

**An Exploration of Boys' and Girls' Responses to Dominant Gender  
Identity Constructions in a Primary School.  
A Case Study in a Rural School in KwaZulu-Natal**

**By**

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## AUTHOR'S STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I, Millicent Ntombizodwa Malinga, declare that this dissertation entitled “*An exploration of boys and girls responses to dominant gender identity constructions in a school. A case study in a rural school*” is my own work and that all sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination committee in any other university.

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## **DEDICATION**

I began this journey towards a master's degree over three years ago as a widowed woman having had to deal with parenting and other responsibilities alone. I have witnessed a plethora of situations in my life since I began the journey of my studies. Some of them easy-flowing; some of them challenging. What has primarily kept me going has been the unrelenting and inexorable presence of the memories about the person I will always wish was with me, my loving husband. I strongly believe that my journey felt sometimes lonely because he was not there to hold my hand. I believe he would have gladly done it if he were still alive. He was a wonderful person to be with. However, I believe that he was always with me in spirit. As such, this work would not have been possible without the diligent presence of his memories. As such, I want to dedicate this work to my late husband, Professor Godfred Humphrey, for being a role model and believing in me, even in his absence. I believe the presence I enjoyed in him while he was still alive, is what made this work possible. Frankly, this work exists now because he allowed me an opportunity to learn from his way of life.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Gender is a social construction. Society presents us with acceptable models of masculinity and femininity, and these teach us how to be masculine or feminine in a sense. We learn how to be as women and men through some sort of social conditioning, although we have some agency to resist such normative constructions. This study sets to explore how boys and girls responded to dominant constructions of gender in a rural primary schooling context. The idea was to explore ways in which boys and girls colluded with and/or challenged constructions that ‘boxed’ them into particular versions and constructions of femininity and masculinity. A qualitative case study located within the critical paradigm was used. Poststructural feminist theory was used as a lens to understand how participants responded to the dominant constructions of gender. Participatory methods of generating data were used to address the key research questions, namely, transect walks, mapping, non-participant observations, and document analysis. The existence of alternative discourses in the voices of participants helped us to understand how boys and girls constructed, negotiated and performed gender in the context of the research study. Findings revealed that participants’ views represented processes of constructing, reconstructing and negotiating their gendered social identities. This was not a static process. It was a confluence of fluid processes of pushing boundaries and challenging stereotypes and coded messages characterising dominant definitions and expectations of femininity and masculinity. However, on the other hand, it was a mixture of interrelated acts of submitting and colluding with dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity. In essence, with regards to participants’ responses to dominant gender constructions, there existed a criss-crossing of competing discourses some of which had more powerful influences on participants, making the act of challenging dominant gender discourses a complex affair to construe.

## CONTEXTUALISATION OF CONCEPTS

**Apartheid:** former official policy in South Africa of discriminating against and keeping apart people on the basis of their racial identities by the enactment of law of parliament

**Basic education:** education as defined in terms of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996

**Bill of Rights:** the Bill of Rights contained in Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996

**Child:** a person under the age of eighteen (18) years

**Constitution:** the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996, which serves as the supreme law of the country

**Curriculum:** everything that influences the learner, from teachers and their work programmes, right down to the environment in which processes of teaching and learning occur

**Educator:** any person who teaches, educates or trains other persons or who provides educational services, including professional therapy and education psychological services, at any public school, further education and training institution, departmental office or adult basic education centre and who is appointed in a post on any educator establishment in terms of the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998

**Grade:** that part of an educational programme which a learner may complete in one school year, or any other education programme which the Member of the Executive Council (MEC) may deem to be equivalent thereto. An MEC is the political head of a government department.

**Learner:** any person receiving education or obliged to receive education in terms of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996

**Municipality:** an organ of state within the local sphere of government exercising legislative and executive authority within an area determined in terms of the Local Government Municipal Demarcation Act 27 of 1998; consist of: political structures and administration of the

municipality, and the community of the municipality; functions in its area in accordance with the political, statutory and other relationships between its political structures, political office bearers and administration and its community; has a separate legal personality which excludes liability on the part of its community for the actions of the municipality.

**Parent:** a) the parent or guardian of a learner; b) the person legally entitled to custody of a learner; c) the person who undertakes to fulfil the obligations of a person referred to in a) and b) towards the learner's education at school

**Primary school:** school offering education for Grade R to 7

**Principal:** an educator appointed or acting as the head of a school

**Quintile ranking:** government's ranking of public schools in terms of their socio-economic situation

**School:** a public or independent school which enrolls learners in one or more grades between grade 0 and grade twelve

**School Management Team:** the principal, deputy principal and head(s) of department(s)

**Secondary school:** school offering education for Grade 8 and upwards

**Section 21 school:** school whose governing body has been allocated functions in terms of Section 21 of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996

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# *Chapter 1*

## **Introduction, Background and Problem Statement**

The 27<sup>th</sup> April 1994 signalled a fresh start for the people of South Africa, politically, economically and institutionally (Ramphela, 2012). Changes following the first democratic elections on 27 April 1994 served as a promise that a plethora of forms of inequality that characterised life under apartheid would come to end, at least legally. One of these changes was the legal inscription in the country's constitution of a section called the Bill of Rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The Bill of Rights forms the cornerstone of democracy in South Africa, enshrines the rights of all people of South Africa, and affirms values of human dignity, equality and freedom (Republic of South Africa, 1996, p.1245). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa formally outlaws all forms of unfair discrimination, and recognises the right of all irrespective of differences based on race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, age, sexual orientation, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth, to basic education and equal access to educational institutions. The Bill of Rights lists equality as a substantive right on which all other rights are based (Ngcobo, 2006). To this end, all subsequent legislation is founded on the Constitution.

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Department of Education, 1996) which acknowledges a history based on inequality and segregation, amends and repeals all Education Acts of the apartheid period, and stresses the need for all public schools to provide quality education for all learners regardless of their difference. The essence of this Act is to overhaul a system of education based on racial separation, and establish a system of education with capability to “advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance” (Department of Education, 1996, p.1).

Furthermore, at an international level, South Africa has committed to a number of International Conventions that directly and/or indirectly protect people against various forms of unfair discrimination, for instance, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), World Declaration on Education

for All: Meeting Black Learning Needs, Convention against Discrimination in Education, to name but a few.

However, South Africa still faces daunting challenges in its efforts towards making a clean break with the burdens of the apartheid past. South Africa is still plagued by a persistent presence of the unyielding hegemonic cultural beliefs and ideological expressions that work to undermine the progress the country has made. In addition to these burdens, South Africa faces new forms of social evils that seem to be a product of too much focus on power struggles, and very little focus on the improvement of the quality of life of its citizens (Ramphela, 2012). To this end, the majority of those who are relegated to marginalised positions still have little or no access to the various forms of capital. For instance, in some communities masculinities are often expressed in the form of sexual and/or physical violence towards women. Women are still represented as sexual objects, not as human beings, but just body parts (Tucker, 1990). Unfortunately, reforms that have been undertaken with regards to promotion of gender parity have largely been located in gender and development paradigms, rather than in the discourses that work to confront gendered institutional relations that continue to trouble South Africa. The question of addressing hegemonic gendered relations is crucial in addressing socio-economic challenges facing South Africa (See for instance, Shisana and David, 2004).

Schools are regarded as sites for the reproduction of inequitable social patterns (See for instance, Gultig and Hart, 1990). Various studies have revealed intimate connections between gendered power relations and school values and practices (Bhana, 2002; Morrell, 1992, 1998; Morrell, Unterhalter, Moletsane and Epstein, 2002). Renold (2000) contends that schools serve as a specific social and cultural arena for the production of gendered identities and gendered regimes, and that sexuality and heterosexuality, results because of socially constructed differences between boys and girls, and that this influences and shapes how they construct gender and their everyday experiences in the schooling spaces. This does not deny the fact that sexuality comes at least in part from biology. For example, Francis (2000) suggests that boys' constructions of masculinity as competitive and that ultimately make them perceive themselves as better than girls, results in boys expressing masculinities that are situated within discourses that position men and women differently in the social hierarchy. He contends that, for example, boys'

expression of such masculinities could include them alienating and/or absenting themselves from school in order to represent themselves as ‘hard and cool’, behaving in unacceptable ways in class. Renold (2005) suggests that some form of compulsory heterosexuality seems to be at work and gives birth to hegemonic or dominant expressions of masculinity and femininity, which creates docile bodies, particularly in boys, who are often confused, anxious and powerless, and are unable to adopt contradictory and/or alternative ways of constructing and performing gender. Such compulsory heterosexuality provides some form of socialization template that shapes cultures that govern the doing of gender in the schooling context. This is often evident in the manner in which some boys tend to project heterosexualised identities that take various shapes of performances, including displays of masculinity as violence against girls (Renold, 2005).

The school curriculum is also believed to play a significant role in generating heterosexualised ways of doing gender, resulting in the view that constructs boys as better than and superior to girls. Mirembe and Davies (2001) assert that schools constitute an arena that has a potential to limit choices for boys and girls resulting in the view that constructs boys as better and superior than girls, and hence providing a milieu that endorses the discourse that purports that girls and boys should therefore be allocated differential access to social goods. When this happens, girls often feel inferior and marginalised, as a result of their early socialization and how teachers subsequently treat them in class. For instance, boys are often encouraged to take what is regarded as ‘high status subjects’ such as mathematics, science and engineering. Boys are often encouraged to take these subjects because there is a prevailing belief that boys are more ‘intelligent’ than girls, and that they have an inherent capacity to outperform girls in these subjects by virtue of being boys. When this happens girls, who are often constructed as submissive, weak and passive, are encouraged to enrol in ‘low status subjects’ such as home economics, which further reinforces within the broader social sphere subordinate constructions of girls and women. The problematic economic penalty that has to be paid when this happens is that boys’ social position within hegemonic economic discourses is entrenched, with boys getting access to high profile jobs later in life, and girls socially engineered and channelled into low status jobs, further entrenching and reinforcing the devalued status of women in society.

These inequalities at schools could be regarded as having a contributory effect on the various forms of social ills that are a daily occurrence in schools (Sathiparsad, 2003). Within the school context, symbolic violence that tends to be directed to girls has a bearing on the ways in which their school life gets constructed and performed. For instance, patriarchal discourses of the school construct girls as having intrinsic deficits. In the process, this masks causal factors arising from the larger social, political and organisational mechanics of the school, that are external to girls as individuals (Skrtic, 1987). When this happens, the issues, challenges and the processes of learning and teaching are now focused on girls as ‘individuals’ and far less on the ‘system’ (Hallack, 1999).

Much of the research on the construction of gender has focused on teenage boys and girls (Renold, 2003). Very few studies have focused on the construction of gender by girls and boys in primary school education (see for instance, Bhana, 2002; Connell, 1995; Martin, 2006; Renold, 2003). Many of the studies that focus on children’s construction of gender in primary schools have had a limited focus on children as active constructors of gender – on how children negotiate and resist hegemonic or dominant constructions of gender (Morojele, 2009). However, some studies have focused on children as active constructors of gender, capable of negotiating the intricacies of the dominant ways of performing and doing gender (See for instance, Bhana, 2002). For instance, Bhana (2002) and Connell (2002) have focused on how children contest and collude with the dominant constructions of performing and doing gender (Butler, 1990).

As an educator feeling challenged by the issues that I have raised so far, I felt obliged to conduct this research in order to try and understand gender dynamics as they happen within a particular schooling context. The appetite for this research also stems from the gap in literature in the Sub-Saharan region with regards to children’s responses to hegemonic constructions of gender. In a study conducted by Morojele (2009) in Lesotho, the findings were that not much research has yet addressed the question of diversity and ambiguities surrounding younger primary aged boys and girls, with specific regard to how they actively construct gender identities. As such, the current study seeks to explore the various ways in which children, both boys and girls, in a rural primary school in a particular geographical context respond to hegemonic gender identity constructions. The study will do this by interrogating the following key research questions:

- What are the learners' experiences in relation to gender identities?
- How are these identities constructed and contested within the context of a school?
- In what ways do these (experiences, constructions, and contestations) affect the academic and social lives of these learners?

As a teacher, it is part of my duty and obligation to see to it that I clarify my understandings with regards to the gender construction and performance. My understanding is that such understanding will assist me in giving expression to the imperatives of our Constitution, and the social justice project as a whole. This speaks to the main purpose of this study, which is to explore how boys and girls respond to the dominant gender identity constructions in a rural school.

### **Structure of the dissertation**

**Chapter One: Introduction, Background and Problem Statement** provides the rationale for the study, and locates it within the broader debates on how children construct and perform gender.

**Chapter Two: Literature Review** locates the study within the broader scholarly debates. It does this by reviewing related literature on how children respond to dominant or hegemonic gender identity constructions in various contexts.

**Chapter Three: Theoretical Foundations** deconstructs post structural feminist theory as a lens that was used to understand children's responses to the hegemonic or dominant gender identity constructions

**Chapter Four: Research Methodology and Design** explains and describes how I negotiated methodological and design journey, indicating the theoretical and methodological choices I made, and the philosophical assumptions behind such choices.

**Chapter Five: Presentation of Findings and Discussion** presents a discussion and analysis of the findings of the study. The findings are structured according to key themes that emerged during the data analysis process.

**Chapter Six: Reflections** presents the conclusion, implications and limitations of the current study, and some ideas for further research.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided the rationale informing directions taken in this, and located the current study within the broader debates on various ways in which children construct, negotiate and perform gender.

The next chapter locates the study within the broader scholarly debates.

## *Chapter 2*

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

It has been argued by many researchers that schools, and in particular teachers, are social sites and agents that produce and reproduce hegemonic or dominant constructions of gender (Renold, 2000). Renold (2003) points out that a number of studies have looked at how children construct and perform gender within hegemonic discourses of gender construction. However, Renold (2003) has observed that there is a tendency to focus on children's constructions of gender within secondary school contexts, and very little focus on children's constructions of gender in primary school contexts. This is despite the observation that children's constructions of gender are often formulated and developed long before they enter secondary school (Skelton and Francis, 2002). This means that studies focusing on children in primary school contexts are few. It is therefore for this reason that this study explored primary school children's responses to dominant gender identity constructions.

Francis (1998) has observed that the process of ascribing gender roles and the stereotypes that accompany and reinforce them, exert influence on how teachers and learners define themselves within different classroom contexts. He notes that learners who are active and show more interest in learning and teaching activities by asking and answering questions are often valued and encouraged to participate in classroom activities. Moreover, differential access to social power tends to play out in the different roles that learners adopt during learning and teaching activities. For instance, Davies (2003) observed that girls tended to choose subservient roles during role-play, whilst boys tended to adopt socially valued, high status roles that often led to them having more access to social power.

Harro (2000) attributes such 'voluntary acceptance' of dominant forms of being in the early learnings of being, to a process that she calls socialization. For example, in a study conducted in Lesotho by Morojele (2009), the findings were that first born boys, upon birth, assume the title

of 'heir' which places them in the position of deputising their fathers or taking over when they are no longer there. Within this context, it is not clear what would happen if there is no boy-child in the family, which might explain social expectations by society for parents to break their backs in an attempt to 'make sure' there is a male child in the family. The continuation of processes of socialization that such family contexts have started depends on schools subsequently playing their role in secondary socialization processes. For instance, schools often play a role of reproducing, reinforcing and maintaining dominant patterns of being.

Essentially, it is on these grounds that processes of constructing and performing gender could also be tied to how we are "trained" to get used to and collude with dominant social constructions of gender. Institutions and persons such as school and home possibly play a significant role in shaping, reinforcing and maintaining these social constructions.

### **Attitudes of teachers towards gender**

Teachers often adopt a view of conscious gender-blindness in educational settings, where teachers adopt the view that gender is not their point of focus – that is, that for them gender is an irrelevant variable in the equation of education. These are teachers who subscribe to the view that claims that they do not look at learners in terms of gender, and that children are just children to them rather than boys and girls. Within this discourse, girls, who are often being alienated by the dominant culture of the school, are treated much like boys who have more access to the benefits of the dominant discourse. McIntosh, Vaughn, Schumm, Haager and Lee (1993) contend that this view has potentially beneficial and harmful consequences for learners.

The positive dimension of this view is that learners (both boys and girls) appear to be accepted unconditionally by the welcoming teacher; treated by the teacher equally, fairly and impartially; involved in the same seat arrangement; and work on the same activities and use the same materials in the class. However, there is a potentially bothersome consequence of this outlook that is hardly problematized in the uniform treatment of learners irrespective of their gender differences. The danger with this view is that workings of the school may not be interrogated and adapted to suit the diverse needs of learners. That is, structural transformations would be made without any due regard to give effect to cultural transformations. For instance, in areas where

being a girl means fetching water and cooking after school, and where being a boy means doing whatever one chooses to do, this view might not be able to assist in understanding the dynamics of the situations faced by learners as boys and girls in the context of their communities. That is, girls may find themselves subjected to the same expectations as boys, which might lead to girls not being able to rise to those expectations. For instance, teaching and learning processes may not be differentiated to meet the needs of all learners who might require different forms of support. That is, some learners may be physically included in the classroom, but their participation would be very limited or totally lacking, and they may not be very engaged in the learning process, either by their own or by the teacher's initiation. Because so little or none of the workings of the classroom is adapted to meet the individual needs of learners, and the primary mode of operation is usually located within a framework of blindness to difference, some learners may not fully engage in learning processes. As such, this view fails to open a space for the rigorous interrogation of assumptions, values, beliefs, norms and practices that are fundamental to reformation, restructuring and reculturing of dominant patterns of teaching and learning (Ngcobo, 2006).

Streitmatter (1994) argues that there has been a significant improvement in the gender dimensions of the language used by teachers when interacting with learners. For instance, teachers are diligently trying to be more welcoming by refraining from using masculine language to refer to boys and girls. That is, teachers' use of language has become more accommodating to both boys and girls. However, Stromquist (2007) asserts that there is evidence that reveals that boys and girls are still treated unequally when it comes to their interactions with teachers. For instance, she contends that the situation is that still "boys enjoy more challenging interaction with teachers, dominate classroom activities, and receive more attention than girls through criticism, praise, constructive feedback and help" (Stromquist, 2007, p.8). In line with the assertion made by Stromquist (2007), the study conducted by Robinson (1992) in Australian high schools, findings revealed that teachers perceived girls as submissive and passive, and hence more controllable than boys. This perception of girls often gives birth to a situation where teachers expect girls to succeed through "quiet diligence" and boys to succeed through being "naturally clever" (Skelton, 2005; Stromquist, 2007).

What needs to be remembered here is that the different ways in which these interactions are constructed are never neutral – accounts are constructed in order to achieve particular social goals (Burr, 1995). That is, the accounts are charged and are likely to give rise to the dominance of particular discourses of gender while silencing and/or side-lining others. To this end, particular cultures and contexts, arising from the inequitable valuing of discourses, are likely to nurture and/or constrain particular versions of social identities and envelope people into particular sets of social expectations. The world that we experience is constructed by the social practices of people, such as teachers. Different social expectations or discourses give rise to particular possibilities for social action – some ways of representing and painting self in the world and not others. So, if learners find themselves having to operate with particular social frames, they are likely to respond to dominant gender constructions in particular ways and not others.

### **Construction of a gendered school curriculum**

Power, human interest, preferences and even political issues are crucial drivers behind processes of shaping the curriculum. So, the curriculum constitutes an important social device in the maintenance of the social order. That is, the curriculum is a reflection of society's interests, norms and values. The knowledge, skills, attitudes and values acquired and imparted in schools are a product of the values and interests of the society in which the curriculum is generated and operated. In essence, the curriculum is incapable of neutrality; it is a value-laden social device deployed to advance particular discourses and ideologies while pushing into extinction others. So, the nation's curriculum is the story of life of the society in which such curriculum finds expression.

Although the dominant public rhetoric is that both male and female students should be able to follow school subjects of their choice, existing research literature suggests that a higher proportion of male students continue to categorise subjects in the humanities and arts as having little relevance or value. In order to further illustrate the point about the gendered dimensions of subject choices, I turn to McGraw's (2012) study in which the intention was to understand the nature of the relationship between student's perceptions of knowledge and their subject choices. In trying to understand this relationship, McGraw (2012) reported on a study that aimed to make

sense of the scientific puzzle of whether students chose subjects that they thought were important. Findings were that students responded to the affirmative that Mathematics, English, Computer Studies and Science were the most important subjects to study at school, and that parents also played an important part in assisting both boys and girls in choosing subjects at school. However, the disturbing aspect of subject choice was the fact that although it was expected that both male and female students would identify the same subjects as being 'important and unimportant', findings of the research study suggested that there was a discrepancy that suggested that the aspect of subject choice was a gendered construction, which led to girls and boys being encouraged to take particular subjects, and not others.

Ozkazanc and Sayilan (2008) noted another dimension of the construction of the curriculum in the way girls viewed education in their study. Their study revealed that girls regarded education as the most important and effective means for personal empowerment against the possible barriers or restrictions in a gender-biased society where males could possibly impose their patriarchal expectations on the structure and functioning of a marriage. However, in the context of the school, it was found that these high expectations remained unmet as gender regimes in school were still based on patriarchal standards. That is, it was found that it was often impractical to achieve these high expectations within the existing gender regimes of school. However, the principle of hard work that characterised education excellence was found to be a very useful source of empowerment for girls. This hard working attitude instilled by demands of education to girls, gave them courage and experience to work to challenge hegemonic patterns in the dominant ways of constructing gender. This attitude could be viewed as a way to escape and/or survive traditional and hegemonic construction of roles of men and women in families and society in general. In schools, this attitude generates a survival strategy against dominant constructions of gender roles in a patriarchal society (Ozkazanc and Sayilan, 2008).

Another finding of Ozkazanc's and Sayilan's (2008) study was that this view of education had both a philosophical and a utilitarian value. This led to the perspective providing the girls with a hard working attitude, which seemed to provide girls with a way to escape from the traditional time consuming chores at home and from traditional women's role imposed by the family. That is, the attitude of being hard at work – diligently doing their schoolwork – helped them to

develop survival strategies that shielded them against patriarchal forces exerted on them by their families and communities (Ozkazanc and Sayilan, 2008).

Teachers and curriculum are sides of the same coin. Teachers construct curricula and curricula construct teachers. Francis (1998) found that teachers often based curriculum activities around topics they believed would motivate boys, in the hope that by engaging their interest, good behaviour would subsequently result. In other words, teachers constructed curriculum activities ‘with boys in mind’, and not ‘with learners in mind’. So, it was likely that teachers would be unable or ‘forget’ to construct a curriculum sensitive to the needs of girls.

It is safe to conclude that if gendered attitudes are deployed in the construction of curriculum activities, then it is likely that in a patriarchal society like ours, curriculum is likely to be constructed along lines that sustain domination of men and subordination of women in various spheres of life beyond education.

### **Gendering the school environment**

The school environment could be regarded as playing a significant role in the construction of teaching and learning. The importance of the school environment is that it should be able to provide a space that would be conducive to learning and teaching. In other words, it should provide a space that is both accessible and welcoming, which are integral parts of an equitable society.

Casey (2003) states that children and young people spend up to twenty five per cent of their total school time in the school grounds. She contends that school grounds, therefore, offer an important resource for learning, play and child development, and may promote positive health and well-being, understanding of the environment, citizenship and physical activity for the children. However, Casey (2003) further contends that though it was once common for school grounds to be used for both formal and informal curriculum, this has changed, and school grounds have been mainly used for physical education, games and playtime. The significance of playtime in schools is that it is seen as an aid to build relations between learners. Although there are rarely school rules specifying that girls and boys should play separately or have their own

playing areas separately located, there seems to have been unexpressed acceptance that it should be so.

Colclough, Rose, and Tembon (2000) report studies that argue that the school environment needs to be conducive to the attendance and performance of boys and girls. They pointed, for example, to the role of school environment in the building of safe schools. They pointed out an example of unsafe toilets, which suggests that girls may be vulnerable to sexual abuse by boys who could exploit the situation. Their assertion was that this could lead to girls disliking school and eventually dropping out of school.

### **Peer Interactions/Influences**

The sociocultural development of learners is an important component and outcome of learning. The school is expected to teach learners to develop meaningful relationships and interactions with others (Bowman and Tremain, 2004).

Tate (2001) asserts that although peer influences is a powerful factor in adolescent development, the use of this resource has been confined to problematic populations. He contends that peer group programmes have tended to produce orderly, productive, and positive academic and rehabilitation environments. These tendencies seem to have generated positive results in creating productive social group living environments, and have helped reduce aggressive behaviour in group living settings. On the other hand, there is a belief that the impact of peer influence on adolescent development is generally associated with negative connotations (Tate, 2001), whereas poor relationships have been closely associated with social cognitive skills deficits (Dodge, 1983). Dodge (1983) also indicates that adolescents who had developed positive peer relationships generated more alternative solutions than problems, proposed more mature solutions, and were less aggressive than youth who had developed negative peer relationships. On the other hand, Bansal (1996) concurs that adolescents who compared themselves negatively in reference to their peers experienced a reduction in attention to problem solving tasks.

Power, as observed by Hammerström and Ripper (1999), plays an important part as an attribute to control others. That is, boys tend to use this power to try and influence and/or compel other

learners, especially girls, to clean after them and to agree to their often inequitable preferences. In trying to fight and stand up for themselves, Hammerton and Ripper observed that girls tended to develop and use alliances to reverse the inequitable power differentials in their relationships in schools. The alliances were often built with other girls as well as teachers. Alliances with other girls were often aimed at protecting themselves from future cycles of abuse. In other words, alliances with teachers could have a potential to generate benefits for both girls and boys. That is, if teachers take alliances in the serious light, they could increase the girls' and boys' chances to influence the content of a lesson. For instance, Hammerström and Ripper (1999) found that as girls felt that their chances of having influence were restricted when boys were present, girls would normally go and talk with the teacher before the lesson began in order to ensure that their interests were accommodated. Girls also resisted to boys' dominance in class by yelling and shouting at the boys, they regarded themselves as more verbally competent and made use of this to express their dissatisfaction when treated in a bad way by boys. In trying to show their power boys would influence other boys to act out by slamming doors (Hammerström and Ripper, 1999).

Despite all of the above most public and private schools continue to overlook informal learning. Schools instead have been noted to focus on formal learning. Programmes used in school are often designed to control youth and maintain staff-imposed order. This is not the right way to do things; teachers and practitioners need to consider cultural biases in facilitating discussions with peers, if this is not done it may slow progress resulting in more troubled adolescent (Tate, 2001).

### **Production of alternative feminities and masculinities**

Masculinity - the cultural and social expression and definition of maleness - serves as the main building block of the definition of most men's sexuality. It is through their understanding of masculinity that men perceive and think about their sexuality, and it is through their sexuality that men confirm their sense of themselves as masculine (Fracher and Kimmel, 1987). Normative definitions of masculinity require men to shun and repudiate all forms of alternative masculinities such as all those behaviours and orientations associated with femininity. These definitions prescribe that men are to avoid at all costs any association with feminine behaviours,

interests, and personality traits, if they want to be regarded as 'real men' and taken seriously within a patriarchal society. This building block of masculine sexuality requires of men to never stop patrolling their boundaries and observing their performances to ensure that they are sufficiently male (Fracher and Kimmel, 1987). The normative heterosexual masculine expectations for success and power lead man to adopt a view that perceives the sexual arena as a site for displaying sexual competence, conquest and performance. For many men, this means producing hegemonic displays of masculinity in order to be accepted in the normative life of society.

Normative understandings of sexuality appeal to men to view themselves within the lens that constructs a particular version of man, while subverting and shutting down others. It is through dominant definitions of sexuality that men tend to confirm their sense of self as masculine beings (Fracher and Kimmel, 1987). For instance, Kilmartin (1984) observed that the traditional, normative masculine view of man tends to construct man as a sexual machine. That is, any man who buys into this view is rendered incapable of construing the complexity of man beyond sexual definitions. For instance, with regards to their sexual relationship with women, men who subscribe to this normative view tend to understand sex as a set of technical skills rather than as a human connection (Kilmartin, 1984). Sexual organs become crucial measurements of manhood. For example, not having a huge penis means that you are less of a man (Kilmartin, 1984). This male sexualisation, contends Kilmartin (1984), socially conditions young men into casting a surveillance net on their emotions, constantly ensuring that they detach their emotions from sexual experiences. This detachment often graduates into 'not feeling for others' and gets expressed in, for instance, instances where men tend to see nothing wrong about betraying the trust of their partners by having numerous sexual partners.

Patriarchal social relations trap men's sexuality in a double-bind as noted by Horrocks (1995). In essence, for patriarchy to work it has to simultaneously bring men together yet prevent the expression of overt mutual sexuality. He further elaborates that homophobia (fear of same-sex attraction) is both the substance and the enforcer of patriarchy and sexism, he says men have learned to sexualise feelings of attachment this causes difficulty when men begin to feel close to each other. Hence homophobia functions as a social trap for men, squashing them into rigid

gender roles that work to limit their interactions with other men. This defensive style prevents men from learning about themselves and encourages them to conform to the pressure exerted by masculine insecurities, resulting in negative implications for their relationships with other people. For instance, the gay men who have learned to hate homosexuals (as a result of socialization) may find themselves dealing with feelings of self-hatred in adulthood (Ozkazanc and Sayilan, 2008).

Findings of the research conducted by Ozkazanc and Sayilan (2008) revealed various ways in which patriarchal notions of existence served to subordinate school girls. For instance, it was revealed that in a dominant masculine culture, school girls were noted to be stigmatised, categorised, and labelled as other by masculine culture. Young women were often not ‘allowed’ to be; they were supposed to present a desirable heterosexual femininity or risk marginalization. Ozkazanc and Sayilan (2008) contend that this subordinating culture appears to serve as a social device that works to shape the normative emotional and physical interactions between boys and girls. Within this culture, alternative forms of femininity such as those where girls display attitudes to be assertive are considered to be anti-feminine, and tend to be interpreted negatively within hegemonic masculine culture. Hence, the school experience of girls inside the masculine culture is shaped in accordance with the masculine power culture. So, within hegemonic definitions of masculinity and femininity, women and men have to strive to ‘fit neatly’ in boxes of normative femininity and masculinity.

Alternative masculinities serve a particular political function in the struggles against subordination and dominance. They trouble the marriage that seems to associate masculinity with maleness, domination and power, the subsequent representation of femininity and masculinity as “two fixed, static and mutually exclusive role containers” (Kimmel, 1986, p. 521). Furthermore, the concept of alternative masculinities opens space for representation of masculinities as multiple and varied, with different varieties occupying different rungs in the hierarchy of masculinities. Peluso (2012) has argued that certain social activities offer performative opportunities to transgress normative definitions regarding gender and sexual identities, appearance and performance of the body. Such spaces open up opportunities for the production of alternative masculinities and femininities. For instance, Peluso (2012) revealed

various ways in which women challenged dominant gender constructions. The performances demonstrated by these women produced alternative versions of self rather than watered-down versions of dominant identities. Alternative femininities produced and demonstrated by women in this study served to trouble hegemonic constructions of femininity, allowing for the politicizing of female sexualities.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter reviewed literature on broad debates on the construction and performance of gender in education, and society in general. The following themes were explored: Teacher attitudes towards gender construction and performance, construction of a gendered school curriculum, gendering the school environment, peer interactions/influences, and alternative femininities and masculinities.

The next chapter will provide an outline of the lens that will be used to read this study.

## *Chapter 3*

### **Theoretical Foundations**

The aim of this chapter is to deconstruct post structural feminist theory as a lens that was used to understand children's responses to the hegemonic or dominant gender identity constructions. I deploy poststructuralist theory, focusing particularly on Michel Foucault's concept of discourses as well as feminist post structural work, in order to make sense of children's responses to the dominant gender identity constructions. I turn to these theoretical understandings in an attempt to understand the complex, dynamic interaction in which society, institutions, meaning, human subjectivities relate to the act of constructing, performing and doing gender. My hope is that by recognizing the relational dynamic of power, knowledge, practices, institutions and individuals, one would be able to deconstruct the manner in which gender construction and performance operates to shape the lives of boys and girls in a rural primary schooling context, and in society in general.

Feminist theory is a brainchild of theorists from the Frankfurt school. It is about equal access of people to good things in life; it studies social conditions of women in a patriarchal, sexist world. It aims to expose sexism and gender blindness in all spheres of life. Its goal is to understand women's lives in order to redress the subordinated status of women in society and contribute to changing patterns of dominant gender regimes. It seeks to empower women and give them a voice to speak out about their experiences of gender oppression. It views knowledge as a social construction that is incapable of objectivity and universality; it believes in the subjectivity of the researcher and sees a researcher's philosophical assumptions as the bedrock of the act of doing research (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2007).

Foucault's interest is in discourse, and this serves as a dominant template in the deployment of his oppositional politics. The emphasis on discourse is reminiscent of the desire to deconstruct the relational nature of discourse, social and cultural practices and the impact this has on the individual as part of this relationship (Weedon, 1987). Burr (1995, p. 48) defines a discourse as "a set of meaning, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some

way together produce a particular version of events.” However, representations of the world should not be seen as singular; they present as a multiplicity – a variety of events, significations and representations. This enables us to make sense of ourselves and informs our ability to distinguish between what is right and wrong, real and unreal or important and unimportant. It follows then, that, as individuals we will have a multiple understanding of what is represented to us through language. Also, this implies that there will be a variety of discourses available which will have a different way of representing specific realities for individuals. These diverse discourses will give birth to different understandings for us to consider, and our understandings of these discourses will have different implications for how we behave and construct our reality. Discourse can then be understood as frames of reference against which we can make sense of our reality (Ngcobo, 2006). For instance, patriarchal discourses of masculinity view women as objects for use in the achievement of men’s aspirations. Within these discourses, women are viewed and used as a device to advance and sustain normative masculine culture(s).

Discourse is in essence constituted by a relational configuration of power, knowledge and truth. That is, power produces and controls our epistemological perspectives, theoretical structure and taxonomy of formal knowledge, the cultural codes by which we construct and act out our roles. More specifically, knowledge and truth are tied up with the way in which power is exercised, and are themselves caught up in power struggles of their own (Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 2000). From this view, then it is possible that a discourse can then fix how we construct and understand our world, and that the very process of constituting or constructing a discourse is an exercise of power because of its ability to control what we see as valid and true, as well as who and what is given the authority to verbalise and silence it. Power creates particular regimes of knowledge. For example, the discourses of masculinity and femininity produce different kinds of knowledge and practice around gender and how individuals construct and understand themselves through hegemonic definitions and constructions. Discourses can also open themselves up to be used as political apparatus then to justify and provide reasons for doing things that may be oppressive. A particular discourse can, for instance, construct women as in need of a marital relationship with a man in order to live as complete human beings, or it can construct them as incapable beings who need a man in order to be able to live their life to its fullest – so decisions are made for them

rather by them. However, within poststructural feminist thought, women are not seen as docile beings, but as agentic beings capable of defining themselves.

Within post structural understandings of feminist theory, heterosexuality is understood and viewed as a form of gender oppression and social regulation (Connell, 1987; Warner, 1993). Blaise (2005, p. 86) points out that this view of gender accepts that “every culture has hegemonic or morally dominant forms of genders and sexualities” that are considered as a performance compass for women and men. Heterosexual prescriptions and presumptions are the major feature of hegemonic varieties of masculinity, and shape and guide the structural order of gender relations (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the cultural expression of the dominant forms of femininity and masculinity that governs and regulates alternative conceptions of femininity and masculinity. For instance, within a culture of hegemonic masculinity, sport is viewed as having varieties that fit neatly within feminine and masculine boxes. That is, there are sport codes for men and sport codes for women, and the social enterprise of sport is a gendered enterprise, with selectively-permeable walls.

However, Connell (1987) contends that performance of alternative forms of femininity and masculinity is possible even within a context of the most rigid forms of hegemonic masculinity (Also, see Peluso, 2012). However, he asserts that there is no possibility of femininity that is hegemonic in a society governed by hegemonic masculinity. Instead, there is a space for what he calls emphasized femininity, which is a contrived form of femininity which is at the mercy of hegemonic masculinity in the sense that it is defined around collusion with, subordination and accommodation of patriarchal definitions, interests and desires. That is, it is constructed as an alternative to particular varieties of hegemonic masculinity. He contends that ‘hegemonic’ and ‘emphasised’ signify connotations of cultural dominance, but not total dominance and subordination. To this end, there is a space for the construction and performance of alternative conceptions of femininity and masculinity (Connell, 1996). However, both hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity sustain and maintain practices that strengthen the existence of the hegemonic gendered order and institutionalized men’s dominance over women (Blaise, 2005).

The dominant expressions of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity are shaped by hegemonic discourses of heterosexuality, which are allowed expression by gendered norms and expectations based on stereotypical views of women and men. From this perspective, doing gender is not a fixed and static event; it is a kind of normative performance, an activity of normative becoming and doing gender (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990), making it virtually impossible to understand and view gender in alternative ways, forcing us to view and understand gender within what Butler (1990, p. 151) [quoted in Blaise (2005)] calls a “heterosexual matrix”, a normative lens that naturalises our views with regards to our bodies, genders and desires within the confines of normative heterosexual presumptions and prescriptions. We walk into the invisible trap of the “heterosexual matrix” with our eyes closed as it is what constitutes the normal ways of thinking, understanding and viewing ways of performing gender. We are unable to imagine and conceive of genderedness without the coupling device of heterosexuality. That is, forms of genderedness are made possible by a foundation of heterosexuality – conceptions of genderedness without heterosexuality are difficult to imagine. In addition, collusion with the hegemonic heterosexual prescriptions is enforced through different forms of social rewards and sanctions. So, heterosexuality operates as a political device set up to disempower both men and women.

This brings us to the question of how children are socialized to assume their positions with a patriarchal society. Harro (2000) asserts that children learn gender and become invested in hegemonic forms of femininity and masculinity through a process of learning to be and not to be called socialization – a process whereby children are constructed as boys and girls. However, the difficulty with theories of socialization is their representation of children as docile bodies – that is, they fail to account for children’s agency to construct themselves as active participants in gendering processes (Blaise, 2005). The premise of this study is that children are agentic beings capable of negotiating and contesting dominant constructions of gender. As such, the view taken in this study is that socialization theories of gender construction fail to unearth the political dimensions of doing gender. However, they are regarded as useful in highlighting the constraints that children have to negotiate in constructing themselves as boys and girls.

Blaise (2005) contends that there has been a useful shift in furthering understandings of how gender is constructed over the past two decades. This perspective focuses on the usefulness of post structural feminist understandings of doing gender such as subjectivity, discourse, agency, power, resistance, power-knowledge regimes in the analysis of gender relations and interactions of children in the processes negotiating, performing and constructing gender. The current study sought to contribute to the growing body of feminist poststructuralist gender research by exploring responses of primary school children to hegemonic or dominant gender identity constructions within a particular geographical context.

The position taken in this study is that theories are useless if they cannot subject themselves to being applied usefully to understand the intricacies of the world (Bourdieu, 1983). The major question then for purposes of theory as expressed by Bourdieu (1983) is then how will the feminist orientation be useful for my study? My study is an endeavour to understand how primary school children, both boys and girls, challenge and/or resist the constructing forces of dominant gender identity constructions. That is, how boys and girls push and/or collude with the discursive forces in order to construct alternative gender identities – the counter-hegemonic struggles – or collude with hegemonic masculine and feminine discourses and performances. Singh (1997) asserts that children, both boys and girls, have potential to resist and brave the storms of dominant gender identity constructions. He points out that boys and girls are capable of challenging hegemonic constructions. The major question is how this is possible within a society constrained by the tunes of the dominant discourse of performing and doing gender? In this study, I align with Singh's (1997) assertion that girls and boys are capable of challenging hegemonic ways of doing gender by performances that are thought not to be for them. For example, some girls could take up leading roles such as doctors which are normally understood as a province of boys. In turn, some boys could take up roles defined as subservient such as caring, cleaning which are normally understood as what girls and women should do in a patriarchal society.

Within a feminist paradigm, gender differences are socially and culturally produced (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Theories of socialisation (Harro, 2000) point out how we are “trained” to get used to and collude with these dominant social constructions of gender roles.

Institutions and persons such as home, school, media and others play a significant role in shaping, reinforcing and maintaining these social constructions, and in turn functioning as socialising devices for boys and girls. For example, roles such as cooking are normally given to girls and roles such as fixing things are normally given to boys. Roles are allocated to construct girls as not so important, or subordinate. However, roles allocated to boys may help them perceive themselves as being superior to girls. In my study, learners are thought of as active beings who possess agency to actively engage in gender struggles in construction of their identities (Harro, 2000). It is the view of this study not to negate and dismiss the perpetual life of society's constructed categories allocated to boys and girls, but to endeavour to expose the potential weaknesses of dogmatic understandings of the taken for granted social and political meaning attached to these realities, as if they were fact, and inevitable (Gergen, 1999, pp.47-48).

Feminist theory argues for a counter hegemonic discourse that thinks that patriarchal notions can be challenged and resisted notions. This supports the notion that both boys and girls possess agency to either challenge the dance moves prescribed by the vicious cycle of socialisation (that is, raise consciousness, take a stand and educate for liberation), or collude with the dance to the tune of the winds of the cycle of socialisation (that is, do nothing, promote the status quo and not make waves) (Harro, 2000). My study seeks to find a magnified view of the possible tensions involved in both instances. That is, I seek to trace how boys and girls construct and perform gender in a rural primary schooling context. This view seeks to test the strength of the understanding that sees girls and boys as having no voice in these constructions (Leach, 2003).

This theoretical framework relates to my study in the sense that it is founded on the imperatives of the emancipation of human subjects from the shackles of the patriarchal system, and recognises human subjects, in this case boys and girls, as the active beings they are supposed to be, who possess agency to (re)construct their own realities. The social constructionist theory guided by the "feminist agenda" is generally associated with emancipation or liberation of women/girls, establishment of equal rights and opportunities for girls and women with their male counterparts (boys/men) and opposition to various forms of male dominance (De Jong, 1992, pp. 125- 127). Then, if knowledge is socially constructed, multiplicity and fluidity of gender meanings and constructions are expected. In order to understand how children construct gender,

it is necessary to focus on the social realms within which these participants are related. The theoretical framework does not deny socially constructed categories allocated to boys and girls, but it challenges the taken for granted meanings attached to these realities, as if they were fact, static, and inevitable (Gergen, 1999).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced poststructural feminist theory as the guiding theoretical framework for the study.

The next chapter will provide an outline of the research methodology and design framework adopted in searching for responses of participants to dominant constructions of gender in a rural primary schooling context.

## *Chapter 4*

### **Research Methodology and Design**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I present data the collection techniques and procedures, and provide reasons for the choices I made. The data collection techniques included transects walks, mobile interviews, participatory mapping, non-participant observations and document analysis. The following were key research questions for this study:

- What are learner's experiences in relation to dominant gender identities in a primary school?
- How are these identities constructed and contested within the context of a school?
- In what ways do these experiences, constructions and contestations affect the academic and social lives of learners?

#### **Positioning the feminist researcher**

Within the qualitative tradition, the political neutrality of a distant observer is a utopian idea as all questions and answers generated by research involve presuppositions (Hammersley, 1995; Wilson, 2000). So, rather than being an objective scientist, a qualitative researcher is a subjective scientist implicated in all processes of research (Hatch, 2002). This section is an endeavour to come clean with reference to my allegiance to particular philosophical positions and not others. I attempt to declare my assumptions, biases and orientations that have a potential to influence ways in which I view, understand and analyse data generated in this study.

#### **Initial induction into being a woman**

Differential access to social power and the prejudices that we harbour about particular groups and individuals, give rise to oppression. Oppression is a biased exercise of power that results in the construction of groups and individual with differential access to the goods of life based on their socially constructed differences of, for example, gender, ethnicity, race, religion and

economic class. So, the way(s) in which society constructs itself often results in what becomes of us later in life depending mostly on our early socialization around particular social identities, and we choose to construct who we are within the constraints of the social milieu. Ethier and Deux, (1994) defines social identity as the construction of self that relates the person to some socially constructed collective groups or category. Often, social identity exists in a continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation, meaning for a person to be able to identify themselves socially and otherwise, they have to be socialised first. That is, taught and ‘channelled’ on how to be in line with dominant social values. This process encourages some forms of being and devalues and discourages others. To this end, our social identity is a product of socialization, which involves negotiation and re-negotiation, construction and re-construction of self in society. I was born into a society with already established socio-political mechanics: prejudice, stereotypes, biases, habit, history, misinformation, you name them. At a personal level, I could not escape the charged teachings by my parents, relatives, teachers and those that I loved and trusted (Harro, 2000). The expectations I later used as a compass of my life, was shaped and influenced by the expectations, norms, values, model ways of how to be as modelled and taught to me by the people amongst whom I found myself. This early socialization provided a foundation of who I later became in life. However, I could modify my view of life, yet I could and cannot escape the effects of these teachings and learning’s in their totality. I am therefore a product of my past, present and future.

### **A baby girl ... defying social expectations**

I am told that when I was born, the atmosphere in the tiny world of my family was filled with excitement. My mother and other family members began with preparations for my birth as soon as they heard the first news that my mother had conceived. However, when I was born, a girl rather than a human being was born. My mother bought me a whole wardrobe full of pink. My clothes were mostly dresses, jumpers and baby-suits, all in the colour pink. I was given a name Ntombizodwa. Ntombizodwa means ‘girls only’ because my mother had so far not had a boy for a child; at that time, my mother had only my sister and me. When this story is told, I get a sense that my family was still expecting a boy for the family to be complete. That is, I was there yet I was not there. This is how girl-children were regarded in my family’s communities. In my family’s community, girls married and changed their maiden names to that of their husbands. As a general rule, my sister and I would marry and change my father’s surname to those of our

husbands. This was in direct contrast to what happened to boys. Boys married and kept the family name. So, giving birth to a boy in this community meant that the family name would not wither and die. So, my mother's giving birth to girls only was regarded as an omen that would mean the extinction of our family name, if a boy was not given birth to. That is, girls came and disappeared into other families, and boys ensured the custody of the family name.

Given the fact that a girl's and boy's lives was constructed and understood differently by my family, and that I would later marry and leave my family, I was brought up in a way that constructed me as a girl rather than a human being. My world was mainly filled with playing with dolls. My mum bought me dolls, tea sets and all of the 'girly' stuff. When I became a toddler, I was introduced to particular kinds of games – the kind of games that girls played in my community: hopscotch, cooking, playing wife, playing mother, etc. The kinds of mother and wife I played were often based on the stereotypical representations of women in a patriarchal society. As I grew up into a young woman, particular roles were allocated to me as a girl, whilst I was taught that other roles were for boys only, which served to reinforce the belief that I could not be a complete human being without a husband. For instance, my mother taught me how to clean the house, wash my school clothes and cook.

When my brother was born, things changed dramatically. On the day he was born, I got a sense it was a relief to my family. Although I believed that we had loving parents, who loved us as their children, I felt that most of the love we used to enjoy was now dedicated to our brother. I often felt like this love was like a bubble, and I was always outside of it despite being a child of my parents. At the time I could not understand why this was the case. That made me "voel naar" about the whole thing. Frankly, I felt that this was unfair. It is only now when I have been introduced to certain theories like the cycle of socialisation and relationships of oppression that I have a better understanding of why things were happening as they were. Harro (2000) captures the essence of my situation eloquently when he states that socialization begins when we are born into this world with no choice. For instance, no-one brings a survey asking into which gender we want to be born. I did not choose to be a girl. I was conceived and born a girl. During the early years of my life, my family played a huge role in instilling certain norms, values, dreams, traditions expectations, behaviours and rules to me.

## **School, church and construction of gender**

The teachings that constructed me as a girl were reinforced and strengthened by various institutions including the church, school, media, you name them. I remember my first day at school very well. I was very excited and had been waiting for a very long time for this important moment of my life. I still remember that my school principal was a woman and all the teachers in the school were women. When I think about it now, I understand that the rationale for this was based on the stereotypical idea that women are suitable caregivers capable of nurturing young boys and girls. The idea seems to have been that when I see my teachers, I would see my mother. As a child, a teacher was important and I would do anything that my teacher told me to do; it didn't matter what my mother or any family member said – no-one could compete with the word of my teacher. However, little did I realise that the version of my teacher was a re-hash of my mother's version of the reality of what it meant being a girl or woman. That is, this version too was a product of the normative template of life in a patriarchal society. In class, the teacher was the only one who knew everything; as learners we were expected to sit quietly and listen and not question anything the teacher said. The style of sitting in class seemed to have been formatted to fulfil particular ends. We sat the way we were told to sit, it did not matter whether a child was having an eyesight problem or not. Girls were always seated at the front and boys at the back. Boys would use this seating arrangement to talk freely and make noise. I kind of got a sense that my social status was somehow below that of boys. Soon I learned that my feelings did not matter, as I soon learned that a teacher will always decide what happens in your life.

A girl was always seated next to a girl and a boy next to a boy. Different roles and tasks were allocated to boys and girls. Boys would clean the board and girls would tidy and sweep the classroom and the teachers' table. When I think of it now, I think this was beginning of the teachings on how to be and how to perform as a girl or boy. As a girl, I was taught to hide my body and not let anyone touch it, through songs and rhymes and stories and direct instructions.

Going to church was not an option; it was a must-do irrespective of whether you liked it or not. At church, as a young girl, I always had questions about why Jesus was always portrayed and represented as male, but answers to my questions were not the subject and purpose of the church. So, there were no answers for the questions I had about the origins and sources of these biased

representations. All the prominent people in church such as the Pope, priest and deacons were males. In fact, the whole procession at the Catholic Church was made of adult males. I used to envy the fact that my uncle was part of the procession, but I knew that I was not going to be able to be part of the procession because I was female. I used to feel very bad about this, as being part of the procession was often represented as being next to God more than those who were not part of the procession. I also wanted to be closer to God like all those who were part of the procession, and I began to understand my gender as a barrier that stood between me and my God. In my mind, what was valued by the church was valued by God, and what was devalued by the church was also devalued by God. I wanted to change my gender, but the source of gender understandings at that time were often based on physical genitalia, which was something I could not change however hard I tried. I remember I hated the fact that I was a girl, and began to form ideas that being a girl or woman was a curse. I began to view being a woman as a subordinate status – a restrictive status that condemned me into a being less of a human being. Actually, I wanted to be a boy, and later a man, in order to enjoy the privileges that characterised man's life.

I remember at church I had to dress up in a certain way in order to qualify and be accepted as part of church. For example, no trousers were allowed, and I did not wear them because I wanted to be accepted. I felt that I had to look like a decent girl, and that decent girls wore long dresses and stockings. So, I wore long colourful dresses and stockings. At church, I remember I used to go to Sunday school and we had a teacher there. Our teacher was a woman just like at school. My early encounter with images of God was not without bias of representation. God was always portrayed and represented as a male. Phrases and words such as 'He', 'the Father', and 'His' were often used to refer to God. Moreover, the walls of our church had pictures of males such as Jesus representing the images of God. This helped me to form an image of God that was a man. There was no way of questioning this representation of God, as questioning the 'word of God' was viewed as the worst form of sin. I did not have to question anything, I had to do and believe as I was told because the Christian version of reality was seen and regarded as the truth. I was taught that there was only one religion (version of constructing and reading my reality) acceptable to God, and that religion (version of constructing and reading my reality) was Christianity. However, I know now that there are different versions of Christianity. At the time, I could not even imagine that there were other religions (versions of constructing and reading my

reality), Christianity constituted the only lens and compass of leading one's life. I remember that the Christian way of doing gender was viewed as the truth, and I strongly believed that decent girls and women had to meet and represent these religious expectations. The dominant Christian discourse with regards to pregnancy is based on the understanding that a girl is not supposed to fall pregnant before marriage. As a result, any girl or woman that falls pregnant extramaritally is often ostracised and rejected, whereas a boy that has impregnated a girl is normally allowed to continue with life unabated. So, this became part of my ideal as a young girl – to marry and then get pregnant, because once married I had to get pregnant and bear children, not just children but boy children. I knew that this was my ultimate destination as a girl. That is, I had to marry, get pregnant and give birth to a son.

### **Career choice ... a gendered choice**

My socialisation as a girl/woman encouraged me to be caring, look after my younger siblings, and so on. Later on, when I thought about a career, it became relevant for me to be a foundation phase educator. As a foundation phase educator, I was going to look after the young ones, who are still young in the schooling environment. Essentially, I was going to serve as their second mother. So, for me, being a foundation phase educator allowed me to extend my mothering experiences. I went to a college that was specialising with educating foundation phase educators and senior phase educators who were mostly men. In terms of learning to work with children, much of what we learned was like rehearsing what I had been taught at home. It all centred around what I would call 'mothering responsibilities' in terms of the patriarchal discourse. In our classes, there were only women, no men. So, one of the hidden criteria for specializing in teaching in the foundation phase was that one had to be female. In essence, foundation phase teachers were female teachers. That is what I 'saw' while I was still at school, and this is what I became when I decided to become a teacher.

### **The turning point: Taking a stand**

In 2009, I decided to further my studies; my honours degree was in the area of curriculum studies. Initially, I thought I was going to pursue my master's degree studies in the area of curriculum studies. However, I met a person who was passionate about Social Justice in Education, and I was attracted to Social Justice in Education because it somehow seemed to

resolve some of my own struggles as a black woman in South Africa. Just by hearing the name, I thought I would be able to resolve some of the issues, confusions and mysteries I had growing up.

Taking Social Justice in Education led me to a new terrain of thought. I learned new ways of understanding myself and others. I began to experience difficult 'internal struggles' with myself. I am not sure why it began with me, but I feel it had to begin with me. It was about me. In order to enable my understandings of how gender constructions play out in various contexts, schooling contexts in particular, I needed to, as a consequential imperative, challenge hegemonic notions about the construction and performance of gender and its functions within a patriarchal frame. The idea that gender is a neutral construct, that it does what everybody believes it does, must be seen for the fake that it is. Rather, I must acknowledge that it may operate to fulfil other functions which are not immediately or easily known for the people involved – not even for those who are regarded as the norm.

There are various expectations that I need to meet in order to execute the above-mentioned socio-educo-political task. Firstly, I will need to interrogate the objective structures that sustain hegemonic practices in society. When examining objective structures, I need to be careful not to view and treat language, symbols, traditions, actions, etcetera as objects but as products of normative practices steeped into dominant constructions of society, and serving a particular purpose and not others. These practices create structures that work for those groups and individuals define reality for others. Secondly, I need to take a stance that advocates the analysis of how different individuals (such as children and teachers; boys and girls) relate to these structures, especially how they challenge and/or collude with them. In particular, I need to interrogate how cultural features give birth to symbolic practices (Bourdieu, 1990).

### **Mapping the Research Context**

The research context was a rural school situated in a tribal area within Umgungundlovu District Municipality. Umgungundlovu District Municipality (UMDM) is composed of seven (7) local municipalities. This school was chosen because it is a primary school situated in a tribal area, and patriarchy is believed to be “established feature of all southern African systems of customary

law” (Bennet, 1993, p. 30). So, my hope was that intersections between school and a tribal community would provide a useful context for the study of children’s responses towards dominant gender identity constructions. The idea of a school in that community was initiated by Inkosi, who believed in the value of education and saw education as a tool to liberate his people from the shackles of socio-economic ills. To this end, when the school was established, it was named after the Inkosi who led the tribe between 1960 and 1970. The members of the community I spoke to about this, viewed this as brave leadership, as the decade in which the Inkosi led was a decade of intense political struggle in South Africa. So, the act of thinking about education at the time of political turmoil was for them an indication of a rare ability to think about others when circumstances required focus on self-interest.

The school was established in 1970 and it first started as a primary school from sub-standard A to standard two (now known as grades one to four) and had only three female teachers and 200 learners. When the school started, it was housed in a church building. The site for the building of the new school was donated by Inkosi. The construction of the first buildings of the school was funded by collections from parents and donations from as the apartheid government did not allocate funding for the construction of schools in black rural areas. There were four classrooms in the school, made of mud. When the Department of Education took over the running of the school in 1980, the school had five classrooms. The Department of Education has so far expanding the school by building two blocks of eight classrooms. Over the years, the numbers of learners increased, and the school is currently providing education for Grades R to seven. Today, there are 540 learners and a staff establishment of eight females and 8males: sixteen state-paid educators, two support staff members, namely, an administration clerk and a security/cleaner. There are three women that cook in the kitchen, employed in the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), who cook for learners. The School Management Team (SMT) is composed of four members: principal, two heads of department and post-level (PL1) educator. The decision to include a PL1 educator in the SMT was based on the feeling that it had potential to improve the effectiveness of the school. The SMT is composed of three females and one male, and they are all black in terms of race.

The school is a Section 21 school in terms of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Department of Education, 1996). It is co-educational, meaning that it caters for both boys and girls. The socio-economic ranking of the school is quintile 4, which means that it is regarded as a relatively well-to-do school. This also means that the school charges school fees. The school fees are currently at R70 per learner per annum. However, the school faces some challenges with regards to its socio-economic ranking. Other schools in the area, serving the same community, where the school is situated are ranked below quintile 4, although decisions regarding quintile rankings are said to be taken based on the socio-economic situation of the community the school is serving. This has had negative consequences for the school as it has created confusion and conflict between parents and the school authorities, as some parents find it hard to accept theirs is the only school that should charge school fees in the area. Consequently, some parents have decided to adopt what happens in other local schools, and are no longer paying school fees. The principal reported that this had dire consequences for the quality of education they are able to provide. The principal alleged that they raised their concerns on this matter with the provincial department of education, but to no avail.

The school had its own vision and mission statement, but in the year 2005 the provincial department of education instructed that all schools in the province had to have the same vision and mission statement which read as follows:

*A well-educated and higher developed citizen and the mission is to provide access to equality educational of the people of KwaZulu-Natal.*

The vision and mission statement was as follows before this instruction:

*Work and pray!*

The principal reported that the school community was concerned about this as their vision and mission statement articulated clearly what they sought to achieve in their own context. However, the principal reported that they had not lodged a formal concern with the Department of Education.

The dominant religious discourse in the school is that of Christianity. Most learners, including teachers, are believed to come from Christian backgrounds, although some members of the school community believe that there are some learners who are from other religious orientations, which are often disregarded and devalued.

### **Paradigmatic Perspective**

In this study I have employed a qualitative case study approach, located within the poststructuralist feminist paradigm. Feminist research has its foundations in critical theory and aims to expose sexist tendencies and gender blindness in all spheres of life. Its goal is to study women and girls in their struggles to challenge the subservient status afforded to them in a patriarchal society, and contribute to social change and reconstruction. It has a useful potentiality of interrogating the relationships in social spaces, for instance schools, and how these spaces perpetuate and/or challenge inequalities. For purposes of my study, I found this paradigm useful in its potential to open opportunities to studying the world of women and girls and their ways of knowing (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

A qualitative research tradition was adopted for its potential to generate rich “context- bound” data (Creswell, 2003). Creswell (2003) contends that this notion is based on the underlying belief that human situations are complex and therefore, need to be read through a multi- dimensional lens rather than focus on a narrow field (Bogdan and Biklein, 1992). The intention of locating my study in this tradition was to put a lens on the perceptions and experiences of boys’ and girls’ realities in a primary school context, with an attempt to try not to see one but multiple realities (Merriam, 1988). In essence, I wanted to understand how boys and girls responded variously to dominant gender constructions. The case study approach was relevant to this study as it allowed me to focus on a specific instant or situation bounded in space and time (Merriam, 1998; Rule and John, 2011). Within the context of this study, the case was the learners and the school was the setting.

The following data collection methods were used to investigate the key research questions, namely, transect walks and unstructured mobile interviews, participatory mapping, non-participant observation and document analysis. The use of participatory methods was important

because it provided valuable information that might not have been accessible through conventional methods.

### **Selection of participants**

The participants were eight grade 7 learners. Grade seven learners were chosen because they were at their last grade of primary schooling, and as such they were thought to have developed some sense about who they are in terms of their social identities. The selection of participants involved their class teacher, who was given a criterion to select learners who would, in their judgment, be able to respond to questions about their self-identity. In addition, the teacher was requested to include both boys and girls in their selection. In that regard, sampling was purposive. Purposive sampling was found to be useful as it allowed itself to be used in “special situations where sampling is done with a specific purpose in mind” (Maree and Pietersen, 2007, p. 178). For example, within the context of this study, the purpose was to explore children’s responses to dominant gender identity construction, and this required participants who have relatively matured to be able to respond to questions about their social identity. The teacher provided me with names of eight learners: four boys and four girls. I then requested consent from their parents as they were minor, and all the parents gave consent.

### **Access to participants**

The research proposal for this study was first presented at Faculty of Education Higher Degrees Committee, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2011. The Committee granted full approval and support to the proposal at its meeting held on the 21<sup>st</sup> June 2011.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal requires that researchers submit proposals for ethical clearance before they commence with the proposed study. On receiving this notification from the Committee, I then submitted application for ethical clearance for consideration by the Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. The Committee recommended as that I made some corrections on the proposal (Appendix A). I then responded to these issues and the Committee considered the revised application and granted full approval to the research protocol on the 14<sup>th</sup> August 2011 (See Appendix B). Clearance was granted to me on the 30<sup>th</sup> August

2011. Clearance was granted subject to a set of conditions which I had to comply with before going to the field (See Appendix B for details on the ethical clearance granted for this study). Permission to conduct research in a schooling context was obtained through the recognised protocols of the Department of Education.

I negotiated access to gatekeepers and research participants in August 2011. Access to this research site was obtained through a school visit, a talk to introduce the study to the school principal, and a letter to the school principal and governing body detailing the purpose and nature of my study (See Appendix D). Informed consent was requested from the parents of the participants since my participants were primary school learners, still regarded as minors in terms of their age (See Appendix C). I explained in detail to the participants what my research study was about and that all information gathered would be confidential and no real names would be exposed. I assured both parents and participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants' responses, and instructed them not to discuss responses with others (Ngcobo, 2006).

## **Data collection process**

### ***Transect walks***

Transect walks refer to a systematic walk or tours along a defined path with community members who are knowledgeable about their own community and the physical and social organisation of the context (Mahiri, 1998; Maman et al., 2009; Motteux, Binns, Nel and Rowntree, 1999). Transect walks are aimed at stimulating responses, observing, asking, listening, looking and producing a transect diagram from participants about how they understand themselves as part of a particular context (Mahiri, 1998). Transect walks are known to engage participants, and to provide a relatively safe space for participants to express themselves.

Before beginning with the transect walk with the participants in this study, we discussed the purpose of the walk, and participants decided on the path that should be taken. The walk took about 60 minutes. This walk took place in the afternoon after school, because that was the only time given to me by the principal. As part of transect walk, participants were asked questions based on the themes I wanted to cover for my study and what emerged during transect walking.

This was done with the intention of trying to access deeper understandings of what meanings participants attached to the particular physical and social organization of the school.

The questions asked during transect walking were unstructured and centered around the following broad themes: how particular activities, such as sport, are constructed in relation to dominant gender constructions; how particular experiences, such as play during break, are constructed in relation to dominant gender constructions; how particular patterns of understandings of gender, such as who is allowed or not allowed to use which equipment or parts of the school premises, are constructed in relation to dominant gender constructions; how constructions about the particular physical organization of the school premises support or challenge the culture of gender silence and/or speaking out; how the particular physical organization of the school premises does and/or does not oil the wheels of the social organization of the school life in relation to dominant gender constructions; how participants respond to dominant gender constructions emanating from the particular organization of the physical and social organization of school life.

The conversation was conducted in IsiZulu, because it was the participant's preferred language. During these walks, notes were taken and later these notes and discussions were expanded into full transcripts. Discussions were tape-recorded with the prior permission of the participants. I ensured validity by using different methods of data collection and revisited data more than one time and also checked with the participants if what was interpreted, written was the reflection of their views (Silverman, 1993).

### ***Participatory mapping***

Rambaldi, Kyem, McCall and Weiner (2006) state that participatory mapping helps to build relations. In this research, participatory mapping was used to build relations between myself and the participants, and also to get information that was hoped to lead to responding to the key research questions of this study. Participatory mapping helped to encourage participants to talk about their environment, school, feelings, their wishes, worries, what they thought about their fellow students and anything that they gave explanation about concerning their maps. After the transect walk, the information was used to draw a map of the school; it was the current and the

future map of the school. The current map represented the present situation of the school as the participants saw it, and the future map represented how the participants would like to see change in the school. Individually, participants made decisions about what would be included in their maps, reflecting both the present and future situations. During these talks, I would stop them to get clarification about their maps. These maps helped me to see the current and future situation as constructed by participants. During mapping, I also asked questions, and participants discussed their maps individually.

### *Non-participant observations*

Non-participant observations were conducted at different sessions of the school day to observe the behaviour patterns of learners. Non-participant observations were used with an intention to reduce possibilities for interaction with the participants and to focus the attention on the events (Burns, 2000). The decision against the use of a structured observation schedule was taken, as I was not looking for specific behaviours, but the objective was to generate a descriptive record of what happened in the observed settings.

Class observations were conducted during lessons while school observations targeted behaviours during free times, during recreation and at the morning devotions and after school. School observations were structured as follows: **Morning activities:** Observations started before the arrival of learners, educators and support staff so that I could observe all activities in the morning. Later on, I observed activities at the morning assembly. **Break times:** A break in the school activities was assigned for observations. Movements of learners and patterns of groupings were observed. Learners were consulted for better understanding of any observable groupings. **After school activities:** All activities taking place from the time when the last period or session ends to the time when everyone else has left the premises was observed, unfortunately no activities took place after school for the time I was in this school. All classes with learners who participated in the study were observed. Six full days was spent in this school and two days in this class. This helped me to get a sense of interactions between learners and their teachers in general and in particular with the participants in this study.

During observations, field notes were made, and later I cross-checked them with the participants at times to ensure that interactions and activities were correctly interpreted and soon after I typed them, to add reflections. Data from the observations was used to broaden my understanding of context during analysis and to generate tentative interpretations.

### ***Document analysis***

Although some documentation was regarded as confidential by the school, I requested the school to allow me access to these documents. Where this was possible, I conducted a careful inspection of the relevant documents such as various school policies, children's workbooks, admission book, register, admission forms, learners' progress reports, and mark books. I used these documents and artefacts to understand the context within which research participants spent their lives and to triangulate data elicited through other methods. The information generated from these artefacts provided a perspective on both the participants to be written about and the individuals responsible for these documents. The themes that emerged helped me to answer my research questions.

### **Data analysis**

I developed a classification system while collecting data. It helped me to divide the data into segments, that is, smaller units of data containing chunks of meaning. Data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach, with initial coding involving identification of broad categories of issues. Both emic and etic categories were identified and defined (Headland, Pike and Harris, 1990). Emic categories represented participants' views and perceptions that were distinct to their setting. The rationale behind the utilization of emic categories was to understand participants' responses to dominant gender identity constructions from the perspectives of the participants (Pike, 1967). Etic categories represented my views as a researcher – the outsider's perspective (Headland et al., 1990). This included my own interpretations, explanations and conclusions based on literature review and my own personal experiences and philosophical and theoretical convictions. Thereafter, the analysis involved theorising of coded data in search of themes (Ngcobo and Muthukrishna, 2011) that would represent fairly responses of participants to dominant gender identity constructions. This involved a merging of insights from literature regarding the responses of children to hegemonic gender constructions.

The key themes that emerged are discussed in Chapter Five of this report.

### **Considering ethical issues**

An ethical clearance certificate was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal through the relevant university protocols. The ethical clearance number was: HSS/0779/011M (See Appendix B). Permission for access to the school was obtained from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education and then the school principal, and the school governing body. Efforts were made to have all discussions tape recorded with the permission of participants and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data was verified with the participants through a process known as member-checking (McMillan and Schumacher, 2001). Every effort was made to treat participants with respect. Their individual information, including their responses, was treated with confidentiality. Pseudonyms were constructed in order to enhance anonymity and confidentiality. Informed consent was requested from parents of participants, since my participants were minors.

There is a requirement for a feminist researcher to develop empathy with the participants. That is, showing the understanding of the circumstances of the participants is important when conducting feminist research (Davies, 2003). For example, I presented my role as that of a researcher who was there to understand their experiences and perceptions of their lives as girls and boys in a primary schooling context. I stated in the most categorical terms possible that my study had nothing to do with the curriculum of the school and that it was not for assessment purposes or any passing and failing for that matter. I had also asked the participants to give me a name that they liked, this worked very well in terms of them seeing me as their 'friend' and it gave them some power. They also chose their own names that they liked during this research. I am under the impression that this clarification of my role was useful, as participants seemed to respond positively and without fear of prejudice, which seemed to have contributed to helping them to open up to me without holding back when I was interviewing them during transect walks and during the discussion of the maps.

## **Design limitations and challenges**

The major limitation in this study was that data was generated from only one school within a specific geographical area, and from a small sample of eight participants. However, it is crucial to unambiguously declare that it was not the intention of this study to generalize findings to other contexts, but to understand how boys and girls in a particular context respond to dominant identity gender constructions. In addition to the above, the study was constrained by restrictions of time. The qualification had to be completed within a specific period which in most cases did not necessarily smoothly reconcile with the complex dynamics of doing a research study on complex human activity. It is also important for me to point out that since I am not teaching at this school, the biggest challenge was the time limit given to me by the principal as the principal often hinted that the school was not going to benefit from this research; instead the principal felt that it was wasting valuable learning and teaching time for the participants.

## **Credibility and trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the data gathering instrument (Lincoln and Guba, 1995). To ensure credibility in this research, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985: 99), I have used multiple methods of data collection. In addition, I also checked with the participants if what was interpreted, written or verbalised reflected their views and attitudes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

## **Dilemmas, tensions and contradictions**

### ***Technological glitches***

One of the challenges I faced when engaged in this research was that I took it for granted that I knew how to use the latest technological devices such as the dictaphone. To my surprise, when I was transcribing I found out that all the data that I had recorded during the transect walk had somehow been deleted. Out of panic, I called my supervisor who calmed me down, and arranged that I bring the device with me. Although I kind of expected it, I was shocked to learn that the data was not there. I had to redo the transect walks with the participants and this time I made sure that I did not touch any wrong buttons. I was worried (in fact I thought I knew) that participants would not be able to say things in exactly the same way that they had done during the first run. This ordeal in the long run sort of helped both participants and myself in the sense that if there

was any tensions during the first walk or missed points, it was going to be thoroughly dealt with during this round of transect walks. The second time around everything went well, transcribing and notes taken.

### ***Methodological dilemmas***

On the first day of my arrival at the research site, the principal of the school could not hold herself when she heard that I was doing a masters' research study. She immediately offered me a position of educator at the school, which if I had taken I thought would have complicated ethical issues for me. I also felt that in order for me to be able to complete my studies, I was better off without that job because then I would have sufficient time to work on my thesis. Seeing that I was not ready to deal with more ethical dilemmas and more workload, I promised her that I might consider her request as soon as I was done with my research. I knew that this situation had potential to jeopardize my chances of access if I was not careful.

Secondly, another area of contestation had to do with my structural social identities. As a middle class, black woman, doing research at a rural school was a challenge, but also a learning experience for me. For example, when we were doing the transect walk with the participants, particularly when they were showing me their toilets, that is where my middle class socialization refused to see things differently. The toilets were unbearably dirty, and they were not flushable. As a parent myself, I thought about my daughter having to use such facilities. The guilt emanating from the awareness of the discrepancy between middle and working class life engulfed my thoughts. I felt sorry for the kids, especially the girls who, on top of everything, had to face the situation and clean the toilets.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have discussed the ontological, epistemological and methodological position I have taken in this research study. I have discussed the role of my early socialisation in positioning myself to be who I am today, and how my experiences and understandings could influence what I ultimately 'saw' in the data. I also outlined the methodological and design journey that I undertook during the course of this study. This pertained to issues relating to my philosophical stance, methods of data generation, selection of participants, consideration of

ethical questions, approaches deployed in understanding the data, design limitations, etcetera. The components of the methodological journey and research design helped to serve as a means for me to address the key research questions that this study set to explore.

The next chapter provides a presentation and discussion of findings of the current study.

## *Chapter 5*

### **Presentation and Discussion of Findings**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter describes and discusses findings emerging from the data generated in this research study. The study sought to explore and understand responses of children, both boys and girls, to the hegemonic constructions of gender in a rural primary school in a particular geographical context. The key research questions for the study were as follows:

- What are the learner's experiences in relation to dominant gender identities in a primary school?
- How are these identities constructed and contested within the context of a school?
- In what ways do these experiences, constructions, and contestations affect the academic and social lives of learners?

#### **Contradictions and silences: "It is very unfair ..."**

The school had pit toilets, that is, toilets that are not flushable. As such, the school depends on a 'honey-sucker' provided by the local municipality. When I was at the school, the local municipality division concerned had not come to empty the toilets, and the toilets were dirty and unusable. This placed a lot of strain to girls as it is accepted school practice that if toilets are dirty, it is girls that should clean them. In this instance, in addition to cleaning the toilets, girls had to deal with the smell of 'full' toilets as well. When I asked the principal what she had done about the state of the toilets, it seemed as if the school did not care about the health and hygiene of learners, particularly girls who had to brave the smell cleaning the toilets. I also took liberty of viewing teachers' toilets. On the contrary, teachers' toilets were spotlessly clean, and participants reported that girls were actually responsible for keeping teachers' toilets clean as well, yet there were not allowed to use them in those cases where the local municipality did not keep its end of promise.

What also came out from the participants was that from Life Orientation lessons participants do not learn about their rights. This could also indicate that teachers do contribute in perpetuating marginalisation as a form of oppression. This tells us that in this school learners normally do not have rights.

Girls have fewer toilets (8) than boys who had ten toilets. Moreover, toilets were without doors. Girls expressed their awareness of this situation as something that was the cause for serious concern for them. One of the participants expressed the reading of the situation as follows:

“We are not safe in the school; we feel that boys can rape us as they are no doors in our toilets”.

Girls are constructing themselves as vulnerable to this situation, as they were aware that the dominant discourse was that boys were more likely to present as a threat to their safety, primarily because of the way in which boys tend to be socialised. At an institutional level, the school seemed to be totally oblivious and/or negligent of what it meant for girls to be using toilets without doors. So, the school environment was more hostile to girls than boys with regards to the question of toilets.

The toilets at the school provided a critical site for the socialization and identity (re) formation of participants. All toilets, for boys and girls, were dirty. When girls were asked about this, one of them summed up their feelings as follows:

“It is very unfair that boys are not asked to clean the toilets. We are not happy that we have to be the only ones cleaning the toilets and yet we all use them. We are not allowed to use the teachers toilets and yet we clean them, one learner was caught there once and was punished”.

The constructions of gender with regard to the cleaning of toilets revealed unequal power dynamics and maintenance of subservient roles for girls. The duty of cleaning has been institutionalised, that is what girls are expected to do just because that is what is accepted as what

girls should do. The school authorities seem to have bought into principles of the discourse underpinned by male domination. I spoke to one of the teachers, who revealed that teachers in the school encouraged both boys and girls to be equal, through encouraging both boys and girls to clean up the classroom. However, as can be discerned from what happens with the cleaning of toilets, girls did not feel that this was the case, as they claimed that they were the only ones doing the cleaning all the time. When asked if they had expressed such dissatisfaction to their teachers, one of them responded:

“We have not discussed this issue with our teachers, because we are scared of them we feel they are harsh to us and do not want to answer any questions we pose”.

Giroux (1992) refers to what he calls border crossings and the right language to push borders and challenge stereotypes. With the right language he is referring to being able to voice opinions openly, and knowing one’s rights. Although girls expressed unhappiness about being the only ones cleaning the toilets, they did not have the right language (Giroux, 1992) to challenge hegemonic discourses, and advance the course of fighting against male superiority that works to construct and position girls as subservient to boys. Thandeka, one of the participants, depicts the girls’ fed up position:

“Each time when toilets are dirty girls are called to clean up” we are tired of this and the rest of the girls feel the same. As girls we feel these things favour boys”.

This could tell us that girls were aware of the unfairness of this, but did not have adequate capital (Bourdieu, 1983) to push the boundaries of the patriarchal discourse however no matter how much they might have wanted to do it. This is a typical feature of oppression that it is restrictive. In this instance, girls are challenging socialisation by dominant discourse, and are showing willingness to adopt a stance and position that advocates an alternative discourse that views the duty of cleaning toilets as something that boys should be doing as well.

Another interesting issue in the case of toilets is the changing roles that different people seem to play in different contexts. This corresponds with Young’s (1990) assertion that power is relative.

For instance, women as members of the target group, construct themselves differently in different contexts. For instance, at home women are usually expected to be subservient to males, but as teachers at school they take on an identity and position that allows them more access to social power. In the case of this research study, participants reported that it was women teachers who were instructing them to clean their toilets. This could indicate that because of their new position of power, women teachers were able to take on a more dominant role that allowed them to instruct those who had less access to social power to clean toilets. This situation is eloquently captured by words of one of the participants:

“Female teachers tell us to do the cleaning everyday’. We do not like it but feel it is something we have to do”.

Then if toilet cleaning is for women, why are women teachers not doing it as well? However, another question that one may want to ask is: Why is it that it is women teachers who instruct girls to clean toilets? This is a matter of further investigation, but an initial explanation might be that women teachers still see the duty to ensure that cleaning happens as their duty as women\_ they have internalised the fact that women have to ensure that places are clean because cleaning is understood as the responsibility of women. So, there is an instance of horizontal sexism where women teachers socialize girls into social roles traditionally viewed as for women. That is women teachers are teaching girls how to be nice and good women in a patriarchal society. Although the school principal, as the school leader, is a female in this school, it would seem that it has not changed the way in which learners think about women. Despite this, boys still constructed women as weak and soft. Boys still believed in the traditional roles of men and women. This is seen in the way boys are unwilling to clean up, and also when they were asked about whether they cook at home. It could be deduced from their responses that they only cooked because they ‘had no choice’ and that they did not want to be associated with cooking. This is what they said when there were asked about cooking:

“We will be laughed at because only women and those unmarried men cook, we boys do not cook, we only cook when there is no one, and we are lazy to do it. We only cook at restaurants because there is payment involved”.

Participants who were boys believed that one has to be very gifted to be able to cook, and that girls are gifted since they can cook. This seemed to help boys to build gender walls based on the values of the patriarchal discourse, where one side (dominant side of the male) of the wall gave people more access to social power while the other side (subordinate side of women) gave people little or no access to social power. Constructions of gender revealed that boys were colluding with the core values of masculinity discourse, by constructing themselves as hard if they wanted to and soft if they wanted to. To go back to the story of the toilets, there are 10 toilets for boys and 8 toilets for girls; somehow subconsciously there seems to be an inscription of belief that because boys and girls use different facilities, then their social roles also need to be separated, unequally. This socially constructed belief of institutions seems to contribute to boys and girls seeing themselves as different.

### **Construction of sport in an unequal society**

Participants, particularly girls, reported dissatisfaction about how sport was being operated and managed at the school. For example, they expressed unhappiness, in particular about the use of sports fields. For instance, participants mentioned that grade 7 girls did not have a place to play as opposed to boys who were using much of the ground. During that discussion, boys revealed that they wanted girls to “ask for the grounds nicely” and that they were happy to allocate some land to them. They seemed to believe that they could allocate parts of the premises to those who were nicely requesting them to do so; they seemed oblivious of the fact that this was supposed to have been done by teachers in the first place. Instead, they felt that they had the power to decide who should use or not use which parts of the school premises for sports. When girls were asked how many grounds they had, they responded:

“There are 3 grounds for boys; girls do not have their ground”.

Boys responded:

“Girls should ask for the grounds nicely we will give them”.

The problematic consequence of this is that the allocation of land ends up in the hands of boys, which might be internalised and acted out by boys when they are adults and have to take up key socio-political roles.

Mostly boys do soccer, and girls do netball. When both boys and girls were asked if they would like to try sport codes traditionally thought of as belonging to the opposite gender, they unanimously responded to the affirmative. This is how one of them expressed their feelings with regards to this issue:

“We would like to try different sports, if teachers allow us to”.

This seems to challenge thinking from the dominant discourse that purports that boys should be socialised into playing soccer and girls into playing netball. Participants’ views suggested that, when given a chance, they would like to try other kinds of sport, including those that were traditionally perceived to be for a different gender group. The constructions of gender with regards to who plays which sport revealed that participants were beginning to challenge dominant discourses that view sport as a gendered domain.

### **Corporal punishment as site for gender construction**

Corporal punishment used to be prevalent in schools in many parts of the world, but in recent decades it has been outlawed in many countries including South Africa. In South Africa, the use of corporal punishment in schools is prohibited by the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. According to Section 10 subsection (1) and (2) of this Act, no person may administer corporal punishment at a school to a learner, and any person who contravenes Subsection (1) is guilty of an offence and liable on conviction for a penalty which could be imposed for assault (Department of Education, 1996). The introduction of this Act has meant that the old age practice have had to be abandoned by many schools which used to rely on it as a means of maintaining discipline in schools.

What I noticed from observations was that corporal punishment was still being administered at the school. For instance, common practice suggested that boys were to be beaten on their

buttocks and girls on their hands, but some boys according to a girl participant refused to have this happen to them. When this happened, they often created a scene each time they were beaten up, and because of these incidents, rules were had been adapted and both boys and girls were then beaten on their bums. This achieved very little in resolving some of equality concerns boys and girls were experiencing in the school, as this girl participants expressed their interpretation of such adaptation of rules:

“We feel that boys are more listened to, and what we feel does not matter”.

This suggested that the problem of corporal punishment was viewed as part of a broader situation of injustice, where girls were often treated as less equal to boys.

The issue of corporal punishment also brought to light other forms of violence that were prevalent at the school. Participants not only mentioned forms of violence that were perpetrated by teachers against learners; they also mentioned incidents of learner-on-learner violence. This participant reported that learners seemed to have ‘copied’ the example of using violence from common practice at the school, and have begun to practise it against other learners:

“Although we do not want to be beaten by our teachers, but as learners we beat each other and fight a lot”.

This suggested that the question of corporal punishment at the school could be regarded as part of the broader ‘scheme of things’ that worked to construct gender in some ways and not others. In order to deal effectively with the concerns of gender inequality, one of would also have to address the question of corporal punishment as a phenomenon that contributed space for hegemonic constructions of gender. That is, if corporal punishment is allowed to continue in schools, particularly in its current conception that suggests that it should be administered differentially in terms of gender, there is likelihood that it would sustain practices of gender inequality.

**Gendered discourses of feeding: “... women and unmarried men are supposed to cook ...”**

The school where this research study was conducted participated in the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). The NSNP is a national intervention targeting learners from quintile 1-3 schools. More resources are allocated to poorest schools (quintile 1-3) and less to least poor schools (quintile 4 and 5). The quintile ranking of a school is based on national census data for the school catchment area, namely:

- Income
- Unemployment rate
- Level of education ( e.g. literacy rates)

There was a kitchen in this school; two women cooked in it. When boy participants were asked why is it that men were not doing the cooking, because they too were unemployed and needed a job, boys responded:

“We would be laughed at, because only women and unmarried men are supposed to cook”.

“We only cook when there is no one around”

“We only cook at restaurants because we will be paid”.

One boy insisted that even if he could be offered a job to cook at the school, he would not take it because he was good at doing ‘hard jobs’ like being on the roof to fix things. This might indicate that the boy participant still thought of chores within a hegemonic gender frame. This speaks back to Kelly’s (2000) argument that if both genders have an opportunity to participate equally in social roles, they would ‘grab the opportunity with both hands’. It would seem that boys were still resisting crossing dominant gender boundaries, and that they were still colluding with dominant gender discourses with regards to the matter of chores such as cooking, even though it meant receiving an income. This should not surprise us as there is evidence that gender bias is still prevalent in schools (See for instance, Bhana, 2002; Stromquist, 2007; Martin, 2006).

Within the context of this research study, my observations were that girls were more trusted with cleaning by teachers whereas boys were trusted with carrying of heavy stuff like water for girls to wash the dishes. This might suggest that learners' constructions were still caught up in the powerful network of dominant gender discourses.

As can be understood, with South Africa subjected to high levels of poverty and unemployment, this view of gender roles has a potential to create a social barrier where certain kinds of jobs are perceived as more appropriate for people from a particular gender. The continued gendering the job market has potential to complicate the implementation of equity policies, particularly if learners continue to grow up viewing life through hardened patriarchal lenses.

### **Performing gender: A 'mam' or a 'sir'?**

When participants were asked, based on their experiences with teachers in this school, which teachers they preferred, their response was that they preferred female teachers because female teachers were thought to be more caring, good listeners, and "made jokes" as compared to males who "did not listen to learners and their complaints, even if it was a serious issue like a desk being broken". They reported that male teachers did not listen to their "stories", did not even want to repeat where they had not understood:

"Male teachers are hard and not approachable and if we ask them to repeat something, they say nobody was repeating for them at school".

This finding speak back to research findings that suggested that teachers, regardless of their gender, listened to boys more than girls. As found in this study, in this school, male teachers were reportedly not listening to both boys and girls alike. Participants, both girls and boys, preferred female teachers for their caring attitude towards them.

### **Pathologising difference: "Jerry is a moffie"**

Boys related a story of a boy who they described as doing everything that, as far as they were concerned, was supposed to be done by girls. One of them reported that "he even used girls' toilets". When I asked how they knew that he used girls' toilets, they said one of them sat by the

window and spied on toilets through the windows of the toilet. When participants were asked why they had to single out Jerry<sup>i</sup> in this way, one of the participants responded (with the majority of participants nodding in agreement):

“We do not want to be like Jerry, because he plays with girls and teachers do not stop him from playing netball”

Critical feminist thought seeks to address unequal gender status in society, give a voice to the voiceless and emancipate people from shackles of the patriarchal gaze. In the case of Jerry, the data revealed that dominant constructions of gender tended to put tremendous pressure for boys to perform gender as boys. If they failed to demonstrate hegemonic masculinities, which seemed to be the case with Jerry, they would be demonised, ostracised and cast out as outsiders. Jerry was not accepted as ‘normal’ by participants because, according to participants’ standards of measurement, he was not masculine enough. However, it would seem that Jerry was also not regarded as feminine enough. So, his was hanging as an ‘indeterminate identity’ in-between feminine and masculine standards. This was seen as his ‘fault’. That is, he had to ‘carry the cross’ as a penalty for being unable to meet normative standards of femininity and masculinity. As a result of this perceived insufficient masculinity, Jerry was often discriminated against and did not have access to social power. One participant even described Jerry’s identity as constituting a taboo – a disease or curse – that required miraculous powers of a sangoma to cure. When one girl participant was asked what she would do if one day she woke up to find that she was like Jerry, she responded:

“I will go to a sangoma”

There is another problematic dimension of how Jerry seemed to be constructed. This has its source in the construction of femininity and masculinity as homogenous. That is, there seemed to be a belief that a particular (often uniform) set is accepted as a measure of standards of femininity and masculinity. This has potential oblivion to the fact that there are alternative versions of femininity and masculinity. If femininity and masculinity are defined in ‘rigid’ ways, social life is likely to give rise to people experiencing themselves as insiders and outsiders. This flies into

the face of what critical feminist theory seeks to achieve. For instance, in the case of this study, participants seemed to want to dissociate themselves from Jerry just because he was perceived to be falling outside of the normative definitions of masculinity and femininity. Hence, that he was demonstrating and performing a different version of masculinity became a source of regarding him as an ‘abnormality’ in a ‘normal’ society, and he was therefore not accepted as an eligible member of this society just because he displayed a behaviour that did not meet hegemonic standards of masculinity and femininity.

When probed about their feelings regarding Jerry, some participants responded that they did not wish to be like Jerry. For them, Jerry represented what no person should be like. The problem with this kind of thinking is that no one chooses their social identity (Harro, 2000). Social identities are ascribed to us by society. So, Jerry did not choose to be gay, and it was unfair for him to be constructed as an abnormal, an outsider in his own school, his own community, and his society. Also, this begged the question of who has a right to judge which identities should be accepted and not accepted. Furthermore, should social identities be subjected to some parading contest where they are dubbed accepted and not accepted? Reasons given as to why some participants did not want to associate with him, reflected patterns of how society in general reacted to a gay people in general. This is how one participant retorted on this matter:

“I don’t want to be called a moffie and be laughed at...”

It could be discerned that Jerry was being constructed as not meeting some pre-established gender norm or standard of the ‘real’ person. He was receiving judgement, not because of being a person, but because of being the ‘wrong’ person, marked and inferior (Ngcobo, 2006). The critical question is: Does society really believe that if people are being treated in negative ways, they would change and become what society wants them to be? If so, then when and how will people be able to choose to be who they want to be? For instance, one participant said they would consult a sangoma in order to find a cure for being gay, as if being gay was more of a disease or a curse. This could indicate that this boy was being constructed as sick, and in need of some help as sangomas traditionally help sick people.

As can be concluded, participants had not yet crossed the borders drawn by dominant gender discourses; they seemed to have opted to respect these boundaries, and remained loyal members of the dominant gender discourses. Giroux (1992) asserts that once students become border crossers, they would be able to move in and out of borders, i. e. challenging barriers that society has constructed. That is, instead of embracing hegemonic constructions of gay and lesbian people, participants were expected to be challenging these constructions, definitions and understandings.

Moreover, language used by participants when referring to Jerry sounded discriminatory and offensive. For example, participants used words like ‘moffie’, ‘sick’ and ‘arrogant’ to refer to Jerry. I guess no-one would like to be called these names. What participants were doing is contradictory to what Giroux (1992) would call the right language to push barriers and challenging boundaries. When bad language is used, it does not help us to do the right thing; instead it minimises people and limits them (Giroux, 1992), as in this case of Jerry who is ill-treated and called names. When this happens, it subjects Jerry to powerlessness, discrimination and oppression. Moreover, chances of people using this language crossing borders of dominant discourses are likely to be severely constrained. That is, this kind of language would hardly assist their efforts to redefine themselves and others in alternative terms. Seeing and constructing others as outsiders perpetuates ‘us’ and ‘them’ divides that work to maintain dominant constructions and performances of, for instance, gender. Essentially, for participants to ‘see themselves and others in a new light’, they need a language to redefine what they are striving to become.

### **Discourses of being a girl or boy: Myths and misconceptions**

When I asked the participants how they felt about who they were in terms of their gender, girls responded that they were happy about their social identities, citing reasons such as the fact that “girls are liked in the school, because they do their schoolwork diligently” as compared to boys who were regarded as “always absent themselves from school”. This is in line with what Francis (2000) points out when she points out to girls’ ways of resisting schools dominant regimes, such as chatting quietly to their table mates rather than absenting themselves from school. Boys responded that it was “bad being a boy at home”, because when parents came with goodies they

normally got nothing. One boy participant reported that girls were more listened to and that they were “known by their first names”, and when asked why it was so he said:

“Boys are disrespectful; they chew gum when talking to teachers”.

This could also suggest that boys have feelings like everybody else. They are emotional beings who can feel the pain of being excluded. This could imply that boys were not always the ‘strong guys with emotions made of steel’ that patriarchal discourses seemed to be representing them as, but that they also had emotions – that they sometimes, like every other human being, needed emotional support – as seen in the case where they felt they were not being preferred as compared to girls. This suggests that consideration should be taken when parents and teachers are dealing with them; they are not hard beings that hegemonic discourses constructs them to be; inside they have their own soft spots and insecurities.

There was another point raised with regards to different school dress for boys and girls. Girls felt that their school dress did not take account of prevailing circumstances:

“We do not like it that boys wear long trousers and we wear dresses because in winter we suffer because it is cold and boys are warm.”

This speaks to the social organization of the school, that is, the way in which schools are governed and managed. Rules pertaining to dress are a function of school governing bodies in terms of Section 20 of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Department of Education, 1996). School governing bodies are composed of parents and educators in primary schools. Why is it then, that parents are oblivious of such concerns in terms of their parental obligations? Have they ‘forgotten’ about the interests of their own children? Why? The fact that there are rules that ‘forget’ that girls can also feel cold as human beings, could indicate that when these rules are made, they are made with the girl and boy in mind, and not with the human being who may be affected by environmental conditions such as weather. If that is so, whose interests are they serving?

Girls did not like the fact that there is a garden for boys only. They felt boys were being preferred and that is why there is a garden for them. This is how they expressed what they wanted to see happening:

“We would like to work together with boys in the garden”.

The existence of alternative discourses in the voices of participants helps us to understand how boys’ and girls’ view themselves by construction, reconstruction and negotiating their social identities. As noted earlier on in this research, there exists a variety of competing discourses some of which have powerful influence on boys and girls, making it unimaginable for them to dare challenge boundaries. The source of this is how society constructs itself and those in it with regards to dominant gender discourses. How children understand themselves depends largely on the access they have to alternative understandings and largely on the access they have on alternative understandings and constructions. Children spend a lot of time in school, which might suggest that their understandings could be influenced by the school and its operations. For example, at this particular school learners were expected to play in playgrounds allocated to them by teachers, for example boys and girls used separate fields during play. This is however not the case at home; boys and girls grow up playing together especially if they are siblings and neighbours. So, the discord between school and home cultural dynamics is likely to have an influence on how learners construct their identities with in relation to dominant gender constructions.

### **Traversing boundaries: “... I am scared ...”**

During discussions of the maps drawn after the transect walks, with a view to understanding how boys and girls constructed and contested dominant gender identities, a number of issues emerged. For instance, when participants were asked how they felt about the present and future map of the school they had just drawn, one male participant pointed out that he felt that the environment at the school was not safe and that it was only at assembly that he felt safe because there were teachers present who helped with the maintenance of order and safety against different forms of abuse. This speaks back to the normative ways in which boys are normally constructed by dominant discourses: nerves of steel, strong, audacious. For instance, the

dominant discourse is that girls are the ones who should be scared due to mostly experiences of sexual harassment, bullying, etcetera. That is, feelings of fear, let alone expressing them in public, are usually regarded as unheard of for males. However, the message from this participant troubles the authority of such normative understandings of boys, which characterise boys as a homogenous group bearing qualities of a stereotypical male being. The message from this participant reminds us that boys are just as human as girls are:

“In this school I am scared, because there is no security, the gate is falling apart and thugs can just come in”.

In this case, boys are pushing boundaries and challenging stereotypes and coded messages that dominant discourse hold about boys being tough and brave, and girls being weak and scared. Discussion on maps drawn suggested that boys also wanted to see in the future, the school being developed into a double storey so that all learners could be accommodated, “so that older kids can be accommodated in the upper floors” in order to deal with the concern of overcrowded classrooms at the school. He further suggested that “in the big school” boys would have easier access to girls so that they could get an opportunity and space to propose love and “chase” girls. This could indicate to the social meanings that some boy learners attribute to particular infrastructural arrangements, namely the view of girls here being that girls were something that was worthy of chasing rather than people with whom to interact and live harmoniously. This implies that what boys saw as increased is also expressed as decreased security for girls. For instance, if girls are seen as objects to be chased, then they are also likely to be subjected to violence resulting from such constructions.

On the other hand, there was a counter-discourse from a boy that contended that it was “only cowardly boys who abused their power to propose love to girls”. He pointed out that boys were normally physically stronger than girls because they are encouraged to participate in physical activities that develop their bodies in this way. He vehemently disputed the claim that boys were born physically stronger than girls. This is how he expressed this argument:

“Boys do a lot of physical work, like climbing on the roof, playing soccer and riding bicycles”.

What came out from observations was that learners normally pray in their classrooms. This means they have little time to be together as a school during assembly unless there are important announcements to be made to the school as a whole. Participants reported that they would like more opportunities to be together in a whole-school format, and that they regarded the morning assembly as a space that presented such an opportunity, as one of them points out below:

“At assembly we get an opportunity to see our friends from other grades. This makes us feel as one”.

On one day learners were writing a test, and it was for only 30 minutes. It was a maths test administered by a male teacher. Girls and boys were seated separately and all desks were facing the front. There was this one group of boys sitting together, and the reason cited by the teacher was that they were “slow learners”. Girls were the first to finish their work and they mostly got everything correct whereas boys were behind, and when the teacher looked at the work of those who finished quickly, he found that almost everything was incorrect. Research suggests that boys tend to excel in the high powered subjects like maths, and that girls are good in subjects like home economics. However, in this case, girls were performing better than boys in mathematics, a subject where boys are normally encouraged and expected to do better than girls. However, discourses from boys seemed not to measure their performance against that of girls as human beings, but as girls who were supposed (by standards of patriarchal discourses) to perform worse than boys. The following words by one of the boys suggest the difficulty this boy might have been experiencing with accepting the fact that girls were winning the mathematics contest fairly; he wanted to attribute this to “dark ways” of achieving success:

“Girls like to copy each other’s work, and they are not smarter than us “.

In this school, boys were reported (by some participants) to be struggling with their subjects and mostly absent from school. When boys were asked why they were mostly absent, one of them responded:

“We only do not come to school when we are sick”.

To the same question, girls responded:

“When we are absent it is normally because we have to look after our siblings”.

This seems to stem from the process of early socialization whereby parents and/or guardians tend to socialise children into different gender roles when they are a boy or a girl (Harro, 2000). This is could be discerned from the above whereby boys were only absent when they were sick whereas girls were mostly absent from school because they had to take care of their younger siblings.

Further, boys construct themselves as hard and disruptive, they normally bully others for food, money and pens. In this study, both boys and girls spoke out about issues affecting them in class. For this reason, class rules had been designed and agreed upon by all, and roles were the same for boys and girls. For instance, they had to alternate (take turns) sweeping the classroom (this information is according to their class teacher). In this view the school is trying, although in baby steps to discourage roles being allocated according to the ways dictated by dominant gender discourses. If this social arrangement continues even when learners are at home, both boys and girls could be empowered to take on whatever chore there is to be done.

## **Conclusion**

The existence of alternative discourses in the voices of participants helps us to understand how boys and girls view themselves construct, reconstruct and negotiate their social identities. As noted earlier on, there exists a variety of competing discourses some of which are powerful and have influence on boys and girls, making it unimaginable for us to construe the complexities around the challenging of dominant gender discourses. The source of this might be in the various

ways in which society tends to construct itself and those in it with regards to dominant to dominant gender discourses. How children understand themselves depends largely on the access they have to alternative understandings and largely on the access they have on alternative understandings and constructions. Children spend a lot of time in school, which might mean that their understandings could be influenced by the school and its rules. For example at this particular school learners were expected to play in playgrounds allocated to them by teachers, like boys play alone and girls play alone. This might be strange in the context of homes where boys and girls grow up playing together especially if they are siblings. So, the relativity of school and home cultural dynamics in this case might have an influence on how learners construct their identities with in relation to dominant gender constructions.

## *Chapter 6*

### **Reflections and Implications**

#### **Introduction**

Since 1994, the new democratic government of South Africa has embarked on a mission to develop an education system that is able to respond to a diverse range of needs of the learner population, irrespective of gender differences. The major lesson that could be learned out of this process is that who we are is ultimately sourced from a combination of constructions, experiences and learnings. Some of it is a policy matter, which we could regulate, but much of it cannot be brought about only through promulgation of policy. Gender construction and performance is a matter that has its roots in the social foundations. So, the implementation of policies on gender transformation in order to bring about gender parity, particularly in a developing context, is a messy process. It is infested with a myriad of contextual factors.

This chapter provides my personal reflections on the ways in which participants in this study engaged with discourses that sought to construct gender along hegemonic lines. I then provide critical evaluation the scope of the current study, and provide some recommendations for further research.

#### **Pushing or crossing borders?**

The existence of alternative discourses in the voices of participants helped us to understand how boys and girls constructed and performed gender in the context of the research study. Participants' views represented processes of constructing, reconstructing and negotiating their gender identities. This was not a static process. On one hand, this was a confluence of fluid processes of pushing boundaries and challenging stereotypes and coded messages characterising dominant definitions and expectations of femininity and masculinity. On the other hand, it was a symphony of interrelated acts of submitting and colluding with dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity. In essence, with regards to participants' responses to dominant gender constructions, there existed a combination of competing discourses some which have more

powerful influences on participants, making it unimaginable for participants to dare challenge boundaries. As can be concluded from the above, participants in this research study had not yet crossed the borders drawn by dominant gender discourses, they seemed to have opted to respect these boundaries, and remain loyal members of the dominant gender discourses. Giroux (1992) asserts that once individuals become border crossers, they would be able to move in and out of borders. That is, challenging barriers that dominant ways of constructing and performing gender is not a matter of a done deal; it does not imply that people are not excluded on the basis of gender identification and definition. Challenging dominant constructions of gender is an up-and-down process, which implies that the act of challenging dominant constructions and definitions begs the question of what of what new forms of hegemonic constructions have developed, and what alternative constructions and definitions the act of challenging presents for them.

My view is that the primary source of this was how society has and continues to construct itself and those in it with regards to dominant to dominant gender discourses. The findings from this study provide some initial understandings that point to the possibility fact that how children understand themselves depends largely on the access they have to alternative understandings, and constructions. Children spend much of their time in school, and by implication the school is better placed to influence how children negotiate and position themselves within dominant discourses of gender construction and performance.

### **Placing the current study under a lens**

It is important to critically evaluate a study in order to be able to justify conclusions and gain perspectives regarding the implications of the findings that emerge.

The major limitation of this study is that data was collected from a few participants who were learners in a primary school from a restricted geographical area. As a result, their responses and views may not be representative of the majority of other learners from other schooling contexts, especially the most socially and economically deprived areas in South Africa. However, generalising finding to other contexts was not the intention of this research study. The prime objective was to reveal certain patterns regarding the different ways in which learners position themselves within dominant discourses of gender construction and definition.

## **Recommendations for further research**

It is of critical importance to realise that the current study was undertaken in during the second decade of democracy in South Africa. This is a period when debates about race and racism had begun to lose their lustre in the national discourse. Although the issue of gender and sexism was still located in the mainstream of the national agenda, it did not seem to infuriate and engage people in the way that debates about race and racism seemed to do. Frankly, the issue of gender and sexism seemed to occupy its place in the national agenda for purposes of political correctness. In my eyes, it was not considered as a very serious problem. There were more pressing national issues to be considered. It was conspicuous by its absence in the list of national priorities of the ruling party. To this end, further changes in policy and attention on and resuscitation of debates on gender and sexism may change the scope of research in this regard. Based upon the findings of the current study, the following recommendations for further research are made:

- Expansion of the current research theme to other parts of South Africa, especially historically deprived and more affluent contexts.
- Research in order to determine to what extent goals of teacher training (pre-service and in-service) have been adapted in order to ensure that teachers are able to create teaching and learning environments that are able to empower learners to negotiate and respond to dominant constructions of gender.
- Research on possibilities for developing resistance and agency, and/or on the nature of interventions that would address gender inequality.

## **Conclusion**

The question of schools as sites of gender construction and performance is of national interest in any country that has committed to treating all its citizens equally and equitably. South Africa has committed to various international conventions in its pursuit of a non-sexist society. The current study was an exploration of learners' responses to dominant constructions and definitions of gender. Findings revealed that a mixed bag of responses where participants were challenging and colluding with dominant constructions of gender. The implication of this is that the South

African government needs to strengthen its attention to the function of schools as social sites that has a potential to produce and reproduce hegemonic and/or alternative constructions of gender.

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Appendix A



UNIVERSITY OF  
KWAZULU-NATAL  
INYUVESI  
YAKWAZULU-NATALI

Faculty of Education

ETHICAL CLEARANCE REVIEWER'S REPORT

Date 17 AUGUST 2011

Name of applicant MILLCENT NTOMBIZODWA MALINGA

Comments:

THE STUDENT INTENDS OBTAINING PERMISSION FROM  
RELEVANT GATE-KEEPERS TO CONDUCT THIS RESEARCH.  
ANONYMITY OF PARTICIPANTS IS GUARANTEED, AS WELL  
AS THE SCHOOLS IN THE STUDY.

NO STRUCTURE HAS BEEN PROVIDED FOR THE  
MOBILE INTERVIEWS.

I RECOMMEND THAT THE STUDENT INCLUDE A ROUGH  
OUTLINE OF QUESTIONS THAT WILL BE ASKED DURING  
TRANSECT WALKS.

HOWEVER, I RECOMMEND THAT ETHICAL CLEARANCE  
BE GRANTED FOR THE CONDUCTING OF THIS RESEARCH.



## Appendix B



Research Office, Govan Mbeki Centre  
Westville Campus  
Private Bag x54001  
DURBAN, 4000  
Tel No: +27 31 260 3587  
Fax No: +27 31 260 4609  
[rc@unp@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:rc@unp@ukzn.ac.za)

30 August 2011

Ms MN Malinga (209531983)  
School of Education & Development  
Faculty of Education  
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Ms Malinga

**PROTOCOL REFERENCE NUMBER: HSS/0779/011M**

**PROJECT TITLE: An exploration of boy's and girls' responses to dominant gender identity constructions**

In response to your application dated 24 August 2011, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

  
.....  
Professor Steven Collings (Chair)  
HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

cc: Supervisor: Mr J Jacobs  
cc: Ms T Minksi, Faculty Research Office, Faculty of Education, Edgewood Campus

## Appendix C

### Informed consent letter to the parent or guardian for the child to participate in the research study

#### Dear Parent/Guardian

I am a student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal doing a Master of Education Degree (Social Justice Education) in the Pietermaritzburg Campus. A requirement for this degree is a dissertation and I have chosen the following topic:” **An exploration of boys and girls responses to dominant gender identity constructions**”. This investigation is being conducted in my personal capacity.

The purpose of this proposed study is to explore boys and girls responses to dominant gender identity constructions in school. Information gathered in this study will include data generated from transect walks, non-participation observations and unstructured mobile - interviews with selected learners and document analysis.

Please note that your child’s name will **not** be disclosed or included in the report or any documents pertaining to this study. **Anonymity and confidentiality is of utmost importance** and every endeavour will be made to maintain it throughout the study.

Your child’s participation in this study is **completely voluntary**. Both you and your child have the right to withdraw at any stage of this research without any prejudice. **All questions are optional** and if your child at any stage wishes not to answer a question, may do so.

I appreciate the time and effort it would take to participate in this study. I would be very grateful for your child’s participation, as it would enable me to complete my studies.

I can be reached by email at: [zodwamalinga@telkomsa.net](mailto:zodwamalinga@telkomsa.net) or by phone: 0825844005. My academic supervisor is Jabulani Ngcobo, based in the school of

Education, Pietermaritzburg Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He can be contacted at email: [Ngcoboj@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Ngcoboj@ukzn.ac.za) or by phone 033 260 6039.

.

Thank you in anticipation.

Yours faithfully

\_\_\_\_\_

Millicent N. Malinga

Student Number: 209531983

**Declaration of informed consent by parent/guardian**

I ..... (full names of parent) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to my child participating in the research project.

I understand that my child is at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should she/he so desire

Signature of Parent

.....

Date

.....

**Incwadi yesicelo sokuba umzali noma umbheki womntwana agunyaze umntwana ukuba abambe iqhaza ocwaningweni**

**Mzali/Mbheki womntwana**

Ngingumfundi eNyuvesi yaKwaZulu-Natal. Ngenza izifundo zeziqu zeMaster of Education (emkhakheni we-Social Justice Education), ophikweni lwaseMgungundlovu. Ukuze ngiphothule izifundo zami futhi ngibhale nombiko wocwaningo ngikhethe lesisihloko: **Ucwaningo mayelana nezindlela abafana namantombazane abaphendula nababumba ngazo ububona uma bebhekana nezindlela umhlaba abaphila kuwo obalindele ukuba bazibumbe ngazo njangabantu besilisa nabesifazane.**

Inhloso-ngqangi yalolucwaningo ukubheka ukuthi ngabe abafana namantombazane bebhekana kanjani nezindlela ezibekiwe zokubumba nokwakha lokho abayikho ngokobulili njengabantwana abafunda esikoleni samabanga aphansi. Ulwazi oluzotholakala lubandakanya oluzotholakala ngokuhamba sizungeza isikole nabantwana, imibuzo ehlelwe ngokukhululekile, ukubheka izincwadi eziphathelele nokwenzeka esikoleni, ukuhlala ngibheke abafunda befunda emagumbini abo okufunda. Ngifuna ukukunika isiqiniseko sokuthi igama lomntwana wakho ngeke nanini lize lidalulwe kulolucwaningo. Ngiyoyikelela kakhulu ukungawavezi amagama abantwana kuze kube sekupheleni kocwaningo. Akuwona amagama abo kuphela engiyoyikelela ukungawadaluli, kodwa futhi ngiyosusa noma ngifihle konke okukhona okungahle kubadalule ocwaningweni. Ngifisa futhi nokukwazisa ukuthi umntwana akaphoqiwe futhi akanyanzelekile nakancane ukuthi abambe iqhaza kulolucwaningo. Lokhu kusho ukuthi wena nomntwana ningayeka noma kunini manizwa kungasavumi niqhubeke; soze nabekwa cala ngalokho.

Inombolo yami yocingo ithi: 0825844005 noma email zodwamalinga@telkom.sa.net. Ekathisha ongibhekile nongilulekayo kulezizifundo naye okuyo leNyuvesi yaKwaZulu-

Natali, unguMnumzane Jabulani Ngcobo: Inombolo: 033 260 6039; ikheli le-email: [Ngcoboj@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Ngcoboj@ukzn.ac.za)

Ngicela imvume yakho njengomzali noma umbheki womntwana ukuba umntwana wakho abambe iqhaza kulolucwaningo esengiluchaze kafushane ngenhla noluzoba sesikoleni sakhe. Ngijoyabula kakhulu uma umntwana umvumelile ukuba abambe iqhaza kulolucwaningo, futhi lokho kuyongisiza kakhulu ukuphothula izifundo zami.

Ngiyabonga kakhulu.

Yimina ozithobayo

---

uMillicent N. Malinga  
Inombolo yomfundi: 209531983

**Ifomu lokuvuma**

Mina ..... (amagama aphelele) ngiyavuma futhi ngiyaqonda ngalolucwaningo futhi ngichazeleke kahle ngakho konke okuphathelele nalolucwaningo. Ngiyavuma ukuba umntwana wami abe yingxenye yalolucwaningo. Ngiyaqonda futhi ukuthi uma umntwana engasathandi ukuqhubeka akanyanzelekile ukuba aqhubeke noma engasathandi noma engasakhululekile, kodwa ukhululekile ukuyeka noma inini, futhi ngeke abekwa cala ngokwenza kanjalo.

Amagama omzali

.....

Usuku

.....

## **Appendix D**

### **Letter of consent: School Principal and the school Governing Body**

The Principal/Governing body

31 August 2011

Dear Sir or Madam

#### **REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH**

I am studying towards a Master of Education degree in Social Justice Education. As part of the requirements of my studies, I have to complete a research project. My research seeks to explore boys' and girls' responses to dominant identity gender constructions within a primary schooling context. As an ethical consideration, I need permission from both the principal and the school governing body to conduct research at your school. My participants will be Grade 7 learners, both boys and girls. The reason for the choice of both the school and the participants is because of accessibility and relevance to the purpose of my study. Participation in this project is voluntary, and participants are free to withdraw any time, should they decide, for whatever reason, to do so. Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants will be protected at all times, and all information that has a potential to identify them will be removed or altered.

Thank you in anticipation.

Yours faithfully

---

Millicent N. Malinga (Ms)

**Declaration of consent by Principal**

I..... (names of the principal) hereby confirm that I understand the nature and purpose of this research project and allow Ms Millicent N. Malinga to conduct this study at our school.

Signature of the Principal

.....

Date

.....

**Declaration of consent by School Governing body**

I..... (name of the school governing body representative) hereby confirm that I understand the nature of this research project and allow Ms Millicent N. Malinga to conduct this study at our school.

Signed of the on behalf of School Governing Body

.....

Date

.....

---

<sup>i</sup> Jerry is not his real name. The name 'Jerry' has been chosen to conceal the identity of the learner.