



## Gender in the early years: Boys and girls in an African working class primary school

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### ABSTRACT

Understanding the ways in which young boys and girls give meaning to gender and sexuality is vital, and is especially significant in the light of South Africa's commitment to gender equality. Yet the, gendered cultures of young children in the early years of South African primary schools remains a, marginal concern in debate, research and interventions around gender equality in education. This, paper addresses this caveat through a small-scale qualitative study of boys and girls between the ages, of 7 and 8 years in an African working class primary school. It focuses on friendships, games, and violent gendered interactions to show how gender features in the cultural world of young children. Given that both boys and girls invest heavily in dominant gender norms, the paper argues that greater, understanding of gender identity processes in the early years of formal schooling are important in, devising strategies to end inequalities and gender violence.

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### 1. Introduction

South African schools were not expected to challenge gender inequalities prior to democracy in 1994. Since then, researchers have begun to explore the ways in which gender inequalities manifest in schools (Morrell, 1998; Bhana, 2005). Gender inequalities and violence are considered to be twin epidemics in South African schools, with widespread reports of violence against girls (Wolpe et al., 1997). In the context of the feminization of HIV and AIDS and the calamitous effects of the disease in South Africa, addressing gender inequalities and violence remain a critical concern.

In KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa, the setting for this study, the rate of HIV infection at antenatal clinics is reported to be 39% (UNAIDS, 2007, 16), and 10.2% of 15–24-year-olds South African are infected with HIV/AIDS (Pettifor et al., 2004). Sexual coercion, HIV infection and unequal gender relations interweave to produce vulnerabilities for young women. Gender and sexual violence are at staggering levels, with almost 13,268 rapes reported in KwaZulu-Natal between March 2009 and April 2010 (South African Police Services, 2010)

In South Africa the effects of historical apartheid inequalities together with persistent social and economic inequalities have

produced a context of high levels of violence. Entrenched views about male privilege produce an understanding the gendering of the disease which makes young African women most vulnerable to violence and risk (Bhana, 2009a). Ideas of masculinity, such as those invested in male entitlement and sexual prowess, are important in studies of vulnerability to HIV infection, violence and prevention.

The ways in which boys construct their masculinities has effects for the form and extent of sexual risk: these constructions include a jostle for power, the use of violence and multiple heterosexual partners. In the context of gender equality and a rights-based political culture in South Africa, concerns have been raised about the high prevalence of HIV and the scourge of gender and sexual violence, and there has been growing awareness of the importance of schools in addressing gender, sexuality and HIV and AIDS (Morrell et al., 2009).

Schools have been regarded as appropriate places to address sexual and gender violence and curb the spread of the disease. Research in South African schools (Human Rights Watch, 2001; Leach and Mitchell, 2006) shows how unsafe such institutions are—they are places where gender and sexual violence are major and habitual problems for girls. While secondary schools have been placed under the spotlight in terms of research and interventions (see Leach and Mitchell, 2006), the early years of primary schooling have been neglected (see Bhana, 2005 as an exception).

In South Africa we have yet to consider more seriously gender in primary schools (Bhana, 2002). This paper addresses a missing face in South African research on gender and education, and turns the

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focus onto boys and girls in Grade two in an African working class primary school. The paper explores the process through which boys and girls attach meaning to gender and the ways in which they forge their gender identities.

Feminist work has drawn our attention to the fact that primary schools are important places where gender and sexuality are enacted, and a significant site contributing to unequal gender relations (Thorne, 1993; MacNaughton, 2000; Renold, 2005). Thorne's (1993) classic US study of primary school boys and girls shows how gender is actively policed in producing dominant versions of masculinity and femininity.

While it has been found that children in primary school appropriate gender stereotypes, the border that separates children is also delicate and fragile. Boys and girls do gender maintenance work, separating from each other as the dominant understanding here is that boys and girls should be apart. Renold (2005) argues that romance, love and kissing are significant cultures in the primary school, even though teachers ignore these as frivolous and childish activities. In this paper we will show that gender borders are broken through the formation of games and friendships, but at the same time gender stereotypes are constantly policed and maintained.

Scholars working in gender and education in South Africa (and Africa) have tended to ignore the question of children's agency and the meanings ascribed to gender and sexuality. There is a complete silence in the South African literature on young boys' and girls' gender investments (see Bhana, 2002, 2005 as exceptions). It is argued in this paper that the investment in dominant norms increases gender polarities, but this process is fraught with ambiguities and contradictions. As the paper will go on to show, gender norms are created, resisted and recreated.

Many conservative proponents of children's development argue that gender and sexuality are abstract concept and the association with childhood problematic (Tobin, 1997). The idea of innocence is a somewhat unyielding representation of childhood, and the continued emphasis on children's sexual innocence reflects the discomfort of adult society in recognizing children as agents.

The policy context which embeds South Africa's commitment to gender equality is slowly denting the representation of childhood as a stage and phase of innocence. So, too, is the context of AIDS. Girls' relative disempowerment, as described earlier, with regard to boys and men is a critical factor in the feminization of the disease—placing gender and sexuality at the centre of the HIV prevention challenge. In South Africa, education policy now compels teachers to address AIDS and social equality. In early schooling sectors this requires that teachers work with young children, instilling (for example) habits of behaviour appropriate to gender equality and the formation of peaceful gender relations—and is especially significant in the context of the HIV and AIDS (Bhana, 2007).

This study makes visible three areas of school cultures in which gender and sexuality are implicated: friendships, games and violent gendered interactions. These areas might appear frivolous, particularly to those who deem young children as innocent and without gender and sexuality. Yet as the new sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2005) argues, these are important sites through which children as social actors become visible.

The sociology and psychology of childhood has traditionally viewed this phase as quite distinct from adulthood, and has constructed children as people in a stage of transition, as not fully developed, as "blank slates" who need to be spoken for. Against this view, the new sociology of childhood has argued that children are active agents, and research underpinned by children's agency is attempting to give them a voice and to hear what it is like being a boy or a girl from their points of view (Jame and Prout, 1997). This paper builds on the literature in the sociology of childhood and

foregrounds the ability of young children to exercise their agency, addressing a neglected area of work in the research on gender and the early years.

The focus in this study is on young African boys and girls in a poor, working class township context. The social context from which children in this study emerge is important, since it affects the ways in which gender relations are forged. For African children in poor social contexts, the effects of apartheid and colonialism, for example, and the persistent levels of poverty and unemployment in the country are important co-factors in the experience of gender and childhood sexuality.

What we intend to do in this paper is to focus on ways in which friendships and play are significant areas through which boys and girls actively negotiate being and becoming a boy or a girl. Bhana (2002) has begun to show how primary school sites are both gendered and sexual arenas. Girls and boys actively learn as they engage with the formal and informal processes of schooling as gendered and sexual agents. Bhana's work illustrates the ways in which young children in the early years of primary schooling take on normative gender roles, separating as they do but also coming together as they tease, mock and play with each other.

This paper is situated within this developing work in South Africa and, like Bhana, attempts to understand the making of gender in the early years of South African schooling. With specific attention to a working class African township school, this study attempts to investigate how Grade two boys and girls understand gender, and the implications of this for addressing gender equality in the primary school (see Nzimakwe, 2009).

## 2. Gender and young children

Being a young child is often perceived as a space where children are untroubled and untouched by the cares of the (adult) gendered world. Although this is not true about children in this study, for some theorists children are seen to be without knowledge about gender and sexuality. They are seen as too young to understand such issues (see Tobin, 1997). This study is in agreement with Renold (2005), who sees children as active rather than passive agents in constructing their gendered cultures. Such cultures draw from the school and broader social context from which children emerge, and are often embedded within patriarchal notions of power. As Corsaro (2005) notes, children should be treated as autonomous beings and as active agents rather than as blank slates. Instead of being constructed as blank-slatted, children in primary school are active agents giving meaning to who they are as boys and girls.

Research shows that primary schools are important sites where femininities and masculinities are produced (Skelton, 2001; Bhana, 2005). MacNaughton (2000) argues that even very young children are clearly aware of gender roles, whether they are playing among themselves, listening to stories or interacting with adults. School provides opportunities to develop friendships, but these too are highly gendered and sexualized. Children separate and come together through sharing, fighting, teasing and mocking each other. Even at age 7 and 8, sexuality is pervasively present as young children make meaning of their femininities and masculinities.

Renold (2005) breaks the myth that the primary school is a cultural greenhouse for nurturing and protecting children's sexual innocence. Renold maintains that primary schools are a key social and cultural arena for the making of sexuality. The gendered and sexual cultures of the broader social context influence and have effects on the ways in which young children actively engage in the boyfriend and girlfriend culture.

Research in southern Africa, while limited, has provided insights into the gendered experiences at school (Dunne, 2008). In Lesotho, Morojele (2009) argues that in primary schools gender

violence is often misrecognized, since children are not seen to be capable of violence. Chireshe and Chireshe (2009), in a study of sexual harassment and young women in Zimbabwe, found that male students and teachers continue to violate young women, without such incidents being reported. Inside classrooms, corporal punishment, bullying and everyday forms of gender and sexual harassment flourish (Leach and Machakanja, 2000).

Dunne (2008) notes that in schools in Botswana and Ghana, gender issues were not seen to be of any concern and gender was naturalised, with gender violence common in both country settings. In this study Dunne argues that classroom space, resources and seating arrangements contribute to the gendered organisations of school and part of the continuum of gender inequalities in and out of the classroom. Dunne adds that dominant versions of subordinate femininity limited girls' ability to respond to violence, while boys enacted dominant masculinity in relation to female teachers and habitual intimidation of girls in and out of the classroom.

In South Africa, Bhana (2005) focuses on young masculinities and femininities and points to toxic forms of masculine and feminine forms of conduct in the early years. Violence remains one of the major social problems in South Africa, and is also a major issue in current debates about education (see Bhana, 2009a). In the context of social inequalities and the legacy of the effects of apartheid, Bhana (2005) finds that violent social conduct has an impact on the ways in which young children position their gender roles and identities. Importantly, she finds that in primary schools located in working class African township contexts, violence inheres in social relationships in the classroom and in the fields.

Schools are implicated in the making of masculinities, and it is increasingly accepted that schools have a role to play in preventing violence. In South Africa gender and sexual violence in schools has been vividly illustrated by the Human Rights Watch (2001). However, there remains a dearth of information and intervention strategies designed to address gender violence in the early years of primary school. It must be noted that violence interferes with a school's ability to produce a safe learning environment.

Bhana's (2005) study of a township school revealed the extent to which violence was endemic in the school. Children's conflicts ranged from the demand for a slice of bread to a fight for an old pencil, and were highly gendered. Boys were already inserting into violent conduct and used their power in ways that achieved material reward. Arguing that the social context impacts on the violent regime of the school, Bhana maintains that persistent economic inequalities make violence a desirable means to achieve material reward. This paper is situated within this body of emerging work, and addresses the relative neglect of focus on young children, primary schooling and gender.

### 3. Research methodology and design

This research was qualitative in design and the intention was to understand how Grade two boys and girls between the ages of 7 and 8 years make meaning out of gender. The study was conducted in an African junior primary school in Durban, South Africa. The school is located in greater Durban, within close proximity to a township area. Learners come from neighbouring townships in greater Pinetown, Durban, and others from squatter settlements in the area.

To investigate gender in the early years, interviews and observations were conducted among the Grade two boys and girls. Purposive sampling was used, and since the second author had experience in teaching Grade two, questions of access and feasibility were satisfied. Interviews and observations took place in

a sample of 14 Grade two learners (7 boys and 7 girls). Unstructured group interviews with boys and girls were conducted in single-sex and mixed-sex groups. Observations were also carried out to supplement the interviews.

The vocabulary of young children is developing in the early years, and the data reflective this. Boys and girls were observed in the classroom, in the morning assembly, and on the playground. We were highly aware of ethical considerations in dealing with young children. Informed consent was sought from the Department of Education, from parents, school teachers and the principal of the school.

English and isiZulu were used in the interviews. The second author is a first-language isiZulu speaker, so interviews with young children were enabled. In South Africa English is compulsory in schools, and so children were able to switch between English and isiZulu. Where children spoke in isiZulu, the data have been translated.

Data were analysed through reading the transcribed interviews and the field notes and categorising them into themes. In this approach we read the typed transcript several times, read the observation notes, and came to a shared view about the themes we selected. We compared the responses of boys and girls as they articulated their meanings of gender, and described how the themes were interrelated.

From here, the article focuses on the results and findings, highlighting three interrelated areas of gendering in the early years.

### 4. Gender, friendships and sexuality

Friendships were highly gendered and membership of friendship groups often followed stereotypical formations. As Thorne (1993) notes, despite opportunities to develop cross-gender friendships in schools, girls and boys have shown a strong preference to maintain gender normative boundaries. Even when children play team sports, Thorne argues, girls more often choose players according to who is a friend rather than who is more skilled at the game.

In this study the girls made it clear that there are certain qualities that they look for when choosing friends, including beauty, intelligence and appearance. Economic status was also raised by girls as an important marker of friendship. On the other hand, boys were less concerned about appearance and beauty in choosing friendship groups; they were more concerned about the skills displayed in playing football:

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Casa (b) <sup>2</sup> : | We play football.   |
| Sphe (b):               | We don't play with Siphos because he can't kick a ball; he is a 'cow'. <sup>3</sup> |
| Researcher:             | You say Philile is your friend. What do you like about her?                         |
| Wendy (g):              | Muhle [she is pretty].  |
| Nokuphiwa (g):          | Her dad has a shop and she gives us chips and sweets.                               |
| Wendy (g):              | He also gives us money to buy pens from Mrs Musi.                                   |

While being pretty was a marker of friendship, it is important to note here that femininities and masculinities were constructed in

<sup>2</sup> All boys' names are indicated by (b) and girls' names by (g).

<sup>3</sup> "Cow" as used here is denigratory and homophobic. In isiZulu, while cows are important for bride wealth and valued, here the word is used symbolically to show subordinate masculinity which does not exhibit sporting prowess—a cow cannot play soccer and lacks agility.

ways that reproduced gender norms but locked into specific social circumstance. The children at the school emerge from impoverished material environments, and having a friend whose father is financially more able enables friendships. As Bhana (2005) shows, food and material security impact on the nature and form of gender relations—and here we show that it is also related to the formation of friendships. Gender, race and class intersect in ways that forge friendships. Boys' preference to play soccer was based on agility and skill, and worked to forge dominant masculine positions against which boys like Sipho were excluded and referred to as a "cow".

Through observations of friendship groups at the school, this study confirms what Thorne (1993) found in her study—that researchers who have asked children of different ages to name their best friends have found that in at least 75% of the cases, boys name only boys and girls name only girls. Friendships are polarised, with boys and girls stating that they do not have friends of the opposite sex—although this was open to contradiction. Observations in both the playground and the classroom confirmed that both boys and girls preferred single-sex friendships, but this does not mean that gender boundaries are impervious to alternate forms of relationships. However, when did this happen, sexuality as a dominant force precluded the formation of cross-gender friendships. Mocking and teasing occurred, and this meant that boys and girls who came together faced the embarrassment and shame of being seen as "boyfriend and girlfriend". Children themselves do not like to be seen engaging in opposite-sex chat, and were thus actively involved in policing the gender friendship boundaries:

- Zinhle (g): Wendy has a boyfriend . . . His name is Khethelo. Wendy kissed him in class.
- Mlungisi (b): Siyanda is writing a letter to her girlfriend. It says "I love you". [note grammatical slip as Siyanda is a boy]
- Casa (b): Teacher, this one has a girlfriend. Her name is Thando.
- Sphe (b): [Pointing at Siyanda] You told me, and she wrote you a card . . . you and gave her flowers.
- Siyanda (b): He is lying. I am still young.

It is important to understand that masculinities and femininities are constructed as almost entirely heterosexual. Adults tend to construct childhood as a time of innocence, and yet as the above transcripts show, sexuality was pervasive and informed how children related to each other as boys and girls. The exchange of flowers that Sphe mentioned suggests that children are not too young to know—they understand the meaning of flowers as gifts showing love and affection.

There were many other illustrations of the sexualized nature of the school, but we confirm that children as young as 7 and 8 take part in "boyfriend and girlfriend" cultures and, like Renold (2005), we maintain that primary school is a key social and cultural arena for doing gender and sexuality.

## 5. Gender games

In this section we show how games are deployed in ways that break gender boundaries but also contribute to separation. Playing games is often regarded as a regular, everyday feature of primary schooling, and often not taken seriously (see Thorne, 1993; Bhana, 2005). At the school under study, several games were played and were highly gendered. *Masigcozi* (house-house) involved playing mothers and fathers, through which both boys and girls participated as imagined heterosexual adults in a family. Such

play occurred at informal levels during break times and on the fields of the school:

- Researcher: Do you play *masigcozi*?
- Nokuphiwa (g): No, my mom said I must stop playing it . . . They go to buy and cook mud . . . My mom said I must stop playing it because other girls want to play with boys.
- Researcher: Why?
- Nokuphiwa (g): Because boys like to play with girls and girls are not to play with boys.
- Researcher: Why?
- Nokuphiwa (g): Because boys want to kiss girls.

*Masigcozi*, as children suggest above, breaks gender boundaries; both boys and girls play together, but are simultaneously policed by dominating discourses, which regulated gender boundaries.

- Researcher: Do you play with the girls in this class?
- Siyanda (b): Yes we do.
- Researcher: What do you play?
- Siyanda (b): We run after each other.
- Researcher: You play running after each other?
- Siyanda: We play hide-and-peek and touch games.

Siyanda confirms that touch games and hide-and-peek are important means through which gender boundaries were broken, and it is through games that both boys and girls came together and separated at the same time. When observing boys playing other games, we found that the games they played were very risky. The most popular game was a stick-fighting game where they hit each other with sticks. Stick-fighting must be seen in the context of KwaZulu-Natal, where historically stick-fighting was an important means through which to demonstrate physical prowess and courage. One boy made it clear that the stick game was a boys' game and girls were unable to play it as they were not strong.

Thorne (1993) confirms the adventurous nature of boys' games, and maintains that many researchers have reported that boys engage in more rough-and-tumble play and physical fighting than do girls. As researchers argue, the playground is the most commonly cited example of overt gendered segregation, with boys' games monopolising the space—but the playground is also a space where boys and girls can and do come together to play hide-and-peek and touch games (Connolly, 2003). Connolly's study discloses that boys who played football regularly gained status and prestige among peers. In this study, boys who were unable to display skills in football were excluded from friendship groups.

Girls' games are different from those of boys. Girls involve themselves in games that keep them closer to their classes. Singing and clapping games are popular among the girls. One girl once sang a song about the love she had for a boy she met on a school trip. As in Bhana's study (2002), this study of Grade two boys and girls demonstrates that girls use play to construct their gender and heterosexual identities, and that girls' play often involves singing and clapping to the sounds of rhythmic tunes about girls, boys, kissing, love and imagining a cosy life.

## 6. Violence against girls

As seen in Bhana's study (2005), violence is prevalent in South African primary schools and is almost always gendered; in the main, young boys were the perpetrators of violence in this school.

- Nompilo (g): Casa was hitting us in class, and slapping Sindy and I. They were hitting us with pipes.  
 Wendy (g): They [boys] throw stones at us.  
 Nokuphiwa (g): They kick us.  
 Wendy (g): They trip us.

There were many examples illustrating the ways in which girls were disproportionately the victims of violence in the school. Human Rights Watch (2001) confirms the acute forms of gender and sexual violence in South African schools, leading to the claim that girls in schools are afraid and schools are not safe places. Girls in this study were vociferous in denouncing the violence of boys, and it is through violence that gender separation was forged:

- Gugu (g): We don't want boys ... They annoy us.  
 Vuyo (g): They hit us.  
 Researcher: They hit you? Why do they hit you?  
 Girls (together): We don't know [in unison].  
 Vuyo (g): They tease us ... They say *siyaphapha* ('we suck') ...  
 Gugu (g): They kick us ... they are naughty.  
 Nompilo (g): They say they will give us 10 babies.

Nompilo suggests that even at ages 7 and 8, boys are acquiring knowledge of their power and sexual power over girls, as indicated by "they will give us 10 babies". A constant theme was the ways in which the violence of boys affected the girls both physically as well as verbally, resulting in construction of boys as "naughty". A strong alliance was built up among the girls as they spoke against the violence of boys, and through this separated from boys. While young children's words and utterances are often considered frivolous, this study takes their voices seriously. It is not often in the everyday world that they are able to articulate the effects of violence.

## 7. Conclusion

In this study of gender and sexuality in the early years of primary schooling, we demonstrated the ways in which gender and sexuality operate through friendships, through routine games children play, as well as through violence. We have made visible the voices of young children often not considered in research in gender and education in South Africa.

Boys and girls in this study often policed their boundaries, although the boundaries that separated boys from girls were fragile. Boys and girls come together (as they separate) in relation to friendships and routine games like *masigcozi*, based on imaginary heterosexual family life (see Epstein et al., 2001).

It is important to realise the extent of sexuality in the making of friends and the gendered nature of games. Already at ages 7 and 8 sexuality is a key dimension through which meanings of gender are being made.

The contradictions in coming together and separating from each other are not so apparent as far as violence is concerned. While boys and girls can and do develop cross-gender friendships, the violence of boys prevents the development of equitable relations. Girls were very eloquent in their accounts of boys' violence, referring to verbal as well as physical accounts of violence. Sexual violence was implicit in the comment "They say they will give us 10 babies".

Young children, often forgotten in intervention programmes, are actively engaged in the early years in resisting, adopting and negotiating gender boundaries. Gender norms make it difficult for boys and girls to relate in ways that are expansive of their

freedoms, as dominant discourses about boys and girls prevent the forging of such relations. However, the possibility of coming together exists, as this paper has shown, through games as well as through friendships. Freeing girls of the burden of violence remains a concern.

The analysis in this article makes the voices of very young children pivotal and contributes to the body of knowledge around the new sociology of childhood, confirming their agency and the ability to navigate issues around gender and sexuality (MacNaughton, 2000; Renold, 2005). In the African context, analysis which centres on young children is rare. In the context of the broader social issues, including the feminization of the HIV epidemic, gender and sexual violence, analysis which makes heard the voices of young children has an important role to play in designing gender transformative intervention strategies in the early years.

Any intervention strategy must take into consideration young children's ability to think, know and feel about matters that are often considered taboo. At an early age young boys and girls in the township are inducted into the rituals of gender, through which expressions of sexuality are clear. Their expressions suggest a familiar context, illustrating their knowledge and experience of gender inequalities—with young girls in marginal positions. This is of particular concern, since much of the research shows patterns of vulnerability and risk for women and girls (Dunne, 2008; Hallman, 2007).

Bhana (2009b) shows how young boys and girls are peripheral in gender transformative interventions, and yet – as this paper illustrates – they are actively engaged in those very gender cultures, producing as they do familiar understandings of gender and sexuality (which have been argued to give rise to sexual risk and disease). Schools are obliged to address these concerns.

Interventions within the early years of schooling must begin to address children as agents of gender and sexuality. Often teachers in the early years are equipped with developmentally appropriate practice, which fails to address issues around gender and sexuality in early childhood. Interventions will demand that teachers of young children acquaint themselves with emerging theories and research around gender and childhood studies (see MacNaughton, 2000). Importantly, knowledge of how violence operates – implicating boys and masculinities as issues of power – is important to address.

Developing gender-sensitive guidelines and policies in the early years of schooling – beyond the national call for gender equality – will be helpful to the early-years agenda. While policy in itself cannot do the work of equality, it is important to ensure that children are protected and that their rights to freedom are realised.

In the South African context of HIV, the feminization of the disease as well as the broader project of gender equality, addressing gender, sexuality and vulnerability in the early years remains a matter of urgency. Equally important is the political will to ensure that children are not made invisible to the serious social and health problems in the country—all of which are connected to the gendering and sexual processes of identity (Bhana, 2007).

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