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## **RAISING AWARENESS: HELPING FOUNDATION PHASE LEARNERS UNDERSTAND GENDER EQUALITY**

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### **Abstract**

Raising awareness about gender equality has been shown to be essential for young learners, as it assists them to understand concepts of fairness and equal treatment, regardless of their gender. This participatory action research study explores how early-grade teachers can help raise awareness and promote gender equality in South African classrooms. The study uses a qualitative research approach. Six teachers were purposively sampled from three government schools located in rural areas of the Vhembe District in Mudaswali circuit. Semi-structured (focus group) interviews and observations were used to collect in-depth views from participants. Data analysis was done using thematic analysis. Five key concepts emerged that highlight the advantages of inclusive teaching methods as well as the ongoing difficulties. Although learners showed more understanding and interest in fair treatment of all genders, strong stereotypes and cultural pushbacks, particularly from their families, were evident. The study shows the significance of using inclusive materials and having teacher-led conversations. The study also emphasises how crucial it is for parents to get involved and for the content to represent many cultural perspectives. The results highlighted the need to provide teachers with the right tools and methods to address gender bias starting from an early age. Teachers are working to encourage equality, but the environment frequently makes this difficult.

*Keywords: Early childhood education, Foundation phase, Gender equality, Inclusive teaching, Raising Awareness*

### **Introduction**

One of the most important concepts for ensuring that everyone is treated equally and given access to education is gender equality. In South Africa, early childhood education offers a significant opportunity to shape young children's perspectives about gender roles. However, the new government of South Africa, which began in 1994, marked a significant shift. In 1996, they created a new set of national regulations for the country. The government made a law to prevent unfair treatment based on gender. Numerous regulations have been developed to ensure that boys and girls are treated equally in schools. These rules have ensured that boys and girls attend school on an equal basis, and more of them participated in school related activities (Reddy & Moletsane, 2020). Although more learners are able to attend school, both boys and girls do not obtain very high-quality education. Without realising it, many teachers in rural areas still follow old ways of thinking about gender and are unaware of how their classroom practices reinforce gender stereotypes. Many teachers unintentionally still use teaching methods that promote gender unfairness, either by coincidence or because they are unaware of the ways in which their actions contribute to gender inequality. Because the narrative is that boys are stronger than girls, the teacher could, for example, ask the boys to move the table (Mayeza, 2018). While girls are supposed to be silent or to perform specialised tasks, guys are frequently perceived as stronger or more capable of leadership. These beliefs are often shared without people realizing it, including teachers who might not have been properly trained in teaching gender issues (Dlamini & Jacobs, 2019). As a result, the classroom can become a place where boys and girls are treated unfairly without anyone intending to do so.

In early childhood, particularly for learners between the ages of 5 to 9, children start to learn about the world around them, including how boys and girls are expected to behave (UNESCO, 2021). If learners don't get proper guidance about these early ideas, they might grow up believing that boys and girls can only do certain things, which is not true or fair (Blaise & Taylor, 2020). Even though these behaviours may not be viewed as unfair, they often display hidden biases that reinforce stereotypical ideas and typical traditional gender roles and norms. As a result, opportunities to advance equity, inclusiveness, and equal treatment for learners are usually overlooked.

This study examines the ways in which teachers can support gender equality by raising awareness, using inclusive materials, and encouraging open discussions with learners.

Teachers have a crucial role in supporting or changing these rules. According to Ngcobo and Mthembu (2020), young learners continue to face discriminatory gender stereotypes in their homes, schools, and communities, which might hinder them and promote social injustice. The objective of the study is to explore the different methods that teachers use to raise awareness about gender equality in foundation phase classrooms and how these awareness activities help learners to understand fairness, inclusion, and equal treatment for both genders. Another objective is to understand how teachers help in starting conversations and dealing with gender stereotypes in the classroom. Finally, to make recommendations on how to involve teachers and the curriculum in order to enhance gender equality for both boys and girls in the foundation phase.

### **Literature review**

Foundation Phase learners are at a pivotal point in their development of values of equality, respect, justice and inclusion. Children in Grades R–3 who are just beginning their formal education are known as Foundation Phase learners; they are typically between the ages of 5 and 9 (UNESCO, 2021). This stage is about building the basic skills in reading, writing, socialising and everyday life skills, which will help the Foundation Phase learners to grow academically and socially in the future (Hernandez, Chikapa, & Letsoalo, 2024). At this age, children are developing their language, social skills, reasoning and feelings. It is an important time when young children begin to learn about social rules, including what society expects from boys and girls (UNESCO, 2021).

If gender biases are not addressed by teachers in the early years of a child's life, these beliefs may become stronger and negatively affect how children see themselves, what they want to achieve, and how they relate to others (MacNaughton, 2020). According to UNICEF (2023), children start to learn about gender roles from a young age through influences like parents, teachers, friends, media, and cultural traditions. These basic skills shape how learners view themselves and other people, which may lead to rigid beliefs about what is appropriate behaviour for boys and girls. Campbell, Brunsting, Landmark, Butler, & Cook, (2025) argued that teachers may unintentionally reinforce prejudices if they are not informed and trained.

This highlights how crucial it is that teachers receive training that takes gender concerns into account. Govender (2020) points out that there are ongoing differences in reading and writing skills between boys and girls in young students in South Africa. Her study found that boys usually do worse than girls in reading and writing skills. This might be related to expectations based on gender and how things work in the classroom. This highlights the importance for teachers to use teaching methods that consider gender, so that all students can participate equally and break down stereotypes that impact their school performance. Venketsamy and Kinear (2020) say that teaching about sexuality in early school years is important to raise awareness about gender and to help stop abuse. Their research shows that teaching learners about body autonomy and respecting gender from a young age can help them build better friendships and decrease gender-based problems.

Educational resources are crucial. Campbell et al. (2025) demonstrated the significance of presenting narratives that challenge conventional gender norms, such as stories about fathers raising children or women who pursue careers in science. These stories help children see that gender roles can be different and not limited to what they typically believe them to be. This is consistent with the participants' statements in this study. Inclusive storybooks made the learners curious and helped reduce gender-based harassment. The researcher believes that fostering critical thinking and empathy in young learners can be achieved by using the appropriate educational materials and having meaningful conversations. However, these efforts face challenges in societies with strong traditional ideas about gender.

According to UNESCO (2023), early action to challenge strict gender roles helps to create equity in education and society over time. Therefore, gender stereotypes should be addressed from an early age. Teachers in South Africa frequently struggle to strike a balance between traditional cultural expectations and the progressive goal of gender parity (Ngcobo & Mthembu, 2020; Dlamini & Jacobs, 2019). The findings confirmed that learners get confused because they receive opposing messages about gender equality development which makes it harder for them to understand their own gender identity. The researchers wanted to emphasis that raising awareness to encourage gender equality in young children should involve families and communities. This will contribute to the

development of stable and encouraging settings for change. Because after school, learners go back to the community and hear narratives that are different from those reinforcing gender equality they may have learned about at school. This supports the aim of increasing understanding about gender equality in the early stage of education.

Sikhwari (2025) looks at how School Governing Bodies (SGBs) help promote fairness between genders in early education. He discovered that when school governing bodies help with gender-inclusive policies and training for teachers, schools are more likely to adopt practices that question traditional gender roles. This support from the organization is important for keeping gender awareness programs running in the classroom. UNESCO (2019) offers a worldwide plan for including gender equality in teacher training. The guide suggests that teachers should learn how to spot and fight against gender bias in what they teach, how they talk to students, and how they grade them. Using these ideas in early education can help children form fair views about gender from a young age.

However, VVOB South Africa (2024) created a training presentation for early childhood development workers to encourage fairness between genders in early childhood care. The resource helps teachers think about their own biases and use language, materials, and activities that include everyone. This training is important for helping teachers create learning spaces that treat all genders equally. The Department of Basic Education (2018) published a guide to help teachers use gender-sensitive teaching methods for young children. It includes useful ideas like changing who does different jobs in the classroom, using a variety of storybooks, and promoting play between boys and girls. These methods help break down strict ideas about gender and encourage fair attitudes in young students.

Bhana (2016) conducted ethnographic research in a primary school in South Africa to examine how boys and girls create their gender identities. She noticed that learners often learn about gender roles by interacting with their friends and from their teachers. Her research findings show that taking action early is important to change these patterns and help people have a more flexible view of gender. Rephrase

In brief, the research shows that early childhood education has a critical role in shaping learners' perceptions of gender. According to Keddie and Mills (2020), who assert that play and storytelling assists young learners in discovering various identities, this study emphasises the value of ongoing support for teachers and easily accessible educational resources that can help combat stereotypes and promote gender equality from an early age. Reddy and Moletsane (2020) caution that for curriculum to be effective in South Africa, they must be tailored to local culture. Govender and Moodley (2022) argued that if parents do not get involved, school-based programs might be at risk of being undermined at home. UNICEF (2017) highlights the need for early childhood development programs that consider gender. Their report supports creating school programs and training for caregivers that understand the different needs of boys and girls. By including gender awareness in early learning, teachers can help promote fairness in society over time.

The findings of this study closely align with trends happening around the world. In the United Kingdom, for instance, schools and regulations work to ensure that all people, regardless of gender, are included starting from early education. Demirkol (2022) adds that teachers should be trained to challenge stereotypes by using storybooks, having open talks, and treating all learners fairly in the classroom.

South African teachers who would want to make a change, face challenges of not having enough support from their schools, particularly in rural areas. This makes it difficult to implement and put their ideas into action. In Kenya, a study showed that cultural beliefs significantly influenced how people view gender in early childhood centers. Similar to their South African counterparts, Kenyan teachers often reinforce stereotypes and prejudices without meaning to, particularly when they have not received training on gender equality (Hassani, Mutekwe, Rakumako, 2021). Nonetheless, even small changes, like teacher workshops and using diverse classroom teaching resources, led to noticeable improvements in how learners perceive gender expectations.

In South Africa, many schools, particularly those in rural and under-resourced areas, lack access to inclusive materials, lack parental support, and adequate training, (UNESCO, 2021; Ngcobo, Mthembu, 2020, Otoole, Keating, & Baker, 2022). Scholars contend that the layout of schools and the set-up of the environment play a significant role in assisting teachers in promoting gender equality in early education. For instance, in rural schools in the Vhembe district area, there are insufficient learning resources that meet everyone's needs, parents provide little assistance, and teachers receive inadequate gender equality training. This may lead to situations where discriminatory gender stereotypes are unintentionally reinforced. In South Africa, a majority of teachers in the foundation classes are women. In the Foundation Phase, there are not many male teachers, and the ones who are there often focus on being strict, which can reinforce traditional male roles in society. More male teachers, particularly those who advocate for gender equality, should be hired and retained in early childhood education. They can inspire learners and other teachers by providing positive examples of being a man and encouraging all learners to embrace gender equality.

The opportunities and challenges of introducing gender equality in Foundation Phase classrooms across Africa, and particularly in South Africa, have been the subject of numerous research (Pillay & Mphahlele, 2023). Dlamini and Jacobs (2019) emphasised the importance of teacher empowerment and critical reflection, after findings in their study. It revealed that Foundation Phase teachers in KwaZulu-Natal often reinforced traditional gender norms due to lack of knowledge, professional training and limited awareness. Similarly, Ngcobo and Mthembu (2020) found that cultural beliefs and societal expectations deeply influenced classroom practices, often resulting in the unintentional strengthening of gender stereotypes by teachers. Learners' views are still influenced by cultural differences and parents do not think to talk about gender equality as it goes against traditional beliefs. Being aware that society's norms and expectations might result in unequal treatment of boys and girls, conventional gender roles and beliefs should not be undermined by parents and the community. It is vital to raise gender awareness. Gender awareness seeks to support fairness and equality by recognizing and dealing with these differences (UNICEF, 2023). To address these issues and guarantee that everyone has a thorough grasp of gender education, legislators, families and schools must work together (Mahadew & Hlalele, 2022).

Similar to South Africa and Kenya, Okafor and Chika (2020) observed that Foundation Phase teachers typically follow traditional beliefs, particularly in conservative communities. Gender-responsive strategies should be implemented in classrooms to treat boys and girls equally. For example, when learners took turns serving as class leaders, Mulovhedzi (2017) observed a shift in the way learners behaved with regard to gender equality. This shows that raising teachers' awareness and understanding of gender equality can greatly aid in bringing changes, even without big changes in the system.

However, by highlighting that "intentional teaching about gender equality during early childhood leads to more inclusive classroom interactions and challenges binary stereotypes," Blaise and Taylor (2020) also support the idea that indeed raising awareness can help Foundation Phase learners to understand the importance of equality. Similarly, a UNICEF (2023) global review emphasized that "learners exposed to gender-inclusive practices from an early age are more likely to respect diversity and engage in collaborative learning environments, irrespective of their gender".

Inclusive teaching materials have also been identified as a powerful tool in raising gender awareness. According to Mabena and Khumalo (2022), learners who read different gender-neutral storybooks began to question traditional gender roles and took part more equally in class activities. "Traditional gender roles are culturally and historically rooted expectations that prescribe specific behaviors, attributes, and responsibilities to individuals based on their biological sex" (Ahmed, 2024). These roles often perpetuate binary notions of masculinity and femininity, which can limit personal development and reinforce social inequality (Bermúdez, Dabetić, and Saeidzadeh, 2023).

These findings are consistent with the current study since they show how teacher-led activities contributed greatly to young children's understanding of gender equality. Similarly, as mentioned by Freeman, Colomer, and Trépanier-Street (2021), to promote equality and social justice from an early age, school curriculum should include different gender identities and roles. While most existing studies focus on strategy and teacher attitudes, there is a growing need for classroom-based, participatory and research that captures learners' evolving perceptions of gender equality (Khoza, 2024). This gap highlights the significance of studies like the present one, which aims to explore how raising awareness through intentional teaching practices can influence Foundation Phase learners' perceptions of gender roles and equality.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is underpinned by Feminist Pedagogy, a critical educational theory that emphasizes equality, empowerment, and the breakdown of societal hierarchies, particularly those pertaining to gender equality. This theory serves as the foundation for this current study by echoing the dismantling of social orders related to gender (Hooks, 1994; Shrewsbury, 1993). Feminist pedagogy encourages learners to speak up, collaborate, and reflect on their learning. It goes against traditional ways of teaching where teachers are in control and may show bias based on old ideas about gender. This theory helps teachers to fight against unfair educational practices. Shrewsbury (1993) explains the Feminist pedagogy as a way of learning and teaching that focuses on the value of community and shared control in the classroom.

Feminist pedagogy holds that rather than being objective, education is a powerful tool that either supports or challenges the existing social rules (MacNaughton, 2020). In early childhood education, children are still learning about the world including what it means to be a boy or a girl. During this time, they observe gender stereotypes—such as the idea that boys are better at Maths. The teacher, serving as both role model and facilitator, can assist young learners to start challenging those stereotypes. Teachers support children in challenging these stereotypes

and understanding justice, equality, and the idea that all people are created equal by using inclusive language, resources, and teaching methods (O'Donnell and Lydon, 2021).

This study encouraged teachers to consider their teaching methods carefully and help learners to recognize and question gender stereotypes. Using the Feminist pedagogy, this study presents the classroom as a transformative environment where learners and teachers exchange knowledge regarding gender equality (Hassani, et al, 2021). It provides a starting point for understanding how thoughtful and inclusive teaching can fight early gender stereotypes and contribute to long term social change.

### **Method**

This study used a qualitative research approach together with a participatory action research (PAR) approach. The researchers and the participants worked together to brainstorm and develop better approaches to promote gender equality. Participatory Action Research (PAR) develops meaningful solutions, by tackling real-life issues and drawing on the cultural and social understanding of the people involved. It promotes social justice and challenges inequality (Baum, MacDougall & Smith, 2006). Through collaborative research, Participatory Action Research (PAR) improves research skills, critical thinking, and teamwork, laying a strong foundation for further community engagement and positive change (Padayachee, Maistry, Harris & Lortan, 2023). It ensures that research is participatory, action-oriented, considers the local context, and aims for equity. This research design is good for studies that aim to advance fairness, inclusion, respect, and equality. Participants will share their thoughts and experiences about what they have encountered.

The research was conducted in three government schools in the Mudaswali circuit of the Vhembe District in the Limpopo province. Purposive sampling was employed to select six teachers, two in grade 3 from each school in order to gather rich and relevant insights for raising awareness to help Foundation Phase learners to understand gender equality.

This study used in-depth semi-structured (focus group) interviews to help generate themes for data presentation and analysis, draw conclusions, and answer research questions based on strategies that can be used. The main focus was determining how awareness-raising activities guided by teachers influence Foundation Phase learners in their understanding of gender equality and encourage fairness, storytelling, and role-playing. According to Padayachee et al. (2023), Foundation Phase learners explore gender roles and challenge stereotypes in constructive, peer-supported ways, fostering shared ownership and respect based on their educational level. A number of open-ended questions centred around the subject of interest were a part of the semi-structured or focused group interviews.

The researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps procedure to analyze, transcribe, and code the data thematically. Manual coding was used to find common themes and contradictions in the teachers' statements. Researchers got ethical clearance to conduct the study and ensured everyone involved agreed to participate voluntarily.

### **Findings**

The analysis of the information from the focus group discussion with six teachers, two from each of School's A, B, and C revealed five important themes. The results showed that although learners were more aware of gender equality, there were still some persisting issues. Among these were strong stereotype beliefs and differences between what is taught at school and what is experienced at home. Data saturation was reached as the teachers from various schools shared the same concerns and observations.

#### **Theme 1: Better Understanding of Fairness and Equality for Learners**

All six teachers saw a clear change in how students took part in classroom activities, moving away from old ideas about what boys and girls should do. Teacher 1 from School A said, "Boys and girls both want to help clean the board or be first in line, it's not just for boys anymore." Teacher 2 from School C supported this by saying, "It's now normal to see a boy helping to hand out books or clean up the reading area." Teacher 2 from School B said that even though everyone took part in easy tasks, some old ideas about leadership persisted. She stated, "When it comes to being a leader in math, boys tend to take the lead more than girls. Girls often feel unsure or wait for someone to choose them." This means that although some hidden issues with gender inequality, particularly those related to who has power or confidence, still exist, students are starting to grasp equality in everyday classroom tasks.

#### **Theme 2: Challenging Old Ideas About Gender Roles**

Teachers noticed that students were starting to ask more questions about stereotypes in a positive and

constructive way. Teacher 1 from School B said a learner questioned why a girl in a story was repairing a car. Before, they used to laugh, but now they were interested and paying attention. Teacher 1 from School C said a boy once said that his sister is better at soccer than he is. They now view roles in a new perspective. However, Teacher 2 from School A felt differently about it saying, "Some kids still laugh when boys do things that are perceived as 'girly'. They understand what we teach, but they aren't completely okay with it yet." This shows that students are starting to consider gender roles more thoroughly, but they still have some doubts or hesitations, particularly when influenced by their friends.

**Theme 3: How Teaching Materials Affect Opinions Using inclusive storybooks and pictures made a big difference.**

Teacher 1 from School B explained, "There was a book about a girl who was a firefighter, and the students were really interested in it. They stopped referring to it as a "man's job"." Teacher 2 from School A said, "I told them a story about a dad who stayed home while the mom went to work. They were surprised, but they accepted it." "However, sometimes the stories are very different from what really happens," Teacher 1 from School C warned. They often question whether such a place exists and whether there are truly mothers like the ones described. This shows that using inclusive materials is important, but there's a catch: children understand better when the materials relate to their own cultural or social contexts.

**Theme 4: Teacher-Guided Talks Created a Safe Space for Conversation**

All the teachers noticed that organized discussions encouraged learners to ask questions about gender roles. Teacher 1 from School A considered it and mentioned that during circle time, one girl said her brother told her that girls shouldn't play with robots. The others started engaging in the conversation and it was powerful. Additionally, Teacher 2 from School C also mentioned that some students talked about what goes on in their homes. It helped them realize that not everything they hear is true. However, Teacher 1 from School B stated that, "Not all students join in." Boys sometimes make jokes or steer clear of the subject, especially when it seems too personal. The talks allowed for some thinking, but not all students felt at ease. This shows we need to create ways to assist everyone to take part more comfortably.

**Theme 5: Standing Up to Culture and the Importance of Parents Getting Involved**

All six participants talked about concerns they had about differences between what learners learn at school and what their families believe. Teacher 2 from School A said, "Some parents wonder why we allow boys to sweep in class. They still say it is work for girls." Teacher 2 from School B said, "One parent asked me if I was making boys into girls by letting them help in the kitchen during pretend play." Teacher 1 from School C stressed, "Students get confused. They believed us, but then they went home and heard different things. It makes them move forward more slowly." Even though the teachers saw the problem, none of them knew how to address the issue. This highlights a significant issue: if parents do not get involved and support their children, what is learned in the classroom may not lead to lasting changes in how they think.

**Discussion**

This study looked at discussions with six teachers from three schools. It showed that there have been some improvements but there are still some challenges in educating young learners to understand gender equality. The key ideas demonstrated that learners are starting to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and are becoming more open to gender equality. However, there are several issues, like internalized preconceptions, lack of cultural connection in materials, inconsistent learner engagement, and pushbacks from parents, that speaks to how complicated this change will be. In Theme 1, teachers from all three schools noticed that students, no matter their gender, were more willing to help out with classroom tasks. This observation backs up recent research showing that young learners can start to behave more fairly towards different genders when they are in classrooms that support equality (Hassani et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Teachers are very important in either supporting or questioning these ideas, but many of them still do not have the right training and resources to do this well. However, the South African government and its partners have started many programs to help teachers. According to UNESCO and VVOB (2021) the GRP4ECE, the SIYALINGANA guide (from UNESCO, 2023), and a toolkit from UNICEF (2020) offer helpful ideas and plans for teaching that considers gender. These resources focus on using inclusive language, a variety of learning materials, and teaching methods that encourage thoughtful reflection. The researchers noticed that these changes on the surface were positive, but they were insufficient. While some learners happily took on tasks like cleaning or helping, many, especially girls, were hesitant about taking on leadership roles.

This highlights that deep-rooted beliefs about gender roles still exist even though there seem to be progressive changes. This idea is supported by recent research by Dlamini and Nkoane (2022), which found that people might seem to participate equally, but underlying issues of power and self-confidence still persist. Theme 2 provided more proof that students are actively thinking about stereotypes. Teachers talked about times when boys recognized what girls could do or challenged ideas about what boys and girls should do. This matches what Keddle and Mills (2020) said, “When learners are asked to think about gender roles in stories, they start to change the way they think about them.” Still, some students laughed or felt uneasy with different ways people express their gender beliefs, showing that not everyone is accepting the change. The researchers realised that these different reactions were an important reason for this study. To continue changing their attitudes, teachers require resources as well as ongoing assistance, particularly in settings where their peers are resistant to adopting new approaches. The research and rules show that increasing awareness of gender issues in the early education stage is both important and possible. Early childhood is an important time for learners to learn about who they are and fairness. However, traditional ideas about gender still affect what happens in classrooms, what is taught, and what teachers expect from students (Cekiso, 2015; Singh & Bipath, 2024).

In Theme 3, all the teachers pointed out how crucial teaching materials are in shaping learners’ perspectives. They emphasize books and pictures that talk about gender equality, demonstrating what boys and girls are capable of. Some participants mentioned that some materials seemed too distant or unrealistic for the learners, especially when they showed city life or family situations that were different from what the learners were used to. Reddy and Moletsane (2020) agreed that it is important to have teaching materials that are based on local cultures and fit the needs of South African classrooms. As the researchers, our job was to watch and assist people to use relevant and contextual educational materials. VVOB South Africa (2024) and AthenaAI (2025) provide teaching ideas like sharing leadership roles among students and using storybooks that don't reinforce stereotypes to encourage everyone to participate equally. Even with these efforts, things are not being done consistently. Singh and Bipath (2024) discovered that many teachers still have hidden biases that affect how they interact with students. Jagles (2025) and Skae, Brown, and Wilmot (2020) show how important it is to create classrooms where every child feels appreciated. The researchers quickly realized that while diversity is important, it needs to connect with the learner’s lived experiences for it to be impactful and make a difference in their understanding. Theme 4 showed that when teachers lead discussions, it helps create a safe place for students to share their thoughts and question ideas. These discussions show Freire's ideas about learning through conversation (Freire, 2021), where people make sense of things by talking and reasoning together. Teachers said that talking like this helped reveal hidden beliefs and made people think about their own family values. They also said that participation wasn't equal, especially from boys, who sometimes lost interest or made jokes during talks. This backs up new research by Mahlomaholo and Thwala (2024), which highlights how important it is for teachers to have training that focuses on gender. This training helps them deal with resistance and encourage open discussions. The researchers realised that without strong guidance, these sessions might make people silent instead of helping them change. Lastly, Theme 5 pointed out a big issue: people at home were against gender equality because of their cultural norms. All the people involved said that parents usually hold outdated beliefs, making it hard for learners to understand gender equality and causing them to resist what is taught in class. This topic supports what Govender and Moodley (2022) stated, that school programs about gender are unlikely to succeed without involvement of parents. The researchers found the gap very concerning. Teachers are working to encourage equality, but the world around them often makes it difficult.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study gives helpful information on how significant it is to teach learners about gender equality in early school years, but it has some limitations. First, the research was done with a small group of six teachers from three schools in a certain area. Even though the findings are detailed, they cannot apply to all schools in South Africa or other places in Africa because of differences in regions, cultures, and resources. Future research should include different types of schools, such as those in rural and urban areas, as well as both public and private schools, to see how the environment affects how gender equality education is taught and received. Second, the focus group method is good for getting group opinions, but it might limit what individual teachers can share because they may feel influenced by others or do not have enough time. Some people might have felt pushed to agree with the main opinions in the group. Future studies could use focus groups along with one-on-one interviews or classroom observations to gather more detailed and personal insights. Another limitation is that studying only looks at a short period of time. Although teachers noticed quick changes in how students acted and felt, the study did not check if these changes lasted. We need to do long-term studies to see how learning about gender equality early on affects students' beliefs, actions, and sense of identity as they go through school. The study found that parents

not wanting to participate was a big problem, but it didn't involve any parents in the study. Future research should involve families and communities understanding their views on gender roles and create shared strategies to match the values at home and school. This work would improve the field by providing a more complete, community-focused way to change gender roles in early education. In the end, this study mainly looked at the differences in treatment between boys and girls. Future studies could also look at the experiences of students who do not fit into just male or female gender role categories. Figuring out how classrooms for young children can be welcoming for learners of all gender identities is important for improving ideas and actions in teaching about gender equality. Additionally, Böhmer and Murru (2025) highlight ongoing differences in learning between genders, especially in reading and math. This shows that we need bigger changes in the way the system works. In summary, we have made some improvements, but we still need ongoing training for teachers, support from leaders, and changes to the curriculum. This is important to make sure that every Foundation Phase classroom promotes and practices gender equality.

### Conclusion

This study shows that if young learners are given supportive materials and have guided discussions with their teachers they can understand and practice gender equality. Teachers noticed that learners were beginning to change their behaviors and becoming more critical thinkers. However, pushbacks, especially from family situations, and deep-seated beliefs about gender still hold the progress of gender equality back. The researcher discovered that supporting teachers is a crucial first step, but making real change also needs support from the system and culture as a whole. Maintaining progress requires parents to be involved, the use of relevant resources, and teacher training on gender equality issues.

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