



FAWE
Forum for African Women Educationalists
Forum des Educatrices Africaines



No. 23

FAWE Conference on Girls' Education in Africa

23 August 2017, Lusaka

Gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education (GRP4ECE)

Anna C. Murru (VVOB)

Daphne Nawa-Chimuka (FAWE)

Tom Vandenbosch (VVOB)

Hendrina Doroba (FAWE)

Corresponding author: Anna C. Murru (anna.murru@vvob.be)

Strategic objectives of the CESA 16-25: CESA SO 1/SO 4 - Revitalize the teaching profession to ensure quality and relevance at all levels



1. Table of content

1. Table of content.....	i
2. Acronyms	ii
3. Abstract	1
4. Background and issues	3
5. Goals and objectives.....	10
6. Implementation strategies.....	10
7. Analysis and interpretation.....	15
8. Implications and key lessons for policy, planning and implementation.....	16
9. References	18

2. Acronyms

CEA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practices
ECE	Early Childhood Education
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationalists
GRP	Gender-responsive pedagogy
GRP4ECE	Gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education
PLC	Professional Learning Community
RoSa	Centre of Expertise, Library and Archives for Gender Equality and Feminism
TTC	Teacher Training College
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNESCO-IICBA	UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa
UNGEI	United Nations Girls' Education Initiative
VVOB	Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance
ZIC	Zonal In-service Coordinator

3. Abstract

Through early gender socialisation, young children in Africa are exposed to the predominant gender roles and expectations. Early gender socialisation is reinforced within formal early childhood education settings (e.g. through gender-specific toys and gender-based activities), resulting in persisting inequalities, affecting girls and boys. Children start forming their gender skills, competences and values at the age of 4. Addressing children's early years' experiences is crucial to impact their long term cognitive and social-emotional development, and to work on the prevention and elimination of gender inequality (a precursor to gender-based violence). Early intervention, through gender-responsive pedagogy at a time when children's brains and social identities are developing rapidly, has the biggest impact. It is in early childhood that children develop self-awareness, basic values and attitudes. During this phase in life, stereotypes become set and are likely to have long-lasting impact on how children perceive themselves and their roles and position in society. The early years of education, therefore, hold great potential to develop in children a gender-sensitive view of self and others, impacting on the life choices that both girls and boys will make later in life.

While actions on gender are often targeting young adolescents and adults (preventive action) and victims, recent research shows that preventive action should start at the age when children start developing their gender identity, between the age of 3 and 5. Almost immediately after becoming gender aware, children begin developing stereotypes, which they apply to themselves and others. These stereotypes are well developed by 5 years of age (Martin & Ruble 2004), making the preschool years a critical period to deal with gender stereotypes (Aina & Cameron, 2011). Children within this specific age group will acquire even more rigid stereotypes on gender roles when families and teachers share the beliefs that differences among individuals of both sexes still exist. Preschool educators can help children develop a positive sense of their own gender. Teachers who are familiar with the factors that influence gender identity and stereotype development, and who understand the child's active role in gender identity formation, can effectively counteract and neutralise gender bias in their classrooms and attempt to prevent the formation of children's gender stereotypes. As such there is a big need for teacher professional development on gender-neutral, gender-sensitive and gender-responsive preschool education.

While it is generally accepted that boys and girls should be given a range of opportunities to be kind, thoughtful, strong, adventurous, emotional, brave, gentle, resilient, assertive, active and nurturing, it is much harder for early childhood education teachers to think about how to achieve this for all children (Tayler & Price, 2016). Early childhood education teachers can work more consciously to challenge gender stereotypes before they become a set and unconscious way of thinking. They can provide a gender-responsive environment in which children can develop to their fullest potential. Within this background, and with more than a decade of experience in gender-responsive pedagogy in primary and secondary education, VVOB and FAWE are currently jointly developing a toolkit on gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education teachers in support of CESA Strategic Objectives 1 and 4 and the implementation of SDG targets 4.2 and 4.7. This toolkit will be used in capacity development initiatives for early education teachers in Rwanda, South Africa and Zambia (and possibly other countries), by teacher education colleges and in-service teacher trainers during the initial training and professional development of early education teachers.

In 2014, VVOB and FAWE signed a formal partnership agreement to strengthen their collaboration for the benefit of school children in Africa. The organisations have joined forces on topics such as gender-responsive pedagogy and school leadership, and gender-sensitive teaching and learning materials. The partnership also includes joint engagement at national, regional and international levels for gender-sensitive education policies and practices. VVOB and FAWE started using FAWE's gender-responsive pedagogy model at the level of early childhood education in Zambia and Zimbabwe. Through these early experiences, the organisations realised that the model of gender-responsive pedagogy would indeed be valuable in early childhood education as well, if adapted teacher support could be made available specifically for early childhood education. The partnership has since grown to include stakeholders from Belgium, Rwanda and

South Africa in the development of a toolkit on gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education (GRP4ECE). The development of the toolkit commenced in January 2017 and is expected to be finalised by mid-2018, resulting in a co-publication by FAWE and VVOB. Three country working groups from Zambia, South Africa and Rwanda, undertake the development of this toolkit, guided by FAWE's Regional Secretariat (FAWERS). The working groups include teacher education practitioners, VVOB Teacher Education Advisors and Gender Focal Persons, Ministry of Education representatives as well as FAWE local Chapters and the Regional Secretariat. FAWE, VVOB and its partners would also like to invite others to join this partnership. The toolkit will be trialled out in pilot schools and later rolled out to initial teacher education institutions and providers of continuous professional development for early childhood education teachers.

4. Background and issues

FAWE and VVOB decided to develop a toolkit and provide teacher professional development on gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education (GRP4ECE) against the following background:

- The experiences with GRP since 2005 in several African countries;
- The expected expansion of early childhood education in Africa;
- A new body of international research and knowledge on diversity and inclusion in early childhood.

Each of these three issues is explored in more detail in the following sections.

Experiences with GRP

FAWE's gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) has been implemented since 2005 in several African countries. GRP equips teachers with knowledge, skills, and attitudes to empower them to respond adequately to the learning needs of girls and boys by using gender-responsive classroom processes and practices. The United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) has documented GRP as a best practice (Wanjama & Njuguna, 2016). Teachers have become more gender-aware and have adopted practices that promote equal participation of boys and girls within the school environment. This resulted in teachers transforming their teaching. Teachers stopped using harsh, abusive, and threatening language. There is consistent evidence of a change in the behaviours and attitudes of girls and boys in the classroom. The girls actively participate in classroom discussions and their confidence levels increased. Consequently, learners feel encouraged, interact freely with teachers and among themselves, and support each other in school work and assignments. The encouraging language raises learners' self-esteem and confidence, particularly girls'. They are not hesitant in raising their hands to answer teachers' questions and participate. In presenting group work, both girl and boys participate as presenters in equal measure. This has improved learning, as girls and boys no longer have unhealthy competition but support each other to learn.

In Malawi and Ethiopia, the two countries where GRP was fully embraced, the Ministries of Education made mainstreaming GRP in teacher training colleges (TTCs) a policy. Several factors contributed to this, which have implications for an Africa-wide promotion and adoption of GRP, in line with the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA):

1. Political will and commitment: During the pilot phase, FAWE worked very closely with the Ministries of Education (and a few other partners who had expressed interest). In Ethiopia for example, FAWE worked with the Gender Directorate Unit of the Ministry of Education.
2. The results from the GRP pilot: The results from the GRP pilot in itself were very positive, with GRP clearly addressed an existing, relevant and important gap in the education system.

3. Effective partnerships: Apart from the Ministries of Education and FAWE, other partners were crucial to the mainstreaming of GRP. These include communities, teacher training colleges, student teachers and development partners. In Ethiopia, the David Lucile and Packard Foundation supported a cluster of schools, requested FAWE to train all its staff and teachers in GRP and supported scaling up of GRP in schools through school-based in-service training. The World Bank supported the development and adoption of the Amharic version of the GRP teacher’s manual and supported the integration of the module into teacher professional development. In Malawi, FAWE worked very closely with GIZ, which later supported the replication of GRP in other teacher training colleges across the country.

The GRP model, where adopted by Ministries of Education, helps transform education systems by empowering teachers with new pedagogical approaches that promote a gender-responsive teaching and learning environment. FAWE utilises cultural norms, institutional dynamics, and role models to inform the creation and application of lesson plans that seek to gradually remove the barriers that women and girls face in classroom settings and that may hinder their ability to equally participate and reach their full academic potential.

Community involvement in GRP interventions has emerged as a prerequisite for success as it promotes “buy-in”, ownership, and support of schools by the community, particularly in areas of learning and discipline. In schools where GRP has been embraced, parents have favourable relationships with teachers and collaborate with school leadership in regular consultation with teachers on the behaviour of their children. They monitor learners outside school and step in if learners are in danger or misbehaving and report it to the school authorities. After gender sensitisation, parents have become aware of the unfair distribution of household chores between girls and boys and sensitise other parents to share household activities equally among boys and girls.

FAWE’s GRP model is an effective intervention to improve the quality of teaching and learning processes and increase enrolment, access, retention and performance of girls in schools. FAWE National Chapters, with support from local partners, Ministries of Education and donors have engaged with education authorities in their countries to integrate the GRP model in schools and TTCs. VVOB and FAWE have been piloting the GRP model with early childhood teachers in Zambia and Zimbabwe since 2015. These experiences showed that the GRP model is indeed also very valuable for early childhood educators, but that there is also a need for a more specific toolkit for this new target group. Early childhood educators for

instance make frequent use of learning-through-play methods, which were not yet included in the original GRP model.

Expansion of early childhood education in Africa

Studies have shown that investing in early childhood education is a cost-effective strategy that can mitigate childhood disadvantage, producing higher rates of economic return for the individual person, community, and country. Early childhood education leads to cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and moral developmental gains that carry over into later stages of development. Neuroscience research and growing evidence from child development studies, including those that focus on economics and politics, have reinforced the argument that all countries should increase expenditure on early childhood education, paying attention to practical and sustainable policies and programs. In many African countries, there are now major policy and practical initiatives toward implementing and sustaining quality early childhood education.

Early childhood education is an education sub-sector which receives special attention in the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA) 2016-2025. Although there has been improvement in this sub-sector in the last decade, enrolments in Africa are still far below than those in other regions. Enrolment is about 20% on average in Sub-Saharan Africa for the age-cohort. However, it is much higher in Northern African countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Although policies and strategies exist, implementation in terms of infrastructure, teacher development and materials has been generally too slow. Quality in this sub-sector suffers from poor planning, limited allocation of resources, poorly trained teachers and inadequate materials. Too many African children go to primary school unprepared and thus discontinuities between the home and classroom environments are prevalent. Africa is the only continent where the language of instruction is often a foreign language, making it difficult for children to cope with a new language and structured approaches to teaching and learning. Early childhood education (ECE) is therefore the next frontier if Africa is to realize sustained quality education and training. The child's readiness to learn in school, the school's readiness to accommodate children with different abilities and the capacity of families and communities to collaborate with schools to enhance learning are essential ingredients for a successful educational journey (African Union, 2015).

With the expected further expansion of early childhood education in Africa, the role of schools will become more prominent in the lives of children younger than 6 years of age, which provides new opportunities for the education sector to improve diversity and inclusion from the early years. The early years are the years during which interventions can have the largest impact on children's further lives and future careers.

Diversity and inclusion in the early years

From the moment a baby is born we are aware of gender. Often the first question asked is 'Is it a boy or a girl?' For many people the answer to this question is the crucial beginning to decision about names, clothes, toys and ways of being with the baby. Expectations are based on the views we hold about girls and boys in terms of temperament, behaviour, interests and play preferences. Even very young children have deep and complex understandings about gender and they bring these understandings with them into early years settings (Tayler and Price, 2016).

Children pick up both positive and negative attitudes and behaviour while learning about the world around them (Browne, 2004). They can learn that boys and girls have choices and that they can all be strong, caring, gentle and powerful or they can learn that boys have more power than girls but that they don't cry and can't be caring. Early childhood educators have a responsibility to provide children with opportunities and experiences that encourage the full range of human emotions and capacities.

Martin (2011) analysed the use of space in a nursery and found that boys dominated indoor and outdoor construction areas, climbing frames and specific sports equipment such as baseball nets while girls dominated writing areas, collage tables and indoor and outdoor roleplay areas. She found that the children played predominantly in single-sex groups and that they learned what knowledge was important in order to belong to these groups. Her research shows that while practitioners may support a child who acts outside these roles, they rarely actively challenge the roles themselves. She suggests that many practitioners see their role as supporting developmentally appropriate practice and that from this perspective children are simply choosing to engage with the activities they prefer.

The early gender bias experiences that young children encounter can shape their attitudes and beliefs related to their development of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. For early childhood educators, being aware of the effects of gender stereotypes is particularly critical, because children begin to form concepts of gender beginning around age 2. Between the ages of 3 and 5 years, children develop their gender identity and begin to understand what it means to be male or female. Almost immediately after becoming gender aware, children begin developing stereotypes, which they apply to themselves and others, to give meaning to and gain understanding about their own identity.

These stereotypes are fairly well developed by 5 years of age, and become rigidly defined between 5 and 7 years of age (Martin & Ruble, 2004), making early childhood a critical period to deal with gender stereotypes. Stereotypes and sexism limit potential growth and development (Narahara, 1998) because

internalizing negative stereotypes impacts self-esteem and ultimately, academic performance. Long-term gender bias effects become most apparent in students during adolescence (Carlson, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2004).

Teachers have tremendous influence on how children develop ideas of gender and gender significance. Traditional caregivers typically reinforce gender-stereotyped traits when they praise girls for their clothing, hairstyles, neatness, and helping behaviours, and in contrast praise boys for their strength, physical skill, size, and academic accomplishments. While unintentional, a teacher's inherent biases can perpetuate unfair stereotypes and may be manifested in discriminatory classroom practices.

Early childhood educators can help children develop a positive sense of their own gender. Teachers who are familiar with the factors that influence gender identity and stereotype development, and who understand the child's active role in gender identity formation, can more effectively counteract and even neutralize gender bias in their classrooms and attempt to prevent the formation of children's gender stereotypes (Zaman, 2007).

At the same time, it is crucial to understand that children have agency and power. They are not blank slates waiting to have the norms of any given culture inscribed on them. They will develop their own ways of thinking about gender and their own understandings of our gendered world (Kane, 2013).

Early childhood education in many African countries has been influenced by the principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP). DAP is closely associated with child-centred ideology. A child-centred approach is basically an education approach based on Piaget's (1954) theory, which describes basic stages of human development, generally universally perceived as having the same processes, irrespective of children's social or cultural background. What schools or adults can do, according to this line of thought, is to respect the stage of a child's development. This practice eventually leads to child-centred pedagogy (Burman, 2016). Child-centred pedagogy itself is characterised by at least five key ideas:

1. To be able to learn, children must be socially, emotionally and cognitively ready.
2. Education should respond to children's needs and interests.
3. For education to be effective, it needs to be designed in order to fulfil children's needs. Failure to meet those needs is understood to eventually lead to a malfunctioning in an individual's later development.
4. Learning for young children should be joyful and fun.
5. Learning should be based on children's personal experience.

A child-centred ideology has dominated the field of early childhood education (ECE). Many early childhood educators and experts believe that this ideology views young children in a more democratic and humanistic way. Consequently, the child-centred approach has been widely welcomed across the globe, including Africa. However, by emphasising the ‘naturalness’ of child development the child-centred approach has marginalised particular issues, such as gender and power, in the field of ECE (Adriany, 2016).

MacNaughton (2000) questioned the extent to which the child-centred ideology is gender-neutral. While many practitioners continue to see the ideology as an approach that does not promote particular gender norms and values, MacNaughton believes that it is gendered as it maintains and sustains particular gender norms and values that support a binary opposition between males and females in society. When girls show interest in playing with dolls or selecting pink clothing while boys demonstrate interest in playing with cars or wearing blue clothing, these are perceived as the children’s interests and are restricted by the principle of a child-centred approach. Teachers are unwilling to challenge these because to do so may disrespect what children want, an attitude that would be seen to violate the child-centred principle. MacNaughton (2000) and Connolly (2003) have pointed out possible tensions that result from the child-centred ideology, where teachers face the dilemma of whether to challenge children’s constructions of traditional binaries or to simply follow and allow whatever the children want to do. MacNaughton (2000) also argues that feminist perspective theories believe that *‘the innocence and naturalness of childhood is a myth; child-centred pedagogy regulates rather than frees the child; and gender politics flourish in developmentally appropriate programmes’*. Child-centred theory has also been contested because it tends to subordinate girls. As Connolly (2003) elaborates: *‘The model of children’s self-directed learning tends to privilege the needs and interest of boys, and conversely, tends to deny and subjugate those of girls. At the heart of this model is the view of the child as a ‘little scientist’ – naturally inquisitive about their immediate social environment and forever exploring and experimenting with it. This construction of the child as active, assertive and confident reflects the stereotypical traits traditionally associated with males and masculinity’*.

Early childhood educators have many responsibilities and challenging gender inequality can seem of less importance than keeping children safe, thinking about their development and providing for next steps, carrying out observations and assessments, communicating with parents and caretakers and the many other roles that need to be carried out daily (Tayler and Price, 2016). However, being open to thinking about all aspects of inclusion is a central and vital responsibility in early childhood education. Educational practice based on equality and justice is good educational practice and involves developing empowering relationships built on trust, respect and an appreciation of diversity. We have a responsibility to support

children's early learning and to help them unlearn the prejudices and discriminatory attitudes they absorb from the world around them (Brown, 1998).

In summary, there are plenty of needs and opportunities within early childhood education to challenge traditional gender stereotypes, to give boys and girls space to develop a strong sense of themselves and their value, and to give them the confidence to make their own choices, free of any sense that a fixed script has already been written for them.

5. Goals and objectives

The goal of gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education is that early childhood educators can support children to reach their full potential and not be constrained by gender expectations. The GRP4ECE toolkit will therefore introduce teachers, school leaders and teacher trainers to key aspects of gender in early childhood education. Effective teacher professional development trajectories will make use of this toolkit to effectively change attitudes, behaviours and practices in a sustainable way.

6. Implementation strategies

In line with Strategic Objective 1 of CESA 16-25 (“*Revitalize the teaching profession to ensure quality and relevance at all levels*”), the implementation strategies for GRP4ECE will focus on teacher professional development. An important precondition for teacher professional development on GRP4ECE is the development of a GRP4ECE toolkit.

The idea for a specific toolkit on GRP4ECE originated from two practice-oriented trainings in Zambia for more than 50 teachers and Zonal In-service Coordinators (ZICs), Standards Officers and Zonal Heads on Gender-Responsive Pedagogy (GRP) in the early years, organised by VVOB and FAWE in 2015. Several aspects of GRP were considered in these trainings: classroom set-up, teaching and learning materials, lesson delivery, language use, teacher-pupil interaction and pupil-pupil interaction. During school support visits, ZICs gave specific support to improve GRP in the classroom. Reports from these support visits show that teachers displayed and used gender sensitive materials and made conscious effort to involve boys and girls equally in activities. But gender biases – such as making girls responsible for tidying up and labelling boisterous boys as naughty – still exist. Teachers and ZICs indicated that more specific support for applying GRP in ECE in an effective way is needed.

Based on these experiences and feedback from teachers and other stakeholders, the further conceptualisation of a GRP4ECE toolkit was done in 2016. The development of the GRP4ECE toolkit started in 2017 and a first regional workshop on the GRP4ECE toolkit was organised in Zambia in May 2017. Three country working groups from Zambia, South Africa and Rwanda, started the development of this toolkit, guided by FAWE’s Regional Secretariat (FAWERS). The working groups include teacher education practitioners, VVOB Teacher Education Advisors and Gender Focal Persons, Ministry of Education representatives as well as FAWE local Chapters and the Regional Secretariat.

The objectives of this first regional workshop were to develop a table of contents for the toolkit, to divide writing assignments between the country teams, and to agree on an interactive learning format to include with the toolkit. During this workshop, the team received support from RoSa, a gender expertise centre based in Belgium. RoSa prepared a literature list for the toolkit writing process, shared practical tips on writing and some things to keep in mind while designing interactive formats. Representatives of the three country teams shared ideas of interactive formats. One of the outputs of this first regional workshop is a draft table of content for the GRP4ECE toolkit (Table 1).

Table 1: Draft table of content of the GRP4ECE toolkit

0. Preliminary section
1. Understanding gender
 - 1.1. Definitions of key concepts
 - 1.2. Gender in education
 - 1.2.1. Gender in the African education context
 - 1.2.2. Importance of gender in education
 - 1.2.3. Gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP)
2. Gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education (GRP4ECE)
 - 2.1. Relevance of gender-responsive pedagogy in early childhood education
 - 2.2. Teachers and unconscious bias
 - 2.3. Teaching and learning environment
 - 2.4. Language use at school and in the classroom
 - 2.5. Lesson planning and delivery
 - 2.6. Interactions
 - 2.7. Assessment
3. School management and leadership
 - 3.1. Gender-responsive school environment
 - 3.2. Child protection and school safety
 - 3.3. School health and nutrition
 - 3.4. Planning and budgeting
 - 3.5. Teacher supervision
 - 3.6. Parental and community involvement
4. Monitoring and reflection on gender-responsiveness of early childhood education
 - 4.1. Why the need for monitoring?
 - 4.2. How to use the gender lens checklists

Annexes

Gender lens checklists

A specific guide for teacher trainers will also be developed. The aim of the teacher trainer's guide is to give ideas of interactive ways to help teachers (and school leaders) discover the content of the teacher's guide. This guide would include the following:

- Chapter 1: Introduction (gender concept and importance of GRP)
- Chapter 2: Pedagogical chapter
- Chapter 3: School leadership
- Chapter 4: Monitoring and evaluating GRP4ECE

Different working groups have started writing out parts of this toolkit, which will be further finetuned, reviewed and finalised in subsequent regional workshops.

FAWE, VVOB and their partners are still welcoming others to support the development and use of the GRP4ECE toolkit. UNESCO-IICBA has already expressed its interest to provide technical advice and to contribute to the Africa-wide dissemination of the GRP4ECE toolkit.

The development of the GRP4ECE toolkit is expected to be finalised by mid-2018. The toolkit will be trialled out in pilot schools and later rolled out to initial teacher education institutions and providers of continuous professional development for early childhood education teachers.

Building on its more than 35 years of experience of working with Ministries of Education, initial teacher education institutions and providers of continuous professional development for teachers, VVOB documented the key characteristics of effective teacher professional development (Table 2), which will assist in the effective and sustainable rollout of teacher professional development about GRP4ECE.

Table 2: VVOB's key characteristics of effective teacher professional development

1. Effective teacher professional development is concrete and related to the context and content of teaching.
2. Effective teacher professional development emphasizes learning by doing and is oriented towards classroom implementation.
3. Effective teacher professional development is a continuum between initial teacher education, school-based induction systems for newly qualified teachers, and in-service teacher professional development.
4. Effective teacher professional development addresses deep reflections about teacher beliefs (e.g. about gender), which have a profound impact on classroom practices.
5. Effective teacher professional development combines school-based professional development with external inputs.
6. Effective teacher professional development is supported by effective school leadership.
7. Effective teacher professional development is rooted in reflection and self-evaluation.
8. Effective teacher professional development is inclusive, differentiated and flexible.
9. Effective teacher professional development sees learning as a process rather than a once-off event.

7. Analysis and interpretation

The marginalisation of gender issues from early childhood education often inhibits children from achieving their full potential. Neglecting gender issues in early childhood education (ECE) will naturalise school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) and aggression between children and between children and their teachers. In the long term, ignoring gender in ECE might result in restricted career options for men and women. By addressing gender in early childhood education, we expect the GRP4ECE toolkit to contribute to a good quality education which provides girls and boys with the skills they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies, and enhance individual well-being.

Attention should be paid to how the child-centred discourse in early childhood education influences the implementation of gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP), as the child-centred discourse could sustain gender regimes in schools. By developing more critical ways of perceiving the child-centred discourse, teachers would be able to negotiate their role in challenging children's gender construction without feeling guilty of being disloyal to the child-centred discourse.

One of the approaches which may be used for effective teacher professional development on GRP4ECE are professional learning communities (PLCs) of teachers. PLCs enable deep learning among their participants, and encourage the ownership of their learning. As such, PLCs have an influence on the practices and motivation of teachers, i.e. on what they do in their classrooms and on how they do it (VVOB, 2017).

It is anticipated that professional development of teachers, school leaders and teacher trainers with the GRP4ECE toolkit will also feed into their work in equity generally. Gender is just part of a much bigger picture of diversity that schools should be engaging with. Working on gender equity can lead schools onto the next step in working on equity in general.

8. Implications and key lessons for policy, planning and implementation

Early interventions targeted toward gender have much higher returns than later interventions. At current levels of resources, society overinvests in remedial investments at later ages and underinvests in the early years. Working with early childhood educators can be an effective way of impacting children in the early years. Initial gender norms (learned at home and in the community) can be challenged and/or reinforced in early childhood education.

Early childhood educators' interpretations of the curriculum are based on the beliefs, norms and values of society, also on gender. Gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education (GRP4ECE) should and can counteract traditional gender patterns and gender roles. There is a big need for GRP4ECE in Africa, and with the expansion of early childhood education services in Africa, the timing is right to include GRP4ECE in policies, strategic planning, curricula and budgets.

Orienting policy, planning and implementation towards GRP4ECE requires an integrated and multi-sectoral approach. Addressing the complexity of gender in the early years requires a flexible, but determined effort by governments and their partners. Policymakers and others – including schools and communities – have to seek ways to make the content and approaches of early childhood education more meaningful and effective within the context of promoting gender equity. A policy framework should place all learners at the centre of the teaching and learning process, emphasizing that, from the outset, policy must acknowledge their diverse characteristics, circumstances and learning needs and counter gender stereotyping. Strategies should draw on the strengths of learners and on their knowledge, interests and capacities.

Even though gender has often been overlooked in ECE curricula, changes can be initiated by early childhood educators. Early childhood educators can indeed challenge children's gender construction while at the same time remaining respectful to children's interests. But early childhood educators are often not trained in recognizing and combating gender stereotypes and prejudices—their own and others—and, therefore, they often model, expect, reinforce, and lay the foundation for gender differentiation among their learners. The complexity of gender equality and how to achieve it in early childhood education is an important task to discuss for teachers and school leaders. Policymakers should create and allow opportunities for early childhood educators to include gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP) in their continuous professional development, for instance in professional learning communities (PLCs).

For successful implementation of GRP4ECE, it is also important to first deconstruct early childhood educators' gender ideology. An important step of doing this is integrating GRP4ECE into initial teacher education. Curriculum reforms in initial teacher education should therefore include the integration of GRP4ECE.

9. References

Adriany, V. (2015). Gender in Pre-School and Child-Centred Ideologies. *Men, Masculinities and Teaching in Early Childhood Education: International Perspectives on Gender and Care*. Routledge.

African Union (2015). *Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025 (CESA 16-25)*. African Union.

Aina, O. E., & Cameron, P. A. (2011). Why Does Gender Matter? Counteracting Stereotypes with Young Children. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 39(3).

Brown, B. (1998). *Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years*. Trentham.

Browne, N. (2004). *Gender Equity in the Early Years*. McGraw-Hill Education.

Burman, E. (2016). *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. Taylor & Francis.

Carlson, E. A., & Egeland, B. (2004). The Construction of Experience: A Longitudinal Study of Representation and Behavior. *Child Development*, 75(1), 66-83.

Connolly, P. (2003). Gendered and gendering spaces: playgrounds in the early year's. In C. Skelton, & B. Francis (Eds.), *Boys and Girls in the Primary Classroom* (pp. 113-133). Open University.

Kane, E. W. (2012). *Rethinking Gender and Sexuality in Childhood*. A&C Black.

MacNaughton, G. (2000). *Rethinking gender in early childhood education*. Sage.

Martin, B. (2011). *Children at Play: Learning Gender in the Early Years*. Trentham.

Martin, C. L., & Ruble, D. (2004). Children's Search for Gender Cues: Cognitive perspectives on gender development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13(2), 67-70.

Narahara, M. M. (1998). *Gender Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books*. ERIC.

Piaget, J. (1954). *The Construction of Reality in the Child*. Basic Books.

Taylor, K., & Price, D. (2016). *Gender Diversity and Inclusion in Early Years education*. Routledge.

VVOB (2017). Putting SDG4 Into Practice: Professional Learning Communities in Education. *Technical Brief No. 2*. VVOB.

Wanjama, L.N., & Njuguna, W.N. (2016). *Documentation of Gender Responsive Pedagogy as a Best Practice by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)*. United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI).