Changing attitudes: teacher reflection as a tool to promote gender equality in primary schools

Item Type	Article (Published Version)
UoW Affiliated Authors	Sheehy, Amanda
Full Citation	Sheehy, Amanda (2024) Changing attitudes: teacher reflection as a tool to promote gender equality in primary schools. Education 3-13 International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education. pp. 1-15. ISSN 0300-4279 Online: 1475-7575
DOI/ISBN	https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2439816
Journal/Publisher	Education 3-13 International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education Taylor and Francis
Rights/Publisher Set Statement	© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.
Item License	CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
Link to item	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03004279.2024.2439816

For more information, please contact wrapteam@worc.ac.uk

Changing attitudes: teacher reflection as a tool to promote gender equality in primary schools

Amanda Sheehy

Published online: 18 Dec 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 66

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Changing attitudes: teacher reflection as a tool to promote gender equality in primary schools

Amanda Sheehy ⬤ⁱᴰ

Department of Children and Families, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

ABSTRACT

Teachers' discussions about their life histories and their practice were analysed to evaluate the possible application of reflection as a useful tool to promote gender equality. In semi-structured interviews, 14 teachers from English primary schools reflected on the influences which had shaped them, their exposure to gender stereotypes and how these may have contributed to their own pedagogic approaches and interactions with pupils. Findings suggest that this approach can be a powerful tool in changing attitudes; the teachers in the sample demonstrated a willingness to alter their practice, changing their behaviour, language, choice of resources, approaches to curriculum and management of the learning environment. The data suggest that inviting teachers to reflect on their personal experiences and their potential implications for their professional practice, may trigger long-lasting attitudinal change which can be effective in promoting equality to the benefit of pupils at an important stage in their gender construction.

Introduction

Gender inequality continues to affect people of all genders. Childhood exposure to stereotypes can have a lasting impact (Bussey and Bandura 1999; Cerbara, Ciancimino, and Tintori 2022; Eagly 1997; Ellemers 2018), the results of which may be seen through attainment gaps (Carroll 2023), disparities in boys' and girls' career aspirations (Woods et al. 2023), a gender pay gap (ONS 2024) and uneven distribution of household work and care roles between genders (Allen and Stevenson 2023).

It seems unlikely that primary school teachers would aim to present their pupils with a restricted or unequal view of the world however, research suggests that educators may unknowingly – or unthinkingly – use language or demonstrate behaviour which may perpetuate gender stereotypes (Swinson and Harrop 2009). Prior research by the author indicates that teachers' contemporary understandings of masculinities and femininities appear to reflect some of the deeply entrenched societal (mis)understandings of how gender should be performed (Sheehy and Solvason 2023). Some of these representations of gender included pervasive ideas about the nurturing female, male as breadwinner and sportsman and females' preoccupation with their appearance. Since teachers have the ability to shape the views, opinions and more specifically, the gender construction, of their pupils (Skelton et al. 2009), it is relevant to understand how teachers' attitudes to gender may evolve and their awareness to the impacts of their behaviour on pupils' attitudes can be heightened.

With an aspiration to minimise the impact of gender stereotypes on future generations and the aim of reducing the inequalities described above, it appears that there is a need to bring about attitudinal change. Consequently, promoting equality can be seen an ethical duty of educators (Sheehy 2023). In the UK, sex discrimination is outlawed by the Equality Act 2010 (DfE 2014). Prior to this act, English schools had a statutory duty to promote gender equality and have a gender equality scheme in place. However, under the Equality Act, this has been replaced by the general equality duty, of which sex forms one of the protected characteristics. DfE (2014) guidance requires that schools consider equality implications as they develop policy and keep them under review on a continuing basis. This is supported by Ofsted's (2023) endeavour to monitor the extent to which schools promote equality and diversity. Schools are expected therefore to explicitly promote gender equality. This paper seeks to further knowledge into the effectiveness of one approach to this intention.

The research aim is to understand how teacher reflection can be used as a tool for promoting gender equality. The focus is on challenging deeply entrenched gender stereotypes by analysing the roots of teachers' attitudes through reflection on their own experiences as a means of analysing the effects of practice on pupils' experiences, providing novel insight into how teachers' pedagogic approaches may be developed through this approach.

Literature review

Despite the long history of reflection within education, its application to enhancing primary teachers' practice in promoting gender equality has yet to be explored. This study seeks to gain knowledge about the possible effectiveness of inviting teachers to reflect on their practice and experience within this realm. It contributes to the landscape of knowledge, responding to the following review of existing literature which examines the nature of reflection, its association with teachers' professional development and schools' responsibility to initiate change.

Reflective practice at the heart of education

Reflective practice has long been an important element of educators' professional development (McDonagh et al. 2012) and, with many forms and names, it continues to be a driver in raising standards in education (Machost and Stains 2023). Dewey's (1938) understanding that reflection on experiences creates meaning and relevancy has shaped modern conceptions of reflective learning. Within the context of education, reflection can be understood to be an individual endeavour in which educators make sense of their experiences resulting in possible changes to their own skills, knowledge and attitudes (Gadsby and Cronin 2012).

Many thinkers have suggested that this reflective process may be deemed cyclical, as one learns to make sense of experiences. Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning shows the nature of the learning process incorporating four stages: Experience; Reflect; Conceptualise and Act which can be seen to follow in an unending cycle. Such models recognise the act of reflection not as an end but possibly as a beginning, shaping new thoughts and consequently new behaviour. This process may be considered part of the human condition but also as a conscious act in order to develop understanding. It is within this context that this study is undertaken – namely exploring the need for conscious recognition for the need to examine how we have processed our experiences and the impact they have on our practice.

For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to draw a distinction between the day-to-day process of making sense of events and a more purposeful summative questioning of one's attitudes and actions. Schön (1983) describes reflective practice within these two contexts: reflection on practice and reflection in practice; the distinction coming from proximity to the experience. He defines *reflection on practice* as taking place before or after the event, calling for space and distance from daily practice. *Reflection in practice,* however, is defined as an approach in which professionals consistently examine their practice, evaluating their effectiveness and seeking improvement. Both

concepts can be applied to understand how teachers bring about changes to their practice through constant re-evaluation in the classroom but also when allowing distance from the daily practice of both doing gender and from teaching.

Gender is performed and understood by the individual (Butler 1990) but for many this may be undertaken subconsciously without analysis or recognition. As a consequence, teachers may unwittingly pass on messages to pupils about their own gender yet through critical reflection they may become emancipated from *false consciousness* (Habermas 1987). In the context of gender, this could require individuals to be provoked to analyse their own gender constructions.

One significant barrier to such self-emancipation is a lack of awareness of any issue. Reflective inference pairs a partial lack of understanding with prior possession of some meaning (Dewey 1938), building knowledge on that which we already hold. Where there is no concern or no awareness, the effort of reflective thought will not take place.

In order to bring about changes in practice, teachers are required to reflect on flaws, challenges or areas for development. It has been recognised that this process may be difficult. Brookfield (2017) warns of the issues associated with critical reflection – damaging one's own well-being through lost innocence. It may be uncomfortable coming to an understanding that something needs to change. Machost and Stains (2023) acknowledge that reflection requires educators to consider past experiences, prior knowledge and beliefs that led to their actions, exposing their vulnerabilities. Some suggest then that reflection is both uncomfortable and damaging to one's self-esteem. Clegg (1999, 167) questions the assumptions and consequences of reflective practice arguing that it may become a 'vehicle for self-surveillance and orthodoxy'. As this practice is largely associated with female dominated occupations (such as education and healthcare), they suggest that it disproportionately affects women.

In contrast, others focus on the emancipatory and beneficial aspects of reflective practice. Taking a reflective approach, it is possible to explore and develop teaching practice in all areas of education. Many writers employ this approach to focus on educators' capacity and opportunity to carry out their own formal or informal research. Practitioner action research encourages the researcher to consider, why am I concerned? To recognise areas for development and to reflect on the values which underpin the choice to investigate them (Whitehead and McNiff 2006). Whitehead's (1989) living theory – seeking to help teachers to unpick their actions and the meaning behind their behaviour – and Dinkelman's (2003) self-study – an intentional and systematic inquiry into one's own practice – are reflective tools for professional development which focus on the individual. These approaches offer teachers a degree of autonomy, recognising them as professionals capable of making decisions about their own development yet they also require a level of self-motivation (and space and time to undertake such independent advancement).

Teachers' professional development

Ongoing teacher development is an expectation of professional practice (Department for Education 2016) the promotion of which can be traced back to the 1972 James Report on teacher education and training which is regarded as a milestone in professional development for teachers in England (Robinson 2014). Teacher development can, however, be undertaken in numerous ways. The Department for Education (2016) call for sustained development programmes which focus on improving and evaluating pupil outcomes, underpinned by robust evidence and expertise, valuing collaboration and expert challenge. Robinson (2014) suggests that collaborative and coaching models may be effective for teacher professional development but raises questions about how outcomes may be measured. Formalised workshops and courses may not be the preferred method to meet the diverse learning and development needs of individual teachers (Antonsen, Aspfors, and Maxwell 2024). Many elements of teacher development take place without structured training courses or management involvement. Kyndt et al. (2016) discuss the ways in which teachers' informal learning activities impact on practice and form an important element of teachers' daily lives.

They recognise that collaboration is at the heart of teacher learning and their communities of practice. Whilst it is acknowledged that teacher development is the responsibility of school leadership, it must also be recognised that teachers can and do take a role in their own professional development. With this understanding, Antonsen, Aspfors, and Maxwell (2024) recommend a blend of informal learning contexts alongside more structured learning opportunities.

Initiating attitudinal change in schools

Schools seeking to promote gender equality may implement policy, inspect their curriculum or consider other school-wide actions but a high priority will be to ensure that educators have the desire, skills and knowledge to bring about lasting change in their daily practice (Griffin 2018). Considering attitudes to change in an organisation, Piderit (2000) highlights the relevance of employees' ambivalence. Teachers can be invited or instructed to make changes to their practice but, without a personal investment from staff, these school-wide changes alone will have less impact. Freire (1972) asks whether individuals can be invited to seek out emancipation or if they must seek the change for themselves.

Without questioning one's own position and the origins of it, one cannot avoid reproducing an inherited gendered view or even being used by the state to further its own political objectives (Foucault 1977). An advocate of critical pedagogy, Apple (2013) invites teachers to take responsibility for what and how they teach, arguing that schools control people and control meaning. Even for those teachers who would not describe themselves as critical pedagogues, political or as having a feminist agenda, raising awareness of a political issue can result in pedagogical change. The decisions teachers make are not taken without context – social or political – and should be reflected on within these contexts. It is therefore necessary for teachers to be political in order to avoid becoming what Austin and Birrell (2015, 132) describe as 'unthinking sheep … and deliverers of others' agendas.' If teachers are able to analyse how hegemony functions in schools and how it is resisted and challenged, they may be deemed radical pedagogues (Giroux 2011). Without such action, there is a passive acceptance to sustain the status quo; schools must recognise their position of power in maintaining or challenging an historic patriarchal hegemony. Individually, teachers may choose to address these issues through reflecting on their role in the gender constructions of their pupils. With the understanding that teachers can be invited to inspect their own understandings, to interrogate them and to reflect on their impact, this study seeks to explore teachers' reactions to such prompts.

There is very little research available on the impact of a reflective approach on promoting gender equality in schools. An Austrian pilot study with 38 secondary school teachers, examined the impact of inviting teachers to reflect on the gender stereotypes they convey to their students with the intention of increasing female students' participation in STEM subjects (Kollmayer et al. 2019). The results of the study showed that the programme was effective in that the teachers felt more confident to promote their students' motivation regardless of their gender and saw gender differences as subject to change.

Prior research suggests that reflection and education are eternally entwined however, this study adds to the landscape of knowledge by seeking to understand the scope of taking a reflective approach to enhancing primary teachers' practice in promoting gender equality.

Methodology

Theoretical framework

Perceptions of how gender is performed, experienced and understood are crucial to the design of this study. Butler (1990) suggests that gender is performative with daily ritualistic acts demonstrating and contributing to our experiences and performances of masculinities and femininities. A social

constructionist approach was taken, deeming each individual to have their own unique understanding of gender shaped by their own experiences and a raft of varied influences but formed by the social attitudes of the day. This interpretivist methodology allows the understanding that gender is both individually and societally constructed (Butler 1990).

Research design

The intention was to explore how teachers' reflections on their understandings of gender and their prior experiences may impact on their practice. It was necessary for the researcher to be present to co-explore and to reflect alongside the teachers. Consequently, life history interviews were chosen as the most appropriate means of gathering this data (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018; King and Horrocks 2010). The interactive nature of face-to-face life history interviews enabled the researcher, as interviewer, to ask open-ended questions, allowing the teachers to guide the interviews and to discuss what they deemed most relevant. This allowed the participants to reflect on their own life history and share what they felt was pertinent, but importantly, what they were comfortable with discussing. The interviews were conducted in person or online, with time taken to put participants at ease, audio recorded and transcribed.

Goodson and Sikes (2001, 21) argue that life histories provide a tool to examine the social context of an individual's experience and that the method can be used to provide 'useful data on practically every social issue'. Therefore, this was a useful approach to explore the complexity of the individual experience of gender within its social and political context.

Sample

A small number of participants was required for this qualitative study since the goal was to explore and describe, in some detail, the experiences of a group of people in a range of settings and each with individual stories to tell. Such a sample may provide insights into the behaviour of the broader research population (Dawson 2019). Purposive sampling was used to gather a suitable range of participants; gatekeepers from a number of different kinds of primary schools in the Midlands were approached and invited to join the study. One school in London was also contacted as they had previously taken part in a gender equality programme.

The sample comprised fourteen teachers (9 female and 5 male) from five English primary schools (one in London and four in the Midlands). Though the sample is small, a wide variety of experience is represented within it with a range of ages, teaching experiences, societal context and lived experiences. Although it is not possible to make any claims to this data representing the wider population, it does provide a rich and interesting variety of viewpoints.

Tools of data collection

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted in person (11) or online (3), each lasting around an hour. During the interview, the teachers were given time and space to reflect on how their own life experiences may have impacted their attitudes towards gender, and the implicit messages that they might convey through their pedagogy. The basic structure of these interviews can be seen through the example questions below, however they were very much guided by the interviewee. All of the interviews followed a broadly chronological structure following the life history of the participant.

- Do you think of yourself as being particularly masculine or feminine?
- Thinking back to your childhood, can you remember when you first noticed the difference between boys and girls?
- As you were growing up, who do you think had a significant impact on you?

- Can you remember anything about gender equality as part of your teacher training?
- Do you feel that gender equality is important to you now?
- Can think of any ways in which you treat boys and girls differently?

Nine months after the initial interviews, the participants were contacted by email and asked to reflect on the nature of the interview and whether it had influenced their practice. Their emailed responses contributed to the data gathered for analysis.

Ethical considerations

All formal ethical protocols were followed during the research, in line with the requirements of BERA (2018), with full ethical approval being gained through the university prior to the research beginning. All research respondents were clearly informed about the purpose of the research, their role within that, what would happen with the research data and their right to withdraw at any point. Considerations were made to the potentially sensitive nature of the topics to be addressed and the emotional implications of discussing life histories.

Process of data analysis

The transcriptions of the life history interviews provided data which were rich in detail and context (Geertz 1973). Thematic interpretive analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to explore the ways that participants represented gender throughout the interviews, their understandings of how their prior experience had shaped their behaviour, and their reflections on how their practice had been affected by their gender constructions. After immersion in the data, becoming very familiar with the content of each interview, coding was undertaken. Collection of these codes began to result in the recognition of patterns and common experience. These included patterns within the participants' understandings of masculinities and femininities, the range of influences within their lives and the ways in which their professional practice had evolved. For each of the participants, changes in their behaviour could be seen to fit within a framework which was constructed as a set of four themes. This systematic and rigorous approach to examining the qualitative data resulted in the development of the themes which are examined below: Raising Awareness, Evolving Attitude, Taking Action and Elevating Importance. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Findings

All of the teachers in the study made changes to their practice as a result of reflecting on their own attitudes to gender. This reflective approach therefore appears to be effective in prompting educators, at whatever stage of career or prior interest in feminism, to take action to further promote gender equality.

The teachers in the study reflected on the implicit messages they may convey to their pupils concerning gender and how they could improve their practice in this area, considering language, learning environment, resources and curriculum content. What emerged from the interviews was the power of the reflective process and the findings suggest that inviting teachers to reflect on their practice in this way has potential to be a powerful tool in promoting gender equality when teaching children.

Through reflecting on their own practice, they considered whether they ever treat children differently because of their gender. They began to unveil some ways in which their own prior experiences had left them with deep-rooted understandings of gender which could manifest in prejudiced expectations for their pupils. They welcomed this opportunity to examine their own attitudes and later spoke about how they had changed their behaviour as a result.

The teachers in the study engaged in a period of reflection incorporating their personal and professional selves and how these intersect within a wider political sphere. This process resulted in changes in practice amongst all of the participants. There were a wide range of events and people that precipitated a change in the attitudes and/or practice of the participants. It emerged that there were triggers which initiated changes to the teachers' practice but that the steps to taking action may not have happened instantly. The themes which were developed have been organised in a chronological sequence – recognising an apparent three-stage process by which change occurs. This sequence resulted in the teachers altering their practice. In some cases, the participants reached a fourth stage in the process, elevating the issue through engagement with other professionals.

The four stages which emerged will be discussed in turn:

1. Raising Awareness
2. Evolving Attitude
3. Taking Action
4. Elevating Importance

Raising awareness

Across the data set, there were numerous examples of ways in which the teachers described how they had been prompted to reflect on the nature of gender inequality and encouraged to think more deeply about a need to initiate change. The stimuli for change which were discussed in the data could all be categorised within the following themes:

- recognising injustice
- literature
- consultation with a colleague
- professional training

Some of the participants described how their consciousness of gender inequality was raised through an incident which highlighted to them the nature of discrimination. For some, this moment of raised awareness was part of a wider teenage awakening and politicisation whereas for others, it was in response to incidents later in life. In her teenage years, Maggie deemed the dynamics in her family as bitterly unfair. She noted how her mother and sisters were expected to do all of the housework in her home freeing her father and brothers. She turned to feminist literature which shaped her views.

> Maggie: *By the time I was 15, I was reading Simone de Beauvoir and the L-shaped Room and I was absolutely sure, my God no one's going to make me do these jobs and I was having none of it so absolutely staunch feminist.*

Sophie felt frustration too during her adolescence at 'unfair' difference in rules for her and her younger brother.

> Sophie: *I think it was as a teenager that all those things started to shift, thinking this isn't fair. I could see from a level-headed perspective that it was so obvious: he's got a random girl over and that's OK but I can't have my long-term boyfriend over and I'm older than him.*

Hercus (2004) describes the paths by which her participants came to feminism, categorising the women into three groups: those who have described themselves as *always feminist* which they attribute to incidents in their childhood; *evolving feminists*, who slowly and gradually shifted their position to a more feminist viewpoint in response to personal experiences and a greater exposure to literature and media which awakened an interest in feminism; and a third group which she calls *personal quest*, for whom dissatisfaction with life led them to seek a new way of understanding the world. These categorisations bear similarity to the experiences and reflections of the participants.

For example, Sophie and Maggie might be seen to belong to the first category of *always feminist* and Alison and Jackie as *evolving feminists*. Recognising injustice in their own lives or those of people around them was a trigger for pedagogical change or a call to learn more about feminism. For example, when Alison reflects on her isolation during maternity leave or when Jackie describes her frustration with her peers' domestic arrangements. Within this small sample, those who acknowledged they had experienced or recognised sexism were more likely to take steps independently to alter their practice.

It was also evident that remarks made by a colleague can initiate the reflective process. Steve recognised the role a colleague had played in altering his outlook.

> Steve: *So I'm very aware. Much more aware than I was from working with a strong female role model … You need someone to open your eyes don't you. Even if you're not meaning to come across as if you're treating boys and girls differently or the way you address a group of children that you should be aware of it.*

All of the participants from the two schools which had undergone some gender equality training mentioned the impact this had had on their practice, raising their awareness to the issue, sparking reflection. These findings support other studies which suggest that the exchanges of knowledge between teachers can initiate a process of reflection which may ultimately lead to pedagogical development, be they *tiny talks,* snatched discussions in the corridor or whilst making a break time coffee (Zoshuk 2016); peer led interactions (Tarrant 2013) or a more structured whole school process.

Evolving attitude

Another theme within the data was shifting outlooks – a process of evolving attitudes which occurred at apparently different rates and resulted in the participants changing the way they viewed the world. This is in line with Dewey's (1938) suggestion that after an individual's eyes have been opened to an issue, they become more receptive to recognising it in the world around them.

It appeared that once a seed was planted in the minds of the participants, their awareness grew of the need to actively pursue equality. In this case, noting the nature of gender discrimination, the participants appeared more aware of daily encounters with gender stereotypes. Hannah reflected on how her attitudes had evolved during her career.

> Hannah: *I think I definitely value gender equality a lot, especially in the role that I've got here [early years teacher]. A lot more possibly than I used to really … wider experiences and influences have impacted on that really … my own mindset really has kind of changed.*

Following the moment of recognition of a need for action, they spoke of questioning their own behaviour and acknowledging their own sub-conscious bias.

> Samuel: *It was [the gender equality training] that shone a light on it and it is that key moment where you just reflect. But you have to go through that training to break apart those assumptions. You have to shatter them to then build them up …. there's a lot of stuff on unpicking the assumptions and breaking that down.*

Maggie noted that despite her feminist attitudes, she had been unaware of her use of gendered language, until she consciously turned attention to it.

> Maggie: *I was doing an assembly and I never knew I said 'guys' so many times. It's that unconscious voice that you bring into your speech.*

McNiff (2016) suggests that educational practitioners receive ideas, guidance and instruction from others but choose whether to adopt changes to their practice. Individuals have agency to decide whether or not to be influenced by others. Likewise, the participants in the study showed that they had reflected on the issue of gender equality and in some cases, their heightened understanding developed into changes in practice.

None of the teachers explicitly described themselves as critical pedagogues, however, it was evident that some actively aimed to encourage their pupils to question structures of power and oppression and all had, over the course of the research come to support the notion that promoting gender equality was part of the responsibility of the teacher.

Taking action

Once the teachers had reflected on the issue and recognised the benefit of making some change to the attitudes or experience of their pupils, they shared the ways in which they had sought to bring about this change. These included:

o Avoidance of labels
o Altering language
o Considering representation in displays
o Changes to curriculum
o Initiating change with parents/ carers
o Teacher as role model
o Overcoming assumptions
o Sharing good practice

Language

Through this process of reflection, there were frequent mentions of the use of language and how this may inadvertently be conveying gender stereotypical messages. For example, Alison commented,

> Alison: *[The interview] made me reflect on some of the language I use day to day both in school and socially, and to question whether in fact it was showing* equality.

Lily noted that she had begun to avoid identifying pupils by their gender and had tried to cease using the terms *girls* and *boys* as descriptors. Samuel no longer addressed his male pupils as *mate*, having noted the way that he had previously unconsciously treated pupils differently based on their gender. Lena noted that she no longer used the term *guys* when talking to a group of people ('*most of the time!*') and also tried to use *they* instead of *he/she*. These clear intentions signify an understanding that use of language can emphasise difference to children and strengthen the belief that gender is a significant element in a child's identity upon which expectations for performances of masculinities and femininities should be played out (Skelton and Francis 2003). It is possible that the regular use of the seemingly innocuous labels *boys* and *girls* may be furthering this process. In their endeavour to remove the habitual use of these terms, these participants are consciously avoiding contributing to the process. The '*most of the time*' caveat and verb choice of '*try to*' also suggest that, although this may be the intention, it can be difficult to break habits which have become embedded within language.

In a review a range of studies conducted over recent decades, Harrop and Swinson (2011) suggest that, in primary schools, teachers interact more with boys than girls, the content of the teacher-talk varies between genders and that male pupils more often dominate classroom talk. Jones (2020) recounts numerous ways in which teachers' language can be used to endorse (or challenge) gender stereotypes. The findings of this study suggest that reflecting on practice may encourage teachers to recognise or alter these patterns.

Curriculum, resources and learning environment

Those teachers who had already taken part in gender equality training, spoke about how they had continued to develop their curricula and to carefully select their resources to promote equality and to avoid stereotypes. Maggie, for example, explained,

> Maggie: *When planning and resourcing work, I make a conscious effort to ensure that I'm representing different genders in a variety of job roles.*

Lena spoke about the choice of story book that she shares with her class and how she audited her book corner to consider the impact of the available books. She noted that there were many '*books on princesses with pink covers*' and described how she asked herself – and her pupils – whether this may be offering a limited view of what women should be.

Jackie also spoke about how she had become '*more savvy*' with the books she shares during story times, deliberately selecting books which counter gender stereotypes. This purposeful selection of resources is recognised as one of the strategic actions which educators can take to challenge or minimise pupils' exposure to gender stereotypes (Jones 2020).

One of the areas in which the teachers showed they had changed their practice was the consideration of the learning environment, particularly amongst early years practitioners Jackie and Hannah who now consciously seek to encourage children of different genders to access all areas of the learning environment. Jackie described how she encourages girls into the construction area and Hannah spoke of creating role play areas which countered gender stereotypes.

Behaviour

Recognising that their actions may be endorsing or validating gender stereotypes, some of the teachers raised examples of how they had changed their behaviour. Lily described how after the interview she began to consider '*whether I am being too harsh on the boys in my class, in comparison to the girls*'. Nick reflected that he planned to be more direct in his communication with parents '*and in particular our dads*' to challenge assumptions. Lena was aware of her status as role model to her pupils and she explained how she shared with her pupils her own hobbies and personal experiences to '*show yes, you are a woman but you do all of these things as well which are not limited to your gender.*' Phil also commented on this responsibility as the only male teacher in his primary school, '*I'm the one decent male role model that they've got in their life.*' After previous reflections on her status as a role model and the implicit messages she may be conveying, Jackie had made a determined effort to show her pupils that she was very capable at building and fixing but also that she could call for help from others which may challenge gendered expectations, asking '*Grandad to help to sew on a button or Mummy to fix the bike chain*'. Such real life examples of how the teachers' behaviour had altered as a result of the reflections they had made show the potential power of these reflections in bringing about change which may contribute to shaping children's understandings of gender.

Elevating importance

Seven of the participants appeared to have progressed to a fourth stage in which they had become so convinced of the need to bring about change and enthused by their own ability to take action that they sought to encourage other teachers to do the same. For example, Hannah explained how she raised the issue with her colleagues in the pre-school nursery and actively engaged in conversations with parents and carers to encourage them to allow their children to play with a range of toys and to dress up in whatever they liked, speaking of the limiting nature of restricting choice based on gender stereotypes. Similarly, Nick was working hard with his colleagues, families and the community to share his passion to encourage children of all genders to enjoy sport.

> Nick: *What I'm trying to elevate is to show* people *what we're capable of here by just giving girls positive influence around them.*

These instances of professional development echo the findings of Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) who suggest that teachers influence the practice of other teachers, and that teacher collaboration

can be seen to have a positive impact on outcomes. Sophie had long been an advocate of gender equality and had sought in her various workplaces to educate her peers in their responsibility to act as role models for children and to consider how their practice and their language affected their pupils. She mentioned the '*snowball effect'* and that she had heard her peers sharing the same thoughts with others, at which she expressed her satisfaction.

> Sophie: *I definitely went into school really aware about gender … I really pushed gender to the top of the agenda. They're still aware now … because I banged on about it really.*

This experience corresponds with Levine and Marcus (2010) findings that comments made by one teacher on successful implementation of strategies may then be adopted by others. Two of the participants (Samuel and Maggie) also reflected during their interviews on the possibility of applying the same reflective process to their attitudes to race and the implications for their practice. This stage of the process, whereby teachers influence their peers, can be seen as the development of a community of practice (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015). This is the forming of a group (in this case promoting equality) who learn together as they interact and reflect with the potential for a *ripple effect*.

In summary, the findings contribute to knowledge in the revelation that teachers' practice can indeed be altered by such a process of reflection.

Discussion and implications for practice

These findings provide valuable insight with which to examine the process of gender equality training. Prior research suggests that teachers may inadvertently convey gendered messages to their pupils (Riley 2014; Sheehy and Solvason 2023) however, it appears when provided with the opportunity to reflect on their own practice, they are able to overcome these habits.

The range of experiences within the data provide a rich variety of individual examples which indicate that each educator can have their own understandings of gender and ways in which these may leak into their expectations of their pupils. This aligns to Butler's (1990) theory of gender being performative but also moulded by experience.

Each of the participants reflected in their own unique way (Gadsby and Cronin 2012) and responded to the set of life experiences which had shaped their attitudes and practice. Although it might be deemed that this process could be uncomfortable, potentially exposing their vulnerabilities (Brookfield 2017; Machost and Stains 2023), all of the participants did so with honesty and a willingness to progress their pedagogic approach. Several participants commented explicitly on the positive nature of the experience.

The four themes which emerged, fitting within a chronological framework, can be seen in part to align with other models of the reflective process. Kolb's (1984) model has four phases: Experience; Reflect; Conceptualise and Act. The themes which were drawn from the data within this study overlap in some senses with those of Kolb. The Raising Awareness stage is akin to Experience in that an event or experience triggers the reflective process. Evolving Attitude equates to Reflecting and Conceptualising. The third stage, Taking Action relates to Kolb's fourth stage Act. Finally, it could be deemed that the fourth theme, Elevating Importance, begins the cycle again for another teacher who has had their awareness raised and re-enters the Experience phase.

For those who had given little or no thought to their requirement to promote gender equality to their pupils prior to their involvement in this study, or to the gender quality training in their school, the teachers can be seen to have been 'emancipated from their false consciousness' (Habermas 1987). This prompt encouraged each of them to examine their practice and make changes – which appear to have been sustained.

The findings showed that teachers' attitudes can change following reflection. It appears therefore that, given the time and space to reflect, they will make changes to their practice. This provides a compelling contribution to knowledge. It is evident that educators want to treat children fairly and want to promote equality. Nevertheless, they may inadvertently be passing on gender

stereotypical messages. However, through reflection, teachers are able to alter their language and behaviour and new habits can be formed. Bringing awareness to the influence of prior life experiences on an individual's thinking can lead them to make a conscious effort to overcome previous assumptions. By identifying one's own prejudice, one may seek to overcome it.

The process of reflection on gender construction and pedagogical approach can result in beneficial changes to practice such as:

o Consideration of representations of gender in the classroom.
o Use of language.
o Choice of resources which challenge gender stereotypes.
o Alterations to curriculum content or focus.

This suggests that reflection can be an effective mode of bringing about change in an organisation. There are significant implications for practice in these findings. Having understood the power of reflection as a tool and its role in critical pedagogy, the conclusion may be drawn that inviting teachers to reflect on their experiences and their practice is an effective way to initiate change.

Schools (and other educational establishments) are therefore encouraged to:

Prompt reflection to raise awareness

It appears that teachers want to treat children fairly and want to promote equality however they may inadvertently be passing on gender stereotypical messages. Through reflection they are able to change their practice so provide prompts and the space to reflect. Triggers for reflection may be images or statistics relating to gender inequality or questions which invite them to reflect on their own childhood experiences or influences.

Encourage pedagogical evolution

Given this opportunity, educators may change their language, resources, curriculum content and learning environments; new habits can be formed. This study suggests that this is a powerful approach – possibly more so than policy change.

Provide opportunities for reflection

Schools may carry out workshops in which this approach can be applied to allow teachers to reflect on their own gender constructions, to discuss openly and honestly on their practice and how it might affect their pupils and how they can make changes which will benefit their pupils.

Conclusion

Early years and primary educators have a unique opportunity to promote gender equality amongst their students during the formative phases of their gender construction. This article contributes new knowledge by presenting evidence that inviting individual educators to reflect on their own attitudes and the implications of their practice presents a critical opportunity for primary educators that has not been previously examined. The data gathered from a sample of teachers from a range of backgrounds, provided the opportunity to explore the potential effectiveness of this approach. The study shows that when teachers are prompted to examine their own backgrounds and reflect on how their prior experiences may impact on their behaviours, they are encouraged to change their practice. This a highly engaging approach in which teachers maintain a high level of autonomy. Further research would be beneficial into the effectiveness of this approach to promoting other aspects of equality. For example, in which teachers are invited to reflect on their own

attitudes to race, sexuality or social class, to openly and honestly discuss their practice, how it might affect their pupils and how they could make changes which could benefit their pupils. In conclusion, this reflective approach to promoting gender equality stands as a highly effective educational practice that, we argue should be widely promoted.

Ethical approval

I can confirm that this study received full ethical approval through the College of Arts, Humanities and Education committee at the University of Worcester: CAHE18190013.

ORCID

Amanda Sheehy 🔵 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9108-7759

References

Allen, J., and I. Stevenson. 2023. "BSA 40: Gender Roles." *National Centre for Social Research*. Accessed January 30, 2024. https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-09/BSA%2040%20Gender%20roles.pdf.

Antonsen, Y., J. Aspfors, and G. Maxwell. 2024. "Early Career Teachers' Role in School Development and Professional Learning." *Professional Development in Education* 50 (3): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2024.2306998.

Apple, M. 2013. *Knowledge, Power, and Education: The Selected Works of Michael W. Apple*. London: Routledge.

Austin, R., and G. Birrell. 2015. "Why Shouldn't Teachers Be Political?" In *Challenging Perceptions in Primary Education*, edited by M. Sangster, 130. London: Bloomsbury.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Brinkmann, S., and S. Kvale. 2018. *Doing Interviews*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: SAGE.

British Educational Research Association. 2018. *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. 4th ed. London: BERA.

Brookfield, S. 2017. *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Bussey, K., and A. Bandura. 1999. "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation." *Psychological Review* 106:676–713. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.106.4.676.

Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.

Carroll, M. 2023. *Sex Gaps in Education in England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

Cerbara, L., G. Ciancimino, and A. Tintori. 2022. "Are We Still a Sexist Society? Primary Socialisation and Adherence to Gender Roles in Childhood." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19 (6): 3408. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063408.

Clegg, S. 1999. "Professional Education, Reflective Practice and Feminism." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 3 (2): 167–179. https://doi.org/10.1080/136031199285101.

Dawson, C. 2019. *Introduction to Research Methods: A Practical Guide for Anyone Undertaking a Research Project*. 5th ed. London: Robinson.

Department for Education. 2016. *Standard for Teachers' Professional Development*. Gov.Uk. Accessed April, 2024.

Dewey, J. 1938 (1997ed.). *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone.

DfE. 2014. *The Equality Act 2010 and Schools*. Department for Education UK. Accessed January 30, 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7e3237ed915d74e33f0ac9/Equality_Act_Advice_Final.pdf.

Dinkelman, T. 2003. "Self-Study in Teacher Education: A Means and Ends Tool for Promoting Reflective Teaching." *Journal of Teacher Education* 54 (1): 6–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487102238654.

Eagly, A. H. 1997. "Sex Differences in Social Behavior: Comparing Social Role Theory and Evolutionary Psychology." *The American Psychologist* 52 (12): 1380–1383. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.52.12.1380.b.

Ellemers, N. 2018. "Gender Stereotypes." *Annual Review of Psychology* 69 (1): 275–298. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011719.

Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin.

Freire, P. 1972. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin.

Gadsby, H., and S. Cronin. 2012. "To What Extent Can Reflective Journaling Help Beginning Teachers Develop Masters Level Writing Skills?" *Reflective Practice* 13 (1): 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2011.616885.

Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Hutchinson: Basic Books.

Giroux, H., ed. 2011. *On Critical Pedagogy*. London: Bloomsbury.

Goodson, I. F., and P. J. Sikes. 2001. *Life History Research in Educational Settings: Learning from Lives*. Buckingham: Open University.

Griffin, H. 2018. *Gender Equality in Primary Schools: A Guide for Teachers*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Habermas, J. 1987. *The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 2: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Harrop, A., and J. Swinson. 2011. "Comparison of Teacher Talk Directed to Boys and Girls and its Relationship to their Behaviour in Secondary and Primary Schools." *Educational Studies* 37 (1): 115–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/03055691003729260.

Hercus, C. 2004. *Stepping Out of Line. Becoming and Being a Feminist*. New York: Routledge.

Jones, K. 2020. *Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Education*. London: Learning matters.

King, N., and C. Horrocks. 2010. *Interviews in Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE.

Kolb, D. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Kollmayer, M., A. Pfaffel, M. Schultes, M. Lüftenegger, M. Finsterwald, V. Popper, G. Jöstl, C. Spiel, and B. Schober. 2019. "REFLECT – ein Interventionsprogramm zum Aufbau von Lehrkräftekompetenzen für reflexive Koedukation." *Zeitschrift für Entwicklungspsychologie und Pädagogische Psychologie* 51 (2): 110–122. https://doi.org/10.1026/0049-8637/a000210.

Kyndt, E., D. Gijbels, I. Grosemans, and V. Donche. 2016. "Teachers' Everyday Professional Development: Mapping Informal Learning Activities, Antecedents, and Learning Outcomes." *Review of Educational Research* 86 (4): 1111–1150. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315627864.

Levine, T., and A. Marcus. 2010. "How the Structure and Focus of Teachers' Collaborative Activities Facilitate and Constrain Teachers' Learning." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 26 (3): 389–398. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2009.03.001.

Machost, H., and M. Stains. 2023. "Reflective Practices in Education: A Primer for Practitioners." *CBE Life Sciences Education* 22 (2): es2–es2. https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.22-07-0148.

McDonagh, C. 2012. *Enhancing Practice through Classroom Research: A Teacher's Guide to Professional Development*. London: Routledge.

McNiff, J., ed. 2016. *Values and Virtues in Higher Education Research*. London: Routledge.

Ofsted. 2023. "Ofsted's Equality Objectives 2023 to 2027." *Ofsted's equality objectives 2023 to 2027 – GOV.UK*. Accessed January 30, 2024. www.gov.uk.

ONS. 2024. *Gender Pay Gap in the UK:* 2023. Accessed January 30, 2024. www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2023.

Piderit, S. K. 2000. "Rethinking Resistance and Recognizing Ambivalence: A Multidimensional View of Attitudes Toward an Organizational Change." *Academy of Management Review* 25 (4): 783–794. https://doi.org/10.2307/259206.

Riley, T. 2014. "Boys are Like Puppies, Girls aim to Please: How Teachers' Gender Stereotypes may Influence Student Placement Decisions and Classroom Teaching." *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 60 (1): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.55016/ojs/ajer.v60i1.55729.

Robinson, W. 2014. *A Learning Profession?: Teachers and Their Professional Development in England and Wales 1920-2000*. Rotterdam: Springer.

Schön, D. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner*. London: Temple Smith.

Sheehy, A. 2023. "Promoting Gender Equality in UK Primary Schools: Educators' Ethical Duty to Minimise Pupils' Exposure to Stereotypes." In *Ethics in Education: Contemporary Perspectives on Research, Pedagogy and Leadership*. 1st ed., edited by C. Solvason and G. Elliott, 66–92. Bradford: Ethics International Press Limited.

Sheehy, A., and C. Solvason. 2023. "Teaching Lads' Lads and Girly-Girls: Why Recognising and Tackling Gender Stereotypes Still Matters in Education." *Education 3-13*, 10:1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2023.2224842.

Skelton, C., B. Carrington, B. Francis, M. Hutchings, B. Read, and I. Hall. 2009. "Gender 'Matters' in the Primary Classroom: Pupils' and Teachers' Perspectives." *British Educational Research Journal* 35 (2): 187–204. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920802041905.

Skelton, C., and B. Francis. 2003. *Boys and Girls in the Primary Classroom*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Swinson, J., and A. Harrop. 2009. "Teacher Talk Directed to Boys and Girls and its Relationship to Their Behaviour." *Educational Studies* 35 (5): 515–524. https://doi.org/10.1080/03055690902883913.

Tarrant, P. 2013. *Reflective Practice and Professional Development*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Vescio, V., D. Ross, and A. Adams. 2008. "A Review of Research on the Impact of Professional Learning Communities on Teaching Practices and Student Learning." *Teaching & Teacher Education* 24 (1): 80–91. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.01.004.

Wenger-Trayner, E., M. Fenton-O'Creevy, S. Hutchinson, C. Kubiak, and B. Wenger-Trayner, eds. 2015. *Learning in Landscapes of Practice*. London: Routledge.

Whitehead, J. 1989. "Creating a Living Educational Theory from Questions of the Kind, 'How Do I Improve My Practice?" *Cambridge Journal of Education* 19 (1): 41–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764890190106.

Whitehead, J., and J. McNiff. 2006. *Action Research: Living Theory*. London: SAGE.

Woods, B., C. F. Miller, L. A. Wheeler, and M. Reisslein. 2023. "Children's Engineering-Related Achievement Beliefs and Career Aspirations: The Role of Gender." *Psychology in Schools* 60 (7): 2135–2155. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22848.

Zoshuk, R. 2016. "'Tiny Talks' Between Colleagues: Brief Narratives as Mediation in Teacher Development." *Language Teaching Research: LTR* 20 (2): 209–222. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168815627659.