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Gender equality matters: a precious “GEM” to tackle gender inequality through a whole-school community educational programme

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the efficacy of the Gender Equality Matters (GEM) educational programme in raising awareness, building confidence, and enhancing capacity levels among children to tackle gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and gender-based violence (GBV). While many primary schools are open to engaging children in the aforementioned topics, current literature perceives the lack of age-appropriate classroom materials, curriculum overload, and specific training for both parents and teachers, as existing barriers. GEM is an EU-funded project, including over 2,500 participants across five partner countries (Ireland, Spain, Italy, The Netherlands, Greece). This paper focuses on the children who participated in this study in the Irish primary school context (aged 10–13 years old). Pre- and post-questionnaires, semi-structured focus groups, visual cues, and lesson evaluations were utilised to gain an insight into the effectiveness of the GEM programme on this target group (n = 693). Post participation findings indicate that pupils reported a better understanding of gender equality relevant terminology, and increased confidence levels were they to be a victim of, or witness to, gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and GBV. Overall, the findings suggest a need for primary school education programmes on the above topics. Although there have been many efforts to promote gender equality, including legislative and policy changes, our findings highlight the positive and enduring role of whole-school community educational programmes, like GEM, to instil societal change, to inspire and empower at both national and global levels.

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Introduction: gender inequality and gender-based violence

Achieving gender equality is widely considered an ambitious but pressing universal objective. Gender equality indexes assessing global and European contexts demonstrate clear and persistent disparities across many aspects of life, including economic, employment, social and political power, educational attainment, and distribution of unpaid labour (EIGE, 2021; WEF, 2022). Ireland, for example, ranks 7th amongst all European

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Union (EU) countries for gender equality, demonstrating both significant gain and areas for improvement. Moreover, globally, the 16th edition of The Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2022) highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic downturn disproportionately affected women, with particularly pronounced effects on gender parity in the workforce, amplifying long-standing structural barriers and unequal distribution of caring responsibilities (WEF, 2022).

A central facet of the move towards gender equality is the elimination of gender-based violence – i.e. “violence that is directed against a person on the basis of their sex or gender [including] acts that inflict emotional, physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty” (Dlamini, 2020, p. 583) Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive systemic global issue, with recent WHO (2021) statistics estimating that 1 in 3 women experience physical or sexual violence across their lifetime (a figure that has remained relatively stable over the past decade). Notably, the risks of GBV are amplified for women who face further marginalisation due to ethnicity, migration status and/or socioeconomic status (Mayock et al., 2012; Ozcurumez et al., 2021). GBV has many adverse and persistent effects on women, including social, economic and health-related effects (Brudvig et al., 2020; Rees et al., 2011; Vázquez et al., 2012). Significantly, experiences of GBV often began in childhood, with a survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014) finding that one-third of women in the EU reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence before age 15.

Childhood development, gender roles, and gender stereotypes

Gender inequality is underpinned by social, culturally and institutionally ingrained gendered social structures, which are internalised and expressed by children in their early years of development. Children as young as three to four years old have been shown to ascribe physical appearance, roles, occupations, objects and colours and aggression levels to specific genders (Martin & Ruble, 2010). While predominant naturalistic assumptions about childhood have often assumed children as “gender innocent”, Keddie (2003, p. 297) used ethnographic case studies to explore the way in which young boys socially define and maintain norms of masculinity, challenging these existing essentialist narratives.

Children not only show knowledge of culturally developed gender roles and stereotypes from a young age, they learn to behave in “gender appropriate” ways, often adopting behaviours and interests in line with these. Children who step outside these socially ordained gendered ways of behaving are often subject to adverse evaluations by both peers and parents (Freeman, 2007; Owen Blakemore, 2003). These patterns demonstrate the development and internalisation of gender roles – “the widely accepted social rules about roles, traits, behaviours, status and power associated with masculinity and femininity in a given culture” (Kågesten et al., 2016, p. 3) and gender stereotypes – “structured sets of beliefs about personal attributes, e.g. interests, competencies, and roles, of men and women” (Kollmayer et al., 2018, p. 366).

These norms and expectations manifest in many settings, including education. For example, research demonstrates that boys and girls express different competency beliefs in subjects such as maths and English, often persisting when controlled for skill differences (OECD, 2014). The expression of gendered competency beliefs in, and

strengthening across, childhood demonstrates the critical importance of childhood as a period of gender role socialisation and gender stereotype internalisation. As summarised by Cerbara and colleagues (2022, p. 2):

[D]uring the primary school years, together with the family context, the socio-cultural context, teachers, peers and the media play a crucial role in the acquisition of social constraints that have long-term impacts on their aspirations and the perception of their opportunities, affecting also their relational and psychological well-being.

Researchers have consistently identified early adolescence (10-14 years of age) as a critical period for developing and intensifying negative attitudes towards gender and gender relations. A systematic review found that, across cultural settings, children aged 10–14 commonly endorse gender norms, stereotypes and or inequitable gender relations (Kågesten et al., 2016), highlighting early adolescence as a crucial time for developing and implementing education programmes that challenge reductive gender norms and gender stereotypes.

Importantly, gender norms do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they function to uphold gendered social arrangements, reproducing and naturalising gender differences (Talbot, 2003). Hegemonic masculine ideals – “constellations of actions that protect and reinforce the dominant position of men in a society” (Salazar et al., 2020, p. 2) – reinforce expectations that men should be assertive, rational, risk-taking, heterosexual, aggressive, and socially dominant to women (Kågesten et al., 2016). In contrast, gendered norms and expectations of girls involve caretaking, accommodating, nurturing and modesty (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Such norms are mutually reproductive and reinforce the idea that women are innately submissive to men in traditional heteronormative, hierarchical social arrangements (Moreau et al., 2019).

Gender norms play a role in the normalisation of gender inequality and the enactment of GBV (Heise, 1998). For example, high endorsement of traditional gender norms has been repeatedly associated with the perpetration of domestic and sexual violence (Carr & Vandeußen, 2004; Jewkes, 2002). In addition, the inability to meet cultural gender norms has been associated with ostracism and victimisation. Men and boys who transgress gendered norms or engage in activities traditionally associated with women and girls often face stigmatisation and even violence (Adams et al., 2016). Moreover, women who transgress traditional feminine gender roles are commonly the victim of discrimination (Gordon & Meyer, 2008; Riggle, 2018). Reaching into childhood, research has demonstrated the negative impact of gender expectations and norms on the well-being and mental health of both boys and girls in the school context (Pearson, 2021; Stentiford et al., 2021). However, such gender norms and expectations remain deeply culturally engrained, continuously reconstructed and sustained across social and institutional settings, including education (Salazar et al., 2020).

Gender-transformative education: mechanisms for societal change

Due to the pervasive negative impact of gender norms and stereotypes, researchers, policymakers, and educators have increasingly focused on proactive approaches to disrupt and disentangle attitudes and behaviour that underpin gender inequality. Policy and research recommendations have emphasised the critical importance of education

programmes as a site for challenging social attitudes that normalise gender discrimination and gendered harassment. Researchers from the Irish Consortium on Gender-Based Violence emphasise schools as a central institutional setting in which gender inequalities are reinforced and normalised and, thus, a fundamental site for interventions challenging said norms (Dunne & Suvilaakso, 2012).

One way in which this approach has been enacted is through the development of gender-transformative education programmes – i.e. “those which overtly aim to transform gender norms and promote gender-equitable attitudes and practices” (Peretz et al., 2020, p. 107). Specifically, gender-transformative approaches to education include explicit focus and critical reflection on gender norms, stereotypes and expectations (Casey et al., 2018). Many gender-transformative education programmes advocate for positive, healthy understandings of masculinity, promoting characteristics such as emotional regulation, empathy, inclusion and fostering supportive relationships (Banyard et al., 2019; Perez-Martinez et al., 2021). In addition, several gender-transformative education programmes focus on increasing the role of “bystanders,” i.e. “third parties who witness risk or who have the potential to model prosocial norms” (Banyard et al., 2019, p. 166).

Gender-transformative education programmes have been shown to be effective in many areas. For example, a review of fifteen gender-transformative educational programmes worldwide found that such programmes showed consistently positive results in combatting harmful gender norms, attitudes, and stereotypes (Perez-Martinez et al., 2021). Moreover, gender-transformative approaches have also been shown to be effective in improving positive sexual health behaviours (Fleming et al., 2016; Lohan et al., 2022) and reducing GBV (Dworkin et al., 2013; Perez-Martinez et al., 2021). Notably, gender-transformative approaches have been found to be most effective in influencing attitudinal changes among children and young adolescents. Blum (2020) found that gender-transformative education programmes aimed at a younger audience (i.e. school-based education aimed at those under 16) were more effective than those aimed at older audiences due to the increased malleability of attitudes. Furthermore, Ollis and colleagues (2022) demonstrated the effectiveness of a whole-school education approach to combat gender stereotypes in early primary school-age children in the Australian context. These forms of gender-transformative education form an integral part of respectful relationship education.

Education has a key role in nurturing future generations who are not only critical thinkers, but also informed, empowered and prepared to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies. In childhood, schools play a pivotal role in developing relational skills and understanding and appreciation of sharing, fairness, mutual respect and cooperation. For example, they aid in formulating “... the foundational values and competencies that are the building blocks towards the understanding of concepts such as justice, democracy and human rights” (UNESCO and UNODC, 2019, p. 10). Therefore, the production of quality education programmes on issues of gender equality represents an essential avenue for equipping children with the knowledge, values, attitudes and behaviours they need to make ethically responsible decisions in their daily lives that support justice and human rights (UNESCO and UNODC, 2019, p. 14). This paper focuses on the implementation and evaluation of one such programme; Gender Equality Matters – an EU-funded education programme focused on tackling gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and gender-based violence in the school setting.

Intervention overview: gender equality matters

The primary aim of the Gender Equality Matters (GEM) programme is to raise awareness, build confidence, and enhance capacity levels among children, parents and teachers to tackle gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and GBV. GEM was funded by the European Union (EU) under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) programme, and was a collaboration between five EU partners led by Dublin City University (Ireland). The European partners were KMOP Social Action and Innovation Centre (Greece), Fondazione Mondo Digitale (Italy), the University of Murcia Group of Researchers in Educational Technology (Spain), and the European School Heads Association (The Netherlands). The programme was piloted in Ireland, Spain and Greece during 2019–2021.¹

While many schools are open to engaging children in education around gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and GBV, the lack of age-appropriate materials to explore these areas is perceived as a barrier. To bridge this gap, the GEM primary classroom materials were designed specifically for 10-13-year-old pupils using an equality and rights-based approach. Through adopting an equality and human rights-based approach, GEM participants become positive change makers in their whole-school communities and broader society. The lessons are grounded in the national curriculum and existing school policies such as anti-bullying, well-being and child protection of that particular jurisdiction. By embedding the GEM classroom materials within the existing curriculum and school policy, it provides teachers with a means to tackle such sensitive topics in a safe and age-appropriate manner.

There are five lessons in total:

1. Rights and Equality
2. Gender Stereotyping
3. Gender Stereotyping and the Media
4. Gender-based Bullying and GBV
5. Making a Difference.

The classroom materials include teacher notes and guidance, curriculum mapping, an LGBTI + glossary of terms sheet and a list of national support services. Each lesson contains specific curriculum based learning outcomes, a list of resources, key vocabulary and extension activities if teachers wish to continue discussions on a lesson topic. The GEM classroom materials also include *Home-School-Links* for each lesson to promote and encourage meaningful parental partnerships. The inclusion of these links in each lesson is considered a key element of this teaching resource as it provides a trigger for conversations in the home, which extend and consolidate children's learning in school.

Research by Priegert Coulter (2003) emphasises the critical importance of a whole-school approach, including support from parents and teachers, when engaging adolescent boys in gender equity education. Therefore, underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) systems theory, the GEM programme adopts a whole-school community approach to preventative education, targeting children, adolescents, teachers, parents and preservice teachers. In the classroom context, the pupils' learning is facilitated through an array of discussion formats to allow active pupil participation, i.e. carousels; mind-mapping.

Stimulating visuals, fictional scenarios, drama techniques and age-appropriate use of multimedia resources are also utilised. All of the above methods promote collaborative learning with peers.

Examples of these classroom activities are shown in Figures 1 and 2. These images include student copies of collaborative drawing exercises that accompanied the classroom lesson on gender stereotyping. Figure 1 shows an example of a student copy of classroom material from an activity termed "Inside the box". In this exercise, students were directed to list as many examples of stereotypical gendered behaviours as they could think of. Figure 2 shows an example of a student copy of an accompanying classroom material from an activity termed "Outside the box". In this exercise, students were

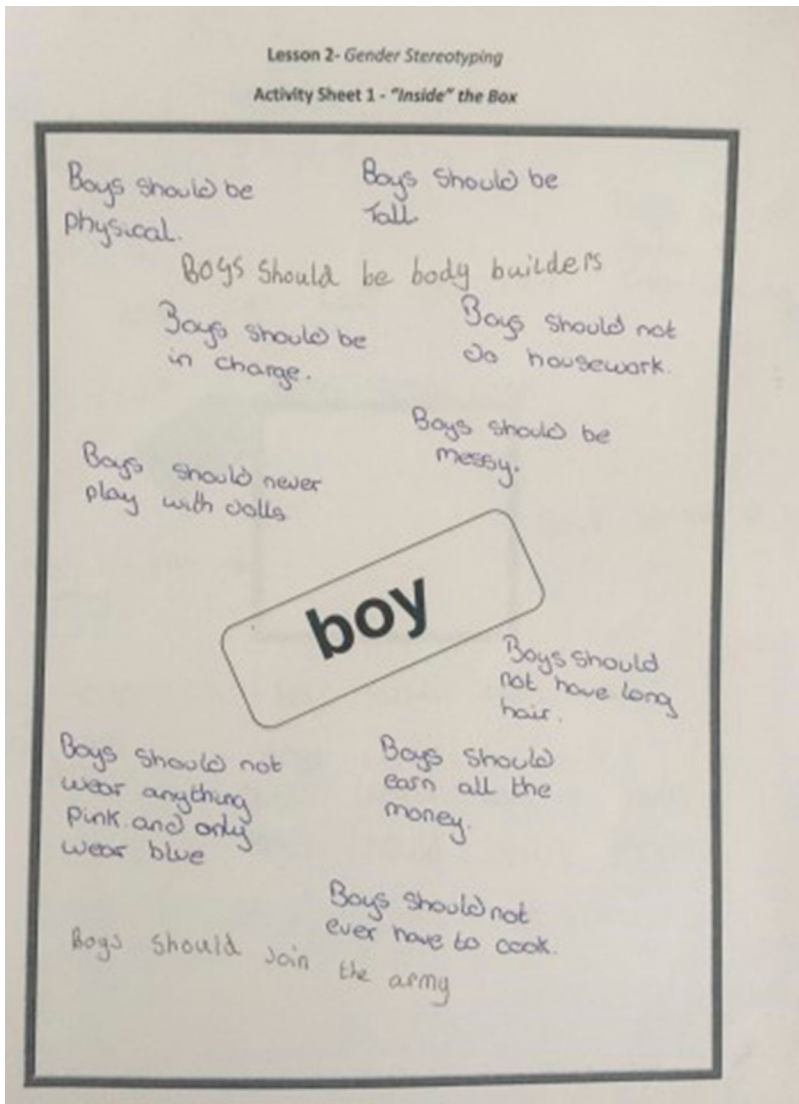


Figure 1. Sample of classroom materials from lesson 2 activity "Inside the box" in which children were directed to think of as many gender stereotypes as possible and write them inside the box image.

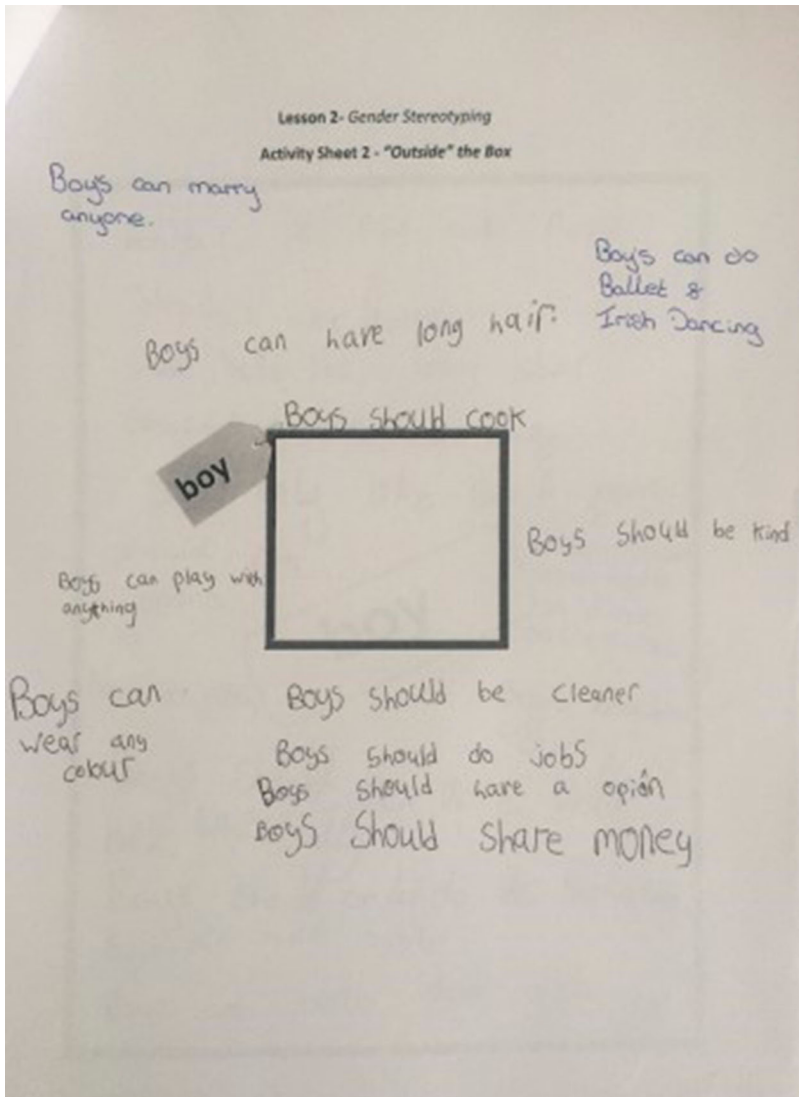


Figure 2. Sample of classroom materials from lesson 2 activity "Outside the box" in which children were directed to think of as many non-stereotypical behaviours as possible and write them outside the box image.

directed to, in contrast, list as many examples of non-stereotypical gendered behaviours as they could think of. Both activities were designed to encourage students to reflect on the content of the classroom lesson and engage students in active discussion around gender stereotypes with peers.

In addition, an array of training modules (whole-school staff, teachers, trainers, parents) were developed for both online and face-to-face delivery, which included participatory, experiential and transformative approaches, i.e. A Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). The inclusion of GEM trainer modules with a trainer manual functions to sustain the impact of GEM into the future.

Materials and methods

Evaluation design

The initial GEM programme was implemented from September 2018-May 2021 and included over 2,500 participants (children, parents, stakeholders, teachers, and preservice teachers) across all five partner countries in the initial pilot phase. The data reported in this paper focuses solely on the implementation of GEM in Irish primary schools. Twenty-seven primary schools participated in the GEM pilot in Ireland. For this particular cohort, data was collected through pre- and post-evaluation questionnaires, a semi-structured focus group and lesson evaluations. The focus groups were guided by open-ended questioning to gain a deeper insight into the pupil's experience and learning from the classroom materials post-delivery. The two questionnaires (pre- and post-intervention) and five lesson evaluations were administered in hardcopy format by the children's classroom teacher, while the focus group ($n = 5$) was conducted by a GEM research team member from Dublin City University (DCU). The final pupil sample consisted of 693 pre-questionnaires and 536 post-questionnaires. For a full breakdown of the sample, see [Table 1](#).

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from DCU's Research Ethics Committee (REC) before the commencement of the research. All proposed GEM evaluation tools were reviewed by the REC prior to use. GDPR regulations were followed at all times, i.e. all hardcopy data was stored in secure, locked cabinets; electronic data was encrypted with passwords. In the classroom setting, participants were given an age-appropriate plain language statement explaining the project before involvement in the programme. This statement provided details of whom they should contact in the event of any issues/difficulties and guaranteed their right to withdraw at any stage of the research. In addition, both the children and their guardians signed consent forms assenting to participation prior to programme commencement.

Before the programme began, two critical ethical considerations were identified. Firstly, as children aged 10+ were one of the project's target groups, the GEM lessons

Table 1. Demographic information of pilot evaluation.

	Pupil Pre-Questionnaire (N = 693)		Pupil Post-Questionnaire (N = 536)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender				
Female	340	49.1	293	55.0
Male	353	50.9	240	45.0
Class				
5th Class	364	52.5	287	53.6
6th Class	329	47.5	248	46.4
Age				
10 years	99	14.3	50	9.3
11 years	334	48.2	267	49.9
12 years	241	34.8	200	37.4
13 years	19	2.7	18	3.4

Note: *N*'s for post-questionnaire range from 535 to 532 due to occasional missing data, 1 non-response for age, 1 non-response for class and 3 non-response for gender (including one student who drew in and ticked an additional "not sure" category).

would be conducted with young adolescents who may be grappling with emerging gender and sexual identity issues. Consequently, guidelines and protocols were implemented to ensure that all school personnel interacting with children were aware of this and had robust strategies in place should any issues arise. Secondly, the possibility of disclosures in relation to gender and sexuality-based bullying and violence were considered. As a result, the partner schools were guided at all times by the Child Protection Policies of each organisation/institution, as well as the policies in place in school/youth settings, national laws and EU guidelines. No issues or disclosures arose throughout the programme's duration.

Data analysis

Firstly, using SPSS, descriptive statistics were run on the pre-questionnaire responses to evaluate pupils' experiences of gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and GBV to identify gaps in the curriculum regarding these issues. Descriptive statistics were run on pre- and post-questionnaires to evaluate participant changes in knowledge, confidence and capacity levels to intervene in gender stereotyping or gender-based bullying incidents.

Secondly, in order to ascertain a more rich qualitative description of pupils' experience of the GEM programme, a focus group was run with a subset of five pupils after they participated in all five of the programme lessons. Research using participatory methodologies often benefits from a flexible mixed-methods approach to analysis and evaluation (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018; Molina-Azorin & Fetters, 2019). In this case, focus group data functioned to further elucidate the experiential and educational impacts of the GEM programme on pupils, adding a richer understanding of the impact and outcomes of GEM in the real-world classroom setting.

The qualitative approach adopted was thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) – a method used to analyse and identify patterns within descriptive data. Thematic analysis' "accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data" makes it particularly useful for exploratory research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 77). The analysis was carried out following the following methodological steps: 1) Familiarisation with the data 2) Generating initial codes 3) Searching for initial themes 4) Reducing and naming themes 5) Reporting of findings.

Overall, using this combination of quantitative and qualitative, the results were categorised under the following four core themes; gaps in knowledge and victimisation needs, intervention and bystander confidence, knowledge enhancement and application, and community buy-in and dissemination.

Evaluation design and perspective constraints

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12 (The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2010, p. 15) states:

Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child ... the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body

Incorporating this ethos into the foundation of the GEM programme, the design of the programme evaluation focused on providing an opportunity for real-time in-person feedback from pupils before and after participation in the GEM programme. Therefore, in-classroom evaluations provided an opportune channel for evaluation focusing on child-friendly and accessible methods that would allow the pupils' voices to be heard. However, due to the inherent complexities of conducting classroom-based evaluations filled out by young children in a busy school setting, the in-classroom evaluation design posed some sampling constraints. Specifically, evaluations were filled out by hand by children in a classroom setting, leading to occasional missing data in both the pre- and post-questionnaire samples due to non-compliance. In addition, as the project ran between 2019–2021 across three European partner countries, data collection was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. While the in-classroom lessons with children ran successfully before the closure of schools, many of the training and evaluation procedures had to be adapted due to the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. For example, online training modules for parents were developed for online formats. Furthermore, follow-up interviews with parents who participated in the programme were conducted online and face-to-face, depending on the Covid-related restrictions at the time. These restrictions and resulting adaptations were carried out at various levels across the partner countries depending on national policies and guidelines at the time. Impactfully for this paper, data collection procedures were often restricted by the Covid-19 pandemic-related lockdowns in Ireland. These restrictions led to many challenges in retrieving data due to the closure of schools for long periods leading to data often being inaccessible for long periods. In addition, the extreme strains on the workloads of teachers and administrators in those settings led to problems accessing and distributing follow-up evaluations. Therefore, there was a significantly lower number of post-questionnaires collected than pre-questionnaires.

Due to these sampling constraints, the quantitative analysis was restricted to descriptive statistics, focusing on the frequencies of responses in each sample.

Results

Gaps in knowledge and victimisation needs

As part of the GEM pre- and post-questionnaires, pupils were asked to respond to a range of questions assessing whether topics such as human rights, bullying, gender equality, gender stereotypes, GBV and LGBTI issues had been discussed in the classroom to date. In addition, pupils were asked to report whether they had experienced gender inequality, gender stereotypes, bullying, gender-based bullying and GBV in the school setting. Descriptive statistics were run on the pre-questionnaire responses to these questions to highlight gaps in the existing curriculum, as well as rates of gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and GBV amongst pupils involved in the GEM programme evaluation (Figures 3–5).

With regard to existing curriculum gaps, pupils reported a high level of education on human rights (80.1%) and bullying (92.9%), demonstrating established integration of these topics within the Irish primary education curriculum. In contrast, pupils reported much lower rates of education on gender equality (61.7%) and gender stereotypes

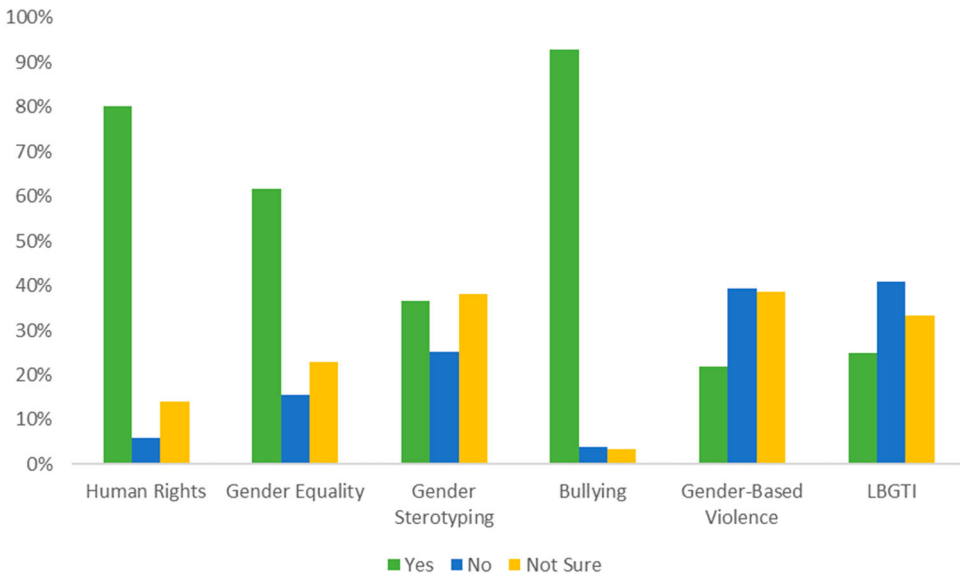


Figure 3. Breakdown of pupil pre-questionnaire curriculum needs assessment (“Have you ever discussed in class, as part of a lesson or class activity, any of the issues below”).

(36.7%). Additionally, less than one-quarter of pupils reported having had any education focusing on GBV or LGBTI issues (22% and 24.9%, respectively), with LGBTI issues being reported as the subject pupils most wanted additional information about (39.4%). Notably, despite low reported education rates on issues such as gender stereotypes, the GEM classroom material pupil responses reveal familiarity with a range of gendered expectations (see Figure 1). For a complete breakdown of results, see Table 2.

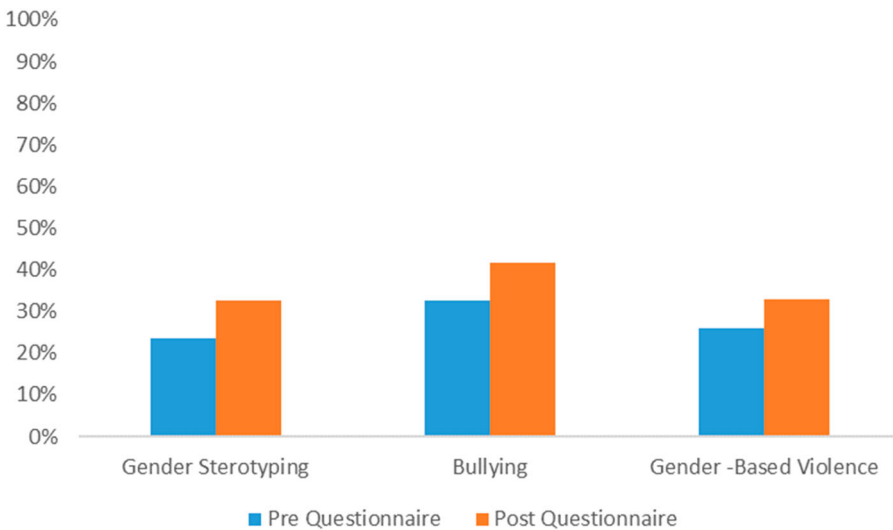


Figure 4. Breakdown of change in confidence pre- and post-GEM programme (“I would feel very confident about doing something if I were a victim of ...”).

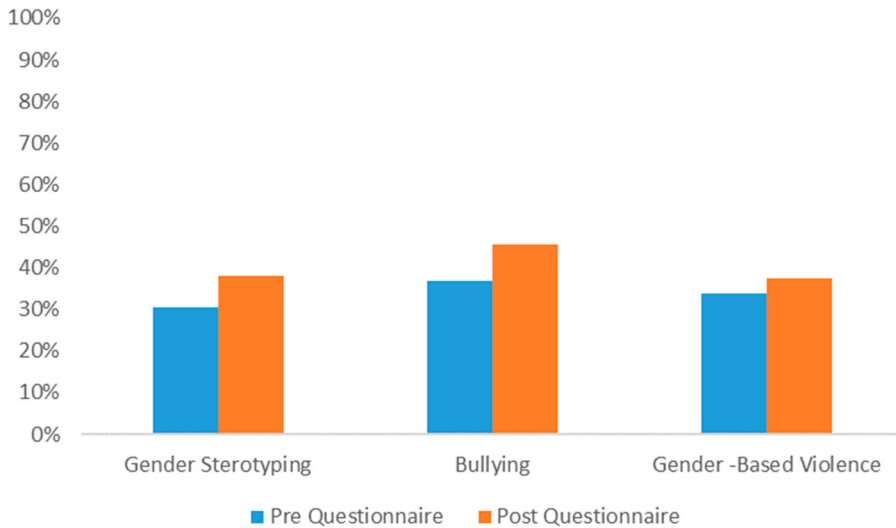


Figure 5. Breakdown of change in bystander confidence pre- and post-GEM programme (“I would feel very confident about doing something if I were a bystander of ...”).

In terms of victimisation needs, the data revealed significant rates of gendered expectations or treatment in the school setting. For instance, 21% of pupils reported feeling subject to gendered expectations in the school setting. Similarly, 22.5% of pupils reported feeling they had been treated differently due to gender in the school setting. Notably, a large cohort of pupils were unsure whether or not they had experienced gendered expectations or gendered treatment (31.5% and 30.2%, respectively), pointing to the lack of previous education in the area. In terms of bullying, 26.5% of pupils reported experiencing bullying at some point in school, while 25.8% of pupils reported witnessing another pupil being bullied in school. In contrast, pupils’ reports of experiencing or witnessing incidences of gender-based bullying were low (5.5% and 6.5%, respectively). Similarly, only 2.1% of pupils reported experiencing, and 3.6% reported witnessing, GBV in the school setting. For a complete breakdown of results, see [Table 3](#).

Echoing the quantitative findings, thematic analysis of the focus group data found that pupils expressed a lack of knowledge of core concepts before participation in the GEM programme. For example, pupils expressed particular interest in lessons focused on topics such as gender stereotypes, gender-based bullying and gender-based violence due to their lack of coverage in the curriculum prior to the GEM programme.

Table 2. Pupil pre-questionnaire curriculum needs assessment.

Have you ever discussed in class, as part of a lesson or activity, any of the issues below?	Yes		No		Not sure	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Human Rights	550	80.1	40	5.8	97	14.1
Gender Equality	423	61.7	106	15.5	156	22.8
Gender Stereotypes	251	36.7	172	25.2	260	38.1
Bullying	637	92.9	26	3.8	23	3.3
Gender-Based Violence	149	22.0	267	39.3	263	38.7
LGBTI	177	24.9	280	40.9	227	33.2

Notes: N's range from 687 to 679 due to occasional missing data.

Table 3. Pupil pre-questionnaire victimisation needs assessment.

In your school, have you ever ...	Yes		No		Not sure	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
... felt you had to say or do something because you are a boy/girl?	143	20.0	323	47.5	214	31.5
... noticed any incidents or situations where pupils were treated differently because they were a boy/girl?	153	22.5	322	47.3	205	30.2
... been bullied?	179	26.5	414	61.3	82	12.2
... witnessed any of your classmates being bullied?	174	25.8	336	49.9	64	24.3
... been bullied because of your gender (including gender identity or expression)?	37	5.5	585	86.7	53	7.8
... witnessed any of your classmates being bullied because of their gender (including gender identity or expression)?	44	6.5	519	76.8	113	16.7
... been the victim of gender-based violence?	14	2.1	606	89.4	58	8.5
... witnessed any of your classmates being the victim of gender-based violence?	24	3.6	528	78.2	123	18.2

Notes: N's range from 680 to 649 due to occasional missing data.

My favourite was the gender stereotyping because I didn't know what it meant before. (female pupil)

My favourite was the Gender-Based Violence and Gender-Based Bullying because I didn't know that people would be violent to people because of their gender. (female pupil)

In addition, mirroring the quantitative data, pupils expressed gaps in knowledge about gender inequality. Specifically, pupils reported familiarity with human rights and equality frameworks, but expressed gaps in knowledge around the position or scope of gender-based targeting as a form of inequality.

I didn't really know about the gender part of it. I knew more about the equality, but not gender. (female pupil)

I didn't realise it can be anywhere, I thought it was only in those countries where girls can't go to school; I didn't realise it was in jobs and in schools and all. (female pupil)

Finally, pupils expressed that before participation in the GEM programme, they were unaware of, or unable to label, common incidences of issues such as gender stereotyping in their daily lives.

Like in [toy] shops you see the girls' section and the boys' section, but I didn't think anything of it until this. (male pupil)

Overall, these results highlight significant gaps in education for young adolescents in Ireland (children aged 10-13) regarding a range of gender-based issues. However, the results also demonstrate that, despite these curriculum gaps, children report experiences of gender inequality, gender stereotyping and gender-based bullying in the school setting. Notably, the results highlight a need for education targeted at young adolescents to improve their competency in this area, as well as to challenge the norms and structures underlying the perpetuation of such behaviour in the school setting.

Intervention and bystander confidence

To evaluate the impact of the GEM programme on behaviour, pupils were asked pre- and post-participation to evaluate their confidence levels in intervening if they

Table 4. Change in confidence pre- and post-GEM programme.

I would feel very confident about doing something if I were a victim of ...	Pre- Questionnaire		Post- Questionnaire	
	n	%	n	%
Gender Stereotyping	159	23.5	164	32.7
Bullying	217	32.3	209	41.8
Gender-Based Violence	175	26.0	164	32.9

Notes: Pre-Questionnaire N's range from 677 to 671 due to occasional missing data. Post-Questionnaire N's range from 501 to 499 due to occasional missing data.

themselves were a victim of gender stereotyping, bullying behaviours or GBV. In addition, they were asked to evaluate their confidence in intervening as bystanders in cases of gender stereotyping, bullying or GBV. In order to evaluate reported changes in rates of intervention, descriptive statistics were run on the pre-questionnaire and post-programme responses.

When pupils were asked to report how confident they felt in acting if they were subject to gender stereotyping, bullying or GBV before and after participating in the GEM programme, there was a notable increase. Specifically, there was an increase in the percentage of pupils who reported feeling very confident in acting if they were a victim of gender stereotyping, bullying or GBV after participation in the GEM programme. For example, there was a 9.2% increase in pupils who reported feeling very confident in acting if subject to gender stereotyping after participating in the GEM programme. Moreover, there was a 9.5% increase in pupils who reported feeling very confident in acting if they became a victim of bullying and a 6.9% increase in pupils who reported feeling very confident in acting if they became a victim of GBV. For a full breakdown of the results, see [Table 4](#).

A similar increase appeared when pupils were asked to report how confident they felt in responding as a bystander to incidences of gender stereotyping, bullying or GBV before and after participating in the GEM programme. Similarly, there was an increase in the percentage of pupils who reported feeling very confident intervening as bystanders in cases of gender stereotyping, bullying or GBV after engagement with the GEM programme. For example, there was a 7.5% increase in pupils who reported feeling very confident intervening as a bystander in cases of gender stereotyping after participating in the GEM programme. In addition, there was an 8.9% increase in pupils who reported feeling very confident intervening as a bystander in cases of bullying and a 3.8% increase in pupils who reported feeling very confident intervening as a bystander in cases of GBV. For a full breakdown of the results, see [Table 5](#).

Table 5. Change in bystander confidence pre- and post-GEM programme.

I would feel very confident about doing something if I were a bystander of ...	Pre-Questionnaire		Post-Questionnaire	
	n	%	n	%
Gender Stereotyping	205	30.5	190	38.0
Bullying	247	36.8	227	45.7
Gender Violence	228	33.8	187	37.6

Notes: Pre-Questionnaire N's range from 674 to 671 due to occasional missing data. Post-Questionnaire N's range from 500 to 499 due to occasional missing data.

Knowledge enhancement and application

Supplementary to the quantitative data measuring the outcomes of participation in the GEM programme, in terms of confidence and bystander intervention, feedback from pupils in the focus group demonstrated significant gains in knowledge of the key topics covered in the GEM programme. For example, after the GEM programme, pupils reported being able to confidently define and discuss the concept of gender equality.

No matter what your gender is, you're all equal, you're all the same. (female pupil)

Boys and girls and men and women should all be treated equal, because there's no reason that they all shouldn't. (female pupil)

Furthermore, after participation in the GEM programme, focus group respondents were able to clearly define and outline examples of issues reported as curriculum gaps prior to the GEM programme, i.e. gender-based bullying.

Yes, I was going to say the same, because they're not falling into the pattern – or what do I call it – box of girl/boy. Say a boy came in with makeup on, everyone would look at him whether it's bullying or not because it's unusual to see a boy like that. (female pupil)

Moreover, despite analysis of the pre-participation survey data highlighting low educational coverage of issues of GBV prior to the GEM programme (see above), pupils in the post-participation focus group were able to clearly define and outline examples of GBV.

It would be if you're actually hurting someoneyou're actually punching or kicking them because they're a girl or because they're a boy, or what they wear or what they play with. (female pupil)

I didn't really know about violence and that people would hurt people just because of their gender, so I realised that that does happen in the world in different countries and stuff. (male pupil)

Another central finding from the post-participation focus group data was that pupils not only expressed increases in definitional knowledge around key concepts, but demonstrated the ability to apply this knowledge to real-world examples. For example, pupils were able to demonstrate the application of information gleaned from the GEM programme to familiar every-day scenarios from their own lives.

I also liked seeing the fairy tales, because I didn't realise that [gender stereotyping] before. And then when I looked at it, I was just like, "Oh yes, that does happen in fairy tales a lot of the time". (female pupil)

Because that one [lesson] stood out a lot, because you can see it more often. Because if you look at ads and all on the TV, Barbies are played with by girls, there's never a boy sitting down playing with them. (female pupil)

Moreover, when prompted to use and apply the knowledge gained from the GEM programme to strategies to combat gender inequality, pupils were able to adapt the knowledge gained to real-world examples of intervening in instances of gender stereotyping in their daily lives.

Well, I have a lot of cousins, and sometimes the girl cousins are like, "Oh no, don't play football, it's stereotypically for boys." But you could say, "No it's not, you can go and play football

if you want.” Because one of my cousins likes football but she’s a girl, but she likes football and stuff. (female pupil)

So, our Principal usually comes in and says, “Oh, I want four boys to carry tables,” so we were discussing it in class and we said, “Why don’t some girls stand up next time to lift the tables?” So, then she’ll kind of be, “Oh, but I asked for four boys,” and then we would say, “Oh, but four girls can do the same job.” (female pupil)

The ability of students to adapt and apply the definitional knowledge gained through the GEM programme to real-world examples and interventions against gender stereotyping and gender inequality represents a significant depth of knowledge gained throughout the GEM lessons. Moreover, it demonstrates the potential for long-term learning and skills enhancement due to pupil engagement in the GEM programme.

Community buy-in and dissemination

One of the guiding principles of the GEM programme is raising meaningful awareness and action in children, parents and educators to empower the whole school and wider community to challenge attitudes and behaviours towards gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and gender-based violence. To do this, as indicated earlier, the GEM lesson plans include *Home-School-Links* to promote and encourage active parental involvement and to trigger conversations in the home. Notably, the post-participation focus group data highlighted the efficiency of engaging pupils in at-home discussions. For example, pupils were able to detail discussions they had with their parents, based on the issues raised in the GEM programme.

My mum said that the jobs are better now, but even so, in her work, 90% of the people that work there are women, but all the men have the top jobs. (female pupil)

Well, I told my mum about a few jobs, and got my mum to see which one would be if you think a boy would do that job or a girl, like a firefighter and stuff. And I was surprised with some of the stuff, because a few jobs I thought she’d pick a boy but she actually picked a girl instead, or a boy instead of a girl. (male pupil)

In addition, pupils reported that during the at-home conversations, facilitated by the *Home-School-Links*, their parents expressed positive feelings about children’s participation in the GEM programme.

My mum was very happy because I showed her one of the videos where it says you develop your stereotypical view from five to seven. She was happy that we could adjust it a bit as we were still close to the age from five to seven; we were still close to the age rather than learning it when we’re way older. (female pupil)

Yes, so my mum was saying that the gender stereotyping, it’s getting worse, but now because of this programme it’s getting much better because people are talking about it. (male pupil)

Finally, participation focus group data about at-home dialogue with parents demonstrated the GEM programme as a potential pathway for the dissemination of education throughout familial and community social networks.

And also, because my mum was telling my auntie, because I was over at her house and she was telling my auntie all about the stuff. So, my auntie could tell all her friends. (female pupil)

When it goes to different schools, they could tell their parents, their parents could tell someone else, and it just spreads around, yes. (female pupil)

Overall, the focus group data highlights the possible avenues for dissemination through at-home discussions facilitated by the *Home-School-Links*, providing opportunities for broader impacts and norm changes through community social networks.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the efficacy of the GEM educational programme in the Irish context, focusing on awareness, confidence building, and capacity enhancement levels among primary school children to tackle gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and GBV. The overarching vision of GEM is to create whole-school communities that are proactive in tackling the aforementioned societal issues. By utilising participatory and transformative methodologies, the GEM programme meaningfully challenges the norms and structure that underlie the perpetuation of such behaviour, specifically focusing on their manifestation in the primary school setting. By working with children as young as 10, the GEM programme aims to create long-term changes in attitudes and behaviours, including the active involvement of, and partnerships with, parents/educators in a participatory capacity.

Combining pre- and post-participation survey data with qualitative focus group data, the research demonstrates significant curriculum and knowledge gaps on issues of gender equality, gender stereotypes, gender-based bullying and GBV in primary school-age children. However, the research also demonstrates promising results for the efficacy of the GEM programme in-classroom pupil lessons and home-school links to bridge this gap. For example, the results demonstrate that pupils who participated in the GEM programme had increased definitional and applied knowledge across a range of issues, including gender inequality, gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and gender-based violence. In addition, the results demonstrate promising increases in intervention and bystander confidence in pupils post participation in the GEM programme. Finally, the results of the GEM evaluation demonstrate the usefulness of this approach in fostering community engagement, explicitly highlighting the efficiency of engaging pupils in at-home discussions. Importantly, the GEM programme findings highlight the importance and value of providing children with an active voice in the discussion and evaluation of child-friendly and accessible education programmes.

The GEM programme addresses key gaps identified by Crooks and colleagues (2019) by positioning the spotlight on structural and social issues instead of focusing solely on individual level factors. While there have been many efforts to promote gender equality, including legislative and policy changes, the results of the GEM programme evaluation highlight how school-based educational initiatives play a positive and enduring role. Drawing on evidence identifying early adolescence as a key time for the intervention into the development of these norms and ideals (Blum et al., 2017; Kågesten et al., 2016) and the gap in currently age-appropriate material covering this topic, the GEM programme provides a promising means for early intervention. Moreover, building on research which emphasises the importance of a whole-school community educational approach to challenging social issues, such as gender equality (Priegert Coulter, 2003), the GEM programme provides a proactive channel for early educators to engage in these often perceived sensitive issues.

Most notably, the current research adds to a growing body of research highlighting the potential of gender-transformative education in combatting the substrates of gender inequality (Banyard et al., 2019; Exner-Cortens et al., 2020; Lundgren et al., 2013; Ollis et al., 2022). By empowering children, teachers, parents and the wider community, educational programmes such as GEM can challenge attitudes and behaviours that undermine gender equality and enable societal change. Importantly, Keddie and colleagues (2022) emphasise the need for these developing approaches to be intersectional. Commencing gender education in early childhood settings and spiralling this approach through primary, secondary and even higher-level education settings can enable future generations to reach their true potential without being hindered by gender inequalities.

Tomorrow's world is already taking shape in the body and spirit of our children. (Kofi Annan)

Note

1. The GEM post-primary classroom materials were piloted in Italy.

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