents in the curriculum. Moreover, the researcher aims to identify the challenges faced by the teachers in transacting the instructional material based on LGBTQ+ community or when engaging into LGBTQ+ visibility. Importantly, Meyer et al. (2019) found that the teachers at secondary level were more comfortable to teach LGBTQ+ topics than the teachers at elementary level. The percentage of the teachers who were comfortable in dealing with the LGBTQ+ topics were 45% (kindergarten teachers), 64% (5th grade teachers) and 75–80% (7–12 grade teachers) Undoubtedly, the researcher stressed that we need to make the purpose of implementing LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum clear before actually implementing it. Many parents felt that they

were not comfortable in making their kid study LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum but once they were explained the purpose of having such a curriculum they agreed (Meyer et al. ,2019) The researcher proposes that the teachers need support of the Principal so as to be strong and comfortable in teaching LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum.

In light of the review of the literature, it was noted that to make the teachers comfortable in transacting LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum, the teacher training institutions would be expected to train in-service and preservice teachers towards transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum

Also the purpose of implementing LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum must be clear before actually implementing it in the classrooms. There is not sufficient research on experiences in transacting contextualized LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum in Indian classrooms. The present study aims to understand the experiences of pre service teachers in transacting LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum.

#### **Research Elaborations:**

Under the pre-mentioned theoretical framework of intersectionality, the researcher aims to understand the teacher's challenges in transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum as well as the strategies used to overcome them. For this the researcher picked 30 pre service teachers from B Ed level and trained them to create LGBTQ+ inclusive instructional material with an aim to create a classroom which is safe and LGBTQ+ inclusive. Research has proved that awareness of the LGBTQ+ issues as well as activeness in addressing them makes one comfortable at transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum .Thus the researcher tried to implement activities of an intervention module based on concept of LGBTQ+, awareness of LGBTQ+ in Indian context ,plight of LGBTQ+ children in classroom, strategies to handle LGBTQ+ inclusive classrooms, designing of LGBTQ+ inclusive instructional materials .After the intervention the researcher tried to examine the experiences of pre service teachers towards transacting LGBTQ+ curriculum. This is because if the teachers experience is positive only then it will be used in future in their own schools.

#### **Context of the Project:**

Teachers are main instruments of developing empathy among the students. Students of wide variety of diversities and genders exist in the Indian classrooms .One of the online articles on The Hindu it was mentioned that the children are not aware of their sexual orientation and gender identity. So there is no need to talk about this concept at school in India .The youths follow traditional values .We are aware that there has to be a safe inclusive climate for all the children, however we notice the students are bullied for their effeminate looks or sometimes due to sexual orientation. Homophobic or transphobic bullying leads to mental health issues like suicidal ideation or even suicides. We need to be aware of how to handle co-existence of children of diverse genders and sexual orientation .The children are oriented to only binary genders in a heteronormative society. They haven't been accustomed to read about people of diverse genders or sexualities existing in their textbooks. Teachers can plan content which is LGBTQ+ inclusive. The intervention module designed by the researchers expect teachers to know how they can design an instructional material with infusion of LGBTQ+ related content and implement it. Through such an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum we could lay a strong foundation based on developing empathy and tolerance in our children.

### Research Questions:

**R Q** What did Pre service teachers' experience during the implementation of instructional module based on the theme of inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues in school curriculum for secondary school students?

RQ.1. What are the challenges faced when implementing the lesson plan based on infusion of LGBTQ+ inclusive elements?

RQ.2. What are the different ways to overcome the teacher challenges in transacting the lesson based on infusion of LGBTQ+ inclusive elements?

### Methods:

The present research adopts a qualitative approach with a one-shot case study. The study aims to assess the level of confidence among the pre service teachers towards transacting LGBTQ+ inclusive instructional material in the secondary classroom in a particular CBSE school.

### Participants:

30 pre-service teachers became the part of this study in which the researcher trained the pre service teachers to design and implement the LGBTQ+ inclusive instructional material. The aim was to develop empathy in the students towards the people of diverse genders and sexualities.

### Sampling technique:

The sample of the study focuses on 30 pre service teachers pursuing B Ed program from a particular teacher education college .The researcher made use of convenient sampling technique. The researcher made sure that the pre service teachers who were willing to transact the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum were trained to handle the inclusive classroom .Consent was taken by the researcher so as to teach the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. Apart from convenient sampling the researcher made use of purposive sampling technique. This is because to create safe inclusive classrooms we need to train teachers and it is teacher education level where we can empower them with the skills to handle a LGBTQ+ inclusive classroom .Thus the sample of study was deliberately chosen as pre service teachers.

### Data collection:

In order to know the experiences of pre service teachers towards transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum the researcher designed questionnaires for testing it before and after the intervention. The questionnaires were designed in such a way that it could collect the experiences of pre service teachers in designing as well as implement the LGBTQ+ inclusive instructional materials.

**Data analysis:** The present study used a thematic analysis in which the qualitative responses were given by the pre-service teachers to share their experiences in transacting lessons based on LGBTQ+ inclusive content.

**R.Q.1** *What are the challenges faced when implementing the lesson plan based on infusion of LGBTQ+ inclusive elements?*

Pre service teacher's responses to this research question pointed towards the difficulties faced in transacting the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. The following codes emerged out from the qualitative responses of the pre-service teachers.

*Table1: Responses of Pre service teachers for the RQ 1*

Theme	Codes	Participant Responses
Challenges for transacting LGBTQ+ inclusive instructional materials	<p><i>Training for questioning societal norms</i></p> <p><i>lacking awareness</i></p>	<p>“The most challenging part was asking the students to be vocal; some were just shy to speak about the topic while some didn't know much about the LGBTQIA+ community.”</p> <p>“The challenge I faced was the assumptions that were either related to their experiences or something they read about. But the most challenging part was to change their wrong assumptions, as they were too adamant to reflect on what I was speaking.”</p>
	<p><i>Age appropriateness of content</i></p> <p><i>&amp;</i></p> <p><i>Use of sensitive language</i></p>	<p>“Age-appropriate themes are not always possible. Keeping in mind the language that is being used to conduct the class is also important to genuinely incorporate components that are LGBTQ+ inclusive into the chosen topic.”</p> <p>“I did not face any major challenges. I just had to be careful that the information I am adding in the lesson plan or PPT is age appropriate and is conveyed in a language that is not vulgar or hurting anyone's sentiments.”</p> <p>“How to be sensitive and be an ally. I consider myself straight. Hence, <b>I needed to be careful while using certain terms</b> as I didn't want to be insensitive in any way”</p>
	<p><i>Learner Resistance</i></p>	<p>“Additionally, my focus was diverted by a few students' lack of interest in the LGBTQ+ topic or their impatience.”</p> <p>“The children were unsure of how to address the LGBTQ+ community or group using pronouns. In my lecture, I had stressed that you should always ask someone's preferred pronouns before speaking to them or introducing them to others in order to avoid offending or humiliating them. The students had the same understanding. However, the kids became a little perplexed when I started talking about the different pronouns they use or prefer. They claimed that although their Pronouns (Grammar) were powerful, they became lost when</p>

		<p><i>it was infused with LGBTQ+. Particularly when I introduced them and used the gender-neutral pronouns THEY, THEM, and THEIRS. Many of them questioned the use of the pronouns they, them, and theirs. The use of the pronouns they, them, and theirs in LGBTQ+ contexts was questioned by many of them, because, in their eyes, they, them and theirs is typically used to refer to more than one person/many people. However, in the LGBTQ+ community, a single person utilizes they/them to hide their identity. Here, the students were utterly perplexed.</i></p>
	<p><b>Use of derogatory terms</b></p>	<p><i>“They appeared to be fascinated at this age and one of them taunted friends about the subject by using slang. We must be careful not to encourage them and give them wrong ideas.”</i></p> <p><i>“As the image of a cross dressed transgender woman was shown ,the students went giggling and made use of some words which would be hurtful for a real person in class”</i></p>
	<p><b>Integrating LGBTQ+ perspectives in teaching</b></p>	<p><i>“My topic was introduction to graphs wherein I had to show them different types of graphs like bar graph, linear graph, pie chart, etc. The focus was on linear charts but I could hardly find any linear chart so I had to make them online using the data available on Internet”</i></p> <p><i>“To implement the issues in the syllabus and transfer it to the students.”</i></p>

*R.Q. 2 What are the different ways to overcome the teacher challenges in transacting the lesson based on infusion of LGBTQ+ inclusive elements?*

*Table 2: Responses of Pre service teachers for the RQ 2*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Participant Responses</i>
<i>Strategies to overcome the teacher challenges</i>	<i>Fostering understanding of status of LGBTQ+</i>	<p><i>By sharing the experience of a transwoman they felt that I had some evidence of what I was speaking. After a few logical debates, they understood my point of view and I tried to understand what they wished to say.</i></p> <p><i>“I used newspaper articles, statistics &amp; research to make the students connect to the reality of LGBTQ+ community across the globe.”</i></p> <p><i>When I started the lesson I could see some students laughing, some were not very interested in learning about them or may be uncomfortable So I showed a graph of how many girls, boys and transgender appeared for 2020 CBSE exam. They were shocked and sad looking at the figures and that too for 2020 exam. This brought the tempo down and they started thinking about this seriously. If we could raise awareness of the conditions of transgender and be supportive of our transgender friends these figures can improve.”</i></p>
	<i>Encouraging participation of students</i>	<p><i>“Participation of the students is crucial. It was easier to stay in the flow when I was receptive to their thoughts and views and encouraged them to reflect and formulate questions and opinions.”</i></p> <p><i>“Student engagement through drawing activity helped them to express their perspectives freely ”</i></p>



		<i>“By carefully putting the issues in the topic and relating it to real life of LGBTQ+ community and asking student to discuss”</i>
	<b>Knowledge about LGBTQ+ community</b>	<p><i>“I researched and learned more about the community.”</i></p> <p><i>“Finding more about the LGBTQ+ community especially the terminologies learnt helped to clarify the student queries “</i></p> <p><i>“Being aware about what alphabet stands for in the acronym LGBTQ+ community and what it means helped me to overcome the challenges in teaching the lesson “</i></p>
	<b>Training for use of pronouns</b>	<i>“Through the explanation and discussion. I had few examples which made them understand on who we can use Pronouns according to their preferences. The picture talk example was useful and whatever ideas my mentor gave was implemented in the lesson plan which made it easier for me to overcome the challenge.”</i>

**Conclusion:**

The pre-service teachers were prepared to handle the LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum with confidence as their responses showed that though they had faced challenges, they tried to use different strategies to overcome the difficulties .Some of the challenges faced by the teachers were to use sensitive language, designing age appropriate content , use of derogatory language or even learner resistance due to shyness or dilemma related to some concepts .The preservice teachers handled the difficult situations by having dialogues over concepts to clarify dilemmas ,raising awareness about the LGBTQ+ community ,sensitizing through real life status of the LGBTQ+ community ,student engaging discussions & training for using appropriate pronouns .The study helped to give lot of insight into how one can work towards creating safe inclusive classrooms. Few responses showing positive experiences in transacting LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum gives us hope to bring a transformation in our classrooms.

### Recommendations:

#### For teachers:

- Teachers need to upgrade knowledge about the concepts of sexual orientation & gender identity.
- Teachers need to be aware of existence of students of diverse sexual orientation and gender in the classrooms
- Collaborative groups could be formed by teachers to share the strategies for making safe LGBTQ+ inclusive classrooms.
- Teachers need to develop skills of counseling to handle cases of homophobic and transphobic bullying.

#### For administrators:

- Principals need to provide with research journals & teacher magazines so as to provide opportunities for teachers to have expertise in the area of Inclusive education.
- Seminars and workshops can be organized and attended to upgrade the knowledge and skills in handling homophobic /transphobic bullying
- Diversity, Equity and inclusion policy needs to be implemented in the school for employees and students.

#### For curriculum designers:

- Textbook writers need to design model lesson plans to orient the in-service teachers towards designing LGBTQ+ inclusive lesson plans
- Teacher training workshops can be conducted for educators to help them design some short modules on SEL for safe co-existence of LGBTQ+ inclusive classrooms
- Taking feedback from stakeholders to know effectiveness of the LGBTQ+ inclusive content is essential for curriculum framers.

#### For teacher educators

- Offering certificate courses for teachers to learn how to create LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum should be a major focus for Teacher education colleges.
- Conferences and seminars can be organized to share expertise about contextually designed safe inclusive curriculum.
- Faculty development programs need to be conducted to sensitize teachers at all levels to convince them of the need for LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum in today's context.

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