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Boys and bullying in primary school: Young masculinities and the negotiation of power

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In this article, we draw on data from focus group discussions to examine the ways in which some young boys in a South African township primary school construct and negotiate hegemonic masculinity through bullying, and other forms of violence, within the school. Deviating from the simplistic victim-bully binary, we draw from critical masculinity studies to show how younger boys exert power over girls through violence but are, themselves, also victims of violence which, they say, is perpetrated by girls. Boys are often identified as bullies at school, but when we gave them the opportunity to talk about what it meant to be a bully, we gained a far more complex picture of how bullying behaviour manifests between learners at school. Indeed, our participants' accounts of violence at school gave us great insights into the complexities of gender violence and highlighted the broader socio-cultural and economic conditions that produce it. We conclude that it is vital to understand the mechanisms of gender power relations among primary school learners, if primary school violence prevention interventions are to be effective.

Keywords: boys; bullying; gender power relations; primary schooling; South Africa; violence

Introduction

On 26 September 2017, a Grade 2 primary schoolboy brought a firearm with live ammunition to school, which he intended to use to harm one of his schoolmates (Masinga, 2017). This media report reflects the everyday incidents of school violence, harassment and bullying. According to a report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2019:16), sub-Saharan Africa has the highest percentage (48.2%) of children who experience bullying at school, and South Africa is no exception (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018). However, in South Africa, research on bullying in schools often draws on individualistic and essentialist discourses of bullying which tend to overlook broader socio-economic forces while viewing bullying as a problematic personality trait, part of an individual's behavioural pattern (De Wet, 2007; Masitsa, 2011; Prinsloo, 2005; Swart & Bredekamp, 2009). Within these discourses, addressing a "trait" such as bullying thus requires therapeutic work with the individual in an effort to change him (or her) in some way. These discourses also suggest that the relationship between a bully and a victim is unidirectional and binary. For example, Olweus, Limber and Mihalic (1999:10) argue that bullying is "repetitive aggressive behaviour over a period of time" where the intention of the bully is to bring harm to the victim. Individual psychological problems, pathologising and personality traits are often seen as key factors that cause an individual to bully a helpless, passive and vulnerable victim (Ayers, Wagaman, Geiger, Bermudez-Parsai & Hedberg, 2012).

The dominant individual-based and essentialist discourses of bullying not only foreground the bully-victim binary; they also suggest that bullying behaviour is innate, rather than socially produced. For example, Swart and Bredekamp (2009:405) argue that "some girls have innate characteristics that help maintain bullying while others have characteristics that protect them from bullying", and according to De Wet (2007), teachers often distance themselves from bullying and violence between learners at school by conceptualising bullying as the individuals' problem, where the problem (and the potential solution to it) resides within the bullies and victims themselves. However, other studies (Bisika, Ntata & Konyani, 2009; Morrell, 2001) have found evidence that teachers can contribute to bullying behaviour and violence between learners in schools, particularly if they use corporal punishment as a means of disciplining learners, which is another form of bullying.

Deviating from such individualistic and essentialist binary discourses of bullying, in this article we draw on the work of social scientists who have demonstrated how bullying operates as a complex social phenomenon which manifest within unique contexts of race, class, culture, gender relations of power, and discourses of masculinity (Bisika et al., 2009; Carrera-Fernández, Lameiras-Fernández & Rodríguez-Castro, 2018; Leach & Mitchell, 2006; Mills, 2001; Moma, 2015; Parkes, 2015). We recognise bullying as dynamic gendered behaviour in which both boys and girls emerge as active social actors who are capable of engaging in bullying as perpetrators and as victims. As do Besag (2006), Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2003), Parkes (2015), and Ringrose and Renold (2010), we argue that most explanations for bullying in schools fail to address nuances of power, which requires careful attention to gender and broader social structures through which to understand the local manifestations of violence.

The study reported on here was set in a township primary school near Durban, in 2016, and focused on 10- to 13-year-old boys whose teachers had identified them as bullies. The black African township was a product of apartheid segregation laws, and still, some 26 years after the capitulation of apartheid, people in this township continue to face many socio-economic challenges, including violence, high levels of unemployment, and

poverty. Poverty was the backdrop for the majority of learners who participated in our study, and its impact was evident everywhere, not least in that many came to school hungry and with no lunch, relying on the state-funded school nutrition programme for food. As the findings from this study show, poverty and cultures of violent masculinities in the township had a significant influence on manifestations of bullying and violence between girls and boys at school.

Indeed, our aim with this research was to move beyond the binary discourse so evident in much scholarship on bullying in schools, and determine how boys understand bullying and being bullies, and how they construct, experience, and negotiate everyday violent versions of masculinity within a schooling context that is marked by social inequality, poverty, and food insecurity.

We used a broad critical lens for our analysis, and this enabled us to examine how gender power relations and the wider socio-economic context of the township impacted on bullying. Such a lens enabled us to move away from the oversimplified bully-victim binary, and to recognise the complexities of bullying, for example, how bullies become victims and vice versa (Ma, 2001).

Literature Review

While bullying practices permeate different spaces within schools (Bisika et al., 2009; Leach & Mitchell, 2006), literature indicates that, in primary schools, the playground is an important arena where boys take up hegemonic forms of masculinity based on sexual violence against girls, aggression, assault and misogyny (Moma, 2015). Literature from the global north suggests that children's playground activities are often deeply rooted in fights for power through which some boys produce and maintain domineering, rough, and tough masculinities (Bartholomaeus, 2012; Paechter, 2007; Renold, 2005; Skelton, 2001; Swain, 2006; Thorne, 1993). Frosh et al. (2003) provide a good example in their study on young masculinities in the United Kingdom, where they analyse how constructions of hegemonic masculinity often subject girls (and boys who are regarded as effeminate) to forms of marginalisation and violence on school grounds.

Some sub-Saharan African research on gender, violence, and schooling also highlight various dangers, risks, and vulnerabilities that many young girls endure in school playgrounds, particularly during break or free-play time, when teacher supervision is minimal or absent (Moma, 2015). Other sub-Saharan studies have found that learner toilets are spaces of danger and risk for girls (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018). Indeed, toilets emerge as one of the key spaces in which young girls become victims of bullying due to violent constructions of hegemonic masculinity among

boys at school (Abrahams, Mathews & Ramela, 2006; Mitchell & Mthobhi-Tapela, 2004). Mitchell, Moletsane, Stuart, Buthelezi and De Lange (2005), in their study in South Africa and Swaziland, documented how Grade 7 girls, aged 12 to 13, considered the toilet at school to be unsafe. Asked to take pictures of safe and unsafe spaces at school, most girls took pictures of toilets and said that that was where they felt most vulnerable to male violence (Mitchell et al., 2005). According to Ngidi and Moletsane (2018), a key explanation for why school toilets are unsafe spaces prone to bullying is that surveillance, proper security, and teacher/adult supervision are often limited or non-existent in these spaces.

Bullying among children at school has numerous consequences. According to a UNESCO report:

Self-reported quality of health and life satisfaction is lower among children who are bullied and who are both bullies and victims of bullying than those who are not involved in bullying. Children who are frequently bullied are nearly three times more likely to feel like an outsider at school and more than twice as likely to miss school than those who are not frequently bullied. Children who are bullied have worse educational outcomes than children who are not. (2019:8)

The quote above highlights some of the major consequences of bullying among learners at school. Given how severe the impacts of bullying can be, it is clearly important to address it early on. Against this background, we argue that to effectively address the problem of bullying in the primary school requires that we have a thorough understanding of its gendered dimensions and the broader socio-economic contours surrounding it.

Theoretical Framework

This article is based on data from a qualitative study among primary school boys that focussed on their constructions of masculinity and bullying in a socio-economically marginalised township in South Africa. We found Connell's (1995) theorisation of masculinities, gender, and power useful for examining how boys' masculine practices, attitudes, and values often hinge on their domination of girls/femininities, and how this becomes key to what Connell (1995:77) calls "hegemonic masculinity": the everyday social practices or behavioural patterns that define "appropriate", "acceptable", or "normal" ways of being and doing masculinity (see also Bartholomaeus, 2012; Swain, 2006).

Ideas around what constitute "appropriate" masculinity are premised on a male power that subordinates femininity. How this plays out in practice varies across cultures and contexts. Hegemonic masculinity is synonymous with the power that many cultures and societies accord to men, boys, and masculinity (Connell, 1995). It is a

social status that many men/boys strive to achieve and maintain because it gives them access, and a sense of entitlement, to positions of power and authority. Hegemonic men/boys draw on a wide variety of strategies to protect their interests and positions of power over women/girls and, in schools, these include violence and bullying (Moma, 2015). Jewkes and Morrell (2018), Morrell (2001), and Ratele (2017) show how constructions of hegemonic masculinity in South Africa often draw on the discursive context in which social, political, cultural, and economic conditions have produced violent aberrations of masculinity which are harmful to girls/women/femininity.

Poverty, and other forms of social inequality, combined with the legacy of South Africa's history of apartheid-derived violence, has produced a culture of violence which exacerbates vulnerability among South African girls/women/femininities (Parkes, 2015) and, we argue, boys. Boys are not immune to vulnerability, but primary schoolboys' perspectives on gender and violence remains understudied in South Africa – a gap we sought to address with this study. In striving for power, boys' hegemony can be weakened by an environment of poverty, body size and shape, age, their fighting prowess and strength, and their ability to express and exercise power over girls, given the contestation and resistance they may experience from girls (Leach & Mitchell, 2006; Moma, 2015; Parkes, 2015). Hegemonic masculinity is thus both a personal and collective struggle. It is not monolithic and it changes within different social circumstances (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005): A boy can be powerful in one situation, but lose power in another. This suggests that a fixed construct of bully-victim is a simplistic and deeply inadequate starting point for any analysis of boys' constructions of power and masculinity.

Methods

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Necessary permissions were obtained from the Department of Basic Education, the school principal and the parents/legal guardians of all learners who participated in the study. The study was explained to the learners and their parents/legal guardians in their home language (IsiZulu), and they were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw without consequence at any stage of the research. They were also informed that we intended to audio record focus group discussions, but that their participation would be anonymous, and that they had an option to allow or refuse permission for the audio recording. All participants agreed to be recorded, and we received signed consent forms from each before they were

admitted into the study. Identities of the participants have been protected through pseudonyms.

Sampling

We used a purposive sampling technique and the key criteria were that the boys had been identified by their class teachers as the main perpetrators of violence, or as "bullies", and be studying in Grade 4, the highest grade at the school. We chose Grade 4 because our pre-fieldwork interactions with teachers indicated that the perpetration of violence was most common among boys in this grade than in younger boys, which was supported by school records of violent misconduct. Potential participants were identified through teachers' general observations and official school records that confirmed learners' involvement in bullying and violence. In all 27 respondents participated in the study.

Data Collection

Focus group discussions were our main instrument for collecting data. They allowed us to explore the boys' personal and group perceptions, attitudes, opinions, feelings, and experiences around bullying, and thus provided a richer, more nuanced and well-rounded perspective on the issue than would have been possible through other qualitative methods such as individual interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). We divided the boys into three groups of nine. A total of nine focus group discussions were conducted, three with each group, which served as a measure for strengthening trustworthiness, as well as allowing for an in-depth exploration of issues. The first session was designed to introduce the study as a whole and to build rapport with the participants. The second session discussed issues in depth. In the third and final session, we gave the participants an opportunity to review the data and verify its accurateness. The discussion sessions were all conducted at the school outside of official learning periods, and each lasted approximately 90 minutes. They were facilitated by the first author (male and 29 years old at the time of the study) in IsiZulu – the mother tongue of all the participants, after which it was translated into English by the first author.

A set of semi-structured questions was drafted beforehand to guide the discussions in the second session. These included: Is there anything that you would like to say about bullying in your school? What are your experiences of bullying? Where/when does bullying happen? What causes the bullying? How do teachers in your school respond to bullying? A series of follow-up questions were also asked based on how the boys responded to the first questions.

Data Analysis

Our analysis took a young person-centred approach which sought to understand, from the perspectives of the boys themselves, how they explained their involvement in violence and bullying at school. Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) method: we used an inductive approach in which codes and themes were systematically identified and developed. While our concern in the analysis that follows was to do justice to the boys' own perspectives around bullying and the mechanisms of power at the school, we also drew on previous research to enrich the analysis and understanding of the issues that emerged.

Findings

The analysis of the data yielded the following three key themes: 1) gender violence and reporting to teachers; 2) negotiating the toilet as a space of safety; and 3) the relationship between poverty and violence. These themes are discussed below.

Gender Violence and Reporting to Teachers

Research on primary school masculinities suggests that one of the ways in which young boys construct hegemonic masculinity is through violence and the marginalisation of girls and femininity (Bartholomaeus, 2012; Paechter, 2007; Renold, 2005; Skelton, 2001; Thorne, 1993). While our analysis confirms the established significance of violence as part of how primary school boys construct masculinities, boys in our study also distanced themselves from the perpetration of violence, arguing that girls were often the initiators. For example, according to Sabelo: *"What we don't like is when the teachers blame us and say we hit girls. The problem is that they don't know that it's the girls who hit us first and then we also hit them."*

"Hitting", in the context of our study, emerged as a vital means through which gender relations of power were reproduced and challenged at the school. The male perpetrator-female victim binary was both challenged and reproduced as the boys talked about their unhappiness with the way their teachers tended to associate violent behaviour with boys and victimisation with girls. From the boys' points of view, teachers reproduced familiar gender binaries in which girls were rendered vulnerable, passive, and helpless victims of violent masculinity. The boys expressed anger at what they regarded as injustice resulting from teachers pathologising them as violent, and spoke about the complex operation of power between boys and girls at the school:

Thami: When the girls hit us we don't report them to teachers but we hit them too. We are the bosses, we are strong boys and we can fight our own battles, we don't rely on teachers. Girls hit us and then they rely on teachers. Girls report us to teachers when we have hit them and that's why

teachers think that we are the bullies and girls are just the victims. But we are the victims too! It's just that we are the bosses and bosses don't report to teachers about being hit by a girl. We are not soft and weak but we hit the person who annoys us, we fight with them!

We interpreted the term "boss" as a form of hegemonic masculinity that incorporates violence as it asserts and negotiates power. Thami believed that reporting violence to teachers was anathema to the (re)production of a tough "boss" masculine identity. In contrast, he regarded girls as weak as they relied on teachers to address violence. Emerging from an environment where cultural norms weave through gender and masculinity, the boys validated Zulu masculinity as tough and expressive of power in the use of the term "bosses." As noted by Ratele (2017), Black African masculinity rotates around cultural ideals where strength, toughness, fighting prowess and violence form an integral part of the construction of masculinities. This is not to say that masculinity is fixed. Rather, the specific form of masculinity being expressed here is one that is constructed as powerful. Indeed, in their study on Zulu masculinities and male violence in South Africa, Carton and Morrell (2012) illuminate how the socialisation of IsiZulu speaking boys involves games such as stick fighting. While this game is valued for inculcating social bonds, self-mastery, resilience and self-defence among the boys, it also reproduces masculine identities that are characterised by aggression and conquest (Carton & Morrell, 2012). Thus, we argue, phrases such as "we are strong", "we can fight our own battles" and "we are the bosses and bosses don't report to teachers about being hit by a girl" are underpinned by the broader cultural context where violent masculinities and patriarchy are normalised.

However, it was also clear that the position of boys as "bosses" was a vulnerable one. "Bosses" are powerful because they use violence against girls but violence is also used by girls against them, momentarily undermining their power. Thami identified with the hegemonic position of a "boss", but he also regarded himself as a victim of girls' violence. His use of girls as the "other", as "soft and weak", however, also functioned to maintain gender binaries – even if gender relations are fluid and subject to change (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Swain, 2006; Thorne, 1993). A "boss" can simultaneously be tough to girls and a victim of girls' violence.

Girls were not the only group of learners identified by the "bosses" as "other" due to their tendency to depend on teachers when faced with violent victimisation. Young boys in the lower grades were also conceptualised as "soft and weak." Smile explained:

It's only the Grade 1 and 2 boys who rely on teachers when hit by girls. It's because they are

still too young, they are soft and weak. They're always bullied by girls, they're young now and don't know how to fight and so they rely on teachers to help them. But when they get older and get to Grade 4 they will become the bosses too and then they will know that they have to fight and don't rely on teachers. Bosses don't rely on teachers, we hit back!

The “bosses” thus distinguished themselves as a group of hegemonic boys who were not “weak, soft or too young” and who did not rely on teachers when faced with gender violence perpetrated by girls. Drawing on the discourse of patriarchy that permeates the South African society (Gqola, 2007), the “bosses” constructed their identity as figures of power through differentiating themselves from the younger boys. Such a differentiation is significant as it highlights the plurality of masculinities that occupy different positions in the gender/masculine hierarchy of power (Swain, 2006). Within such a hierarchy, the “bosses” occupy a hegemonic position that is supported by patriarchy, while the younger boys are subordinated as “weak” and incapable of enacting violence against girls who bully them. The “bosses” seek and retain their power by concealing their vulnerabilities as reflected in how they resort to further violence instead of reporting victimisation to teachers. As Sphiwe said: *“Bosses don't report violence to teachers, it's the girls who report us to teachers, we are not girls and so we don't report to teachers, we just hit the girls when they bully us.”* Reporting violence to teachers was thus regarded as a move away from power and the hegemonic version of masculinity adopted by the “bosses.”

Negotiating the Toilet as a Space of Safety

When boys hit back against girls who victimised them, the girls often sought safety and protection not only through reporting the violence to teachers but by using the toilet as a gendered place of safety. While previous research has highlighted learner toilets in schools as danger zones where girls (and some boys) face heightened risk of violent victimisation (Mitchell & Mothobi-Tapela, 2004; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018), we found that toilets were seen as potential spaces of safety and protection against bullying and other forms of violence: they were described by our participants as safe spaces where weak girls are protected from the exertion of male “boss” power. One “boss”, Musa, articulated girls’ safety in the toilets as follows:

All the time the teachers say boys must not enter the girls' toilets. I wish boys and girls shared the toilets and the girls will have nowhere to run to and hide when we want to hit them... When they run into their toilets there is nothing we can do because there is a rule telling us that boys are not allowed to enter girls' toilets! But we know they [girls] can't hide in the toilets the whole day; they

do come out... We are always ready to catch them and we beat them up!

The school rule that prohibits boys from entering girls’ toilets (and vice versa) renders the toilets as spaces of safety for girls. However, they have limitations as places of refuge as girls cannot stay in them indefinitely. We asked the “bosses” whether or not they used the boys’ toilets to seek safety if they felt at risk of being bullied by girls. The answer was an emphatic “no”:

Smile: As bosses, we don't hide in the toilets because we're not scared of girls. There is not even one girl that I'm scared of here at school! If a girl is bullying me, I hit her because I want her to stop what she is doing and she must not do it again. I can't run to hide in the boys' toilets just because I'm scared of a girl, never!

The school toilets are thus significant spaces for the construction of gender and the expression of male power and female weakness. The “bosses” associate the use of the boys’ toilets as a space of safety with younger boys who emerge as the main victims of violence perpetrated by older (Grade 4) girls. Younger boys’ vulnerability is captured in Thabo’s words: *“Bosses are not scared of girls. But there are those boys in the school who are scared of girls – it's the younger boys from Grades 1 and 2. They are bullied more and, when they are scared, they run into the boys' toilets when the older girls want to hit them.”* While younger boys react to girls’ violence by “running into the boys’ toilets” for safety, the “bosses” react with reciprocal violence. By using violence, they are able to reduce the risk of girls’ violence toward them – and their vulnerability to it. But, at the same time, they incur the risk of being labelled as “perpetrators” or “bullies” when girls report the boys’ violence to the teachers. Sabelo explained:

You know what happens when girls report us to teachers? The teachers punish us! The punishment is very harsh. They will shout at you and they will give you some hiding too! They hit us with a stick! But, girls are not punished for all the violence that they do to us in the yard during break. When we tell the teachers that it's the girls who hit us first, teachers won't believe us. They always say 'boys are not supposed to hit girls' and they don't say anything about girls who hit boys! We are always blamed for the violence, the girls hit us and when we hit them back teachers hit us again. Teachers don't hit girls for hitting boys!

Teachers’ use of violence as a disciplinary strategy does not help to reduce the problem of gender violence between learners at school (Bisika et al., 2009). Rather, the use of corporal punishment and the inability of teachers to see gender beyond essentialised notions of violent boys and innocent, passive girls has the effect of maintaining the gender binary and a regime of violence at the primary school.

The Relationship between Poverty and Violence at School

It is clear now that the boys in our study have argued that girls initiated the gender violence by bullying boys. Issues around hunger and a lack of food often underlined such bullying practices. The relationship between poverty and gender violence between learners at the school was highlighted by Sphiwe:

Many learners in this school don't carry lunch to school because there is no food at home, and that's why they end up bullying other learners ... There was a girl who asked me for food during break.... I said no. She kept nagging me and I got irritated and I pushed her. Then she slapped me in the face and then I also slapped and kicked her. She reported me to her class teacher.... The teacher shouted at me and said next time I mustn't hit a girl but I must report to her [the teacher] then she'll hit the girl herself. But I told the teacher that we ended up hitting each other because the girl started it by nagging me to give her my lunch ...

While existing research (Bisika et al., 2009; Leach & Mitchell, 2006; Moma, 2015; Parkes, 2015) shows how poverty and hunger intertwine to increase risks of violent behaviour among learners at school, such research tends to position girls simply as vulnerable victims to gender violence perpetrated by boys. However, our study presents a different finding, one that highlights the active involvement of girls in gender violence between learners at school, violence that is related to poverty. Rather than being passive victims, we found that girls, too, are capable of enacting violence for material rewards – particularly in the context of food insecurity.

Discussion and Conclusion

We began this article with the story of a Grade 2 boy who brought a loaded firearm to school with an intention of harming another learner. A recommendation for the psychological evaluation of this boy was followed after the incident, in order to ascertain his emotional and psychological well-being, diagnose the problem, and then determine the kind of help needed to “fix” his potentially violent personality. While such psychological interventions are important, their limitation is that they often tend to pathologise the individual without taking into account the complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural circumstances that shape the behaviour of the individual.

In this article, we highlighted how the relationships that the “bosses” had with girls, younger boys, and teachers suggested that an individualised pathology cannot take account of how children’s violent behaviour is embedded within the intersecting social discourses of gender/masculinity, poverty, and the negotiation of power through violence. The fights that the “bosses” engaged in were key to their constructions of young masculinity, and how they negotiated

power. We thus argue, like Moma (2015), that young masculinity and notions of violence and bullying must be firmly situated within a context of gender power relations that takes into account the specific socio-economic context of a poor township primary school.

By drawing attention to notions of masculinity (Connell, 1995), we are able to understand the gendered dynamics of the violence between learners at school. While discourses of bullying are widely accepted as key to understanding the perpetration of violence and injury in schools, we have sought to problematise such taken-for-granted assumptions of school-based relations of power. By using masculinities theory, we have shown the utility and fluidity of power, and the complex processes through which boys in school claim power, lose it and negotiate it. When the “bosses” negotiate the primary school space, they do so as a distinct group of boys with shared investments in power and in the expression of violence as key to the making of hegemonic masculinity. When teachers fail to see gender, or when they see gender in normative stereotypical ways which limit their associations of violence to boys and masculinities, they reproduce the “bosses” as bullies and the girls as victims. We have called attention to the limitations of such a view by emphasising the fluidity of power and gender relations between the boys and girls. Boys can be perpetrators of violence; but they are also victims of it.

The complexity of the dynamics of violence between the “bosses” and girls at the school highlights the need for teachers to form solid relationships with parents and other interested parties and share ideas about how to develop more productive bullying prevention strategies that take into account the fact that violence is a highly gendered phenomenon in which both girls and boys are actively involved. We argue that when devising prevention strategies, teachers/parents and other relevant stakeholders should focus not only on problematising the “bosses” as perpetrators of violence but should also focus on understanding how girls, too, become implicated in practices that perpetrate gender violence against boys at school (Burger, Strohmeier, Spröber, Bauman & Rigby, 2015).

Prevention strategies should also take into account the social conditions of poverty and how these may often underpin violence between boys and girls at school: the impact of the burden of poverty that permeates most of the learners’ households should not be underestimated. To effectively address gender violence between learners, we believe that the school needs to develop a comprehensive understanding of the everyday realities of poverty and cultures of violence in the township and how these social

forces interact to influence violent learner behaviour at school (Moma, 2015).

While the school must deal decisively with reported cases of violent behaviour, we argue that forms of disciplinary action must avoid the use of corporal punishment. Indeed, Hamlall and Morrell (2012) and Morrell (2001) have shown that the continued use of corporal punishment in many schools in South Africa is one of the key factors that serves to perpetuate, rather than prevent, gender violence among learners in our schools. Writing in the context of schools in Malawi, Bisika et al. (2009) recognise corporal punishment as intergenerational and gendered violence where teachers exert authority over children. Such violence, they argue, often positions girls as the victims, increasing drop out and preventing girls from accessing universal primary school education (Bisika et al., 2009:288).

Research in South Africa on school-related violence is steadily increasing (examples include Burton & Leoschut, 2013; De Wet, 2007; Hamlall & Morrell, 2012; Masitsa, 2011; Mncube & Harber, 2013; Moma, 2015; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018; Prinsloo, 2005; Swart & Bredekamp, 2009). Our study contributes to this research by offering an analysis which moves away from individual-based discourses on bullying to understanding the dynamic relationship between gender, violence, socio-cultural and economic conditions through which primary schoolboys learn to contest, exercise, accommodate, and negotiate power and masculinity. For instance, our study has shown how broader cultures of violence in the socialisation of boys interact with poverty and patriarchy to reproduce a climate of violent gender relations among learners in the primary school.

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Authors' Contributions

EM conducted the focus group discussions. Both EM and DB analysed the data and wrote the article. EM was responsible for all communication with the Administrative Editor of the Journal.

Notes

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