

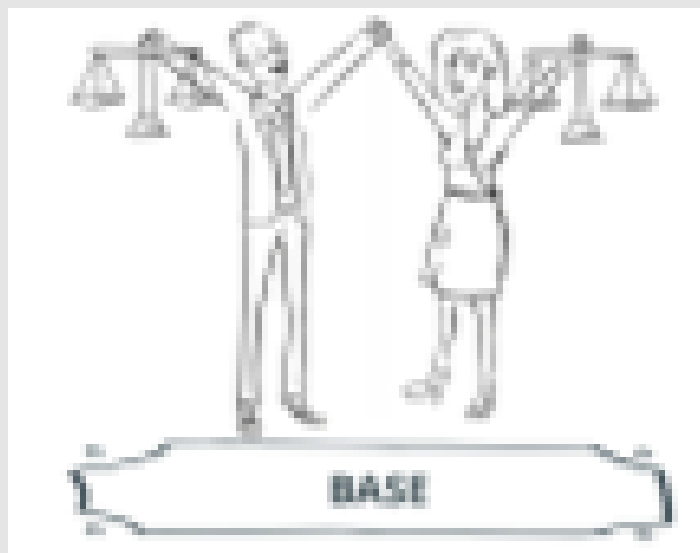
# BALANCING THE SCALES: APPROACHING GENDER ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM.

## A BASE PROJECT



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# Balancing the Scales: Approaching gender issues in the classroom

## INTRODUCTION

This Erasmus + project was set up primarily to tackle the growing gender attainment gap which is happening in schools across Europe and the developed world. In recent years there has been a big push to engage girls in STEM subjects and sports in order to involve them in all aspects of their education but there are less programmes set up for boys who are becoming increasingly disengaged in their learning. As such, boys are more likely to drop out of school early or choose more undesirable behaviours in the classroom which can lead to exclusion – 80% of all school exclusions are male. This then leads to girls out performing boys in exams yet there still exists inequalities in the workplace where men are more likely to achieve higher salaried, senior roles. The objective of this project was to increase awareness and knowledge on gender related issues in school as well as the importance of gender equality in identifying different learner’s needs.

There were four schools participating in the project, carefully chosen based upon their specific characteristics and circumstances and with the same needs. These schools were chosen to take into account the broad range in cultures throughout Europe and encompassed schools in Belgium, Scotland, Italy and Turkey. The project was a joint staff and pupil project and we were careful to include the pupils during every aspect of the project as they are the ones going to lead the change in the coming years.

When planning the project, the teachers all agreed that it was important to have a long term objective as there was no “quick fix” to breaking down gender barriers in our schools. Therefore, through education and awareness of the issues followed by dissemination in our schools and communities, the long term aim is to re-engage boys in their education, therefore cutting down on poor behavioural choices and early school leaving. At the same time, we aim to raise awareness of the issues surrounding gender inequalities, in school and beyond, making for a more equal future workforce and to provide a starting point for other schools, associations, etc. to investigate gender equality and promote it.

During the development of this project, the project team focused on different subtopics related to gender issues in the classroom and beyond. This booklet is the end result of a project which was dramatically derailed with Covid but still managed to achieve some of these massive aims due to the dedication of both staff and pupils in the individual schools. The booklet doesn’t cover all of the topics touched upon during the project (because then it would be book!) but aims to highlight some whilst, at the same time, showing some of the lesson plans which we were designed in Belgium and used with our students and which can be replicated in any classroom across Europe. This booklet and the accompanying web site are both very much works in progress and it is expected that they will be updated as new initiatives come to light.

In the meantime, we hope you find it useful and please feel free to get in touch with your own stories and initiatives into gender equality in your classroom.

<http://orcproject.wixsite.com/base>



## PROJECT FINDINGS

1. External factors and societal expectations have a huge impact on what happens in the classroom. Historically, boys have been told that they will succeed in anything they do—often without much effort but girls are told that they have to work harder than boys if they want to be successful. There have been societal expectations for girls to sit down and be quiet and there is still the prevailing attitude that “boys will be boys” whereas girls have always been expected to be seen but not heard. In recent times, there have been slow changes to this attitude in some cultures but there is still a long way to go to help boys understand that there is a need to be more active in their own learning.
2. Dr Joseph Smith Professor of Education at Stirling University believes that, in order to succeed, all pupils, but especially boys, need to see a purpose to their learning. He maintained that without purpose, students will have a “what’s the point?” attitude. Furthermore, he argued that purpose should not simply comprise of abstract skills but should be related directly to reasons for learning this particular topic. If schools were to incorporate purpose into the curriculum rather than learning for the sake of learning, then boys would be more likely to concentrate in class.
3. Social Media and mobile phones. This was discussed at length and it was believed that it is becoming a growing problem in schools, not only in terms of mental health and increasing screen addiction but also because there are so many different factors and influences which the pupils are being exposed to. There was no easy answer as to how this could be tackled.
4. Unconscious gender bias is a massive factor which dictates how teachers relate to pupils in their classroom and will have a bearing on how they build relationships and manage to keep pupils engaged. It is also necessary to recruit more men in order for boys to feel understood at school.
5. We can no longer discuss gender related issues by simply looking at boys and girls. As there is a growing population of pupils who are openly Trans or gender dysmorphic, it is necessary to tackle gender inequalities on a much wider scale.
6. Covid 19 has highlighted a growing number of young people who suffer from Mental Health issues and, as such, are not fully able to be included in their education. Schools should have a wellbeing team who the young people can approach if they feel they need to have someone to talk to.
7. This is an uphill struggle and there are no quick fix solutions. Creating an equal society where everyone is able to access services on the same level all the time, will take a seismic shift in many ingrained attitudes. We can make a start but it will be the next generations who will make the difference.





# Unconscious gender bias and why it matters in the classroom

Unconscious gender bias is when we make assumptions about people based on our learned experiences and societal stereotypes. Our brains use this as a way for us to process information quicker and easier.

## So, if everyone does it, why does it matter?

These ingrained biases alter our perceptions of people and how we interact with them. This can have a detrimental effect on life chances and opportunities in wider societies. For instance, if management at the local construction company are looking for a new bricklayer, they will unconsciously be expecting their applicants to all be men and may favour male applications over female based on perceptions of strength as well as character. Similarly, recruiters at the local Drs Surgery may expect all applicants for a midwifery post to be female and may favour female candidates over male ones based on societal expectations of nurturing roles. For the little girl who grows up with ambitions to build houses and the little boys who wants to help deliver babies, these biases will undoubtedly hinder them in their career choices.

## What can we do about this?

By being aware of our biases we can help to mitigate them. Often, as a teacher, I have looked at a new class list and noted that I have more boys than girls in the class. I will assume that the class will be louder and less easy to control than a class with mostly girls. Of course, this isn't necessarily going to be the case but this bias can impact how I deal with those classes on our very first meeting which will then affect them for the months to come. If I am aware of this bias before I meet the class then I can adapt my own behaviour on that initial meeting and start off on a more neutral basis.

This is also true for issues not directly related to gender. For instance, the first meeting with a new pupil whose older siblings caused you some grief. You may show a negative bias towards that student before you even meet them (worth remembering they may also be biased towards you, based on what their siblings has told them) based on your perceptions of their family. If that student feels you dislike them from your first meeting, why should they make any effort in your class?

Awareness of unconscious gender bias allows for a much more inclusive learning experience, helps build stronger relationships with students and gives everyone the opportunity to thrive from the start of the school year.

## An Exercise in Unconscious Gender Bias...

*“The words of my doctor from earlier that morning were still ringing in my ears when I found myself slamming the brakes of my car to avoid a nasty collision. An incompetent driver was cutting across two lanes at a roundabout just in front of me. Still perspiring somewhat I carried on to drop off my screaming child with the nanny. It was a hectic morning.”*

Read the story again and write down which gender you unconsciously assigned to the characters in it.

**NARRATOR:**

**DOCTOR:**

**INCOMPETENT DRIVER:**

**SCREAMING CHILD:**

**NANNY:**

Why do you think you assigned those genders? Were you even aware you were doing it when you first read the story? When you became conscious of assigning genders, would you have changed anything?



# Does the gender of the teacher affect the engagement and attainment of students?

## Some facts and figures:

In the UK:

Primary Schools = 14.1% of teachers are male

Secondary Schools = 35% of teachers are male

Tertiary education = 45% of teachers are male

### Staff Discussion points:

Think about the staffing in your school:

Are these figures reflective of your own setting?

Are some subjects more dominated by male/female teachers than others?

Think about your Senior Leadership Team? Does the gender make-up of senior management match the school population as a whole?

- In the UK, female students are outperforming boys at every level and age and in every subject area.
- With few exceptions, this data is matched throughout the developed world
- Young Women are 35% more likely to enter university than men.
- If this trend continues, in 15 years time, girls will be 75% more likely to enter university than their male classmates
- White males from disadvantaged backgrounds have the worst attainment in the UK. Only 13% of these boys will go on to further education, compared to 19% of white girls from the same background.

Some academics and researchers believe that the gender of the teacher is important to the attainment of the students.

Although there has been a slight drop in the overall recruitment of male teachers, there has been a slight rise in recruitment of male teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds which coincides with a slight rise in the attainment of pupils from these backgrounds.

A study in Milwaukee, USA, found that black boys were 39% less likely to drop out of school early if they had just one black male teacher in elementary school.

**Staff Discussion points:**

Do you agree that the gender of the teacher affects the learning of the pupil?

Can you think of any examples in your school where this has been the case?

Why do you think the number of male teachers is dropping?

Could governments be doing more to recruit more male teachers?

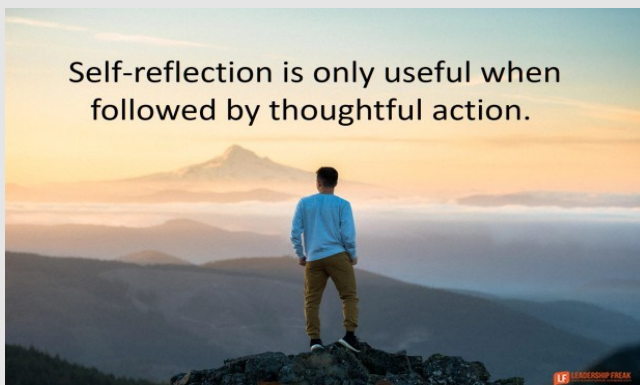
**Self reflection:**

Are the following statements OK to say or think in the classroom? Mark each one with “OK”, “Not OK” and “Depends”.

- ◆ I need two strong boys to help move this desk
- ◆ Must be a woman thing
- ◆ Boys need clear boundaries
- ◆ I have no unconscious bias—I treat everyone the same
- ◆ Go and help her to move that desk
- ◆ You throw like a girl!
- ◆ Man Up!
- ◆ Girls are more creative and helpful
- ◆ Boys are more analytical and mathematical
- ◆ Girls are more empathetic and caring
- ◆ Boys are better at logical thinking



Self-reflection is only useful when followed by thoughtful action.





## Conclusion: Some ideas to help you tackle Unconscious Gender

### Bi-

- **Be Self-Aware.** How we communicate is important. Think about words, tone of voice, body language and facial expressions. We may verbally say the same thing to both boys and girls but does our non-verbal interaction show?
- **Classroom interactions** – does unconscious bias play a role in who you ask to answer questions, how you manage relationships and behaviour and how you make decisions regarding different learners
- **Consider** the context and scenarios you use in learning activities. Is unconscious bias present in learning, teaching and assessment?
- **Analyse** your expectations of learners. Is 50% a good grade for him but could she have done better?

**When greeting others**

Avoid: ladies gentlemen ma'am sir girls guys etc.

Consider using instead:

- "Thanks, **friends**. Have a great night."
- "Good morning, **folks!**"
- "Hi, **everyone!**"
- "Can I get you **all** something?"
- "And for **you?**"

**Why?**

Shifting to gender-inclusive language respects and acknowledges the gender identities of all people and removes assumption.

**Be mindful of language**

on Toni Latour's "Hello there" cards. Learn more at [qmunity.ca](http://qmunity.ca)

## Student Assignments

The project team have always been aware that this project would not, in itself, be enough to change society and make the world more gender neutral. Our students are the future and we have included them throughout the project to raise their awareness of gender inequalities at school and in the wider community. The following pages are lessons which were set up to help students understand the importance of gender equality. Although the lessons are numbered, they are in no particular order and can be used as stand alone lessons or as part of a wider scheme of work.



# Lesson 1—Gender differences in Education

## Purpose

To increase awareness on the influence of gender differences in education and to educate students on the topic.

To teach students how to investigate and report on an investigation in social sciences.

To promote critical thinking and increase problem solving skills.

The above are the most important goals of the assignment. It is clear that additional aims e.g. in research, writing, cooperation and presentational skills are integrated in the evaluation of the assignment.

## Approach

Students are divided in teams of 2. The whole group contributes to the research of the main question: *which factors can affect the chances of success for boys in secondary and higher education?*

The teacher offers sub-questions and makes sure that every group has a different question:

1. What is the impact of the number of boys/girls in a group on the behavior of the boys in the group?
2. What kind of motivation works better for girls and what for boys?
3. Which is the best learning method (according to Kolb) for girls and for boys?
4. Do boys and girls have different brains?
5. Which hormones can have an influence on the (learning) behavior of boys and girls during adolescence?
6. How do boys and girls express emotions?
7. Are girls and boys treated differently in the class room?
8. What is the best way to give feedback to girls and to boys?
9. Are choices for higher education influenced by gender stereotypes and if so, is this based upon valuable arguments?
10. Why do girls perform better in higher education?
11. Are girls or boys more sensitive to external influences?

## Lesson 1—Continued

Students are asked to **conduct a research** and **write a paper** following the step-by-step approach as described below.

The results of each team are **presented** in class, followed by a **debate**, a **general conclusion** and resulting in a **set of tips / guidelines** for teachers and students.

### Assignment

Choose one of the questions below and elaborate this research question as follows:

explore the subject through **literature**

- ◆ Report part 1: an introduction to the subject and a summary of the most important content found in professional literature; make sure to add citations

add your own **observations, surveys / case studies / interviews**

- ◆ Report part 2: describe the methodology you used, the aims of your investigation and the results; add the content of interviews, questions and figures of the survey, ... as an attachment to your paper

articulate a **conclusion**

- ◆ Report part 3: compare the information found in literature with the information in the second part to draw conclusions

add your own **opinion**

- ◆ Report part 4: articulate your opinion and make sure to use the correct terminology, facts and valuable arguments to support your opinion; make sure to approach your results with a critical eye
- ◆ **connect the above with the overarching question:** How do these results impact the chances for success for boys in secondary education?
- ◆ Report part 5: come up with possible **adjustments** and feasible **solutions** to improve the daily classroom practice regarding your subject
- ◆ Report part 6: write a general **conclusion**
- ◆ Report part 7: After writing the report, make a presentation (appr. 5 minutes) to share your results with the class. Every team can choose which program/tool to use for the presentation, but make sure to be creative and make your presentation interactive.

## Lesson 2— Gender Stereotypes in Education

### Introduction

Students explore gender stereotypes in primary and secondary education. The students develop a small investigation based upon a self-chosen research question and design the approach together with the teacher.

### Purpose

- ◆ To increase awareness on gender stereotypes in education.
- ◆ To teach students how to create a feasible and valid research question e.g. taking into account the circumstances, define the research group, etc.
- ◆ To teach students how to develop an approach to conduct a small investigation in social sciences.

*The above are the most important goals of the assignment. Any additional aims e.g. in research, writing, cooperation and presentational skills can be added to the assignment.*

### Approach

By offering a wide range of choices and gradually teaching them how to design their investigation and by involving the whole group where one idea leads to another, the students benefit from peer-learning and become more involved in the assignment.

To enhance the participation of all students, teachers use Kahoot throughout the process and add polls, questions, brainstorming that are directly visible for the class on a screen.

### Example

Below we give an example of how this assignment was carried out by students aged 16-17.

The students chose the following research questions:

- ◆ Do children age 10 to 12 assign certain professions, behavior, emotions, ... to a gender?
- ◆ Do textbooks in secondary education contain gender stereotypes?

## Lesson 2—Continued

- ◆ Students selected words that are often related to a specific gender. E.g. certain professions, behavior, emotions, objects, tasks at home and wrote them on post-its
- ◆ They made 3 posters: boys/men, girls/women, neutral
- ◆ The children were asked to put the post-its on the right poster according to them.
- ◆ After a few weeks, the students returned to the classroom and organized a debate, based upon statements that directly assessed the childrens' opinion on the relation between certain professions, behavior, etc and gender.
- ◆ This approach was chosen to additionally assess whether there was a difference between the first activity, where children were asked to do the activity individually and without context, thus acting more instinctively, and the second activity, where the assignment was done in a group and with a small introduction of the purpose of the activity.
- ◆ For the children aged 10 to 12, their teacher organized a follow-up lesson on gender stereotypes and gender equality.
- ◆ The students compared the results of the two working sessions in the classroom and came up with a conclusion on their research.
- ◆ For the research in secondary education, students divided school subjects among the class group and worked in pairs. They explored the textbooks and other teaching materials e.g., tests, assignments, ... looking for gender stereotypes.
- ◆ During the investigation, the students added an additional challenge: looking for examples that were contradictory to common gender stereotypes.

The results were shared via Padlet and discussed upon in the classroom.

# Lesson 3—Gender Stereotypes in Expression

a lesson for the English classroom

## Introduction

Gender inequality and gender stereotypes are ingrained in our daily language. Studying expressions and quotes in English related to gender stereotypes offers an opportunity to investigate the origin of it, to evaluate its meaning and assess it in the light of current society and as a starting point for debates on the topic of gender equality.

## Purpose

To increase awareness on gender (in)equality in expressions.

To teach students how to find the origin of expressions and evaluate their meaning in current society.

To improve conversational skills in a foreign language.

## Approach

Students are asked to prepare for the lesson by searching for expressions and quotes related to gender. During the lesson, all quotes and expressions are written on the blackboard. The most common and most interesting are marked. Students search the internet to find the origin of the expression.

For the debate, students are divided into groups of 4. Each group discusses the meaning of the expression and if it is still applicable / meaningful in current society.

After the debate, each group reports the results of the debate to the class.

## Examples

Examples of expressions and quotes that were discussed upon by our students:

- Boys don't cry
- An old wives tale
- Behind every successful man stands a caring woman
- A women's work is never done
- To make an honest woman of someone
- A woman's place is in the home
- It's a man's world
- To talk man to man
- Be man enough to do it
- Boys and their toys

# Lesson 4—Gender Stereotypes in recent History

A lesson for the History classroom

## Introduction

When it comes to gender equality, we still have a long way to go if we look at current events. Nevertheless, things have changed tremendously over the past decades.

While youngsters tend to focus on their own reality, environment and to the present, the project team searched for a way to bring the past closer to their world by having them interviewing grandparents on gender equality in the recent past.

Afterwards, students were asked to study fragments of the *Code Napoléon* that are related to gender (in)equality and reflect on it.

All students in the class are involved in the assignment, that was implemented in the curriculum of the students.

## Purpose

To increase awareness on the evolution of gender equality in the recent past.

To promote critical thinking and to enhance the ability of students to look at past events considering the status quo in society at the moment of the event.

To improve students' insight in the fact that some ideas on gender are a cultural phenomenon, based upon theories that are thousands of years old (Greek philosophers, Bible, ...).

## Approach

Each student interviews one or two grandparents on their opinion on gender equality at this moment and on gender equality in the past. Before the interview, students prepare defined questions or statements to start from.

The interviews are filmed.

All the films are collected by the teacher and watched in class. Students select certain topics and fragments related to this topic. These fragments are used in the production of a coherent summary video.

For the second part of the assignment, the teacher selects fragments of the *Code Napoléon* related to gender (in) equality. Together with the students the teacher investigates if some of the aspects still seem present in the stories and opinions of the grandparents, if some had already changed, and if we can still notice some consequences of it in nowadays' society.

For quite some aspects, the origin of the ideas can be related to the theories of Greek philosophers, the Bible, ... that still have a significant influence on our society.



# Lesson 5 — Gender equality on the job market

Assignment for students in Social Sciences

## Purpose

To explore the job market and gender (in)equality in the job market in the fields related to the students' current education, being health care, social and pedagogical sector, education. In addition, more general research was conducted in interim offices.

To increase awareness on the importance of gender equality in the job market and to educate students on the topic. To investigate if man or woman more often get the leading positions or jobs with higher salaries.

## Approach

Students are divided in teams of 2. Each team explores one company or office.

Every team starts from the same questions:

- ◆ How many man and how many women work in the company?
- ◆ In case of a larger company: divided according to the hierarchy of the company
- ◆ What are the main competences that are important for the job?
- ◆ Are the main competences (assumed to be) gender related?
- ◆ Is gender important in the recruitment procedure?
- ◆ When applicable: is there a policy of negative or positive discrimination?
- ◆ What is the average wage of female and of male employees?
- ◆ What is the percentage of male and female employees within the leading positions of the company?

The results of the investigations of the teams are compared in the classroom. A summary of the findings is made with the whole class together.

Out of the conclusions and based upon research by the government, students select a profession/company/field where there is a distinct difference in the percentage of employees being male or female. They contact a person that is working in a field where most of the employees have a different gender.

Examples our students explored: a male nurse, a male teacher in kindergarten, a female engineer in construction, a female electrician, a male medical secretary, a male house cleaner, a female gardener, a female plumber, a female CEO, a male pharmacy assistant.

Students interview the employee to explore the advantages / disadvantages / prejudices / difficulties / ... of employees working in an environment where most of the employees have a different gender. Relevant information is selected out of the interviews and reported in class.

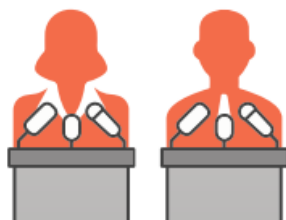


5 GENDER EQUALITY



# ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

IT WOULD TAKE ANOTHER  
**40 YEARS**



FOR WOMEN AND MEN TO BE REPRESENTED EQUALLY IN NATIONAL POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AT THE CURRENT PACE

WOMEN'S SHARE IN NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS

22.4%

2015



26.2%

2022



WOMEN ACCOUNTED FOR

**39%**

OF TOTAL EMPLOYMENT IN 2019,

BUT **45%**

OF GLOBAL EMPLOYMENT LOSSES IN 2020

MORE THAN 1 IN 4 WOMEN (15+ YEARS)



HAVE BEEN SUBJECTED TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (641 MILLION) AT LEAST ONCE IN THEIR LIFETIME



GENDER-RESPONSIVE BUDGETING NEEDS TO BE STRENGTHENED

PROPORTION OF COUNTRIES WITH SYSTEMS TO TRACK GENDER-BUDGET ALLOCATIONS (2018-2021)



26% | COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEMS

59% | SOME FEATURES OF A SYSTEM

15% | LACKING MINIMUM ELEMENTS OF SUCH A SYSTEM

ONLY **57%**

OF WOMEN (15-49 YEARS)



ARE MAKING THEIR OWN INFORMED DECISIONS ON SEX AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CARE

(64 COUNTRIES, 2007-2021)



# Further Reading

## Articles

Professionally speaking: Challenges to achieving equality for LGBT people—the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights—Chapter 2 - [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2016-lgbt-public-officials\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2016-lgbt-public-officials_en.pdf)

The European Institute for Gender Equality - <https://eige.europa.eu/>

Kumar, G—How to promote gender equality in the classroom, <https://in.pearson.com/blogs/2020/03/how-to-promote-gender-equality-in-the-classroom.html>

Gender differences in the classroom—Lumenlearning.com— <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-educationalpsychology/chapter/gender-differences-in-the-classroom/>

Gender issues in the classroom: The past, the promise and the future—Janice Koch (PDF) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228030624\\_Gender\\_Issues\\_in\\_the\\_Classroom](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228030624_Gender_Issues_in_the_Classroom)

## BOOKS

Pinkett, Matt—*Boys Don't Try? : Rethinking masculinity in schools*

Roberts, Mark—*The Boy Question: Teaching boys to succeed in schools*

Tsouroufli, Maria and Redai, Dorottya—*Gender Equality and Stereotyping in Secondary Schools: Case Studies from England, Hungary and Italy*

Brownhill, Simon et al., - *Men, Masculinities and Teaching in Early Childhood Education: International perspectives on gender and care*

Holt, Matthew—*Sexual Orientation Equality in Schools: Teacher Advocacy and Action Research (Queer Studies and Education)*