

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Effectiveness of a gender-responsive pedagogy model in early childhood education in South Africa

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1. Introduction

Based on previous literature (among others, Bhana et al., 2011; Bian et al., 2017; Kilsby, 2014; Oliveira-Formosinho & Araújo, 2011), it is argued that proper timing of interventions in early childhood education is indispensable to tackle gender stereotypes and foster gender equity. Already by the age of seven, children have formed gender identities, and stereotypes become more rigid. Children are socialised early to accept social norms that legitimate gendered power hierarchies and that fuel the persistence of gender-based violence. Consequently, interventions aiming at equitable gender attitudes are protective against single and repeat episodes of intimate partner violence perpetration in adulthood. The gender socialisation of children means that they have different life experiences that play out in the education system, both within the pre-school classroom and later in higher education institutions. Children do not develop their full potential when gender biases occur. Negative stereotypes about girls' ability to perform well at school impact their learning opportunities and aspirations and, later, representation in technical careers. In adulthood, inherent gender differences lead to different labour market outcomes between men and women (e.g., gender pay gap).

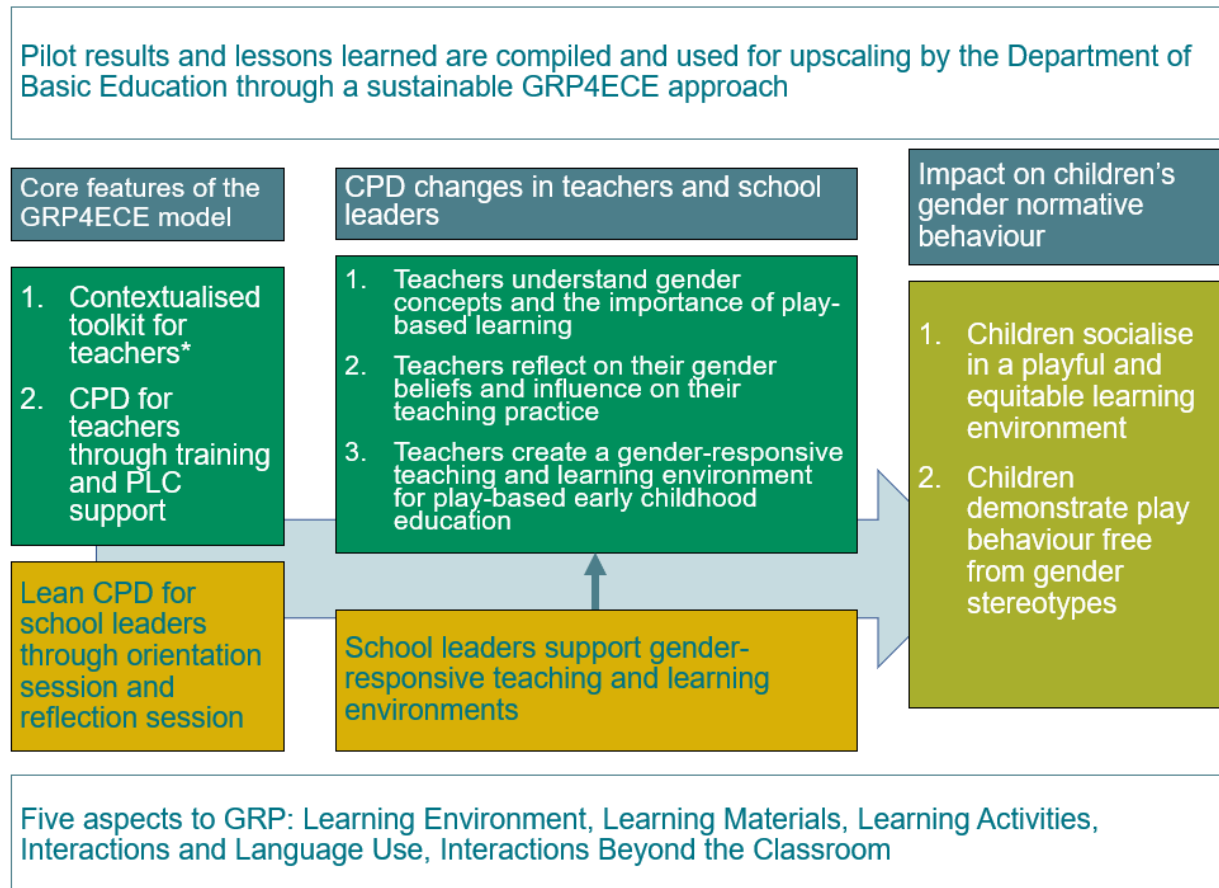
Different forms of gender-based violence insert urgency to early intervention in many African countries, including South Africa. The prevailing social environment and cultural context in South Africa facilitates considerable tolerance of violence, and, consequently, intimate partner violence and rape are widespread. Half of all women murdered are killed by their spouses – the highest rate of such murders in the world. An estimated 28–38% of adult South African men disclose rape perpetration (Abrahams et al., 2013; Jewkes et al., 2011). At the base of such an alarming observation are many complex social interactions that are culturally embedded and which often arise from an early age. They frequently relate to gender stereotypes and inherent perceptions on gender equity. Gender stereotypes are associated in the previous literature with intra-household emotional abuse, physical violence, and sexual harassment. It is also associated with school-related gender-based violence in a teacher-child relationship and between children. Gender stereotypes shape our behaviour, education, career choices, ambitions and relationships.

From the literature, we know that in South Africa, as in many other countries, most Early Childhood Development (ECD) programming tends to be gender-blind (not discriminating or distinguishing between different genders) rather than gender-sensitive (the process by which people are made aware of how gender plays a role in life through their treatment of others) and responsive, and there is a gap in interventions to address this. To tackle this gap, VVOB – *education for development*, the South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the South African Council for Educators (SACE) partnered in a pilot project on Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education (GRP4ECE) that ran over two years (January 2020 – December 2021). VVOB and the DBE collaborated to develop a practical toolkit on gender-responsive pedagogy for early childhood education that provides an opportunity to proactively bridge this gap for all young children.

The contextualized and tested GRP4ECE approach should provide school leaders and teachers with the necessary competencies to create and promote gender-responsive pedagogy in play-based teaching and early learning environments. From the literature review, we know that gender identities are formed in the early years, which emphasises the importance of intervening early to prevent gender

biases, social injustice, and inequities. Early learning environments hold the potential to actively challenge and transform gender stereotypes and norms. Guidance for educators is needed so they can be gender-responsive in play-based teaching practice in a contextually relevant way. From the literature review, we have also identified that adults unconsciously reproduce practices they were exposed to as children. Educators often do not identify gender stereotypes.

Figure 1: Intervention logic



*By the end of the GRP4ECE project, a full toolkit was developed, including a guide for school leaders, a PLC booklet, the [Sivalingana](#) video series, resources for parents and online courses

The contextualised toolkit to promote gender-responsive pedagogy was developed through a highly consultative process led by a task team of the DBE and supported by Stellenbosch University and other academics and practitioners. The toolkit was developed around three guides: one for teachers and practitioners, one for school leaders, and a Professional Learning Community (PLC) booklet. Additional videos, leaflets and posters were developed and were embedded in online courses for teachers and school leaders. The toolkit is structured around five aspects to GRP: the learning environment, learning materials, learning activities, interactions and language use and interactions beyond the classroom. As outlined in the intervention logic (figure 1), the core features of the GRP4ECE model are a contextualised toolkit for teachers and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers through training and PLC support. The CPD approach aims for teachers and school leaders to become cognisant of gendered realities in which children and parents/caregivers live. Through CPD activities,

teachers are able to understand gender concepts and the importance of play-based learning. Secondly, the CPD activities encourage teachers to reflect on their gender beliefs and the influence such beliefs have on their teaching practices to create a gender-responsive learning environment. The training was conducted in isiZulu, making use of English training materials.

Overall, the model seeks to equip teachers and school leaders to help children socialise in a playful and equitable learning environment and help children demonstrate play behaviour that is free of gender stereotypes.

The GRP4ECE model was tested through a CPD approach with practitioners and leaders from 103 ECD centres in one of the nine provinces of South Africa: KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). It is a rural province that holds 23.6% (163,000) of Grade R children in the country. In partnership with The Unlimited Child, 165 practitioners were trained in a three-day workshop and received additional follow-up support in the format of PLCs. PLC activities were conducted through site visits and WhatsApp support. WhatsApp/PLC groups were formed based on existing clusters. Twice per month, each WhatsApp group participant received a message on how to incorporate GRP in daily activities with learners. Such messages were followed up with questions to instill reflection and discussion on the theme in the WhatsApp group. Each centre was also visited twice. During these visits, a monitoring tool was used to assess practitioners' progress and implementation of GRP after the training and to identify needs for further support. Such additional support was offered through cluster meetings with practitioners from the ECD centres.

Leaders from the participating centres receive a one-day orientation session to expose them to the content of the teachers' guide and to reflect on their role to support a gender-responsive teaching and learning environment. Half a year after the orientation session, centre leaders join a cluster meeting to reflect on their support to practitioners.

2. Overview of Research

Evidence-based research evaluated the effectiveness of the GRP4ECE-project that was implemented in 84 ECD centres in Kwa-Zulu Natal province. The research products are presented in three working papers.

1. Exploring Gender-Responsive Pedagogy in Early Childhood Development in South Africa: A literature review
2. Towards a Gender-Responsive Climate in South African Early Childhood Education Through Continuous Professional Development of Teachers and School Leaders: A quantitative study
3. Promoting Gender-Responsive Pedagogy for Young Children in South Africa: A qualitative study

Research on the effectiveness of the GRP4ECE model was embedded at early stages in the project. We present the findings on net programme effects, backed up with a systematic literature review, site observations post-intervention in all ECD centres included in this study, and interviews with key informants at baseline and post-intervention. To estimate net programme effects, the impact study relies on a quasi-experimental treatment-control group research design using a baseline and post-intervention

study. The total sample consists of 230 ECD practitioners (teachers) in Kwa-Zulu Natal province. Furthermore, qualitative insights were drawn from a random selection of 15 teacher and 6 school management teams (SMTs) in the treatment group as well as 183 site observations with control and treatment centres (96 and 87 respectively). We mapped the direct effects of the GRP4ECE project on teachers' and SMTs' knowledge and attitudes (1), effects on their gender-responsive practices in the classroom and school (2), and the indirect effects on the children (3).

3. Findings

3.1. Changes in knowledge and attitudes of teachers and school leaders

The impact study indicated that several key questions were driving the changes in beliefs and practices of ECD practitioners, (e.g., There are some jobs that only men or women should do, or a boy should not behave like a girl). On these questions, the ECD practitioners in the treatment centres changed their answer significantly (i.e., 0.5 to 1 point on the Likert scale) compared to ECD practitioners of the control group, indicating that there has been a positive shift in the treatment group to becoming more gender responsive. On the contrary, and in line with the previous literature (e.g., Emilson, Folkensson, & Lindberg, 2016), it was found that ECD practitioners in treatment centres hardly changed their opinion about the question 'A person's gender is determined by nature (or birth)'. The change is close to 0 points on the 5-point Likert scale and not significant. This is an important question because it targets teachers' implicit views on gender, which are harder to change in a short period of time. But even in gender-neutral schools in Sweden, where gendered behaviour was not promoted over a longer period, Emilson et al. (2016) found that these implicit views on gender did not change as they conflicted with traditional family values.

Through qualitative, in-depth interviews with SMTs and teachers in the treatment group schools at both baseline and endline, it was evident that the training provided by VVOB impacted on the views and practices of SMTs and teachers in certain regards. Consistencies from baseline and endline were evident in the teachers' and SMTs' understanding of genders. Both SMTs and teachers reported that gender was socially constructed, rather than biologically determined, and was mostly influenced by the ECD centre as well as their families. This conflicted with earlier survey results which indicated that gender is determined by birth. ECD plays a crucial role in mitigating stereotypes of gender and preventing these stereotypes from impacting on children's understanding of gender and their development, self-confidence and relationship with others, now and in the future. Although key themes, such as the role of the ECD centre and the role of the family in shaping how gender is socially constructed remained the same between the baseline and endline interviews, it was clear that at endline, teachers changed their practices in line with their change of beliefs. It was reported by teachers that, following the VVOB training, children were encouraged to choose whatever clothing they liked and were no longer taught what different sexes should wear. This was another instance in which it was clear that the VVOB training changed the perceptions that teachers held in terms of gender and clothing and there was a change in the reported way in which they addressed this in their teaching practices. Some of

these findings were not explicitly mentioned during the baseline interviews (previous practices), which may have been a result of attempts to provide a socially desirable answer. Such responses surfaced during the endline interviews, where respondents could reflect back and identify how their increased knowledge, as a result of the training, had impacted on their knowledge and attitudes and shaped their new and current practices.

The training that the SMTs underwent also appears to have changed their views with regards to who they believe are more suitable for the role of an ECE teacher. While, at baseline, half of the SMTs interviewed believed that fewer men at ECD centres was a good thing, five of the six SMTs at endline reported that this was indeed not a good thing at all. Previous views held on why men are not suited to the role of an ECE practitioner included possible concerns by parents and caregivers of their child having a male teacher due to the high level of GBV and child sexual assault in the country, which may have had an impact on enrolment. Through this, the staff composition at the majority of the centres reflects traditional gender norms and includes mostly, if not only, female teachers. This results in a ripple effect, where learners then begin associating certain careers, such as being a teacher, as something which is only suited for females. The training that the SMTs underwent, therefore, had an impact on their views and understandings, with almost all of the SMTs at endline agreeing that men should become more involved in raising children and breaking these commonly held stereotypes. In summary, there is sufficient evidence, from the data collected, that the GRP4ECE intervention has raised awareness on gender-related issues and has got teachers and SMTs thinking and reflecting on how their prior practices have been reinforcing some normative ideas on gender. The shift in views and beliefs, as a result of the new knowledge obtained during the intervention, has influenced their behaviour in the classroom.

3.2. Changes in school and classroom practices

Impact results show a small to moderate impact of the GRP4ECE pilot on the gender-responsive practices in the ECD centres. The coefficient is equal to 0.283 SD and positive because of the increase of gender-responsive pedagogy and practices in the ECD centres. In line with the positive impact, results from the site observations indicated that the treatment group scored higher across all items – school environment, learning and teaching materials, learning environment, learning activities (play pedagogy), learning activities GRP, Interactions in the classroom (teacher), teacher's role in promoting play-based learning and gender-responsive pedagogy and interactions in the classroom (children) – in comparison with the control group. While observations were not conducted at baseline to assess any changes in each group, one can assume that the big shift in scores between the groups is due to the GRP training that was conducted with the treatment group.

Across all learning and teaching materials (classroom display, books, visual games, make-believe play area and construction area), more than 50% of the items in the treatment centre's classrooms promoted gender equity and encouraged varied types of play. Control centres had considerably fewer learning materials that promoted gender equity. The school and classroom resourcing and activities, together with teacher and SMT responses to the interview questions, strongly reflect the GRP pilot inputs and provide plausible evidence for the effectiveness of the intervention. The significantly higher score for

GRP aspects of classroom practice indicates a conscious implementation of what was learned. Higher treatment group scores in other aspects of teaching and learning, such as the amount of free play, attest to the promotion of play-pedagogy. This has been identified in a recent local study (Umalusi, 2021) as an area lacking in 'ordinary' preschools, compared with curricula such as Waldorf and Reggio Emilia.

Gender-responsive activities were evident within the classroom setup and practices as well. Children were not grouped according to biological sex but rather through various other methods, such as alphabetically, at random, or by learning ability, which remained gender neutral. Since groups had children of different sexes, chores could be assigned at random to the groups rather than to particular individuals, reinforcing the idea that no chores or jobs are specific to a particular sex. Teachers also noted that these grouping strategies assisted in providing children with a chance to play in all areas and not to dominate any particular play-space. More teachers reported at endline that they would intervene in cases where they had to encourage all children to play together. The teachers reported that grouping strategies and encouragement of children to play together clearly reflected a conscious implementation of GRP concepts to counter common normative grouping patterns (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Edwards et al., 2001; Shutts et al., 2017; Manaster & Jobe, 2012). This was reported as being directly related to the training in which they took part.

Not only did treatment centres have a wider variety of play and learning materials in the classroom that promoted gender equity, but they also set up the classrooms and learning materials in a way that encouraged all children to interact with one another, regardless of sex. This was achieved by providing a range of opportunities for the children to explore and learn. Within the treatment centres, practitioners ensured a learning environment that presented activities across the full play continuum and were careful to adapt stories and rhymes to be more gender neutral. No harsh discipline strategies were evident and disciplining strategies used were free of gender stereotypes. Both gender-neutral language and behaviour were always strongly promoted by the teacher. Results from this research indicate that teachers have been facilitating learning through play in various ways.

Peer interactions contribute significantly to the creation of gender identities in play interactions with each other, shaping both children's friendship patterns and their toy and activity preferences (Aina & Cameron, 2011). Preference for same-sex play companions is a well-documented culturally universal phenomenon.

It has been documented that play companions influence social interaction, activities and toy preferences, and there is evidence that young children who favour same-sex playmates develop more extreme gender-typed interests and behaviour over time (Shutts et al., 2017). Encouraging mixed sex groupings may assist in reducing stereotypical behaviour, however, it needs to be carefully managed and teachers may need to be directly involved (Edwards et al., 2001).

In most instances, teachers interviewed reported that children are taught in groups within the classroom. Most of the teachers noted that children of a different sex do not tend to dominate particular play activities because they combine both sexes in a group for activities (reported at both baseline and endline). Instead of grouping children by sex, groups are formed in the following ways:

- Children grouped by learning ability
- Children grouped by age

- Dividing the number of children in the class into equal groups at random
- Groups divided by the number of tables in the class
- Children placed into groups by alphabetical order

Pro-social behaviours are the basis for equitable and empathic relationships that support gender awareness pedagogy. Most of the treatment centres had frequent and positive interaction, warm contact and a pleasant atmosphere. There was effective use of non-punitive methods and staff applied rules consistently. The teacher had a consistent approach to disciplining boys and girls and often intervened to promote the inclusion of children.

In terms of addressing issues of gender socialisation and awareness of staff, the training appears to have had a big impact. At baseline, teachers and SMTs reported that there was some addressing of gender socialisation and awareness which took place. In most instances, however, a lack of knowledge and expertise hindered this process. During the endline interviews, all teachers and SMTs agreed that this was addressed at their centre. The VVOB training was referenced by various participants, who reported that the training had influenced their teaching and management practices at the centre and that there was a clear change in the level of awareness of gender socialisation amongst all staff and learnings. Similarly, while at baseline at least half of the participants reported not knowing how to monitor gender awareness in the classrooms, the increased knowledge from the training assisted with this.

The value of the training was evident to all those interviewed at endline following the pilot. All participants expressed interest in learning even more about gender-responsive teaching and learning going forward. SMTs and teachers believed that GRP training would enhance a practitioner's expertise and knowledge. As a result, increasing the practitioner's knowledge around gender issues would be beneficial for children's development by assisting to raise well-balanced and tolerant adults. Equipping teachers with these skills will also help to combat resistance from parents and caregivers and bring more awareness to the communities in which they are situated. This will result in improved gender attitudes and assist in challenging gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality well beyond the classroom.

3.3. Changes in children's gender normative behaviour

In this last section, we looked at whether changes in gender-responsive practices by teachers and school leaders in the classroom and school impacted on children's gender normative behaviour. This was studied through teacher perceptions on gender normative behaviour. The survey scale was divided in two subscales: 1) teachers' perceptions on child-level gender-normative behaviour, and 2) teachers' perceptions on child-level gender nonconformity. Our results on gender normative behaviour should be interpreted with caution because of the poor reliability of the scale. However, the scale regarding gender nonconformity meets the conventions on reliability. The impact study indicates that teachers' assessment of changes in children's gender-normative behaviour closely follows a coefficient of -0.25 SD, which indicates a small impact. This finding included control variables in the regression analysis. Regarding the subscale on gender nonconformity, we observed a positive, significant moderate effect of GRP4ECE of 0.407 SD. The sign is positive because treated teachers perceive that children increasingly overcome gender stereotypes. Through interview findings, it was found that at baseline, teachers and SMTs reported a high degree of consensus around children having preferences for certain

play materials, activities and spaces, which was in line with the current literature (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010; Klass, 2018). Following the training for the GRP4ECE project, more teachers and SMTs encouraged children to play in a range of play areas and engage with varied learning materials and toys. This change was reported by participants as being directly related to the training they participated in, indicating that the training was successful in helping teachers be more aware of instances where children are showing preference, and encouraging them to play with all toys and engage in all activities. This is also reflected in the results of a quantitative study assessing children's gender nonconformity. Nonetheless, while there is evidence within the results that teachers have changed their behaviour, there may not have been sufficient time between the baseline and endline to identify major changes in behaviour at the level of the child. Changing behaviour is a process that might require additional time and should, therefore, be monitored closely.

4. Recommendations

Based on conclusions drawn from this research and testing the effectiveness of the GRP4ECE model, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. There is a growing sense of urgency within the literature for work on gender within ECE teaching and learning to be done. The literature recommends that there is a need to bring work on gender to the forefront during these early stages of child development when children develop gender norms and identities that will have an impact on their future lives. Given the need for more gender-responsive and sensitive teaching and learnings, as well as the clear evidence from this research showing that the GRP intervention was effective in increasing awareness and challenging gender stereotypes and stereotypical behaviour, the intervention has clear potential to be scaled up.
2. As part of the up-scaling process, it is also recommended that the model be tested on a larger scale across the different provinces of South Africa. The current research has assessed the effectiveness of the model with ECD centres in KZN only.
3. Within the South African context, a local approach for ECE teacher training, as provided by the GRP4ECE model, should continue to be targeted at the poorer and rural areas, such as KZN, where there are deeply ingrained gender norms and roles within the community that easily influence young children.
4. At a policy level, there need to be targeted measures in place to ensure that all children are given a gender-equal and gender-neutral education. Children should never be separated in terms of learning or development. The first step to ensuring that all children are given a gender-equal education is to bring awareness to the teachers and school leaders. The intervention was successful in doing so and, therefore, has the potential to be implemented on a larger scale, with research findings supporting future policy development.
5. Following on the previous recommendations and numerous suggestions, which surfaced from this research, support for discussions on gender responsiveness with communities and parents and caregivers needs to be provided. While it is imperative to conduct gender responsiveness training with ECE teachers, perceptions within the community need to be targeted at the same time to ensure

a more successful result. Investigation into a scalable model is, therefore, recommended. By fostering the development of human resources for the whole community, a sustainable approach to creating gender equality can be created. While one of the aspects of the GRP toolkit is centred around interactions beyond the classroom (working with parents and caregivers) through open educational resources, this component could be strengthened to provide more support to teachers and SMTs in terms of how to initiate and have conversations around issues of gender with parents, caregivers and the community at large.

6. A strong support network for ECE teachers and SMTs is needed as they work to promote gender-responsiveness within the schools. The support structure should include key people with extensive knowledge on promoting gender-responsiveness. These structures should be focussed on sharing learning resources, content, knowledge and pedagogical practices, to ensure gender-responsiveness in their teaching.
7. It was evident from the ways in which teachers described how they facilitated learning through play in their classrooms that teachers participating in this pilot had prior training on play-based pedagogy. This prior training was found to be supportive of the GRP training as less attention had to be given to how to stimulate a play-based pedagogy. Training teachers on play-based pedagogy in cases where they have not previously been trained is therefore strongly recommended as this will support the GRP training in terms of seeing bigger change.
8. While teachers were able to change their attitudes, beliefs and subsequent practices quickly, children took more time to change behaviour. It is therefore recommended that the model be strengthened in terms of behaviour change at the level of the child.
9. Deeply ingrained views of roles and careers associated with certain sexes (which stem from early childhood experiences) were successfully changed by the training. There was, however, insufficient time to witness a change in practices, since changing the composition of staff within a centre might require additional time. Future research studies should be conducted over a longer duration of time to identify if changes within the classroom have held up and whether new practices within the school as a whole has been implemented. Behaviour-related beliefs often take time to change. Therefore, it is recommended that during the up-scaling of the intervention, future training trajectories provide teachers and SMTs sufficient time to implement their training before being re-evaluated.
10. More research should be done on the extent to which the family and larger community influence a child's gender development. While there have been massive transformations over the last century in terms of the role that men and women play, this may not be the case within the rural areas of Africa.

5. Conclusion

The pilot was highly successful in getting teachers to start reflecting on their previous knowledge and attitudes, which may have been introducing gender stereotypes. Through the awareness brought about by the training and their subsequent reflection thereof, the training was successful in changing teachers' gender-related attitudes and behaviours. Teachers and SMTs saw clear value in the GRP training and

strongly believed that it would enhance their expertise and knowledge. All participants expressed interest in learning even more about gender-responsive teaching and learning. It can, therefore, be said that the training was interesting, appealing to the target audience and undoubtedly had an immediate effect on changing knowledge, attitudes and beliefs, as well as initiating a change in behaviours and practices.

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