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Modelling gender equity in the classroom: from teacher educators to pre-service teachers and what gets lost in translation

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ABSTRACT

Gender-responsive pedagogies (GRP) are increasingly recognised as an essential factor in promoting gender equity in the classroom across all levels of education. This paper explores successes and challenges of using GRP to support more equitable gender relationships in Palestine, where equality of access to education between boys and girls has already been achieved but gendered dynamics in teaching and learning prevail. Our reflections are grounded in the lessons learned from a four-year project which explored how GRP and play-based learning (PBL) can be incorporated into teacher education programmes to enhance the educational experience of children in Palestine. We explore how teacher educators who participated in training on GRP and PBL shared their knowledge, practical skills and enthusiasm with the pre-service teachers who took their classes. We question why gender gets lost in translation and how playful approaches can better support the use of GRP in future teacher education initiatives.

KEYWORDS


Gender responsive pedagogies; gender equity; play-based learning; teacher education; Palestine

Introduction

Gender-responsive pedagogies (GRP) are increasingly recognised as an effective strategy for creating a more equitable and inclusive educational experience within the classroom, where the specific learning and social needs of girls and boys are taken into account (UNESCO, 2020). We discuss the experience of teacher educators and pre-service teachers in Palestine in adopting GRP alongside play-based learning (PBL) strategies in their classrooms. The project, entitled *Learning in Motion: Embedding Gender-Responsive, Play-Based*

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Pedagogies in Teacher Education in Palestine, aimed to enhance teacher educators' practices using GRP and PBL in their university teaching, with the expectation that teacher educators would adopt these strategies in their lectures and tutorials with pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers would then adopt the teacher educators' approaches in their practicum and continue to use GRP and PBL strategies once they become in-service teachers. The project provided professional development in both GRP and PBL for teacher educators at four higher education universities in the West Bank and analysed the impacts of this programme with teacher educators and pre-service teachers through, online surveys, classroom observations and interviews. This included both in-person training and teaching, as well as the introduction of digital gamification as a way to incorporate PBL into the virtual classroom. The interviews and observations focused on teacher educators and pre-service teachers' understandings of GRP and PBL as well as the challenges and opportunities for implementing these strategies in their teaching practices at tertiary level and during school placements (teaching practicum).

While there is much written on PBL and a growing body of research-practice on GRP, there is a scarcity of literature which connects the two pedagogical strategies, and the literature on GRP tends to focus on targeting gender inequalities in access to education and completion rates (Aikman et al., 2005). Less has been written about how GRP can enhance the quality of the learning experience between all genders, particularly in creating more equitable gender relations within the classroom, in contexts where equality in access to education has been achieved (Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015). This paper, therefore, attempts to bridge this gap in the literature by analysing the impact of the 'Learning in Motion' professional development programme within an educational context of relative equality in terms of access to and completion of education.

We provide a brief overview of education in Palestine and the gendered dynamics particular to this context, a review of gender as a contested term, and relevant literature on GRP and its complementarity to PBL. We discuss the design and implementation of this project as well as the research methodologies used to gather data. We provide an overview of the findings and a discussion on the potential and limitations of using GRP and PBL together, the challenges of addressing gender in the classroom, and the lessons learned during this project.

Educational context in Palestine

Education has long been a priority for Palestinians even prior to the Nakba of 1948 when over 700,000 Palestinians were displaced from the historical territory of Palestine. Since 1948 education has become a means to resist the displacement and dispossession of the Palestinian people, along with the destruction of their society, culture, identity, and political rights. Among the first actions displaced Palestinians undertook was to create makeshift schools in the refugee camps across Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (Irfan, 2023). From the early 1950s onwards, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) began building schools for Palestinian refugees. UNRWA now provides 40% of all schooling to Palestinian children. The Palestinian Ministry of Education, NGOs and private schools provide a mix of traditional and vocational education (UNICEF, 2018).

The long-term investment and prioritisation have borne fruit, with Palestinians considered to be 'the world's best educated refugees', with a 97.7% literacy rate (Irfan, 2023, para. 1). At primary level, Palestinian schools have a 98% enrolment rate (UNICEF, 2018). Similarly, the Palestinian education system demonstrates significant gender equality between girls and boys at primary level, with 95% enrolment for boys and girls in formal education up to the ages of 12 (UNICEF, 2018).

The educational context in Palestine is diverse with students across all levels coming from distinct ethnic, class, cultural and religious backgrounds, including Bedouin communities, Arab and Afro-Descendent students and teachers. Schools and universities provide learning to a wide range of practicing Muslims and Christians, along with a small community of Samaritans from Nablus, as well as students from secular families. Students come from across the economic/class spectrum including residents of refugee camps, rural communities, traditionally nomadic communities and other contexts of relative economic disadvantage (MoEHE, 2017; NRC, 2021). Students with disabilities also represent a significant cohort in Palestine, with an estimated 7% of the population living with physical or intellectual disabilities in Palestine across all the aforementioned communities. They face significant levels of exclusion from education, including an estimated 10% of children with disabilities who have never attended school and nearly 38% who have dropped out (Masri & Nazmi, 2021).

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE), in its strategic plan 2017-2022 (2017), has committed to meeting the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 which aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (Al-Masri, 2021; UNESCO, 2015, p. 5). Target 4.5 of this goal places particular emphasis on eliminating gender disparities and ensuring that educational facilities can provide safe, inclusive and effective learning environments for all children (Masri & Nazmi, 2021; UNESCO, 2015). Nevertheless, the education system in Palestine is chronically underfunded at all levels, with universities relying almost exclusively on student fees to cover operational costs (NRC, 2021). Education under an ongoing occupation, economic deprivation, and regular outbreaks of conflict present particular challenges to educational attendance, completion and the wellbeing of students and teachers.

Even before the hostilities which broke out on 7 October 2023, UNRWA had documented significant declines in student wellbeing over the last number of years. In Gaza they found that 'Palestine refugee children suffered from bed-wetting, shaking at night, clinging to parents, nightmares and increased levels of aggression (...) [it is] estimated that 373,000 children in Gaza were reported as in need of psychosocial support' (UNRWA, 2016, p. 5). In the West Bank, they documented 'unprecedented levels of intra-student violence and alarming levels of despair, trauma and anxiety among children' (UNRWA, 2016, p. 5).

Contrary to global trends in gender equality in access to education, boys in Palestine experience greater impacts on their education as a result of the ongoing occupation and conflict. Boys, especially teenagers, are more likely to be harassed, assaulted or arrested on their way to school (UNICEF, 2018). In the West Bank boys' schools are more frequently targeted by the Israeli forces with 23 incidents of evacuations, military incursions or different types of ammunition landing in boys' schools in 2015 compared to 13 incidents against girls' schools (UNICEF, 2018). Boys are also more likely than girls to drop out of

school to seek employment (UNICEF, 2018). The cumulative impact of this means that school completion rates for boys decrease significantly at secondary level. Palestine had an almost 100% enrolment rate of boys and girls at primary level during the 2021/22 academic year, with 80% of girls and 70% of boys enrolled at secondary level. However, completion rates at upper secondary school level (15–18) drops to 53.2% for boys, while girls remain steadier at 78.3% (PCBS, 2023).

At the tertiary level, the gender disparity between women and men increases even further, with 48% of females compared to only 29% of males aged 18–23 enrolled in higher education in 2021/22, and nearly 50% of females and only 22% of males graduating. Echoing international trends, female students accounted for 79% of graduates studying education in 2020/21 (PCBS, 2023). Despite the greater number of women enrolled in and graduating from higher education institutions, only 28% of higher education faculty were women (PCBS, 2023) suggesting a considerable gender gap when it comes to professional opportunities for Palestinian women in higher education.

Gender stereotypes of men as ‘providers’, combined with the economic stresses of living under occupation, contribute significantly to the lower completion rates for boys at secondary level and low enrolment rates at university, with 50% of boys and men aged between 15 and 24 active in the labour force, compared to only 11% of girls and women in the same age group (PCBS, 2023). Despite the higher enrolment and completion rates for girls at secondary and tertiary level education, only 19% of women are active in the Palestinian labour force, compared to 71% of men, suggesting that gender stereotypes continue to limit the possibilities for women in Palestine to work outside the home, despite their higher representation and completion rates in secondary and tertiary level education.

Gender as a contested concept

Gender is neither a universal nor stable category of identity, changing across time and cultures as well as the intersections of race, ethnicity, faith, class, ability and age, the meanings of which can be highly contested across political, development and academic literature (Butler, 2019). Gender is increasingly understood as an expansive identity category which encompasses cis gender, trans, nonbinary, agender, queer gender, gender fluid and others. These identities challenge the traditional girl-boy/woman-man binary as the only possible or acceptable expressions of gender and/or sex (Butler, 2024).

The expansiveness of gender identity, particularly when tied to broader struggles for LGBTQIA+ recognition and rights has been met with significant backlash. Across the West, the spectre of ‘gender ideology’ as a threat to the family and the state is increasingly mobilised by right-wing political movements to undermine progress towards gender equality (Butler, 2019). Countries from Brazil to the US and the UK have sought to limit the reach of so-called ‘gender ideology’ in education by initiatives such as restricting access to controversial books, discontinuing sexual health and relationships education programmes and promoting educational initiatives which promote traditional family values, heterosexuality, abstinence and reinforcing stereotypes of women as care-givers (Butler, 2019; Fazackerley, 2023; Van Wichelen et al., 2023)

At the same time, the imposition of Western concepts of gender may fail to account for the complex intersections of diverse identities and cultures, as has too often been the case

in development programming and the Western feminist agenda (Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015; Jolly, 2010, 2022; McLean, 2023). In fact, gender-responsive pedagogy was included in this project in part because the funder, the Irish Research Council, had prioritised the realisation of gender equality under its SDG commitments and this funding scheme in particular which is co-funded by the Irish development cooperation branch of the government, Irish Aid (IRC, 2023). While the work between the two Co-Principal Investigators on play-based learning is part of a long-standing collaboration, we are cognisant of the fact that the addition of gender in this project could be seen as another example of how a research focus on gender can be imposed on cooperating countries by a western partner.

While we recognise and support the expansive understanding of gender beyond binary categories, the authors note that it was beyond the scope of the project to explore these issues. Our principal funder, Irish Aid, continues to prioritise gender as it relates to equality between girls/women and boys/men in its development strategy (Irish Aid, 2019). This is consistent with the focus of most development projects in Global South contexts where gender is often used as a synonym for women in projects aimed at fostering greater equality, and questions of gender identity are addressed in relation to projects specifically targeted at LGBTQIA+ communities (Jolly, 2022). Ongsupankul (2020) highlights how the SDGs – a guiding pillar for development interventions – fail to account for diverse gender identities and reinforce the gender binary. The literature on gender-responsive pedagogies, most of which comes from the development sector, reflects this dynamic and rarely accounts for this diversity in our understandings of gender (Banerjee, 2024). Finally, the educational context in Palestine is marked by relative conservatism in relation to perceptions of traditional gender roles ascribed to girls/women and boys/men and the project was focused on expanding the possibilities for girls and boys in the classroom within this binary conception.

For the purpose of this project and this paper, we have therefore relied on the UN definition of gender as the socially constructed differences in attributes and opportunities associated with being female or male where gender determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context (UNICEF, 2017). Improving gender equality is a key aspect of the UN SDGs, accounted for in Goal 5 ‘Gender Equality’ and cutting across multiple other goals including ending poverty (Goal 1), ending hunger (Goal 2) improving good health and well-being (Goal 3) and ensuring access to quality education (Goal 4) (UNDSGD, 2024).

Achieving gender equity through gender-responsive pedagogies

A principal focus of development theory and practice relating to gender and education is the achievement of access to education for girls, where equal access is hampered by cultural, social and economic considerations, gender-based violence or lack of universal education (Aikman et al., 2005; Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015). Gender equity within the classroom, particularly in contexts where equality of access has been achieved, is far less discussed (Aikman et al., 2005; Baily & Holmarsdottir, 2015; Karlson & Simonsson, 2011). This is beginning to change, however, with a growing body of literature focusing on GRP initiatives aimed at improving gender equity in the classroom across a diversity of educational contexts.

GRP recognises that the classroom, along with the family, is a fundamental school of gender which helps to shape children's perception and experience of their gender from their earliest years (Karlson & Simonsson, 2011). Though no fixed definition of GRP exists, it can be understood as 'teaching and learning processes which pay attention to the specific learning needs of girls and boys' (UNESCO Bangkok, 2017a, p. 4), where 'the learning materials, methodologies, content, learning activities, language use, classroom interaction, assessment and classroom setup are scrutinized to respond to specific needs of boys and girls in the teaching-learning process' (UNESCO Bangkok, 2017b, p. 6).

GRP has developed at the intersection between the education and development disciplines, in response to the tendency for gender hierarchies and inequalities to be consciously and unconsciously reproduced in educational settings across all levels of schooling, from pre-primary to university (UNESCO, 2020). Teachers often reinforce negative gender stereotypes by maintaining lower expectations regarding girls'/women's intellectual abilities compared to boys/men, giving girls/women fewer opportunities to participate in the classroom, assigning classroom roles and tasks that align with traditional gender roles (e.g. girls cleaning while boys are given leadership roles) and providing less feedback to girls than boys (Aikman et al., 2005; Skovgaard & Warne, 2020). Class materials can also reproduce negative gender stereotypes, such as showing boys in active, productive, professional or leadership roles and girls in caring, passive or subservient roles, or ignoring girls altogether (VVOB, 2022). Gender inequities in educational spaces not only impact girls' and women's learning experiences by lowering their own expectations of themselves or undermining their confidence, but can also impact their career aspirations and opportunities available to them in the future (Aikman et al., 2005; VVOB, 2022).

GRP involves the employment of teaching and learning strategies that challenge these dynamics to allow for the more equitable participation of girls. It requires a reform of the curricula and teaching practices towards ones that challenge established gender hierarchies (UNESCO, 2020). GRP values diverse forms of knowledge, particularly students' own knowledge and experiences and greater participation of students in their own learning. GRP aims to address the sexism, racism, ableism and other forms of discrimination that can lead to bullying and exclusion, and recognises and gives space to diverse learning styles across identities and abilities with the aim of promoting a more equitable, engaging and empowering learning environment for all (Aikman et al., 2005; UNESCO, 2020). GRP involves concrete changes to the curriculum, learning materials, language used in the classroom and forms of assessment that promote gender equality (VVOB, 2022). Through GRP teachers can be encouraged to use descriptive, rather than judgemental, language and establish gender neutral communication patterns to use in class (UNESCO, 2015).

GRP can be supported through complementary pedagogical strategies such as PBL, which encourages student-centred, active learning (VVOB, 2022). PBL can be described as a spectrum of playful learning opportunities from free-play, guided play, games and playful direct instruction (Zosh et al., 2018). It supports in building knowledge and skills, critical thinking and problem solving, and encourages active participation of students in their own learning (Zosh et al., 2018). PBL can play a significant role in child development, including learning abilities, psycho-social skills, self-confidence and self-image. When used as a strategy alongside GRP, PBL can foster girls' active participation in the classroom, challenge negative stereotypes about girls' intellectual and physiological capacities and contribute to a more equitable learning environment (VVOB, 2022).

The literature points to an increased need for GRP initiatives at all levels of education as a strategy for achieving gender equity in education which is complementary to other initiatives focusing on access, completion and educational outcomes (Aikman et al., 2005; UNESCO, 2015). GRP initiatives are also necessary for teacher educators – those tasked with educating future teachers – so they can integrate GRP into their teaching from the beginning (Banerjee, 2024; UNESCO, 2015). As GRP initiatives develop, they also need to account for diversities of gender and sexual identity beyond binaries, an aspect which remains lacking in GRP literature and practice, as well as non-Western understandings of gender (Banerjee, 2024). The team also found there is an over reliance on a small number of resources, particularly those produced by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) (eg. Skovgaard & Warne, 2020; VVOB, 2022) signalling a need for more research across a greater diversity of contexts. Teachers who are equipped with the skills of identifying gender inequities and biases in their practices, between their students and in the wider culture, while developing the tools, strategies and practices that allow them to challenge those inequities and can create a more equitable and enjoyable learning environment for all students and teachers (UNESCO, 2015).

Project structure and participants

Our research project, *Learning in Motion*, took place over five years (2019–2024) and aimed to embed GRP and PBL in teacher education programmes in Palestine. The principal research questions which guided this project were: 1) to examine teacher educators'/lecturers' perceptions of gender-responsive approaches; and 2) to examine the impact of the professional development programme on teacher educators and student-teachers during their practical experience. These questions were explored across four phases, where research and practice were used throughout to support our implementation and findings. As is consistent with other research studies (Banerjee, 2024; Skovgaard & Warne, 2020) the team felt that pre-service training plays a major role in allowing pre-service teachers to put new skills such as GRP and PBL into practice prior to beginning their professional training. It is mostly the responsibility of the faculties of education in the Palestinian universities to provide this qualification through educational diplomas.

Overall ethical approval was initially sought at the University of Limerick who were provided with the project description, objectives and research tools, as well the informed consent forms, and subsequently at Birzeit University prior to the roll-out of each phase of the project (see ethical statement). Participation was voluntary and participants were provided with information about the goals of the study, the nature of their participation and the nature of the data to be collected, and we sought their informed consent prior to their participation. Our visits to schools were within the framework of the practicum courses that take place in coordination with the MoEHE and school district offices, as well as with school principals.

The first phase examined teacher educators' perspectives on GRP and PBL within higher education institutions (Khalil et al., 2022, 2023). Based on the challenges and opportunities for using these pedagogies as identified in the survey, the second phase included the design of a professional development programme to meet teacher educators' needs towards embedding GRP and PBL in their teaching

practices. The design of the professional development programme was guided by the Behaviour Change Wheel (Michie et al., 2011). This framework is used to understand factors that shape behaviour and considers the influence of a person's capability, opportunity and motivation to enact the behaviour. The research team drew on the findings of phase 1 of the project to guide the selection of appropriate intervention functions – such as education, modelling, persuasion – for the professional development programme. The design process has been described in detail elsewhere (see Murtagh et al., 2024). This professional development programme was then implemented with teacher educators.

All teacher educators from the faculties of education in four Palestinian universities were invited to participate in the first and second phases of the project. A total of 36 teacher educators completed an online survey and 17 of these expressed their willingness to participate in the interviews. Seventeen teachers participated in the professional development programme.

The third phase of the project focused on the experience of pre-service teachers who had taken classes with teacher educators participating in the professional development programme in GRP and PBL. The pre-service teachers were chosen by the teacher educators on the basis that they would carry out their practicum during the 2022/23 academic year and that the same teacher educators had applied PBL activities with them during the previous semester. A total of 17 pre-service teachers from four universities were selected (four males, and 13 females).

For the final phase, exploring digital gamification, 15 teacher educators participated in online training on digital gamification. The training consisted of three synchronous online sessions, followed by individual support sessions for those who needed additional guidance. The full programmes for each workshop are included in the supplementary online material.

Data collection and analysis

This study employed a mixed-methods qualitative approach, including online surveys, semi-structured interviews and class observation to understand teacher educators' and pre-service teachers' practices in incorporating PBL and GRP. The discussion and findings from this paper draw on the initial online survey (phase 1) and the interviews and observations conducted in phases two to four. Seventeen of the teacher educators who participated in this professional development programme and who implemented GRP and PBL during their classes were subsequently interviewed about their perspectives on and experiences in using these pedagogies. Seven teacher educators were interviewed about their use of digital games and any differences they found in use and acceptability of these technologies between their male and female students. The teacher educators also provided lesson plans and other artefacts from their classes to the research team.

We also explored pre-service teachers' perceptions of the role of teacher educators – who received professional development in PBL and GRP – on the enhancement of knowledge, skills, beliefs and motivation for the adoption of PBL and GRP among teacher educators and pre-service teachers. Two researchers conducted in-person observations of the pre-service teachers for one session of 40 minutes.

Framework analysis was used to analyse qualitative data gathered by semi-structured interviews (Gale et al., 2013). The data were coded into themes which aligned with the theoretical framework of the COM-B model for behaviour change. The themes were developed through a collaborative discussion with the research team following the model elaborated by Braun and Clarke (2006). The participants' contributions in the surveys, observation and interviews have been anonymised in this paper.

A detailed description of the methods used and the results from phases one to three can be found in Hamed et al. (forthcoming), Khalil et al. (2022) and Khalil et al. (2023). This paper focuses particularly on how key gender responsive concepts and practices were transmitted from teacher educators to pre-service teachers through phases one to four and what 'got lost in translation'. Therefore, we draw on data from across the four phases to support this analysis.

Response of teacher educators to GRP

Understanding of GRP

This project took place in the context of a relatively diverse cohort of teacher educators regarding their exposure to and understanding of GRP. Of the 36 teacher educators who completed the online survey prior to receiving the training, only 48% of the participants said they had heard about GRP (Khalil et al., 2023). Of those who had heard about GRP, only 16 participants were able to provide examples of how they understood and defined GRP. Their responses demonstrated a limited understanding of GRP: an approach that treats males and females equally and gives them an equal opportunity of participation in all learning activities; a strategy to differentiate between both genders based on biological and psychological differences; a strategy that is based on the understanding of social context which can challenge prevailing social stereotypes about women and men, girls and boys (Khalil et al., 2023).

All the teacher educators we interviewed agreed that it was important to improve gender equality in Palestinian society and that a gender responsive education was key to achieving this goal. Teacher educators also expressed their beliefs that GRP is necessary from early childhood through primary, secondary and university education. They said that they can be role models for student teachers by modelling gender equitable approaches and behaviour in classes with student teachers. Many of the participating teacher educators expressed their desire for further training in this area as well as a unified and comprehensive gender policy that would apply to all universities in Palestine. They saw this as important for convincing students to adopt and practice GRP in their own classes and to address broader issues of gender inequality in higher education, including in professional practices and policies (Khalil et al., 2023).

Application of GRP

Following the training many participants were able to provide examples of how they applied GRP in their teaching practices. These included: the use of examples and explanations that challenge gender stereotypes; the use of neutral language

(for both females and males) while teaching and interacting with student teachers; encouraging female students to participate in learning activities focused on improving self-confidence; equal treatment of male and female students in the classroom and minimising bias towards particular genders in terms of group work and opportunities for participation; ensuring classrooms are safe spaces for all genders; selecting material and case studies which reflect the diverse roles of women and men in society and acting as a role model for them for gender sensitive practices. These strategies were employed alongside and as part of PBL activities (Khalil et al., 2023).

In terms of modelling positive behaviour one teacher educator commented on how they address gender equity when it comes to interactions between students, taking an active role in challenging discriminatory behaviour in the classroom and modelling potential ways of responding to such behaviour:

I do not allow any misbehavior towards the opposite gender in my classes. Moreover, if an incidence of misbehavior happens, I interfere and discuss the problem in educational and respectful ways. (X15)

Another teacher educator commented on the way they challenge the gendered stereotypes and prejudices their own students bring to the classroom:

Students give stories and examples about the social role of men and women where the man is always a hero with the ignorance of the importance of the existing social role of women, so, I convert these stories to a heroine and discuss with them the success stories of women in society. (X5)

Teacher educators identified special/additional needs classes and English classes as two subject areas where GRP has been particularly effective. The material used in special education courses at the university level contains case studies and other activities that reflect both female and male experiences. English teacher educators commented on how in the English language courses gender differences are not as pronounced as they are in Arabic language courses due to English language characteristics.

When it came to exploring the uses of digital gamification, the participating teacher educators noted that because there was a lower proportion of male pre-service teachers than females in the classes, they found it difficult to judge the differences in responses to the use of digital games. Nevertheless, they did note some positive responses, particularly among their few male students, to the use of these technologies.

One teacher educator noticed that male students' achievement was greater in comparison with the traditional methods, and two teacher educators mentioned that they found their male students had better concentration and were more active in class, while two more teacher educators found this to be the case with their female students. Of particular note, one teacher educator mentioned that digital games support female students participating in play-based learning activities, commenting that:

The importance of digital games is that female students are sometimes unable to play inside the halls, or they may be ashamed to play some physical movements due to social and cultural norms. Digital games provided a comfortable environment for the students, and provided a comfortable space for the female students. (X3)

Motivations for using GRP

We found that the success of GRP often depends on teacher educators' motivation to use this approach during classes. All female teacher educators interviewed were highly motivated to apply GRP in their teaching practices. Though most male teacher educators were eager to apply GRP in their classes, a couple expressed hesitancy about applying GRP. Only one teacher educator refused outright to apply GRP based on the belief that there would be little community acceptance of GRP and therefore it did not have a future (Khalil et al., 2023).

Teacher educators also identified significant constraints regarding the implementation of GRP within higher education, many of which are symptomatic of a severely underfunded and under-resourced education system. They identified a lack of space or suitable spaces for facilitating mixed-gender classes or having to facilitate gender segregated classes by request of their students, a lack of equipment that is suitable for both genders such as gymnastic tools, in addition to the existence of small closed halls inside the university and small outside courts. This makes implementing separate physical education classes for females and males more difficult and takes twice as long, since the classes are not mixed (Khalil et al., 2023).

Response of pre-service teachers to GRP

Understanding of GRP

The pre-service teachers who received classes from the participating teacher educators proved extremely enthusiastic about implementing PBL during their practicum but were less clear about the nature of GRP and how they might use it in the classroom.

During the interviews conducted following our observation of their practicum, we asked pre-service teachers to explain their own understandings of GRP. Their responses demonstrated a diversity of understandings of GRP including: 1) GRP was a way of integrating females and males during the teaching and learning process and ensuring their equal participation in implementing the activities with due consideration for other special cases such as students with disabilities; 2) GRP means taking individual differences into account when designing PBL activities; and 3) GRP means that teachers should consider the differences between genders when using PBL, including diverse needs and abilities for classes such as physical education. A minority of the pre-service teachers interviewed said that they did not know what GRP meant, with one pre-service teacher saying they did not believe there were major differences between genders in childhood but recognised that it is beneficial for girls and boys to learn together.

Application of GRP

From the observation conducted during the pre-service teachers' practicum, we saw that most pre-service teachers, despite these confusions, *did* encourage equal participation

from girls and boys in their activities and chose activities that would be suitable for both genders as well as other students with diverse needs.

The responses from the pre-service teachers suggest, however, that, despite the enthusiasm for using GRP expressed by their teacher educators, the explicit GRP understandings of gender equity and strategies for supporting gender equity in the classroom do not seem to have been transmitted in full, particularly when contrasted with their enthusiasm for using PBL in their classrooms

The challenges of adopting GRP in the Palestinian context

Gender remains a controversial concept

It is clear from their responses that many teacher educators participating in the professional development programme were not learning about or using GRP for the first time, rather the training built on their prior knowledge. Nevertheless, the implementation of GRP in their classes following their participation in the professional development programme was not without its challenges, particularly regarding prevailing stereotypes about men and women, confusions about the meaning of gender and lack of suitable spaces, materials and resources.

Gender stereotypes, particularly relating to acceptable social roles for women, must be approached with consideration for these diverse and complex intersections of identity and experience (UNESCO, 2020). Teacher educators indicated that social position within this diversity of identities and experiences plays a huge role in applying GRP in Palestine. Some families and socio-cultural contexts are more open to gender equality and women's participation in non-traditional roles, while others are more resistant. These differences can also impact how teacher educators and pre-service teachers interact with one other within the university learning environment. Some participants considered the idea of gender to be a Western imposition and of little relevance to the Palestinian context (Khalil et al., 2023).

The relative lack of awareness or understanding of GRP, as compared to PBL, suggests that, despite their teacher educators' professed enthusiasm for adopting GRP approaches, these did not necessarily filter down to their students. It may also suggest that PBL approaches, considered 'gender neutral', are more readily accepted by teacher educators and student teachers than questions of gender. In these cases, teacher educators who modelled GRP approaches while carrying out PBL activities, without explicitly stating they were trying to improve gender equity while using PBL, could indicate a 'lost in translation' effect where the focus was on how to implement 'learning through play' rather than 'doing gender-equity'. Moreover, PBL activities tend to involve very tangible exercises, while GRP includes more subtle changes such as use of language, teacher attitude, design of classroom and organisation of activities which may not be easily identifiable unless explicitly mentioned. Finally, as mentioned above, the lack of expertise, resources and research available for GRP, compared to PBL, is no doubt reflected in the confusions, or lack of enthusiasm for GRP compared to PBL. As such, the authors observed that most pre-service teachers adopted a gender-neutral approach in the classroom, rather than a gender-sensitive approach in their use of PBL.

While GRP is not a new field in pedagogy, the use and development of practice, resources and research tends to come from development contexts where barriers to accessing education for girls are a principal concern (see, for example, Banerjee, 2024; VVOB, 2022; Skovgaard & Warne, 2020 or UNESCO, 2017a, 2017b). The slow uptake of GRP is reflective of a general trend in education where questions of gender equity within the classroom dynamics, including curriculum, materials and teacher attitudes are rarely given the consideration they merit (Karlson & Simonsson, 2011; Prioletta, 2024). The relative lack of enthusiasm for GRP, compared to PBL, demonstrated by the pre-service teachers in this project, suggests that more explicit teaching about GRP is required during teacher training in order to encourage a more overt gender-sensitive approach in the classroom and that GRP needs to be further embedded into PBL approaches. This reflects the findings from a study in South Africa where teachers who had previously received training in PBL were better equipped to incorporate GRP into their playful approaches to learning (VVOB, 2022). Furthermore, Prioletta (2024) cautions that PBL can actually reinforce gender inequalities in the classroom if it is not accompanied by a critical analysis and nuanced understanding of gender. Our research findings suggest that beliefs about the gender binary and traditional gender roles expected to be performed by men and women are so entrenched in our social worlds that it may not be enough to train the teacher educators in GRP. Rather, pre-service teachers would benefit from specific courses that address the fundamentals of gender inequality and inequities, particularly how these relate to education, as well as strategies for implementing GRP through and alongside PBL.

Institutional challenges

Teacher educators and pre-service teachers must also confront institutionalised discrimination within higher education institutions. Participants mentioned a lack of awareness from male teacher educators about gender equality, GRP and the reproduction of gender stereotypes within the university environment; a lack of support from their male teacher educators at the administrative level especially when discussing GRP, and all six female teacher educators interviewed claimed that gender equality was not a priority for their male colleagues. Some of the barriers to participation in the wider academic community mentioned in the interviews included: exclusion from research visits and training when male students are supported to attend these; the lack of mobility or promotional opportunities within the university due to prevailing stereotypes about the role of women and the failure of university management to implement concrete initiatives aimed at improving gender equality (Khalil et al., 2023). These forms of gender stereotyping and discrimination are by no means exclusive to Palestine; indeed gender discrimination remains an issue in higher-level education across a diversity of contexts (for Britain, see Richards, 2024; for Ireland, see Ruggi & Duvvury, 2023; for Australia see Wilson et al., 2010). Universities across the Global North have been forced to address their own deficits in gender, racial, ethnic and class equality in terms of access for students as well as opportunities for staff, through institutional mechanisms such as diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives (Rosa & Clavero, 2022).

The challenges of implementing GRP are not specific to Palestine and have been noted by researchers in Europe and Africa (eg. VVOB, 2022; Karlson & Simonsson, 2011). The relative equality in access to education in Palestine makes it an extremely useful context for exploring the potential GRP in contexts where many of the barriers to access have been overcome but where negative or traditional gender stereotypes continue to have adverse impacts on girls' and boys' participation in school and wider society. The country's racial, ethnic and religious diversity also means that many students are exposed to a diversity of beliefs about gender roles and GRP could be employed to elevate those which support and encourage gender equity.

Impact of ongoing conflict and occupation

Palestine is unique in that education takes place in an extremely volatile context where conflict is ongoing and impacts everyday life in a multitude of ways. Despite relative equality in access to education for boys and girls in Palestine, the occupation and conflict has hampered the achievement of gender equity more broadly. For instance, women's participation in the workforce outside the home is far lower than men, despite the fact that a higher proportion of women than men attend university in Palestine (PCBS, 2023). Post-conflict processes and 'state-building' can offer unique opportunities to advance gender equality and women's greater participation in economic and political life, but these can also serve to reinforce traditional gender roles of women as caregivers or household managers and rarely translate into more equitable power relations in the domestic sphere (O'Connell, 2011).

The escalation of hostilities in Palestine since October 2023 has created unprecedented challenges in terms of ensuring a dignified life and access to education for all. Palestinian children experience high rates of profound and ongoing trauma from living under occupation and the constant threat of violence (UNWRA, 2016). GRP and PBL could be extremely useful for supporting the education of both genders and creating a learning environment which supports the psycho-social needs of girls and boys (Smilan, 2009).

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that there is an openness among teacher educators and pre-service teachers to learning about and embedding GRP strategies in the classroom, and improving gender equity for their students. In the surveys, observations and interviews both teacher educators and pre-service teachers demonstrated significant enthusiasm for the use and implementation of GRP and PBL in their classes, recognising multiple benefits to them and their students. Nevertheless, the authors found lower levels of understanding and implementation of GRP, as opposed to PBL approaches, which appears symptomatic of the broader scepticism towards gender and the difficulties in changing attitudes and practices that are firmly rooted in socio-cultural norms. It is clear that, in order to ensure that gender equity in the classroom becomes a priority at all levels of education, from primary through to higher level, the MoEHE and higher educational bodies would need to incorporate GRP strategies throughout the educational system, including a revision of the

curriculum, available materials and teaching practices so that these support and reinforce the concept of gender equity through all levels of education.

This research also supports the growing body of evidence that suggests that the successful implementation of GRP is intimately linked to the use of PBL (VVOB, 2022). Together these approaches foster diverse opportunities for participation and active learning while challenging established roles and hierarchies of the traditional classroom between teachers and students as well as amongst students (Mytakou & Murtagh, 2024). These lessons could be applicable to any educational context.

Finally, given the particular challenges of education in Palestine, more research is needed to explore how GRP- and PBL-related strategies can support more inclusive learning environments that take into consideration Palestine's diverse religious, racial and ethnic identities as well as students of diverse abilities and the psycho-social needs of all learners (Masri & Nazmi, 2021).

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