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# The politics of school dress codes and uniform policies: Towards gender diversity and gender equity in schools

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### Highlights

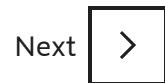
- Dress codes and uniforms can normalize misogyny, homophobia, transphobia & racism.
- Dress codes, uniforms & archetypal social activities are linked to systemic power.
- Teachers can advocate for gender justice or perpetuate inequity and discrimination.
- Systemic, complex and emotional approaches are required for gender equity/diversity.
- Historical, forward and reflective thinking are needed for systemic transformation.

## Abstract

Propelled through 21st century social movements, public interest in masculinities, femininities and gender embodiment has intensified. In schools, despite anti-discriminatory legislation, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia persist, pointing to the need for inclusive policies and practices to support gender equity and diversity. Media reporting in Western countries has also raised concerns regarding the impact of school dress codes and uniform policies on student well-being and the regulation of gender identity and gender expression. Underpinned by queer, transgender and feminist perspectives, this paper takes an intersectional approach to investigate how school dress codes and uniforms sustain gender binaries, while eclipsing diverse gender and sexual identities. The discussion is inspired by third wave feminist scholarship, acknowledging that gender, sexuality and race intersect and overlap on an individual and structural level. Results present recommendations for disrupting discriminatory dress codes and uniforms in a broader discussion about school reform.



Previous



## Keywords

Diversity; Inclusion; Masculinities; Queer; Transgender; Dress codes; Uniforms

# 1. Introduction

Propelled through 21 century social movements, such as #METOO, #Translivesmatter and resistance groups, such as #HIMTOO, public interest has intensified regarding masculinities, femininities and issues of gender embodiment. In schools, despite anti-discriminatory legislation, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia persist, pointing to the need for inclusive policies and practices to support gender equity and diversity ( [Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2018](#); [Martino, Omercajic, & Kassen, 2022](#); [Ullman, 2022](#)). In Western countries, media reporting has also raised human rights' concerns regarding the impact of school dress codes and uniform policies on student well-being and the regulation of gender identity and expression, especially for LGBTQIA+<sup>2</sup> young people. Although studies have often reported on school dress policies from a binary<sup>3</sup>male/female perspective (e.g. [Happel, 2013](#); [Raby, 2009](#); [Pomerantz, 2007](#); [Siner, 2017](#)), little research in this area has considered fluidity of gender identities or gender democratization through concepts, such as feminine masculinities or masculine femininities. Underpinned by queer, transgender and feminist informed theoretical perspectives, this paper takes an intersectional approach to investigate how school dress codes and uniform policies sustain gender binaries, such as hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities, while impacting students who embody expansive gender expression and gender identities.

Typically, discussions surrounding school dress codes and uniforms have highlighted the sexualization of girls' bodies, with boys portrayed as perpetrators or observers. But researchers are highlighting the narratives of diverse groups and are beginning to present the negative impact of such policies on boyhood and schooling, especially regarding racial minorities and expansive expressions of gender or sexuality ( [Bragg, Renold, Ringrose, & Jackson, 2018](#); [Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017](#); [Knipp & Stevenson, 2021](#)). Recently, students' negative reactions to dress codes and uniform policies have also provided a useful lens to examine how hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity can be disrupted, particularly in a digital world. As [Friedrich and Shanks \(2021\)](#) pointed out, although teachers, parents and school administrators have contributed to public debates about school uniforms and dress codes, there has been little academic interest in this field as it relates to inclusion and gender diversity. Further, Friedrich and Shanks argued that from a social justice perspective, more research is required to understand the impact of school dress codes on children and their families regarding gender normativity, economics, disabilities and more.

Given the lengthy amounts of time that students spend in formal schooling and the impact institutional bodily regulations has on life experiences, understanding how schools have designed and implemented dress codes and uniform policies to either support or

discriminate against young people in terms of gender and sexual diversity, represents a worthy problem of investigation (Reddy-Best, Dong, & Choi, 2017). Kelly (2017) concurred, suggesting that cultural debates around school uniforms and dress codes have widened from critiques regarding the uncomfortableness and impracticalities of dresses and skirts for girls to include issues of gender identity relating especially to transgender students. In this respect, from a conceptual perspective, in this paper, I add to the body of knowledge surrounding the establishment and management of school dress codes and uniforms from, which captures gender equity pertaining to boyhood and girlhood as well as gender diversity, which includes transgender, gender-expansive and gender creative young people.

## 2. Bodily control: school dress codes, uniforms and gender stereotypes

To better understand the social context surrounding the conception and implementation of school dress codes and uniforms in the Western world, it is helpful to trace the history of school attire and its association with bodily control, gender stereotypes and normalized versions of boyhood and girlhood. Dating back to the 1500s, the history of the modern school uniform was initiated when a school in England obliged financially disadvantaged students to wear blue capes and yellow hosiery, a practice which distinguished lower socioeconomic classes from other groups in British society (Seigel, 2019). As dress practices shifted towards clothing for men and women in the social arena, schools in the United Kingdom began to introduce uniforms towards the middle of the 19th century as a means of regulating student behaviour and appearance, as well as fostering institutional pride and loyalty (Synott & Symes, 1995). For example, uniforms became increasingly popular with prestigious schools, which served the British royals and upper classes, such as the boys' school Eton College (Seigel, 2019).

According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (2022), a school uniform consists of special attire worn by students at specific schools and is a tradition which tends to be more popular in Britain than in the United States. In complement, dress codes involve regulations regarding which clothes people are permitted to wear at school, in the work environment, or in social clubs, etc. However, both uniforms and dress codes represent the historical agenda of universal schooling, which highlighted a respect for discipline and effort in the working classes. The topic of school uniforms has also led to much public debate in countries such as England, Scotland and Wales, where dominant themes have included social standing, choice of clothing and anxieties surrounding compliance with dress codes and the decreasing morality of young people (Friedrich & Shanks, 2021; Howard, 2011; Savill, 1971). Additionally, North American, uniform debates have popularized trends aiming to minimize socioeconomic differences, promote student citizenship, reduce distractions from

provocative attire, improve academic performance and facilitate school safety through dress codes and uniforms ([Brobeck, 2018](#); [Carey, 2009](#); [Deane, 2015](#); [Happel, 2013](#); [Lumsden & Miller, 2002](#)).

As young people are bombarded daily with gender representation, it is also crucial to recognize the media's critical connections to the social institution of schools, where dominant values about gender expression, identity and stereotypes are played out ([Goldstein-Schultz, 2016](#)). Prime time television analysis has unveiled that male characters are portrayed as verbally and physically more aggressive than female characters, who are depicted as more family oriented than their male counterparts ([Sink & Mastro, 2017](#)). [Golden and Wallace Jacoby \(2018\)](#) also argued that through the theme of princesses, Disney's media company circulates powerful and restrictive messages about girlhood and gendered behaviours, revealing that groups of pre-school girls from diverse racial, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds, held stereotypical conceptions about princesses in terms of beauty, clothing, body movements and exclusion of boys. Equally concerning, is the limited media representation of transgender young people. When GLAAD reviewed its archives for transgender representation on television episodes, it concluded that despite a greater number of transgender characters, much progress is necessary to ensure fair and inclusive representation of the transgender community ([Adams, 2020](#)).

Whether in the media or at school, gender stereotypes can create detrimental learning situations for all, regardless of gender, sex, or age ([Connolly, 2022](#)). At school, because the construction of gender binaries consistently signals opposition and exclusion, difference is positioned negatively, and decreases all students' capacity ([Wolfe, 2022](#)). With regards educational institutions, [Friedrich and Shanks \(2021\)](#) suggested that school uniforms and dress codes anchored in a [Foucauldian \(1995\)](#) lens can unveil paradoxes about how power functions to 'homogenise, divide and hierarchise students' (p.3). Authors such as [Brower \(2013\)](#) and [Glickman \(2015\)](#) also argued that dress codes reflect normative assumptions about gender and sexuality, and are underpinned by controversial concepts of class and race. For example, the aim of school dress codes, suggested Glickman, is to inculcate students to reflect conservative values and a narrow definition of success. 'Girls are to become ladies and boys are to become gentlemen, without regard for what type of adult the child wants to become.' (p. 2). More pointedly, The [National Women's Law Centre \(2023\)](#) reported on how institutional bias in schools discriminated against black girls, their bodies and clothing, thereby interrupting their education:

Black girls in District of Columbia schools, like girls across the country, miss out on crucial class time simply because of the clothes they wear or the style of their hair or makeup.

Again and again, they are suspended for tight pants, sent to the office for shoes that aren't quite the right colour, and told they must “cover up” before they can learn. (2023, p. 3).

In addition, for those students who are unwilling or unable to conform to narrow versions of boyhood and girlhood, repercussions can be severe and long-term. For instance, through the GLSEN School Climate Survey, [Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark and Truong \(2018\)](#) found that unsupportive or discriminatory school policies, including dress codes, can have a detrimental impact on LGBTQIA+ students' experiences. Results from this survey also confirmed, that LGBTQIA+ youth in the USA reported challenges regarding freedom of gender expression in schools. In this way, school contexts can become a hindrance, rather than a support, particularly for gender-expansive adolescents, who are attempting to navigate their developing identities. Traditionally, boys and girls have been socialized at an early age to be either masculine or feminine, depending on their assigned sex at birth. [Swain \(2000\)](#), for example, found that in British schools, year 6 football players established themselves as *real* (emphasis added) boys, defining their masculinity in the playground through actions, physical strength, and power. In this sense, argued [Kostast \(2022\)](#), the football pitch takes on a symbolic materialism of boyhood, which aids in building “successful/heteronormative masculinity” (p. 3).

Unfortunately, it can be socially more acceptable in schools for girls to adopt masculine fashion as opposed to boys, who wish to adopt feminine styles. In the latter context, a hidden curriculum involves questions raised about the masculinities of boys who push the boundaries of gender expression by wearing feminine styles ([Cosbey, 2008](#); [Paoletti & Kidwell, 2011](#)). Transgressing gender zones in school playgrounds, particularly for boys who were uninterested in football or did not display high levels of athletic skills, has been associated with significant negative social and emotional outcomes ([Kostast, 2022](#)). The costs of such gender stereotypes, whereby boys are expected to be ‘strong’ and girls ‘irrational’, can perpetuate inequalities and restrict the capacity of young men and women ([Connolly, 2022](#), p. 11). Long standing stereotypes regarding masculinities and boys of colour can also contribute to a construction of boyhood involving inflexible school policies and high levels of incarceration for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, or a school-prison pipeline ([Nelson & Subedi, 2018](#)). Such stereotypes are embedded in schooling, which promotes reductive gender norms and fails to consider the affective dimensions of boyhood ([Stahl & Keddie, 2020](#)). Narrow and disturbing constructions of masculinity are also aptly illustrated in [Pascoe's \(2012\)](#) ethnography, which concluded that many of boys' behaviours in high school are homophobic and sexist.

Similarly, [Glickman \(2015\)](#) illustrated how transgender students who are forced to conform to gender restrictive codes may experience a negative outcome regarding their gender identity, with long reaching consequences, including decreased academic results, higher study abandonment rates, heightened disciplinary measures, homelessness, and eventually, incarceration. Given that restrictive dress codes or the harsh application of binary dress codes can create a negative school climate in which transgender students can find themselves specifically targeted, many transgender students and their allies have opposed the gender restrictive dress codes in US schools, by individually lodging complaints against schools, school boards or through challenges in the legal system ([Glickman, 2015](#)). Through GLSEN's 2021 National School Climate Survey, [Kosciw, Clark and Menard \(2022\)](#) illustrated that transgender students are more likely to report incidences of discriminatory policies and practice. These results align with [Meyer and Keenan \(2018\)](#), who argued that many school policy solutions are inadequate to support transgender, agender and non-binary students, thereby restricting our understanding of “young people's bodies and (inter)actions” (p. 738).

### 3. History of clothing: feminization of fashion, dissociations from masculinity and the (re) production of power

To contextualize knowledge regarding the conception and implementation of school dress codes and uniforms and the promotion of gender binaries, it is illuminating to trace the history of clothing, which led to the feminization of fashion and its dissociation from masculinity and the (re)production of power. For many years until the end of the 19th century, parents in the Western world dressed their children, regardless of gender, in robes, tunics and skirted outfits ([Paoletti, 2012](#); [Vanska, 2019](#)). In this sense, children were not dressed through individual styles, but with generic themes, differentiating children from adults, particularly boys, who were commonly clothed in long, skirted garments. Up to the early 20th century, having both little boys and little girls wear dresses was normalized practice throughout Europe and America ([Paoletti, 2012](#)). Clothing specific to women and men began to appear when factory-made garments became popular and middle-class men sported simple styles and dark colours, aligned with modern industrial work.

This shift in image for men's clothing towards sombre minimalism with full-length, baggy trousers, was linked to more accessible political structures and the validation of voting rights for all men ([Auslander, 2014](#)). While men were dressed for work in the socio-political and economic world, women's clothing, through dress styles and corsets, continued to symbolize the domestic arena, sexuality, and artificially exaggerated gender differences. In contrast, until the 18th century, aristocrats, both men and women, wore elaborate outfits made from silk, lace and velvet; equally, wigs, intricate hats and pink suits, styled with gold

or silver, were viewed as entirely masculine (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013; Davis, 1992). Until the late 17th century, before high heels became associated with femininity, European men wore them as a symbol of power, stature and masculinity (Barry, 2018). But with the advent of the French revolution, fashion became feminized, along with the demise of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie; increasingly popular Protestant values promoting thriftiness, diligent work and individual economic advancement were also reflected in men's fashion (Davis, 1992).

Along with the feminization of fashion, societal connotations of the colour pink have been intensely affected by historical discourses. For example, until the First World War in Europe, boys were commonly dressed in pink, while girls were clothed in blue. While pink was still valued in the Middle Ages, its popularity decreased dramatically in the 1800s, when pink became viewed as a vulgar and artificial colour (Vanska, 2019). Notwithstanding, pink and pale blue were viewed as appropriate for children; pink was associated with character traits of strength and decisiveness while blue was viewed as feminine because it was associated with the Virgin Mary (Koller, 2008).

By the end of the Second World War, the connotations of pink had shifted significantly away from strength, to include "girlish sensitivity, grace and homosexuality" due to the Nazis' use of a pink triangle to identify 'homosexuals' (Vanska, 2019, p. 303). In contrast, blue, a fashionable colour for military uniforms began to be considered a 'truly boyish colour' (Vanska, 2019, p. 303). Therefore, during the war era, the popular discourse around pink, argued Vanska, began to highlight weakness and became disassociated from strength, boys and ultimately, masculinities. This discourse aligns with the contemporary work of Paoletti (2012) who argued that, "The rejection of feminine styling for boys and the reclassification of formerly neutral elements as feminine may also be attributed to beliefs about sexuality and intensified anxiety about male homosexuality." (p. xviii). In 21st century clothing styles, regressive beliefs are still reflected, with men's trousers predominantly designed for comfort, while skirts and a good deal of women's clothing are physically restrictive and created for the male gaze, a phenomenon suggesting that in schools, the politics and power surrounding uniforms and dress codes are representative of much than fashion (Foucault, 1995; Rycroft-Smith & Andre, 2019).

Over many years, scholars have also argued that educational institutions (re)produce systems of power, that dictate gender and sexual conformity, making schools spaces where LGBTQIA+ young people experience harassment and policing of the body (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Foucault, 1995; Frohard-Dourlent, 2016; Mayo, 2013; McBride, 2020). In a similar vein, Aghasaleh (2018) argued that through discursive and

material representation, school dress codes produce and reinforce cultural descriptions, which aim to codify and stabilize gender categories. For more than a decade, Scotland's Commissioners for children and young people have also suggested that forcing students to wear either skirts or trousers based on gender could be a legal breach of the UN Convention on children's rights ([McCann, 2022](#); [Sherriff, 2012](#)).

#### 4. Theory: queer, transgender, feminist and intersectional paradigms

This section presents the theoretical underpinnings of this paper which are used to investigate the multifaceted nature of how school dress codes and uniform policies inform gender binaries, such as hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities, while discriminating against students who embody expansive gender expression and gender identities. The paper is underscored by queer, transgender and feminist theory, from a perspective of intersectionality ([Amhed, 2006](#); [Anzaldúa, 1999](#); [Crenshaw, 1991](#); [Kumashiro, 2000](#); [Spade, 2015](#); [Stryker, 2006](#)).

##### 4.1. Queer and transgender perspectives

Queer theory is premised on the belief that gender and sexuality are fluid and dynamic, rather than fixed and binary, providing a framework for disrupting heteronormative institutional structures ([Kumashiro, 2000, 2015](#)). Broadly, the term queer has been reclaimed by LGBTQIA+ communities in reference to resisting the status quo and challenging social hierarchies. [Kumashiro \(2000\)](#) explicated that queer theory allows for a re-writing of the heterosexual matrix to challenge the discourses and narratives that only heterosexual desire is normal. Similarly, emerging over the past two decades, transgender theory has critiqued cisnormative regimes, focussing on political movements and lived representations of transgender people. [Spade \(2015\)](#), for example, advocated for grassroots transgender movements to dismantle systems which discriminate against and harm trans populations. Focussing on the physical embodiment of gender and sexuality, transgender theory disrupts the normalized links assumed to exist between gender expression and identities, and biological sex and culture. Concerned about the violence that is often directed towards gender atypicality, transgender theory asks why society should be concerned about the different ways in which people express their gender ([Stryker, 2006](#)).

##### 4.2. Masculinity, feminist scholarship and queer theory

Connell's theory of masculinity (1995), which is intimately linked to queer theory and feminist scholarship is also central to understanding the connections between school dress codes and uniforms and the construction of gender and sexuality. In contemporary Western

society, asserted [Barry \(2018\)](#), fashion and appearance have been created in opposition to hegemonic masculinity, a concept developed by [Connell \(1987\)](#) to describe the position of men in a gender hierarchy, which practices homophobia, legitimizes the devaluation of women, and scorns feminine traits. This conception of masculinity has been associated largely with white, cisgender, straight, middle-class men and masculine scripts, such as risk-taking, stoicism, violence, aggression, courage and competitiveness. “Violence can include name-calling, damage to property, threatening behaviour, physical and sexual assaults and sustained bullying” ([McBride, 2020](#), p. 5). However, hegemony is not necessarily achieved through violence, but also through social hierarchies and cultural institutions. In this vein, masculinities are also constructed through the emotional landscape of schools as gender regimes surface in policies, teaching practices, curriculum design, etc. ([Stahl & Keddie, 2020](#)).

Over many years, the devaluing of femininity and its subordination to masculinity has been elucidated, making it important to understand school dynamics regarding gender ([Connell, 1987](#); [Hoskin, 2019](#)). As [Paechter \(2006\)](#) explicated, adopting feminine masculinities implies distancing oneself from “hegemonic or hypermasculinity” and “giving up power, symbolically, if not in practice.” (p. 8). In contrast, Paechter asserted that, “distancing oneself from stereotypical femininity” via masculine femininities, involves claiming power. “Whether from a feminist standpoint, or through the personal rejection of the feminine declared by tomboy girls ([Reay, 2001](#)), and butch women ([Halberstam, 1998](#)), to oppose stereotypical or normalised feminine positioning is to reject the disempowerment that comes with it.” ([Paechter, 2006](#), p. 9). Therefore, the devaluing of femininity represents a broader societal phenomenon, that serves to regulate power and police gender in the ways that also discriminate against LGBTQIA+ people ([Hoskin, 2019](#), p. 686).

### 4.3. Feminist, queer and intersectional lenses

The feminist/queer scholarship of Sarah [Ahmed \(2006, 2012\)](#), which resists heterosexist and patriarchal systems, contributes to critiquing essentialist and colonialist frameworks, which typically define gender, sexuality and ethnicity through fixed and binary categories. [Ahmed \(2006\)](#) highlighted the topic of being oriented in space in relation to sexual orientation. She underscored the negative repercussions for those individuals who do not conform to the social requirement of heterosexuality, which shapes dominant narratives. From an institutional viewpoint, [Ahmed \(2012\)](#) also examined notions of whiteness and racism, suggesting that commitments to equity should be non-performative to support those actors who embody lived experiences, rather than paying lip service to tokenistic

diversity. See also [Gillard \(2022\)](#) regarding the restrictive ways educational institutions label gender diverse people.

Lived experiences also featured in the feminist writing of Anzaldua, a Chicana / queer scholar and activist born in the United States. In English and Spanish, [Anzaldua \(1999\)](#) explicated how her identities straddled the social, psychological and geographical borders between Mexico and the USA. She envisaged borderlands as fluid spaces where countries, languages, cultures, sexualities and genders meet, but where minorities are marginalized, and tensions are triggered. Through the concept of borderland Anzaldua highlighted the intersection of multiple identities within herself, such as being a lesbian scholar, who was raised a Catholic in communities which presupposed people to be straight. In this way, Anzaldua's work resonates with the primordial concept of intersectionality, which [Crenshaw \(1991\)](#) coined to describe overlapping social identities relating to race, class, education, gender and sexuality. Associated with structural privilege and oppression, the term was originally conceived to critique discrimination and bias against African American women. But increasingly, the term has been used to initiate broader discussions relating to identity politics, legislation and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people ([Crenshaw, 1991, 2018](#)), including in school contexts.

## 5. School dress codes, uniforms policing of the body and curriculum

As previously indicated, scholars have argued that the imposition of gender and sexuality conformity as well as the policing of the body through systems of power in educational institutions creates space of discomfort and harassment for many students. Therefore, it is impossible to ignore the importance of school dress codes, which contribute to the development of gendered identities and the portrayal of boyhood and girlhood, largely through white, patriarchal, heterosexual and cisgender lenses. [Whitman \(2020\)](#) contended that school dress codes form part of an informal curriculum, which promotes hegemonic structures privileging white males, while perpetuating oppression against female students and minority groups. As part of the informal curriculum, educational systems (re)produce certain types of structures and knowledge, which reflect societal attitudes and values ([Apple, 2013](#)).

### 5.1. Media reporting and student resistance

Whilst policy and practices can be controversial on multiple levels, it is significant to note that media reporting regarding school dress codes and uniforms have commonly featured the objectification of girls or discussions about inflexibility of school attire and uniforms. For example, Hobman in the Daily Mail Australia (2022) reported that Victorian schoolgirls

were given detentions because their short skirts were considered a distraction to male teachers; commentary was featured from female students, who deemed the school's policy sexist, explaining that some teachers were inspecting the length of girls' skirt hems, but regulations concerning the length of boys' shorts were non-existent. [Valenti \(2014\)](#) also reported in the Guardian that school dress codes were being used to shame girls about their bodies, citing several examples, including a 17-year-old female high school student, Clare, who was asked to leave her prom because a group of fathers attending the event were distracted by her supposedly immodest attire.

Reporting in the Atlantic that school dress codes had involved discrimination against female students and LGBTQIA+ students over many years, [Zhou \(2015\)](#) highlighted that through the popularity of social media platforms, student resistance against such rules was increasing. For example, in Kentucky, one female middle school student, Maggie Sunseri, responded with social action because girls were being 'disciplined disproportionately' regarding the implementation of school dress codes. (2015, par. 1). To push back against a system whereby girls' attire was considered a potential distraction to boys, Sunseri created *Shame: A documentary on school dress code*, for which she interviewed her school principal and many fellow students.

Along with multiple Change.org petitions, students have staged numerous walk outs and social campaigns of resistance against gendered and inflexible dress codes and school uniforms. Education Reporter Nadra [Nittle \(2022\)](#) emphasized that increasingly in southern USA, student complaints, lawsuits and protests were challenging inflexible dress codes, which often targeted female students, those of colour as well as LGBTQIA+ youth. [Zhou \(2015\)](#) also reported that transgender and gender-expansive youth often clashed with school authorities over dress codes, with documented cases involving students being sent home regarding their attire.

Similarly, in Quebec, Canada, to protest dress codes deemed sexist, homophobic, and misogynistic, many boys posted pictures of themselves on social media wearing skirts to school. As hundreds of boys across numerous high schools attended schools in skirts, these actions, according to [Havela \(2020\)](#), became a strategic social movement. Several years earlier, a protest by schoolboys at Exeter Academy involved groups of boys wearing skirts to school, because they were forbidden from wearing shorts, despite a summer heatwave in Britain. The following week, the school administration announced that the uniform policy would be amended so that boys could choose to wear shorts instead of tartan trousers ( [Adams, 2017](#)). This group protest was preceded by the individual resistance of a 12-year-old boy who wore a skirt to school in the UK to protest the uniform policy, which prevented

boys from wearing shorts in hot weather ([BBC News, 2011](#)). Following the boy's protest, the school administration agreed to reassess the uniform policy later in the year. A decade later in Texas, USA, [Wakefield \(2021\)](#) reported that The American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against a school district on behalf of six boys and a non-binary student, who had been suspended due to the length of their hair. The ACLU qualified the school district's dress codes as violating the Constitution as well as being explicitly discriminatory; punishments for those students who did not comply were also considered overly harsh. Reported in the North American and Australia media, these cases of inequity demonstrate that there has been student resistance to inflexible implementation of school dress codes and uniform policies, principally in relation to the policing of student bodies. Student resistance has taken place primarily on an individual level, but also in groups and in concert with allies, using digital media and legal representation.

## 6. School policies, practices and social activities: regulation, marginalization and advocacy regarding dress codes and uniforms

Although media reporting of student resistance against inflexible school dress codes and uniforms has brought issues of bodily control and subjugation into the public domain, the deeper concern lies paradoxically in the development and implementation of school policies aiming for equity, which ultimately punish certain groups of students. Although many US school districts commonly refer to improved safety in establishing dress codes, these protocols can often make schools less equitable for students, particularly when they are barred from activities due to dress code infringements ([United States Government Accountability Office, 2022](#)). [Meyer and Keenan \(2018\)](#) have argued that school policies and practices aiming to create safety and equity, are ironically, often focussed on regulating and punishing individual behaviour, rather than amending institutional climates, which (re-)produce normative conceptions of gender. As per [Mangin \(2022\)](#), "Gender shapes and is shaped by school structures and educational practices. When children enroll in school they are categorically defined as boys or girls, and gender continues to be a part of their social, academic, and extracurricular activities" (p. 325). School environments, which regularly promote rigid dress codes or gender-based uniforms, are underpinned by epistemological understandings, involving dichotomous, medically based sex categories, gender binaries and the heterosexual matrix ([Butler, 1990](#); [Fausto-Sterling, 2000](#)). Such understandings coalesce over time to produce dominant ideas regarding the 'idealized 'normal' body', which is then stratified according to class, race, and ability ([Meyer & Keenan, 2018](#), p. 739). Here, the work of [Foucault \(1995\)](#) is useful to portray how institutions, such as schools, through regulations, control, and surveillance, subjugate

and target the individual body. As Foucault indicated, disciplined regimes promote docile and obedient bodies, which are dissociated from power. When young people from historically marginalized populations, such as transgender or gender non-binary students, resist gender norms, injustices, reprisals or policing of physical appearance are often reinforced in schools ([Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2018](#); [McBride, 2020](#); [Meyer & Keenan, 2018](#)).

A salient example from Queensland, Australia illustrates how social ramifications from gender-based discrimination regarding *appropriate* (emphasis added) attire for school proms can extend well beyond the school community into national political and media arenas. After privately exploring their gender identity for four years, Citipoint Christian College (hereforth, Citipointe) student Emmey Leo, came out first as gay, then gender non-binary and finally as transgender; 18-year-old Emmey dearly wanted to wear a dress to the school formal, despite pressure from the principal that this action would shatter the event for all in attendance ([Emmey, 2022<sup>4</sup>](#); [Lever, 2022](#)). With support from their mother, fellow students and a lawyer, Emmey chose to attend the formal, wearing a dress. However, several months later, Citipointe introduced a controversial student enrolment contract involving “a statement of faith”. This document explicated that prospective enrolments would be based only on a student's biological sex, and ‘described homosexual acts as “immoral”, comparing them to bestiality, incest, and paedophilia.’ ([Courty, 2022](#), par, 3). It was also revealed in the Guardian Australia that the school principal, pastor Brian Mulheran, who had initiated the contract, had previously lobbied national politicians for employers to have the “right to discriminate” against gay people ([Smee, 2022a,b](#), par 5).

Galvanized in their advocacy by intense push back from the broader community, including LGBTQIA+ human rights groups and Queensland's Minister of Education (Grace), Emmey and their mother appeared on Insight, one of Australia's leading televised and digital forums of debate. Via SBS News, [Emmey \(2022\)](#), told their story and described aspects of the advocacy process. For example, a former student, Bethany Lau, created a *Change.org online* petition, which received 155,744 signatures, to contest the school's discrimination against queer and transgender students ([Burns, 2022](#); [Change.org, PBC, 2022](#)). Meanwhile, Emmey and her allies, including former Citipointe students, formed a support group and developed a website with resources for parents and teachers to educate students about LGBTQIA+ topics. After CCC was referred to the Non-State Accreditation Board, the School withdrew the controversial contract and the principal resigned ([Courty, 2022](#)). Subsequently, a group of parents and former students contacted the Human Rights Commission to lodge a series of complaints against Citipointe in relation to homophobia and transphobia ([Smee, 2022a,b](#)). Ironically, it was also revealed that Citipointe was requesting that teachers sign contracts,

warning that employees could be dismissed “for being openly homosexual” (Smee, 2022a,b, par 1), a practice which Queensland's Attorney General and Independent Education Union condemned as discriminatory and illegal.

## 7. Gender justice and the role of teachers: advocacy or complicity

While the case of Citipointe aptly illustrates the significance of multiple stakeholders in facilitating gender justice for students from historically marginalized populations, such legal contestations, which emerge regarding the implementation of dress codes and uniform policies, reinforce the complex role that teachers can play in response to school power dynamics surrounding gender creativity and the affirmation of transgender students (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Mangin, 2022; Martino, Omercajic, & Kassen, 2022) and hegemonic, white masculinities (Bryan, 2018a, 2018b; Keddie, 2006; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003). Teachers' advocacy roles to disrupt gender normative policies and advocate for gender-expansive practices in schools can be limited and even perpetuate the status quo. As per Frohard-Dourlent (2016) who completed 62 school staff interviews in Vancouver, Canada to examine how educators engage with transgender and gender nonconforming students, it can be argued that teachers frame their experiences by:

- emphasizing bullying;
- presenting themselves as open-minded individuals;
- highlighting external organisational challenges and;
- acknowledging their own complicity in power systems.

Based on interview data, Frohard-Dourlent (2016) concluded that these educators did not demonstrate high levels of reflexivity and in some ways appeared to absolve themselves of responsibility regarding the impact that heteronormative and restrictive gender regimes have on the lives of students and teachers. Frohard-Dourlent called for more advocacy to disrupt normative teaching narratives and create expanded possibilities for all young people (see also Fields et al., 2014).

Numerous scholars concur, reinforcing that a skills gap exists for educators wishing to explicitly support transgender, gender creative and/or gender-expansive students, (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Martino et al., 2022; Smith & Payne, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). Examining the eclipsing of sexual and gender minorities in schools, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2015) also highlighted how one white, cisgender, male-identifying teacher (Tom) in Ontario, Canada, was reluctant to expand on the pedagogical

capabilities of a picture book, *My Princess Boy*, for acknowledging and affirming gender-variant expression and transgender narratives. The text focuses on a boy, who likes to wear tiaras and dresses and who, despite being teased about his 'feminine masculinity' in the school community, receives support from his family.

Arguing that *My Princess Boy* was "in your face" and "out there" (p. 2), particularly for primary school students, Tom appeared uncomfortable about the explicit images of a boy wearing a dress, which he also assumed meant the story's main character was gay. Martino and Cumming-Potvin viewed Tom's pedagogical reluctance as underpinned by the book's capacity to promote authentic classroom conversations about gender diversity and a boy who explicitly embraces gender-nonconforming behaviours. These results affirm the work of [Cosbey \(2008\)](#) and [Paoletti and Kidwell \(2011\)](#) concerning the common denigration of femininities, as well as more recent scholarship pointing to Irish high school girls' perceptions of shame when cycling in public, due to sweating and physical endurance, which were viewed as a "boy's thing" and contrary to normalized femininities ([Egan & Hackett, 2021](#), p. 3). Broadly, Tom's resistance to opening discussions about boys adopting feminine masculinities, raises questions such as:

- What are the perceptions of boys who embrace the feminine and transgress their gender assigned at birth?
- What are the repercussions for boys at school who choose to transgress gender boundaries?

Beyond issues of student dress codes and gender identities, these types of questions emphasize the relevance of queer, feminist, transgender and intersectional constructs for shaping appropriate teacher professional development about non normative gender expressions, feminized masculinities, and the enactment of power and privilege in schools ([Aghasaleh, 2018](#); [Foucault, 1995](#); [Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2015](#)).

## 8. Discussion

The following section deepens the analysis underpinning the problematics relating to school dress codes and uniforms. It captures opportunities for promoting gender equity and gender diversity through transformative pedagogies and school policies, while acknowledging the intense emotions which this work can evoke. Interwoven in the discussion are examples illustrating the application of feminist, queer, transgender and intersectional lenses.

## 8.1. Transforming pedagogies and schools: emotions, gender equity and diversity

Some scholars have commented that due to intensified public attention about masculinities and social inequities, opportunities have widened for teacher professional development highlighting transformative pedagogies, curriculum design and engagement with school policies to raise awareness about gender diversity and gender privilege (Kearney et al., 2016; Keddie, 2021; Keddie & Bartel, 2020). Pedagogically shifting gendered school policies and practices, necessitates that teachers support high levels of reflection from boys as they grapple with their identities and feelings of discomfort (Keddie, 2022; Messner, Greenberg, & Peretz, 2015). For teachers, transformative pedagogies can be particularly useful to explore boys' emotions about masculinities during challenging gender-related conversations (Keddie, 2022; Keddie & Bartel, 2020). Such conversations are primordial, given the resurgence of inquiry into construction of masculinities, as feminist social movements, such as #MeToo have taken off, while homophobia, transphobia and misogyny continue to plague schools (Keddie & Bartel, 2020; Kosciw et al., 2020).

Here the work of Ahmed (2014) highlights how the dynamics between emotions and bodies are infused with the politics of inclusion and exclusion. "Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientation towards and away from others." (p. 3). Historically, emotions have also been associated with women and presented as an indication of weakness, which must be relegated to the margins of rationality. Therefore, Ahmed stressed that "emotionality", whether collective or individual, is interwoven with power as well as spaces and divisions between bodies. (2014, p. 4). Notwithstanding, from a feminist viewpoint, delving pedagogically into the complexities of emotions has been described as fundamental to accomplishing institutional, gender transformative work (Ahmed 2006; Keddie, 2022; Ringrose & Renold, 2014). This assertion aligns with the work of Connell (2020), who argued that emotion was significant in workplace discussions when some men are challenged to accept the arrival of women in managerial roles. To unsettle presuppositions, unearth deeply ingrained values and navigate the emotional complexity of transformative pedagogies, Keddie (2021) recommended that teachers cover three content areas:

- "pedagogical discomfort"
- "mutual vulnerability"
- "strategic empathy' and 'ethical self-reflection" (p. 12).

For example, when feminist work about gender is presented at school, it is common for girls and boys to feel pedagogical discomfort. Typically, girls are outraged when discussing experiences of sexual harassment or assault, whereas boys often demonstrate resistance when asked to consider their social privileges (Keddie, 2021). Further, although the concept may be challenging for some boys and men who might be attached to hegemonic versions of masculinity, the acknowledgment of “mutual vulnerability” which refers to how an individual's fragility and pain are entangled with those of others can lead to “an ethics of openness, connectedness, empathy and passion” (p. 412). “Ethical self-reflection” includes critically contemplating the terms one employs for presenting themselves.

When referring to sexual harassment, boys and men can be encouraged to reconsider “hetero-sexualized narratives that position them as sexual initiators and girls and women as sexual gatekeepers” (Keddie, 2021, p. 409). As per Connell (1995), patriarchal power is not necessarily exerted through domination alone, but also through complicity and compliance with social structures. This combination of factors can result in multiple and fluid masculinities with some being marginalized due to race, class, or sexuality.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) affirmed that hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily involve social reproduction, but rather struggles whereby subordinate masculinities can influence the dominant expressions. This conception of power and privilege operates hierarchically through relationships and bureaucracies, which are interwoven across local, national, and global institutions (Connell, 2009; Foucault, 1995).

## 8.2. Shifting power and privilege: teaching for disruption

Reflecting on bodily policing in relation to dress codes represents only one aspect of building gender transformative programs, which must not shy away from discussions about issues, such as homophobia, heterosexism, male privilege and white entitlement (Keddie & Bartel, 2021). According to Mayo and Blackburn (2020) and Woolley & Airton (2020) the application of queer, transgender and intersectional perspectives can assist educators to move beyond inclusivity, to foster complex, shifting subjectivities, which examine power and privilege in school communities. In this regard, it is useful to investigate how some innovative scholars have stepped back to reflect on transforming teaching and school systems, with the aim of respecting the complex and dynamic differences of gender and sexuality. For example, since 2014, through their co-direction of a university centre in support of gender and sexual diversity, university educators Staley and Leonardi (2021) have facilitated professional development with more than 7000 teachers in the USA, across multiple learning contexts. The innovation lies in how the programs showcase partnerships with schools to share knowledge, practices and resources that aim to develop safer and

more humane school climates not only for LGBTQIA+ young people, but also for families and staff. Deep levels of reflexivity are also inherent in these sessions, which allow participants to think critically about education, normativity, identities, and equity, and how these concepts coalesce with the educators' personal and professional narratives.

[Staley and Leonardi \(2021\)](#) revealed that generally, the teachers attended these pedagogical sessions as supportive adults who seek guidance regarding queering the curriculum. Given the persistent need for professional development that highlights the lives of LGBTQIA+ young people, Staley and Leonardi also hosted two-day summer institutes, which regroup cross-state participants to extend their pedagogical practice to incorporate more than inclusion and make queer topics visible. These types of projects reflect the work of [Kumashiro \(2015\)](#) who argued that schools are not neutral places, but promote the status quo, which shapes oppression through cis-normativity, heteronormativity and racism. Aligned with scholars such as [Chappell, Ketchum and Richardson \(2018\)](#), [Keddie \(2021\)](#) and [Kumashiro \(2015\)](#), [Staley and Leonardi \(2021\)](#) reinforced that teaching for disruption involves working with difficult knowledge, which goes against the grain of normalized assumptions and teaching practices. "Through careful planning, routines and instructional strategies that aim to manage students and control how and what they learn, educators work rather deliberately to avoid disruption." (Staley & Leonardi, p. 515). The disruption may also arise when educators are forced to face their own complicity in regimes that perpetuate homophobia, transphobia and racism. "The interference of that knowledge might lay in conflict with our senses of ourselves as capable educators in your people's lives, and as allies and doers of justice."(p. 515). In this way, a queer sensibility offers teachers options for acknowledging difficult knowledge, fear, discomfort, and internalized resistance.

Although transformative pedagogies play a salient role in the affirmation of gender diversity and gender equity, [Martino et al. \(2022\)](#) have lobbied for the creation of trans-affirmative school climates through the conception and application of holistic policies, which go beyond an individual approach to student resistance or lobbying. Such an approach is underpinned by a trans epistemological framework (e.g. [Rands, 2009](#); [Spade, 2015](#); [Stryker, 2006](#)) to shift school paradigms towards administrative accountability, and acknowledge the harmful impact of cisnormativity, cisgenderism and cissexism. Further, [Martino \(2022\)](#) argued that fundamental to a systemic transgender affirmative approach is a decolonial critique of gender binary systems, which is particularly pertinent given the re-emergence of white supremacist groups. This complex, systemic approach speaks to [Spade's \(2015\)](#) call for institutions to re-evaluate the power relations and structural meanings, which are embedded in traditional legal frameworks.

Because such frameworks promote an individual conception of human rights, transgender or gender non-binary students may be “outed” publicly, as they seek equity on a case-by-case basis, through legal representation and/or through lobbying. The social repercussions can be devastating, bringing unwanted public focus, if not harassment, regarding a student's gender and sexuality, as well their personal and family life. Grounded in the work of [Connell \(2009\)](#), [Martino et al. \(2022\)](#) advocate for a “gender complex” approach, which would entail “all students challenging gender category oppression and gender transgression oppression” (p. 761). Connell explicated that gender regimes are a ubiquitous feature in organisations, such as offices, schools, factories, police academies and sporting teams; these regimes involve patterns which divide and connect people and are part of societal structures more broadly. This phenomenon is embodied through the recent intensification of anti-transgender legislation in the United States of America.

Shifting from a white, male cisgender, heterosexual patriarchy is in fact a means of advocating for gender democratisation, for all students. Attempts to shift this lens are also anchored in the poetry and scholarly work of [Anzaldua \(1999\)](#), who adamantly opposed the limitations, that sociocultural, gender and sexuality labels and colonial narratives impose on society. Looking towards a new consciousness, Anzaldua contended that both individually and as a race, Chicanos must voice their concerns, while white communities must acknowledge the oppression inflicted on racial and cultural minorities through colonialism.

## 9. Conclusion

Over many years, policy rhetoric espousing the benefits of school uniforms and dress codes has been linked largely to improved behavioural standards, increased academic results, and reduced socioeconomic pressures ([Deane, 2015](#); [Shanks, R. \(2023, Jan 23rd\)](#)). However, Deane asserted that when schools demand bodily control and uniformity in appearance from students, uniform and dress code policies are underpinned by an assumption that children's capacity to interact with and accept human differences, is insignificant.

“Standardizing how students appear may give the school an air of control over the schooling environment, but in doing so, these policies tell students that when and where appearances differ, danger lurks.” ([Deane, 2015](#), p. 114). Through student complaints, student resistance and legal confrontations with schools, the politics of human rights against rigid standardization of student appearances have been reported frequently in the North American, British and Australian media, suggesting that the management of dress codes and uniforms has become entrenched in an epistemological tangle of gender diversity, gender justice, masculinities and femininities. Although studies have frequently investigated school dress policies from a binary male/female perspective (e.g. [Happel, 2013](#); [Pomerantz, 2007](#);

Raby, 2009; Siner, 2017), little research in this field has explored the negative impact of such policies on boyhood and girlhood, especially regarding diverse expressions of gender or sexual orientation and people of colour (Bragg et al., 2018; Epstein et al., 2017; Knipp & Stevenson, 2021). Therefore, in this paper I investigated how school dress codes and uniform policies can sustain gender binaries, as well as hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities, while negatively impacting students who embody expansive gender expression and gender identities.

Drawing on an intersectional approach (Anzaldúa, 1999; Crenshaw, 1991) and transgender, queer and feminist theoretical perspectives (Anzaldúa, 1999; Amhed, 2006; Kumashiro, 2000; Spade, 2015; Stryker, 2006), I traced the history of school attire and its association with bodily control, gender stereotypes and normalized versions of boyhood and girlhood. I argued that the promotion of rigid embodiments of gender expression, gender identity as well as stereotypes regarding racialized minorities, can impact negatively on student mental health and lead to disenrollment and a school-to prison pipeline (Glickman, 2015; Kostast, 2022; Nelson & Subedi, 2018). Contextualizing the feminization of fashion and its separation from power and masculinities, I also provide an historical backdrop to clothing, which enriches our understanding of how school dress codes can (re)produce cultural descriptions, curricula, and materials, that marginalize gender ambiguity and reinforce binary gender categories, particularly pertaining to racialized students (Aghasalah, 2018; Whitman, 2020). Media reported incidents of student push back against the policing of the body and the imposition of rigid school dress codes and uniforms are presented, suggesting that although a focus on the sexualization of girls' bodies, particularly for girls of colour is common, disadvantages for transgender, gender creative and non-binary students are also disturbing.. While such reports have showcased student capacity to galvanize allyship and the use of digital media to win individual legal cases, significant concerns remain regarding schools' propensity to develop inflexible school policies, which are often implemented through archetypal social activities, such as school proms (Cumming-Potvin, 2022; Dean, 2011; Smith, 2011). The negative ramifications of gendered policing for such activities may also affect all students and extend beyond schools to the broader community.

In developing a lens to examine how the politics of gender essentialist regimes, including hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities, can be disrupted, it is helpful to consider several points. First, it is paramount to acknowledge the pressing need for appropriate professional development and the complex role of teachers who may advocate for gender justice or perpetuate the status quo (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017; Mangin, 2022; Martino et al., 2022; Staley & Leonardi, 2021). Similar to media reporting, which can fuel

gender and sexual stereotypes or advocate for marginalized students, teachers can play a fundamental role in creating inclusive and welcoming classrooms for students of all gender identities and sexual orientations (Chappell et al., 2018; Woolley & Airton, 2020). Second, the metamorphosis of schools will be supported through transformative, feminist pedagogies, which acknowledge the intense emotions and discomfort, which students may experience during reflective work around masculinities, femininities, gender diversity and gender privilege (Ahmed, 2006; Bryan, 2012; Connell, 2009; Keddie, 2021). Through transformative pedagogies, groups of students can be actively engaged in policy planning for dress codes and uniforms, rather than simply reacting retrospectively to individual cases of discrimination. Third, it is primordial to consider the past, present, and future when advocating for gender diversity, gender equity and expanded versions of boyhood and girlhood. This stretched notion of time resonates with the work of Connell (2009) as well as Mayo and Blackburn (2020) and Ahmed (2006) who call for educational systems which offer new possibilities through forward, backward, internal and external reflections. Finally, on a systemic level, school transformation will be facilitated through a trans-affirmative and gender complex approach, which is also underscored by a decolonial critique of gender binary systems (Crenshaw, 2018; Martino et al., 2022; Martino, 2022). Such an approach relates more broadly to the work of Spade (2015), who argues for new ways of thinking about oppression, with the aim of re-distributing power and life opportunities more equitably in communities. In this respect, given the interwoven nature of power and control in institutions, further research could compare gender justice strategies as well as the construction of masculinities and femininities across the fields of education, health and media.

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- 1 Associate Professor/Director of Research.
- 2 The acronym LGBTQIA+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual. The plus sign indicates diverse identities, which are not covered by the seven initials. It is understood that such language is complex, evolving and, in some cases, contested.

- 3 Male and female are used when referring to sex (biological characteristics). Gender is a socially constructed phenomenon, which refers to people's expressions, identities and behaviours.
- 4 Emme is the student's first name and was used for publication purposes.

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