



We don't play with gays, they're not real boys . . . they can't fight: Hegemonic masculinity and (homophobic) violence in the primary years of schooling



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ABSTRACT

Whenever masculinity and school violence are considered in South African research, the focus is often on the high school. In this paper, we consider a different direction by drawing on Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity to understand the workings of power and violence amongst a group of South African primary school boys. Little is known about how forces of hegemonic masculinity operate to shape every day gender relations amongst younger boys. Against this background, this paper focuses on a particular group of boys, between 10 and 13 years old, who attend a 'black', working-class primary school in South Africa. In addition, they identify themselves as 'real boys', where being a 'real boy' is inextricably linked to violent 'performances' of hegemonic masculinity on the school playground during break time. The paper explores how these boys use forms of violence to claim control of the playground space and to exclude, marginalise and denigrate the other group of boys whom they construct as 'unmasculine' and 'gay'. The findings raise implications for ways of curbing the violence, such as working with the boys to promote non-violent interpretations of performing, being and becoming a 'real boy'.

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1. Introduction

In *Gender Play*, Thorne (1993) argued that children's play in the primary years of schooling is a highly gendered activity. Since then, scholars around the world have argued that when boys and girls in primary school come together in the playground they do so as gendered beings with strong investment in sexuality where misogyny, homophobic bullying and gendered violence gets played out (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009; Swain, 2006; Bartholomaeus, 2012; Blaise, 2005; Bhana, 2005; Renold, 2005; Mayeza, 2016; Huuki and Renold, 2015; Rönnlund, 2015). In the United Kingdom for instance, Epstein (1997) and Renold (2005) show how boys and girls invest in heterosexuality in primary school playground cultures through which alternate forms of sexuality are traduced. A major argument in the literature is that children's play in primary school is highly gendered and both boys and girls are active agents in the (re)production of gendered play and associated inequalities. Notwithstanding this growing body of literature, Huuki and Renold (2015) note that a territorialising body of research about children's

play as frivolous serves to undermine and shroud the social and cultural dynamics through which children learn and perform particular ways of being 'boys' and 'girls'. The common sense and often taken-for-granted definition of a playground is that it is a space to have fun, play games and enjoy leisure time. It is associated with freedom, pleasure, joy, happiness, friendship and community. However, there are other less pleasurable elements. Clark and Paechter's (2007a) study at a London primary school showed playgrounds were areas of freedom for children due to less teacher control in comparison to the classroom. Earlier research by Epstein (1997) observed that children's playground cultures often involve forms of bullying and violent practices. Common acts of school violence among boys on the playground include punching, fighting, shouting, pushing, bullying, intimidating, and verbal abuse (Leach, 2003).

This paper explores ways in which a group of South African primary schoolboys construct gender relations of power and express masculinities on the school playground. Violent notions of masculinity emerge as a pressing societal problem in South Africa and schools are recognised as one of the important sites where violence occurs (Human Rights Watch, 2001). While great efforts are being made to address violent patterns of masculinities and inequalities in South African schools (Tucker and Govender, 2016;

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Anderson, 2010; Bhana, 2012), much of this work draws attention to the violent constructions of masculinities in secondary schools. As a result, very little is known about primary school boys and how they construct masculinities. Bhana (2013) has raised the point that teachers should state early to address issues of gender and violence and argues that young people do not just become gendered and sexual when they reach secondary school. Recent work by Mayeza (2016) suggests the urgency of prevention initiatives to target violence in schools which need to focus on all levels of South African schooling and to include the very early years. Against this background, this paper seeks to examine the processes in which black South African primary schoolboys explore, express and experiment with their masculinity during school breaks on the playground. The paper aims to contribute to ongoing studies and debates around masculinities, violence and schooling in South Africa (Bhana, 2013; Mayeza, 2015; Anderson, 2010).

We focus on a group of boys who subscribe to the hegemonic interpretations of masculinity, which involve the enactment of violence against non-conforming peers. These boys, who identify themselves as 'real boys', use homophobic violence as a means of exerting and yielding power over other boys. In particular, violence was exerted against those they constructed as 'gay', where being 'gay' is associated with physical and emotional fragility, associations with girls, femininity, girls' forms of play, and subordination. By documenting the violence as part of the boys' playground cultures, we debunk the 'common-sense' and often taken-for-granted view of the playground as a site for positive development, characterised mainly by 'fun' and enjoyment of free time. In contrast, we demonstrate that it is a highly gendered and contested space, where violence as a means of asserting patriarchal power, control and privilege is integral to the real boys' everyday playground culture. We conclude by reflecting on ways of addressing the violence, through challenging the real boys to rethink their violent notions of masculinity.

2. Understanding gender violence, masculinity and schooling: some theoretical notes

Gender violence in schools occurs at a global level (Pinheiro, 2006) and is a significant challenge in South African schools (Human Rights Watch, 2001). The ways in which gender violence manifests in schools is shaped by local economic, social and cultural conditions which provide particular contours to the enactment of violence. Leach and Mitchell (2006) use the term gender violence instead of gender-based violence to demarcate the notion that all violence is gendered and power based. Gender-based violence assumes that some violence is gender based and other forms of violence are not. This paper uses the term gender violence to define violence on the school playground as gendered and embedded within relations of power. We use the term gender violence like Leach and Mitchell (2006) and Parkes (2015) to illustrate unequal relations of gender, the imbalances and the multidimensional forms of violence which are connected to broader structures and socio-cultural contexts. Our understanding of gender violence connects individual experience of violence to hierarchies and asymmetrical relations of power and to the broader social landscape. In this regard, we see all violence as gendered. We explore the local contours of gender violence by focusing specifically on a particular group of schoolboys who engage in games during breaks on the school playground. Research indicates that the South African school environment is characterised by increasing incidents of violence, often taking the form of physical violence and verbal assault between learners where girls remain particularly vulnerable (Parkes, 2015).

Writing about the pervasiveness of violence in South African schools, Bhana (2012) highlights its gendered nature, underpinned by patriarchal norms and ideas of hegemonic masculinity. Within this context, girls emerge as a group most vulnerable to the violence although it is important to understand that violence can be perpetrated against other boys and used by girls too to exercise power (Bhana, 2012). Girls do resist (Parkes, 2015); however, because the violence occurs within the broader context of unequal gender relations which foregrounds male power and authority, the effects of these initiatives are usually minimal (Bhana, 2013). In South Africa cultural expectations around male hegemony, coercive sexual relations and high levels of HIV among young people increases girls' subordinate status within gendered hierarchies. Jewkes and Morrell (2010) illustrate the link between dominant notions of hegemonic masculinity, sexual violence and HIV infection by arguing that unequal power relations in heterosexual relationships often place women/girls at a heightened risk of being victims of coercive and unprotected sex, exposing them to HIV infection. Ending violent gender relations underpinned by toxic patterns of male conduct – sexual danger, disease and ultimately death – remains an important part of intervention programmes in the country (Jewkes and Morrell, 2010).

In exploring school violence in a black South African primary school we seek to broaden our understanding of violence amongst primary school boys in this specific local context. We address the under-studied field of how the school playground may act as an important site for the enactment of masculinity and gendered violence (Bhana, 2005). In examining the violence between different categories of young schoolboys, we call into question the popular assumption that masculinity is singular and homogeneous (Frosh et al., 2003). On the contrary, we demonstrate the multiple and plural ways in which masculinities are constructed and performed by boys in the primary years of schooling (Bartholomaeus, 2012). Indeed, Connell's (1995, 2002) analyses of gender in society suggest that there are plural and multiple masculinities, occupying different positions in the hierarchy of power, status and privilege. We draw on Connell's conception of the plurality of masculinities to examine the nature of relations and interactions between a group of South African schoolboys who have unequal access to power and privilege associated with ways of 'doing' masculinity in 'normative' ways. Specifically, we focus on a group of boys identified as 'real boys' and how they use homophobic violence as a means of asserting hegemonic masculinity towards other boys identified as 'unmasculine' or 'less-masculine' through the disparaging label of 'gay'. However, the literature also suggests that the violence performed and inflicted on 'less-masculine' boys in the schoolyard is deeply connected to sexual orientation (Mayerza, 2016; Frosh et al., 2003; DePalma and Atkinson, 2009). Biological differences between men and women are based on the heterosexual assumption where the opposite sex are supposed to desire each other (Connell, 1995). Gender and sexual norms are constantly under surveillance and violence is often used to correct and regulate non-conforming genders. The literature on young masculinities and schooling demonstrates that less masculine boys are targeted as effeminate and therefore gay, and subordinate to heterosexuality. For example, in Mayeza's (2016) research with South African primary schoolchildren, the gendering of sexuality emerged through the way in which the term gay was used to police masculinities in the playground during break time. The boys' gendering of homosexuality through the term gay forms part of the key issues we explore in this paper.

This paper utilises Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity to analyse the ways in which boys express and negotiate power in the playground. Connell (1995) defined

hegemonic masculinity as an exalted way of being a man/boy in any given society. However, it is particularly useful to think about hegemonic masculinity in terms of the logic of a patriarchal gender system: central to the definition of hegemonic masculinity is the subordination of women/girls to men/boys. Hegemonic masculinity is a dominant cultural ideal of masculinity centred on authority, physical and emotional toughness, superiority, sporting prowess, aggression, violence, heterosexuality and male homo-social bonding (Swain, 2006; Jewkes and Morrell, 2010; Bartholomaeus, 2012). Violent elements of hegemonic masculinity in the South African context formed part of Mayeza's (2015) study on gender among children at play in a South African primary school as boys positioned and affirmed themselves as hegemonic males through misogyny, homophobic bullying of boys who played games perceived as for girls, heterosexual rituals on the playground and engaging in physically demanding games of sport such as football that excluded girls (Swain, 2006; Renold, 2005; Mayeza, 2015). The hegemonic males in Mayeza's (2015) study were able to distance and differentiate themselves from girls and femininity, as well as from 'other' boys they perceived as 'unmasculine', weak, soft and effeminate through their display of what they thought were 'feminine' qualities. These 'other' boys were often the subjects of bullying, marginalisation and denigration by the boys who drew on the discourse of hegemonic masculinity in the construction of their identities. Indeed, embedded in Connell's (1995) definition of the concept of hegemonic masculinity are the myriad social processes and practices that reinforce the dominant discourse of gender, elevating and privileging the power and status of masculinity over femininity. Against this background, boys who distance themselves from perceived social markers and standards associated with hegemonic masculinity often get labelled as 'other' and their masculinity is scrutinised (Swain, 2006; Bhana, 2005; Mayeza, 2015). However, it is important to highlight that this description of hegemonic masculinity depicts the social and cultural contexts in which the study is situated. Masculinity is not homogenous and uniform. There are differences and masculinity is shaped by as it shapes contexts and even within the same context different masculinities exist.

Although hegemonic masculinity is a culturally specific dominant ideal of masculinity embodied by a minority of men/boys, the perception is supported by many males because it also serves to give them power (Jewkes and Morrell, 2010; Bartholomaeus, 2012). Hearn and Morrell (2012) explain hegemonic masculinity in terms of the exclusive power and privileges enjoyed by a specific group of men/boys that grants them access, high status and dominance in a society at the expense of women/girls, and 'other' men/boys. In the next section we describe the methodology followed by the analysis of the findings. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of the findings for ways of preventing the violence between boys on the school playground.

3. School context and method

The context of this study is Florida Primary School (a pseudonym) located in a poor and black township called Mariannhill, approximately 16kms west of Durban in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. The black people settled in this township from 1976 under apartheid's *Group Areas Act* (41/1950), which demarcated the area as all black. Like many other black townships in South Africa, Mariannhill Township is densely populated and is also characterised by high levels of poverty, crime, drug and alcohol abuse and unemployment, which has a significant effect on young people.

Florida Primary School is situated in the heart of Mariannhill township, which faces these and many other social ills. At the time of this research in 2014, the school had approximately 1 500

learners, catering for Grades 1–7 with multiple classes in each grade. The school had 45 educators, of whom 70% were female and 30% were male. The school principal was female and a male deputy principal. A feeding scheme provided lunch to all learners and they could also buy snacks from the school's tuck shop. This feeding scheme is very important given that many learners come from extremely poor family backgrounds and some are orphans and dependent on the school meal for sustenance, which, for some, is the only real meal for the day. Due to deaths associated with AIDS, most of the learners are under the care of a single parent who is often unemployed or employed in a menial factory or domestic job. Some live with grandparents who survive on a meagre government old age pension, which at the time of the study was R1 350 per month or approximately US\$82.

This study employed a case study ethnographic research design. Fieldwork involved observations of the children at play during break time. However, to gain participants' own subjective meanings of their playground behaviours and relations, the observations were complemented with focus groups. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for this research. The sample consisted of 30 boys between the ages of 10 and 13, selected from three Grade 7 classes at the school. Each class was made up of 35–40 learners comprising of boys and girls. Selecting 10 boys from each class ensured even distribution. We focused on Grade 7 boys because our preliminary observations indicated that violence was more of a serious issue among boys in these classes. Furthermore, school records and teacher reports confirmed that older Grade 7 boys who were also in the highest grade in the school, were more likely to be involved in acts of violence compared to younger learners in lower grades. One of the important explanations for the higher levels of violence in grade 7 boys compared to other grades is linked to the construction of masculinities, age, size and body in the play of power over other boys in the lower grades. In the context of very limited play resources at the school, the grade 7 boys dominated the limited playground space using their size, height, age to exercise power over other boys. Tensions, conflicts and quarrels were common among the boys as they competed over the limited playground space and resources.

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at The University of KwaZulu-Natal, protocol reference number: HSS/1197/013. Permission was obtained from the school principal and parents/legal guardians of all learners in the study. All participants in the study signed informed consent forms before they were admitted into the study. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. All focus groups were recorded using a digital voice recorder, with prior consent from the participants who were informed that they could withdraw at any stage of the interview. Data collection methods included observations and focus groups. Below we outlined how these methods were applied in the context of this study.

3.1. Observations on the playground

Observation is a data collection tool in qualitative research that involves the collection of first-hand information through a process of observing people and their behaviours at a research site (Creswell, 2013). The approach taken was that of a complete observer, motivated by our concern not to interfere with children's behaviours on the playground. The researcher observed and documented the children's behaviours on the playground and learned how they construct gender identities through play and the significance of violence in this process. Observations were documented in detailed field notes, towards a thick description of the people, site, events and patterns of behaviour (Creswell, 2013). In this context, thick description refers to the process of

documenting not only the setting and behavioural patterns, but also the meanings people give to their behaviours and relationships. Attention was given to boys' behaviours on the playground and the ways in which boys' talk was embedded within relations of power.

3.2. Focus groups

Six groups of five participants each met once a week over a period of two months. These meetings were held at school during times convenient to the learners who made up the focus groups and occasionally after school hours. Each meeting lasted about 45 min. The questions posed to participants in focus groups were largely informed by insights from observations. They garnered a wide range of responses from the boys. Rich discussions were held around the various forms of play they engaged in and their experiences, attitudes and understandings of the nature of the play as implicated in gendered violence.

Finally, data was analysed using thematic analysis method (Creswell, 2013). Thematic analysis involves studying the data as a whole and then organising it in terms of codes and code families which are further developed into themes (Creswell, 2013). These themes are discussed in the next section of the paper.

4. Boys' constructions and experiences of the playground

We began our focus groups by encouraging the boys to talk about their experiences of the playground during school break times. We phrased our initial question as follows: 'what can you tell us about the playground during break at school?' The responses demonstrated the different ways in which the playground is constructed and experienced by boys in the study sample.

- Sibu It's so nice to be outside in the playground, playing and having . . . fun during break. We play different types of games, like football. We like to play football a lot.
- Shoba We have lot of fun on the playground, we play our favourite games . . . and we play a lot with our friends. My favourite game is football.
- Gume Also, on the playground during break, you relax, you play with your friends . . . yeah, we just play and have fun.
- Peter We have great fun playing just by ourselves, there is no teacher there, it's just us boys playing our games. There's no teacher controlling our games. During break, on the playground, it's just us boys, we're just free to play whatever we want to play . . . we are free to do anything we want to do.

It appears that, for these boys, the playground provided them with opportunities to relax and have fun outside the demands and constraints of the teacher-controlled classroom. Significantly, for them, the playground symbolised freedom, leisure, fun, friendship and relaxation. However, this sense of freedom was fundamental to the ways they constructed themselves as hegemonic males as embodied in their categorisation as 'real boys'. They constructed the identity of a 'real boy' as involving the presentation of self as sporty, physically strong and tough. The boys capitalised on the construction of physical strength as a 'masculine' quality through which they differentiated themselves from all girls and some of the boys who they perceived as too soft and fragile, whom they denigrated as 'gay' (Mayeza, 2016). The perceived fragility of all girls and the boys ridiculed as being 'gay' was presented by the real boys as one of the key reasons these categories of learners were excluded from football games that dominated the playground. They were perceived as incapable of playing the perceived masculine game of football.

- Researcher I have seen you playing football on the playground and I wonder why you don't play with girls?
- Peter We are boys! We play football and other boy games. Girls can't play boys' games. Girls are very weak and soft and can't play football, football is a tough game and is for real boys, girls are not strong enough, they can't play football. The other boys, too, gays, they are just like girls . . . they're soft and weak, they're not strong and they can't play football. We don't play with girls, we don't play with gays, too. Football is for real boys!
- Researcher [to Peter] Do girls and the boys you call gay want to play football with you during breaks?
- Peter Yes! Girls and gays always want to irritate us when we play football. But we always say no when they want to come and play with us! We don't play with girls and we don't play with gays.

While break time provided the boys an opportunity to choose ways to spend their time, the way they spoke about the playground suggested that in exercising their freedom of choice in play they restricted both girls' and 'gays' opportunities to engage in play, in part, by excluding them from football games. Indeed, the literature on masculinities indicates that hegemonic masculinity sustains itself by creating a distance from girls, femininity and non-conforming boys (Swain, 2006; Clark and Paechter, 2007b; Martin, 2011; Mayeza, 2016). By excluding girls from football games, boys construct themselves as hegemonic males, a construction which not only excludes girls in perceived male roles but also marginalises the 'other' population of boys deemed 'gay' (Bhana, 2014). The breadth and scope of this marginalisation was visible by the ways the 'real' boys described 'gays' as too fragile and weak – qualities that, according to these boys, make them fail at football. It was also not uncommon for the real boys to use forms of violence to demonstrate their unequivocal condemnation of non-conforming boys at the school who were considered 'gay'. The way the real boys spoke of the playground as a space they control (see below) through football games, excluding 'girls' and boys denigrated as 'gay', and suggests that not all boys experienced break time and the playground positively. Thus, the real boys regarded the playground as free-space where they had fun playing different games with friends, but how they spoke about, thought about, and treated 'gays' suggested that, for 'gays', the playground was a site characterised by varying forms of violence, not least, homophobic violence. We also engaged with these real boys to explore their constructions of non-conformity among boys at the school, focusing particularly on how and why they use homophobic violence to 'police' non-conforming boys.

5. Homophobic violence

We use the term homophobic violence to describe countless abuses and discriminatory practices utilised by the 'real' boys to express their disapproval of boys who they perceived as 'gay'. When asked to talk about their constructions of what it means to be 'gay', the real boys argued that being a 'real boy' involved being physically strong, being able to protect or defend yourself, playing or supporting football, and being able to fight. Boys who deviated from this perceived normative masculinity were seen as not 'properly' male and liable to be bullied and ostracised. In the context of this study, the term 'gay' was applied to boys who were small in build, effeminate, played gently rather than violently, played with girls, played games perceived as feminine, and who

did not fight back when provoked as per the playground cultures among the boys during breaks.

- Researcher So please tell me, do all boys at your school play football and fight as part of what boys do on the playground during break?
- Ayanda Even though we are all boys, we are not the same. We are different in many ways. Some have chosen to be different . . . (Laughing).
- Ayanda We have gays here at school, especially in grade 7B. They kiss [with] boys. This is not right. We don't play football with them. We chase them away from our games because they are not real boys. They cannot fight back. They're weak.
- Bheki 'Gays' are cowards, they can't fight back to defend themselves. They are always pushed around, and often other boys make jokes about them. They are teased all the time.
- Researcher [to Bheki] Do you play with the other boys, the ones who are teased and called 'gay'?
- Bheki No, we don't play with them. They play with girls. We don't want to play football with them . . . So we just want them to be away from us. We don't play with gays . . . they're not real boys . . . they can't fight.

Msibi (2012) argues that one of the reasons why the so-called 'real boys' avoid being seen in the company of boys perceived as 'gay' is they fear they would be labelled 'gay' by association. The real boys were quick to express contempt for, and create distance from, boys they constructed as 'gay'. They despised these boys and excluded them from their football games. Central to the construction of hegemonic masculinity is heterosexuality (Connell, 1995), and any form of being or presenting oneself that deviates from that is likely to inspire abhorrence (Bhana, 2014). As the data demonstrates, the real boys not only constructed themselves as hegemonic males by disassociating themselves from 'gays', but they also routinely harassed and intimidated the non-conforming boys during break on school grounds. For example, the real boys further expressed their contempt for 'gays' as follows:

- Jabu I don't like them [gays]. They behave very funny . . . always doing things like girls. They walk and talk like girls, they're not real boys. You will always see them sitting and talking with girls.
- Senzo I hate gays. I don't just want to see them close to me. They just irritate me. When any of them touches or hurt[s] me, I beat them. I won't play with gays.
- Shoba I see horrible things happen to gays. They get shoved, pushed around. They get hit, they get beaten up. They do and say horrible things to gays.

Homophobic violence characterised all of our research interactions with the real boys, especially when they were asked what it actually means to be a 'real boy'. Their construction of a 'real boy' identity was in constant direct opposition to boys they judged as 'gay'. Certainly, they found it difficult, if not impossible, to define themselves as real boys without making references to what they are not, in other words 'gay'. This is interesting as it illustrates the relational manner in which gender identities are socially constructed and enacted (Paechter, 2007). That is, one form of gender identity only exists or makes sense when compared and contrasted with another (Mazeza, 2016). The dominant discourse of gender dualism makes it very difficult for any one gender identity to articulate itself fully and meaningfully, without positioning itself in relation to another (Martin, 2011). Msibi (2012) notes that language is a powerful tool for perpetrating homophobic violence. According to Msibi (2012), violent language

is used to express conflicting notions of power, often leading to hatred and fear. In the context of this study, real boys' use of violent language was evident in the ways they asserted themselves as hegemonic males and as figures of power and authority on the playground, and this involved subordinating a group of boys considered 'unmasculine' in their behaviours, interests and ways of being.

We encouraged the real boys to talk about the reasons behind the widespread incidents of homophobic violence at the school by phrasing the following question:

- Researcher Why do you think such horrible things happen to gays? I mean why do they get beaten up, for example?
- Shoba My grandmother told me that being gay is very bad. Gogo said our culture doesn't allow a boy/girl . . . She said I must grow up to be a real Zulu man; strong enough to fight and to protect and defend myself and my family. The 'gays' are not real boys, a real Zulu man must fight to defend himself and not be girly and weak. Gays can't play with us, we beat them up and they cry like girls . . .

Shoba gives us interesting insights into some of the cultural explanations behind the homophobic violence that permeates the playground practices of real boys during break times. Bhana (2005, 2013) reflected that culture is often used to define and delineate what is acceptable and 'normal' with regard to gender and sexuality. The social expectation of a patriarchal male puts heavy pressure on the boys, like Shoba, to live up to the expected norms (Petrone, 2010). MacNaughton (2000) proposes that by definition, conforming to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity is not easy: it requires a great deal of sacrifice, investment and commitment. Their compliance to this pressure to conform to social expectations about gender somehow makes them feel that all boys ought to conform. It may be they feel it is unfair if they put in the commitment and effort to conform while others are 'free' to deviate. Therefore, the homophobic violence can be seen as the real boys' own initiative towards ensuring that all boys at school conform. This, in a way, sends a message that conformity is not a responsibility for some but everyone. As illustrated in Shoba's account, parents and grandparents play a significant role in the socialisation of children to conform to prevailing gender norms. This puts pressure on children, like the real boys in the study, to live up to the expected hegemonic/patriarchal male figure, even if this requires restricting themselves in terms of play options and social relations at school (MacNaughton, 2000). The widespread homophobic violence among the schoolboys reflects South Africa's strong patriarchal and heteronormative culture, suffused with unequal gender power relations and gender violence (Jewkes and Morrell, 2010). The next section explores the nature and dynamics of violence on the school grounds by focusing on the violence as manifested among and between the real boys on the playground.

6. Violence as power and control: hegemonic masculinity and violence on the playground

According to these boys, understandings about what it means to be a 'real boy' centre considerably on power and control, and asserting and exercising this power involves violence.

- Khuma As a boy you must be strong and have power. We control the playground, and girls and gays have no place there, we don't want them in the playground. The playground is our space, that's where we play football, and girls and gays are not allowed there!

Mazi We're real boys. And we want to show off that we're powerful and we control the playground. When we see a gay boy coming near us, coming to the playground, we call him names and swear at him. If they speak back to us, we'll hit and kick them. We're powerful boys and we can fight! But we don't go around bullying them and take and eat their lunches or anything like that, it's just that we don't want gays and girls to come and irritate us when we play our games on the playground. That's why we hit them and chase them away . . .

By chasing 'gays' and girls from the playground that they construct as 'their football space', the real boys assert and position themselves as hegemonic males and as authorities on the playground. Emerging from the preceding comments is the point that violence is a means to attaining and sustaining power and control. This hegemonic male power marginalises and subordinates 'gays' and girls, creating and perpetuating gendered inequalities in the primary years (Martin, 2011). Central to the boys' tendency to use forms of violence against 'gays' (and girls) in asserting their claims to power and control is a way of signalling to their peers that they are hegemonic males and subordinating other non-conforming boys and girls is a 'normal' part of the hegemonic male discourse.

What emerged powerfully in our interactions with the real boys about their identities and the playground was the significance of fighting or being able to fight and defend oneself as a key quality of what it means, in their eyes, to be a hegemonic male. In the following extracts, Kenzie highlights the necessity for a 'real boy' to be able to fight and defend himself, because, as he argues, every boy needs to grow up to become a 'man':

- Kenzie Every boy fights . . . I also fight . . . boys have to defend themselves, if you don't fight, they will think you're weak and they'd say you're a girl . . . and you know, one day the boy will be a man . . . I mean a boy has to learn to be a man.
- Researcher [to Kenzie] So, are you saying that boys have to fight or have to learn to fight so that they become 'men' when they grow up?
- Kenzie Yes, men fight to have power and to protect themselves. Boys fight because it is important, . . . for the future, they have to be strong men and be able to protect themselves and their families.

To show that they are real boys entails demonstrating certain hegemonic male qualities which is held in high esteem by the patriarchal gender system of South African society (Jewkes and Morrell, 2010). The way violent masculinities play out on the playground can be seen as a form of negotiation and expression of hegemonic masculinity to position 'real boys' in the trajectory of becoming 'real men'. Kenzie's account illustrates how violence forms part of playground cultures and is closely tied to dominant assertions and performances of hegemonic masculinity, and this, in turn, foments gender inequalities in the primary years which could shape later life patterns. Against this background, we reflect on some ways we think the violence could be curtailed at school so that the playground becomes a space where all learners, regardless of gender, are able to play freely and safely during break.

7. Conclusion

Gender violence between learners in South African schools is a serious issue threatening children's right to attend a school that is safe, secure and conducive to learning. Addressing the issue of school violence requires an understanding of the factors that

underpin the violence. We argue that major influences for the pervasiveness of violence in South African schools are the multifaceted and complex societal structures inscribed with strong cultures of gender difference and associated inequalities. This study reveals how the so-called 'real boys' articulate the dominant ideal of hegemonic masculinity rooted in violent practices towards alternate masculinities. It shows the complex and contradictory nature of the young boys' gendered and sexual cultures in a black, township primary school playground in South Africa. These cultures are strongly embedded within patriarchal and heteronormative discourses, which we argue are vital to our understanding of why the real boys behave so violently towards non-conforming boys, denigrated as 'gay'. By reflecting on the young boys' violent playground cultures, we debunk the popular discourse positioning the playground as a free and innocent space in the primary years of schooling. The playground, as we have shown, is a particular socio-political terrain where violence dominates and which accounts for how the 'real' boys learn and enact local hegemonic ideals associated with being masculine.

Against this background, we ask: what can be done to address the violence on the school playground during break? We argue, as a starting point, that efforts aimed at addressing the pervasive school violence should be underpinned by a thorough understanding of the external factors contributing to violence within the school. Indeed, one of our participants Shoba, articulated the vulnerability of his school to external violence as follows: "some children hit and bully other children at school because they've seen people at home and community doing the same."

Community and family-level violence, as well as violence depicted in the media emerge as primary sources of school violence occurring between learners on the playground. This finding raises implications about effective ways of addressing the problem of school violence. We argue that any efforts aimed at addressing school violence should take into account that such violence originates from the violence beyond the school gates, in the broader community (Parkes, 2015). However, we argue simultaneously that the context of poverty and poor management within the school contributes to violence between learners on the playground. Therefore, at the heart of a 'good' approach to addressing school violence lies in a well-managed and well-organised school committed to strengthening its safety and security measures. Research suggests that efficiently managed schools have a lower risk of experiencing problems of violence compared to poorly managed schools or schools with minimal resources (Mncube and Harber, 2013). A well-managed school is characterised by a learner code of conduct clearly prohibiting violence on school grounds. Non-violent but effective forms of punishment for violent misconduct should reinforce this. This is important since violent disciplinary measures intended as a deterrent to violence, may in fact work to reproduce it. Teachers or other school personnel need to patrol the playground during break, their responsibility being to monitor learners' activities and interactions and to mediate, prevent and resolve conflicts before they escalate into serious acts of violence. It is also important for the school to establish and sustain strong partnerships with parents and the broader community and involve these stakeholders in discussions about solutions to the problems of violence between some of the learners at the school.

Addressing the violence on the playground also requires transformation of the school curriculum. The lack of guidance directly challenging violent ways of performing hegemonic masculinity is a factor contributing to the real boys' persistence in enacting their identities through violence on the playground. Our argument is that to address the violence associated with violent ways of performing what it means to be a 'real boy', the school needs to transform its Life Orientation (LO) curriculum. In

South Africa LO is the formal subject in the curriculum to address issues of identity. However, research suggests that LO is faced with a number of pedagogical challenges, including the fact that many learners perceive the subject as detached from their own every day lived experiences and understandings in relation to gender and sexuality (Mthatyana and Vincent, 2015). We advocate for a transformed LO curriculum that would take into account different boys' (and girls') experiences and constructions of the playground as valuable materials for pedagogy. That is, LO teachers would need to learn from the learners about what it means to be a 'boy' at the school and how different boys experience and give meaning to break time, play and the playground. LO teachers and school management need to recognise the playground as a violent space and as a problem requiring their intervention. This has implications for teacher training programmes. Teachers need training about gender issues among learners in the primary years of schooling and how to respond effectively to violence in general, and more specifically, to the violent ways of performing hegemonic masculinity during break on school grounds. While we acknowledge that little is known about the influence of curriculum transformation on attitudinal or behavioural change, developing LO programmes that foreground learners' experiences and understandings is an important area of work towards raising awareness and seeking effective solutions (Bhana, 2012, 2013). By effective solutions we refer to the context-specific mechanisms by which the school can advance a human rights approach to gender and sexuality. This rights-based approach should be underpinned by an understanding that all children have equal rights to choose their individual expressions as gendered subjects through play. As Bhana (2012) notes, the curriculum is a powerful means of promoting a culture of gender equality, respect for diversity and social cohesion among children in the early years of schooling.

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