



Vulnerable masculinities: Implications of gender socialisation in three rural Swazi primary schools

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Background: This article draws on social constructionism to explore vulnerable boys' constructions of gender within three primary schools in Swaziland.

Objectives: It seeks to understand the ways in which vulnerable boys make meaning of masculinities and the implications of these on their social and academic well-being in schools.

Method: The study adopted a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology, utilising individual and focus group semi-structured interviews and a participatory photovoice technique as its methods of data generation. The participants comprised 15 purposively selected vulnerable boys – orphaned boys, those from child-headed households and from poor socio-economic backgrounds, aged between 11 and 16 years.

Results: The findings denote that vulnerable boys constructed their masculinities through heterosexuality where the normative discourse was that they provide for girls in heterosexual relationships. The vulnerable boys' socio-economic status rendered them unable to fulfil these obligations. Failure to fulfil the provider role predisposed vulnerable boys to ridicule and humiliation. However, some vulnerable boys adopted caring attitudes as they constructed alternative masculinities.

Conclusion: The study recommends the need to affirm and promote alternative masculinities as a strategy for enhancing gender-inclusive and equitable schooling experiences for vulnerable boys.

Keywords: gender equality; masculinities; poverty; vulnerable boys; schooling; Swaziland.

Introduction

One of the devastating effects of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) in Swaziland is the escalating number of vulnerable children (Mkhatshwa 2017). In a population of approximately 1.1 million (Braithwaite, Djima & Pickmans 2013), the country presently has more than 150 000 vulnerable boys and girls in the primary school system (Simelane 2016). According to the country's education system, vulnerable children are those who are orphaned, those from child-headed households and those from destitute family situations (Mkhatshwa 2017). After introducing free primary education in 2010 to cater for the educational needs of vulnerable children, the government of Swaziland through the Ministry of Education and Training committed itself to providing 'disadvantaged groups [in the country] special attention in respect of equity, access, equality and protection – particularly from stigma and discrimination' (The Ministry of Education and Training 2011). The Swaziland education sector policy says disadvantaged groups 'may include rural dwellers, girls and women, persons with disabilities and the poor ... [they] have little or no influence over their own education or welfare' (The Ministry of Education and Training 2011:xi). However, the list excludes vulnerable groups as a social group in school contexts. Practically, such definition gives more prominence to the needs of vulnerable girls over those of vulnerable boys. No wonder, therefore, that for almost a decade now, girls have performed exceptionally well in the Swaziland Primary Certificate examinations (The Examinations Council of Swaziland 2017) and boys are struggling with their education and are lagging behind. Simelane, Thwala and Mamba (2013) reveal that boys in Swazi schools repeat classes and drop out of school and their progress is not as smooth as that of girls. Mkhatshwa (2017) found that a large number of the boys who drop out of school are those affected by vulnerability. The questions that arise are as follows: Is the Ministry of Education and Training missing something in the schooling experiences of boys as compared to girls? Have the programmes aimed at enhancing gender equity in school contexts (SWAGAA 2013) disregarded the lived experiences of boys and made girls the only subjects of gender equity discourse in the country (Clowes 2013)? This is a cause for concern and a reason to invest in understanding

vulnerable boys' lived experiences. In light of this, Anderson (2009) called for research to investigate the complexity of changing formations of masculinity. Focussing on gender dynamics through the ways in which they construct their masculinities would therefore be one way to understand and comprehend vulnerable boys' daily challenges.

West and Zimmerman (2009) define masculinity as an act of 'doing boy'. This is mainly governed, constructed and defined by societies and institutions through their dominant structures and discourses (Messerschmidt & Messner 2018). Rather than being a natural attribute for all boys and men, masculinity is a shared gender identity which is both time-specific and meaningful within a particular context (Morrell 1998). Schools as social contexts too construct masculinities in diverse ways. Hence, researchers have found various ways in which boys in school contexts express masculinity. Swain (2006) found that idealised masculinities were competitive, rough, had no respect for girls and also subordinated weak boys. Renold (2001) says boys in the school context constructed masculinity through football and feminine disassociation. In Lesotho, Morojele (2011) found that hegemonic masculinities were rough, physically strong, uncaring, competitive and assertive, and in South Africa, Mayeza (2015) found that boys expressed their masculinities through bullying and violence, especially in football games, while, also in South Africa, Tucker and Govender (2017) found that dominant boys showed resilience and toughness, indeed proving that in every social context there are different patterns of masculinities drawn from the diverse cultural and traditional resources available (Swain 2006).

Swazi masculinities

The Swazi people's close-knit relationships are tied in maintaining, conforming and preserving their conservative and traditional way of life (Nxumalo, Okeke & Mammen 2014) founded on Christianity and patriarchy (Fielding-Miller et al. 2016). In the Swazi nation, masculinity is viewed as a natural attribute possessed by all boys (Mkhatshwa 2017), even at a young age. Hence, families are excited at the birth of a boy because that guarantees continuity of the family lineage; thus, boys are given names such as 'Vusumuzi (meaning revive the family name) or Gcinumuzi (meaning keep the family)' (Nyawo 2014:121). For example, a woman does not attain the status of *Inkhosikati* [real woman] in her marital home and community until she bears a male child – an heir (Nyawo 2014). Swazi boys are encouraged to show real manhood through heterosexuality and promiscuity even at a young age (Nxumalo et al. 2014). Maleness is associated with intelligence and inventiveness (Nyawo 2014); hence, boys and men are valuable members of the nation responsible for all household and national decisions. Swazi masculinity is constructed as ferocious, inventive and having the ability to take up the providing role well even at a young age (Fielding-Miller et al. 2016). Furthermore, masculinities possess dominant powers in all aspects of life. Mamba (1997) says Swazi boys should:

show the strength of an elephant, as their ultimate duty was to be victorious warriors able to continue the tradition established by the early king Mswati I. [It is] this male identity [therefore] ... that sharpens the boy's determination to succeed in his venture. (p. 66)

The boys are expected to remain powerful and show great strength. Hence, all boys in school contexts are expected to use their inventiveness to navigate their life situations (Mkhatshwa 2017), unlike the girls who are not only regarded as fragile but also as needing special treatment and support from all educational stakeholders (SWAGAA 2013). Indeed, the Swazi concept of masculinity is framed within a heteronormative conception of gender that ignores difference and exclusion within the gender category – masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Therefore, vulnerable boys' masculinities are constructed through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, and thus, like all boys, they are expected to be independent and self-reliant (Mkhatshwa 2017). Within the Swazi dominant discourses, therefore, masculine failure is not accepted. Failure to uphold dominant discourses of masculinities is always a source of embarrassment and ridicule (Morojele 2011). A man who fails to conform and live up to his responsibilities as a 'real man' is viewed with disdain and considered lazy or weak (Mamba 1997). Such perception of masculinity falsifies and obscures the real experiences of vulnerable boys in the country (Mkhatshwa 2017) who by virtue of their social status do not fit in the dominant group of masculinities. Connell (2008:244) says applying the concept of masculinity 'as a static character type' ignores the dynamics within the social group – masculinities. Therefore, to understand vulnerable boys' masculinities, it is imperative to understand the gender systems in which they are defined and constructed (Raza 2017).

Masculinity and vulnerability

Connell (1995) argues that masculinities are heterogeneous, defined by their place in the hierarchical order of the society. To make sense of the hierarchy of masculinities within each context, Connell (1995) classifies masculinities as 'dominant, complicit, submissive and oppositional'. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe the dominant kind of masculinities in any given context as hegemonic. Hegemonic masculinities are the more socially exalted and idealised form of masculinities (Connell 1996). They are associated with respect, authority, influence and social power (Messerschmidt & Messner 2018). Hegemonic masculinities mainly draw from culture and the diverse society's dominant discourses which determine what is normal and what is not normal masculine behaviour (Connell 1995). Connell and Messerschmidt point out that the subordinate modes of masculinity stand in direct contrast to hegemonic masculinities. Connell (1996) says subordinate masculinities are the socially marginalised masculinities in a given context. Swain (2006) points out that they are the repressed and dominated. Subordinate masculinities do not have resources for power and hence their expression of masculinity does not conform to the acclaimed masculine attribute (Connell 1995)

that defines hegemonic masculinities. Morrell (1998) says subordinate masculinities are not only relegated as a differentiation logic from hegemonic masculinities but also subserviently positioned in the social masculine order. Raza (2017) agrees that when poverty intersects with masculinity, it gives birth to subordinate forms of masculinities, agreeing with Renold (2001) that poverty and vulnerability ascribe vulnerable boys (boys who are orphaned, boys from child-headed households and boys from poor socio-economic backgrounds) to subservient masculine positions. This is because their ability to conform to the normative masculine behaviours and norms is circumscribed by poverty and vulnerability (Izugbara 2015). This predisposes them to subordination and marginalisation in schools, mainly by boys who embody perceived hegemonic masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005).

In essence, vulnerable boys' poverty becomes sites for their subordination and suppression (Chowdhury 2017). Given that cultural, social, economic and intellectual status have some influence over identity construction, subordinate masculinities (vulnerable boys) therefore construct their masculinities in ways that are not only different from hegemonic masculinities (Connell 1995) but also strive to align with hegemonic masculinities. The different ways in which vulnerable boys seek to construct their masculinities seem to be harmful to their own well-being (Clowes 2013). For example, adherence to the orthodox provider role has become a basis for gender inequality between dominant and subordinate masculinities. This encourages vulnerable boys to perform masculinities in ways that compensate for the perceived lack of power. South African teenagers intentionally impregnate their girlfriends to claim ownership in the absence of economic power (Hendrikz, Swartz & Bhana 2010). This indicates that homogenising masculinities and looking at maleness through dominant discourses of masculinity, where boys have always been perceived as being strong and legatees of gender inequality in schools, have therefore overlapped problems faced by subordinate masculinities (Shefer, Kruger & Schepers 2015). Viewing masculinities through the lens of the broader social category – masculinity – perpetuates stereotypes and gender inequity and delays democratising gender relations and may not even fully represent the problems that vulnerable boys in the country face (Ratele 2013).

Against the backdrop of the Swazi (people of Swaziland) patriarchal society, the article focusses on what it means to be a vulnerable boy in the context of three rural primary schools in Swaziland. As a contribution to gender studies' debates, this article highlights how the intersection of poverty, vulnerability and expressions of hegemonic masculinities not only place the vulnerable boys in a subservient position (Raza 2017) but also predisposes them to gender inequity, humiliation and ridicule. In this article, we argue that vulnerable boys are profoundly affected by vulnerability as it affects any of the groups already classified by the education sector policy as disadvantaged (The Ministry of Education and Training 2011).

The article is premised on the notion of gender equality as a desired ideal, equally relevant for both girls and boys (Clowes 2013). Using Elliott's (2015) caring masculinities, the article also shows how, by challenging the patriarchal masculine norms, vulnerable boys in the study developed caring modes of masculinities. By privileging the voice of vulnerable boys as the 'voice of experience' (Watkins 2000:40), the article adds a critical component in the equation, which education policy-makers could factor in, in their efforts and strategies for enhancing inclusive education and gender-equitable schooling experiences for the rising number of vulnerable boys and girls in the country (Simelane 2016). By doing so, they are affirming the country's efforts and commitment to gender equality in school contexts (UNESCO 2000).

The theoretical frameworks

The article draws on social constructionism to explore vulnerable boys' constructions of gender within the three primary schools in Swaziland. Social constructionism argues that reality is not just a product of natural creation, but claims to truth are customarily rooted in traditions, values and social relations within diverse societies (Gergen 2009). Likewise, masculinities are socially constructed formations of gender practice that are created through historically regulated and reinforced practices (Connell 2005a; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). It is within individual society's discourses of masculinity and vulnerability therefore that vulnerable boys' constructions and experiences of masculinities are founded, governed and predicated (Gergen 2009). Gee (2011) saw discourse as a socially accepted association amongst ways of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that could be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group. Vulnerable boys' constructions and experience of masculinities therefore rely heavily on and are drawn from their individual society's discourses, traditional gender norms and ideologies (Ratele 2013), to which, as members of the society, vulnerable boys are made to subscribe to through complex and self-perpetuating processes of gender socialisation meant to prepare them to fit into a highly structured and hierarchic social gendered order (Connell 2005a).

Factoring in the gender socialisation and cultural influences on vulnerable boys' experiences and constructions of gender was, therefore, central to this article. Indeed, through vulnerable boys' narratives, the study highlighted various socio-cultural dynamics that informed their experiences and constructions of gender. This included how the realities of rurality, orphanage, poverty and living in child-headed households altered vulnerable boys' masculine prejudices and attitudes, which culminated in their gender performances and which did not signify hegemonic masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). We further drew on Elliott's (2015) caring masculinities and their basic principles in trying to interpret our findings in relation to vulnerable boys' caring attitudes as they constructed alternative masculinities. Caring masculinities propose that when men and boys are immersed in care-

work, they are capable of embracing traditionally perceived feminine performances of gender, such as expressing emotions, caring and nurturing without completely departing from or completely subverting traditional masculinity. For example, caring masculinities could view financial provision not only as a way of expressing hegemonic masculinity but also exhibiting and providing care for the people they love (Hanlon 2012). Elliot says boys who adopt ethics of care into their masculine identity are non-dominating, value life-affirming emotions and emphasise on principles of caring. Indeed, the findings revealed that when vulnerable boys adopted a caring attitude into their masculine identity, they realised high principles of gender equality (Lee & Lee 2016) and better and productive lives for the femininities they care about, including their sisters and friends (Connell 2005a).

Research design

Geographical and socio-economic context of the study

Swaziland consists of four geographically diverse regions – Lubombo, Shiselweni, Hhohho and Manzini. The study was conducted in three primary schools – Muntu primary school (a pseudonym) is located in the Lubombo region, about 42 km from the nearest town Siteki, which is about 104 km from the capital Mbabane. Lubombo is largely rural, and it is the poorest region in the country and the hardest hit by the effects of HIV and AIDS (UNICEF 2009). Hence, it has the highest number of vulnerable children in the country (Braithwaite et al. 2013). Mjikaphansi* primary school is located in the rural area of the Hhohho region, about 25 km from Mbabane. Both boys and girls are usually found roaming the dirty roads, imbibing in alcohol, with no prospects of learning beyond Form 5, and they end up working in pine tree plantations. Mazingela* primary school is located in the rural area of the Manzini region, about 13 km from both Manzini city and from Matsapha, which is known as the industrial town of the country. Most vulnerable children live in rented one-room squatter camps, made of both stick and mud or cement bricks. Most children here stay with single parents, usually women, who work in the textile industry.

Study methodology and data collection methods

The study used a qualitative, narrative approach as its methodological design. Qualitative research was aligned with this study for its ability to comprehend human phenomena in context (Creswell 2014). Through this approach, the study was able to examine vulnerable boys' individual and societal actions and perceptions of masculinities (Gergen 2009) in their context of vulnerability (McMillan & Schumacher 2010). Narrative inquiry was chosen based on the perspective that people are storytellers and their lives are full of stories (Connelly & Clandinin 1990). Through vulnerable boys' stories, the study could better comprehend their daily-lived experiences and

meaning-making of gender. Fifteen purposively selected vulnerable boys – orphaned boys, those from child-headed households and those from poverty-stricken families, aged between 11 and 16 years – were selected to participate in the study. Individual and focus group semi-structured interviews and participatory photovoice techniques were utilised for data collection. For photovoice, each participant was given a camera with 27 frames and trained on how to use the cameras. They were then urged to capture salient spaces and places that held meaning to their real-life schooling experiences, guided by the theme of the study for a period of 3 days, after which the frames were developed and the photo imagery used during the interviews to act as ingress into their views, perspectives and lived experiences (Joubert 2012). Permission was sought from the participants to use a tape recorder to accurately record what they said, which in turn made up for data not recorded in the notes. Field notes were used to record the interviews, especially the participants' emotions and body language. All interviews were conducted in SiSwati so that all the participants could express themselves without any linguistic restrictions (McMillan & Schumacher 2010).

Data analysis procedures

All data were transcribed in English for easy analysis. An inductive process of analysis was followed to derive patterns and themes in the data (Creswell 2014). This necessitated listening and relistening to the recorded data while reading the transcripts for accurate interpretation (McMillan & Schumacher 2010). Data were then organised, linking pseudonyms with informants. This was followed by reading line by line and listening to the recordings again for familiarity with the data and to identify sub-emerging themes related to vulnerable boys' constructions of masculinities. Pictures from photovoice were selected and contextualised with assistance from the participants (Joubert 2012), guided by the objectives of the study. The tone and voice of the participants were also noted, especially in comprehending their emotions. The theoretically informed emergent themes from all the data (photovoice, individual and focus group interviews) were thereafter coded, discussed and analysed through the lens of social constructionism (Gergen 2009) and Elliott's (2015) caring masculinities.

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues were observed so that the rights of the participants were respected (Creswell 2014). Consent was sought from the Ministry through the director's office. Written permission was also obtained from the school principals stating the purpose of the study. Ethical clearance was then obtained from the University research office, after which letters of consent were sent to the parents or caregivers of vulnerable boys in SiSwati, elucidating the issues of confidentiality, privacy and voluntary participation. Letters of consent for vulnerable children who had neither parents nor guardians were sent to the *umgucucuteli* [community caregiver]. As the study considers children to be competent

human beings who can decide on issues that concern their lives, their consent was also sought. Trust and respect was maintained throughout the research process and with all the research participants. The participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study if and when they so desired without any undesirable consequences. For confidentiality, pseudonyms are used in this article to depict both the schools and participants.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Protocol number HSS/1914/016D.

Findings and discussions

Without money we are useless ... masculinities as providers

The findings revealed that all boys in these schools (vulnerable boys included) constructed their masculinities through heterosexuality (see Figure 1). Attempts to forge heterosexual relationships in the case of vulnerable boys were not only compromising to their welfare but also an invitation for humiliation, subjugation and relegation to menial status. Without financial power to provide and maintain support, such relationships lead to distress, shame and ridicule for vulnerable boys (Morojele 2011), as this is not perceived as an accepted performance of masculinities. This logic emanated from the wider Swazi society's

discourses that construed boys as natural providers (Fielding-Miller et al. 2016) and where financially stable and providing masculinities are exalted above all other forms of masculinities (Izugbara 2015). Statements by participants below illustrate this phenomenon:

'I do have a girlfriend, but I don't want to lie, it is stressful. But then I don't think I have an option. Otherwise these guys would think there is something wrong with me ... like I am sort of a fool and I am not man enough.' (Cavin, boy aged 15, from Mjikaphansi Primary: focus group interviews)

'These are the bosses of the school playing and talking happily behind the classrooms. One day my friend played cards with these boys [the boys seen behind the classrooms] but within twenty minutes they chased him away, calling him a school spy because he does not have a girlfriend. Every break time they get behind the classrooms, and all they talk about is girls.' (Cmash, boy aged 13, from Muntu Primary: focus group interviews)

'I am usually alone. In fact being with the other boys is like constantly reminding myself how useless I am. I remember one day, two grade 7 girls spent time with me during the lunch hour. In fact, I was helping them with Mathematics. After school a group of boys from the grade 7 class, waited for me along the way and said bad words [showing anger] and one of them told me to forget about girls and concentrate on my school work because I was not man enough to provide for them [the girls].' (Mzwethu, boy aged 15, from Mazingela Primary: individual interviews)



Source: Photo courtesy of Ncamsile Motsa.

FIGURE 1: This picture shows boys playing behind the classrooms. Cmash claimed that these were the dominant boys in the school – boys with heterosexual girlfriends.

The dominant masculinities in these schools inscribed financial strength into their own masculine identity. Most central was their ability to maintain and provide for the girls in heterosexual relationships around which masculinities were regulated. Even though some vulnerable boys tried to perform their masculinities in ways that signified hegemonic masculinities, their destitute situations circumscribed their effort as they genuinely did not have the means to provide for the girls (Morojele 2011). Vulnerable boys' socio-economic status did not only place them at a menial status in the masculine social hierarchy but with poverty shaping their performance of masculinities (Raza 2017), their investment in heterosexual girlfriends failed to acquire them a space in the dominant masculine space because they could not provide for the girls. Mzwethu's narration illustrates the lonely life of a vulnerable boy prompted by societal gender expectations he could not fulfil. Mzwethu's inability to perform gender in ways that signified real manhood made him 'not man enough', hence subserviently positioning him in relation to the hegemonic masculinities (Connell 1996). For example, even though Mzwethu was good in Mathematics, but because he did not qualify as a real man, his social relationship with girls was monitored by the grade 7 boys, thus limiting his freedom to engage in equitable social relations in the school. Although the advice given to Mzwakhe that he 'forget about girls and concentrate on his school work' could be regarded as constructive, given the context, it could be viewed more as a discriminatory reminder of how useless he was.

Humiliation by girls also made up the daily experiences of vulnerable boys in the school. The girls had also devised cunning ways to ensure that they were provided for in heterosexual relationships. Failing to conform to the discourses of heterosexuality therefore meant that vulnerable boys lived in perpetual fear of being humiliated by both the dominant boys and the girls (Izugbara 2015). Statements by participants below depict the reality:

'The girls here love money. They either go for the boys who have money or the old men who work in the farms. As for us ... having a girlfriend is one of those miracles you would expect once in a while. One day I tried to talk [propose love] to a girl, she looked down at my torn school shoes, laughed at me and left. I just felt like the worst fool.' (Kwesta, boy aged 14, from Muntu Primary: individual interviews)

'Hehehe [laughing] these girls lie and tell you that they love you, yet all they need is your money. You give them the little you have, even sacrificing your money for food and even for pens. But once you do not have money they jump to the next available [one with money] boy. After that everyone would know you failed, and you become the talk of the school [pause] you just feel like the worst fool.' (Gcina, boy aged 13, from Mjikaphansi Primary: focus group interviews)

'When you do not have a girlfriend ... they say you are weak and make fun of you ... ok then you have one ... 1 2 3 days you fail to give her money then she leaves you ... and again they laugh at you. This is confusing and sad!' (Sihle, boy aged 12, from Muntu Primary: focus group interviews)

'The other day a boy called me a coward only because I do not have a girlfriend. It is sad, but the girls here want 'blessers' [a slang term that defines a rich man who financially provides for a younger woman which is usually in return for sex]. I do not have that money but as a man, I do want to have a girlfriend.' (Phathwa, boy aged 11, from Mazingela Primary: individual interviews)

The inability of vulnerable boys to live up to the girls' expectations was akin to failure and was met with disdain by both boys and girls in the schools. Hence, the girls rejected the boys who could not provide for them and that left vulnerable boys, as a social group, further dejected and embarrassed. The narratives reveal how intractable constructions of masculinities, like being preordained providers even in situations where it was not possible, did not only undermine gender equity in the schools but were harmful to vulnerable boys (Shefer et al. 2015). The girls' actions of 'jumping to the next available boy' (a boy's availability was determined by his ability to be a provider) challenged the socially constructed notions of femininities as docile and submissive (Korobov 2011). Instead, this displayed girls' active roles in policing and influencing vulnerable boys' conformity to hegemonic masculinities. Hence, vulnerable boys had to bear the double burden of being demeaned by boys who performed dominant masculinities as well as girls who financially benefitted from this.

Hence, while heterosexuality gave ascendancy to dominant boys because they were in a better position to be *blessers* (providers), it placed vulnerable boys at the lower stratum. Indeed, hegemonic gender discourses in these contexts placed vulnerable boys between the devil and the deep blue sea, so to speak. Here goes the irony, without involving themselves in heterosexual relationships, vulnerable boys were shamed, discriminated and alienated by other boys (Ratele 2013), as effeminate. Yet, vulnerable boys' inability to provide financial resources required to maintain these relationships was equally ridiculed as displaying lack of 'real manhood'. Heterosexuality, therefore, provided basis on which vulnerable boys' masculinities could be judged (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) as real manhood was determined by one's financial strength and ability to maintain and provide for the girls in heterosexual relationships. This reveals how insistent pressure to perform gender in ways that uphold hegemonic masculinities, even in genuine situations where this is not possible, is detrimental and harmful to the social and academic well-being of vulnerable boys within schooling environments (Clowes 2013).

Rejection of heterosexuality ... life-affirming for vulnerable boys

Vulnerable boys' idealised masculinities were compliance with hegemonic masculinities and being involved in 'boyfriend-girlfriend' dynamics. Repudiating and renunciation of these relationships given vulnerable boys' inability to financially nurture these relationships was equally liberating and academically empowering for them in

these schools (Clowes 2013). The following statements by participants are indicative of this fact:

'Here at school we compete on the number of girls you have ... and to get a girl you should be having money ... for us that is not possible so we then avoid the other boys. Myself I concentrate to my school work.' (Yikho, boy aged 12, from Mazingela Primary: individual interviews)

'I do not have a girlfriend because I cannot provide for her. These girls are too demanding. Other students think I am a fool and say I am a coward but I just do not mind that. I think I am okay without the stress of having a girlfriend. Without money, this boyfriend-girlfriend thing can be so annoying. So I do not want the stress ... and I think right now, I am okay.' (Kwesta, boy aged 14, from Muntu Primary: individual interviews)

Competing on the number of girlfriends emanated from the wider societal discourse that encouraged boys even at a young age to express their masculinities through heterosexual promiscuity (Nxumalo et al. 2014). Vulnerable boys like Yikho and Kwesta utilised their human capital not only to mitigate threats to their masculinities and privilege their education instead (Ungar, Russell & Connelly 2014) but also to reject masculine constructions that did not favour their social identities. To create gender-equitable school environments for vulnerable boys would therefore mean deconstructing societal and school discourses that give ascendancy to hegemonic masculinities and relegating vulnerable boys to subservience. A coordinated approach involving all educational stakeholders aimed at addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by vulnerable boys in these communities and schools could be a more sustainable way to alleviate the gender-based schooling plight experienced by vulnerable boys in these contexts. This is critically important, given that in Swaziland quality education and schooling experience are the only feasible means for vulnerable boys to transcend their life of poverty and vulnerability (Motsa & Morojele 2016). It also appears that social competitiveness on which masculine hegemony was established in these schools was not based on level footing. Therefore, there is a need to establish and promote gendered social interactions and affinities that affirm human empathy (Watkins 2000) and masculine diversities, rather than masculine hegemonic power, as logic of enhancing gender equality in these schools.

Our families need us ... adopting feminine roles

The findings reveal that vulnerable boys had propensities to adopt traditionally feminine roles as expressions of alternative masculine performances. This revealed the fluidity of their masculine constructions as determined by their social contexts. Some of the responsibilities of vulnerable boys included doing household chores like cooking and collecting water as illustrated in Figure 2:

'I stay with my grandfather and two younger siblings. As the eldest child I should ensure that each day we have something to eat. So I usually spend about two hours of my time cooking then go play with friends. In fact our principal usually tells us to be responsible and help our elders even with cooking and

collecting water.' (Sihle, boy aged 12, from Muntu Primary: focus group interviews)

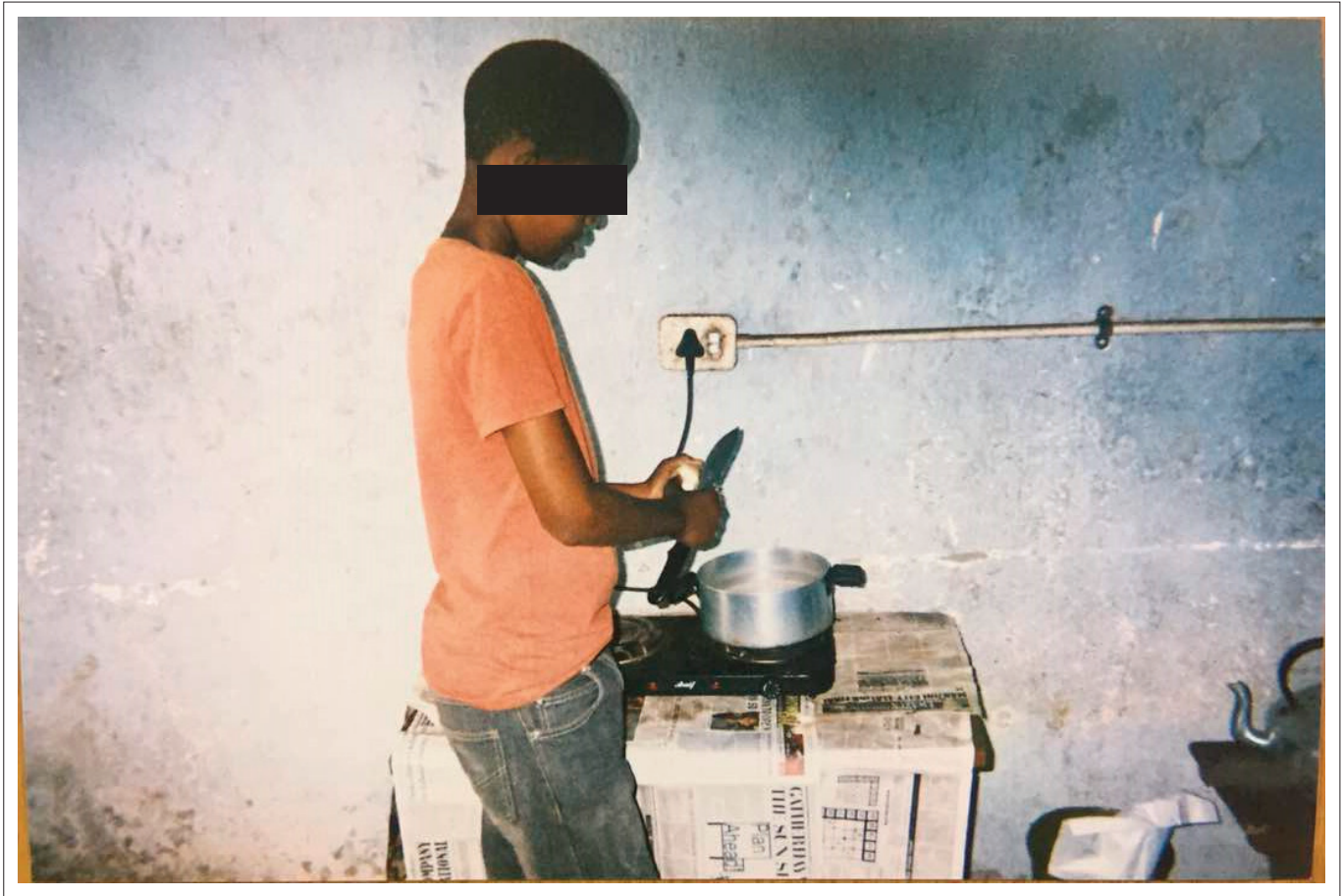
'As a real man ... you should ensure that your family is well taken care of. I cook for my family and I'm okay with that. I'm not very sure how old I was, but with other boys in my neighbourhood we used to go to the Inkhundla centre to collect food parcels for our families and also cook. So there is nothing new or strange about cooking.' (Ngwemash, boy aged 12, from Muntu Primary: focus group interviews)

The data reveal that vulnerable boys' socio-economic status and family responsibilities had shaped their engagement and constructions of masculinities (Gergen 2009). Vulnerable boys seem to have crafted their own interpersonal scripts (Elliott 2015) to fit the context of their family and home situations, which required alternative performances of masculinities (West & Zimmermann 2009). The findings show that some of these vulnerable boys embraced what was generally regarded as feminine responsibilities, and they did so with meaning, passion and pride (Lee & Lee 2016), because for them 'it signified real manhood'. While vulnerable boys who cooked at Muntu Primary school were idealised (probably thanks to the principal of the school who encouraged vulnerable boys to be responsible and help elders with cooking and collecting water) and celebrated (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), in the other schools, such masculine constructs were restricted by hegemonic constructs of masculinities (Medved 2016). Thus, vulnerable boys who cooked were predisposed to name calling, ridicule and stigmatisation. The following statements by participants would explain this phenomenon:

'Even though some of these clever boys [showing anger] call us 'young wives' but I just do not see anything wrong with boys cooking, in fact most boys in my class cook for their families. Your family should never go to bed hungry only because you are just lazy to cook. At home, I stay with my elder brother; he is 17 years old and works in town. My mother died when I was 7 years old and my father when I was 9 years. We are three and the youngest is a boy too. Every day I have to rush home to cook for the family.' (Sisanda, boy aged 14, from Mazingela Primary: individual interviews)

'We cook auntie ... but once these guys know that we cook, they make fun of us. They call us 'gogo Ntoza*' [gogo Ntoza was the school cook and boys who cooked were then given the name gogo Ntoza].' (Mbuso, boy aged 13, from Mjikaphansi Primary: focus group interviews)

The name calling of vulnerable boys who cooked was highly derogatory and demeaning. Viewing cooking and fetching water as gender-neutral responsibilities was therefore a powerful way through which vulnerable boys navigated their dilemma of having to cook and fetch water for their families, the name calling and the hurtful discourse from the dominant masculinities. They perceived the two (cooking and fetching water) not as feminine roles, but as falling under their jurisdiction of providing for their families, hence signifying real manhood (Hunter, Riggs & Augoustinos 2017; Lee & Lee 2016). The authoritative manner in which Sisanda says 'I just do not see anything wrong with boys cooking', denoted how



Source: Photo courtesy of Ncamsile Motsa.

FIGURE 2: From the picture we can see Ngwemash cooking a meal for his family, which consisted of his very old grandmother and siblings aged between 4 and 9 years. Ngwemash provided this picture to illustrate his responsibilities.

he distanced himself and undermined the hegemonic gender discourses that considered cooking as effeminate (Campbell et al. 2016). This points to the fragility and fallacious nature of hegemonic masculinities, especially when they are rooted in expectations that are not relevant to vulnerable boys' social lives and responsibilities. Notwithstanding, the versatility of vulnerable boys' strategies for alternative masculine performances amidst a highly patriarchal schooling context indicates the critical contributions they (vulnerable boys) are ready to make in informing policy and practice. Aimed at promoting gender equality in these schools, vulnerable boys' logic of gender equality is not to ascribe certain chores and responsibilities as feminine or masculine. All children should therefore freely express their human abilities to assist and provide for their families without fear of being ridiculed as effeminate or otherwise.

Recasting of traditional masculine identities – Masculinities as caring

Vulnerable boys further constructed alternative masculinities established on the perceived feminine caring discourse, in ways that were astounding considering their age. Some vulnerable boys had responsibilities that went beyond being mere breadwinners to being caregivers and nurturers for their siblings in the absence of parents or elders. Owing to the

fact that masculinity is perceived through hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), vulnerable boys therefore had to construct their masculinity in ways that would embrace both expectations (Hunter et al. 2017), that is, embracing the traditional masculine provider identity and caregiving.

Mbuso, a boy aged 13, from Mjikaphansi primary provided this picture (Figure 3) to illustrate the caring responsibilities that he had. The following statements illustrate this fact:

'This is my younger sister, Sno*. I have literally become her parent and she loves me (very wide smile). In my family there are three girls and a boy (me) and presently my mother is very sick and she has been sick for a number of years now. As for my father ... eish I don't even know what happened to him. But we are okay without him. I am old enough to take care of my mother and siblings, the youngest (seen in the picture) is 4 years and she attends the crèche just before the church building. I ensure that she is well taken care of ... her uniform is clean ... she has something to eat, etc.' (Mbuso, boy aged 13, from Mjikaphansi Primary: individual group interviews)

'Both my parents are dead and I am the eldest so I take care of my sisters. One of them is old enough to be at school but without a birth certificate it is hard. I asked my cousin to help us and she promised that she would do it next year because it was already late for this year.' (Listo, boy aged 16, from Muntu Primary: individual interviews)



Source: Photo courtesy of Ncamsile Motsa.

FIGURE 3: This picture shows Mbuso's younger sister who forms part of his primary responsibilities besides caring for his sick mother and whole family.

Vulnerable boys in this study seem to have effectively embraced the nurturing role into their performance of masculinities (West & Zimmerman 2009). Contrary to the stereotyped belief that perceived nurturing and housekeeping as effeminate, it appears that these vulnerable boys rejected the traditional norms of masculinity that construed masculinities as distant and detached (Elliott 2015). Instead, they adopted more life-affirming and valuable masculine identities that served not only their identity and responsibilities but also masculinities that were more compassionate and nurturing. For Mbuso, the caring masculine identity enabled him to take care for his sister, his family and also nurse his sick mother as a 'real man' would. Mbuso construes himself as 'old enough' to not only protect and provide but also to care for his family. This emanates from the wider societal discourse that constructs boys as never too young to be the men in the family, *budvodza abukhulelwa*. Mbuso, therefore, had to man up in this situation; hence, he believed they 'are okay without him [the father] because he [Mbuso] could be a man himself'. Caring for his family for Mbuso was therefore part of his duties as a 'man'. From this, we learn that vulnerable boys' resilience to care for their siblings needs to be supported and nurtured by family and supported by community and school for a more balanced lifestyle that would not compromise their educational success (Theron 2012). Again, being a primary caregiver might have socialised Mbuso to have a mutual and caring relationship with girls in the school (Lee & Lee 2016), which is a cornerstone for educational success and gender equity. The following statement is indicative of this phenomenon:

'Ahh girls ... yooooo ... (laughs) ... I no longer love her auntie but I'm worried about hurting her feelings. She has been through so much and in me she has found a friend, we share so much. So even though she annoys me at times but I can't leave her ... it would break her heart. I have to protect her too from other boys who would want to take advantage of her. I think boys have to protect and not hurt girls.' (Mbuso, boy aged 11, from Mjikaphansi Primary: focus group interviews)

Mbuso's narration challenges the myths of 'pathologically narcissistic' (Watkins 2000:70) masculinities, as his constructions of masculinities are rooted in expressions of emotionality and the ethics of good care (Medved 2016). Mbuso is empathic and is 'worried about hurting her [the girlfriend's] feelings'. In ways that subverted the hegemonic masculine identity of being emotionally distant, uncaring (Morojele 2011) and without respect for girls (Swain 2006), vulnerable boys tend to reject patriarchal ideologies and embrace values of care and equitability, in ways that may foster sustainable positive social change for masculinities and improved gender relations (Elliott 2015). Caregiving seems to have sensitised vulnerable boys to the perceived feminine discourse of caregiving and nurturing (Hanlon 2012). Advancing Elliott's (2015) assertion that, when masculinities are immersed in care-work, they develop feminine perceived caring and nurturing attitudes. Such alternative masculine constructions could be harnessed to enhance gender-equitable spaces in the schools, where all boys, vulnerable boys inclusive, can perform gender in more positive ways (Clowes 2013), beyond the limiting prescripts of hegemonic masculinities, thus opening up possibilities for gender-

equitable spaces, where the very same boys would become advocates for gender equality (Lee & Lee 2016). As socialised by their family situations (Gergen 2009), which required caring modes of masculinities, inculcating caring masculinities as part of children's gender socialisation does indeed have a greater potential to widen boundaries for permissible gender behaviours, where multiple forms of masculinities can peacefully co-exist (Campbell et al. 2016). Vulnerable boys' voices have evoked possibilities for gender flexibilities, which the school gender equality policy and practice reformists could harness and inculcate. Noting that the societal inability to accept the fluidities and non-essentialist constructions of gender is a functional source of gender inequalities, they concomitantly thwarted gender relations, gender-based violence and all sorts of such social ills. Vulnerable boys in this study exercised their creative human agency to adopt alternative masculinities best fitting to their contexts and life experiences.

Recommendations

The study has revealed the need for these schools to provide resilient affirmation resources to vulnerable boys so as to allow them to transcend experiences where they feel pressured to conform to prevailing discourses which are harmful to their well-being. To support initiatives aimed at supporting inclusive school spaces and addressing gender inequalities in these primary schools, the schools should adopt coordinated strategies to encourage the liberation and expression of alternative forms of masculinities. This could be in the form of programmes in schools that would inculcate vulnerable boys with self-efficacy skills and confidence to deal with their lived experiences the same way girl programmes are operated in the country's schools. Noting that adopting caring attitudes sustains masculinities in physical and emotive ways (Elliott 2015; Lee & Lee 2016), vulnerable boys whose expression of masculinity is established on ethics of care should therefore be encouraged and supported by the broader society rather than be shamed and ridiculed, as that compromises efforts towards gender equality.

Conclusion

Social constructionism provided analytical insights to understand the complex processes of gender socialisation that tends to exalt hegemonic masculinities at the expense of downgrading vulnerable boys to subservience. Vulnerability and poverty formed structural contexts for vulnerable boys' constructions of masculinity. The article has shown how the intersecting of poverty, vulnerability and gender places vulnerable boys at a subservient social position in the hierarchy of masculinities in the schools. Financial strength and heterosexuality featured strongly as bases around which the dominant masculinities were predicated. Being orthodox providers was therefore one social pressure and obligation confronting vulnerable boys. In ways that were antithetical to vulnerable boys' abilities; they could not financially sustain heterosexual relationships because of poverty. This actually placed them in a catch-22 situation – in which not

engaging in heterosexual relationships was equally relegated, as engaging in heterosexual relationships but without the financial ability to support them. The result was resounding disgrace, ridicule and social exclusion. Indeed, the hegemonic notions associating masculinities with financial prowess deeply compromised vulnerable boys' ability to engage in meaningful social interactions with both boys and girls in the schools. For vulnerable boys who rejected traditional masculinity, the experiences were fulfilling and self-gratifying. Some vulnerable boys in the study embraced the orthodox feminine identity of being nurturers as they constructed alternative masculinities and navigated their spaces of vulnerability and poverty. Lending support to Elliott's (2015) caring masculinities, being immersed in situations where vulnerable children were forced to provide care for their siblings enabled them to develop masculinities with caring attitudes, indeed agreeing with Connell (2005b:24) that vulnerable boys in the schools could be inculcated with information on the importance of 'contradiction, distancing, negotiation and sometimes rejection of old patterns, which allows new historical possibilities to emerge', with life-sustaining possibilities and better schooling and lived experiences.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Authors' contributions

N.D.M. performed all fieldwork, preliminary data analysis and write-ups. P.J.M. was the project leader and made conceptual and analytical contributions.

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