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GENDER STEREOTYPE REDUCTION FRAMEWORK: LESSONS FROM AN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT PLAY CENTRE, MOOIPLAATS SCHOOL, CHIPINGE, ZIMBABWE

GERRY MHLANGA[1] AND SHEPHERD GUMBO[2]

Abstract

Gender stereotyping manifests in all the communities of the world and it remains a contemporary social problem. Drawing from the observed gendered play material usage at Mooiplaats Primary School in Chipinge peri-urban, Zimbabwe this article unpacks the motivation for the practice and proposes a framework which could be used to reduce it. The study adopted the qualitative research approach and data were collected by observing 15 boys and 15 girls in Early Childhood Development using play materials and by interviewing purposively sampled 10 parents/guardians of ECD learners, two ECD teachers and the Teacher-in-Charge of infants. Besides, play material inventories were analysed to establish purchase preferences and the patterns of usage. All this was done basing on the lenses of Oakely's Gender Socialisation Theory. Emerging themes indicate that biological and cultural underpinnings influence the children's social environment comprising families, peers, media, schools, inter-alia, to recommend some gender specific play materials. Gender can be reduced through understanding its source, how it is practised and by appreciating the benefits of its reduction. The GSRF proposed is undergirded by sources of gender, followed by gender practices, gender reduction initiatives and benefits of gender reduction. Community surveillance is necessary to see through its implementation.

Keywords: early education, gender equality, gender practices, pedagogy, sexuality, socialisation

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The current study intends to build more literature about gender stereotyping and increase gender awareness in the marginalised rural community of Chipinge, Zimbabwe. Gender is a contemporary social problem in the world and has been such since time immemorial. The challenge is buttressed by the fact that where there is little education about it, it may not be recognisable even by the people who are disadvantaged by it (Garutsa, 2023). While schools are supposed to fight gender stereotypes through conscientisation of communities, they in some way aid it as observed by Raquel *et al.* (2023) in a study that schools tended to promote gender stereotypes through selecting games and playmates for some learners, which in turn affect the learners' play and learning experiences. While studies done by Olivetti et.al (2016), Jakiela (2021) and OECD (2021) identify patterns in which various social spaces of the children helped in the perpetuation of gender through gendered child socialisation, they did not come out clear on what exactly caused such practices hence the current study. This article presents conceptual and theoretical frameworks, related literature, methodology, findings, discussion and then conclusions and recommendations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The current study is subsisted on gender socialisation, teacher pedagogy and gender stereotyping as they impact on educational experiences of learners in early childhood development (ECD) settings at a rural marginalised school in Chipinge in Zimbabwe. The gender socialisation, teacher pedagogy and gender stereotypes do not only impact the current learning of the children, but also influence their future learning and educational achievement. In order to understand the causes of gender stereotyping and to proffer possible solutions to the problem, the following questions were generated: What factors influence gender stereotyping in the use of play materials in ECD settings? How do these factors and situations perpetuate gender stereotyping among social groups? What options exist in fighting gender stereotyping among pre-scholars? and What recommendations can be proffered to make best alternatives to eliminate gender stereotyping?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study drew from Oakely (1972)'s gender socialisation theory that identifies four ways through which children are socialised into specific gender roles namely, manipulation, canalisation, verbal appellation and activity exposure (Carlos, 2019; Eagly *et. al.*, 2020). According to Spinner *et*

al. (2021), Oakely (1972) opines that one is shaped into masculinity and femininity at an early age.

By manipulation, Oakely (*ibid.)* points out that mothers touch the bodies of male and female babies differently (Olivetti and Erta, 2017). Drawing from Oakely's (1972.) argument, Ellemers (2018) argues that mothers touch their babies in some specific way such that the baby is encouraged to view her or his body in a specific way.

Canalisation entails exposing the child to some specific games and toys such that they associate themselves with those objects (Sicard *et al.*, 2022).

The other channel through which mothers construct gender in early years is by verbal speech (Carlos, 2019). The language used for boys is different from that used for the girls. Spinner *et al.* (2021) commend that through language, boys are trained to be brave and to endure when they are told things like, 'boys don't cry', while the female child will be labelled 'smart and lovely'. Oakely's (1972) theory asserts that in the home, boys are encouraged to carry out outdoor tasks while girls are trained to specialise in the private sphere. By that, parents channel children to different future occupations (Souza, 2019; Raquel *et al.*, 2023). This theory shades light on understanding of gender stereotyping currently under study.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Besides the empirical data collected for the present study, extensive literature related to gender and gender stereotyping was sought. The literature reviewed include the distinction between gender and sex, the concept gender stereotyping, the geographical and global manifestation of gender, global efforts to fight gender, perspectives of gender in Africa and the gender policies and practices in Zimbabwe.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN GENDER AND SEX

Sex is defined as one's biological maleness or femaleness (Souza, 2022; Karpowitz *et al.*, 2023).While one is born as a male or a female and that cannot be changed for life, gender is what society ascribes to an individual, thus giving someone roles, identities and positions that are falsely presumed to be enshrined in one's sex (Suci *et al.*, 2020; Sicard, 2022). According to Faiji and Garutsa (2023), gender refers to the categorisation, classification or differentiation of males and females by a certain group of people. It is gender

that has brought words such as women, men, headmaster, headmistress and chairman among others (Suci, 2020; Raquel *et al.* 2023). The above conceptualisation of gender and sex shows that gender is a product of socialisation, while sex is natural creation. In that regard, gender is relative and is not the same for people in different societies because societies have different values and beliefs (Medie and Kang, 2018). According to Raquel *et al.* (2023), the roles that a female is expected to do in one part of the world may not be the same for another female in another part of the world. It follows, therefore, that the experiences that ECD learners are exposed to at Mooiplaats Primary School in Chipinge, Zimbabwe, may not be the same as those of a related group of learners at a different school in Zimbabwe or in any other country, because societies socialise themselves into specific perspectives of maleness and femaleness. On that note, therefore, one cannot assume uniformity in terms of gender, yet it is true for sex. One can study gender and recommend some reforms while sex studies would not yield any changes.

THE CONCEPT OF GENDER STEREOTYPING

Gender stereotyping is judging and ascribing individuals certain attributes on the basis that those individuals are either females or males (Ellemers, 2018). Propagandists of gender stereotyping believe that there are certain things that are done by all males and not by all females or vice versa. In the context of a school and in learning, therefore, there are certain tasks and subjects that are different for males and females. Teachers engrained in the stereotypical perspective of gender would propagate and sustain a gendered curriculum, thereby disadvantaging learners on account of sex differences (OECD, 2021). The current study challenges the view that academic performance is gender-oriented, hence was conducted with the aim of producing a framework to reduce gender stereotyping.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND GLOBAL MANIFESTATION OF GENDER STEREOTYPING

Worldwide, gender stereotyping is an issue that calls for strong collective effort by society to ensure that it is minimised, if not eradicated all together. Literature shows that the problem of gender has largely been founded on stereotypes. Souza (2019) argues that stereotypes are oversimplified beliefs that males and females, by virtue of their biological make-up, possess distinct physiological traits and characteristics. For example, boys are portrayed as emotionally strong and girls emotionally dependent, weak, followers and child-minders. Toys for play are also gender biased in a way

that these materials are prescribed for a certain sex as appropriate by society (Goldstein, 2012). Many studies in North America illustrate that after infancy, children show preferences towards same gender (Eagly, *et al.*, 2020; Evans *et al.*, 2021; OECD, 2021) This leads to gender segregation and formation of same gender relationship in childhood leading to gender stereotyping in social play, hence affecting their choice of play materials in ECD settings. Countries such as Sweden have already eliminated gender stereotyping and some several empirical trials have, in fact, demonstrated positive changes in early gender stereotyping practices and have designed gender neutral practices (Jakiela, 2021; Spinner *et al..*, 2021). On the other hand, in Africa, gender stereotyping is still conspicuous, maybe owing to cultural beliefs whereby a patriarchal society is regarded as a more suitable one than any other (Chawafambira, 2010). Hence, most studies done on gender stereotyping focus on how it affects the society at large, workplaces and the educational setup. A study by Suci *et al.* (2020) in Indonesia, reveals that the provision of gender-neutral toys provided better options for fighting all stereotypes in ECD settings. In another study, Cohen (2013) discourages teachers, manufacturers and parents from using gendered colours such as the bright and dull colours for the girls and boys, respectively, because that alone provides an impression in the children that they are different, hence impacting on how relate.

While it appears that there are some universal classifications to separate males and females, gender is largely localised. Localisation of gender means that how males and females are viewed and treated in one society may not be the same as they are perceived in another. The argument is that the extent to which gender manifests varies with communities. The different perspectives of gender from society to society may make it difficult to prescribe a uniform solution to the problem, let alone, the strategy to reduce it. However, as it stands, global literature indicates that gender is now more problematic in the global south than it is in the global north (Medie and Kang, 2018; Souza, 2019; Eagly *et al.*, 2020; UNGEI, 2023). The North-South perspective of gender suggests that it is somehow linked to the level of civilisation and development. According to Evans *et al.* (2021), the global south grapples more with gender issues than what the global north goes through. Its major negative repercussion the society is that it retards development since it affects the proper functioning of various social institutions, including family, education, health, the economy and polity, among others (UNICEF, 2019; Faiji and Garutsa, 2023).

Studies indicate that gender stereotyping affects both sexes, both old and the young (Goldstein, 2012; Chawafambira, 2010; Suci *et al.* 2020). Regrettably, it is confirmed by several studies that gender stereotyping is more damaging to the social development of the young ones, especially at the stage of ECD (Souza, 2019; Spinner *et al.*, 2021; Amanda and Carla, 2023;). This is because in an ECD setting and generally through infancy and adolescence, gender stereotyping tends to inhibit the true reflection of sound academic performance. Children's performance drops when they think that others may perceive them through the lens of negative expectations as predetermined by their sex (Mcleod, 2024). This is exacerbated by discriminatory tendencies that result between boys and girls. In some cases, this fully blows into hatred and even tense hostile relationships, depending on one's temperament and other psychological traits. One may end up in a stereotype threat, bullying state or into self-imposed solitary existence. This stifles a good learning environment and kills the enthusiasm and spirit of innovation in a child. In adults, much is to do with sharing of ideas but in children, sharing is about play materials, singing together and working together. Therefore, if there is gender disparity influenced by gender stereotyping, a child's psychological development may be affected negatively. While several studies on gender have been conducted and concluded that gender perpetuates differential educational achievement between boys and girls, little is researched on the underlying reasons for the treatment of people along gender perceptions among most communities in the world (Olivetti and Ertac, 2017; Eagly *et al.*, 2020; OECD, 2021 UNIGEL, 2023) This study is thus carried out to ensure that it adds depth to a body of knowledge on gender, with specific reference to gender stereotyping in ECD centres where it was established that play material choice was gendered, hence influencing educational career choice and achievement of children in the future.

PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER IN AFRICA

In Africa, gender stereotyping is still conspicuous, maybe due to cultural beliefs, whereby a patriarchal society is regarded as a more suitable one than any other (Faiji and Garutsa, 2023). Nonetheless, in Europe, countries such as Sweden have already eliminated gender stereotyping and some several empirical trials have, in fact, demonstrated positive changes in early gender stereotyping practices and have designed gender neutral practices (Mweru, 2012; Amanda and Cala, 2023). For example, compared to other European nations, Swedish fathers are more involved in-house chores and childcare

practices (Goldstein, 2012, Souza, 2019). On the other hand, in other places, women may undertake what may be regarded as menial in an African setting. For example, in Kazakhstan, the woman is in control of the house and children. Female-controlled relationships are respected, hence close the gender gap by conveying egalitarian messages and refraining from such practices as dividing classes by gender (Carlos, 2019). Because of the reported positive impact of gender sensitivity and neutrality in other places, it is important that a framework to reduce gender stereotyping in the Chipinge area of Zimbabwe be proposed, hence this study.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF GENDER IN ZIMBABWE

According to the Zimbabwe Gender Policy (2017), the country has appended her signature to some international instruments that seek to redress gender inequalities and these include, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development and the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa. In line with the dictates of the international statues, the country has also crafted some laws that guide gender issues such as the National Gender Policy (NGP) of 2004 which was revised in 2017. Above that, the Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment 20 of 2013, Chapter 2 on fundamental objectives and Chapter 4 on the Bill of Rights, are clear on the need for equal treatment of boys and girls. With specific reference to education, the Education Act Chapter 25.04 spells out that every child ought to receive education irrespective of their sex. These policy provisions which speak to the need to redress gender inequalities from the government of Zimbabwe, should be celebrated by all. The gender policies need to be supported so that all Zimbabwean communities embrace gender equality initiatives and the current study has come as one way to do that through its recommendations.

The major challenge today is that some societies still misconstrue gender advocacy for feminism. For that reason, the fight for its reduction in such societies is blurred along sex lines. Unfortunately, however, the challenges brought about by gender know no sex. In this research, therefore, the differences between gender and feminism are emphasized, and are emphatic about the separation of gender and feminism. I is contended that feminists' call for affirmative action to bring equality and equity between sexes is

justified because females have been disadvantaged for long in various societies.

METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative and combines the face-to-face interview technique, observation and analysis of documents. The three techniques of gathering data ensure saturation is achieved because triangulation of data is made possible (Cropley, 2021). Forty-three (43) participants took part in the study and these were 30 ECD learners purposively picked from ECD classes, 10 parents of the selected ECD learners, two ECD teachers and the Teacher-Iin-C (TIC) infant school at Mooiplaats in Chipinge, Zimbabwe. The participants were selected on the basis that they were directly involved in the education of ECD learners, hence had the most appropriate information about the choice of play materials by the learners. The TIC, teachers and the parents of the ECD learners participated exclusively through face-to-face interviews, while the researchers interviewed and recorded their observations as they interacted with the learners. Inventory records of the play materials were analysed too. Play material inventories were scrutinised to study the patterns regarding the purchase preferences and usage by each sex.

Consent and assent were obtained from the interviewees and the parents/guardians of the learners, respectively. The researchers explained the objectives of the study in line with Creswell and Creswell (2018)'s advice to assure the participants about their rights to privacy and confidentiality. All this helped to build rapport and increased research worthiness.

The observed data are presented in tables and in the form of photographs, while the responses from the interviews are recorded verbatim. All the names used in this report are pseudonyms and that was deliberately done to protect the privacy of the participants and confidentiality of the data gathered from them. The presented data are analysed in line with the thematic content analysis guidelines (*ibid.*). Besides, the interviews were transcribed, translated and important ideas manually categorised until themes were established.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted to establish the reasons for gender stereotyping in ECD settings at Mooiplaats Primary School in Chipinge, Zimbabwe, with the

view to suggest a gender stereotyping reduction framework. The gender reduction framework is founded on the four themes that emerged from the document analysis, observations and the interviews and these are; sources of gender stereotyping, manifestation of gender stereotyping practices, strategies to reduce gender stereotyping and the benefits of reducing gender stereotyping. These themes are presented in relation to the theoretical framework and the findings of prior related studies.

SOURCES OF GENDER STEREOTYPING AT MOOIPLATS PRIMARY SCHOOL

The current study reveals that gender stereotyping at Mooiplaats Primary School is embedded in the cultural practices that manifested within the learners' families, society, school, class, media and in religion.

Table 1, below discloses that the school, parents and non-governmental organisations provided for the toys at the ECD centre. The information was gathered through document analysis of the school's inventory records. It is reflected that there were gender defined play materials. For example, toy guns were officially recorded as play materials exclusively for the boys, while the utensils were meant for the girls.

Table 1: Play materials inventory *(Fieldwork, 2024)*

Mode of acquisition	Type of toys	Number	Use by gender (most common)	Condition
Donated by UNICEF	Dolls	7	Girls	Good
	Slides	1	Both	Broken
	Puzzles	5	Boys	Missing parts
	Utensils	2 sets	Girls	Good
	Balls	10	Both	Good
Purchased by the school	Dolls	20	Girls	Good
	Teddy bears	25	Both	Good
	Toy guns	36	Boys	Good
Provided by parents	Outdoor-swings	3	Boys	Good
	Slides	3	Both	Good
	Slides	3	Boys	Good
	Climbers	1	Both	Good
	Sand and water play	1	Both	Poor
	Jingles	12	Both	Poor
	Balls	10	Both	Poor
	Dolls			

Participants in the study justified the gendered collection of play materials, thus the TIC, Ms Simango explained that:

> Boys aspire to be soldiers hence these toy guns were specifically bought for them while the utensils were bought for the girls so that they practice what they would do in the kitchen.

Another teacher, Mrs Mhlanga, also justified the gendered allocation of materials and added that:

> If you look at these toy guns, they are in good condition because the boys use them well because they know that they are theirs and the same applies to the utensils for the girls, they are still neat despite the fact that they have been used for the last three years. For your take, look at that slide, it is one year old but broken already because both boys and girls use it.

When the researchers enunciated that the slide could be broken because of over use by many learners, Miss Hlupo refuted and reasoned that:

> It is not the issue of being over used by many learners, but no one has a sense of ownership between both boys and girls, hence poorly maintained.

The teachers' perceptions of the gendered play material allocation was justified by the parents and guardians of the learners, for example, Mrs Hlabiso commended that:

> I would not want to see my boy child playing with utensils at school because even at home, the utensils are for the girls. Toy guns yes, because the boys need to be trained to be brave to prepare them for responsibility in the future.

Another parent, Mr Moyo, seemed annoyed by the researchers' question on what he thought was the reason for the gendered allocation of play materials at Mooiplaats Primary School, thus sarcastically and threateningly responded to the female researcher:

> So, you think this is Harare, you are lucky, I could not have allowed you to set your foot here with your trousers on. That is not acceptable in rural Chipinge. So, you want to spoil our children and teachers by suggesting that a woman can be a man, no, no, let the girls play with those dolls in preparation for motherhood.

The responses given by the participants about the allocation of play materials revealed that the practice had a deep cultural origin. It was clear that the school were just implementing societal practices. In fact, the practice of gender stereotyping was thriving within the school and the community at large because, in the perspectives of Chipinge residents, there was nothing wrong about it, thus depicting a challenge addressed by the Zimbabwe National Gender Policy (2017) as gender blindness. These findings draw from Oakely's Socialisation Theory (1972), especially the concept of canalisation where the significant others subtly and overtly encourage children to take some specific paths in their early lives. Similarly, Spinner *et al.* (2021), in a study in the United Kingdom, noted that children conformed to social expectations of their society.

Manifestation of gender stereotyping at Mooiplaats Primary School

The researchers observed the ECD learners playing with the materials. The observed learners were photographed while playing as illustrated below. The observations gave the researchers an actual account of how gender stereotyping was practised at the school.

Photograph 1: Girls playing with blocks *(Field Survey, 2024)*

Although both boys and girls played with teddy bears, the researchers, through participatory observation, gathered that boys regarded the teddy bears as dogs that they would use for hunting while girls regarded them as their babies. Also, the girls perceived the blocks to be beds for their babies (dolls) to sleep on and, on the other hand, boys perceived the blocks as trucks that they would drive. Thus, although same play materials could be used by both girls and boys, they perceived them differently and the cause for this could be the influence of gender stereotyping of the play materials.

Photograph 2 depicts two boys arranging blocks into a simulated truck that they were "driving" by pushing. One of the boys was recorded saying, "My father is a driver, I want to be a driver." The boy's aspiration to be a driver seemed to have been motivated by his father's profession, indicating that children emulate what they observe. In essence, the gendered verbal appellations and the activities that parents and teachers expose children to will lead to the children pursuing the same.

Photograph 2: Boys playing with blocks *(Field Survey, 2024).*

Apparently, in the current study, the teachers were responsible for issuing out play materials to the children, so one could deduce from the trucks, blocks, tyres, balls and puzzles that were being used by the boys and the dolls that were under the management of the girls, that the teachers were deeply propagating gender inequality.

Nonetheless, the teachers encouraged both boys and girls to play with puzzles, books and balls. It was found that the approval of the teachers in using these materials by both girls and boys propelled the children to dispel gender concerns and focus to excelling in these aspects. The researchers noted that through the encouragement of the teachers, girls also challenged boys in puzzle games. This was important for this research in that it disregarded the view that girls were not capable of doing complicated activities and thus it proved that given a neutral environment, where there was no gender stigmatisation, girls were as good as boys in any activity. In this regard, it is noteworthy that teachers should be gender neutral in their conduct towards the pre-scholars.

However, the attitudes of the teachers shared similarities with Goldstein (2012)'s study on gender roles, whereby the teachers who participated in the survey consented that it was appropriate for girls to play with "masculine" toys but not for boys to explore "feminine" toys due to societal

stigmatisation, peer pressure, religious beliefs and contextual location. For example, one of the teachers' responses reflected a positive acquiescence to a boy carrying a doll in a truck. This implies that although the teacher did not like boys to play with dolls, she did not mind them to indirectly play with them. On the other hand, the teacher disapproved boys playing with utensils. This stereotypical influence of teachers on play materials culminated in the ECD pupils developing stigma on the toys. However, through acute observations and probing further, ball games were approved for both sexes, although boys were encouraged to play soccer drills while girls were made to play netball moves. One of the ECD teachers, Mrs Hlupo, was recorded saying; "Boys go and kick your ball from a distance, otherwise you will soil us. Girls throw your ball one to the other". (). This impression proved that there was direct gender discrimination on how some toys could be handled by the boys or girls. Mweru (2012) also observes that teachers and classroom activities could also have a role in gender stereotyping of play materials. For example, through probing, the teachers admitted that they felt uneasy when they discovered a boy playing with what they perceived to be "feminine" toys. Ms Simango, another teacher, said, "I rebuke him, because the play materials are just meant for girls." This remark is in line with Mweru's (*ibid.*) argument that teachers make a major impact on children's feelings about play materials. Olivetti *et. Al.* (2016) also comments that teachers should avoid certain phrases by using children instead of boys and girls, parents instead of mums and dads, and people instead of males and females. This, he says, can establish commonality among children in ECD settings.

On the other hand, Chawafambira (2010) finds that classrooms, particularly at pre-school level, are arranged into highly gender-stereotyped play areas such as a cooking corner for girls and a building-blocks corner for boys. Such a layout could reinforce the idea that such activities were incompatible and make crossing over to gender-inappropriate activities more difficult. In this regard, the ECD pupils' perceptions of gender orientation were strengthened. Since the pre-scholars' mindsets are still in the developing stages, the attitudes of the teachers towards gender stigma would be ingrained in them and thus would affect their future perceptions of gender in their adult age. Therefore, since playing enhances development, it is of paramount importance for the teachers to instil gender neutrality through encouraging gender neutrality in play materials. Ellemers (2018) points out that stereotyping is bad in that it influences how one perceives self and the

work they do. In a job situation, the job done by a woman is normally looked down upon if it must be compared with that done by a man.

STRATEGIES OF REDUCING GENDER STEREOTYPING

The current study's major objective was to end up with a gender stereotyping reduction framework to be implemented in schools. From the data gathered, it emerged that the Chipinge community of Zimbabwe, where the study was conducted, needed to reform itself first because it largely influenced the way the school was treating gender issues. Although it appeared that gender stereotyping was embedded in the culture of the residents of Chipinge's Mooiplaats communities, the interviews held yielded some results towards a positive direction. First, the participants confided in the researchers as stated by one parent, Mrs Chigiya, that:

> It is like that in our community for boys and girls to be socialised differently, hence difficult to change. However, for some of us who have been to other communities, you can tell that we are not being fair to the girl child and something needs to be changed.

Mrs Chigiya's views were echoed by another parent, Ms Mlambo, who lamented that:

> You see, we love our culture but at times it lets us down. Just imagine, all female teachers at the local school are from another province simply because very few girls from our communities pursue education due to the cultural socialisation that channel us into domesticity. I think there is need for serious awareness, especially among the elders that we embrace gender inclusivity in education as a community.

Mrs Hlupo confirmed that she was from Masvingo Province and was only adhering to cultural practices of the local community but was of the idea that:

> Under normal circumstances, we need to offer a neutral curriculum for both boys and girls so that they are separated on the axis of intelligence and hard work, unlike the current scenario where gender dictates one's life destination. It all starts with the community embracing global trends.

Ms Simangofelt that the school administrators needed to purchase gender neutral play materials, educate the communities about the benefits of embracing gender equality practices at school and then reconstitute school policy to allow the teachers to adopt gender sensitive pedagogy. Even that inscription on the office should be written 'head's office and not headmaster's office

The TIC went further and suggested that:

> As a school and community, we need to start allocating gender neutral roles to the learners and our children respectively so that we give confidence, especially to the

girl child who currently seems to be looked down upon, that there are no occupation reserved for a particular gender.

The participants in the current study seemed positive about the need to develop strategies to end gender stereotyping in both the school and community in general, hence are commended. It is reported too that reduction of gender stereotyping in every part of the world starts with accepting its negative impact on society and by everyone accepting that they have a role to end it (Souza, 2019; Spinner *et al.*, 2021).

BENEFITS OF REDUCING GENDER STEREOTYPING

Despite the strong historical context of gender practices in Zimbabwe's Chipinge rural community of Mooiplaats, participants felt that their community would benefit more by enculturation than sticking to their traditional child socialisation habits. One of the parents who participated in the study, Mrs Mtetwa, opined:

> I think if we socialise our children indiscriminately, it will enhance equal participation between males and females in societal development in the future, thereby modernising our community.

Mrs Mlamboweighed in and said that treating boys and girls at school in the same way was good because:

> the children will respect each other if they see that the parents are treating them as equals and that on its own helps in promoting an inclusive and tolerant society.

Ms Simango was optimistic that Chipinge would develop if gender stereotyping was to be reduced because:

> it will create confidence in the disadvantaged girlchild and we will likely see most of them pursuing their studies and you know what, education is a weapon against poverty. Families with both parents educated are less violent than those where the husband is the only breadwinner.

Another participant, Mr Mugabe, said:

> We are in a global world now and I think it will be an advantage to our children if we embrace what the other communities out there do, for instance, the issue of dressing should be looked at seriously. I don't see the reason for discouraging females to put on trousers because I think dresses may not be comfortable if one attends say, sports at a stadium.

Mr Mugabe's view regarding dressing was also echoed by another male participant, Mr Hlabiso, who asserted that:

> I think some of the things we stress on under the guise of preserving our culture are primitive and disheartening. Imagine, the girls are discouraged to put on trousers even in winter, do you think it is fair? We want them to be comfortable at school so that they compete with the boys on the same footing.

The other benefit of doing away with gender stereotyping that emerged from the current study relates to the promotion of good health practices, especially among the females and this is how it was expressed:

Mr Moyo avered:

> Discouraging gender stereotyping ensures that the girl child is educated, knows her rights and controls her destiny. Even when she gets married later in life, she will know how to manage maternal health.

DISCUSSION

The major finding of this study, whose focus was on establishing the reasons for gender stereotyping at the ECD centre at Mooiplaats Primary School in rural Chipige District of Zimbabwe, was that gender stereotypes were embedded in the cultural beliefs and practices of the local communities. Unfortunately, the gendered socialisation practices disadvantaged girls in education, since they were educated for domesticity. It is disheartening to note that gender practices that disadvantage some sexes continue to happen in contemporary societies when Oakely (1972), in her gender socialisation theory, castigated it for its retrogressive nature. Interestingly, however, both the school and communities felt that although there were gender practices that seemed unchangeable, there was need to gradually adopt some gender-neutral practices to ensure that future generations would easily integrate into the global community. Through participants' views, the study has shown that a systematic thread of interrelated ideas can be utilised to reduce gender stereotyping. The first aspect is to identify the underlying foundations of gender and accept that there are other ways on how things could be understood and done. Secondly, the gender stereotyping practices should be identified and condemned. It is also important to take responsibility and engage in practical steps to reduce the practice. To buy full participation of everybody in working towards the reduction of gender stereotyping, members of the community need to appreciate the benefits of reducing gender stereotyping. Karpowitz *et al.* (2023) emphasize that more and more females need to be educated since education promises to emancipate them from the bondage of patriarchy, hence the proposals made by the participants in the current study cannot be wished away. Ellemers (2018) also observes that the danger of gender stereotypes is that they not only influence the perceived potential of men and women when they are being selected for future careers, but also impact how the work actually performed by men and women is rated and valued where, in most cases, women's work is looked down upon, hence the need for gender re-socialisation.

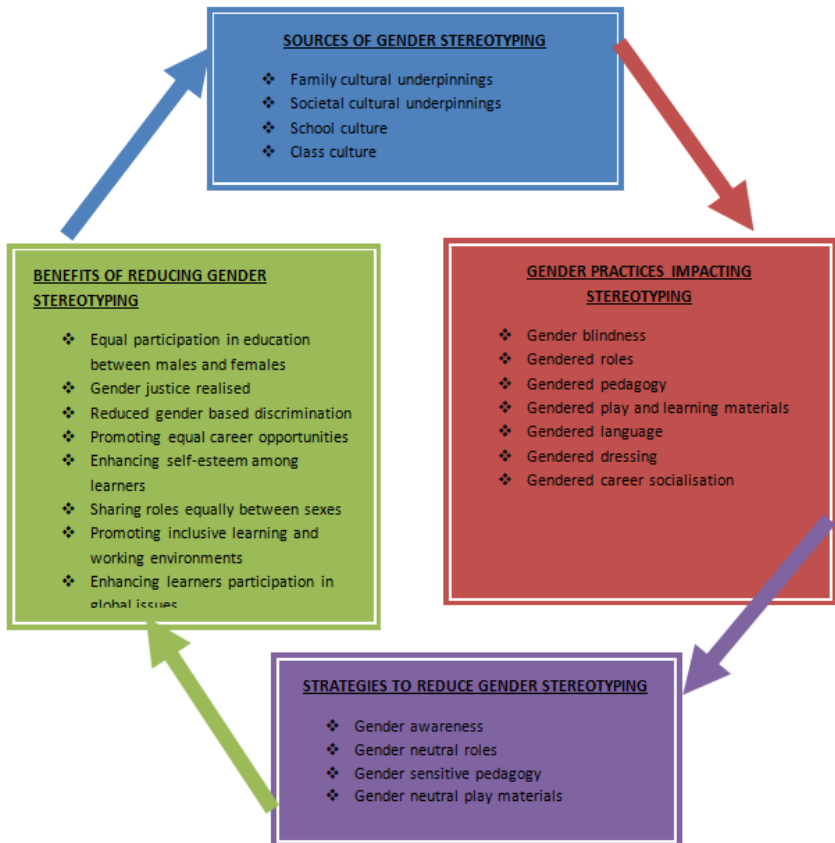The synergies for the reduction of gender stereotyping is represented by the suggested framework shown below.

Figure. 1: Stereotype Reduction Framework *(Authors)*

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study focuses on establishing the reasons for gender stereotyping within ECD settings at Mooiplaats Primary School in rural Chipinge, Zimbabwe. It appears that gender stereotyping at the school was a product of cultural underpinnings. All social institutions within the school community socialised children on gender lines. Even though the practice seemed engrained in the community, the participants pointed out that it was disadvantaging the girl

child more. The practice discouraged girls from working hard in school because they were modelled for marriage, hence their prospects of grabbing opportunities such as good employment derived from education were hindered while they were still young. The participants opined that gender stereotyping could be reduced although it was difficult. Basing on the findings of the study, the researchers propose a gender reduction framework anchored on extensive gender equality awareness. The framework entails re-socialisation of the opinion leaders within the communities, followed by everyone else to: understand the root causes of the vice, identify the practices, cherish the benefits of a gender-neutral society and collectively take practical steps to denounce it. Community-based framework evaluators and paralegal systems ought to be embraced to help sustain the smooth implementation of the framework.

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