



***Young Masculinities: An Ethnography of 8–9-year-old  
Primary School Boys***

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## Supervisors Declaration

‘As the candidate’s supervisor I agree / do not agree to the submission of this thesis’.

Signed



Name: Professor Deevia Bhana

Date: 23 January 2022

## Declaration

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## **Dedication**

*To my dear Grandfather*

*Thank you for your support, sacrifices and decade's worth of knowledge and insights of the  
world!*

## **NRF Acknowledgement**

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## Abstract

In this ethnographic study I set out to examine the construction of masculinities among 8–9-year-old primary school boys. This study was conducted in a racially diverse schooling context comprised of a mixed class of low-middle and low income Indian and black boys in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. A purposive sampling method was employed to select 25 boys for this study. In addition, 11 teacher participants were included to enable a broader lens for my analysis of young masculinities. Following the tenets of feminist poststructuralism, I capture the gendered lives of young boys by prioritising their own views and experiences.

This study highlights the social processes through which masculine identities were formed – nuanced by race, socioeconomic conditions, culture, gender inequalities, and sexuality– all of which contributed to malleable and plural patterns of masculinities. These variables intersected to shape Indian and black boys’ social interactions, their negotiation of power and their racialised and classed subjectivities which constituted a significant force in their negotiation of masculinities. Departing from traditional adult framings of childhood passivity, the study findings foreground the complexities, contradictions and diverse ways through which young boys construct, redefine, negotiate and share their knowledge of gender and sexuality as active agents of masculinities. Violence and heterosexuality emerged as the most dominant and prevalent way of expressing hegemonic masculinity and male power. Violence was exemplified through performances of strength, fighting prowess, an esteemed physical body and the denigration of femininity. However, this was not a uniform experience for all boys: given their agency some boys sought to denounce hegemonic masculinity by adopting non-violent subject positions and developed a shared solidarity by caring for each other, thus transcending racial divides. Heterosexuality was also a normalising force that regulated boys’ sexuality in ways that constrained or empowered their masculinities. They actively invested in heterosexual masculinity, finding pleasure in it but also navigating the complex terrains related to compulsory heterosexuality, material and economic deprivation and competition for girlfriends. Nonetheless, teachers rendered boys' early engagement in sexuality obsolete due to dominant subjectivities of childhood innocence.

The study findings also show that the construction of masculinities extends beyond educational spaces to the context of families which was a central organising site for the social production and reproduction of gender. Within the family context boys actively negotiated and contested dominant gender discourses and male power, instead of simply reiterating gender norms as passive recipients of received knowledge.

This research offers unique Southern perspectives into young masculinities in South Africa given the particular age cohort of boys, their local and socioeconomic contexts and their racial profiles. The findings raise key implications for working with boys at an early age to support their agency and to encourage them to negotiate their masculinities in positive ways. I argue that starting young in developing child-centered pedagogic practices in schools should include intervention programmes that are committed to addressing gender inequalities and to foster the development of mutual respect and non-violence.

## **List of Abbreviations and Acronyms**

AIDS – Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome

ANC – African National Congress

BEE – Black Economic Empowerment

CSE – Comprehensive Sexuality Education

FP – Foundation Phase

HIV – Human Immuno Deficiency Virus

LED – Light Emitting Diodes

LGBTIQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer

NSP – National Strategic Plan

SABC – South African Broadcasting Corporation

SACE – South African Council for Educators

SAPS – South African Police Services

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

WWE – Worldwide Wrestling

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## Publications arising from this thesis<sup>1</sup>

### Publication 1

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<sup>1</sup> Publication 1 forms part of the analysis in Chapter 8 and Publication 2 forms part of the analysis in Chapter 9 of this thesis.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study: How Young School Boys Construct and Negotiate their Masculinities

### Introduction

They [girls] want to use us.... You know, this one time I didn't have money and she [his girlfriend] needed it and she just said "It's over, I can't be with you anymore". The day after, she went to the Indian boy and I saw them holding hands. I was heartbroken. I cried the whole night. They want the *moola!* [cash] I realised that what can I do? He has cash, he has everything. It's over!

Kanelo, black, aged 9

This ethnographic study examines the construction and negotiation of masculinities among 8–9-year-old primary school boys in KwaZulu-Natal<sup>2</sup>, South Africa. There is, historically, a paucity of research on children's gender and sexuality and their early makings of masculinities which is rooted, as I will show, in traditional conceptualisations of childhood as a time of innocence. Bhana (2016a, p.1) highlighted such conceptualisations in her study of gender and sexuality at a primary school in South Africa, where she discovered a consensus amongst her teacher participants that "there was nothing to know, nothing to see and nothing more to find out as children rarely knew anything about abstract matters of gender and sexuality". When I first began to plan this study I was most preoccupied with working out how I would go about conducting research with young children. I wondered if participants would be willing to speak to me about gender and sexuality, especially given their young age. Would they stick to the topic and be able to elaborate? Would I be able to hold their attention for long periods of time? Indeed, like Bhana's teacher participants, I wondered if 8–9-year-old boys even knew about girlfriends.

In order to situate the young boys as active agents, who construct their own identities, are the best authorities on their own lives, and who attach meaning to their actions, rather than as objects of the research process, I followed Blaise (2005) in adopting a feminist poststructuralist approach

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<sup>2</sup>KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) is one of the nine provinces in South Africa and, with approximately 11.5 million people, has the second largest population (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

to the research which emphasised child agency. Kanelo's words in the opening extract, derived from an early interview, demonstrate the complexities he experienced in maintaining heterosexual relations with girls, and how this was significant to the making of masculinities. The excerpt sheds light on how he actively constructed and negotiated his masculinity within his particular context, and the pressures he experienced in doing so. It was evident that heterosexuality was a fundamental part of his life, something that I had not been aware of, despite being a teacher in the Foundation Phase (FP)<sup>3</sup> of schooling. As my study progressed, I became progressively more aware of the importance of gender and sexuality in the lives of young boys and, simultaneously, of the importance of conducting this study on young masculinities. My central focus, throughout the thesis, is to examine ways in which young boys construct, perform and enact masculinities, and how they are active gender and sexual agents.

Kanelo's words also indicate that socioeconomic and racial factors shape the construction of masculinities. All the research participants were low-middle to lower class Indian and black boys,<sup>4</sup> and this study offers unique insights into how they constructed their masculinities amid the influence of specific socioeconomic, racial, political, historical, and cultural conditions and conditionings. In doing so, I aim to contribute to the growing field of research on young masculinities in South Africa by considering its local manifestations and gendered performances, which is often missing in research, as Gottzén et al. (2020) point out.

## **Research Background and Focus of the Study**

Over the past decade research on masculinities has shifted from essentialist renderings which worked to homogenise identities, towards a conceptualisation that they are multifaceted and socially constructed (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Stahl, 2020). Engaging with masculinity

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<sup>3</sup>In South Africa, the Foundation Phase refers to Grades 0 to 3. These learners are generally aged 5–9; the Intermediate Phase comprises of Grades 4 to 6 and the Senior Phase comprises of Grades 7 to 9 (Department of Basic Education, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> South Africa has a unique political and historical landscape that arose out of apartheid and colonialism. Under apartheid, people were categorised as black, white, Indian, and coloured (mixed race). Black could mean African, Indian or coloured. These categories are now used for social redress in order to give opportunities to black people who were disadvantaged by apartheid.

as a social construct involves moving away from rigid norms of gender and homogenous perceptions of identities. Instead, there is a focus on masculinities as having diverse patterns and outcomes which vary according to culture, and which change over time (Connell, 1995). For example, some men may resist masculine power while others may encourage it, and some men may conform to traditional masculine norms—for example in order to sustain patriarchal dividends—while others may challenge them (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Indeed, in contemporary society in South Africa, the hegemonic pattern is celebrated as supreme and advanced by male power, which is exercised over other masculinities and femininities. Connell (1995) defined hegemonic masculinity as daily social practices or behavioural patterns that define appropriate and normal ways of doing masculinity based on binary positions whereby men are viewed as strong, and muscular, and women are assumed to be passive, docile, and nurturing. Hegemonic performances are also inextricably linked to dominant sexual discourses such that being an ideal male means projecting a recognisable heterosexual identity (Butler, 1990; Swain, 2006a). The discourses premised on heterosexuality and hegemonic masculine power permeates life—especially institutional life—and the education sector is no exception.

The study of masculinities in South African schools has flourished in the past decade in the wake of feminist-inspired understandings of young children (see, for example, Bhana, 2016a; 2020; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021). These studies have found that young boys employ a range of hegemonic practices informed by conventional gender and sexual discourses which govern the negotiation of masculinities at school. They have rendered visible the various ways through which heterosexuality is practised by boys as a powerful marker of masculine success. They have also raised concerns that little attention is given to gender and sexuality, and the ambiguity of boys' heterosexual cultures, particularly in primary schools. This is because primary schools are generally perceived as asexual and gender free arenas (Bhana, 2020). Indeed, adult discourses of childhood tend to separate children from the social world, and to regard them as passive recipients who lack the power to construct meaning in their lives. However, a growing body of research, shaped by feminist poststructuralist approaches, has objected to the uninterrupted ways that children's sexualities in early childhood are positioned as innate, predetermined, and asexual (Bhana, 2020; Callahan & Nicholas, 2018; Kelly-Ware, 2016;

Kostas, 2021; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021; Morison et al., 2021; Xu, 2021). These studies have also highlighted that young children are key agents in constructing their own gender and sexuality.

While studies on young masculinities are well established on a global scale (Bartholomaeus, 2013; Bryan, 2019; Gansen & Martin, 2018; Huuki & Renold, 2016; Renold, 2007; Swain, 2004; 2006a; Xu, 2020), the gradual increase of research in the South African context has argued for a more nuanced understanding of gender by considering the local contexts through which masculinities are produced (Bhana, 2016a, 2020; Mayeza, 2017a; 2018; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020; Moosa, 2021; Pattman & Bhana, 2021). Examining the construction of masculinity among Indian and black primary school boys is fundamental to research on young masculinities in South Africa because they have rarely featured in studies.

This is the key motivation behind my study: Within the chapters that follow I focus on the complexities, contradictions and diverse ways in which boys construct and negotiate their masculinities across various social contexts. I illuminate how boys' investment in a range of practices marked by heterosexual pleasure, physical and fighting prowess, and gender inequalities are key to the ways in which they define and consolidate their masculinities thus highlighting the visibility of sexuality and violence in the primary school. In so doing, I show that my participants' understandings and perceptions of gender and sexuality undermine the facile notion of children as unprotesting, blank slates.

In researching boys' masculinities I am guided by the premise that identities are particularly racialised, gendered, and class-oriented (Frosh et al., 2002; Stahl, 2020). Even though apartheid officially ended more than a quarter of a century ago, it continues to pervade race relations and inequalities in South Africa (Bhana et al., 2021; Graaf & Heinecken, 2017). The contexts in which my research participants lived were historically specific and culturally and socially diverse. I therefore consider how historical and contemporary factors have impacted on racialised encounters between Indian and black people, and the ambivalences evident in their relations, even at primary school level (this is a key focus of Chapter 2).

In her research, Bhana (2016a) has shown that primary schools are central sites for the construction of gender and sexuality. She found that the authoritarian and static gendered institutional arrangement at the school contributed to teachers' binary expectations of girls and boys, and conventional notions of masculinities and femininities were fervently policed and regulated as the norm. Building on work such as Bhana's, my study also seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of masculinities through the narratives of FP teachers. I focus, in particular, on how teachers' perceptions of masculinity, sexuality, and violence shape the manner in which masculinities are produced and regulated in the primary school. I also show how male and female teachers differ in terms of their discipline strategies as they reinforce gender norms and hegemonic masculinity. The voices and observations of teachers enabled a broader lens for my analysis of young boys' masculinities.

The qualitative and ethnographic nature of the study also allowed for my analysis to extend beyond educational spaces to the social context of families where masculine subjectivities are also produced—as well as contested. Through emphasising boys' agency, I focus on how they actively connect with their social world to create meanings of gender and sexuality which are both contested and appropriated through family structures. As Nelson et al. (2015) argued in their paper on the intersections of race, class and gender in boys' education, researching boys in cultural contexts and the broader social spaces has the potential to reveal more about the variation, ambiguity, and heterogeneity of boys' identities.

Given my focus on a particular cohort of boys, their low-middle to lower socioeconomic (school and family) contexts, specific ages, and racial profiles, this study offers a unique Southern perspective into young masculinities in South Africa. Following Keddie (2003, 2020), I show that there is a great need to expand research in the field of childhood masculinities. As Keddie argues in her work on young masculinities in Australia, the early years of primary schooling is an ideal time to support young children's agency, and address harmful projections of masculinities as a means of promoting gender equality. To situate my study within the current debates on masculinities, the following sections provide a brief background on the key ways in which masculinity is produced and negotiated.

## **Masculinity: Examining the Concept**

Connell's (1995) theory of masculinity remains influential in the field of men and masculinities. She incorporated race, class, culture, and sexuality in her analysis to demonstrate the rich variety of masculine expressions, which contribute to diverse outcomes within different social contexts. Identity categories such as race, class, age, religion, home life, sport, media, and friendships are pertinent to shaping both the individual and collective sense of being male. These variables intersect, infuse, and overlap in countless ways, resulting in the construction of plural masculinities over time. Connell (1995) identified four categories of masculinities: hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and marginalised (see Chapter 3). These forms, she argued, are not fixed to a static identity; rather, within any given setting, more than one version of masculinity is negotiated.

Hegemonic masculinity has been a significant tool in research on masculinities and gender. It spearheads the gender order and drives expectations of what being a “real” man involves—which is generally linked to the quest for status and power. However, scholars have raised concerns about how hegemonic masculinity has been used to theorise masculinities, particularly in the South African context. For example, in his paper on moving towards African-centred theorisations of masculinities, Mfecane (2018) argued that masculinity theories in the Global West do not completely account for the multifaceted and compound life experiences of men and boys in South Africa, as they fail to consider how the core basis of social life among South African people is nuanced by race, class, poverty, economic marginalisation, and cultural influences. For instance, circumcision, as a cultural ceremony in black communities, marks a transition into puberty and manhood, and stick fighting prepares young black males to become “fearsome warriors” by entrenching aggression and male power (Carton & Morrell, 2012).

Moreover, in their research on hegemonic masculinity in South Africa, Morrell et al. (2012, p.12) argued that contemporary South Africa cannot be understood without taking into account its history—particularly given the divided economic and political landscape, and the extent of race, class, and gender inequalities. They employed hegemonic masculinity to explain male power, historical shifts, and fluidity in the contradictions evident in the construction of

masculinity in South Africa. The authors proposed that at least three forms of hegemonic masculinity existed: “white masculinity”, which represented the political and economic governance of the white class; a rural “African masculinity”, which was entrenched in indigenous institutions such as customary law and chiefship, and “black masculinity” that occurred in the background of urbanisation, and culturally diverse and geographically separate black African townships. Almost a decade later, these ideas of variations in the construction of hegemonic masculinity remain of critical value in understanding masculinities in South African township settings (Pyke, 2020).

Violence, according to Pyke (2020), has become a key feature of masculinities, sustaining a form of hegemonic masculinity that has been adopted in response to the oppressive system of apartheid. This includes the construction of heroic, struggle, or street masculinity, which is characterised by hegemonic notions of strength, endurance to pain, and the enforcement of violence. However, not all boys and men draw on this hegemonic version of masculinity: some may project hegemonic masculinity at particular times, but at other times and in other contexts they may choose to strategically distance themselves from hegemonic concepts.

This study highlights the social processes through which identities are formed, nuanced by race, socioeconomic class, age, gender inequalities, and sexuality, all of which, I argue, contribute to fluid and plural patterns of masculinities. I show how hegemonic power is complex and shifting, and demonstrate that it is not inherent to a particular race, class, or social context. Rather, it plays out differently within different socioeconomic and cultural situations. In the following subsections I draw on the notion of hegemonic power to examine how heterosexuality and violence are employed as key components in the construction and negotiation of hegemonic masculinities in South Africa.

### *Negotiating Heterosexuality in South Africa*

Within the past three decades, feminist-studies have increasingly shown that heterosexuality shapes and regulates the lives of young children (Huuki & Renold, 2016; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019; Paechter, 2017; Renold, 2007; Robinson, 2013, Thorne, 1993). Paechter’s (2017) work on young

children and sexuality in Western contexts revealed that heterosexuality steered boys to express their masculinities in accordance with the dominant sexual norm. This is widely referred to as hetero-normativity—a norm of heterosexuality based on a binary conceptualisation of sex. Not only does it imply “normal” sexual expressions (for example, attraction to the opposite sex) but it is also practiced as a “normal” way of everyday life: hetero-normativity is thus reproduced in daily life, in talk, relationships, and the everyday routine performances within which sexuality, heterosexuality and gender overlap.

In the South African context, the dominant discourse of heteronormativity was an integral part of colonialism and apartheid. Western colonialist dominated sexuality discourses in Africa through religion and in Southern Africa these discourses were founded upon Christian principles (Tamale, 2011). Herein, heterosexuality was promoted as natural and correct in a moral sense, while miscegenation and homosexuality were criminalised (Judge, 2017). Indeed, colonialist norms served to deny the morality and existence of homosexuality and sought to establish a heteronorm which enforced strict gender and sexual ideologies. Variations of sexual identities were strongly condemned since it served to subvert conventional gender hierarchies and relations (Tamale, 2011). According to Judge’s (2017) study on sexuality, gender, and race in South Africa, the binary representation of heterosexuality in South Africa was seen as normative and African, while homosexuality was considered to be deviant and Western. However, Epprecht (1998) has argued that sexuality in Africa is complex since colonialism did not introduce homosexuality in Africa, rather colonialism introduced an intolerance of homosexuality and enforced systems of sexual regulation. McAllister (2013) further noted that sex between African men was largely discouraged in African societies not because it was seen as immoral or for religious reasons, but because of the impact on the patriarchal principle and importance of male sexuality for the purpose of procreation. Nonetheless, same-sex sexualities were considered as cursed and something to be cured in society through religious practices. Patriarchal discourses and religious regulations of sexuality carried from colonialism are active and continue in the current structure of globalisation (Weiringa, 2009). Nkrumah (1965, p.239) explained that “modern attempts to perpetuate colonialism while at the same time talking about “freedom” has come to be known as neo-colonialism”. The civilising mission of colonialism is reformulated in ways to reinforce heterosexuality as the natural order and existing without contradiction. Indeed,

men and masculinity in contemporary South Africa remain largely aligned to heterosexual practices based on male domination, multiple partners, and sexual entitlement—which, according to the dominant discourse, result in unwanted pregnancies, sexual violence, as well as HIV and AIDS (Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Morrell et al., 2012). Heterosexuality is therefore fundamental to the (re)production of hegemonic masculinities and femininities. While South Africa’s post-apartheid democratic constitution protects the right to sexual orientation (Republic of South Africa, 1996), sexual rights are fraught with challenges, particularly in cases where strict traditional norms regarding normative masculinities are enforced in societies. Unless African sexualities are decolonised to explore new frontiers of knowledge and a reconceptualisation of dominant gender and sexualities, heteronormativity remain reinforced in contemporary society against the backdrop of colonial and apartheid framings of sexuality (Tamale, 2011).

In the context of schooling, Ngabaza and Shefer (2019) argued, in their research on sexuality education in South African schools, that instead of challenging the normative gender and sexual order and facilitating agency, schools have sought to regulate and discipline young sexualities along hetero-normative and gender binary discourses, while silencing sexual diversity—sexual diversity refers to expressions and embodiments of gender that do not align and conform to traditional binary norms (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005). However, ideas of childhood sexuality have changed significantly over the years and South African scholars such as Mayeza and Bhana (2019) have challenged fixed constructions of sexuality and called for a broader focus that encompasses factors such as race, gender, class and sociocultural conditions through which meanings of sexuality are produced. They have demonstrated that young children’s sexual agency—through their investment in heterosexual pleasure and violence in the form of homophobia—is shaped by race, class, and cultural contexts. Drawing on this body of scholarship, my study is guided by the premise that children are active agents who construct their identity through their daily interactions and performances. My analysis of heterosexual masculinities (see Chapter 8) situates young boys as fundamentally gendered sexual agents who are complicit in maintaining a hierarchy of masculine identities that shape the way their own masculinities are constructed within their particular social context. From the start, this

perspective helped to steer this study towards research that prioritises the experiences and views of children as significant, diverse, and valuable.

In the next sub-section I provide a background on the extent of violence in the South African context and then discuss how the level of violence in society has implications for boys' negotiation of violence in schools.

### *Gender Violence in South Africa*

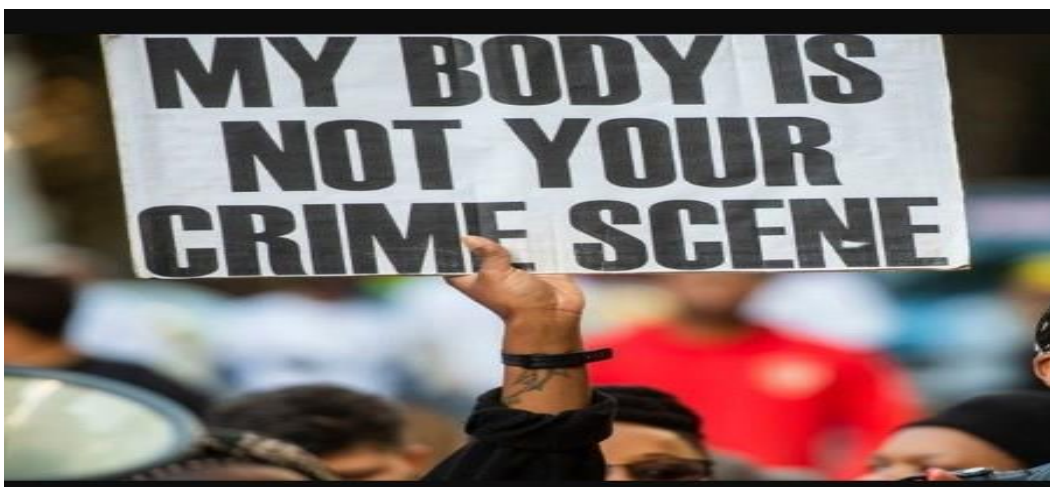
This section focuses on violence, demonstrating the economic, cultural, social and political factors that impact upon and enable violence in South Africa. I follow Leach and Mitchell (2006) in arguing that all forms of violence are gendered, and that a gendered lens should thus be employed to understand violence. Although significant strides have been taken to reduce violence in post-apartheid South Africa, according to the 2018 Global Peace Index it is still ranked 38 among the 163 most violent places in the world. Globally, South Africa has the highest murder rate. In 2020 the South African Police Services (SAPS), reported 21,325 murder cases, which works out to approximately 58 people murdered every day. In the second quarter of 2021 (July 2021–September 2021), SAPS indicated an increase of 20.7% in the murder rate from the previous year. While these figures are alarming, they do not reflect the true levels of violence as many more incidents go unreported due to a lack of trust in the criminal justice system (SAPS, 2021).

Women as victims of violence have come under sharp focus over the past year as police reports and media have covered horrific cases of the rape, murder and maiming of children and women within their homes and communities. In September 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa expressed his commitment to ending gender violence in South Africa, following the death of 19-year-old, Uyinene Mrwetyana, a Western Cape University student who was raped and murdered outside a post office in Cape Town. Her death and the death of a 28-year-old pregnant woman who was stabbed and found hanging from a tree in Johannesburg, Gauteng province led to widespread protests calling for an end to the silence and surge of gender violence (see Figure 1). In June 2020, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) reported the double rape of a

grandmother, aged 51-years-old, and her 7-year-old granddaughter in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. It was alleged that the 51-year-old grandmother opened the door to an unknown suspect who threatened her with a knife before raping her and the 7-year-old. In another incident, which occurred north of Durban, a man was arrested for repeatedly raping his 15-year-old stepdaughter. Almost half (46%) of reported cases of sexual abuse and rape in South Africa concern women and children experiencing violence perpetrated at the hands of people who were meant to protect them (National Strategic Plan [NSP], 2020).

Violence in South Africa continues to rise each year as sexual offences and reported cases of rape increased by 7% in 2021 (SAPS, 2021). The growing rate of rape and sexual abuse indicates that gender violence has become hyper-endemic and affects everyone, irrespective of age, gender, race, or geographical location. South Africa's battle to address issues of gender violence, unemployment, and inequality has been further exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, which has increased the surge of violence in the country. In his address to the country, President Ramaphosa stated "We note with disgust that at a time when the country is facing the gravest of threats from the pandemic, violent men are taking advantage of the eased restrictions on movement to attack women and children" (CNN World, 2020, p.1). Because of the extent of rape and sexual abuse, South Africa was ranked in 2020 as one of the most unsafe places for women (NSP, 2020).

**Figure 1:** The rape and murder of 19-year-old, Uyinene Mrwetyana led to widespread protests across South Africa calling for an end to the silence and surge of gender-based violence in the country (Source: BBC News, 15 November, 2019).



A growing body of research in South Africa have recognised a wide range of factors which should be considered when examining the cause and effects of violence (Bhana et al., 2021; Gevers et al., 2013; Gibbs et al., 2020a; Graaf & Heinecken, 2017; Hodes & Gittings, 2019; Morrell et al., 2012; Shefer, 2021). These studies demonstrate that violence has been a part of South African society for decades, entrenched in colonial and apartheid history, along with high levels of income inequalities, poverty, gender inequalities, patriarchal power associated with hegemonic masculinity, and male sexual entitlement. The notion of hegemonic masculinity has been used widely by these local scholars to explain South Africa's violent society. Men have been found to employ a range of practices associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as taking on the economic provider role in the household, engaging in sexually risky practices, using physical strength to dominate and overpower women and girls, and aspiring towards a dominant heterosexuality which perpetuates widespread homophobia. Moreover, a combination of wider political and contextual factors—including income inequalities, marginalisation, deprivation, and conflict—encourage men to be prone to aggression and to utilise violence to resolve conflict.

Graaf and Heinecken (2017) noted in their case study on men's understandings of masculinities and gender violence in South Africa that, during the apartheid era, the formation of a hierarchy of races resulted in racist propaganda and the dehumanisation of black people. Violence was used by the apartheid government against subordinated groups of people (mainly people of colour) who also used violence as a method to resist the oppressive system. Violence thus became a key feature of masculinities, adopted in response to the oppression of apartheid, and normalised as an acceptable way to respond to conflict (see Chapter 2). Additionally, racial disparities entrenched under the apartheid system resulted in disparate opportunities and a vast income inequality gap between the middle-upper class minority (mainly white) and the working-class majority (mainly black). The deprivation suffered by the majority as a result of the apartheid system, and the unchecked growth in income inequalities since, has been noted by Graaf and Heinecken as possible reasons for the current levels of violence in the country.

According to Statistics South Africa (2021), an estimated 32.6% of South Africans are unemployed—which is also a strong predictor of high rates of violence. Gibbs et al. (2020b) have argued that men's inability to meet the social expectations of manhood—because of

unemployment and the low levels of economic development in South Africa—has contributed to a masculinity crisis, whereby violence is employed as an alternative strategy to achieve masculinity. Indeed, their study on the implementation of gender transformative programmes with young black males in informal urban settlements found that when men were faced with the pressures to live up to normative hegemonic ideals—such as being economic providers—they compensated for their failure with violence. However, they argued that while violence in South Africa is exacerbated alongside economic inequalities, unemployment and apartheid, it is also a global problem, committed by all social groupings, prevalent in all societies worldwide (see, too Graaf & Heinecken, 2017).

Gender inequality is another factor that contributes to violence in a myriad of ways. Indeed, much has been written on a global scale about patriarchy and men's role as economic providers, signifying the prominence it holds in households worldwide (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2020; Helman et al., 2019; Pyke, 2020). The South Africa Bill of Rights prohibits discrimination of any person(s) based on gender and affirms that all South African citizens should benefit from equal rights (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Notwithstanding legislation, violence and gender inequalities continue to be widespread across racial and cultural lines in South Africa, and are particularly prevalent in societies with traditional norms regarding the position of women—norms which tend to position women as passive and subordinate to men. Gibbs et al. (2020a) found that men's perpetration of physical and sexual violence against women in South Africa, and women's experiences of this, is rooted in patriarchal belief systems and social norms which create a context that fuels gender violence and inequalities. Additionally, traditional and cultural expectations of manhood that centre on male entitlement and inequitable gender relations are key in legitimating the use of violence against women as acceptable and unchallenged. In her study which sought to examine women's sexual vulnerability in South Africa, Nduna (2020), too, found that physical and sexual violence perpetrated onto women, linked to patriarchal notions (including women's financial dependence), was among the most prevalent form of violence in South Africa. Sexual violence occurs throughout the country and is a common experience for many young girls and women in South Africa.

Hegemonic masculinities linked to sexual dominance, male coercion, and violence has also worked against the country's efforts to reduce the HIV infection rate (Gibbs et al., 2015; Hodes & Gittings, 2019). According to Statistics South Africa (2020) the estimated number of people living with HIV has increased from approximately 3.8 million in the year 2002 to 7.8 million in 2020. An estimated one fifth of women in South Africa aged 15–49 are HIV positive. Women are regarded as lacking agency to control sexual encounters because men's desires are often prioritised. Women are therefore at a greater risk of HIV and AIDS infections (Gibbs et al., 2015). In addition, Holborn and Eddy (2011) argued that high youth unemployment rates correlate with sexually risky behaviour which further contributes to the high rates of HIV infection.

In their South African study on men's hegemonic construction of masculinity, Jewkes et al. (2015) raised concerns that men who commit violence against girls and women are also likely to use violence to exert power and authority over other men— including gay, transgender and other non-conforming men. Msibi (2018) came to similar conclusions in his study of masculinities and homophobia in South Africa, adding that male violence, whether physical or verbal, was highly gendered and caught up in dominant notions of masculinity. As Judge (2017) established, patriarchal norms and hetero-normative attitudes and beliefs maintain a discourse of masculinity in which homosexual behaviour is considered unacceptable and deviant. This construction of masculinity has fuelled violence in the form of hate, discrimination, and homophobia directed at non-conforming gender identities. For example, in April 2021, 34-year-old Sphamandla Khoza was the victim of a homophobic hate crime: he was stabbed to death and dumped in a trench because of his non-conforming sexuality (SABC News, 2021). Members belonging to the LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer) society gathered at the magistrates court in Durban and pleaded for the court to deny bail to the perpetrator, who had handed himself over to the police. In another incident at a Durban high school in June 2021, 29 year old bigender (having two interchangeable and fluid gender identities) teacher Serbash Thumbadoo was discriminated against by the school principal and a member of management after attending school dressed in a knee-length skirt, stockings, and ankle boots. According to Serbash he was treated unfairly by school management and he reported the matter to his teacher union, arguing that he had not breached any of the school's policies or its code of conduct.

Homophobic and transphobic violence remains a threat to the livelihood of gender diverse and transgender people and one of the most pressing concerns in South Africa is the killing and violence of transgender people, including black women in rural areas. According to Furman et al., (2019) transgender is a broad term used to refer to individuals who do not identify with the gender and sex that they were assigned at birth while non-binary gender refer to individuals who do not identify with the gender and sex assigned at birth and they express their gender in a myriad of ways which can alternate between masculinity and femininity or be exclusively masculine or feminine (Furman et al., 2019). A survey conducted by Sutherland et al., (2016) on South African attitudes towards gender non-conformity reported that participants of their study had admitted to physically harming women who they judged for transgressing gender expressions and roles.

In many South African families children are implicated in gender inequalities and male violence. In their study of men and childcare in South Africa, Morrell et al. (2016) found that men who employed violence against women were also less likely to care for their children. Indeed, child abuse is pervasive in South Africa. According to Meinck et al. (2016), who conducted research in South Africa on the prevalence of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse estimated 56.3% of children aged 10–17-years-old experienced physical abuse, while 35.5% experienced emotional forms of abuse, and 9% experienced sexual abuse—often perpetrated by caregivers, relatives, or teachers. Meinck et al. (2016) stressed that the effects of violence on children can include an increased risk of child trauma, behavioural problems, poor social functioning, drug and alcohol abuse, and poor mental health outcomes. Additionally, in her study on gender violence in education, Parkes (2015) argued that experiences of violence within the home are more likely to result in children’s perpetration of violence outside of the home, thus contributing to a vicious intergenerational cycle of violence.

South African schools are not spared from the scourge of violence and gender inequalities so rife in society (Bhana et al., 2021; Bhana & Pattman, 2011). Because of the extent of violence that transpires within the broader social environment, schools have become central sites in which complex ideologies and gender norms are accommodated, reproduced, and contested. In the following section I examine the pervasiveness of violence within South African schools.

## **Masculinity, Violence, and Schooling**

Violence is common in schools worldwide, and this poses a major obstacle to gender equality (Bhana et al., 2021; Pinheiro, 2006). An estimated number of 246 million children around the world are affected by violence in schools, and this violates their right to basic education and learning in a safe environment (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2017). According to UNESCO (2017, p.20) gender violence within school involves “acts or threats of sexual, physical or psychological violence occurring in and around schools, perpetrated as a result of gender norms and stereotypes, and enforced by unequal power dynamics”. Violence occurs within different school spaces including classrooms, playgrounds and even outside of school, as noted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (2016, p.5):

Acts of violence take place inside an educational institution, when travelling to and from school or a school-related event, or during such an event. This violence typically takes the form of learner-on-learner, learner-on-teacher, and teacher-on-teacher and teacher-on-learner violence and severely disrupts the normal functioning of the school system.

Extensive research in South Africa has demonstrated that violence and crime is a common feature of many schools (Bhana et al., 2021; Makota & Leoschut, 2016; Mayeza et al., 2021; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018a; Parkes, 2015). Various media sources, too, have reported that the scale of violence in schools has reached alarming proportions in South Africa (Mail & Guardian, 2021; SABC News, 2021). While significant strides have been taken to address the surge of gender-based violence through ongoing protests in the country, school bullying has also garnered much attention as the most common form of violence. SAPS (2020) indicated that between April 2019 and March 2020 there had been 345 cases of serious assaults and 546 cases of common assaults perpetrated with the intention to cause bodily harm which were filed as a result of bullying in schools. Incidents of school bullying included nine cases of murder and 19 cases of attempted murder recorded by police in 2020.

The scourge of bullying in schools came under sharp focus in April 2021, following the death of 15-year-old, high school learner Lufuno Mavhunga in South Africa's Limpopo province. Lufuno took her own life after being assaulted by a fellow learner outside the school. The incident went viral on social media resulting in the arrest of her 14-year-old female perpetrator (Mail & Guardian, 2021). The Mail & Guardian (2021) further reported a series of school-related incidents of violence in South Africa. For example, Lineo (pseudonym), an 11-year-old girl in Kimberly, Free State Province, was bullied at her primary school, and stole money from her home to pay for her protection from the bullies. She was the victim of stabbing with pencils, was suffocated with a plastic bag, and had her hair cut off by the perpetrators. The bullying she experienced resulted in her self harm: she slit her arm and refused to attend school.

Primary school boys are also victims of bullying. Speaking at a provincial hearing in Limpopo province on bullying, corporal punishment, and sexual relations between learners and teachers, hosted by the South African Rights Commission, the parent of an 8-year-old boy revealed how her son was bullied for money at his primary school. He resorted to stealing money from her handbag to placate the bullies. The parent recalled a time when she had been a victim of bullying at school due to her dark skin tone (Mail & Guardian, 2021). As Mayeza et al. (2021) explained so well in their study of girls' negotiation of sexuality in South African high schools, the wider societal conditions of intersecting race, gender, ethnicity, and class inequalities shape the kinds of behaviours and relations in which learners engage in school. Indeed, socioeconomic constraints related to race and class inequalities are factors that provide particular contours for the perpetuation of violent behaviour in South African schools.

Tradition and culture are also key elements that lead to the perpetuation of school violence. In 2021 the Mail & Guardian reported how some school boys had been discriminated against and subordinated for not attending initiation school.<sup>5</sup> Some were victims of stabbing; others were prohibited by hegemonic masculine boys from using the school toilets. Mfecane (2018) explained that manhood status is grounded in the physical body, and that being traditionally

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<sup>5</sup>An initiation school in South Africa involves the traditional practice or ceremony of male circumcision among African people, mainly Xhosa speaking. This is a 3-6 week long period during which boys aged 16-20 are initiated into manhood through circumcision and cultural teachings (Gittings et al., 2021).

circumcised is an indication of manhood. Cultural practices such as initiation into manhood and masculinity are significant to boys' reception in schools.

In South Africa, the developing body of research on gender violence in primary school contexts (Bhana, 2016a; Bhana & Mayeza, 2019a; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021; Parkes, 2015), along with existing research on a global scale, firmly links school violence to the production of masculinities and fixed notions of masculine power (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2016; Lunneblad & Johansson, 2021; Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Swain, 2003). Despite the prevalence of school violence around the world, there is an apparent lack of research on violence in primary school contexts, largely due to the conjecture that primary schools are non-violent spaces and to a belief that young children are primarily victims—not perpetrators—of violence (Mayeza & Bhana, 2020). However, studies to date—such as Mayeza and Bhana's (2021) study on gender bullying and male power and Moosa's (2021) study on violent masculinities at a South African primary school—provide empirical evidence that boys are not merely submissive victims of violence: they actively reproduce and contest hegemonic masculinity through acts of violence. They often control most of the school spaces and violate girls' activities by excluding them from playground spaces and enforcing sexual forms of violence against them.

According to UNESCO (2019), in sub-Saharan Africa 48.2% of young people experience sexual and physical bullying at schools. In South Africa, school girls experience misogyny and sexual violence in the form of abuse, harassment, and even rape. In August 2021, SABC News reported the suspension of five general workers at a primary school in Pretoria, Gauteng Province, following the rape of a 6-year-old, Grade 1 female learner in the schools toilets. The distraught victim has not returned to school due to the fear and trauma she experienced.

Ngidi and Moletsane (2018b) revealed in their study of secondary school learners' experiences of bullying that many young girls experience danger and risk of violence when teacher supervision is absent or minimal and where there is no proper security, particularly in the toilet spaces. Given the cultural expectation of male hegemony, ensuing unequal sexual relations and violence increase the subordination of girls within gendered hierarchies. Indeed, research conducted in primary schools worldwide has revealed that sexualised violence is fundamental to

the construction of embodied masculinity and to the achievement and expression of male power (Bhana, 2016a; Bartholomaeus, 2013; Huuki & Renold, 2016; Renold, 2005; Paechter, 2017).

Although girls emerge as the primary victims of violence, boys are not spared as they, too, fall victim to violence perpetrated by other boys and girls. Bhana's (2016b) study on the construction of masculine bodies in the primary school revealed that fighting prowess, bodily strength, toughness, and emotional neutrality were key components for the construction of violent, hegemonic masculinity. Bodily markers such as muscularity served as a source of power and status. Violence was used on younger boys, particularly those who were considered to be weak and less masculine. Bhana (2016b) demonstrated that this was mainly because hegemonic masculinity attains power by differentiating itself from subordinate and less powerful masculinities. Violence inflicted onto less masculine boys is also deeply connected to sexual orientation. According to Mayeza and Bhana (2020), in their study on young boys' negotiation of violence, sexual norms and performances are under constant surveillance and violence is employed as an important means to police sexuality. They found that violence was a strategy used by hegemonic masculine boys to encourage conformity with normative positions of masculinity. Boys who deviated from the conventional norms—such as those embracing gay masculinities—were likely to be policed through a myriad of strategies involving bullying, teasing, and exclusion. Indeed, policing normative sexuality through violence and subordination are central features of the daily construction of masculinity and, as Mayeza and Bhana (2020) note, is prevalent in school playgrounds—which they depict as gendered battlefields of intimidation and power struggles, rather than merely spaces for fun and games.

School rules and teachers' responses to boys' behaviour also shape the manner in which young boys experience and enact their masculinities. Boys' hegemonic behaviour is often normalised in the school. As Bhana (2016a, p.65) argues, the dominant "boys will be boys" discourse stems from innate assumptions which suggest that the aggressive, mischievous, and sexual tendencies that young boys display at school are natural, innocent aspects of their behaviour. In turn, boys have an opportunity to engage in various violent practices which are often left unproblematised. For example, boys often draw on characteristics associated with hegemony—such as physical, verbal, and heterosexualised violence which are considered pre-determined and natural

masculine attributes. This makes male violence difficult to address as both younger people and the broader society tend to condone or trivialise it (Bhana, 2016a).

Even at times when hegemonic behaviour requires intervention, violent strategies are used by school teachers as a means to discipline the boys. According to the 2020 South African Council for Educators (SACE) report, the top three categories of misconduct from teachers were corporal punishment and assault (38%), sexual misconduct and rape (22.18%), and verbal abuse and harassment (16%). Despite the ban on corporal punishment in South African schools, corporal methods to discipline learners are supported by teachers as the most fitting way to respond to violent expressions of masculinities. Hunter and Morrell (2021), in their South African study on the practice of corporal punishment in schools, found that boys were mostly inflicted with harsh physical punishments rather than girls. It is also widely considered to be the only way to respond to boys' physical prowess and aggression. Consequently, corporal punishment in schools is a form of gender violence that results in aggressive and violent behaviours that are normalised and perpetuated—even into adulthood (Hunter & Morrell, 2021).

Children are thus socialised along traditional gender roles due to the dichotomous and cisgendered separation of boys and girls which perpetuates gender inequalities and unequal power relations. Instead of passively accepting traditional norms dictated by the binary gender order, Bhana (2020) argued that children can actively and agentially construct, negotiate, and contest subjectivities of gender within—and also beyond—the constraints of dominant gendered discourses. Because masculinity is fluid, even subordinated boys are able to find ways to privilege power and resistance to violence instead of being fixed to a single pattern. Boys who are most vulnerable to violence at school can either resist violence entirely or become involved in a complex negotiation of masculinities. While the perpetrators of violence employ strategic agency to sustain and conform to hegemonic power, subordinated boys draw on resistant agency to challenge this power by using violence themselves, hence both victims and perpetrators are complicit in supporting and reproducing male power. However, violence is not always a predictable outcome as some boys, drawing on resistant agency—where they have the power to object to the use of violence entirely— can position themselves in more caring, peaceable ways, thus rejecting hegemonic versions of masculinity.

As established earlier, gender violence is connected to local socioeconomic and cultural conditions and to broader social structures which constitute a particular context for the performance of masculinities. Returning to Mayeza and Bhana's (2020) study on primary school boys' negotiation of violent masculinity in lower socioeconomic settings in South Africa, they revealed that the high unemployment rate, fragile families, and poor households, created a context through which violence was perpetuated in fights for food and money in schools. They emphasised that while Western studies on violent masculinities revealed forms of violence characterised mainly by teasing, rejection, and exclusion from peer groups perpetrated by high status boys, in the South African context they found there were more physical forms of violence such as hitting, punching, and fighting for food and money. Violent masculinities, they argued, were constructed within a social context of rising unemployment, poverty, and inequality.

The local manifestation of masculinity and violence in the primary school intersects with the variables of race, sexuality, social class, and culture and these variables shape how boys construct, perform, and experience gender within the context of school—and beyond (in their families and neighbourhoods). An examination of the socioeconomic context is therefore needed to understand the causes of violence and how it affects the construction of gender and sexuality (Bhana et al., 2021). Examining the level of violence and masculinities in South Africa underscores the need to work with young boys towards promoting gender equality and encouraging alternate responses to address violence in schools.

### **The Research Context**

This study was conducted in the town of KwaDukuza which is located on the East Coast of KwaZulu-Natal. KwaDukuza, commonly referred to as Stanger, was founded by the late isiZulu<sup>6</sup> warrior, King Shaka.<sup>7</sup> A national monument built in his honour after his demise constitutes the cultural heritage site and main tourist attraction of the town.

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<sup>6</sup>isiZulu is South Africa's most widely spoken language. Over one quarter (25.3%) of individuals in South Africa speak isiZulu at home (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

<sup>7</sup>King Shaka Zulu (1816–1828) was a famous isiZulu warrior who founded the Zulu kingdom by occupying most of the KwaZulu-Natal province. He fought countless wars against other African tribes and defeated them using his brilliant war strategies and the invention of weapons such as the spear (Carton & Morrell, 2012). He was assassinated in 1828 by his two step brothers.

Recent crimes in the town have left many residents concerned about their safety. SAPS (2020) revealed that KwaDukuza had the most number of contact crimes, with 2446 cases committed in 2019—this is an increase of 106 cases of crime committed in the previous year. The top five categories were robbery, assault with the intent to harm, malicious damage to property, sexual assault, and attempted murder. According to Dlamini (2020), KwaDukuza had an alarming increase in sexual abuse and rape incidents in 2020, with two to three cases being reported to the police on a weekly basis. Most victims were 3–18-years-old. Women were often targeted on their way home from work and after leaving the taverns (bars) and taxis. There were cases of rape perpetrated by ex-husbands, ex-boyfriends, or someone within their residence. In some cases the alleged rapist would offer money to the victims if they would withdraw the case. The poor socioeconomic conditions of victims and their families often makes them vulnerable to accepting money—and hence withdrawing charges (Dlamini, 2020).

Ratele (2017), in his study on masculinities, sexualities, and tradition in KwaDukuza, argued that traditional norms underpinned men’s oppression towards women and also resulted in the marginalisation of other men. He found that the dominant hetero-patriarchal discourse, which was embedded in tradition, regulated gender and sexuality and entrenched power and privilege for heterosexual men. Tradition and geographical location also shaped how masculinities and sexualities were constructed and perceived. He used the example of a traditional gay wedding which was held in KwaDukuza to illustrate his argument. In 2013, Thoba Calvin Sithole and Tshepo Cameron Modisane were married in what came to be known as the first black gay wedding ceremony in the town. While many were supportive of the wedding as signifying a shift towards gender diversity and a challenge to traditional sexual norms, others—especially those within the close community of the Zulu’s (isiZulu speaking inhabitants of the town)—were against it. KwaDukuza has considerable cultural and traditional significance for Zulu people. Historically, heterosexual relationships and marriage was essential to the reproduction of dominant ideologies of sexuality and the construction of manhood. Hence deviance—in this case gay masculinities—presents a potential challenge to the traditional masculine and sexual order, especially in small towns such as KwaDukuza, and township areas. Moreover, dominant gender discourses of masculinity within the black community render queer or “gay” sexualities largely invisible (Judge, 2017; Ratele, 2017).

Through colonialism, conservative Christian principles and missionary ideologies were embedded into local custom and tradition which reproduced gender as a binary and sexuality was controlled within hetero-normative boundaries which upheld the masculine status of men. Within racialised same-sex encounters, the sexuality of black men were considered to be deviant and shameful because black men were expected to be hypersexual and also feared (Bhana et al., 2021). Culture, religion and class combined to define sexuality in deeply oppressive ways. Although such discourses continue in contemporary South Africa, the wedding alerts us to the decolonising power of resistance to dominant sexual norms which served to constrain sexual diversity. De-colonialism refers to ways in which Westernised epistemologies and knowledge systems can be deconstructed and the widening of decolonisation movements in spaces and among people who have experienced apartheid, colonialism, neo-colonialism and slave trade where the domains of culture, religion and aesthetics remain colonised (Chitando & Mateveke, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Tamale, 2011).

While the wedding accommodated alternate sexual desires, it also destabilised homogenous perceptions of queerness as belonging to urban, Western cultures, by showing that alternate sexualities are visible in a culturally respected and historical place such as KwaDukuza. Despite the predominance of violent masculinities in the town, the wedding showed that alternate masculinities are also evident. This marked a significant shift away from hegemonic constructions of masculinity, and opened up a space to accommodate and support alternative versions of masculinities, peaceable gender relations, gender diversity, and gender equality in KwaDukuza.

The site of my study, Willow Primary School (pseudonym) is a quintile five<sup>8</sup>, co-educational, public school, situated in the predominately Indian setting of Stanger Manor, KwaDukuza. Under apartheid the school was classified as “Indian only”, however at the time of the study the school had 762 Indian learners, 239 black learners, seven coloured (mixed-race) learners, and three white learners. The end of apartheid in 1994 resulted in the dissolution of racial segregation

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<sup>8</sup> In South Africa, public schools are graded into categories known as quintiles, on a ranking scale ranging from one to five. The quintile system is sensitive to inequalities and poverty: quintile one refers to the poorest, no-fee paying schools that are allocated a higher subsidy from the state, while quintile 5 schools are fee-paying schools.

in the country and brought racial transformation to the schooling sector, whereby children from black townships, for example, migrated to formerly Indian, coloured, and white schools (Everatt, 2014). The diversity of race, class, culture, and ethnicity at Willow Primary School made it an ideal site for conducting research.

Established in 1982, the school was built to accommodate and provide Foundation to Intermediate and Senior Phase education to learners. The school caters for learners from Grade R (5–6-years-old) to Grade 7 (13-years-old). The annual school fees are R1500 for Grades 1–7 and R3500 for Grade R. Concessions are granted to the few parents who are unable to afford school fees due to financial constraints. The school is well-maintained and well-resourced with facilities such as a staffroom, admin block, computer lab, library, tuck-shop, and a sheltered assembly. There are also sporting facilities such as a cricket pitch and soccer ground; equipment for table tennis, chess, and volleyball; and a jungle gym area. Except for cricket, both girls and boys are actively involved in all the sports. Despite its diversity, English is the preferred language of instruction and almost all learners are proficient in the language. Some of the challenges faced by the school at the time of this study included large class sizes, with a maximum of 44 in each class. The coronavirus pandemic has recently brought further challenges as many parents are unable to settle the school fees due to unemployment and other financial constraints. While the school had a small number of white and coloured learners, they either did not meet the age requirements, or did not sign consent for participation in the study. There were no white male learners in Grade 3 at the time: all the participants were Indian and black. The diverse racial and economic context of Willow Primary School provided an opportunity to examine how Indian and black school boys construct and experience masculinities within their own unique social context.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Study**

Stanger Manor, the site of my study, is a lower-middle income area in which violence is not uncommon. Indeed, it has made national headlines for several incidents of crime, such as the murder of a 24-year-old man at a bus terminal located near Willow Primary School in 2017. Three suspects were arrested for savagely beating the victim to death during a fight (Singh, 2017). The suspects, aged 22, 24 and one minor, resided within the area and came from

prominent, wealthy families. Learners from Willow Primary School, who live in the surrounding areas, wait at the same bus terminal after school. Following the incident, many learners spoke about the news in school—it was the talk of the corridors, at lunch time and other breaks. In 2020, a well-known Grade 3 teacher, Mrs Diaram (59-years-old), was found murdered in her Stanger Manor residence. The residents, teachers, and learners mourned the loss of a dedicated and inspiring teacher. While Mrs Diaram had reported being a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her husband in January 2020, the police ruled him out as a suspect in the murder (Dlamini, 2020).

This evidence of violent crime in Stanger Manor indicates that there is a dire need for young boys to be brought into the conversation of addressing and eradicating violence (Bhana, 2020). As a FP teacher I witness young boys' performance of violent masculinities through acts of bullying, fighting (punching, kicking), and imitating the behaviour of the older boys at school. Indeed, FP teachers at the school have repeatedly expressed concern about the violent behaviour of young boys. I have also observed how gender inequalities ensue from the ways in which teachers respond to girls and boys, and how corporal punishment is enforced in gendered ways. Because of this, I have included teachers' voices in this study in order to gain a deeper insight into how masculinities are regulated and policed in the school.

From an early age, boys learn that hegemonic ways of being are ideal ways of achieving and expressing male power (Renold, 2007). However, children under the age of 10 rarely feature in research on young masculinities, or in interventions that target boys in working towards gender equality (Bartholomaeus, 2013; Bhana, 2020; Keddie, 2020). The discursive positioning of childhood as a period of innocence has constrained any collaboration between childhood research and gender and sexuality. With this study I aim to bridge this gap and gain a broader insight into how young primary school boys construct their masculinities within a range of social contexts that are underpinned by gender, race, class, culture, and sexuality. I argue that the early years of primary schooling are a crucial time to address the violence and inequalities that exist within the cultural and social context from which the boys emerge, and to work with them to enable their agency, challenge dominant hegemonic discourses, and develop gender equitable and non-violent relations.

## **Key Research Questions**

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of how primary school boys construct and negotiate masculinities in South Africa, the following key research questions guided this study:

1. How do 8–9-year-old primary school boys construct and negotiate their masculinities?
2. How do boys construct and negotiate sexuality and why is this relevant to the construction of masculinities?
3. How is violence entrenched in notions of masculinities?
4. In what ways do race, class, culture, and the broader social context shape the way masculinities manifest?
5. In what ways do teachers' perceptions of gender and sexuality in the primary school contribute to boys' negotiation of masculinities?

## **Structure and Brief Outline of the Chapters**

**Chapter One:** *Introduction to the Study: How Young School Boys Construct and Negotiate their Masculinities.*

This introductory chapter outlines the scope of the study, including the main focus and background. The discussion of masculinities, sexuality, and violence highlights the key ways in which masculinities are achieved and negotiated. Through problematising how boys invest in hegemonic masculinity, heterosexuality, and the procurement of male power through forms of violence, I emphasise the need to work with boys from a young age to promote gender equality and encourage their agency, in particular resistant agency, as a necessary response to challenging hierarchal structures of power and hegemonic norms. The overview of the field site offers a contextual background to the study, and the aims and objectives highlight the main argument.

**Chapter Two:** *Race and Class: Contextualising Masculinities in South Africa.*

This chapter provides a rich contextual background to Indian and black identities in South Africa. It details the social and gendered relations between Indian and black people within the

nexus of race, power, and class, and how these feature as key dimensions through which masculinities are constructed and negotiated. Moreover, in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of how Indian and black masculinities manifest, the chapter examines how Indian and black relations are shaped through historical events and contemporary legislation.

**Chapter Three:** *The Theoretical Framework.*

Through presenting an overview of the theoretical perspectives I apply to examine the construction of young masculinities, this chapter demonstrates that a feminist poststructural theorisation is useful for deconstructing young boys' constructions of masculinities. I draw on research that has applied gender theories to frame boys' active production and negotiation of gender and sexuality. Connell's (1995) theory of masculinities offers a particularly useful lens to understand how boys construct their masculinities and how power and violence is entrenched in this construction. I show how this theoretical framework informed both the methods and analysis of my research.

**Chapter Four:** *Literature Review: The Early Makings of Gender, Sexuality, and Masculinities in Primary Schools.*

Detailing the contingencies and contradictions that young boys face in their construction and negotiation of masculinities, Chapter 4 provides insights into boys' engagement in heterosexual practices, thus contesting the depiction of children as without sexual agency. I show that the school is an important site where children reproduce and challenge masculinities, and that teachers play an essential role in promoting and regulating particular versions of masculinities.

**Chapter Five:** *Literature Review: Boys and the Negotiation of Violent Masculinities.*

This chapter demonstrates how boys actively engage in, resist, and contest various forms of violence under particular social conditions. It draws on several studies on masculinities in the primary school in order to show that violence is a visible part of school life. Although I present literature on young boys' construction of violence as a strategy to achieve masculine power, the chapter does not focus entirely on boys as being fundamentally violent. Instead, I show that race, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural values are key factors that should be considered in order to recognise why boys both use and contest violence.

**Chapter Six:** *Research Design and Methodology*

This chapter describes the methodological approaches I used, discussing the research design, the nature of the study, and the methods of collecting and analysing the data. I discuss how the poststructural, feminist perspective guided the process of conducting interviews with young children and how reflexivity was achieved. I also describe the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness of this study, ethical measures and finally, limitations of the research.

**Chapter Seven:** *Beyond Violence: Young Boys and the Negotiation of Masculinities*

Focusing primarily on the plural and complex ways in which boys endorse, contest, and reject violence in constructing their masculinities, I show, in this chapter, that violence was not an inevitable element of masculinities. It was, rather, dependent on contextual situations. I describe how some boys adopted peaceable subject positions, thus challenging hegemonic concepts. The chapter provides rich data describing the racialised divisions between Indian and black boys, but how a shared solidarity is formed when these boys come together in challenging situations.

**Chapter Eight:** *Race, Class and Masculinities: Boys Negotiating Heterosexual Masculinity in the Primary School.*

I demonstrate, in this chapter, that boys are active sexual agents who engage in various heterosexual practices which act as a significant marker of successful masculinity. I describe how race and class structures intersect with young masculinities to create hierarchies of power as boys navigate the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality. Boys' investment in the male provider role and in aspiring to material shows of wealth—such as wearing expensive clothing—are key ways in which they engender heterosexual relationships, which were also nuanced by race and class. While such practices defined boys' masculinities, the failure of some to conform to normative masculine behaviour subjected them to homophobic teasing. This highlighted the regulatory mechanisms through which heterosexual masculinities were policed.

**Chapter Nine:** *“Be a Man”: Boys' Talk about Gender in Families.*

This chapter examines masculinities in the context of families, focusing on how the broader historical and sociocultural context of race and class in which families are located affect how masculinities are negotiated. While boys spoke about family in relation to the reification of

gender binaries, their performances of masculinities were not entirely reiterative of these norms. Instead, boys challenged, negotiated, and resisted dominant discourses based on hegemonic patterns related to gender roles, sexuality, and violence. Through emphasising boys' agency, I show that dominant discourses which position children as irrational, blank slates need to be contested.

**Chapter Ten:** *Masculinity, Sexuality and Violence in School: Insights From Foundation Phase Teachers.*

This chapter foregrounds teachers' observations and experiences of boys and violence, thus providing a different slant to understanding boys' masculinities. I examine how teachers' perceptions of and responses to gender and sexuality affect how masculinities are regulated in the school. I demonstrate how traditional subjectivities of gender and sexuality result in teachers refuting and dismissing the primary school as a gendered and sexual site—and the strategies they employ to achieve this. I also discuss teachers' experiences of addressing boys' violence in school, and how this impacts on the construction of masculinities.

**Chapter Eleven:** In the concluding chapter of this thesis I highlight the main findings which emerged from the data. I suggest interventions that could be implemented in order to address harmful constructions of masculinities and stress the importance of supporting boys with strategies to resolve violence and to develop peaceful relations with each other, including respect for alternate identities.

## **Chapter Two: Race and Class: Contextualising Masculinities in South Africa**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight how a multitude of factors which impact on the ways in which Indian and black identities are constructed and reconstructed in South Africa. These include race, class, culture, history, and geographical location. I also focus on how social relations between Indian and black people are shaped by varying degrees of domination and subordination.

The school where this study took place was 75% Indian learners and 24% black learners. Under the apartheid regime the school was only open to Indian learners who came from the surrounding areas of KwaDukuza. Apartheid's tricameral system of racial segregation meant that people could only participate in the affairs of their own communities (Brauns & Stanton, 2016; Everatt, 2014; Naidoo & Cartwright, 2018). The system comprised the House of Assembly (the white representatives), the House of Delegates (Indian representatives), and the House of Representatives (coloured representatives). Indian education was controlled by the House of Delegates. The desegregation of Indian-only schools began before the formal end of apartheid, and by 1990 increasingly high numbers of black people were seeking admission to previously "Indian only" schools, as in most cases these were the closest to the black townships (Lemon, 2008). All South African schools are now expected to admit learners without any reference to race, gender, ethnicity, culture, or ability to pay school fees (Department of Basic Education, 2021).

In South Africa, there are still concerns over the ways in which the historical positioning of race continues to ascribe stereotypes to Indian and black people based on certain historical discourses—and how dominant gender discourses and subjectivities of race are also actively reinforced in families, schools, and the broader social community (Bhana, 2016c). However, there remains a paucity of research which details the social interaction between Indian and black people, with a few exceptions (see Thiara, 2001; Vahed, 2005). While studies on race in South Africa have often focused on black–white relations or Indian–white relations, analyses of racial

and ethnic conflict within black–Indian relations is often missing (Vahed, 2005). A key objective of my study is to address this gap in research by examining the manner in which Indian and black boys construct meanings of masculinities in their racialised encounters with each other. In this chapter I show that these encounters are mediated by long established racial differences and power inequalities which are imbued by a history that has shaped social interactions and racial subjectivities.

I first provide a rich contextual background on Indian identities, followed by a historical overview of Indian and black relations, including their social interactions, and a discussion about how racial subjectivities of Indian and black people emerged. I demonstrate that masculinities were shaped through historical events and contemporary legislation. This contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how contemporary Indian and black masculinities manifest in South Africa.

### **Indian Identities in South Africa**

Colonialism has left a permanent mark on racial and gender structures everywhere in the world—not least in South Africa (Mfecane, 2018). Several South African scholars have documented how, under British colonial rule, Indians came to Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) in 1860–1911 to work as indentured labourers or as free traders (Bolsmann & Vahed, 2017; Freund, 1995; Hiralal, 2016; Hughes, 2007; Vahed, 2019; Vahed & Desai, 2017). Under British rule, most Indians were distressed and despondent, and departure from India was their last resort to escape the harsh environmental working conditions there. The indenture system was used to provide cheap, disposable, and docile labour for the benefit of expanding British capitalism in South Africa (Vahed, 2005; 2019). Indentured labourers were contractually bound to work in South Africa for a period of 5 years and were offered a fixed wage. They came from various parts of India, bringing with them diverse cultural values and traditions (Rabe, 2018). Some two thirds came from Southern India—the Tamil and Telugu-speaking regions—and the remaining third arrived from the Northern, Hindi-speaking regions (Desai & Vahed, 2012). Almost 60% of workers were assigned to sugar production while the remainder were allocated to railway, municipal, commercial, and mining employers. On arrival, Indians grouped themselves

according to language, caste, and religious categories, which formed a hierarchal structure among the Indian population. Traditional forms of hierarchy related to caste resulted in some Indians being appointed as supervisors or *sirdars* in the fields (Vahed, 2005, p.241). The white authorities instructed the Indian supervisors to enforce beatings on those who failed to comply in the fields.

The arrival of Indians in South Africa is important for understanding masculinity in the country. According to Connell (1995) masculinity is constructed through interaction—in this case interaction with the colonial state, colonial employers and fellow indentured workers, the native black population, and Indian traders. White hegemony was constituted along racial lines which was a central feature of the colonial project. The system of indenture was not only a system of labour but also an important strategy to gain social control and preserve white power (Thiara, 2001; Vahed, 2005). Violence was legitimised and humiliation was inflicted on Indian workers by white authorities. The labourers worked in harrowing conditions and were overworked and poorly housed in crowded, insanitary quarters (Hughes, 2007; Vahed & Desai, 2017). Supervision of their work was harsh, and movement was tightly regulated: Indians could not travel more than 2 miles from the estates without written permission from white authorities, and legal action was taken against those who failed to comply with the regulations, were unproductive, refused to work, or absconded (Vahed, 2019).

Vahed (2005) demonstrated in his research on indentured Indian labour in South Africa that these experiences were crucial to the formation of Indian masculinities. The use of violence against Indian workers was a manifestation of white hegemonic masculinity, to which Indian workers remained submissive. Protesting against the harsh conditions was almost impossible. Their use of non-violent means of resistance<sup>9</sup>—and their failure to oppose the colonial authorities—resulted in a marginalised Indian masculinity and gave rise to homogenising stereotypes of Indian men as timid and unmanly (Vahed, 2005; Valiani, 2014).

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<sup>9</sup> Between 1893 and 1914, Mahatma Gandhi led the struggle for Indian rights in South Africa against the exclusionary policies of colonial white settler regimes (Vahed, 2019). An iconic concept linked to Mahatma Gandhi was his commitment to the concept of *ahimsa*— a non-violent means of political resistance.

Masculinity was not only forged in the daily work conditions but also within families and during leisure activities. Indeed, cultural, religious, and caste ties were central to how Indian masculinities unfolded. Vahed (2005) described how, during leisure time, many workers on the estates engaged in a canteen culture of alcohol consumption and gambling, which informed the creation of hegemonic masculinities, including behaviours involving physical violence. Hiralal's (2016) comparative study of indentured and non-indentured Indian migrants in South Africa revealed that almost 62% of Indian migrants were male, a ratio of 7 men to 3 women. This gender imbalance had consequences on how masculinity was expressed in work, relationships, leisure activities, and family life—particularly as most men were left without female companions. For those who did have families, these took the shape of nuclear units within which the man assumed a central patriarchal role as the economic provider while the women were concerned only with the domestic sphere and were largely excluded from social activities (Hiralal, 2014; Rabe, 2018).

Chopra's (2005) study on family, schooling, and migration in India explained that, in traditional Indian families, young boys are groomed to be breadwinners and future heads of the household, while young girls and women, as Hiralal (2014) described in her study on South African women and migration, are usually socialised into primary roles as mothers and wives. The few women who do work earn half of what men earn. Being economically dependent on men made women legally and socially vulnerable.

While Vahed (2005) noted in his study that many non-married men became skilled in domestic tasks—which may occasionally have influenced a more equal gendered division of labour—most endeavoured to achieve the ideal patriarchal family life—which reinforced unequal divisions of labour. Vahed also stressed that brutal working conditions and harsh penalties for misdemeanours—such as imprisonment for petty theft—often resulted in the separation of men from families and unstable family lives. Indeed, colonial concepts of masculinity and patriarchy served to privilege men and subordinate women. This often manifested in men employing violence against children and women in the domestic sphere as a means of validating their self-worth.

After serving indenture, Indians had a choice to return to India or be granted a portion of land in Natal (Freund, 1995; Hughes, 2007). Despite the unbearable working conditions, the majority remained in the country to work as small-scale labourers, government workers, house servants, and fisherman (Desai, 2019). In the 1880s–1890s, Indians from the North-West of India migrated to Natal under their own steam, as entrepreneurs, traders, and professionals, in order to supply the needs of their labouring compatriots (Vahed, 2019; Yengde, 2021). They were distinct from the majority because of their economic class and language—they were predominantly Gujarati speaking. They saw themselves as British imperial citizens and sought equal rights with the white settlers. The Indian diaspora thus reflects differentiated and diverse identities, as Thiara (2001), in her research on ethnic identity, demonstrates. Despite being homogenised and collectively labelled as “coolies<sup>10</sup>” there are extreme differences between those who left Southern India as indentured labourers to escape poverty and the economically well-off entrepreneurs from the North-West of the country.

Indian identities have undergone significant changes since Indians first arrived in South Africa. Over 95% of South African Indians regard English as their first language, and feel that the caste system has eroded, along with other markers of Indianess (Desai, 2019; Vahed & Desai, 2010). The post-apartheid era has led many to go in search of their roots. Connection to their homeland has been kindled through a variety of ways, including Indian cinema, cricket, and social networking (Desai, 2019).

South African Indians now constitute one of the largest diasporas outside the Indian subcontinent, and currently make up 2.6% of the South African population (Statistics South Africa, 2021). KwaZulu-Natal has the largest Indian population in South Africa—indeed of any region in the African continent (Khan, 2017). Migratory experiences, religion, linguistics, caste, and economic status form a complex hierarchy of relations within the Indian population, resulting in Indian identities being continuously constructed, deconstructed, and remade (Desai, 2019). Most Indian people have roots spanning 4–5 generations in South Africa and are highly unlikely to immigrate to India (Vahed & Desai, 2010).

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<sup>10</sup>The word “coolie” refers to labourer; however it is also regarded as a derogatory or racist slur among South African Indians (Vahed, 2019).

With economic success, family lives are changing, but conservative gender and cultural discourses continue to permeate the home—and women’s domestic roles as caregivers are still seen as inviolate. Family honour and reputation coalesce with religious discourses to reify gender and generational inequalities—within which sexuality is also closeted (Bhana, 2016c). Young people are therefore under immense pressure to behave in ways that support the maintenance of patriarchal standards of respectability and reputation—which includes restricting the expression of sexuality.

Although Indians were politically disempowered, they fared better economically than black people, while still remaining subordinate and marginalised under white authority (Thiara, 2001). Studies have shown that, on the whole, contact between Indian and black people during the colonial era resulted in racial tension (see Thiara, 2001; Vahed, 2005). In the following section I provide a brief historical overview of how historical events and contemporary policies have shaped Indian and black relations.

### **Historical Overview of black-Indian Relations**

During the colonial era, black workers were pitted against Indian workers, with the former enforcing beatings on the latter if they absconded from work, for example (Vahed, 2005). The daily lives of Indian and black people were marked by the struggle for survival in the face of low wages, extreme poverty, high unemployment, and housing shortages which heightened competition and this fuelled tension between the Indian population and the black population (Vahed & Desai, 2017). Freund (1995), in his book on the Indian working-class of Durban in the 1900s, described how further tensions mounted post-indenture when large areas of farmland in Natal were leased to small-scale Indian food producers, resulting in the rapid emergence of Indian people as reliable food producers. By the 1940s, Indians had developed a strong trade infrastructure and were monopolising the transport sector, serving not only the white sector but also the black population (Freund, 1995; Vahed & Desai, 2017). The Indian working-class thus contributed significantly to the economic and commercial infrastructure of Natal. Industrial growth, changing social and material conditions, and increased militancy were integral to the formation of Indian identities (Freund, 1995; Vahed & Desai, 2017).

Hughes (2007) claimed that although Indian agriculturalists were well entrenched in their small-scale agricultural production, supplying towns with fresh produce, black hunger worsened. Black people were particularly troubled by Indians who had been given good portions of land, while the black natives had been given the vilest land within the district (Vahed & Desai, 2017). Black people who lived in close proximity to Indians and competed with them directly in the economy often considered them as standing in their way of economic progress and upward mobility. They expressed their grievances, saying, for example, that the Indian traders were overpriced, that they were mistreated on Indian-owned busses, that high rentals were charged by shack landlords, and that economic competition between Indian and black people was problematic (Vahed & Desai, 2017). Black workers felt that Indians enjoyed a privileged position in Natal and that their economic advancement was restricted because of the dominance of Indian businesses in the city (Freund, 1995). This gave rise to racial tensions and violence in Durban—for example the 1949 Cato Manor riots, the Inanda riots in 1985 and most recently the looting of Indian businesses in 2021 in Phoenix.

In 1949 Indian landlords and traders came under attack from black people in Cato Manor, Durban, who felt that Indian businesses were a threat to their economic livelihoods. Thiara (2001) explained that riots escalated from a brawl between an Indian shop owner and a black boy to violence against Indian people and their property on an unprecedented scale. According to Thiara (2001) the riots led to a total of 142 deaths, 1082 injuries, and the destruction of 247 houses and 58 stores which left a stubborn mark on the emotional state of South African Indians. Three decades later, there were the 1985 Inanda riots in Durban. These grew out of the same tensions as the 1949 riots: another deep phase of economic crisis in the region. The Inanda violence resulted in the destruction of Indian property and houses. The 1949 and 1985 riots were the largest historical events generated by racial tensions between Indian and black people in Natal (Thiara, 2001; Vahed & Desai, 2017). Members of the Indian population were homogenised as exploitative economic traders and subsequently stereotyped as an advantaged racial group which limited the economic progress of black people (Vahed & Desai, 2017).

This history of economic inequality and violence helps to shed light on the tensions that continue to exist between black and Indian people in contemporary South Africa. Even though the 1949

riots lasted for only 3 days, they left a deep psychosocial legacy which informs the way Indian and black people perceive each other. Thiara (2001) argues that the impact of the riots became rooted in people's memories and has been reinforced over the years. The impact of the riots therefore remains—to date—as mutual stereotyping, and suspicion and distrust of one another persists.

The homogenising effects of race were further reinforced by apartheid policies such as the Native Land Act 27 of 1913 which was intended to dispossess the native black people of their land and to organise population resettlement and territorial segregation against them. Despite being the majority, black people were confined to ownership of 7–8% of land only within pre-existing native black reserves and later this was increased to 13% by the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936 (Cordeiro-Rodrigues & Chimakonam, 2020). They were unable to purchase land outside of the scheduled reserves or occupy white areas unless they were under white authority.

Apartheid's enactment of the 1950 Group Areas Act (which resulted in the legal segregation of black, Indian, white, and coloured people along racial lines) succeeded in their intention to divide and rule and further entrenched and reinforced racial divides and distrust (Desai, 2019; Morrell et al., 2012; Yengde, 2021). Long established Indian traders and families were forcibly relocated to Indian-only township areas in Durban, such as Chatsworth and Phoenix, and their previous settlements were re-zoned for emerging white merchants only. As a result their economic and cultural life was turned upside down, and some became severely impoverished (Desai, 2019; Vahed & Desai, 2017; Thiara, 2001). Freund (1995) wrote about how the process made the Indian population acutely aware of their vulnerability to the power structure of the city—which was defined in racial terms—and their alienation from that power structure. The Natal Indian Congress and the Transvaal Indian Congress both played a crucial role in protesting against the Group Areas Act, which they considered a threat to the existence of the Indian community. They called for an improved future for Indian as well as non-white groups of people, following Gandhi's strategy of passive, non-violent resistance (Yengde, 2021).

Along with the Group Areas Act, several other laws were passed to ensure the segregation of the races. For example, the 1969 Mixed Marriages Act prohibited marriage between people

belonging to different racial groups, and the Bantu Education Act of 1953 brought in a curriculum that would only impede the advancement of black learners so that they could not aspire to higher economic positions in the country. The education that black learners received was designed to equip them with the skills needed to serve their own people in their homelands<sup>11</sup> or to work in the labouring sector under white authority. The result of this system was the creation of a society where inequality became a defining feature (Desai, 2014).

When South Africa became a Republic in 1961, the state recognised Indians as a permanent part of the population and withdrew the measures to repatriate them. The state sought to co-opt them into initiatives, such as the South African Indian Council established in 1964—to secure concessions in shipping and transport. However, the city centres and mining sectors remained the preserve of white capital (Desai, 2019; Vahed & Desai, 2017). Nonetheless, Indians accumulated capital through family-owned businesses, mainly in the textile and clothing industries and in retail trade (Freund, 1995). Increased economic mobility was further advanced through the expansion of schools, technical colleges, and universities in Natal. Many new graduates found jobs as professionals, especially in the engineering and building sectors (Freund, 1995). The civil servants in government bodies and the education sector constituted the core of a new Indian middle-class, while the working-class benefitted from the employment of mainly women in the clothing and textile industries (Desai, 2019; Freund, 1995).

The political transition to a democratic South Africa in 1994 recognised the multicultural nature of South African society and aimed to bring people together as equals through embracing diversity and non-racialism. South Africa was declared a “Rainbow Nation”<sup>12</sup> to welcome the changing cultural and racial practices. However, the new ANC (African National Congress) government continued to use racial categories as the basis for implementing affirmative action

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<sup>11</sup> Under the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act “homelands,” or bantustans were scheduled for black occupation. Between 1976 and 1981 independence was granted to four of these so-called “homelands”: the Venda (1979), Transkei (1976), Bophuthatswana (1977), and the Ciskei (1981).

<sup>12</sup> The term “Rainbow Nation” was originally proposed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe an ideal democratic and post-apartheid South Africa in which all racial groups worked as equal participants in the creation of an egalitarian society (Sidanius et al., 2019)

policies (Vahed & Desai, 2010). The introduction of post-apartheid Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and affirmative action advocated for business opportunities and economic employment for previously disadvantaged people—including black, Indian, and coloured people, as well as all women (white and black). These strategies were intended to redress the gender and racial imbalances that were the consequence of apartheid. The aim of the South African government was to offer preferential treatment to previously disadvantaged groups of people, generally as means to compensate them for the effects of past discrimination and to make sure that they enjoyed similar benefits and opportunities enshrined in the new constitution. This compensation involved providing opportunities in sectors such as education, government contracting, access to housing, and inclusion in sporting teams.

As studies have described the policy was controversial. For instance, although Indian and coloured people fell under the broad umbrella of “black”, black people were seen as the group that had been most oppressed and therefore they were the main beneficiaries for redress. While apartheid legally separated the races, affirmative action and the ensuing continued inequitable access to resources played a hand in reproducing stereotypes in new ways (Vahed & Desai, 2010; 2017). Allocations for housing, education, and welfare were deemed to be equalised under affirmative action, but it was more difficult for Indian people to secure jobs and places at universities. In other words, there were parallels with apartheid in the discriminatory ways that BEE, affirmative action and the resource distribution occurred, and this further entrenched a sense of racial separation in the country (Vahed & Desai, 2017).

The functioning of BEE has also been condemned for benefiting a black elite, whilst the majority black population is yet to realise the opportunities which are available to them (Archibong et al., 2013). BEE, which advocated for business opportunities and economic employment for black people, led to the emergence of a wealthy black middle-class, benefiting a minority rather than uplifting society as a whole. The new lifestyle of middle-class black men reflected a common notion of hegemonic masculinity based on economic success being regarded as a marker of the ideal man (Pyke, 2020).

Race continues to operate in contemporary South Africa as a substitute for relative advantage, despite the democratic attempts in a move towards a non-racial society. Tensions between Indian and black people have become a persistent feature of the South African landscape. Although many Indians do continue to hold positions as shopkeepers, for example, the stereotypes of them as exploitative traders remain strong (Vahed & Desai, 2010). The country's history is marked by a violent and brutal struggle over land: the forcible displacement of the black population entrenched violence among black men (Morrell et al., 2012), and continues to shape the construction of black identity today, as I discuss in the following section.

### **Black Identities in South Africa**

According to Morrell et al.'s (2012) paper on hegemonic masculinity in South Africa, because of the country's turbulent past, black men turned to violence in order to challenge the separatist laws which left them economically impoverished and socially marginalised. Unjust laws, racial discrimination, the subjugation of black people, and the appropriation of land and resources all contributed to shaping the political, economic, and social structure of the country. Political violence was common during the apartheid era, and those who resisted were punished through beatings, torture, and arrests. This violence has had an impact on the manner in which black masculinities were constructed, compounded by the hegemonic norms that have traditionally informed male violence. As Morrell et al. (2012, p.20) said, "historically, the ideal form of masculinity included an acceptance (cultural legitimacy) of the widespread use of violence (gendered practices)".

Pyke (2020) demonstrated, in his research on the construction of masculinities in a South African township setting, that the drive for mineral wealth led to a heavy reliance on the exploitation of black male migrant labourers. The migrant labour system meant that black men had to leave their homes in rural areas for long periods of time in order to find employment in mining and urban areas. Indeed, migrant labour was integral to how dominant masculinity—based on men as economic providers—and patriarchal notions were defined. In the context of socio-political inequalities, economic malaise, and men's inability to adhere to cultural expectations around provider masculinity, violence was often a resource through which perceived male weakness was

mediated (Silberschmidt, 2001). With black men unable to achieve normative expectations around masculinity—combined with broader social, economic and political marginalisation—aggression, violence, and exaggerated claims to power in the home and elsewhere seemed to strengthen a sense of masculinity (Pyke, 2020).

According to Ratele and Nduna’s (2018) overview of fatherhood in South Africa, the legacy of apartheid and colonialism also influenced men’s role as fathers. The migrant labour system, for example, resulted in destabilising family lives as fathers were mostly absent, and socioeconomic challenges linked to unemployment and poverty were also influential in contributing to the absence of fathers. This was further exacerbated by traditional and cultural customs such as *ilobola*<sup>13</sup> and *Inhlawulo*<sup>14</sup>. As Hunter (2006) explained in his study of South African fatherhood, even though a man may accept the paternity of his child, owing to his unemployment status it was unlikely that he would pay for *ilobola*, and this contributed to the absence of fathers in the home. Women further restricted men’s contact with children if they were unable to financially provide. Although traditional understandings of hegemonic masculinity have positioned fathers as largely absent, emotionally distant, and uninterested, they have also informed the belief that men should be financial providers—and that this should grant them power, authority, and status within heterosexual nuclear families (Helman & Ratele, 2016). To date, black men fulfilling the role of economic provider denotes successful hegemonic masculinity and serves as a fundamental foundation of fatherhood (Helman et al., 2019). However, Moosa and Bhana (2019) argued in their analysis of male role modelling in South Africa that an overemphasis on men as economic providers limits the possibilities of alternative fathering roles. Despite efforts towards forging more caring masculinities, men are still expected to economically support the family and thus sustain hegemonic norms. They are therefore in constant battle to comply with masculine norms and hegemonic standards—and this is likely to constrain their involvement in childcare.

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<sup>13</sup>*ilobola*—“bride wealth” or “bride price”—is the property in kind or cash which a prospective husband or the head of his family offers to the head of the prospective wife’s family for customary marriage (Ratele & Nduna, 2018, p.75).

<sup>14</sup>*Inhlawulo* is the price an unmarried man is required to pay to a girl’s family for impregnating her (Hunter, 2006).

Young black boys thus construct their masculinities within the nexus of dominant, patriarchal structures, the violence that is part of the legacy of apartheid, and traditional and cultural practices. For example, Carton and Morrell (2012) described how stick fighting moved with migrant labourers to the urban areas as a form of sport that has shaped generations of men into manhood. Stick fighting historically prepared black boys to be formidable men, promoting the characteristics of aggression associated with hegemonic masculinity. Such notions continue to shape hierarchies of patriarchy and peer competition among black boys (Carton & Morrell, 2012).

Shefer (2014) explained in her paper on South African men's pathways to gender equality and justice that there is often a binary separation of gender and race which has resulted in the outsourcing of patriarchy as something belonging to blacks whilst other groups in South Africa are rendered invisible in relation to gender practices and norms. The effect of this position is the location of male violence as a uniform experience among black men and boys, dangerously reproducing racist apartheid narratives. While identities in South Africa are indeed exacerbated by the effects of apartheid, Shefer (2014) has argued that black identities are locally specific and diverse. In this sense it is worthwhile noting that identities cannot be determined by race only, and that it is essential to acknowledge the broader social context which offers varying experiences and different ways of constructing identities (Hendricks et al., 2019; Shefer, 2014; 2016). Considering this, I argue in my study that Indian and black identities are not essentialist renderings of gender or race; instead, the history of apartheid has produced varied versions of masculinities shaped by widely divergent geography, sociocultural context, and class. These axes of difference shape the varying ways in which masculinities are formed, contested, and accommodated (Morrell et al., 2012; Shefer, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I presented a contextual background on Indian and black identities showing how the forces of race, class, culture, religion, and the historical legacies of colonisation and apartheid have shaped the construction of masculinities, racial subjectivities, and race relations between black and Indian people in South Africa. As I show in the chapters that follow, framing South

African masculinity around the specificities of race, class, and historical underpinnings is key to understanding the unique ways in which boys position their individual masculinities.

In the following chapter I present the theoretical framework I used in my research examining the construction of young masculinities. The chapter offers a more nuanced background to the fluid and complex ways in which masculinities inform the everyday gender and sexual practices of young primary school boys.

## **Chapter Three: The Theoretical Framework**

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the theoretical perspectives and key concepts of gender, sexuality, and masculinities which form the framework for my study. I begin by highlighting gender as a social construct and provide a critique of essentialist and sex-role theorisations of gender. The feminist poststructural perspective is useful to my study as it enables me to conceptualise young boys as active agents who construct their masculinities. I discuss Butler's (1990) theorisation of the heterosexual matrix, showing that dominant (hetero)sexuality and gender are inextricably intertwined and are crucial to boys' production of masculinities. Thereafter I present an overview of Connell's (1995) theory of masculinities. Her revised understanding of masculinities as plural and negotiated in fluid ways within different social and cultural contexts is particularly important to my study because my participants are Indian and black boys who emerge from different social and cultural backgrounds and therefore the manner in which they construct their masculine subjectivities are diverse and varying. I also show, drawing on Foucault (1978), how power related to gender and masculinities are fluid and shifting. Finally, I highlight current initiatives that encourage men and boys to construct caring masculinities.

### **Gender and Sex-Role Socialisation: A Critical Examination**

According to Connell (1987), early understandings of gender were examined alongside biological and essentialist thinking where, in essence, individuals were identified solely by their genetic makeup which was used to categorise male and female. Biological determinism and socialisation were based entirely on this understanding, which placed males and females in a fixed dichotomy based on their physical makeup. Paechter (1996) speaks of gender assignment, which refers to the gender that people are socially assigned according to their biological sex. This, she highlights, becomes problematic when gender assignment is wrongly aligned with the gender that the individual personally identifies themselves with.

This brings us to the term “gender identity” which involves a person’s own feelings about who they are and how they choose to position themselves in contrast to their socially assigned gender. Ultimately, socialisation theories are rooted within binary notions of gender because they prescribe how individuals should behave based on how they are perceived to be (either as male or female), instead of how they personally choose to be. Through the socialisation process, gender norms—which comprise rules that a given society believe are appropriate for males and females—are promoted and regulated. Social theorists have argued that gender norms and values are passed along via a top-down approach through socialisation agents such as schools, family members, parents, teachers, and the community (Giddens, 1992; Gottzén, 2018). Performing gender correctly means acting according to one's essential self—but only if it is a self that is supported by society.

However, failing to act or comply with gender norms results in heavy penalties enforced by society—often in the form of exclusion or violence (Butler, 1988). Indeed, categorical thinking and socialisation entrenches unequal gender relations of dominance and subordination within a hierarchical order in which differences between women and men are naturalised. Connell (2002) critiqued this notion, arguing that thinking of gender in fixed, homogenous, binary categories (male/female) is particularly problematic because often males are privileged over females in a perpetual imbalance of power. Connell (2002, p.9) stated that “gender must be understood as a social structure, it is not an expression of biology, nor a fixed dichotomy in human life”. She therefore challenges the view that gender is monolithic and individuals are passive regarding socialisation. Instead, she established that individuals are guided by their own beliefs which are intrinsically motivated. Indeed, gender is a social process that is constantly shaped and reshaped throughout one’s life (Connell, 1995).

Martin (2011) explained, in his study on how children learn and develop their gender identities in the early years in the United Kingdom, that children learn gender norms within their social environment where various messages are conveyed to them regarding acceptable and unacceptable behaviours for girls and boys. Early socialisation begins in the family, where, in most cases, parents and caregivers sanction appropriate behaviour through a gendered differentiation of toys, clothing, and colours. Gender roles involve different social roles for males

and females. According to Swain (2006a) sex-role socialisation implies that there is a general consensus about gender roles which are used as a guide for gender behaviour, and which children learn in a one-way process. There is a set of universal male and female characteristics which are defined as normal and on which children are expected to model themselves. Being a child in the wider community also means that their behaviours and actions are shaped through social expectations and rules—ways that children acquire knowledge of how to get their gender right (Martin, 2011).

According to theories of sex-role socialisation children are assumed to lack the competence to construct meanings of their lives. Instead, they are socialised by society, which has considerable power over them. Taken-for-granted beliefs regarding children range from the idea that children are considered to be too young to have any knowledge about sex or sexuality and theories of biological determinism which see children's knowledge in relation to their stages of growth and development (Bhana, 2016a). It is generally assumed by society that children learn gender by observing and listening to gender and sexual messages, images, symbols, and gestures in various contexts, which they simply reproduce and imitate in their behaviours and relations with others. The overall assumption, according to this line of thinking, is that children do as they are told as blank slates, and this position constructs a view that they are submissive to the social messages and discourses around them—which suggests that the possibilities for them reaching their full potential are narrowed (Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000).

Essentialist ideas of childhood also generalise boys and girls into two homogenous groups: boys are strong, tough and emotionally resilient; girls are perceived fragile, less physically active, and weak. Sex-role socialisation theories have also been criticised for basing identities on a sponge model, whereby it is assumed that children will become feminine or masculine (and heterosexual) passively through internalising dominant gender and cultural norms (Davies, 1993).

A growing body of feminist inspired research has critiqued the ways through which children in early childhood are positioned in fixed categories (Bhana, 2020; Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 2000; Paechter, 2007; Xu, 2020). Connell (2002) comprehensively discredited sex-role

socialisation, claiming it to be static because it assumes that there is a definable set of norms which individuals should fit, and that it thus fails to account for variation, changes, and negotiations of gender within social relations. It also lacks an understanding of gender as varying and multiple, embedded in structures such as race and class.

These shortcomings are why I have used a feminist poststructural lens in my approach to studying children and gender, and why I draw on critical masculinities studies that reject an account of gender as a fixed entity and address children as active agents who interact with the social world. Hence, alongside other scholars (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1993, Paechter, 2007), I reject the conflation of gender and sex in young children, the binary gender categories, and the assumption of childhood passivity, all of which negate children's agency and knowledge.

### **Feminist Poststructural Perspectives of Gender and Childhood**

Social constructionist's investigating gender in childhood, such as Blaise (2005), have noted that children are active agents of gender whose agency is not always determined by their social contexts. Agency is the process whereby individuals are able to develop a sense of their own power. While essentialist notions may position children at the bottom of the hierarchy of gender, feminist poststructural-inspired studies argue that children are not powerless as they have the ability to access and attain some form of power as competent social actors (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; MacNaughton, 2000; Prout & James, 1997). These scholars have advocated for a conceptualisation of children as agential beings who are active members of society. Children's particular social contexts—marked as they are by race, class, culture and traditional structures—allow them to construct and experience varying meanings of gender.

The feminist poststructural framework emphasises that the social learning of gender is complex and contradictory rather than a simple top-down approach of socialisation. Feminist poststructuralists engage with key concepts that draw on discourse, agency, resistance, power, and knowledge to understand how boys and girls, even at a very young age, actively engage with gender and sexuality (Blaise, 2005). Following MacNaughton (2000), I utilise the term discourses in order to refer to particular ways of knowing, feeling, and acting based on ideas of

what is right or truthful. These ways of being are not the only way to knowledge; however, particular discourses are imbued with power and provide a convincing version of what is true and what is appropriate—such as being a boy means thinking and acting with strength, aggression, and heterosexual dominance. Clearly this is not the only way to be a boy, but the discursive practices around gender and masculinity are socially organised and therefore meanings of masculinity and what it is to be a boy draw on these socially produced frameworks (Callahan & Nicholas, 2018).

Poststructural feminists draw attention to how these gendered discourses produce normative constructions of gender and sexuality to which boys and girls are subjected. However, unlike essentialist and socialisation theory, they show that children also act against such norms by either accommodating or subverting them (Blaise, 2005; Callahan & Nicholas, 2018; Paechter, 2007). While dominant adult discourses of childhood innocence are powerful, children's daily gender and sexual experiences do not always align with them. Their identities are constantly evolving, shaped by their daily interactions—and not in linear ways, but in ways that are complex and often even contradictory. For example, teachers have gendered expectations of young boys and they may interact with them in gendered ways, such as assigning the more strenuous physical duties to them, disciplining boys more harshly than girls, and promoting stereotypical play (Callahan & Nicholas, 2018; Skipper & Fox, 2021). Indeed, Epstein et al. (1998) noted that teachers are guilty of supporting normative masculine ideologies, for instance, tolerating male supremacy and violence because these are seen as natural ways of being boy. However, boys actively negotiate their gender, with the result that while at times certain positions and discourses may be passively adopted, at other times these may be contested. Through using a poststructural lens, it becomes evident that subjectivities are never coherent or unified: they are continually shifting in response to various social situations which involve contradictory relations of power.

Key to my study is the notion that boys have agency. Their identity is moulded by contestation and challenges, as well as race-class dimensions, which affect the circulation of power. Therefore, boys' agency is always contextually located. My aim is to examine the dynamic and fluid ways through which boys learn to discursively perform gender in particular contexts, and in ways that destabilise traditional conceptualisations of children as unknowledgeable about gender.

Important to my study is the fact that boys are not passive subjects of socialisation —whether these are the “forces” of family, teachers, peers, or schooling.

### **Young Children, Gender, and the Heterosexual Matrix**

Compulsory heterosexuality means to characterise a hegemonic model of gender which assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense, there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender that is oppositional and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990, p.151).

Butler (1990) maintains that gender is often reproduced through a repertoire of normative acts situated within a stable heterosexual matrix. This matrix offers a mandatory way of constructing masculinity and femininity in a heterosexualised manner as an appropriate way of defining one’s gender identity. The heterosexual matrix also highlights the significance that many societies connect to heterosexuality as an important element of what is considered to be an intelligible or normal way of performing gender. Butler claimed that, in this sense, sexuality and gender are interrelated in that gender identity is reinforced in an oppositional and stable heterosexual matrix which informs all aspects of social life. Drawing on the view that gender is performative and serves the interests of heterosexuality, Butler (1990, p. 33) has argued that gender is a “repeated stylisation, a set of repeated acts”. These ideas of sexuality and identity are also understood and regarded as queer theory.

According to Blaise (2005) queer theory builds on both a poststructuralist framework and Butler’s conceptualisation of the heterosexual matrix, by recognising that masculinity and femininity are regulated by the dominant discourses of sexuality. Queer theory establishes that dominant gender discourses and dominant discourses of sexuality cannot be separated. Heteronormativity—which is based on the assumption that individuals are and should be heterosexual—along with the heterosexual matrix and gender performances are employed by queer theorists to describe the powerful ways through which cisgender and heterosexual discourses work together (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Jackson, 2006; Stahl, 2020). Those who fit within this framework are considered to perform their gender in legitimate and intelligible ways

which further entrench normative categories. However, queer work also disrupts normative categories by making visible other gender and sexual possibilities such as LGBTQI identities.

In her paper on young children's investment in heterosexuality in the United Kingdom, Paechter (2017) illuminates the key underpinnings of the discourse of normative heterosexuality on which children draw to express their sexuality in accordance with the dominant gender and sexual norms. Heterosexuality is continuously constructed in children's daily actions, and underpins most of their interactions. The manner in which gender is commonly spoken about should therefore be pivotal in thinking about how girls' and boys' normative gender identities are attached to dominant ideas of heterosexuality whereby being considered a *real* girl or boy involves (sexually) desiring the opposite sex (Renold, 2005). Hence, girls and boys are subjected to heterosexual pressures of getting their sexuality and gender right.

Paechter (2017) argued that children as young as 6-years-old are excluded from full participation in heterosexuality because they are viewed by adults as pre-sexual beings who should be shielded from sexualisation. When children's sexuality is discussed, the focus is often situated in the context of sexual exploitation and abuse. However, feminist studies on childhood gender and sexuality have provided empirical evidence of the salience of boys' and girls' own heterosexual romantic relations, in particular their investment in girlfriends, boyfriends, dating, and dumping (Blaise, 2005; Paechter, 2017; Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993).

For example, Paechter (2017) revealed that day care practitioners observed preschool children engaging in sexual practices and masturbatory behaviour. She argued that while young children may not have a sexual focus like teenagers or adults, they do, however, express their sexuality and feelings through activities that may be sexualised. Martin (2011) found that boys and girls explicitly positioned themselves within heterosexual femininities and masculinities. For example, young girls constructed drawings of themselves wearing stylish clothing, makeup, exaggerated eyelashes and lipstick, and fancy hairstyles. They also dressed in fancy costumes including wedding dresses and princess gowns. In Blaise's (2005) examination of gender discourses in early childhood classrooms she observed similar heterosexualised acts related to make up and fashion talk among girls, which indicated an awareness of their sexuality. They also

engaged in play, pretending to be princesses attending social parties, for example, and expressing their desire to dance with a prince. Sometimes boys were included in girls' fantasy play as their suitors or husbands, and boys were willing to engage in this play because it contributed to asserting their masculinities. Thus, through play, children imitated and reinforced the heterosexual matrix.

Children's heterosexual practices were also enforced through exposure to (hetero)sexuality in their daily family life, media and school. Paechter (2017) pointed out that boys' and girls' investment in sexual practices suggests that situating young children outside of the heterosexual matrix is unrealistic. By observing the power and pleasure that adults enjoy within a heterosexual discourse, children come to understand that this is an important marker of adulthood and a normative way of doing gender.

Butler (1990) further argues that heterosexuality and gender are so fundamentally intertwined that departure from normative femininities and masculinities could throw heterosexuality into question. Heterosexual performances are maintained not only by essentialising gender but also through shaming and policing non-conforming identities and "abnormal" gender and sexual practices. For boys to identify with—or even to be aligned with—femininity is to call into question the essence of male identity (Epstein, 1997). Key to regulating heterosexuality is, therefore, a complex matrix of power relations. Boys learn to associate femininity with the loss of value and power. They therefore invest heavily in striving to embody masculinity and denigrate femininity due to the fear of being perceived as unmanly and inferior. Associating maleness with strength and power, and femininity and non-conforming identities with powerlessness, strengthens and legitimises male dominance (Epstein, 1997; Keddie, 2003). Heterosexual discourses are therefore infused with power and children actively and strategically negotiate these discourses to produce patterns of inclusion and exclusion and also to access power themselves (Blaise, 2005).

The silence around children's investment in sexual cultures has meant that there have been few empirical studies that have examined children's every day constructions of sexuality within and

also beyond the school—especially in the context of South Africa, where sexuality is so firmly linked to danger and disease (Bhana, 2016a, Mayeza, 2018; Mayeza & Bhana, 2019).

Butler (1990) has been influential in revealing how young children’s normative gender identities are produced and rooted within dominant hegemonic notions of heterosexuality. In this study I analyse sexuality from the experiences and standpoints of children, and my data challenges adult assumptions of childhood innocence. Following Butler’s conception of the theoretical underpinnings of gender and sexuality, I make visible boys’ active involvement in heterosexuality as a fundamental way to construct and reaffirm their allegiance to masculinities.

### **Theory of Masculinities**

In the past two decades, research on masculinities has emerged as a key analytical tool employed to make sense of gender (Frosh et al., 2002; Kehler, 2010; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020). Connell (1995, p. 71) defines masculinity as “simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage in that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experiences, personality and culture”. Connell (1995) argued that masculinity is not an ontological given. Rather, it is brought into existence through gender performances. This performative account of gender is also maintained by Butler (1990), who argues that identities are often brought into existence by an enactment and re-enactment of socially established meanings of gender. The material and social practices through which masculine identities are defined are described in terms of what males can do with their bodies. As I explained in Chapter 1, masculinity is not a predetermined entity: it is embodied in the identity of individuals, be it men or women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinities, as Connell (1995) demonstrates, are accomplished within everyday social conduct, and are executed through bodily practices in diverse contexts. Social and bodily actions are therefore inextricably connected.

An early approach to understanding and accommodating the differences of men was to pluralise masculinity to masculinities (Connell, 1987; Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2013). This approach highlights how the construction of masculinities is varying and fluid, relying heavily on the cultural, social, racial and historical contexts within different phases of time. Viewing

masculinities as constructed by broader social and cultural structures allows for them to be conceptualised in plural terms, and is thus a crucial step away from previous deeply flawed and essentialised understandings. In the next section I discuss the different versions of masculinities in detail.

### *Masculinities as Multiple and Varying*

Connell (1995, p. 76) argued “to recognise more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step towards the critical theorising of masculinity”. The four key forms of masculinities that Connell (1995) identifies are hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalised. Among these forms, she explains, there is a hierarchy, in which the hegemonic form is located at the peak, dominating the others (Connell, 1995). However, the categories are not static within gender relations: they are inconsistent, contradictory, and open to contestation, variation, and renewal.

Hegemonic masculinity is the standard bearer of what it means to be an ideal male. Connell (1995, p.77) defines this as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimation of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”. A considerable number of academic and empirical studies have used hegemonic masculinity as a central reference for understanding male behaviour and conceptualising masculine hierarchies (see, for example, Frosh et al., 2002; Skelton, 1997; Swain, 2000). It exerts its influence by defining the normative way that males should fit into and conform to its demands. Although it is not a fixed character type, hegemonic masculinity generally mobilises around normative and social constructs of masculinity, such as being strong, athletic, competitive, tough, and heterosexual (Swain, 2000; 2004). Hegemonic principles tend to be seen as inherent and natural features in the lives of men, and many men aspire to conform to and meet the demands of its principles. Dominant patterns of masculinities are also organised around bodily performances. Therefore, for most males, physical performances of masculinities are considered to be the most esteemed and acceptable ways of being male—which is problematic for males who wish to construct their masculinity in alternate, non-hegemonic ways.

The concept of masculinity has also been employed to empirically and conceptually understand male behaviour across diverse educational settings, including primary schools (Bhana, 2016a; Paechter, 2007; Swain, 2004; 2006a), secondary schools (Duckworth & Trautner, 2019; Msibi, 2012), and tertiary institutions (Ngubane & Singh, 2021). These studies have been useful in highlighting how educational institutions are gendered and gendering sites where masculine and feminine behaviours and unequal gender relations between boys and girls are regulated and normalised. Connell (2002) argued that schools produce and encourage not merely a single form of masculinity, but multiple forms, with the hegemonic form being a prominent feature in the lives of boys. Vital towards developing a masculine identity is the way in which boys navigate schooling based on peer approval, achieving hegemonic status, and complying with masculine norms in order to achieve the dominant and accepted hegemonic form (Swain, 2003).

A large body of studies have shown that primary school boys display characteristics associated with hegemony, such as aggression, physical and verbal abuse, and fighting prowess which allows them to dominate most of the school spaces, thus disrupting the activities of girls and other boys. They invest much of their energy in maintaining a dominant position in the peer group (Bhana, 2016a; Keddie, 2006; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Mayeza, 2017a; Paechter, 2007; Thorne, 1993; Wardman, 2017). Studies have also shown that disparaging femininity and displaying misogynistic ideals are important means through which boys affirm their identity as hegemonic males (Msibi, 2012; Paechter, 2019). Due to the power imbued in hegemonic masculinity, boys display homophobic tendencies and use violence and insults against those who are unable to abide by hegemonic principles. This is because a close connection to dominant sexuality is essential to the construct of hegemonic masculinity—as was established by Butler (1990). Thus, constructing a dominant masculine identity within the heterosexualised milieu is a way of defining and confirming ones gender. Transgressing hegemonic masculine norms means rejecting the heterosexual matrix—and non-conforming masculinities, as I have established, are punished with violence (Paechter, 2017).

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) various societies hold different meanings regarding what constitutes as hegemonic masculinity. Hence, not all men and boys within a particular society may conform with or even support the dominant and prevailing discourses of

being a hegemonic male. Hegemonic masculinity may therefore be stable or unstable, visible or less visible, or boys may conform to or resist the school's authority (Swain, 2006a).

Additionally, not all boys benefit from or have access to hegemonic power. Indeed, there are other versions of masculinities which are produced alongside the dominant hegemonic form (Connell, 1995). For example, complicit masculinities are “masculinities constructed in ways that realise the patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy” (Connell, 1995, p. 79). This means that there are those boys who do not necessarily take on a dominant hegemonic role but instead simply benefit by being part of the dominant group, reaping its benefits. For example, Swain (2006a) found that there were many boys in his study who imitated the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity but without exerting its influence and power. For example, they did not employ violence to enforce their masculinity, although they did join in with the subordination of femininity and non-conforming masculinities. Hence, even when boys fail to conform to hegemonic masculine norms, they are complicit in sustaining them through the subordination of girls and investment in the patriarchal dividend. The boys in Swain's study were also actively involved in playground games and practices, but rarely took on roles which involved decision making, such as selecting participants for games and sporting activities. He found that these boys did not desire dominant leadership roles or to challenge other boys in fights, but, rather, enjoyed the benefits of being part of the patriarchal dividend.

In contrast to hegemonic masculinity, subordinate and marginalised masculinities, according to Connell (1995), are subjugated and oppressed. Subordinate masculinities are often located as the inferior “other”—those who fall outside the legitimate norm of masculinity (Schippers, 2007). Because hegemonic masculinity is positioned in contrast to femininity and being feminine, boys who are considered to be engaging in feminine practices are situated at the bottom of the masculine order. Swain (2006a) highlighted how, in educational settings, boys were often subordinated for looking different and behaving in masculine transgressive ways such as being passive, showing fear, lacking physical strength or sporting prowess, as well as failing to keep up with advancements in technology, games, and locally celebrated knowledge. Subordinate boys were punished through taunts and insults and were excluded from most peer groups. In this way

school boys actively maintained a hierarchy of masculinities. Boys may also be marginalised based on their ethnicity, race, socioeconomic class or disability.

Swain (2006a) has argued that, in theorising masculinities, it is important to note that in a given setting not all boys with non-hegemonic masculinities aspire to subordinate others or are inevitably subordinated. Indeed, boys have different versions of masculinities which are context specific, and different contexts give rise to different opportunities of learning the meanings of being a boy—and that there are possibilities for other, softer versions of masculinities. I return to this later in the chapter.

In South Africa, Bhana (2016a) has argued that there is a paucity of debate about masculinities in the primary school, including the compound dimensions of gender relations. She has raised a concern that the construction of hegemonic masculinity is often focused on older boys and men, rather than on understanding that gender and masculinity are integral parts of the life course and that a focus of attention is needed to the early (childhood) production of male power and gender relations. Following Bhana, my study aims to demonstrate that the hegemonic position which some boys adopt—and the subordinate position that others experience—are not inevitable because, depending on the context, boys use their agency to negotiate various versions of masculinities: in other words, boys have multiple masculinities.

In the analysis of my data I also draw on Foucault's (1978) notion of power as fluid and as a form of resistance in order to show how my participants held power in some occasions and were stripped of it in others. This is the focus of the next part of this chapter.

### **Foucault's Theorisation of Power**

According to Foucault (1978) power is malleable and ubiquitous. It is never localised, and power relations can be maintained and disrupted through discourses. Power is often understood as the ability to impose upon and dominate the powerless or to force individuals to conform to certain ways of being. In this sense, power is understood as something owned or possessed by individuals who enforce power onto others. Moving away from this idea, Foucault (1978) argued

that power is not merely owned by an individual or an institution but instead it is manifested in strategic and productive ways, enabling new behaviours to emerge. For instance, individuals are not always simply objects or victims of power exerted over them; they can be active agents who resist that power. As a result, power relations between individuals should not be reduced to an oppressor–victim relationship, or to a master–slave one; instead, it should be seen as product of relations because where there is power there is also resistance. Foucault (1977) therefore classifies power into two categories: domination, which refers to a form of power that influences and regulates people; and resistance: the power that is contested. In this sense, power is complex, never stable, and always dynamic and transient.

Foucault (1978) argues that power is embedded within school institutions through routine practices which serve to normalise the setting. Similar to how gender is internalised and constructed within everyday social practices, power, too, is internalised within everyday school practices—as well as in the dominant gender discourses that are embedded in school policies, organisational practices, discipline methods, the formal curriculum (for example, school textbooks), the relationship between teachers and learners, and sport and games—all of which serve to provide a space for young boys to enforce and sustain masculine power (Connell, 1995). The gender structures and practices within schools are institutionalised to the extent that differences between boys and girls are naturalised and normalised. Hence, ideas of masculinities and femininities are based on inequitable assumptions of gender power—a power which maintains dualistic gender relations and unequal power relations.

Swain (2003) pointed out that power relations are complex at school, sometimes visible, sometimes hidden, and that they work in fluid ways. For example, learners may hold a powerful position among their peers in the playground at one moment and then be marginalised in the classroom at another moment. Nonetheless, power relations are ever-changing since power can be modified and contested. Bhana (2016a) argued that although children may be dominated by hegemonic boys and subject to the authority of teachers and the school’s formal culture, this power can nonetheless be reversed and resisted. In other words, the dynamics of power can shift through acts of resistance.

Foucault's conceptualisation of power is also important in theorising the fluidity of masculinities. According to Bartholomaeus (2013) it enables a clear understanding of the plural discourses that boys engage in as they negotiate power in ways that combine hegemonic and other practices, highlighting their ability to disrupt prevailing discourses related to dominant gender and sexuality, and their active negotiation of multiple versions of masculinities. It subverts the notion of a fixed pattern of masculinity. This concept of power is crucial to my study as it opens up a broader lens to understanding resistance, agency, fluidity, and the plurality of masculinities.

### **Towards African-Centred Theorisations of Masculinities**

Drawing on Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity as an exalted expression of male power, researchers in South Africa have demonstrated how boys and men embody ideologies, practices, and values which legitimise the domination and control of men over women (Gibbs et al., 2020a; Morrell et al., 2012; Ratele, 2016). This illustrious form of masculinity is constructed in relation to masculine power, men's ability to provide, toughness, strength and heterosexual prowess. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been useful in illuminating gender inequalities and power in South Africa, which is particularly important in light of concerns about violence, and women's vulnerability to male violence.

Mfecane (2018) argued in his study on African masculinities in the South African context that the idea of a hegemonic masculinity associated with paid labour, sexuality, sport, and independence has gained global application. However, he believes that it fails to account for what it really means to be a man in African contexts. For example, childhood ceremonies such as circumcision in South African communities mark a transition into puberty, adolescent, adulthood, and manhood. Yet, traditional ceremonies are not simply a celebration of an individual's transition to particular life stages; they also hold profound symbolic meaning about their relationship with families, communities, ancestors and African concepts of personhood. Mfecane (2018, p. 298) further pointed out that masculinity in African contexts is influenced by mundane aspects, for example, a person's name because names are believed to shape the character of individuals. For example, names such as "Mncameni" which translates to "we have

given up on him” were associated with unruly behaviour, and so the community was unable to encourage positive behaviour because of the qualities attached to this name.

Mfecane (2018) also described how individuals embarked on searching for their paternal families, ancestors, and biological fathers because it was necessary to know their real surnames and perform ritual ceremonies on their behalf with the belief that this would positively impact their lives by resolving long-standing personal challenges—such as those associated with miscarriages, alcohol and drug addiction, unemployment, poor academic achievement, and violence. Mfecane also pointed out that studies have demonstrated how black men verify their masculinity by being breadwinners, having several sexual partners, being homophobic and consuming alcohol (see, too, Hunter, 2010 and Ratele, 2017). He said that these practices are meaningful to men’s construction of masculinity and that failure to participate in beer-drinking sessions, for example, resulted in a man being labelled *epog* (antisocial), for example (Mfecane, 2018, p. 300). Mfecane argued that understandings of masculinity in African contexts should take into account tradition, the inner essence of men which is driven by spiritual forces and religious beliefs, and pressure from unemployment, poverty, and traditional practices which are crucial to men’s production of masculinity.

Mayeza and Bhana (2020) demonstrated in their study on primary school boys’ negotiation of gender violence in South Africa that hegemonic masculinity has been widely employed by social researchers to explain fixed and homogenous patterns of masculinities among boys, and analysis of masculinities in traditional and localised contexts are often sidelined. I draw on Mfecane (2018) and Mayeza and Bhana’s (2020) arguments in this study to examine local manifestations of masculinities among young boys, taking into account their cultural and traditional practices, beliefs, and structures of race, gender, and socioeconomic inequalities, which, as I show, may or may not be generalised and compared to constructions of masculinities in other settings.

### **Towards Caring Masculinities**

Research has highlighted the development of resistance masculinities and alternate versions of masculinities based on notions of gender equality, respect, and care (see Bhana & Mayeza,

2019a; Ratele, 2016). In this section I examine the notion of care. Connell's (1995) theorisation of masculinities as plural demonstrates that there are variations in—and multiple expressions of—masculinities so that males can and do engage in change and can therefore be encouraged to challenge unequal gender practices. Scholars such as Elliott (2016) and Hanlon (2012) have sought to highlight gentle and caring forms of masculinities, diverting our attention away from simplistic understanding of masculinities as associated solely with dominant hegemonic versions.

Elliott (2016), in her paper on theorising the emerging concept of care, offers a feminist analysis regarding how masculinities could be reworked to accommodate notions of care based on equality and change. Elliott points out that the core of caring masculinities entails the rejection of domination associated with hegemonic masculinity, and the integration of values such as gender equality, interdependence, respect, positive emotions, and the power to engender change. While these values are traditionally associated with women, Elliott set out to incorporate them into understandings of masculine identities, arguing that men's involvement in care is not new.

Connell (2002) also highlighted how men's patriarchal roles have shifted towards caring integrated models over the decades. In South Africa, Morrell et al. (2012), too, noted that gender politics has already seen a shift towards gender equality and care within constructions of masculinities. This was evident in South Africa's former president, Nelson Mandela, who encouraged and demonstrated a gender equitable form of masculinity. Elliott (2016) argued that men's values of care and humanising practices are intricately connected to the empowerment of women. Hence, a focus on caring masculinities should be regarded as a positive move towards engaging men in gender equality.

Hanlon (2012) further noted in his research on masculinity, equality, and care that caring practices are thought to offer rewards such as feeling respected and competent, and that they encouraged self esteem among men. He found that caring practices enriched the lives of men in myriad ways, both emotionally and physically, but that men's engagement with care was not without challenges. Indeed, there are barriers which may deter men from adopting a caring masculinity because care is often seen as feminine, and men may be subordinated by other men

(and, indeed, some women) for transgressing from hegemonic masculinity. Having a caring masculinity can mean surrendering the power associated with dominant masculinity because of not conforming to expected masculine norms. Men feel entitled to patriarchal practices, sexism, masculine power, and success, and they rarely want to give up these entitlements.

However, although men may consider hegemonic masculinity to be desirable, drawing on caring discourses can enable the reconfiguration of hegemonic notions. For example, traditional concepts of masculinity, such as providing and protecting, can be translated into care-oriented notions; respect can be translated into love instead of fear of the patriarchy; and responsibility can be translated into caring for the family in more inclusive ways, instead of merely bringing home a wage (Hanlon, 2012). Hanlon also argued that caring masculinities should be supported and encouraged in gender equality interventions and that doing care work should be associated with a flexible definition of masculinities. This complex process puts a stronger emphasis on the need for masculinity to be a fluid enough concept to allow males to engage in flexible practices—such as those involving care.

Hunter et al. (2017) also caution not to assume that caring masculinity is an entirely new concept. Rather, it should be understood as a concept that is seeing more men evolving as caregivers. Within the context of schooling, Moosa and Bhana (2017), in their South African study on men as managers in the primary school, called for an increase in the number of males teaching in the FP of primary school as means to promote and increase men's involvement in child care. They maintain that this will not only increase men's involvement in childcare, but also engender nurturing relations with children which will possibly challenge, if not diminish, inherent notions of men as simply uncaring and hegemonic.

The notion of caring masculinities is useful to my study. Following Elliott (2016), I do not intend to homogenise a fixed character description of an entirely new type of man or a new type of masculinity. Instead, I aim to emphasise the concept of care as another possible dimension of masculinity and to see this as a positive step toward engaging boys in gender equality. I therefore argue that hegemonic masculine identities can be reworked to incorporate the value of care, and that this can do much to destabilise harmful masculine discourses in the lives of young boys.

## Conclusion

This chapter presented a range of theoretical frameworks and conceptual terms which I draw on in the chapters that follow to understand how boys in my study construct, negotiate, and perform their masculinities within specific social contexts. I began by examining gender as a social construct and presented a critique of essentialist and sex-role socialisation. Following a feminist poststructural theoretical standpoint that has previously been used to understand gender in childhood, I highlighted that young children are not simply passive recipients of gender messages from society. Rather, they use their agency to construct varying experiences and meanings of gender. This poststructural perspective is fundamental to framing the findings for my study because it allows me to situate young boys as active gender and sexual agents who are able to enforce and contest dominant norms. Drawing on this perspective reinforces the idea that children are not passive subjects of socialisation.

I then outlined Butler's (1990) theorisation of the heterosexual matrix which is useful for highlighting boys' active engagement in sexuality and examining the manner in which their masculinities are produced within dominant notions of heterosexuality. I presented Connell's (1995) theorisation of masculinities as multiple, diverse, and fluid, and explained how this allows me to position boys beyond fixed notions of male identity. In the chapters that follow I show that not all boys within a given context are the same in that they all support, embody, or conform to the dominant discourses of being hegemonic. Instead, I illuminate boys' shifting and contradictory positions and how they respond to different contexts and situations which involve incoherent relations of power. In this context I drew on Foucault's (1978) notion of power as fluid and malleable in order to demonstrate that boys' access to power is not always stable or guaranteed.

Last, I highlighted the importance of African-centred theorisations of masculinities which place great importance on addressing local manifestations of masculinities, taking into consideration the traditional, cultural, and socioeconomic influences which shape the construction of masculinities and which cannot be easily inscribed onto other settings. Moving towards an enlightened model of masculinities, I highlighted Elliott's (2016) concept of care as another

dimension of masculinity which can mark a positive move towards engaging boys in gender equality.

In the next chapter I examine global literature on boys' construction of gender and sexuality in the early makings of their masculinities.

## **Chapter Four: Literature Review: The Early Makings of Gender, Sexuality, and Masculinities in Primary Schools**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I review significant literature on gender and sexuality within various primary school settings, drawing on key researchers who have framed the manner in which masculinities are constituted and experienced by young children in multiple and ambivalent ways. Using feminist poststructural underpinnings, I aim to offer rich insights into the manner in which gender and sexuality intersect to shape boys' construction of masculine identities. Recent studies have sought to defy the dominant conceptualisation of children as asexual and have shifted their focus towards childhood power and plurality (Bhana, 2020; Kostas, 2021; Lytleton-Smith, 2019; Meland & Kaltvedt, 2019; Ollis et al., 2021; Xu, 2020). This has offered new ways to understand boys' construction, performance, and experiences of masculinities.

The body of research I draw on has addressed the diversity surrounding boys' gendered and sexualised cultures. Important to note, is the paucity of studies around young boys' construction of masculinities within the specific age cohort of 8–9-years-old. Overwhelmingly, studies on sexualities have centred on the production of masculinities among high school learners (for example, Allen, 2015; Krebbekx, 2018; Msibi, 2012; Smith et al., 2016). The lack of research scrutinising the early formation of masculinities in the primary school is founded on stubborn discourses and conservative agendas on childhood sexual immaturity. To highlight the pervasiveness of gender and sexuality in the lives of young primary school boys, I begin this chapter with an examination of four studies that have rendered visible the performances of gender and sexuality in early making of masculinities. In the South African context, these studies include Mayeza's (2018) "'It's Not Right for Boys to Play with Dolls': Young Children Constructing and Policing Gender during 'Free Play' in a South African Classroom"; Bhana's (2016a) "Gender and Childhood Sexuality in Primary School"; and Mayeza and Bhana's (2019) "How 'Real Boys' Construct Heterosexuality on the Primary School Playground". Then I focus on Renold's (2007) study "Primary School Studs: (De)Constructing Young Boys' Heterosexual Masculinities" in the United Kingdom. In addition to these studies, I also make reference to several other studies that have demonstrated young children's expressions of gender and

sexuality in the primary school and I highlight the need for expanding research on sexuality within primary schools in South Africa. Following this, I focus on the manner in which masculinities are constructed and established through sporting prowess and by policing non-conforming sexuality in the primary school. Finally, I demonstrate how the school, itself, shapes children's negotiation of gender and sexuality considering its gendered practices, discourses, curriculum and teachers' perceptions of childhood sexuality.

### **Boys' Construction of Gender and Sexuality in the School**

Following a child-centred approach to research, Mayeza's (2018) ethnographic study at a black township setting in South Africa examined 5–7-year-old children's construction of gender during free play. Challenging adult-centric views of socialisation, Mayeza argued that children were key agents in constructing their gender independently. One of his key findings was that children not only positioned themselves in gendered ways during free play but also constantly regulated and policed each other's behaviours.

Mayeza (2018) observed that the children's fantasy play area in the classroom was structured around gender-stereotypical understandings of boys and girls. For example, the fantasy area for girls included toys related to kitchen themes, women's clothing, and a washing machine—for domestic roles. The boys' fantasy area included toys such as Lego, construction blocks, and superhero figurines. These gendered areas were created by teachers who encouraged children's gendered interests. However, the boys did not conform rigidly to these spaces and resources; instead, they utilised their agency to actively negotiate and transgress the spaces prescribed for them. For example, some boys sought to explore girls' toys in the fantasy area. But their negotiation of gender was not without challenges. Mayeza found that boys' negotiation of gender in play was complex and laden with power relations and power was not only in the domain of boys; girls too, emerged as holders of power when they rebuked boys for entering the perceived girls-only play domain. Mayeza argued that boys' acceptance of girls policing the play area, and girls' resistance to boys entering their domain disrupted taken-for-granted assumptions of passive femininity and dominant masculinity. Central to poststructural framings, is the plurality of masculinity and femininity that critiques homogenous and essentialist views of boys and girls.

Mayeza (2018) further discovered that when some boys sought to enter the girls' domain, other boys pointed out that participating in stereotypical girl behaviours would subject them to the discriminatory label of "gay". Other studies by Mayeza (2017a), such as his ethnographic study of 6–10-year-old South African primary school boys and girls policing gender on the playground, found that boys who engaged in stereotypically feminine practices were considered "unmanly". Socialising closely with girls was not considered platonic but, rather, an indication of femininity and failure to comply with expectations of normative, dominant masculinities. Boys were demoralised, humiliated, and excluded from the playground space for associating closely with girls. Mayeza (2017a) argued that deviation from normative masculinity, with consequent forms of gendered policing behaviour in the school, worked to reinforce gender boundaries. He pointed out that these practices promoted gender inequalities among children that could shape their future polarised and patriarchal gender relations. Nonetheless, not all boys were acquiescent to gender boundaries and they continued to maintain cross-gender friendships with girls. This understanding is relevant to the feminist poststructural standpoint adopted in my study, and emphasises that boys are active agents who have the ability to negotiate and defy gender and masculine norms.

Returning to Mayeza's (2018) study, he found that teachers played a key role in promoting polarised gender behaviours among children. Children's policing of gender boundaries were considered by teachers to be a reflection of their natural differences; they alluded to a biological understanding of gender and sex-role socialisation—a theory that has been criticised for narrowing children's agency and their full potential (Blaise, 2005). Mayeza (2018) raised concerns that teachers' sex-role socialisation approach to play denied children's agency because they were unable to acknowledge how gender polarity constrained the children's play choices. Indeed, children's gender transgression in play illuminated the plurality and multiple ways in which they constructed their gender and also the multifaceted ways through which gender power relations operated amongst young children—yet, teachers were largely unaware of this. The implications of his findings exposed the need for teachers to open up ways of thinking about gender and to challenge gender boundaries that constrain children's gendered expressions. He advocated for teacher interventions that would recognise and address gender stereotypes and polarisations in the primary school.

Several international scholars have also documented how play is structured around sex-role socialisation and stimulating the gendered interest of boys and girls in polarised ways. In the United States, Gansen's (2017) study on gendered sexual socialisation among 3–5-year-old children found that, in the early years, children frequently engaged in play related to house and marriage, which involved acting out heterosexual family roles. Within their play, Gansen (2017) also noticed that bending gender roles and norms were not permitted, for example, cross-gender roles such as girls acting out father roles. This goes back to gender performance manoeuvred within and around the heterosexual matrix. Similarly, Lyttleton-Smith's (2019) study on gender binary practices in three early childhood settings in Australia found that the home corner in early educational settings was structured according to boys' and girls' interests. It was also a space where children acted out violence. For example, boys acted out roles as monsters that chased girls around the classroom with roaring voices and hands held up like claws. Girls tended to take on the victim role in these monster games. Lyttleton-Smith (2019) argued that it was necessary for teachers to discourage gender segregation in the classroom by mixing and selecting objects for use in the classroom. This would provide diversity of play and learning that could challenge gender normative stereotypes and promote an agenda for diversity and equality.

Ollis et al. (2021), in their paper on the implementation of respectful relationships in two Australian primary schools, argued that children's perceptions of gender and their interest in masculine and feminine toys aligned with traditional gender attitudes and broader social norms where gender conformity is reinforced. Other studies have also provided empirical evidence demonstrating that girls enjoyed playing with feminine toys such as dolls and boys were excited to engage in sport and traditionally masculine activities—mainly because children are aware that engagement in these activities will gain recognition and approval from adults and peers (Blaise, 2005; Gansen & Martin, 2018; Meland & Kaltvedt, 2019).

On a different level, in his study of how 2–6-year-old children construct their gender subjectivities in early childhood education settings in Scotland and China, Xu (2020) argued that children's performances of gender are situational and involve a constant process of doing and undoing gender where they are able to embody, repeat, and also challenge dominant gender discourses—similar to what Mayeza (2018) pointed out in his study. Xu (2020) noted that boys

and girls have fun playing across gender borders. Boys joined the girls in playing house and even participated in nurturing roles while girls engaged in rough and tumble play. However, Xu (2020) further argued that children may suffer as a result of gender deviance and, indeed, doing gender can be pleasurable or unpleasant. These findings illustrate the incoherent and messy negotiations of gender—as further pointed out by Bartholomaeus (2013) in her empirical study on 6–13-year-old boys’ construction of masculinities in Australia.

Bartholomaeus (2013) explored the complex and diverse ways in which boys engaged in practices that contributed to plural versions of masculinities based on being studious, engaging in feminine activities, and being caring—all of which challenged dominant gender discourses. She argued that focusing solely on a one-dimensional construct of masculinity neglects the focus on plural practices of masculinities that boys may engage in. For example, some boys in her study engaged in traditionally feminine practices at home, displaying a desire to cook, knit, and sew; however, at school they concealed such practices and instead, engaged in sporting activities. In the home, boys engaged in feminine practices because they did not have to construct their masculinities in relation to other boys. But at school, their construct was relational and contradictory—hence, they shifted in and out of performing diverse masculinities in different spaces.

It was evident that although classroom spaces were segregated into rigid gender zones based on binary notions of gender and sex-role socialisation, children actively constructed gender on their own terms—although negotiating gender was not without challenges. Important to note, is that gender is indeed flexible and fluid and boys and girls are actively involved in the makings of gender within the early years of schooling. I now turn my focus to boys’ investment in heterosexuality in the primary school.

### *Boys Construction of Heterosexual Masculinities*

“Masculinity and heterosexuality are entwined and to be a “real” boy (or girl) is to be heterosexual” (Swain, 2003, p. 17).

The institutionalisation of dominant notions of gender and masculinities tied to compulsory heterosexuality are empirically examined in a growing volume of research, globally (Bartholomaeus, 2012; Bhana, 2016a; 2020; Govender & Bhana, 2021; Huuki & Renold, 2016; Kehily & Montgomery, 2004; Mayeza & Bhana, 2019; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Morison et al., 2021; Morojele, 2011, 2013; Renold, 2007, 2013; Swain, 2006a). This scholarly work has paid great attention to heterosexual construction in primary schools, showing that children's investment in sexual cultures is indeed present. The studies I focus on particularly in this section are those by Bhana (2016a), Mayeza and Bhana (2019), and Renold (2007) whose findings have demonstrated that schools are key sites where children as young as 6–8-years-old construct meaning of their sexuality. These three studies are set in different contexts and they all provide rich insights into the various ways in which young boys engage with and practise their heterosexuality—showing how integral their complex sexual practices are to the construction of a “real” boy image.

Bhana's (2016a) qualitative study of 6–8-year-old children in four primary schools situated in the province of KwaZulu-Natal examined a wide range of performances through which sexuality was entrenched as schoolboys defined and consolidated their gendered identities. She found that children expressed sexual agency through kissing and holding hands, writing love letters that instantiated boyfriend/girlfriend cultures, and speaking about marriages which engendered sexual pleasure—this was integral to heterosexual expression and validation. Boys and girls also found excitement in tactile contact in kiss-and-chase games that opened a trajectory for social pleasure and heterosexual desirability, thus breaking the silence of childhood innocence. It is evident that while the common discourse is that children are assumed to be too young to display sexual knowledge and understand sexuality, the heterosexual matrix is nonetheless predominantly at work within primary schools and even long before children have begun schooling (Curran et al., 2009).

The prevalence of kiss-and-chase games was also documented in Thorne's (1993) ethnographic study exploring children's construction of gender in Australian schooling contexts. Thorne found that children guided their play using sexual practices such as marriage play and narratives. Such practices often transpired in various school spaces such as the playground and the classroom. In

these spaces, boys sought to maintain a heterosexual position by engaging in heterosexual fantasy talk and forming girlfriend/boyfriend relationships.

Although Bhana (2016a) revealed children's active participation in sexual cultures, she argued that their expressions of sexuality involved ambivalence and contradictions that invoked male power, misogyny, and inequalities. Boys close proximity to girls was indeed masculine confirming, but at the same time, physical or emotional alignment to femininity was seen as masculine denying. For example, transgressing masculine norms led to instances where some boys' were labelled as "mummy's boy" and wearing the colour pink conferred inferior status and an assumption of being feminine. In their efforts to denigrate femininity, boys exercised male power and dominance through misogynistic and oppressive practices that involved disparaging anything associated with or considered feminine.

In addition, Bhana (2016a) found that boys sought to reproduce acceptable masculinity such as engaging in activities that bestowed masculine credentials in order to move away from the feminine. Boys strove to position themselves as physically strong by engaging in sporting activities such as playing ball rather than feminine activities such as skipping. Her participants claimed that skipping was "dumb" because it did not require any skill in contrast to playing ball. Misogynistic attitudes were a way of affording ascendancy to boy games such as playing ball.

While some boys distanced themselves from femininity to avoid being teased, others contested certain behaviour patterns that might have led to them being subordinated, such as crying, for example. Bhana (2016a) found that, although normative constructions of masculinities prescribe that "boys don't cry" because this is largely associated with femininity, some boys in her study defended such actions claiming that certain circumstances such as a death in the family may justify emotional displays. These findings point to the complex way in which the boys were able to negotiate their masculinity by challenging hegemonic notions and defending emotional displays. Such diverse constructions of masculinities indicate an escape from the rigid understanding of gender—and challenge the devaluation of non-hegemonic masculinities.

Although childhood sexuality is seen to be unthinkable and is silenced, Bhana (2016a) has offered significant insights on the salience of sexuality and gender in the lives of children. She also reflected on an occasion during her fieldwork when she was asked by her young participants if she did the French kiss or if she had a boyfriend. In posing these questions, the children displayed familiarity with hetero-normative discourses and the importance placed on knowledge of sexuality. Bhana argued that by acknowledging and taking seriously the sexual practices of young children, the early makings of sexuality become visible.

The next study I focus on is Mayeza and Bhana's (2019) ethnographic study of 12–14-year-old primary school boys' construction of heterosexuality and gender in the school playground. Although my study does not focus on this age cohort, Mayeza and Bhana's study offers empirical evidence on the prevalence of heterosexuality in the primary school, which younger boys may observe and seek to imitate. Their study was conducted in a historically black township in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, characterised by high levels of unemployment and poverty. Their findings demonstrated boys' investment in heterosexual relations such as having girlfriends, displaying sexual agency, and involvement in heterosexual competition and violence.

Mayeza and Bhana (2019) illustrated how playground practices involved the construction of girlfriend/boyfriend relationships including practices such as kissing, hugging, and sexual explorations. Kissing was an important indication of sexual prowess and masculine expression contributing to heterosexual masculine validation. Boys' expressions of heterosexuality were, however, ambiguous in that they problematised girls who openly expressed their sexual agency. For boys in their study, construction of heterosexuality as a real boy meant taking the lead in sexual decisions and playing an active role in the initiation of boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. Girls who sought to do this themselves, especially those who were not physically attractive, were considered to be rude and undesirable. As a result, girls' agency was policed and constrained by the discourse of heterosexual masculinity that often separated sexual agency from girls and allocated it to the domain of boys.

Violence was also entrenched in boys' negotiation of heterosexual masculinity. Mayeza and Bhana (2019) discovered that girls who rejected sexual advances and romantic proposals from

boys were subjected to sexual violence and harassment in the playground. Harassment was practised through sexually abusive language, mocking girls, shaming their physical bodies, and whistling at girls to exercise male power. Boys also competed against each other over girlfriends. Playing with girls led to heterosexual competition and battles among boys that entrenched violence. However, some boys sought to distance from girls in order to avoid violent heterosexual rivalry with other boys thereby suggesting their desire for non-violent interactions with other boys on the playground.

Mayeza and Bhana's (2019) study demonstrated the meanings primary school boys attached to sexuality, and demonstrated the complexities involved in their negotiation of heterosexual masculinity. The school playground was a key space for their construction and negotiation of masculinities—thus pointing to the daily occurrence and visibility of sexuality in the primary school. The authors concluded by pointing out the need for schools to acknowledge the playground space as a fundamental site for the production of heterosexual masculinity and boys' active investment in heterosexual relationships and violence.

The final study I focus on here is Renold's (2007) ethnographic study of 10–11-year-old boys' construction of heterosexual masculinities at a primary school in the United Kingdom. As in Bhana's (2016a) study, Renold too demonstrated how boys consolidated their sexuality through boyfriend/girlfriend cultures and misogyny. As established, my study focus is on 8–9-year-old boys but Renold argued in her study that young boys often reproduce the heterosexual activities of mature and older boys, which can challenge the perceived asexual primary school environment. Renold embarked on her study with the aim to disrupt the assumption that the primary school is a sanitised, asexual environment and sought to examine how children constructed their sexuality amidst the pressures of conforming to compulsory heterosexuality—mainly what being an ideal boy and girl meant.

Renold (2007) found that heterosexuality was practised by young children through discursive practices such as going out, dumping, and fancying each other. Although going out did not really mean going out anywhere, being a boyfriend was fundamental to the construction of proper masculinity; however, it was also fraught with contradiction and anxiety. While being a

boyfriend bolstered a boy's masculinity, for some, close proximity to girls brought exposure to teasing behaviours. In order to prove their masculinity and move away from concepts of femininity, boys engaged in sporting activities as a means to evade romantic topics when not romantically pursuing girls. In this way, they maintained their masculine hegemonic reputation.

The ways in which young boys established and made visible their heterosexual masculinity were by distancing femininity and also by subordinating alternate masculinities. Antithetical to hegemonic boys were those whose sexuality was constituted outside the normativities of heterosexuality—such as counter-normative identities or non-conforming masculine identities. Renold (2007) found that in order for boys to position themselves as dominant sexual subjects, they subordinated and teased those boys who expressed non-conforming or counter normative behaviours such as lacking interest in football and girlfriends and being studious, quiet, and “girly”. Reinscribing their heterosexual power, boys also denigrated girls through the use of sexually abusive languages, behaviours, and gestures towards them, thereby illustrating the overt ways in which young boys performed their heterosexuality.

Renold's (2007) findings also revealed how boys engaged in hyper-heterosexuality that involved boys' desire to publicly establish themselves as “studs” through grooming their hair and styling their bodies by wearing fragrances, a tie (which was not part of the formal dress code), sporting the latest fashion (such as oversized pants, sweatshirts, and trainers), and aligning themselves with older secondary school boys. Renold argued that these behaviours were more about keeping up with the pressures to construct a heterosexual masculine image than enjoying heterosexual relationships with girlfriends or girls. Simply talking about sexual relationships and dressing a certain way, boys expressed their heterosexuality and demonstrated that they fit into the normative heterosexual spectrum as established by several international scholars (Allen, 2013; Bragg et al., 2018; Braun & Davidson, 2017; Huuki & Renold, 2016; Kehily, 2015; Thorne, 1993).

The boys in Renold's (2007) study were confronted with the paradox that being heterosexual and having girlfriends was masculine confirming, but that associating too closely with concepts of femininity was masculine denying. In order to conform to the heterosexual matrix—which

involves engaging in recognisable heterosexually, as established by Butler (1990)—boys defined their sexuality by engaging in boyfriend/girlfriend relationships which were non-sexual, sexual fantasy, fashioning and stylised bodies, misogyny, and policing and shaming non-conforming boys. Investing in such symbolic, discursive, and embodied practices worked to bolster and confer heterosexual masculine status on these boys. However, as Renold explained in her 2003 paper based on her ethnographic work with primary school boys, boys did not have to be in a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship to be heterosexual. Some boys defined their heterosexuality by publically projecting their heterosexual desires and fantasies through demonstrations of sexual knowledge and sexual objectification of girls viewed in magazines. They positioned themselves as dominant sexual subjects by declaring their desire for supermodels.

### *Researching Gender and Sexuality in the Primary School*

My focus on literature in South Africa and in international contexts in this section has illustrated the prominence of gender and sexuality in children's daily practices in the primary school. The findings are consistent throughout the literature, and some studies have alerted us to the contradictions and ambivalences apparent in young children's negotiations of gender and sexuality, and to how agency is exercised. It is evident that schools are gradually becoming recognised as important spaces for the creation of children's sexual cultures. The performance of sexuality and heterosexuality has been empirically examined in a large volume of studies globally, and research in the South African context is gradually beginning to uncover young children's sexuality. Nonetheless, South African scholars such as Bhana (2020) and Morojele and Motsa (2019) have raised concerns about the apparent lack of research in Southern contexts that scrutinises the specific age group of children in primary school contexts and the social structures such as race, class, culture, and religion that shape the negotiation of heterosexual masculinities.

Research in Southern contexts—for example, Morojele and Motsa's (2019) study of how 11–16-year-old boys living in poor socioeconomic contexts in Swaziland construct their heterosexual masculinities—discovered that boys' achievement of heterosexuality was based on normative discourses that emphasised their role as the economic providers in heterosexual relationships.

Their poor socioeconomic background rendered them vulnerable because they were unable to fulfil heterosexual obligations of male provider. Their socioeconomic class and lack of material wealth intersected with masculinities such that poverty rendered the boys vulnerable to subordination and subject to humiliation by girls. Morojele and Motsa (2019) argued that adherence to the orthodox provider role was a basis for inequalities between the hegemonic and subordinate masculinities. Consequently, vulnerable boys sought to compensate for their lack of economic power by impregnating their girlfriends. However, although some vulnerable boys drew on hegemonic practices to compensate for their apparent lack of economic status, other boys adopted more caring attitudes—suggesting that not all boys exercised hegemonic masculine practices to define their heterosexuality. They embraced more nurturing ways by engaging in caring practices in their relationships. By showing affection and care, Elliot (2016) established that boys are able to perform their masculinities in ways that are non-dominating and this can be an important move towards gender equality. In my study I too, have detailed the manner in which some young boys had to navigate their heterosexual relationships amidst the socioeconomic pressures of providing for their girlfriends and wearing expensive clothes (see Chapter 8).

To address the paucity of research on primary school boys' construction of sexuality in South Africa, my study examines the influences of specific socioeconomic conditions that affect how heterosexual masculinity is negotiated by Indian and black boys situated in a low-middle to lower income setting. In this way, I offer unique perspectives on childhood gender and sexuality in South Africa, considering my participants diverse racial and socioeconomic background.

Next, I uncover the construction of masculinity in relation to the physical body and sport in local and international contexts.

### **Construction of Masculinity through an Esteemed Physical Body and Sporting Prowess**

“For many boys, being sporty is seen as being cool . . . it gives kudos and is a major signifier of successful masculinity” (Swain, 2006b, p. 318).

Central to the construction of gender and masculinities is the body and what it can do. How the body is utilised and performed is important in attaching meaning to gender and masculine identities (Bhana 2016c; Coffey et al., 2016; Kehily, 2015; Swain, 2003, 2006b). Performativity is central to this study because boys are constantly involved in developing their masculinity in bodily ways rather than being passive throughout their schooling. Research on masculinities indicates that boys are considered embodied agents because they invest in various physical performances such as achieving a fashionable identity by sporting a cool look, having fancy hairstyles, and wearing the latest clothing and footwear (Bhana, 2016c; Coffey et al., 2016; Frosh et al., 2002; Renold, 2005; Shefer et al., 2018). In particular, Swain's (2002) year-long empirical study of young masculinities in three primary schools in the United Kingdom explored how 10–11-year-old boys used fancy clothing to gain recognition, form bonds, and share interests and intimacy in the peer group. Specifically, wearing branded items was a way in which boys acquired symbolic value and were ascribed higher masculine status; those who conformed to the schools dress code were at risk of being subordinated. Clothing therefore offered boys a sense of social acceptability and self-worth within the peer group, which was important to the construction and performance of their masculinities.

Further, in an empirical study of young masculinities in that same context, Swain (2003) discovered that boys engaged in practices of swearing, cussing, and playing wrestling games as a means to achieve a physically strong body image. Often in accord with most senior boys at the primary school, younger boys employed profanities to gain status and achieve hierarchical privilege in the masculine peer group. Swain also recounted many instances where being nice was associated with being soft, which was undesired by most boys. In contrast, those who were brave, tough, and vulgar were successful in achieving a macho status. This resulted in violent tendencies being apparent in most boys as they expressed violent attitudes and took on aggressive roles, such as wrestling games. Boys retaliated in physically aggressive ways, engaged in risky play and defensive practices to attain patriarchal advantage. The body was used as a tool for violence in terms of portraying physical strength and aggression in order to gain power and authority over others. Boys also sought to display physical strength through sporting activities in order to avoid being labelled as nerds—as has also been pointed out by other scholars (Bartholomaeus, 2012; Kostas, 2021; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2019).

Studies have found that young boys place great importance on developing a “six pack” in order to construct an esteemed physical body, which Krebbekx (2018) described as well-defined abdominal muscles that form an essential and visible element of masculinity (Bhana, 2016b; Kehily, 2015). In her study on the role of the body in the production of junior masculinities among 7–8-year-old South African school boys, Bhana (2016b) found that displaying physical prowess, a muscular body, endurance of physical pain, and sporty postures were significant for the construction of masculinities. Like Swain (2002, 2003), Bhana argued that boys’ engagement with the body was fundamentally about developing their masculine identities.

Bhana’s (2016b) main findings were the ways in which the body was linked to sporting prowess as fundamental to achieving masculinity. The boys in her study engaged in soccer skills such as tackling, which denoted physical strength, stamina, and exercise as leading markers of masculinity. As in Swain’s (2003) study, the weak were subordinated and expressions of pain were considered non-normative. Boys who were bigger in size were constructed as powerful and used their bodies to subordinate the weak. Both Bhana (2016b) and Swain (2003) argued that the body and what it could do produced dominant and subordinate versions of masculinities that entrenched unequal power relations and masculine hierarchies.

Bhana’s (2016b) study also focused on how bodies were constructed through boys’ interaction within their social contexts. The embodiment of sport, predicated on having an esteemed physically fit body, was assumed to provide opportunities to attain high economic status and a life out of poverty—especially for her participants who hailed from conditions of economic deprivation. The broader social context shaped masculinity where, at an early age, the commercialisation of sport by, for example, sports t-shirts, stickers, cards, and hairstyles all worked to shape boys’ understanding of sport and masculinity. The boys spoke about how famous and professional soccer players were successful and economically well-off due to their sporting prowess, which they also desired. Even combat sports such as wrestling which places great physical demands and it affords boys an opportunity to be tough and to display their strength, was desired. Boys learnt to associate sporting success and physical fitness with an opportunity to transform their economic conditions, noting that being a professional soccer player or wrestler would open up avenues towards a better life and instantiation of successful

masculinity. Bhana (2016b) argued that the intersections of race, class, and masculinities were entwined with the body under specific circumstances. She showed in her study that boys were active gender subjects in the making of their bodies and masculinities. She emphasised that the ways in which boys use their bodies to perpetuate inequalities in early childhood is an area of concern and that more research is needed.

Bartholomaeus and Senkevics (2015) argued in their study on gender construction among primary school children in Brazil and Australia that, apart from being an activity of enjoyment, sport is viewed as the quintessence of hegemonic masculinity because it offers boys an opportunity to dominate the sporting field and create divisions in the playground space. Most boys in their study claimed sport to be something that they, rather than girls, played—owing to the idea that girls were unskilled in sport or chose not to play at all. The school playground—a site where games are played and a space for socialising with friends—was also found to be a dangerous space where boys utilised the area to dominate others in sport, such as football. In the playground, boys also excluded girls—preventing them from taking over the spaces they reserved for football, even if a girl desired to play. Other scholars—such as Frosh et al. (2002), Kostas (2021), Martínez-García and Rodríguez-Menéndez (2019) and Paechter (2017)—examining junior masculinities found that boys’ perception of sport, such as football, signified a dominant masculinity that involved the exclusion and downgrading of girls. Sport served to create and enforce spatial division by excluding girls from the playground due to the cultural and social conceptions of girls as lacking sporting skills. Paechter (2017) also argued that schools with little resources or playground space make it less likely that girls would be given an opportunity to participate in sport—which further contributes to their exclusion. The school itself is an essential social institution that supports dominant masculinity where boys are able to construct and exhibit sporting skills (Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2019; Paechter, 2017).

Although these studies found that boys sought to subordinate girls through exclusion from the playground, contrary to this, Renold’s (2003) study on boys’ investment in heterosexuality at a primary school found that boys used sport such as football to be romantically desirable to girls. Being good at sport and looking hard and tough were considered to be “cool” and the most

sought-after boys were those who belonged to the football team. Mayeza's (2017a) study on South African boys' construction of heterosexuality through soccer in the primary school also found that boys' engagement in soccer was linked to heterosexual identity because being considered the best soccer player was a way to impress girls and earn popularity among them. Boys who were seen as gentle, non-sporty, and did not participate in the heterosexual matrix were constructed as heterosexual failures. In this way, heterosexual hierarchies were maintained and reinforced.

Now, I will discuss how boys police and regulate compulsory heterosexuality in the primary school.

### **Policing Non-Conforming Sexuality in the Primary School**

Several studies conducted in high schools have illustrated how boys' anti-gay performances saturate peer-group cultures and social relations in the construction of masculinities; however, primary school studies too, are gradually uncovering how young boys police and regulate the non-conforming behaviours of other boys (Bragg et al., 2018; Braun & Davidson, 2017; Kostas, 2021; Ollis et al., 2021; Paechter, 2017, 2019; Thornberg, 2018; Wardman, 2017). These studies have pointed out that the most defining quality of masculinity involves the demonstration of heterosexual masculinity and that non-conforming sexualities imply a move away from heterosexual masculinity. Performing sexuality according to one's assigned gender, in particular being heterosexual, is significant to the identity of boys and how their peers respond to them (Paechter, 2019; Preston, 2016).

Mayeza and Bhana's (2020) South African study on how 10–14-year-old boys negotiate hegemonic masculinity in the primary school found that boys who deviated from conventional norms of hegemonic masculinity were likely to be policed by hegemonic masculine boys, including their peers. Those who failed to measure up to gender and sexual norms were often pressured by their peers who endeavoured to swerve them back into line. Inherent assumptions of gender and normative ideologies led to peers shaping the gender attitudes and behaviours of non-conforming boys through acts of policing. Policing involved various strategies that

hegemonic masculine boys employed to encourage normative and coherent ways of doing masculinity. These strategies involved teasing and shaming of gender, especially when gender practices pointed towards feminine notions. For example, masculine transgressing behaviours involved disengaging from sporting activities, having an assumed weak physical body, engaging in stereotypical feminine behaviours such as skipping rope, and not engaging in boyfriend/girlfriend relationships.

Mayeza and Bhana (2020) observed how non-conforming boys were policed through physical exclusion and rejection, and were ostracised and victims' of violence in the form of bullying. Verbal abuse was perpetuated on them by bullies who used the term "gay" to describe their non-conforming identities. Studies conducted globally also found that hegemonic masculine boys used the term "gay", which is a term that is not derogatory in itself, but was used by bullies within a context to insult boys who were perceived to be non-masculine or gender transgressing. In a study based in Iceland, Kjaraan (2015) revealed that non-conforming school boys were teased as "fag" or "sissy". In their study based in the United Kingdom, Paechter (2019) also revealed that non-conforming boys were subordinated through the use of words such as "nerd" and "fag" employed on them and Kostas (2021) explained that young boys were assigned the labels "little girl" or "sissy boy". In Spanish contexts, Carrera-Fernández et al. (2016) found that nicknames such as "faggot" or "fag" were employed on primary school boys who were perceived to be homosexual. Mayeza (2017a) argued that practices of subordination make it challenging for boys to transgress gender borders without facing negative attitudes and forms of violence from hegemonic masculine boys. Subordinating alternate non-conforming masculinities simultaneously worked to subordinate all things feminine, which included girls and all their practices.

With more school boys' and girls' openly identifying as gender diverse and transgender even at very young ages, how schools respond to their integration and visibly is unexplored (Neary, 2021). Indeed, transgender students face difficulty in navigating their school environments due to the lack of awareness and understanding regarding gender diversity hence hetero-normative learners respond to them in unequal and subordinate ways. In their study of transgender and sexual diversity in Australia, Jones et al., (2016) reported that 65% of gender non-conforming

learners experienced verbal abuse, 21% experienced physical abuse because of their assumed gender non-conformity and 25% of learners avoided schools for failing to conform to dominant gender stereotypes. Transgender students further experience challenges such as difficulty in accessing gender segregated areas in schools such as locker rooms and bathrooms. Due to the schools culture of hetero-patriarchy and hetero-normativity, transgender learners have negative schooling experiences.

South African scholars have argued that heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, and male power linked to boys' subordination of femininities and non-masculine boys are integral to the daily construction of hegemonic masculinity by boys at school (Bhana, 2016a; Mayeza, 2017a; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021). This is mainly due to how hegemonic notions of masculinity are embedded within the acceptable norms and gendered behaviour of South African males—such that they are expected to live up to idealised standards of being a real man. South African scholars revealed that these standards and norms are culturally bound and informed; therefore, boys are expected to conform to a conventional or stereotypical version of masculinity (Bhana et al., 2019, 2021; Mfecane, 2018; Pyke, 2020; Shefer, 2021). South African boys are therefore under constant pressure to negotiate their sexuality in ways that uphold hegemonic social and conservative norms (Bhana et al., 2021; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021). Hence, compulsory heterosexuality is sustained and naturalised in schools while non-binary identities are silenced, resulting in both gender and sexuality being policed (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). In my study, I add to this line of knowledge by highlighting how Indian and black boys construct their heterosexual masculinities by actively policing and regulating masculinities in ways that entrench violence and homophobia in the primary school.

Several studies inspired by feminist poststructuralism, including those reviewed above, have provided critical insights into the various ways in which children are positioned as active and not passive objects of masculine and heterosexual processes (Mayeza, 2017a; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020, 2021; Osgood & Robinson, 2017; Paechter, 2017, 2019; Wardman, 2017). The findings from these studies have all troubled the dominant discourse of childhood innocence in ways that challenge how we understand children's gender and sexuality. Mayeza (2018) argued for the

need to rethink the assumed dominant discourses of sexuality as being in the domain of adults and, instead, acknowledge children as being sexually knowing.

Having explored the ways in which boys construct, negotiate, and perform their gender and sexuality in the making of masculinities, I will now show how the school itself—through dominant gender discourses, practices, and teacher ideologies of childhood—shapes children’s negotiation of gender and sexuality in the primary school.

### **How Schools Construct and Reproduce Gender and Sexuality**

Although schools claim to abide by the South African Constitution and legislation regarding respect for gender and sexual diversity, research provides evidence on how normative gender identities and heterosexuality are endorsed solely in South African schools (Francis, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Contemporary gender identities in South Africa are linked to past political and economic challenges that detail the everyday practices of masculinities, which influence South Africa’s social identity in profound ways through the investment of male power (Bhana et al., 2021).

Ngabaza and Shefer (2019) explained in their study on sexuality education in South African schools that, instead of challenging normative gender and sexual narratives, school pedagogies are usually framed by sex-role socialisation and binary thinking of gender and sexuality. Both in terms of form and content, there is a tendency for traditional South African gender roles to be reinscribed such that stereotypical ideologies, gender bias, and binary understandings connected to the broader social world are reinforced in schools through classroom practices, sport cultures, curriculum content, and teacher beliefs. The relational understanding of gender sustains binary polarities at school, which serves to reproduce masculinity as strong, dominant and active and femininity as passive, weak and emotional—thereby entrenching unequal gender hierarchies and male power (Bhana, 2016a; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015).

Studies internationally have also documented the role of schools and teachers in shaping children’s construction of gender. In Callahan and Nicholas’s (2018) observational fieldwork

they found that gender based on binary notions were naturalised in teachers' relationships with children. Gym teachers, for example, often rewarded children with stickers according to their assumed sex; boys were given blue stickers and girls, pink. The pink and blue dichotomy was accepted as a normal and common-sense categorisation of gender that promoted stereotypical gendered meanings. These scholars argued that fostering this difference did not provide any space for the gender diverse child to situate themselves. Engagement with binary thinking served to constantly re-essentialise gender and sanction gender norms in the school. Nonetheless, although teachers in Callahan and Nicholas's (2018) study sought to reinforce gender differences, the scholars argued that children's performances of gender were not entirely reiterative of these norms. Girls sought to reshape and resist dominant discourses by employing ambivalent agency. For instance, in their role as the woman of the household during free play, girls sought to construct a powerful image in which they bossed the boys—thus challenging notions of passivity and subordinate roles that are associated with women as caregivers.

Bartholomaeus's (2013) study of primary school boys' masculinities in Australia revealed the plural ways through which boys engaged in masculinities based on being studious, engaging in feminine activities, and being caring—all of which challenged dominant gender discourses. Young boys in her study were able to resist and subvert gender discourses, drawing on their agency. Adopting a poststructural lens for researching young children, several international scholars have pointed to the ways in which children can attach meaning to their gender, foregrounding their personal agency—rather than being passive recipients (Bartholomaeus, 2013; Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Ollis et al., 2021; Xu, 2020). Xu (2020) emphasised the importance for teachers to develop an understanding of children's active engagement in gender in ways that are fluid, complex, and diverse and to support them to create alternate subjectivities of gender in order to challenge gender stereotypes. Nonetheless, efforts aimed at promoting gender equality in schools are constrained due to teachers' perceptions of childhood sexuality.

In the light of young children's active investment in gender and sexuality, in the following section I look at the current state of, and debates regarding, the teaching of gender and sexuality in schools. I further uncover how teachers' perceptions of childhood gender and sexuality forestall the implementation of sexuality education in schools.

### *Teaching Gender and Sexuality in Schools*

Pattman and Bhana's (2017) South African study on gender and sexuality stated that until the early 2000s, few studies focused on the subject of sexuality in South African schools because it was considered to be private and inappropriate. While studies to date are increasingly focusing on the construction of sexuality in schools, scholars continue to assert that issues of sexuality are silenced because of adult notions of children as non-sexual beings (Bhana, 2020; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020, 2021). Indeed, recent research conducted by Mayeza & Bhana (2019) and many international scholars discussed earlier have attested that young children are sexual agents and have shown the various ways in which inequalities are entrenched in children's engagement with sexual practices (Bhana, 2020; Huuki & Renold, 2016; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019; Mayeza, 2017a; Renold, 2007; Xu, 2020). Nonetheless, the teaching and learning of sexuality in primary schools continue to be plagued with controversies and tensions steeped in anxieties from the larger cultural and social discourses that presume that sexuality in early childhood is developmentally inappropriate, irrelevant, and dangerous to young children (Bhana, 2016a, 2020; Ferfolija & Ullman, 2020). The consensus regarding children as asexual beings also arose out of feminist concerns regarding child abuse and pornography and this have resulted in a move away from sexuality education towards unrealistic abstinence programmes in schools. Although sexuality education is aimed at promoting gender equality and sexual diversity, children's learning of sexuality is constrained and compromised in educational settings.

Shefer and Macleod's (2015) paper on sexuality education in South Africa argued that the current sexuality component of the Life Orientation curriculum in the senior phase of primary school is confined to addressing the transmission and prevention of HIV/AIDS, promoting discussions on abstinence, encouraging heterosexual relationships, and silencing discussions of sexual diversity. Religion supports a culture of heteronormativity which facilitates discrimination and subordination of homosexual identities in South Africa. Due to religious beliefs, young people's sexual choices are constrained and negatives views about LGBTIQ identities as sinful and wrong is promoted (Mayeza, 2021).

Shefer and Macleod (2015, p. 4) argued that the teaching of sexuality is based on the discourses of “danger, disease and damage” and fails to offer a platform where learners can reflect on their own experiences and identities—as pointed out by many other scholars (Bhana et al., 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ubisi, 2021). Moreover, sexuality education promotes discussions on abstinence. Levine (2002) argued that the “abstinence-only” education of sex and its concomitant association with disease and danger means that schools should rethink the boundaries drawn in protecting learners from issues of sex and sexuality. Teaching about abstinence only fails to educate learners about birth control, sexual orientation and access to sexual transmitted disease services or contraceptives. Spronk and Hendriks (2020) have also argued that sexuality in African contexts is only made visible when the focus is on promiscuity, HIV/AIDS, corrective rape, and sexual violence—this contributes to the dominant image of sexuality as dangerous and damaged in Southern contexts.

In the FP of primary schools, the Grades 1–3 Life Skills programme comprises of beginning knowledge, creative art, physical education and personal and social well-being (Department of Basic Education, 2012). This Life Skills programme aims to present knowledge on social relationships and personal health and safety, with a focus on sexual abuse and violence. Bhana (2016a), however, raised concerns that the Life Skills curriculum in the FP is limited to ensuring concepts of gender equality and social and personal development while topics of sex, sexuality, and sexual diversity are absent. Bhana (2016a) argued that the Life Skills curriculum also fails to account for children’s struggles in their daily construction of gender and sexuality in their socioeconomic and geographical contexts. The current curriculum is simply limited to moral injunctions that operate to deny sexual agency; and teaching is guided by the assumption that children are asexual and unknowing. In addition, childhood sexuality in schools is promulgated by religious underpinnings which have effectively controlled the manner in which sex and sexuality is taught in public schools (Levine, 2002).

Although Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) has been integrated into the Life Orientation curriculum for almost 20 years, in 2019 the South African Department of Basic Education announced plans for a new, revised Life Orientation curriculum for 2020 that would, in age appropriate and sensitive ways, introduce sexuality education—with technical guidance

from UNESCO as well as research from reputed South African institutions on sexuality education. The need for a revised curriculum was in response to the challenges that South African learners experienced in terms of reproductive and sexual health, their early sexual debut, exposure to explicit sexual content in media, and their reluctance to negotiate the use of condoms—leaving them susceptible to contracting sexually transmitted diseases (Department of Basic Education, 2019). UNESCO (2019) called for the implementation of CSE to address the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of sexuality as a key component in ensuring quality education that aims to improve sexual health and gender equality. The curriculum will also work to disrupt negative gender norms and stereotypes, which will help to curb or prevent gender violence (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; UNESCO, 2019). While the current traditional model of teaching sexuality is based on biological understandings, reproduction, and prevention of diseases, CSE aims to go beyond that, based on active teaching and learning that fosters learners' critical thinking, their ability to make decisions, and be responsible for their actions in a move towards gender and sexual transformation (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; UNESCO, 2019).

In terms of masculinities, UNESCO (2019) argued that discussions of masculinities are often left out of sexuality education programmes largely due to the assumption that young boys are unproblematic. Such notions stem from the idea that boys' hegemonic behaviours are inherent and a natural part of their masculinities (Bhana, 2016a; Callahan & Nicholas, 2018). Including the topic of masculinities in CSE will assist to address and challenge dominant hegemonic norms, gender stereotypes, biases, and inequalities—thus supporting boys to construct and perform their masculinities in positive ways (UNESCO, 2019).

Notwithstanding the South African Department of Basic Education's (2019) aims and commitment to delivering successful CSE, South African scholars have argued that implementation of the programme is indeed faced with pedagogical challenges—one of which involves negative attitudes from the public (Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Ubisi, 2021). This stems from adult concerns regarding the effects of teaching young people about sex and sexuality. Sexuality is considered adult domain and knowledge, and children are viewed as in need of protection from sexuality. Social opposition and resistance from parents and the community are further fuelled by misconceptions and concerns that teaching about sexuality is unsuitable for

young children because it goes against religious and cultural teachings, encourages early sexual practices, and promotes alternative lifestyles such as non-conforming gender identities. Children also come from diverse family backgrounds that impact their learning of sexuality in schools given that certain topics may be considered taboo, controversial, and inappropriate by their families (Bhana et al., 2019).

The fear of controversy among parents often affects teachers' willingness to discuss the use of condoms, birth control, sexual diversity, and relationships—instead, they prefer to teach that relationships are dangerous and should be delayed until marriage (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Teachers and adults fail to hold informative, intelligent and enlightened conversations about sexuality with children because they too, consider sexual topics to be controversial; and they are also not prepared to listen or respond in positive ways to what learners have to say about how they experience sexuality (Levine, 2002; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019). Guided by their personal and religious beliefs, teachers erase sexuality from the curriculum because these topics conflict with their sociocultural beliefs, moralities, prejudices, and biases (Bhana, 2012; Francis, 2019).

As established in Chapter 1, in South African schools, non-conforming sexualities such as homosexuality are seen as unnatural, immoral, and un-African (Bhana et al., 2019; Judge, 2017). Although numerous studies have revealed how boys are subjected to homophobic insults and penalties such as shaming, humiliation, and exclusion from peer groups and playground spaces in South African schools (Bhana, 2016a; Mayeza, 2017a; Msibi, 2012), the topic of homosexuality is rarely acknowledged or addressed in the schooling system. The school curriculum maintains a hetero-normative understanding of gender that fosters a culture of heterosexuality—thus exacerbating the discrimination and subordination of non-normative identities. A large body of research in South Africa highlights how classrooms continue to function along homophobic lines in which teachers are complicit in silencing learners' non-normative practices (Bhana, 2016a; Msibi, 2012; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer et al., 2015). Despite legislation in place to protect students from discrimination and bullying (South African Schools Act, 1996), homophobic harassment remains prevalent because it is encouraged by teachers themselves, other students, and administrators.

In Msibi's (2012) research on high school learners' experiences of homophobia in South Africa, he argued that, despite the power and authority that teachers have to address prejudiced behaviour and tyrannical structures, teachers continue to disregard discrimination because they themselves struggle to address and eradicate their own biases. They may perpetuate harassment either intentionally or unintentionally because of their personal biases, sociocultural norms, and lack of knowledge of the harmfulness of their actions. Their attitudes are entrenched in the perception that homosexuality is fundamentally wrong, associated with disease or deviance, and something in need of reprimand and their biases are further connected to their religious and cultural beliefs. For example, Msibi (2012) found that anti-gay sentiments arose from teachers' religious views that same-sex relations are wrong and sinful. In this light, the teachers in his study claimed that it was difficult to support non-normative identities at school because they contravened their own religious teachings.

Internationally, results from a school climate survey conducted by Dessel et al. (2017) in the United States reported that homophobic practices were often dismissed by teachers; 67% of queer students who experienced assault and harassment reported that the school did nothing to address this. Consequently, negative attitudes further contributed to a negative school climate based on bias and inequalities. Dessel et al. (2017) claimed that biased attitudes by teachers towards non-binary identities resulted in low academic achievement, symptoms of loneliness, identity crisis, isolation, depression, and self-hatred among learners. Given that teachers' assumptions of gender are situated around genetic understandings, gender diversity is rarely promoted hence; those whose identities stretch outside the norm receive little or no support from teachers at school.

South African scholars have highlighted that teachers often reinforced the silencing of gender diversity because they felt inadequately trained to teach gender and sexual diversity (Bhana, 2012; Francis, 2019; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Msibi, 2012). Teachers therefore require opportunities to reflect on their personal subjectivities and pedagogical knowledge in order to teach gender and sexuality. Francis (2019) argued that there is a need for teacher training in South Africa to address issues regarding gender inequalities, and for a move towards challenging traditional South African gender stereotypes and biases. Efforts should be taken to help teachers

to acknowledge and challenge dominant patterns of masculinity in order to disrupt the gender order that supports and privileges male power and masculine positions that entrench violence.

A key precept common in studies of the early years is the significance placed on legitimising young children as active agents in the production of sexuality at school and, more broadly, in the home (Bhana, 2020; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020). Schooling should eschew prescribing fixed gender roles on young learners and, instead, highlight gender fluidity and empowerment. There is a need to rethink sexuality education for young children in more reflexive ways that will benefit boys in their understanding of what it means to invest in sexualities, gender identities and masculinities.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined literature on boys' construction of gender and sexuality in the early makings of their masculinities. The literature on gender and sexuality in primary schools, both in the local context and more broadly on a global scale, attests to young children's early gender and sexual practices, which they negotiate on their own terms despite biological and binary frameworks. Underlying this scholarship of research is the significant shift from childhood innocence to examining the contradictions and contingencies evident in boys' negotiation of masculinities. The literature highlighted various practices employed by young boys to construct their masculinities in ways that engendered pleasure, excitement, pressure, contradictions, and inequalities. These included their engagement in boyfriend/girlfriend cultures, kiss-and-chase games, heterosexual competition, and embodying an admired physical body through investment in fancy clothing, muscular bodies, and engaging in sport. Although boys gained heterosexual pleasure from these activities, they also regulated masculinities by policing non-conforming identities through acts of violence in the form of teasing, shaming, exclusion, and homophobia. Indeed, these practices worked to shatter the silence around children's perceived asexuality and rendered visible the dynamic ways in which boys' negotiation of masculinities transpire in the early years.

Bhana (2020) has argued that relatively little research in the Global South has sought to examine young boys' sexual construction (in ways that are both harmful and pleasurable) within the

intersections of race, age and class. In this study, I aim to situate young boys as active sexual and gender agents in navigating their identities amidst social norms and pressures in order to enrich understandings of masculinities from the perspectives of young Indian and black boys. My contribution to research on young masculinities in South Africa addresses Indian and black boys' construction of gender and sexuality within their localised context through which socioeconomic conditions, racial stereotypes, cultural norms, and social interactions shape their negotiation of heterosexual masculinities in complex ways.

My study also draws on teachers' views around gender and sexuality by examining how they either promote or deny boys' sexual agency in the primary school. As studies have argued (Bragg et al., 2018; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020), examining teacher's pedagogical responses to sexuality is fundamental because their actions have a significant impact on how children construct their subjectivities of gender and sexuality. It is therefore important to address teachers' views on childhood gender and sexuality in this study—with the hope of challenging binary and hetero-normative understandings in order to pave the way towards gender diversity and promoting children's agency.

In the next chapter, I review literature that demonstrates how boys actively engage in, resist, and contest various forms of violence in their construction and negotiation of masculinities.

## **Chapter Five: Literature Review: Boys and the Negotiation of Violent Masculinities**

### **Introduction**

One of the aims of my study is to examine how violence is entrenched in notions of masculinities. In the previous literature review chapter, I highlighted boys' active investment in sexuality that is fundamental to the construction of masculinity. Violence is inextricably bound to gender and sexuality hence, understanding the construction of masculinities involves an examination of how boys employ violence as means to fulfil prevailing discourses of gender and (hetero)sexuality. In this chapter, I uncover how boys construct their masculinities by advocating, resisting, and challenging violence. I review literature in local and international contexts, under specific themes, to show how violent masculinities contribute to the ongoing problem of school violence whereby boys engage in violent practices as a justifiable tool to gain hegemonic masculine power. The extant literature on violent masculinities helps me to situate my current study in the various bodies of knowledge on how masculinities are produced and contested in the primary school.

Studies in South Africa have argued that research on violence in primary school is evaded because children are assumed to be incapable of undertaking violent positions (Bhana, 2020; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020, 2021). Mayeza and Bhana (2021) argued that stereotypical and essentialist perceptions of gender render childhood as a unitary and homogenous experience, hence these lines of thinking preclude the recognition and examination of gender violence in the primary school. In this study, I work to expand the scope of violence in the primary school by moving beyond the limitations of the discourse of childhood passivity to show that violence is indeed present and problematic in the primary school. In this way, I aim to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on how violent masculinities are produced, negotiated, and contested by South African primary school boys.

In this chapter, I show that families, schools, and popular media culture are fundamental pipelines for the construction of violent masculinities. As the first agents of gender socialisation—as Lundgren et al. (2019) emphasised in their study on how 10–19-year-old boys and girls embody gender norms within their social contexts in Uganda—the family home is a

salient site where notions of masculinities are produced, re-produced, and challenged. I therefore begin this chapter by highlighting the construction of violent masculinities in the home context. Next, I examine gender violence in schools—illustrating how boys actively engage in violence such as bullying and sexual violence to achieve hegemonic masculinity and establish male power. Then, I examine how corporal punishment in the school and home contexts serves to promote violent masculinities among boys. To gain a broader understanding of the construction of masculinities, I highlight how binary gender norms and dominant notions of masculinities are communicated through various media sources which shape children’s construction and performances of violent masculinities. To conclude, I draw on a range of scholarship which shows that depending on specific situations, boys have the capacity to negotiate their masculinities in non-violent ways, drawing on their agency.

### **Constructing and Contesting Violent Masculinities in the Home**

Although boys negotiate masculinities within various social contexts such as the school, neighbourhood, and religious institutions, a large body of research on childhood gender and sexuality has demonstrated the pivotal role of families in the gendering of young children (Gansen & Martin, 2018; Helman & Ratele, 2016; Kane, 2012; Solebello & Elliott, 2011; Stacey & Padavic, 2020). Particularly striking are the complex and problematic means through which young boys learn to navigate their masculinities in ways that devalue the feminine within unequal gender relations. According to Helman and Ratele’s (2016) study of gender inequalities in South African families, early socialisation of gender begins in the family where parents and caregivers take on the responsibility to convey gender messages, inculcate social norms, sanction appropriate behaviour, and act as symbolic markers of masculinity. This is largely informed by dominant binary discourses that are paramount for setting the norm towards conformity. For example, through the discourses of motherhood, women are seen as possessing innate nurturing capabilities—thus positioning them as the primary caregivers in the family—while men are exempt from nurturing roles by virtue of their patriarchal position as economic providers, disciplinarians, and protectors. These discourses produce and reinforce unequal relations in families. Helman and Ratele (2016) argued that children’s knowledge of gender is correlated to

those of their families. They are socialised according to normative gendered scripts and practices that reproduce gender inequalities and male power.

International studies, such as Paechter's (2017) study on young children and the construction of heterosexuality in the United Kingdom, noted that, from a young age, girls were encouraged to engage in stereotypical play characterised by nurturance and boys were directed towards motor activity. Boys were also socialised to be masculine and aggressive whilst girls were socialised along the lines of passivity. Even the methods of discipline enforced were highly gendered as highlighted in Carvalho et al.'s (2017) study of parental discipline in Portugal. They found that boys were the main targets of physical punishment because they were considered to be less obedient than girls. Dominant gender discourses were limiting because they worked to sustain binary categories that positioned boys and girls unequally within the household.

As established by Butler (1990), hegemonic masculinity is inextricably connected within dominant framings of sexuality such that to be an ideal boy means to achieve heterosexual relations. The family home is an important heterosexual site where meanings of sexuality are constructed, reproduced, and mediated according to the dominant notions of masculinities. Hetero-normativity plays a fundamental role in parents' sexual lessons to children. To date, research foregrounds the power of parents in conveying sexual messages with the aim of normalising heterosexuality (Kane, 2006; Martin, 2009; Solebello & Elliott, 2011; Stacey & Padavic, 2020). For example, Stacey and Padavic's (2020) study of parents' gender and sexual expectations of children in the United States emphasised the immense joy parents experienced when children conformed to sexual normative behaviour. Additionally, Kane's (2006) research on parents' reactions to their preschool children's gender non-conforming behaviours in the United Kingdom highlighted how sexual messages to children strongly emphasised the importance of heterosexuality. Parents displayed negative responses towards discordant behaviour when boys engaged in activities that were believed to be icons of femininity in the fear of their sons being perceived as homosexual. For example, they responded negatively to their sons wearing the colour pink, dressing up in feminine attire, and engaging in dance associated with femininity. Parents also discouraged passivity and emotional outbursts from boys. Fathers in particular expressed concern that they did not want their sons to "cry like sissies" or "cry like

a girl” (Kane, 2006, p. 161). These findings demonstrated parents’ concerns regarding non-conforming masculinities, which led them to invest heavily in teaching boys that homosexuality was intrinsically wrong—based on the fear that children may be subjected to potential gender bullying for transgressing masculine norms. In the sub-section below, I examine the role of fathers in promoting hegemonic masculinities in the home.

### *Hegemonic Masculinity and Fatherhood*

According to Jamieson et al. (2018), in South Africa, the prevailing sociocultural context promotes a gendered hierarchy where men are in a superior position to children and women. Such notions are shaped by South Africa’s historical past when the migrant labour system forced men to work away from their families. This facilitated men to engage less in the home and more in hegemonic practices associated with patriarchal power and economic provider roles. Additionally, Helman and Ratele (2016) argued that male authority within South African families is often normalised and unquestioned, and this contributes to unequal gender relations where violence is utilised by men on women and children in the household to sustain male power. Indeed, the country’s turbulent past has created violent masculinities in the home and children are caught up in the dominant discourses of hegemonic masculinity. Several South African scholars have further argued that family turmoil and instability experienced by young boys in the home may increase the potential for them to become susceptible to violence as knowledge and power related to masculinity is learned and normalised (Bhana, 2016a; Heilman & Barker, 2018; Ratele, 2008).

The violence boys are exposed to in the home may also be associated with drug and alcohol abuse by their fathers. Leopeng and Langa’s (2019) study on the state of black middle-class men in post-apartheid South Africa revealed that that excessive consumption of alcohol was traditionally linked to aggressive and macho versions of masculinities that led to the perpetuation of violence. This had particularly detrimental effects on the construction of masculinities because nothing was done in the home to prevent alcohol abuse, which boys consequently perceived to be a normal part of being a male. Violence and alcohol consumption are examples of ways in which

men are able to construct and reinforce notions of hegemonic masculinity, thus communicating negative messages of masculinity to their children.

Apart from simply witnessing violence and alcohol abuse, young boys are also socialised into violence. For example, Christensen and Wright's (2018) study on how parents perceive and respond to gender bullying among children in the United States found that fathers encouraged boys to utilise violence as an acceptable way to respond to violence perpetrated on them. Studies have therefore revealed that the manner in which masculine identities are constructed at home—characterised by acts of violence, being motivated to engage in violence, and exposure to alcohol consumption—may increase the potential for young boys to become prone to violence such that they are more likely to perpetrate violence, even at school (Christensen & Wright, 2018; Jewkes et al., 2015; Parkes, 2007). It is for these reasons Adams and Coltrane (2005, p. 232) argued that “as we raise boys to be masculine men, we often end up with troubled boys”. This is because they experience increased amounts of pressure from social fabrics to conform to masculine norms, which has severe consequences for their safety as well as their physical, mental, and social well-being.

Nonetheless, Helman and Ratele (2016) stated that although male authority and violence are prevalent in South African families, this is not to imply that all men cannot practise good fathering. Due to shifting social structures and the increase in numbers of women entering the economic sector, men are now emerging within a concept of fatherhood based on care, support, and increased involvement with their children. Fatherhood can therefore embody traditional masculinity of being a provider alongside caring roles and positive relationships within the family, thus reinforcing fluid notions of masculinity.

Helman and Ratele (2016) also argued that, as much as fathering may offer normative ways of constructing masculinities, children themselves have the agency to challenge what is presented to them. Evident in their findings, were the dynamic ways in which young boys employed their agency to secede from rigid norms and dominant discourses. For example, drawing on conventional norms of masculinity in the home, they found that an 8-year-old boy associated authority with maleness by referring to himself as the man of the house. Nonetheless, while some

boys adopted dominant hegemonic discourses of patriarchy, others in their study sought to position themselves as respectful and caring in opposition to traditional notions of male power. Hence, although hegemonic masculinity is situated at the pinnacle of the hierarchy, its position is not fixed—this means that boys can unsettle notions of male power and disrupt the gender dichotomy.

Indeed, fatherhood is often positioned alongside hegemonic and violent notions, considering past social and political representations of men which have rendered them prone to violence and male power (Morrell et al., 2016). However, although families are regarded as gendered spaces through which dominant ideas of masculinities and femininities are promoted, what is often missing in research is the complex and contradictory ways in which children are involved in disrupting and challenging traditional gender norms instead of simply reifying hegemonic norms in the home. Engaging with feminist poststructural perspectives requires an understanding that children are capable of counteracting the so-called natural polarisation of masculinity and femininity and its heterosexual assumptions (Blaise, 2005). Hence, important to my study is this understanding that, although interactions are shaped by gender discourses that are imbued with power, this power can be contested by children because discourses are flexible and unstable (Blaise, 2005). I employ feminist poststructural framing to illuminate the complexities in boys' construction of gender, seeing them as active agents who accommodate, enable, negotiate, and challenge the dominant discourses of masculinities.

In the South African context, Helman and Ratele (2016) argued that few studies have examined how gender is produced within South African families. In addition, the ways in which traditional values and culture shape South African boys' construction of masculinities are rarely addressed in research (Mfecane, 2018). Given this apparent paucity, my study intends to offer unique insights into the ways in which young black and Indian boys from low-middle to lower socioeconomic contexts experience, negotiate, and challenge gender norms in their homes in the light of their diverse cultural backgrounds.

In the following section, I examine gender violence in the context of schools. I focus on how gender bullying and sexual violence contribute to boys' negotiation of violent masculinities.

## **Negotiating Violent Masculinities at School**

Violence in schools around the globe is not uncommon—and it is particularly rife in South Africa (Bhana et al., 2021). According to Prinsloo and Naser (2007, p. 47), violence in school is an “intentional physical or non-physical (verbal) act which results in physical or non-physical pain inflicted on the recipient of that act while the recipient is under the school’s supervision”. Several studies in South Africa document violence perpetrated by school boys that is linked to achieving hegemonic masculinity (Bhana, 2016a; Bhana et al., 2021; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020, 2021; Moosa, 2021; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018a; Parkes, 2015; Pinheiro, 2006; Tucker & Govender, 2017). Rather than being a safe place, these studies reported several incidents of violence characterised by physical, sexual, and verbal abuse, bullying, homophobia, corporal punishment, and gang-related as daily occurrences—all intractably connected to violent masculinities and the need to achieve male power. To this end, it is worthwhile to acknowledge that violence—in all its forms—is indeed gendered.

Educational settings are prominent sites within which masculinities are produced and hierarchal relations characterised by levels of domination and subordination are sustained. As established in Chapter 1, gender violence in South Africa is tied to historical underpinnings when violent masculinities and cultural norms that validated male power and patriarchy were employed by South African men to mediate their socioeconomic weakness. Instead of contesting these dominant societal and historical norms that support and, indeed, legitimise the entrenchment of violence, the school is a prominent site that reinforces gender roles, patriarchal power, and gender disparities—ultimately shaping boys' understanding of what it entails to be a male.

Often, the discourses that work towards essentialising male violence as innate and biological tends to remove violence from the perpetrator and justify boys’ violent behaviour as normal (Bhana, 2016a). In this sense, school children remain unprotected because they learn to negotiate their identities in an environment where violence is normalised due to essentialist understandings. However, although male violence is normalised, Mayeza and Bhana (2021) have highlighted that both boys and girls, and even teachers within various school contexts, may be

perpetrators or victims of violence. Violence is therefore not exclusive to a particular gender, person, or school type.

Several studies on primary school violence globally, have argued that because masculinities have been noted as dynamic, fluid, and multiple, boys negotiate, not only a single type of masculinity but rather, a range of different masculinities—with the hegemonic form being at the forefront (Bartholomaeus, 2012; Bhana, 2015; Le Mat, 2016; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020, 2021; Moosa, 2021). Power relations are also sustained in schools, affording boys opportunities to acquire multiple ways of constructing their identities in the school-specific context. The violence perpetrated by boys are most often utilised with the aim of policing boundaries, achieving heterosexuality, and maintaining a hierarchical order of masculinities. Masculine norms are tied to hegemonic ideals that increase the likelihood of boys to experience or perpetrate violence—the reasons put forth by scholars include: to achieve a socially recognised manhood, to conceal their emotions, to create and affirm the divisions between male and female, and to reinforce patriarchal power (Bhana, 2016a; Bhana et al., 2021; Le Mat, 2016; Wardman, 2017). While there are several ways through which gender violence occurs at school, Carrera-Fernández et al. (2016) stated that gender bullying is the most common occurrence in schools.

### *Gender Bullying in School*

Several studies have defined bullying as intentional harm that is inflicted onto one or more individuals committed by either a single person or a group repeatedly over time due to the imbalance of power based on age, physicality, or popularity (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2016; Department of Basic Education, 2015; Rosen & Nofziger, 2018; Wardman, 2017). These studies have documented the devastating extent of bullying in school, which involves severe forms of violence such as gang violence, fighting, kicking, hitting, choking, hair pulling, and name calling.

Carrera-Fernández et al.'s (2016) study on Spanish adolescents' perception of bullying raised the concern that bullying is situated within ideas of gender essentialism to describe boys' violent behaviours—to the extent that power and violence are normalised. The authors argued that

analysis of bullying has often disregarded masculine expressions involved in bullying. Hence, their study placed great attention on gendered understandings of violence, which offered a broader understanding of gender violence beyond biological variables. From this perspective, they noted that bullying afforded boys an opportunity to express their masculinities and also to control the gender identities of peers who transgressed gender norms. Other feminist poststructural inspired studies were consistent with Carrera-Fernández et al.'s (2016) views, for example, Rosen and Nofziger's (2018) study on how bullying behaviours shape and reinforce the construction of masculinities among 11–19-year-old boys in the United States, and Mayeza and Bhana's (2021) study on bullying and the negotiation of masculine power among 10–13-year-old school boys in South Africa.

Rosen and Nofziger (2018) argued that little research has explored the ways in which bullying is utilised to strengthen ideas about gender and masculinities. Their study aimed to examine how experiences of bullying worked to construct and reify masculinities in the school. They found that bullying was frequent for many school children and established that it was indeed gendered, taking on a range of forms and experienced by both girls and boys. Four key themes emerged from their findings, namely, hetero-normativity, acceptance of violence, physical dominance and social location.

As established in the previous chapter, heterosexuality and homosexuality are fundamental to the construction of hegemonic masculinity. Rosen and Nofziger (2018) found that boys who did not comply with hetero-normative principles were at a greater risk of being bullied and victimised by their peers. Boys were teased for their perceived sexual orientation and non-conforming behaviours. For example, displaying emotions such as crying led to punishment where they had to endure physical assault to their genitalia. Boys were also considered to be immature for not having a girlfriend. However, boys who were seen hugging girls were also teased for their close proximity to femininity, hence their negotiation of violence was contradictory.

Similarly, Christensen and Wright (2018) claimed that the objectives of gender bullying were to inflict verbal and emotional harassment on less-masculine boys in order to police conformity to dominant and patriarchal discourses of gender. Violence in the form of bullying was perpetrated

with an understanding that only certain forms of gender expression and identities should exist. This comprehension of bullying is relevant to my study in order to show how violence in school can serve to enforce dominant, hegemonic notions of masculinity.

Rosen and Nofziger's (2018) second finding revealed that boys engaged in bullying to achieve physical dominance based on hegemonic notions such as being brave, tough, and independent. They sought to adhere to hegemonic masculinity by engaging in physical forms of bullying such as punching, kicking, and choking weaker boys. In keeping with ideal masculinities, boys did not want to be considered weak or as victims of violence—instead, they retaliated in violently aggressive ways to reclaim their power. Such notions were also apparent in the findings of Hellstrom and Beckman's (2019) study on the bullying experiences of girls and boys in Sweden. They found that boys used bullying as an important tool to alleviate aggression and therefore targeted boys who were weaker. The power sought through bullying also allowed boys to acquire a sense of belonging in the peer group and to be perceived as stronger than others.

Rosen and Nofziger's (2018, p. 15) findings also revealed that boys engaged in bullying because they, like teachers, supported the homogenous "boys will be boys" discourse. They argued that it is often socially presumed and accepted that boys are inherently violent and aggressive simply because they are boys. This is particularly problematic because such notions imply that boys are wired to be naturally violent. The boys in their study engaged in violence simply because they believed that it was normal behaviour. Many participants also revealed that at some point—as victims—they learnt to accept being bullied by laughing about it. The authors concluded that shrugging off incidents of bullying, and holding a static view of masculinities, may increase the likelihood of boys' perpetration or being victims in a continuous cycle of violence.

Rosen and Nofziger (2018) also found that aspects of race, religion, and socioeconomic class intersected with hegemonic masculinity, which led to violence employed as means to oppress others. Some boys were bullied and teased based on their physical appearance, which did not measure up to conventional masculine standards. The participants revealed that they were often called ugly and short while others were called poor, based on their socioeconomic conditions. In terms of race, participants said that they were often beaten up and insulted through derogatory

words based on the colour of their skin. At times even their religion was labelled “dumb”. The authors pointed out that masculinity indeed intersects with identities whereby boys are stigmatised based on their size, appearance, social class, race and religion. Rosen and Nofziger’s (2018) study offered valuable insights on how bullying was utilised as a means to achieve and reinforce notions of hegemonic masculinity. They argued that future research should focus on how bullying behaviour is shaped by and reinforces masculinities.

According to the National School Safety Framework, bullying has devastating effects on the lives of children in school (Department of Basic Education, 2015). Victims of bullying may sustain injuries, face social exclusion, maintain poor school attendance, and eventually drop out of school. Other studies on bullying in childhood reported various adverse effects on victims such as mental and physical health problems, stress, depression and anxiety—and also included effects on the offenders linked to suicidal and criminal behaviours (Christensen & Wright, 2018; Rosen & Nofziger, 2018). Considering these consequences, Christensen and Wright (2018) argued that part of the problem of bullying at school is linked to socialisation in the home where parents tend to normalise bullying behaviours, considering them to be a rite of passage; some parents also encourage children to fight back, thus promoting violent retaliation simultaneously when violence is invoked. In such cases, boys may not only succumb to bullying but also contest bullying through violent retaliation.

Mayeza and Bhana (2021) also examined bullying within a gendered lens at a township primary school in Durban. They too argued that research on violence often draws on essentialist notions where bullying is seen as a behavioural problem and part of an individual’s personality traits. As a result, the broader aspect of race, gender, and power relations that intersect to shape boys’ negotiation of violence is overlooked. Mayeza and Bhana (2021) found that teachers associated violence with boys, and girls were viewed as passive recipients of male violence—this worked to reinforce and maintain gender binaries and inequalities in the school. As a result, boys in their study expressed the injustice they felt because teachers dismissed incidents when girls inflicted violence on them. Nonetheless, some boys sought to react in physically violent ways such as attempting to hit those girls who victimised them. Girls sought to protect themselves by using the toilet space as a gendered place of safety. Mayeza and Bhana (2021) argued that, although

previous studies highlighted the toilets as a danger zone where girls experienced violence (see Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018b), they found that the toilets were a safe space for girls and protected them from male power. However, this worked to reinforce the expression of male power and female weakness because girls were seen as weak and in need of protection. Boys who inflicted violence on girls were punished by teachers in corporal ways such as beatings with a stick. Although girls also employed violence on boys, especially older girls who bullied Grade 1 and 2 boys at the school, Mayeza and Bhana (2021) argued that teachers were unable to move beyond essentialised notions of violent boys and passive girls and therefore failed to address girls' engagement in violence. Their findings further revealed how bullying practices were underwritten by issues of hunger related to poverty. Girls emerged as the main perpetrators who bullied boys for lunch. The authors argued that, although girls are often positioned as vulnerable to male violence in schools, it was evident that they were actively involved in violence for material rewards in the context of hunger and food insecurity. Mayeza and Bhana (2021) noted that violence should be situated within gender power relations, and that future research should take into account the socioeconomic contexts that provide particular contours for the enactment of violence at school.

Transcending essentialist understandings of bullying, Rosen and Nofziger (2018) and Mayeza and Bhana (2021) demonstrated how bullying was a gendered experience that manifested in the context of race, socioeconomic class, and gender relations of power as has been highlighted in other feminist studies (Carrera- Fernández et al., 2016; Parkes, 2015). These scholars have illustrated the importance of addressing the nuances of gender power and argued for the need to pay attention to the broader social structures in order to understand local manifestations of violence at schools.

Considering the above arguments, in my study I shed light on how Indian and black boys navigate their violent masculinities under social, racial, and cultural conditions that are strongly shaped by the legacies of apartheid. What is unique in my study, and missing in research, is how race relations are negotiated by Indian and black boys considering the racial tensions and ambivalences conceded throughout history. In order to enhance local knowledge of masculinities, I examine how young Indian and black boys actively engage in or reject dominant

narratives of sexuality and gender underlined by inequalities and violence. I also show how girls emerge as perpetrators of violence on boys, which is an area that requires attention as pointed out by Bhana and Mayeza (2019b) in their study on primary school girls addressing and negotiating violence in South Africa.

Next, I examine how sexual violence is also enforced as a way of gratifying hegemonic notions of masculinities.

### *Achieving Hegemonic Masculinity through Sexual Violence*

Sexual violence is the most pervasive public health concern and human rights violation in the world (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018; Leach & Mitchell, 2006; World Health Organisation, 2002). In South Africa, sexual violence is one of the greatest concerns, post-apartheid, with the country having the highest occurrence of sexual assault globally; yet only one out of 20 cases of rape are reported to the police annually (Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018a). While studies have documented abuse within the home and communities, schools have been largely implicated too (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018; Bhana et al., 2021). Health concerns such as the spread of HIV/AIDS have been a catalyst in directing attention to schools in order to uncover the extent of sexual violence in educational settings (Leach, 2006).

In the sub-Saharan African context, a consistent pattern of sexual abuse has been reported in many studies—demonstrating school girls’ experiences of sexual harassment by boys in classrooms, playgrounds, toilets, and corridors (Humphreys, 2013; Muhanguzi, 2011; Scorgi et al., 2017). These studies also documented various sexual offenses perpetrated by boys at school such as vandalising the school walls with sexualised graffiti, speaking and touching girls in a vulgar manner, and cornering girls in the corridors, classrooms, and playground to enforce power on them. Gender relations were key aspects to understanding sexual violence where hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, and hetero-normativity were entrenched and normalised through sexual violence. In South Africa, Ngidi and Moletsane’s (2018a) study on 14–17-year-old orphaned children’s experiences of sexual violence correlates to sub-Saharan findings; they too, found that boys utilised sexual violence as a way to disempower and enforce control on girls in high school settings.

In Western contexts, Robinson's (2005) examination of sexual harassment and the construction of hegemonic masculinity at an Australian high school demonstrated that sexual harassment was practised by boys as a successful method to establish and maintain a hegemonic status quo characterised by an expression of power and heterosexist oppression. Boys normalised their practice of sexual violence claiming that sexually harassing girls was all just fun and jokes. They believed that their actions posed no harm because the girls enjoyed it—despite evidence that suggested that girls were indeed upset. They also believed that sexual harassment was a necessary part of attracting the attention of girls and a way of establishing intimate relations. This is particularly problematic because boys come to internalise that sexual harassment is inherent to the performance of heterosexual masculinities. Consequently, as Robinson (2005) argued, sexual violence became a part of the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity articulated in boys' everyday gestures and behaviours. Teachers also naturalised boys' sexual behaviours, hence the problem of sexual violence in school was rendered invisible.

Other motives for engaging in sexual violence were boys' reactions to girls' behaviour. For example, participants in Robinson's (2005) study claimed that sexual harassment was utilised as appropriate means to deal with girls who disrespected them. Hence, boys not only engaged in violence as a way to sustain heterosexual relations with girls but also as a means to reclaim and affirm their power. Girls taunting boys often challenged their dominance so in order to reinforce their masculine power they reacted in sexually abusive ways. Boys also felt offended when girls did not respond to their sexual advances. To be denied sexual relations impacted negatively on their masculine image hence, under such circumstances, boys perpetrated violence on girls.

Other reasons for boys' practices of sexual violence were the need to establish a masculine status within the peer group. Often, boys were pressured by their peers to engage in hegemonic violent behaviour. This highlights how hegemonic masculinity is constructed in the nexus of collective power, consolidated, and policed within the peer group. Nonetheless, despite the pressure to engage in sexual violence, some boys in Robinson's (2005) study articulated more peaceable versions of masculinities; however, in doing so, they found themselves being victims of harassment from hegemonic masculine boys. Boys revealed that they were targeted by

aggressive masculine boys for contesting sexual violence and also for constructing equitable relations with girls. Boys were therefore placed under great pressure to sexually harass girls as a means to sustain their hegemonic masculine position in the peer group.

Although several studies globally and in South Africa have documented adolescent and older boys' perpetration of sexual violence (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018a; Ngidi et al., 2021; Robinson, 2005), Bhana (2016a) has argued that even boys as young as 7-years-old are guilty of sexual offenses—yet little research in primary school has examined boys' sexual cultures due to dominant framings of childhood asexuality. Although the South African Schools Act (1996) enshrines the right of every learner to free and safe schooling, sexual violence continues to be a major problem as early as primary school. In her study, Bhana (2016a) sought to interrupt the silence on childhood innocence by demonstrating that sexual violence was indeed prevalent in the primary school. Bhana highlighted that sexual assaults were perpetrated by young boys during recess, in toilet facilities, hallways, empty classrooms, and on school grounds. Boys' attacks on girls were often initiated in a group of two or more boys. Bhana (2016a) also found that young boys engaged in sexual talk about girls that included occurrences of misogyny which was discussed in a focus group setting. Boys' talk about sex within the group discussion afforded an opportunity to establish and reproduce their sexual knowledge.

In her South African study on how sexual violence against 12–13-year-old primary school learners operates to reinforce hegemonic masculinities and gender power relations, Moma (2015) found that in order to be considered a “man” in the presence of their peers, boys engaged in sexual violence on girls by touching them inappropriately in the playground— this was also employed as a means to gain power over girls. Boys were considered to be unmanly when they resisted violence perpetrated on them by girls. In order to establish and redeem their hegemonic masculinity, boys sought revenge by sexually abusing girls after school or on the way home. Moma argued that, for many girls, their walk home from school is a treacherous experience. What transpired on the playground was carried beyond the school gates where girls became victims of violence. Girls were therefore expected to succumb to sexual objectification and violence from boys in the school or else they were susceptible to sexual abuse outside school. Ngidi et al.'s (2021) study on adolescents' vulnerability to sexual violence on their way to school

highlighted that of approximately 2.8 million school children in KwaZulu-Natal (Statistics South Africa, 2016), two million walk to school daily. In their study, they found that girls were often vulnerable to sexual assault, rape, abduction, and even murder in their journey to and from school. The scholars argued that, often, the price for male approval is that victims remain submissive and passive to male power and, by extension, sexual violence. School journeys were therefore influenced by males who had power and control over girls.

Moma (2015) also found that some boys ventured into the girls' toilets to produce drawings of female bodies and genitals on the walls to ridicule them and violate their self-esteem. The ridiculing remarks, coercive talk, and verbal taunts were ways of gaining power over girls which increased girl's vulnerability to male violence in the primary school. This violence has adverse effects on victims who may suffer depression and anxiety, experience psychological trauma, engage in alcohol and drug abuse and also drop out of school (Mayeza et al., 2021).

Although these findings provided evidence on ways in which sexual violence and inequalities actively manifest in the primary schools, Bhana (2016a) argued that teachers fail to acknowledge and address sexual violence because they consider it to be normal heterosexual behaviour. As established, these perceptions stem from adult discourses that presume young children are unable to understand abstract concepts of sexuality. Lack of reporting of sexual abuse and violence in schools further contributes to the silence and surge around sexual violence in primary schools.

Teachers themselves may also be guilty of sexual violence. According to UNESCO (2019), despite teachers being caring professionals, some may abuse their powerful position by perpetrating sexual abuse on learners. For example, in Tanzania it was found that over half of boys and girls who experienced sexual abuse identified their teachers as the abusers and in Samoa, 41% of children identified their teachers as perpetrators of sexual violence (UNESCO, 2019). In South Africa, Nako and Muthukrishna's (2018) study on teacher-instigated interpersonal violence in public schools found that male teachers were reported for sexual abuse of female learners in school. They argued that this finding reflects the gendered nature of violence in patriarchal South African society where men dominate women in most spheres of their lives. Ngidi and Moletsane (2018a) also revealed that South African teachers were

instigators or perpetrators of sexual violence. Threats of assault from teachers lowered the likelihood of girls reporting teachers' sexual misconduct hence, underreporting may obscure the true magnitude of sexual misconduct by teachers at school. Nako and Muthukrishna (2018) raised concerns that, despite these findings, there is a scarcity of research that examines teachers as perpetrators or victims of violence in schools.

Addressing and eradicating violence is indeed priority for many schools; but how teachers perceive gender and sexuality in childhood remains understudied (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017). In my study, I address this paucity by including teacher participants to examine their perceptions of childhood sexuality and violence and how this shapes masculinities in the primary school. My study also aims to address the need to inculcate values in boys, following Keddie (2020) who argued that teaching boys to develop respect and empathy for individuals who are subordinated is an important starting point to address violence.

In the following section, I examine how the context of school and home are significant spaces for the promotion of violence through corporal punishment—and its implications for how violent masculinities are produced.

### **Corporal Punishment and Its Implications for how Masculinities are Constructed**

According to Gershoff's (2017) global perspectives on corporal punishment, the lawful status of corporal punishment around the world suggests that it is prohibited in 128 countries in Europe, South America, Africa, and East Asia and prevalent in 69 countries including some states in Australia, the United States and the Republic of South Korea. Global reports indicated various ways through which children were punished by teachers, which involved slapping, pinching, pulling ears and hair, and throwing objects—also, forcing children to stand in awkward and painful positions, stand in the sunlight for long periods, sit in an invisible chair position, exercise excessively, ingest harmful substances such as cigarettes, hold heavy objects, and kneel on small surfaces such as stones (Gershoff, 2017). Children were hit with objects such as sticks, wooden boards, and straps on almost every part of their body—with the head, arm, hand, and buttocks being common targets. Similar punishments were reported in several countries such as India,

Sudan, Zimbabwe, and South Africa as consequence of a range of behaviours such as not producing homework, late coming, carrying cell phones to school, sleeping in class, using vulgar language, making strange noises, answering questions incorrectly, and failing to pay school fees. Additionally, Pinheiro (2006) reported that an entire class may be punished for the misbehaviour or truancy of even a single student. Gershoff (2017) argued that if adults were to be inflicted with similar punishments, by law it would be accounted as assault yet, with children, this has been prevailing in 69 countries.

The South African Schools Act (1996) outlawed and prohibited corporal punishment in schools and it is counted as illegal assault under the criminal code of South Africa (Hunter & Morrell, 2021). Notwithstanding the transition to the new constitution valuing the rights of children, corporal punishment continues as a regular part of education when we consider the alarming rates of reported cases. According to Statistics South Africa (2020), nationally, 6.8% of learners were victims of corporal punishment in schools in the 2019 academic year; this translates to at least one million children who experienced corporal punishment in school. These statistics point to the devastating occurrence of corporal punishment—particularly in primary schools where even the legal prohibition of corporal punishment fails to safeguard children given that they are still subjects of assault in the schools they attend.

Mahlangu et al.'s (2021) study on the occurrence of corporal punishment in South African public schools highlighted that corporal punishment has been a fundamental part of schooling for most learners and teachers in the 20th century—characterised by historical legacies of authoritarian schooling practices and the belief that corporal methods were essential for orderly education. Mahlangu et al. (2021) argued that corporal punishment is a common practice in public schools due to overcrowded classrooms, under-resourced facilities, and under-qualified teachers. Their findings revealed that boys were most likely to be inflicted with physical punishments than girls at school. Teachers inflicted punishments on boys in the belief that physical punishments were effective in correcting boys' deviant behaviours. However, instead of addressing deviant behaviour, the use of corporal punishment worked to exacerbate misbehaviour because boys had eventually become insensitive to the pain inflicted on them. These findings on the gender differences of corporal punishment are consistent with research findings from other countries.

For example, Portela et al.'s (2015) research reported that in Ethiopia, Peru, India, and Vietnam, boys were more likely than girls to experience corporal punishment. Drawing from Portela et al.'s (2015) and Gershoff's (2017) studies, I tabulated the percentage of boys and girls as victims of corporal punishment in the different countries (Table 1). The statistics from Egypt, Kenya, and the Republic of Tanzania are drawn from Gershoff's (2017) paper.

**Table 1:** Percentages of boys and girls who experience corporal punishment in different countries around the world

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Percentage of Boys</b>	<b>Percentage of Girls</b>
Egypt	80%	62%
Ethiopia	44%	31%
India	81%	73%
Kenya	46%	41%
Peru	35%	26%
Republic of Tanzania	98%	91%
Vietnam	28%	11%

Several other studies, too, revealed that boys were likely to receive harsher punishments than girls due to the perception that they were physically stronger to resist pain, while girls were given verbal warnings instead (Dunne, 2007; Parkes & Heslop, 2011). Dunne's (2007) study on gender and sexuality at a secondary school in Botswana reported how boys were punished through lashings on their buttocks with electric cords and their heads being thrown against a wall, based on the assumption that such punishments would toughen the boys. Scholars globally have argued that, due to the harsh methods employed to discipline boys at school, aggressive and violent masculinities are promoted and, in contrast, submissive femininities—thereby entrenching unequal gender relations between boys and girls in the school environment (Gershoff, 2017; Morris & Perry, 2017). These scholars noted that school disciplinary practices were the main contributors to gender inequalities tied to masculine power, which contributed to negative behaviours in boys along with poor academic achievement and health problems. Hunter

and Morrell (2021) maintained that corporal punishment continued for several reasons including the absence of effective disciplinary measures, which resulted in a particularly violent schooling culture. This violent school climate continues to flourish as violent forms of masculinities are promoted and normalised in schools.

Despite being widely reported, corporal punishment is less recognised as a type of violence and rarely viewed in gendered terms. Mayeza and Bhana's (2017) paper on how primary school teachers at a township setting in South Africa constructed meanings of gender violence among young children argued that corporal punishment is indeed a gendered practice involving the investment of power, authority, and control perpetrated by adults and teachers. Teachers' discipline methods in the classroom reinforced traditional adult-centric approaches to teaching based on authoritarian roles that view knowledge and power as exclusive to adults. Additionally, Moosa and Bhana (2017) explained in their study of South African male teachers' involvement in the early years of primary schooling that male teachers were expected to fulfil roles in school discipline and management, thus aligning corporal punishment with male power. Likewise, in Morrell's (2001a) study on corporal punishment in South Africa, he found that male teachers were egocentric, violent, and less tolerant hence, their methods of discipline were administered more severely than female teachers. As a result, the model of masculinity presented by male teachers as violent, authoritative, and strict reinforced violent masculinities. Female teachers further reproduced this discourse by calling on male teachers to resolve discipline problems in harsh ways; consequently, learners may come to internalise that being a male means to be dominant and authoritative.

Further, corporal punishment transpires within the home setting, which also has implications for masculinities and schooling.

#### *Corporal Punishment Enforced in the Home*

Jamieson et al.'s (2018) examination of family violence in South Africa indicated that the most regular form of violence witnessed and experienced in South African homes is corporal punishment. Despite the South African Constitutional Court's ruling that effectively banned

corporal punishment in homes on the basis of violating human rights, these scholars found that children who experienced corporal punishment in home reported being physically punished with items such as belts, sticks, and other hard objects—often resulting in physical injuries.

According to Morrell (2001b), corporal punishment is highly gendered and based on innate understandings of girls and boys as biologically different and this has effects on the ways in which girls and boys are punished. Similar to the findings in schools (see Mahlangu et al., 2021), innate perceptions served to entrench severe punishments on boys more than girls in the home due to the assumption that boys were strong enough to endure physical pain. Morrell (2001a) argued that for as long as families continue to inflict corporal punishment within the home, it will be legitimised at school and, for as long as learners themselves continue to tolerate and normalise this form of violence, teachers and parents will continue to inflict it on them. Mayeza and Bhana (2017) also argued that corporal punishment persisted due to parents' investment in this method at home and some even supported its enforcement at school.

Examining corporal punishment in the home is essential to understanding school violence because, as Mahlangu et al. (2021) reported, experiences of neglect and lack of support and care at home contribute to misbehaviours that render learners prone to corporal punishment at school. Gershoff (2017) further explained that parents inflicted corporal punishment within the home in order to police normative gender behaviour and ensure compliance; however, they failed to facilitate internal moralisation, which involves teaching and encouraging non-violence—instead, corporal punishment served to promote violent hostile behaviour among children.

Considering the voices of children, Carter-Davis and Bristow (2018) based their study on children's attitudes and responses to corporal punishment in the United Kingdom. The children in their study expressed their pain and anger about physical forms of punishment. The children sought to resist or contest punishments by retaliating and lashing out at parents. Carter-Davis and Bristow (2018) indicated that physical methods of discipline affected children's relationship with parents because they legitimised the power and authority of adults. This has been noted as one of the disadvantages of this method of punishment: it disrupts parent-child relations and evokes feelings of anxiety, fear, and anger in children—constructing them as powerless. Negative parent

styles also entrenched negative attitudes and behaviours in children. Carter-Davis and Bristow (2018) argued that such emotions are detrimental to the well-being of children such that they may engage in hostile behaviours in conflict situations with other children at school. Gershoff (2017) also highlighted that if parents adopted more sensitive and calmer ways of dealing with discipline, they are likely to achieve positive outcomes. A positive approach to managing discipline in the home would therefore afford boys an opportunity to navigate their masculinities in more peaceable ways in the school setting too.

The findings on corporal punishment in the school and home setting provided evidence that children still experience corporal punishment in South Africa. Mahlangu et al. (2021) argued that there is a need to intervene in both the school and home environment in order to break the cycle of violence associated with corporal punishment. There is also a need to acknowledge and address how gender inequalities and violent masculinities are promoted through the use of physical punishment on boys.

One of the findings emerging from the data of my study is the influence of media on boys' construction of sexual knowledge and violence. In the next section, I examine the role of media in shaping the construction of gender, sexuality, and violent masculinities among children.

### **Media and the Construction of Masculinities**

Several scholars have established that boys construct and negotiate their masculinities within various social contexts such as families, school, neighbourhoods, and media (Bhana et al., 2021; Bragg et al., 2018; Lundgren et al., 2019; Swain, 2006a). The 21st century is a critical time in which technology and media is significant to the everyday lives of young people. Hilton-Morrow and Battles' (2015) study on media and the construction of sexual identities found that young people between the ages of 12–24-years-old spent most time on the Internet, and almost three quarters of teenagers and young adults made use of social media. They further reported that children between the ages of 8–18-years-old spent roughly seven and a half hours a day using media devices such as computers, television, smart phones, and other electronic equipment.

These sites offered children opportunities to construct meanings of gender and sexuality and to interact with others.

Some scholars globally, have highlighted how gendered messages are communicated through various media sources including television advertisements, video games, and print magazines, which have implications for children's construction of gender (Ellemers, 2018; Kågesten et al., 2016; Spinner et al., 2018). These studies found that media shaped gender attitudes and reinforced the binary sex roles of men and women in society. For example, in magazines, television, and internet sites, men were mostly depicted in roles involving physical strength and alternatively, women were seen in care-giving roles. Media also glamorised women by prioritising their dress style and body, thus sexualising them in contrast to men who were largely involved in politics, business, and sport.

Exposure to media has implications for children's construction and negotiation of gender; it naturalises the gender binary, enforces gender conformity, and repudiates alternate identities (Spinner et al., 2018; Swain, 2006a). Television programmes were found to have a profound influence on presenting children with stereotypical content. For example, Coyne et al.'s (2014) study on young children's gender stereotypical play in the United States found that images of masculine boys encountered in popular media culture were based on hegemonic concepts such as physical strength, heterosexual prowess, and dominance—resulting in higher levels of stereotypical play. In addition, while parents may discourage children from viewing violent television programmes, many boys imitate violent characters to perform their hegemonic masculinity, which they also reproduce at school—as pointed out by Bartholomaeus (2012).

Scholars have also argued that media shapes the construction, negotiation, and reinforcement of sexuality (Renold, 2007; Spinner et al., 2018). For example, Spinner et al. (2018) found that television programmes conveyed sexual knowledge and normative heterosexual practices that served to influence children's playground activities in school where story lines, characters from television, and sexual knowledge were talked about and imitated. In addition, although children are assumed to be immune to sexuality and unable to display sexual knowledge, Renold (2007) demonstrated how children actively responded to sexual representation and behaviours viewed in

media. Renold found that young boys were curious to know about transgender identities based on what they had viewed on television. She also found that young girls sacrificed their own personal taste in clothing and fashion for a collective taste guided by popular high street fashion in magazines. They dressed their bodies in sexualised ways, drawing from fashion and clothing promoted by media and magazines. Boys also used magazines and television to declare their desire for supermodels—including topless models. In this way, boys drew upon traditional heterosexual discourses in which women are often represented in media as passive objects of sexual desire. Other heterosexual practices among boys involved adjusting song lyrics in order to sexualise the content. The impact of media contributed to boys' validation of heterosexuality and the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity. It was therefore evident that children were able to draw conclusions about gender and construct their emerging sexual cultures from media. Renold (2007) established that, to this end, sexual innocence has been something that adults wished upon children however it is, indeed, not an intrinsic feature of childhood.

Although media is recognised as an important socialising agent for children's gender and sexual cultures, Spinner et al. (2018) argued that the impact of media on children's construction of gender attitudes has received little scholarly attention. In this study, I pay attention to how media offers conventional masculine images and knowledge of sexuality that boys use to validate their own masculinities. However, guided by the work of many feminist scholars who argued that, despite hegemonic masculine norms presented to boys in various social platforms, boys are able to negotiate fluid and plural versions of masculinity by embracing non-violent subject positions (Bartholomaeus, 2012; Bhana, 2020). Hence, boys' exposure to violence in media does not imply that they are or will become intrinsically violent. Acknowledging the plurality of masculinities and boys' agency to negotiate their masculinities in responsible ways is imperative to feminist research, which can work to deconstruct the assumption that boys naturally accept and reiterate violent messages within their social environment. More on boys' plural and fluid negotiation of masculinities is discussed in the next section.

## Boys' Fluid and Complex Negotiation of Masculinities

In her study on South African children's perceptions and meanings of violence, Parkes (2007) argued that although children may navigate a path of violence in various social contexts, they may also position themselves in unpredictable and complex ways by perpetuating or resisting violence. Their masculine positions may be constrained by the dominant gender discourses in their homes, schools, neighbourhoods, and media; however, these discourses can also be key resources that can enable alternate, non-hegemonic subject positions. Considering this, I acknowledge that not all boys are violent given that they may take up alternate subject positions in non-violent ways, depending on different contextual situations.

Bhana's (2016a) illustrated how plural versions of masculinities were negotiated in the primary school. She found that some black boys engaged in violent patterns of conduct termed as "*tsotsi*" (township gangster) masculinity. This form of masculinity was based on hegemonic notions characterised by aggression and domination. The boys positioned their masculinities in relation to their specific township environment, which was rife with street thugs and violence. Although Bhana (2016a) noted that some boys drew on the hegemonic version of masculinity, her findings revealed that not all boys coming from similar contexts wanted to be portrayed as tough gangsters—instead, they constructed more peaceable patterns of conduct, which was termed "*yimvu*" (sheep) masculinity. These boys were compared to gentle sheep, taking on values of respect and displaying good behaviour. As a result, even though violence was rife in their environment and hegemonic masculinity was prized, boys' construction of masculinity was not monolithic. It was resisted by boys who sought to achieve peaceable masculinity. Similarly, Ratele et al.'s (2007) account of coloured, black, and white boys' masculinities in seven schools in the Western Cape province of South Africa, found that boys resisted the gangsterism and violence that was rife in their communities by adopting positive and peaceable ways of being.

Another study that highlighted how boys were able to resist violence by taking on more caring positions is Anderson's (2010) ethnographic study of 14–17-year-old coloured boys' masculinities in a working-class context in Durban. Anderson found that, although violence was a daily occurrence for most boys in her study, it was not an expected outcome for all boys. Even

though the boys hailed from an environment of violent crime, interpersonal conflict, and gangsterism—providing ample opportunities to engage in violence—they did not automatically generate violent masculinities. Instead, most boys drew on religious values and going to church as a tool to renounce gang violence. Nonetheless, simply leaving gangs did not imply that the boys were rejecting hegemonic masculinity entirely. They sought to uphold their masculinities through heterosexuality. This meant exercising power and domination over their girlfriends and subordinate masculinities. As a result, rejecting violence and gangsterism did not compromise their masculinities because they were able to negotiate more than one hegemonic position. Such notions are also evident in the primary school context where several scholars have demonstrated that masculinities are not fixed and coherent—boys have the agency to resist violence, and also shift between hegemonic and peaceful positions (Bartholomaeus, 2013; Bhana & Mayeza 2019a; Pattman & Bhana, 2010; Xu, 2020).

Bhana and Mayeza's (2019a) primary school study of South African boys' negotiation of hegemonic masculinity focused on a group of black boys who sought to challenge and resist violence from hegemonic boys whom they considered the "bosses". In resisting hegemonic masculinity, these boys were subordinated by the "bosses" through physical, verbal and emotional abuse, and harassment. Despite this, subordinated boys refrained from responding violently by embracing a studious masculinity based on upholding the school rules, being academic, and displaying well-mannered conduct.

Pattman and Bhana's (2010) study on black and Indian boys' negotiation of race, gender, and class at a former white high school in South Africa demonstrated how black boys engaged in hegemonic masculine practices based on physical strength, being streetwise, and acting cool as a means to gain status and achieve racial appeal. In this manner, they performed their identities alongside racist stereotypes in which teachers constructed them as inherently violent. Nonetheless, some black boys in the study sought to counteract racial stereotypes by drawing on the values of respect and non-violence, thus distancing themselves from the stereotypical image of black boys as inherently violent. Such coping measures employed by black boys worked to counteract the myriad of stereotypes they faced on a daily basis. In this sense, racial stereotypes

did not essentially define identities because boys were able to destabilise negative assumptions about themselves.

Drawing on the plurality of masculinities, it can be understood that there are several ways of being a boy. Some boys in the studies above were shown to negotiate and resist hegemonic masculinity but, simultaneously, they were still able to uphold particular notions of hegemonic masculinity or draw on more peaceable versions. This is because hegemonic masculinity is not a rigid character type—it can be disrupted and modified, as pointed out by Connell (1995). Throughout this study, I have drawn on Connell's (1995) insights to tease out the various forms of masculinities featured in the lives of young boys. She argued that, often, masculinities are exaggerated—with a tendency to focus entirely on the hegemonic form in most research; however, if research focuses on one particular form then it is unlikely to acknowledge that alternate patterns exist. Given that agency accompanies the construction and performance of masculinities, I demonstrate how boys are able to move fluidly between the different forms of masculinities as they navigate their identities.

In this section, I have drawn on studies that focused on black and coloured working-class South African contexts, yet there remains an apparent gap in research that examines the construction of Indian masculinities (Martin & Govender, 2013). My study offers insights on how Indian boys negotiate their masculinities amidst socioeconomic and racial conditionings. I also shed light on how Indian and black boys engage in, negotiate, and/or contest violence in their pursuit of gratifying particular notions of masculinities in their diverse social contexts. Unique to my study, is the manner in which Indian and black boys use their agency to counteract racial stereotypes they encounter in school, and how they offer support to each other in challenging times—thus transcending racial tensions.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined literature that highlighted how primary school boys constructed their masculinities by engaging in, negotiating, and challenging gender violence in schools and within the context of families. Gender bullying, teasing, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse were

common forms of violence boys engaged in to achieve masculine status and power in local and international settings. Indeed, several scholars have shown that violence is not a homogenous experience for all boys. Drawing on their personal agency, boys were able to denounce violence by advocating for more peaceable ways of constructing their masculinities. Nonetheless, violence in schools remains an overwhelming experience for boys that require early intervention (Bhana et al., 2021). It is imperative to privilege the voices of young boys and highlight why gender matters to their experiences. Several feminist scholars have argued that schools have the power to disrupt hegemonic masculinities and violence and nurture new possibilities. Despite the call for more research on childhood gender, sexuality, and violence, Bhana et al. (2021) raised the concern that many studies have examined violence from perspectives outside a gendered lens or external to the context. There also remains a paucity of research in South Africa on violence in childhood, and the sociocultural and local contexts that shape the negotiation of violence in ways that are indeed unique from international findings. My aim is to address the erasure of Southern knowledge of young masculinities by presenting contextual experiences of violence across diverse settings such as the home, school, media, and teacher perspectives to examine the contradictions, challenges, and constraints in boys' pursuit of masculinities. I further shed light on how Indian and black boys navigate their violent masculinities under cultural, social and material conditions that are strongly shaped by the legacies of apartheid.

The next chapter of this thesis presents the research methods and data collection instruments employed in this ethnographic study of primary boys' construction of masculinities.

## Chapter Six: Research Design and Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter describes the research design and methodological approaches that I used in my examination of primary school boys' construction and negotiation of masculinities. I begin with an outline of the research design and then discuss the feminist poststructural perspective which guided the methodological process. Following this, I describe the research context, sampling strategies, data collection, and the process of analysis. The latter part of this chapter delves into the measures employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

### The Research Design

According to Thomas (2016) research design begins with having a purpose for conducting a study and establishing a research question. The purpose of this study is to examine how boys construct their masculinities within their specific social contexts. It is a qualitative study and therefore the research design was relatively flexible as this was the best approach for gaining an in-depth understanding of masculinities, allowing me to move back and forth in the research plan as new questions and ideas arose. The table below presents an outline of the research design which, following Baran and Jones (2016), has been my blue print for the study, illustrating the research paradigm, the data collection instruments, sampling methods, and analysis employed to address the research questions. Each aspect is then explained in detail under specific headings.

**Table 2:** Outline of the Research Design.

<b>Research Design</b>	
<i>Qualitative Study</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Ethnographic Inquiry</li><li>- Feminist Poststructural Perspective</li></ul>
<i>Sampling Methods</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Purposive</li><li>- Convenient</li></ul>

<i>Data Collection Methods</i>	- Semi-structured Interviews	- Individual Interviews - Focus Group Interviews
	- Unstructured observations	- <i>Field Notes</i> - Classroom - Playground - Recess - Sport
<i>Data Analysis</i>	- Coding - Thematic Content	

### **Conducting Ethnographic Research with Young Children**

According to Kyngäs et al. (2020) the basis of qualitative research is the study of human behaviour and perceptions and, when carried out properly, it can offer a meaningful account of people’s experiences within their personal life settings. Ethnographic researchers immerse themselves into different communities and cultures to capture the lived experiences of people, their normative behaviours, practices, and shared patterns of beliefs and values, as well as issues of power and resistance (Baran & Jones, 2016; Creswell, 2012). In so doing, ethnographers spend long periods of time in the setting in order to obtain rich and thick data which sheds light on the ways in which individuals feel, think, and experience their lives.

As established in Chapter 3, young children’s interests, knowledge, and experiences have been largely excluded from research due to the dominant adult perception that children are unknowing blank slates, and in need of protection (Bhana, 2016a; Keddie, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000). To this end, research has mainly focused on adolescent and adult interests and this has contributed to children being perceived of as at the mercy of the adult social world. There are striking exceptions. An early example is Anderson who, in her 2010 study on coloured boys’ masculinities in South Africa, immersed herself in the school setting in order to view the world through the eyes of her participants. Following examples such as this I, too, immersed myself in the school setting, and this enabled me to witness various moments in boys’ lives, including the reality of their experiences within various contexts, how they constructed meaning from their experiences, and their interactions with others, which ultimately contributed to the construction of their own identities.

I found that the principles of ethnographic research converged with the tenets of feminist poststructuralism as I approached my research from the standpoint of the children, foregrounding their experiences, and enabling them to wield a certain level of control over the research in order to fully capture their meanings and experiences of gender and sexuality. As argued by Prout and James (1997, p. 8) “ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood, it allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research”.

Bhana (2016a) pointed out that the advantage of ethnographic research amongst children is that it enables a researcher to take children’s experiences seriously, and it illuminates the multiple and different realities of their lives. Following feminist scholars such as Bhana (2016a), Mayeza (2017b), and Renold (2005)—who have all conducted ethnographic research with children—I considered the boys’ in my study to be active participants rather than objects of the research process. Indeed, I realised early in the research process that conducting research from the standpoint of children means respecting them as active producers of knowledge who are able to use the research process as a vehicle to communicate the feelings and experiences that are most important to them. For this reason, I strongly believe that feminist poststructuralist research contributes to denaturalising the assumption that children should be voiceless.

Following the tenets of feminist poststructuralism, I was also able to understand boys’ complex negotiation of masculinities by listening to their pleasures and sorrows and to the pressures they felt when trying to live up to normative ways of being boy. It was important to view them as actors in their own right, who have compelling opinions and views about their gender. This allowed me understand childhood from the perspectives and narratives of the boys themselves, and enabled me to deconstruct my own preconceived notions of childhood.

### **The Research Background and Context**

I conducted this study in KwaDukuza (see Figure 2) located on the East Coast of KwaZulu-Natal, which borders the Indian Ocean (see Figure 1). The name KwaDukuza reflects the rich historical and cultural background of the town, which was founded by the late isiZulu king,

Shaka, in 1820 (see Chapter 1) who named the royal settlement Dukuza (the maze). After Shaka was assassinated by his two half brothers, Dingane and Mhlangane, in 1828, the town was burnt down and deserted. In 1873 colonial European settlers rebuilt the town due to the growing sugar industry around Dukuza. The town was renamed Stanger, after William Stanger, who was the first general-surveyor of Natal. In 2006, the town's official name was changed to KwaDukuza. A monument established in honour of King Shaka is also dedicated to the early settlers of the town (Statistics South Africa, 2011).

The population dynamics of KwaDukuza are diverse due to its rich settlement history and multi-racial composition, which includes the Indian settlers who arrived in Natal to work on the sugarcane plantations (see Chapter 2). According to Statistics South Africa<sup>15</sup> (2011) the population of KwaDukuza is 78% black, 14.1% Indian, 5.6% white, and 1.0% coloured (mixed-race).

**Figure 2:** Map of South Africa Showing KwaZulu-Natal Province.

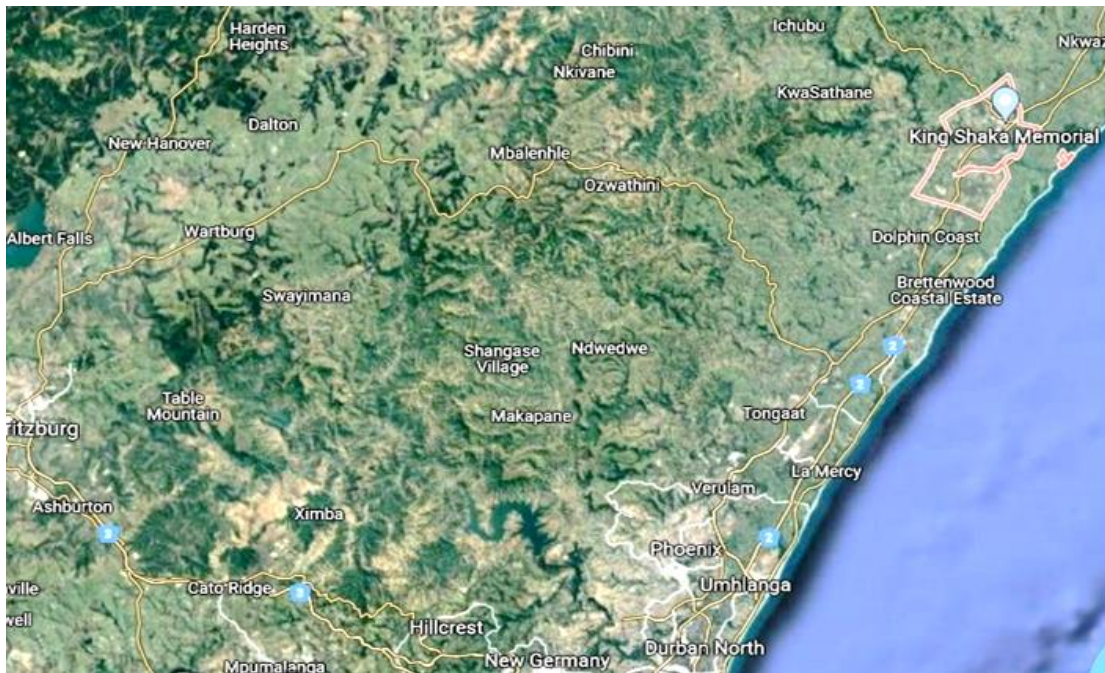
(<https://www.google.com/maps>)



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<sup>15</sup> The population census in South Africa is typically conducted every five years; however it was extended to 10 years. The next population census will be conducted in 2022.

**Figure 3:** Map Showing KwaDukuza, Situated on the East Coast of KwaZulu-Natal  
(<https://www.google.com/maps>)



### *The Research Site*

Stanger Manor is a lower-middle socioeconomic area in KwaDukuza. The school, Willow Primary, was opened on 13 April 1982 with the enrolment of Indian learners only (due to apartheid's tricameral segregation of race groups), all of whom came from the surrounding farm areas as there were no residents in Stanger Manor at the time. Indian learners were transported to the school by buses provided by the House of Delegates. Gradually, the area developed and many people left the farm areas to be in closer proximity to the school. The residential area now comprises a majority of Indian residents, some of whom own small businesses at a shopping centre situated 300m from the school. Post-apartheid, the school gradually opened enrolment to black, white, and coloured learners, who now comprise a small proportion of the population in the area. Stanger Manor has developed significantly in recent years, with new infrastructure including a conference and recreation centre, a community hall, religious establishments (a mosque, church, and temple), small restaurants, a fuel station, a bakery, and medical facilities. There is also a library and a bus terminal within close proximity to the school.

Most learners, especially those who reside nearby, arrive at school by private transportation. After school some of the learners are left at a nearby day care centre or in the care of their grandparents because their parents work late hours. The few learners who reside in the periphery of Stanger Manor such as Kersney and Shakaville make use of public transport (bus and mini-bus taxis) and are dropped off at the bus terminal. This means that they have to walk the short distance from the terminal to the school (320m). The buses arrive after school at 14:30 to pick up learners from both the primary and high school. The primary school learners who finish school earlier (12:30–13:30) have to wait an hour or two at the terminal until the buses arrive. This puts them at risk as they hang around the shopping centre and have to cross busy roads unsupervised. During this time, some learners have perpetrated serious acts such as throwing stones at each other, and this has resulted in injuries that have required medical attention. During their wait, the primary school learners sometimes interact with the older learners from the high school. On a few occasions the younger learners have reported that the older learners have bullied them for money during their interaction.

The school's infrastructure is relatively old; however, repairs and maintenance are regularly carried out. There are eight buildings at the school, two double storey and six single storey. There are 27 classrooms in total, including a library, computer lab, and sports room. Each classroom holds a maximum of 44 learners and there are approximately 120 learners per grade (1–7). The toilet facilities are situated at the corner of the main buildings where the classrooms are. The girls' and boys' toilets are separate but adjacent to each other. In front of the lower-level classrooms there are small gardens which each grade is responsible for maintaining. Throughout the year, the school initiates various fund-raising activities and the money raised is invested in the school's eco-club for the purchase of plants and other resources to improve the school's environment. Learners are prohibited from walking inside the garden area or in the corridors of the school during recess. The school has a tuck shop, a sheltered area for the morning's assembly, one large sports field, one small playground, a tennis court, a cricket pitch, and a prefab structure where religious studies are held. Learners also participate in extracurricular activities such as karate, kids club, chess, soccer practice and girl guides, all offered on the school premises. The school facilities are used during the weekends for these extracurricular activities.

During recess, FP learners, and Intermediate and Senior Phase (Grades 4–7) girls occupy the assembly area. The older boys (Intermediate and Senior) occupy the sports field. This gendered arrangement of separating the Intermediate and Senior boys from the rest of the learners is based on the assumption that the older boys are troublesome and the younger learners, including the older girls, should be protected from them. It further reinforces the dominant perception that older boys are violent and girls and younger boys are vulnerable to violence. The older boys' movements are restricted on the sports field. They are expected to congregate at the entrance to the ground, within the seating areas. They become extremely bored and use the resources that they have to stimulate excitement, such as rolling up the foil from their lunch boxes to play catch and throw, and kicking plastic fizzy drink bottles to each other. Boys often try to escape the area or occupy their time by provoking others or starting a fight. Indeed, pursuing girlfriends was a challenge to them and for some boys the trip from the sports field to the tuck-shop provided an opportunity to chat to girls—although teachers and prefects on field duty usually intervened.

Most learners are given a large amount of pocket money (approximately R20–R100), which they bring to school to spend at the school tuck-shop, or venture beyond the school gates to buy sweet treats from the street vendors—regardless of the school rules, which forbid this. Indeed, many attempts have been made by the school and the local police requesting the vendors not to sell to the learners, but learners continue to purchase from them, and they continue to sell to learners. This poses a major risk for the safety of learners, as is evidenced by the growing number of media reports of drugs being camouflaged as sweets and given to young children outside schools. For example, in 2016, 60 learners at a primary school in Johannesburg were hospitalised after consuming sweets laced with drugs which were handed out by a stranger outside the school (Mqadi, 2016).

In order to protect learners, the school has secure perimeter fencing and three security guards, one stationed at the entrance and two who patrol inside and outside the school. There is a surveillance camera at the entrance and three more were installed following the theft of a learner's school bag in early 2018. Theft has been rife in the area, and many houses adjacent to the school have been robbed. Early in 2018 an elderly resident residing opposite the school was

held at gun point and robbed of her jewellery. Since many residents work during the day, thieves see this as an opportunity to target the affluent homes in the area.

### *Demographics of Learners and Teachers*

The racial profile of the school at the time of this study was mixed, with 762 Indian, 239 black, seven coloured, and three white learners. There were a total of 504 boys and 507 girls.

Participants' demographic details were available from the school's admission file and the learner profile form. I consulted these documents to determine the race and age of participants and to obtain their physical address and parents' details. The table below shows the number of learners at Willow Primary School according to race and gender.

**Table 3:** Number of Learners by Race and Gender

<b>Black</b>		<b>Coloured</b>		<b>Indian</b>		<b>White</b>		<b>Total</b>	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
119	120	5	2	379	383	1	2	504	507

At the time of the study there were 39 qualified teachers at the school, 36 Indian and three black. There were no white or coloured teachers. The school had one male principal, one female deputy principal, two female departmental heads in the FP and two male departmental heads in the Intermediate and Senior phases. There were 31 female teachers and eight male teachers. The male teachers at the school mostly taught in the Intermediate and Senior phase. For the past 35 years, the FP has been taught only by female teachers. However, at the time of the study one male teacher from the Intermediate Phase taught Physical Education in the FP and another male teacher was appointed in 2018 to teach IsiZulu and Creative Art in the FP. Table 4 shows the number of teachers according to race and gender.

**Table 4:** Number of Teachers by Race and Gender

Black		Coloured		Indian		White		Total	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1	2	0	0	7	29	0	0	8	31

### Sampling Methods

I chose to research boys in the age cohort of 8–9-years because I taught this age group for 6 years and there has been little focus in the literature on masculinities and gender for the ways in which boys younger than 10 years of age make meaning of gender (for exceptions see Bhana, 2020; Bhana & Mayeza, 2019a). Moreover, ages 8–9-years-old is a period of transition from childhood to prepubescent years during which masculine and sexual identities become more salient. I also chose to include teachers who had previously taught or were currently teaching this age group in order to gain different perspectives and insights.

Gaining access to the site was relatively simple because I was a FP teacher at the school. I commenced with fieldwork in the 2018 academic year, soon after gaining permission from the school principal. I used purposive sampling, which involves choosing informants or participants who may be expected to have good knowledge of the research topic (Kynge et al., 2020). In fact, all 8–9-year-old boys and Grade 3 FP teachers fit the criteria for my study and were invited to participate. There were 60 Grade 3 boys in total at the time of the study. Table 5 shows the total number of Grade 3 learners according to race and gender.

**Table 5:** Demographics of Grade 3 Learners by Race and Gender.

Black		Coloured		Indian		White		Total	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
13	14	2	0	45	49	0	1	60	64

Initially, I was reluctant to conduct research at the school I was employed at because I did not want to influence the research in any way. However, being familiar to the parents was an advantage because they were willing to allow their child to participate in this study. I also used a few minutes from the regular parent–teacher meetings held at school to explain the nature of my study to parents. This led to a few more parents signing consent. Out of the 60 consent letters issued to parents, 29 parents gave consent, eight parents refused, and three were returned unsigned. The remaining 18 letters were not received and these were considered as non-consent. There were two learners in Grade 3 who had already turned 10 and therefore did not meet the age criteria and were not included in the study. There were no white boys in Grade 3 and no coloured boys who gave consent at the time of this study. Although I did not ask parents to stipulate reasons for not granting permission, three parents explained that the boys were timid and did not want to participate and one parent said that he did not want his child to be exposed to any thoughts and questions about gender violence which may have a negative impact on his well-being. It was evident that the parent subscribed to the dominant framing that children should be protected from any knowledge or thinking about gender and sexuality. His views were respected.

Following receipt of parental consent, I sought informed assent from my learner participants which was constantly negotiated with them on an ongoing basis, on their own level. According to Huser et al. (2022) in addition to parent consent, informed assent for children highlights their right and capability to make their own choices about participation in research. In order to obtain the young participants' assent I made use of assent letters. I thoroughly explained the contents of the assent letters to the learner participants and afforded learners the autonomy to decide if they wanted to be a part of the study. One boy decided not to participate, despite having received permission from his parent.

The end sample was 25 boys, 19 Indian and six black, and 11 teachers—a total sample of 36 participants (learners and teachers). The teacher sample was relatively small due to the limited number of FP teachers who were currently teaching or had previously taught Grade 3. However, it was sufficient as purposive sampling commonly used in qualitative, ethnographic studies involves an in-depth account of the lives of individuals, and so sample sizes are not large, as is pointed out by Palys (2008).

## **Data Collection**

Qualitative studies can span various data collection methods such as observations, interviews, written material such as diary entries, journals, meeting minutes and other documentation as noted by Kyngäs et al. (2020). To conduct this study, I triangulated two different data collection sources which included field observations and in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

### *Observations and Field Notes*

Participant observation was a key data collection method. Being familiar with all the participants was helpful because I could easily identify them outside of the classroom and observe them in an unstructured way, using field notes to record my observations. I observed them during class time, sporting activities, recess, and on the playground. During recess each grade was assigned a designated part in the assembly area so I knew exactly where to locate the Grade 3 boys. I also observed the teachers' interactions with boys and how they spoke about young children. I carried out observations as a non-participant observer and collected the data through direct observation of what was currently happening without influencing the setting or the participants' behaviour. Petty et al. (2012) claims that such an approach ensures that the researcher remains objective in the process. As a teacher at the site under study I was indeed concerned about the Hawthorne Effect which involves a positive reaction or behaviour that a participant adopts due to their knowledge of being observed, as noted by Anderson (2009). During sport and Physical Education, I watched the boys from the car park situated above the sports field. To avoid the Hawthorne Effect, at times when my presence would be noticed—for example in the classroom—I sought to develop a causal relationship with the participants by changing the way I dressed and adopting a friendlier outlook so that they would not be intimidated by my presence. Oswald et al. (2014) argue that dressing in a causal manner is vital towards creating a non-threatening relationship with participants. I noted their behaviour patterns during play and documented the gender differentiated manner in which their social interactions, the genre of books they chose to read, who they sat next to during library and play time were organised. I also observed how boys and girls dominated particular spaces in the playground, and the contexts during which power dynamics were evident in their interactions.

After a while I decided to be involved in the setting as Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) maintain that the researcher may first be a non-participant observer and then move to become a passive participant observer with greater engagement in ethnographic studies—whilst still maintaining an objective observer role—without influencing the setting. Passive observation involves interacting with participants by asking questions relating to what is currently happening (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). I therefore occasionally joined in boys' conversations in the classroom and on the playground. This allowed me to informally question the boys about their actions and engage in a conversation—what Swain (2006c) calls conversations with a purpose. One example of this was when a group of boys was looking at an advertisement of pellet guns during recess. I decided to join in the group discussion with the aim of learning about their interest in guns. However, to maintain my role as a teacher and researcher and still remain objective, I always refrained from engaging too closely with the boys in their everyday activities (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Swain (2006c) also claims that there is a dialogic relationship between observation and interviews because observations pave the way for establishing new questions for the interview schedule. Indeed, the direction the interviews took was steered by prior observations in order to gain an in-depth comprehension of the boys' rationale for behaving or situating themselves in the ways that they did.

I recorded my observations in a field notebook following a written format which provided a first-hand account of boys' masculine practices. I recorded the date, time, the physical location, and period of the day—such as recess, class-time, or playtime. Although I did not write down everything that I observed because I did not want to miss out on anything in the field, I found that jotting down small points was enough to trigger my memory of what I observed. I also avoided making notes during my informal conversation with boys because I wanted them to speak freely and feel comfortable in our interactions. The field notes were also beneficial because, as Swain (2006c) says, they provide a voice to the introverted, marginalised, and less interested participants. In other words, I found that participants who were unavailable for the interview sessions were still able to participate in the study without interviews.

### *Semi-Structured Individual Interviews*

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions, views, experiences and feelings, I used a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 4a/b). According to Gill et al. (2008), semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to diverge from the list of questions in order to probe and pursue a particular issue further. I facilitated this process by asking open-ended questions which set the agenda for free-flowing discussions and focusing on topics which participants raised themselves. I also asked questions relating to my field notes—penned during observations—as a way of verifying the data. I asked participants to elaborate, too, when new ideas relevant to this study emerged in our discussions.

I conducted 36 individual interviews with 25 learner participants and 11 teacher participants. Most of the interviews were conducted in the participants' own classroom, free from noise and distractions, and were audio recorded. I also encouraged the learner participants to decide on their preferred location for the interview, hoping to make them feel more empowered. Some chose to be interviewed on the school playground, a child-friendly space associated with fun and comfort, as Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al. (2019) point out. I interviewed some of the participants in the mornings before school, some during the interval breaks, and some after school if they were waiting for their older siblings to be dismissed. I interviewed the teacher participants after school hours when they were available.

The interviews lasted approximately 20–30 minutes, depending on the participant's openness to share their experiences. I conducted all the interviews in English. At times, the black participants used phrases that drew on the local IsiZulu language, and these were translated by a first language IsiZulu speaker.

The flexibility of the semi-structured interview method was useful as it allowed me to dive deep into the personal and social matters of participants by probing for further responses. This also led to the emergence of heterosexuality as a significant theme in the boys' discussions. Sensitive subjects such as the fear of being called “gay”, and their feelings about non-conforming

identities were also brought up by the boys. The fact that most boys moved to a discussion on girlfriends and gays demonstrated a clear link between gender and sexuality.

One of my aims was to understand how boys made sense of masculinities within and beyond schooling and the contexts in which these are shaped and negotiated. Some of the questions which led to boys opening up conversations about the family included: Who is your hero? Why? Tell me more? What about violence? Do you know of anyone who is violent? Who does it? Why? Tell me about your experiences. Where did it happen? How? What about girls? What do you think of them? The family featured frequently in their responses to the questions raised.

Most of the learner participants were enthusiastic about being interviewed and often disrupted classes to ask when the interview would be conducted. Some boys also approached me at the end of the research to share and report incidents that had transpired on the playground or to express their personal feelings about certain issues. I always listened carefully and tried to ensure that their voices were always prioritised, and not only during the interview sessions or when I took on the researcher role.

Tables 6 and 7 below indicate the biographical and interview details of the learner and teacher participants. All participants' identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms.

**Table 6:** Details and Profiles of Learner Participants—Individual Interviews.

<b>*Names</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Parents (both/single)</b>	<b>Home Language</b>	<b>Duration of Interviews</b>
Ayaan	8	Indian	Both	English	22min 37sec
Darsh	8	Indian	Both	English	18min 58sec
Kalvin	8	Indian	Single	English	09min 49sec
Shaylin	9	Indian	Both	English	15min 10sec
Caleb	9	Indian	Both	English	16min 44sec

Rohan	9	Indian	Both	English	38min 25sec
Kaylin	9	Indian	Both	English	10:00 min
Riaan	9	Indian	Both	English	10min 23sec
Tamir	9	Indian	Both	English	19min 27sec
Ulwazi	9	black	Both	IsiZulu	17min 08sec
Kanelo	9	black	Both	Sesotho	26min 53sec
Shiven	9	Indian	Both	English	21min 33sec
Sohan	8	Indian	Both	English	22min 43sec
Vihaan	8	Indian	Foster	English	45min 39sec
Lebo	9	black	Both	IsiZulu	23min 07sec
Rishay	8	Indian	Both	English	29min 31sec
Atif	9	Indian	Both	English	10min 49sec
Kamil	9	Indian	Both	English	13:00 min
Keylan	9	Indian	Both	English	52min 24sec
Lungelo	9	black	Single	IsiZulu	25min 29sec
Zee	9	black	Both	IsiZulu	44min 01sec
Yash	9	Indian	Both	English	11min 07sec
Siya	9	black	Both	IsiZulu	23min 21sec
Aasim	9	Indian	Both	English	11min 23sec
Shreyan	9	Indian	Single	English	17min 22sec

**Table 7:** Details and Profiles of Teacher Participants.

<b>*Names</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Home Language</b>	<b>Number of years teaching</b>	<b>Duration of Interviews</b>
Mrs. Rita	46	Indian	female	English	26	23: 00 min
Mrs. Neha	58	Indian	female	English	35	09min 31sec
Mrs. Janvi	60	Indian	female	English	36	11:00 min
Mrs. Mrinal	50	Indian	female	English	27	35min 48sec
Mrs. Joseph	47	Indian	female	English	8	18min 02sec
Mrs. Chetty	56	Indian	female	English	36	06min 41sec
Mrs. Ella	56	Indian	female	English	34	07min 42sec
Ms. Ntuli	37	black	female	Sesotho	4	15min 09sec
Mr. Singh	48	Indian	male	English	20	24:00 min
Mr. Luhle	26	black	male	IsiZulu	3	38min 58sec
Mrs Mistry	58	Indian	female	English	36	21min 30sec

*Focus Group Discussions*

A range of experiences and rich understanding of the participants' views and opinions were captured through the focus group discussions as they shared their common interests and beliefs. I was unable to conduct focus group sessions with the teacher participants due to their after-school commitments. It was convenient to conduct individual interviews with them instead. I conducted six focus group interviews with 4–5 boys in each group, which I found was the optimal number for being easy to manage and giving boys the most opportunity to speak. The details of the focus group discussions are shown in Table 8.

**Table 8:** Details of the Focus Group Discussions.

<b>Number of boys</b>	<b>Names</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Duration of Interviews</b>
4	Ayaan, Lebo, Kanelo, Keylan	Diverse	39min 08sec
4	Ulwazi, Vihaan, Darsh, Aasim	Diverse	42min
4	Kaylin, Sohan, Shreyan, Riaan	Indian	42min 05sec
5	Kanelo, Ulwazi, Siya, Lungelo, Lebo	black	48min 53sec
5	Keylan, Shreyan, Shiven, Rohan, Vihaan	Indian	55min 48sec
6	Lebo, Shiven, Vihaan, Keylan, Kanelo, Ulwazi	Diverse	62min

I chose pre-existing groups of boys who were familiar with each other because I felt that they would share similar experiences and common views, and would be comfortable to speak freely in front of each other. Indeed, this was an effective strategy: I found that some boys interviewed individually did not open up as much as they did when I interviewed them in the focus group discussion. It was also an effective way to explore and validate the responses of their peers since some of them were able to retell certain events from different perspectives. Often, the concerns raised in the focus group discussions differed from those raised in the individual interviews since the boys felt more comfortable expressing themselves openly in a friendship group setting.

The focus group sessions averaged 40–60 minutes and were mainly conversational: I simply facilitated and guided the session by probing for further responses. While I afforded boys the opportunity to talk freely I was mindful to remain in control at all times, following Swain (2006c) who argued that even though we allow participants the autonomy to express themselves, we should always remain in control. In his study on young masculinities in the United Kingdom, Swain (2006c) ensured, for example, that participants did not place their feet on the table, diverge from the topic, or openly use swear words out of context. I was also guarded against some boys who were outspoken, eager to share their experiences, interrupted others and sought to dominate the conversation. In order to address this I instructed the participants to raise a green

card whenever they spoke, and once the card was raised no other person could talk at the same time. This was only implemented for one particular group where many boys sought to dominate the conversation.

## **Data Analysis**

I transcribed the data collected from the audio recorded interviews using InqScribe transcription software. Initially, I transcribed a few individual interviews myself, before having some of it professionally transcribed, so that I could identify areas for improvement and relevant questions to add to the interview schedule. I decided to transcribe all focus group interviews myself because I could recognise and identify the boys by their voices. In transcribing the interviews I not only represented what the participants said but also recorded their emotions, feelings and behaviour patterns which I noted in brackets. The transcripts were a permanent record of the interviews and an effective reference tool because they allowed me to revisit the data at any time.

I analysed the data after vigilant reading of the interview transcripts and field notes, and used thematic content analysis to identify common patterns of meaning (Clarke & Braun 2017). Following Taylor et al. (2016), I applied an inductive approach, teasing out key themes by multiple readings of the data, instead of collecting data to test a predetermined theme. I highlighted and categorised common patterns of data from the interview transcripts and field notes manually through a process of coding. According to Clarke and Braun (2017) coding involves the process of recognising and capturing the richness of the data, relative to the study aims and objectives, which can then be organised in a way to easily develop common themes. This enabled me to recognise common patterns of thought, behaviour, and experiences, which I colour coded and categorised into main themes and sub-themes. I also looked at the field notebook and highlighted aspects that were common in the interviews and which I added to the themes. I triangulated the themes by drawing comparisons, examining contradictions, and confirming meaning from the different data sources (field notes and interview transcripts). This added to the validity of the study as I was able to verify conclusions.

My analysis was guided by Connell's (1995) theory of masculinities, which contributed to my understanding of masculinities as embodied, multifaceted, and built on power hierarchies. This theory was important as it provided a platform to understand young boys' behaviour in context. The theoretical tenets of masculinity theory and feminist poststructural perspective were critical to shaping my interpretative focus and supporting the findings of this study.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

During the fieldwork I assumed multiple subject positions by shifting between the roles of a teacher and a researcher. In this section I reflect on how this research has contributed to my personal development and how my position as a teacher and researcher shaped the research process.

#### *Negotiating My Personal Identity*

I began teaching at the school under study in 2013. Most of the teachers were seasoned and mentored me in 2009 when I trained at the school as a pre-service teacher. I therefore shared good social relations with them. The teacher participants took interest in my studies— they were always keen to participate in the interview sessions and offered their support. It was imperative to remain objective and respectful of their views during the interviews, instead of being critical, especially when they openly voiced their opinions and personal issues about certain school policies or the challenges they experienced with parents.

Some teachers also took interest in my personal life. I found that my relationship status was sometimes the nucleus of most conversations after the interview sessions. My position as an unmarried, Indian woman reaching 30-years-old was considered by older female teachers in particular as “too late” since, ideally, marriage was considered by these teachers to be a compulsory norm and stringent for women of my age. I was also told that if delayed marriage I would eventually end up with a divorcee. I was therefore made to feel that marriage beyond 30 was complex and problematic. The gendered beliefs and norms that teachers sought to enforce helped to deepen my understanding on the socialisation of gender and why a study examining teacher perceptions about gender and sexuality mattered.

Indeed, teachers were concerned about my age coupled with cultural ideologies regarding late marriage and child bearing; hence some teachers requested to find suitors for me. It was important to share a good rapport with my participants not only as a researcher but also on a personal level—as a colleague, peer and friend. I sought to unsettle conventional notions of femininity by kindly declining their requests and informing them that my PhD was important to me and I valued my individual autonomous subject position. Education was important to them as it was to me so I was also able to redirect the conversation to the aims and objectives of my study.

However, I cannot ignore some of the contradictions in my life which includes my hidden anxiety about marriage and relationships. Most of this stems from growing up with an absent father. I was raised by a single parent. My father abandoned my mother before I was born. His absence troubled me, mostly during my interaction with other children at school. The question of “Who/Where is your father”, “What happened to him?” would arise and I would often change the subject because I feared the social stigma that would follow since, coming from a traditional Tamil household, morally women are expected bear children after marriage. In high school I sought to address the question, but my response was always based on a lie that he died in a car accident—mainly to evade the topic and further probing. It was only until after high school that I sought to break the silence and developed the courage to confront my fears. I was no longer ashamed to say “I don’t know him, his absence does not matter” mainly because I was proud to be raised by an independent, single woman whose strength was evident in her resilience to the social and familial stigma she experienced.

These experiences shaped my life to a great extent and the greatest challenge I faced was being able to trust men. This influenced the manner in which I negotiated personal relationships with men where I refused marriage proposals and avoided relationships. However, engaging in this study on masculinities enabled a paradigm shift in terms of the way I perceive men. Indeed, absent fathers have been linked to men and hegemonic versions of masculinity, as studies have shown, but this does not imply that caring men do not exist (see Morrell et al., 2016). I am now 32 years old, single and passionately pursuing my PhD degree, carving a space in the world where I can disrupt sociocultural stereotypes and attitudes regarding women, age and marriage. I

use the term “single” instead of “unmarried” following Ellison (2003) who argued that the term “unmarried” defines women by their legal affiliation to men.

During the fieldwork I maintained a reflective journal, in which I wrote down my personal thoughts, feelings and goals. I also reflected on my personal growth and progress that I have made in my life beyond the traditional benchmark associated with age and marriage. My personal life and experiences have shaped my aspirations for this study which involves the need to engage boys, from a young age, to develop values and responsible attitudes so that they will negotiate their masculinities in positive ways well into adulthood. Acknowledging the malleable construction of masculinities provides optimism that boys can indeed work towards nurturing masculinities provided that they are given adequate support to do so.

#### *Negotiating a Teacher–Researcher Subject Position*

Self-reflexivity was particularly important to the research because I was a teacher at the site under study. Being a teacher meant that it was challenging to be objective about boys engagement in violence—not least because I had to police their behaviour in order to protect them and ensure that there were no injuries on the playground. This impacted the power relations between me and my learner participants since policing their behaviour placed me in an authoritative position. Nonetheless, I was optimistic about reducing the dynamics power following Mayeza (2017b) who explained that the power relations between adults and children are not rigid, but rather fluid and dynamic: I sought to build relationships based on trust where, on one hand, the participants obeyed my commands as a teacher and on the other hand, they were also comfortable to speak about their experiences when I took on my role as a researcher. It was therefore essential to strike the right balance between establishing a good rapport with participants and maintaining a level of control. For example, I refrained from reprimanding boys at times when I was not on field duty and there were other teachers on duty at the time as I knew that they would attend to the problem. Berger (2015) claims that researchers should acknowledge their position at any given time and how their positioning may affect the research. I did so by observing from a distance, instead of immersing myself completely in the field, so that children would not report incidents to me, but rather seek help from other teachers on duty at the time.

I applied a child-centred approach to the research which allowed me to privilege the boys' subjective thoughts and experiences and also to minimise the teacher–learner, researcher–participant power dynamics. In my role as the researcher, I adopted a less authoritative and a “least adult” subject position (see Mayeza 2017b) in order to develop friendlier relations with participants. For example, I sat with the boys during playtime, sang along to their favourite songs, and listened to their talk about movies and sport. They were keen to share this information as knowledgeable experts of their lives which helped to reduce their perceptions of adult power. I constantly reflected on the research through a feminist lens which was centred on valuing the voices of these young children.

I also maintained a positive body image throughout the interviews by smiling, maintaining eye contact, nodding, and showing interest in what was said, all of which, as Oswald et al. (2014) stress, is important to maintain when conducting interviews. This enabled me to develop a positive rapport with the participants and fostered good communication. I also earned their trust by assuring them that the information they disclosed will be confidential. Attia and Edge (2017) highlighted that an accurate and thick description of data can be achieved if trust is established between the researcher and the participants, and the trust we established most certainly strengthened the validity of this study.

It was evident that participants trusted me because they were not afraid to talk about their use of violence, and black participants were comfortable speaking about the racial tensions they experienced with Indian boys. I sought to transcend the racial boundaries between myself and the black learner participants by communicating greetings and words of praise to them in their native IsiZulu language. There were times when I did not pronounce certain words properly and my young participants would correct me; indeed, they were keen to educate and correct my use of the language and this afforded them a sense of power and comfort, and also strengthened our rapport.

As the interviews progressed, boys expressed themselves freely and were not afraid to comment on my extremely long grey hair or to point out that I was getting old during the interview session. The boys also took an interest in my personal life, wanting to know about my cellphone and advising me to get an upgrade because the model was “too old fashioned” for me. I allowed

them to share their thoughts and offer their advice because it helped to improve the power dynamics. I hoped that by adopting a least adult role when I took on the position as a researcher, children would position me as possessing less power over them in comparison to other adults in the school.

It was also important for me to understand my position in the field by reflecting on the aims of the study, and on how my personal beliefs, concerns, anxieties, and close relationships with the participants I taught, might influence the study. According to Attia and Edge (2017), researcher reflexivity can be achieved by stepping aside to develop awareness and understanding of the participants within the field. I used the reflective journal to note the concerns I had regarding boys' engagement in violence. However, as soon as I completed the fieldwork, I found it necessary to educate the boys about negotiating their masculinities in peaceable ways and encouraged them to reflect on their own actions and behaviour.

### **Measures Undertaken to Ensure the Trustworthiness of the Study**

According to Kyngäs et al. (2020) trustworthiness in qualitative studies includes credibility, validity, dependability, confirmability, authenticity, and transferability. Credibility involves carrying out the study in a manner which enables the reader to believe what is reported in the findings. I sought to enhance credibility by ensuring that the study participants chosen were appropriate for the research in that they could provide the data which was needed to address the research questions, and that data saturation was reached during the data collection. Indeed, my sample size was appropriate to reach data saturation. During the interview sessions I was careful not to influence participant's responses by sharing my own personal views or to manipulate them to answer in a certain way. A few teacher participants asked to see the interview questions beforehand, but I politely declined; however, I assured them that everything they revealed was valuable, and that there were no correct or incorrect answers. I allowed them enough time to think about their responses.

According to Fusch and Ness (2015), ethnography is highly useful as it allows for data saturation due to its lengthy timeframe within the setting, as well as the flexibility to use various methods

of collecting data. The various data collection methods—such as field observations, individual and focus group interviews—enabled greater triangulation of the data which also enhanced the credibility of this study. In order to ensure that participants are able to comprehend the interview questions, Flick (2014) maintains that interview questions should be easy to understand. I used simple language and reworded and repeated questions so that learner participants were able to comprehend.

Kyngäs et al. (2020) stressed that for research to be trustworthy all the interviews should be recorded and then transcribed. I used my cellphone to record the interviews because I did not want my young participants to be uncomfortable with the presence of a more formal recording device, or to face any problems should it malfunction. I also found the cellphone convenient to use and, when set on silent mode, incoming calls and messages did not interrupt the recording process.

To strengthen the dependability of the study I engaged in a process of peer checking or peer debriefing which, according to Kyngäs et al. (2020), involves a process whereby the researcher consults a colleague who is familiar with the field to read through the findings and provide feedback by sharing their candid opinion. Kyngäs et al. (2020) argue that having another set of eyes may be useful to notice overlaps in the data or categories that may have been missed. I asked a researcher familiar in the field of gender to offer comments, identify flaws, and suggest areas to improve in the findings. This process was also useful as it ensured that my personal biases were not reflected in the research. The identities of my participants were not revealed to the researcher who I consulted.

To confirm the data, I asked the teacher participants to verify their responses by reading through the transcripts. However, I was unable to conduct participant checks with the learner participants because some of the transcripts were lengthy and I worried that it would be tiresome for the young boys to sit through the entire reading. Instead, I asked them to confirm only the data that I used in my key themes. My written notes in the observation notebook were useful here as they served to support and confirm the data and findings drawn from the interviews.

To ensure the authenticity of the findings I have included citations from different participants throughout this thesis, intended to show the range of realities that was experienced by the participants and also to show that participants often held similar views. This has also helped to highlight contextual detail regarding the political, social, and economic experiences of participants.

The data generated from this study reflects the experiences and views of the teacher and learner participants from a single research site. This means that the findings are related to its specific context which therefore cannot be transferred to other settings (Petty et al., 2012). However, as Tracy (2010) points out, it is entirely up to the reader to determine the extent to which the findings may be transferred into other settings or to a similar context.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics are a fundamental part of every study, and they extend throughout the research process, from the formulation of the research topic, to the sampling methods, data collection process, analysis techniques, and dissemination of the study findings. They include maintaining good professional practice and protecting the study participants. I conducted this study ensuring that all ethical procedures were adhered to and that participants were respected. Ethical clearances were obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Ethics Committee (see Appendix 1) and from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education (see Appendix 2). My research was also part of a wider project at UKZN titled “Stop the violence: Girls and boys in and around schools”. Mukherji and Albon (2018) maintain that if research is conducted at a school with young children, permission has to be granted by someone in a position of power who can protect the individuals within the institution. I sought permission to conduct research from the school principal (see Appendix 3a). In the letter I clearly stipulated that the organisation would not be harmed in any way and confidentiality of the school and participants will be maintained.

After gaining approval to conduct the study, I sent consent letters to the learners’ parents (see Appendix 3b), assent letters to the learner participants and consent letters to the teacher participants (see Appendix 3c). The letters clearly outlined the nature of the study and stressed each participant’s right to withdraw from the research at any time. Pietilä et al. (2020) explained

that autonomy is important to research ethics because it affords participants the right to privacy, liberty, self-governance, agency, and freedom. Informed consent respects the individual's right to participate in the study and valid informed consent is only achieved once the participant is accurately informed about the research, data confidentiality, and their role and rights as participants, which I ensured. I was mindful, however, following Mukherji and Albon (2018), that while adults may give consent on behalf of their child to participate in a study, young children are capable of withdrawing by refusing to participate in the study. Hence, I respected boys' decision to participate or withdraw from the study. Learner participants were also free to leave the group interviews at any time. No participant was forced or coerced into answering any questions. Permission to audio record the individual and focus group interviews were also obtained from all participants. I emphasised confidentiality to all participants, guaranteeing that their identities would not be revealed (I have used pseudonyms throughout), and that all data generated will be used for research purposes only and kept in a secure location to which only I have access. It will be stored safely for five years and thereafter destroyed.

I also clarified that while every precaution would be taken to maintain confidentiality, there would be limits should a participant's well-being be compromised. In this case I would seek their permission to address or report issues that may arise. I also upheld the principles of justice by ensuring that all participants were treated fairly and had an equitable opportunity to participate in this study. Hence, consent letters were issued to all Grade 3 boys and FP teachers, not specific to any particular race group, socioeconomic status, religion, or language.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As this is a qualitative study conducted at a single research site, the findings are limited to its specific context and may not be applicable or transferred onto other settings. Further limitations were time constraints. Some interviews could not be completed in a single session, especially the focus group discussions. In these cases, follow-up interview sessions were held the following day. The consequence of this was that the build-up of emotions and excitement established during the interview session was interrupted and had to be re-established in the next session. As a teacher at the site under study it was challenging to negotiate an objective outsider role when

conducting the research. Reflecting on my subjectivity and recording my thoughts using a reflective journal was useful. Lastly, the availability of teachers for the interview sessions was a limiting factor since they often engaged in various extra-curricular and after school activities. As I discussed earlier, conducting focus group sessions with them was difficult for this reason. For the individual interviews I negotiated a time that was convenient for them such as during their non-teaching periods and intervals.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the research design and methodology I used for this study. It demonstrates how my research plan was designed and executed in a manner which I found was best suited to address my research questions and the overall aim of this study. In order to do this, the chapter presented a description of the research site, the participants' profiles, and an outline of the sampling strategies, the data collection, and the analysis process. The implications of my position in shaping the research and my attempts to reduce the adult/child and teacher/learner relations of power were also discussed. Finally, the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness, ethical principles, and the limitations of the study were noted.

## **Chapter Seven: Beyond Violence: Young Boys and the Negotiation of Masculinities**

### **Introduction**

This chapter focuses primarily on the fluid and complex ways in which young boys endorse, contest or reject violence in the process of constructing and negotiating their masculinities. Both international and local studies have firmly linked violence to the construction of masculinities, and have shown how boys and men employ violence as a key mechanism to achieve masculine power (Dunne et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2015; Parkes, 2015; Swain, 2003). There is now a groundswell of studies arguing that primary school boys are not submissive recipients or perpetrators of violence; rather, they actively contest (or sanction) a range of violent practices (see, for example, Bartholomaeus, 2013; Carrera-Fernández et al., 2016; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020; 2021; Swain, 2006a; Wardman, 2017). This is one of my key research findings, and the intention of this chapter is to illustrate and describe the agency my participants' demonstrated as they developed and negotiated their own identities at school.

I begin by outlining how participants' engaged in various violent practices to fulfil conventional notions of hegemonic masculinity, which, following Connell (1995) I define as the most dominant, prevalent way of expressing masculinity and achieving male power. Given the multiple ways of being a boy, however, it is evident that more than one version of masculinity will be enacted within a given setting, and that not all boys draw exclusively on the hegemonic masculine pattern (Bhana, 2016a; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In stark contrast to hegemonic masculinity—premised, as it is, on violence—is caring masculinity. The central focus of caring masculinity involves the rejection of authority and dominance (a characteristic that is also central to hegemonic masculinity) by embracing values of care, gender equality and positive emotions (Elliott, 2016). As I show, depending on the situation, boys adopted different subject positions, shifting between these alternative versions of masculinity. Some boys—a minority—sought to challenge hegemonic discourses by constructing their masculinity entirely on values of peace and non-violence. The themes I present in this chapter illustrate how young boys are active agents who construct, negotiate and/or contest violence in their daily lives.

Against the backdrop of the turbulent legacies of apartheid, and the ongoing impacts of contemporary legislation, which I described in Chapter 2, the chapter also provides rich data describing racialised divisions between Indian and black boys that emerge when they come together at school, and how masculinities are forged and shaped by these divisions. While my fieldwork found that violence was, indeed, pervasive in the primary school, I also show that boys have the potential to develop a shared solidarity by caring for each other, which transcends racial divides. South Africa's colonial and apartheid history has produced varied versions of masculinities, shaped, too, by geographic region, race, socioeconomic context and class, all of which impact in overlapping and interwoven ways on how masculinities are formed, contested and accommodated (Morrell et al. 2012; Shefer, 2016). The overarching purpose of the chapter is to show that essentialist renderings of gender or race that understand violence as a uniform experience are deeply flawed: violence is not an inevitable product of masculine negotiations at school.

### **Taboo Hand Gestures, Swearing and Discrimination**

The first theme I discuss is *Taboo Hand Gestures, Swearing and Discrimination*, which foregrounds boys' experiences and perpetration of violence, ranging from non-verbal taboo gestures, to swearing, discrimination and bullying in the form of verbal teasing. I focus on how participants' associated hand gestures, such as the raised middle finger, with concepts of swearing, and how they used swear words as a key mechanism to affirm their masculinity at school. Jay and Jay's (2013) study, which was conducted in the United Kingdom and focused on the emergence of swearing in childhood, pointed out that swearing among children is largely unexplored in research. They found that children as young as 1–2-years-old repeated offensive words they heard. They noted that by the time children reach school age, they have acquired a fairly elaborate taboo vocabulary. This study resonates with my own: swearing and taboo gestures were pervasive among my participants. Two participants, Ayaan, an Indian boy 8 years of age, and Keylan, also Indian and 9-years-old, described their experiences in the following terms:

Ayaan: Sohan [Indian, 8, classmate] shows me the middle finger [raised middle finger gesture]. Sohan teases me and Shiven [Indian, 9] swears [at] me using bad swear words. They will swear [at] you if you are too soft [emotional], and if you are helpful. If they are bullying someone and if you go and help them, they will call you names and then you get emotional and they swear [at] you and show you the middle finger.

Keylan: Sohan always calls us the 'F' [fuck] word. They do it over and over again. If you tell the teacher then they will come by you and swear [at] you more.

Ayaan and Keylan both emphasised the emotional distress they felt from Sohan's behaviour—behaviour that was prohibited at school but was nonetheless rife. Ayaan claimed boys who were considered to be emotionally soft were mainly the victims of swearing. Moreover, defending a friend further risked boys becoming victims of swearing. The perpetrators targeted those seen as emotionally weak. Indeed, subordination of the weak and male power are key components in the daily construction of hegemonic masculinity within the primary school, as several studies have demonstrated, such as Swain's (2004) ethnographic research on the construction of masculinities among 10–11-year-old primary school boys in the United Kingdom. According to Swain, a prevalent part of school life involves engaging in racist slurs, teasing, inappropriate hand and body gestures, and name calling. He argued that boys' investment in swearing and body gestures were stylised performances which bestowed masculine status and prestige within the peer group. He noted, too, that many boys swear as part of the process of disengaging from their childhood as they adopt mature masculine projections.

Keylan also stressed that reporting swearing incidents to a teacher did not help, but rather encouraged the boys to swear even more. In this way they were placed at greater risk as victims of swearing. While Keylan and Ayaan did not respond to swearing in violent ways, another Indian boy, Rishay (aged 8), cautioned that if black boys were victims of swearing they would respond in physically violent ways. He said, in his individual interview: "If Sohan swears [at] the black boys, the black boys will hit him badly". It is important, here, to stress the legacy of

apartheid legislation which continues to pervade and poison race relations in South Africa<sup>16</sup>. Evident in Rishay's observation is his perception that Indian and black relations are informed by understandings of domination and subordination, and that racial encounters, even at school, are shaped by this understanding (see Chapter 2 for a discussion on racial stereotypes in South Africa). Therefore, Rishay was concerned that black boys would react violently towards Sohan's verbal provocation. His concern indicates a sense of fear of black boys as he associated their reaction to swearing with hegemonic masculinity and its concomitant violence. This finding resonates with Morrell et al. (2012) who found, in their research on hegemonic masculinities and race in South Africa, that boys' subjectivities of violence were largely shaped by colonial and apartheid discourses which positioned black masculinities as hegemonic. Such historical stereotypes are evident in Rishay's perception of black males as an inherently violent "other", regardless of their individuality and their plural projections of masculinities in the school.

Indeed, black boys who participated in my focus group discussion spoke about how they felt particularly disturbed and angered if they were victims of swearing. However, the majority said they did not respond in violent ways, and instead raised concerns that the Indian boys sought to boss them. For example, 9-year-old Lungelo said:

I felt terrible, ma'am. They [Indian boys] are only bossing us. Well, they only like to make themselves the boss of the Zulus [the predominant black sector of the population in the province of KwaZulu-Natal]. They only think that they are the boss of us.

Lungelo's words indicate a sense of inferiority and determination not to be subordinated. Evident here is that for Lungelo power relations were racialised. Furthermore, Lungelo's use of the word

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<sup>16</sup>The history is long and complex. See Chapter 2 for a detailed overview. Suffice to say here that black people were instructed by the white colonial authority to trace Indian indentured labourers who had absconded and enforce beatings (Vahed, 2005). Further conflict transpired through the 1949 Cato Manor riots and the 1985 Inanda riots where violence erupted between black and Indian people. The experiences of indenture and the violent nature of the riots led Indian people to construct and reinforce the stereotype of black people as violent (Vahed, 2005). Meanwhile, the Indian population was homogenised as exploitive economic traders and an advantaged racial group that dominated the business and transport sectors, thus restraining the economic progress of black people (Desai, 2014).

“us” suggests that the sense of subordination was shared by all the black boys—particularly in a setting where they were the numerical minority: as I established in Chapter 2, when I conducted my fieldwork the school was made up predominantly of Indian learners (75%). Black learners comprised just 24%.

The sense of group subordination that Lungelo voices brings to mind a study by Haavind et al., (2014) in which they focused on the experiences of subordination faced by Chinese American elementary school girls in the United States. They found that when children were interviewed separately they were not always able to speak about their experiences as victims of subordination. However, when they were interviewed in groups, they created a “we”-based discussion and thus lent themselves to “othering” and hence to subordination. I, too, found that when I interviewed my black participants all together they used the space to share their concerns regarding the subordination they felt as a racial group being bossed by another racial group (the Indian boys)—as is evident from Lungelo’s words.

While Rishay’s understandings of historical stereotypes homogenised black boys as a hegemonic racial group, the excerpts below from a focus group discussion with the black boys who participated in my fieldwork indicate that, despite being victims of swearing, most of the boys sought to resist violence:

Ulwazi [black, 9]: Every day when we go for PE [Physical Education], Sohan says “*voetsek*” [get lost!]. He knows all the swearing words in Zulu. Keylan says “fuck you”, and also “*pus*”. He also says “go to hell!” and he shows us the middle finger, some of them says it means “fuck you” [the finger]. I feel like I want to hit them but you hold yourself because you don’t want to be in too much trouble.

Lebo: [black, 9]: Keylan always calls me an idiot. He tells me the “F” [fuck] word. I feel angry about the Zulu swear word [*voetsek*]. I ask him to say sorry but he says “no!”

These extracts illustrate how swearing manifested in racial tensions and that language was important in the construction of racialised identities that were embedded within relations of power such that the Indian boys humiliated the black boys by using the word *voetsek*. Language was thus a tool to enable verbal forms of violence as well as to create distinctions between the racial groups. This was found by Haavind et al. (2014), too, who found that language was used to employ violence which reinforced a categorical frontier between races.

While both Ulwazi and Lebo expressed their anger at being victims of swearing, they were also guarded in their reactions, choosing to resist violence. In this way they contradicted and undermined preconceptions of them as violent hegemonic males—such as those expressed by Rishay. Indeed, instead of reacting with violence, Lebo requested that the boys apologise for their actions, indicating a non-hegemonic reaction based on values that indicated striving for more peaceful relations. However, Keylan refused to apologise. In his individual interview, Keylan explained “If you say sorry they take advantage over you or they say that you are a coward, you only know to say sorry, and you can’t fight back”. Due to his need to uphold his hegemonic masculinity and avoid being seen as lacking courage, Keylan refused to apologise as he felt that this would compromise his identity. This is mainly because hegemonic masculinity, as Hanlon (2012) argued in his book examining men’s engagement with care work in Ireland, encourages shame when men fail to comply with hegemonic ideals, and this often results in the silencing of emotional expression such as sadness and regret.

Apart from swearing, some boys were also victims of verbal bullying related to their physical appearance and skin tone. Take, for instance, this exchange in a group discussion between Shiven, an Indian boy, 9 years of age, and Vihaan, also Indian and 8-years-old, based on their experiences of bullying:

Shiven: Keylan [classmate] said I’m small, I’m thin, and he’s going to punch me and after that nobody wanted to be my friend. That is why now I don’t have any friends. He also calls us silly names like “black face”. He calls me and Vihaan that.

Vihaan: Keylan calls me names because sometimes he can lie to the teacher that he didn't do it and he says I'm mad and then he teases me: "big, black face".

Researcher: How do you feel when he calls you "black face"?

Shiven: Hey, I feel like hitting him till he spins.

Vihaan: Bad, I feel like hitting him but I can't because whenever I try to hit him, he takes his lunch bag and flings it on my face.

Bias and discrimination against those with darker skin tones was rife at the school. Lemon's (2008) account of Indian identities in South Africa helps to contextualise this: South African Indian identities, he explains, continue to adhere to strict traditional, cultural and ethnic discourses which they use to erect social barriers and distances not only against black people but also against one another. One of the ways in which this occurs is through colourism<sup>17</sup> which is a salient feature among the Indian community. Shiven and Vihaan were clearly victims of such colourism, and this evoked feelings of anger and aggression such that they desired to respond in physically violent ways. However, they failed to defend themselves due to the fear of being injured by boys such as Keylan, whom they viewed as being hegemonic males, in contrast to how they viewed themselves as lacking power. Evident here is that power struggles between the boys were far more complex than mere race-based discrimination. Even amongst some Indian boys skin tone was a source of power that informed relations of domination and subordination and colourism worked to create and sustain intracultural hierarchies among Indian boys in this study.

In addition to discrimination based on his skin tone, Shiven was further subordinated because of his petite physical appearance. Because of their physical appearance, therefore, Shiven and Vihaan were both subjected to verbal teasing which rendered them powerless. Furthermore,

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<sup>17</sup>Colourism is prevalent in large parts of the world, whereby people belonging to the same racial and ethnic group regard those with a lighter skin tone as superior (Craddock et al., 2018). As established in Chapter 2, in South Africa, two thirds of Indian indentured migrants came from Southern Indian regions with the remaining third arriving from the Northern region (Hughes, 2007). Indians from the Northern region were commonly known for having a lighter skin tone than their Southern counterparts. Marway (2018) has shown that in India a light skin tone is associated with attractiveness. Individuals with a darker skin tone are generally reported to face greater discrimination and social exclusion (Assari & Caldwell, 2017).

being a victim of violence affected Shiven's social relations as he failed to develop friendship with others, thus reinforcing his subordinate position on the social hierarchy. The physical body therefore contributed to the manner in which domination and subordination played out.

Other studies have noted that boys employ bullying as an important tool to gain power over those who fail to measure up to masculine ideals, such as by having a physically weak body (Coffey et al., 2016; Hellström & Beckman, 2019; Rosen & Nofziger, 2018). Bhana's (2016b) study on the role of the body in the construction of masculinities in South Africa, placed much emphasis on the performance of the body, in terms of what it can and cannot do, and how this is linked to age, size, gender and violence. She explained that from a young age gender is embodied and that girls and boys are involved in actively constructing their bodies. This enables boys to construct their masculinities through an awareness and accrual of power in relation to others. The discourses associated with hegemonic masculinity are based on notions of strength and toughness and a "steeled masculine body" which, according to Bhana (2016b, p.53), boys use as a method to gain hegemonic status. Consequently, boys were often subordinated and bullied for behaving in ways that was not compliant with normative masculine concepts and for looking different—and which therefore afforded them an inferior status. Subsequently, hegemonic masculine boys could affirm their masculinity and power by subordinating those who portrayed non-masculine traits. Likewise, in my own fieldwork, I found that through verbal insults and discrimination Keylan could affirm his masculine power over Shiven and Vihaan, who were positioned as subordinate and powerless.

### *Knowledge of Profanity and the Spaces of Sexual Learning*

In this sub-section I examine the platforms through which some boys, including those who perpetrated swearing at school, gained knowledge of swear words. While swear words were forbidden in the school space, most of the boys claimed that they learnt to swear within the school premises. The following exchange between Shiven, Vihaan, Lebo and Keylan occurred in a focus group discussion:

Shiven: In the boys' toilet, on the door, there's a list of all the swearing words. Sohan will definitely tell you what they are writing. Boys' are swearing F [fuck] and B [bitch] and S [sex]. They [also] draw hearts.

Vihaan: They are writing on the doors; they write somebody loves somebody else.

Lebo: Even Ayaan from our class—Ayaan draws the girl's private part.

Keylan: They write bad things. They draw the boy's private parts on the door and then they write the name for the boy's private part and write your name. Ask Shiven he knows the S [sex] word. My parents don't know that I know a swearing word and I know about swearing. I know all, A to Z of swearing words. Shiven and I learnt the words from the boys' toilets. I have big friends, like in high school, so I play with those guys and they taught me all that.

Researcher: What does it mean, the A to Z of swearing?

Keylan: I can't tell you ma'am, ah you [are] so [much] bigger than me, how can I tell you what a swearing word mean? I got it in the back of my head. Ma'am, we know all of it.

Vihaan: I saw it on the toilet wall then I saw it in the dictionary. For sex I checked in the dictionary, it means male and female so there's nothing bad about the word.

Evident in this exchange was that allusions to sexuality and swear words dominated the graffiti on the walls of the boy's toilets. The FP learners (aged 5–9) are only allowed to use the toilets within their designated block. Due to restrictions in movement, no other grade is permitted to use their toilet. This suggests that FP learners were responsible for the writings and drawings on the walls. It was evident that the toilet walls were a learning site through which boys gained knowledge of swear words. Keylan mentioned that he and Shiven learnt most of the swear words they knew from the toilet walls. Toilet graffiti also afforded a platform for the FP boys to demonstrate their knowledge of swear words (suggested by Keylan's "A-Z list" of swear words), while simultaneously constructing their own knowledge of sexuality as part of practicing their masculinity in the primary school. This resonates, too, with Allen's (2015) article on how sexual meanings are constructed unofficially in secondary schools in New Zealand. She highlighted that students learnt about sexuality in spaces that extended well beyond the walls of the classroom, and that peer group interactions were key, as were gym locker rooms, and heterosexual graffiti

on the walls of the toilets and classroom desks. In other words, it was students' everyday practices that produced sexual meanings and performances of sexuality.

Keylan also noted that male genitals were drawn and labelled with boy's names, and explained that some boys were targeted in the labelling of these drawings. Lebo further claimed that Ayaan, a peer from his class, was responsible for drawing pictures of female genitals. Bhana (2016a), in her book on childhood gender and sexuality in South Africa, explains that the sexual objectification of girls and their bodies works to subordinate femininity while simultaneously confirming heterosexual masculinity. In this way, the boys in her study could reproduce sex and gender relations by reinforcing their heterosexual dominance.

Swear words and genital graffiti on the walls of the toilet also spurred curiosity and sexual learning, as indicated in Vihaan's account where he looked up the word "sex" after reading it on the toilet wall. Vihaan was curious to learn about sex and sexuality, and the toilet space was a platform for learning and exploring sexual terms. The toilet space was also used to declare relationships, as Vihaan said: "They write somebody loves somebody else". Declarations of love were thus revealed on the walls of the toilets and sometimes those were statements made by third parties who sought to disclose the relationships of others. I recall a time when Kamil (a 9-year-old Indian boy) reported that his name appeared on the toilet wall which read "Kamil loves Sasha". While Kamil said he was not involved in producing toilet graffiti, for others, the graffiti created on the walls was a public expression of their hidden sexualities. Robinson (2008) argued in her Australian study on the moral panic associated with childhood and sexuality, that childhood sexuality is perceived by adults to be non-existent. She critiques the notion that sexuality is solely the realm of adults who, on the whole, perceive children as naive and in need of protection. My findings support Robinson's view and debunk assumptions of childhood innocence, demonstrating that children are, indeed, sexual beings—and this calls into question hegemonic discourses that position them as sexually unknowing.

Lundgren et al.'s (2019) ethnographic study of how young people negotiate and reproduce complex gender norms across social, personal and structural contexts in Uganda found that the initial learning of sexuality stemmed from a larger dialogue with parents, peers and media. This

is evident in the extract from Keylan, where he spoke about learning swear words from his high school friends which he then conveyed to his peers at school. For example:

Researcher: What are you watching on YouTube?

Shiven: Keylan is watching swearing movies and watching people kissing. *Pie in the City?*

Vihaan: He was watching people naked and running around and he said there's kissing, sex. *Pie* something...

Kanelo: Oh *American Pie!*

Keylan: I can't tell it to ma'am, no ma'am is too big... I'm on the road, chilling with my friends, my high school friends. I come with the phone and they use data and stuff and we watch movies... I take my tablet [electronic device], I put it in my shirt at night, I zip my shirt up in the night, and I cover myself with the blanket. No one comes to see me in the night, I lock my door. I open my zip and I Google: I go on YouTube and I watch any show. I have WiFi. Even if it's PG100 I don't care. I watch swearing movies on YouTube.

The movie the boys were referring to was *American Pie* (1999), an American teen romantic comedy about a group of high school boys who vow to lose their virginity before graduation, which Keylan watched despite the age restriction of 16. Shiven, Vihaan and Kanelo described the content of Keylan's viewing, indicating that he had repeated sexual messages from the movie to his peers. Moreover, Keylan watched the movie on his mobile device in the company of his high school friends, suggesting that there was no adult supervision. Keylan said he also viewed unsupervised content at night through YouTube videos, saying that the parental guidance restriction did not bother him.

This scenario resonates with Ponzetti's (2016) study, an evidence-based overview of sexuality education from a global perspective, which found that young people live in a sexualised world where they gain a great deal of sexual knowledge and understanding through the internet and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Indeed, their daily activities and social world are largely informed through media such as instant messaging and watching online

internet content. Through these media platforms children can gain information about diverse and non-hetero-normative sexuality which schools do not officially provide thus expanding their knowledge and views of gender, sexuality and sexual expression. Ponzetti further argued that what children learn within their broader social network, without the guidance of adults, can also make them susceptible to misinformation and sexual danger, which they also pass on to their peers. It was evident that his tablet gave Keylan access to adult sexual concepts and messages, the sort of content which, according to Ponzetti (2016), can give rise to oppressive ideals of masculinities that are then interpreted and taken up by young boys.

Sexual messages conveyed from the broader social networks were reproduced through spaces of the school toilets and through interactions with peers. Such practices work to position young children as sexually knowing while also highlighting the potential hazards of children being left to their own devices, unsupervised, where they are exposed to sexually explicit material. In the next section I demonstrate how boys utilised physical violence in order to achieve masculine power.

### **Boys Procuring Masculine Status through Physical Violence**

In this section I demonstrate that boys upheld notions of hegemonic masculinity by perpetrating physical violence onto other boys, and the importance that they placed on a boy having a strong, muscular body. The following excerpts, transcribed from individual interview sessions, describe some of the forms of physical violence that my participants observed, experienced and perpetrated in the school:

Rishay: The two boys in my class, when we are in the toilets and the door is locked, they go against the wall and knock the door so we can get hurt... One day I went to the office, I saw a boy's head and nose was bust. I think a boy took a bottle and hit him.... Akona [black, 9, classmate] can do anything to us, and he can hit us and slap us.

Sohan: Sometimes the boys, they slap us, they hit us on our backs.

Vihaan: They are hitting me. Like the other time I was going in front to read. I was going to choose a book from the back and then Lungelo [classmate] pinched me from the back.

Lebo: Beko [a black boy, aged 9] is always bullying me and always pulling me over here [gesturing to his collar] and I got hurt. Beko is always pulling me on the side to side. When I was in Grade 1, I was very naughty. I was even hitting the prefects [Grade 7 learners].

Ulwazi: They hit you, put you down, kick you, and pick a fight. Ma'am, some Grade 2 boys are small but they can hit me like they [are] in Grade 3.

The nature of the physical violence the boys describe is characterised by incidents of hitting, slapping, pinching, pulling and shoving, and kicking. Physical violence transpired within different areas of the school such as the boys' toilets and the classroom, as noted by Rishay and Vihaan, respectively. Additionally, Ulwazi mentioned how physical violence was pervasive among boys from a young age. He claimed that a young Grade 2 boy asserted power over older boys through physical violence, while Lebo confessed to perpetuating physical violence by hitting a prefect when he was in Grade 1. This suggests that even at a very young age some boys are able to stand up to authority and enforce their masculinity. This resonates with findings in Bhana's (2013) paper on gender violence within and around South African schools where she noted that boys as young as 6-years-old were able to construct and reproduce violent masculinity.

While Lebo and Ulwazi described the physical violence that they experienced, they were also involved in perpetrating violence themselves. They mentioned that the rationale for engaging in physical violence was associated with the need to fight back and defend a friend:

Lebo: I taught Kanelo in preschool how to fight: "You [Kanelo] are my best friend; I'll hit them for you". I remember, in Grade 2, Ulwazi taught Kanelo how to fight because when bullies come to bully them they will not just cry and run away.... Some of them they think that I'm not just a boy, I can fight like that,

but Lungelo knows that I can fight, Caleb knows that I can fight, Darsh knows [boys from his class].

It is clear from this excerpt that Lebo sought to defend the honour of his masculinity by standing up to bullies. He also took initiative to ensure that his friends, Ulwazi and Kanelo, were able to fight back to assert their masculinity. He therefore sought to protect his friends by encouraging them to fight back instead of fleeing, as crying and running away showed emotional weakness. The importance young boys place on avoiding showing such weakness has been well documented in Mayeza and Bhana's (2020) recent study. Their findings highlighted how fighting and defending oneself against the perpetrators of violence was a key way in which boys achieved masculine power. In addition, being a male victim of violence denoted being in a position of weakness, and hence boys placed a great deal of importance in fighting back and defending their friends. This was echoed in my fieldwork. Indeed, Lebo also desired to be known for his physical prowess and to be seen as tough in the presence of his peers, claiming that most of his peers knew that he could fight. His peers, Kanelo and Ulwazi shared similar desires:

Kanelo: Sometimes I punch people, I injure them or break their bones, break their lips. They would say "Ah man, you weak, you weak, be a man, you weak, you can't even fight, and you can't even hit a punch! [Clicks his tongue to express disapproval]...I'm not your friend anymore. Get out!" It's like, doesn't make me feel like I'm a man and I don't feel that "man-ness" [masculinity] because it's like he also hit me and I didn't feel like I am that strong... It's like when you fight with other boys it makes you feel like a man. Like when he punches us we also get hurt but also when you get punished, you won't feel more pain because you already had that kind of pain and you felt it. Sometimes I get blue [black] eyes, blood, or [I] might break my hand. You become a man.

Ulwazi: I won't cry. I will hit them back... because you have to be a man.

Researcher: Why won't you leave them alone or report to a teacher?

Kanelo: Because I'm a man! If someone hits you and you cry, even if it's a soft punch and if you cry it's going to be like you [are] an idiot. I say "Idiot! Why are you crying coz it doesn't matter, it's gonna be like you stupid".

Central to the notion of ideal hegemonic masculinity, as Mayeza & Bhana (2020) demonstrated particularly well, are its characteristics of strength and aggression. In my study I found that Kanelo placed immense importance on the need to be considered a man and not be seen as weak. In order to move away from being considered “less masculine” and less of a man he was prepared to advocate, defend and subscribe to violence in the process of constructing a hegemonic masculinity. Engaging in physical fights, as noted by both Kanelo and Ulwazi, was important to affirming manhood, and this indicates that they yearned for mature, hegemonic positions. The effects of violence, such as having a black eye, or a bleeding and a broken hand, were considered, by Kanelo, to be part of the process of becoming a man. Likewise, Swain’s (2003) study in United Kingdom and Bhana’s (2016c) study in South Africa, both of which focus on the body and constructions of masculinity, noted that boys admitting to pain suggested a failed masculinity, and that it was therefore important for boys to refrain from showing any signs of weakness. Kanelo encouraged his peers to be strong, and spoke to them in a harsh tone, calling them “idiots”, in order to ensure that they conformed to dominant hegemonic traits and avoided being labelled as “stupid”. However, not all of my participants felt as Kanelo did. For example:

Lebo: If someone bullies you and you keep quiet then you get energy and you can fight back.

Ulwazi: You get power to hit him more... and energy.

Studies all over the world have noted how bullying is employed as a fundamental strategy to gain power over those who are weak, rendering the victim subordinate and powerless (see, for example, Bartholomaeus, 2013; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020; Rosen & Nofziger, 2018; Wardman, 2017). However, in the context of my study in KwaZulu-Natal, Lebo and Ulwazi constructed an alternate subjectivity of bullying which afforded power to the victim in order to fight back. They claimed that being a victim of bullying gave them the energy and power to retaliate in violent ways. In other words, bullying was a motivating factor for them to engage in violence, as being victims of bullying fuelled their anger and afforded them the energy to react in physically violent ways.

In a similar vein, participants in a focus group discussion spoke about how having a strong body indicated male power:

Lebo: I was beating everyone and showed them my six-pack [well-defined abdominal muscles].

Researcher: Did you all see Lebo's six-pack?

Keylan: Yes, we saw. For real, I saw it and I know how a six-pack looks.

Ayaan: Technically, when he should fight with us he should always lift his shirt up.

Researcher: Why do you think he shows off his six-pack when fighting?

Kanelo: Because maybe he is trying to gloat.

Having a strong body with well-defined abdominal muscles was integral to the way Lebo conceived his masculinity. Ayaan described how Lebo often raised his shirt when fighting, and Kanelo claimed that Lebo's six-pack was a visible method to boast his muscularity. Acting tough, showing off his strength, and displaying intimidating behaviour during physical fights was a way for Lebo to procure and enhance his masculine status. This resonates with other studies which have found that a key element to enacting violent masculinity involves projecting bodily strength. For example, Bhana (2016b) found that steeling the physical body was an integral part of portraying a "real boy" image. Moreover, boys in her study defined their masculinity through actions such as fighting and using their bodies to demonstrate strength, skill and fitness as a successful expression of masculinity. However, in doing so, Bhana argues, boys learn to use their bodies in ways that perpetuate unequal gender relations through the subordination of others (see, too, Paechter, 2000).

As I have shown in this section, boys' rationale for engaging in violence was 1) to defend themselves and their peers; 2) to avoid being labelled as weak; 3) to put themselves across as being mature, hegemonic men; and 4) to prove they had strong, physical bodies—all of which are fundamental to achieving masculine prowess. However, the manner in which these boys constructed themselves did not hold for all boys in my study: as I show, other boys sought to enact more caring versions of masculinity alongside their hegemonic positions, depending on the

situations they found themselves in, thus destabilising stereotypical assumptions that all boys are inherently violent.

### **Boys Reinforcing Unequal Gender Relations with Girls**

In this section I turn to gender relations, demonstrating first that girls were often the perpetrators of physical violence, and boys the victims, and second that instead of responding in violent ways, participants often sought to maintain non-violent relations with girls. The following excerpts from individual interviews illustrate this well:

Kanelo: Girls usually slap boys on the face.

Zee [black, 9]: One girl in our class, she teases me and calls me fat, bushy, fat pig, but I just keep quiet.

Aasim [Indian, 9]: When we were going on the [play]ground, they put me against the fence and I did not know what they were telling me. They just pushed me on the fence.

Shreyan [Indian, 9]: Anele [a girl from his class] takes the ruler and she hits, spanking! She takes the face cloth and goes pah! pah! I don't want that, a girl hitting me with a face towel...but the cloth is painful. They chase me around and they take out the handkerchief and say "Hey! Come here!"

Shiven: Hey, ma'am, girls are big fighters, hey! Girls are very irritating! Ma'am, like Dhiya [a girl from his class], she's such a donkey! She comes by us.

Keylan: They just come and say for example if Caleb [Keylan's friend] just swear and talk, they look at him for no reason. They look at him with an angry face for no reason. Coz like... ma'am, say if a girl is far away from everyone, if we are swearing and using languages [swear words], even if she does not talk to us, she will come up to us and say "Stop swearing!" when it's none of her business.

Rishay: Girls fight with me. Saylee, from our class, she has two friends, they bring so much of sweets and juice in a bag and they hit all of us with that bag and they push us against the wall.

According to these boys, girls inflicted both physical and verbal forms of violence on them. Zee was teased because of his physical appearance, while others described their experiences of being either slapped, shoved or hit with any items on hand such as face towels, rulers and lunch bags. It is clear from the extracts that the boys felt dominated by the girls' practices of verbal and physical violence. Keylan also talked about how girls sought to police their behaviour by discouraging swearing on the playground. He was particularly frustrated about this, saying that girls should mind their own business. However, rather than seeking to achieve and reclaim power through reciprocal violence, as they did with other boys, it is clear from the excerpts above that they were physically passive in their responses to girls' violence.

It was evident that violence was not merely a one-dimensional expression of male power—and this finding contrasts with several studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa which have shown otherwise. Girls have often been depicted as the main victims of male violence and the most susceptible to HIV and AIDS and sexual violence due to unequal gender relations (Bhana, 2008; Leach & Humphreys, 2007; World Health Organisation, 2002). Additionally, these studies, along with Mayeza's (2017a) study, which focused on how 6–10-year-old children policed gender on the playground in a black working-class primary school in South Africa, all found that boys were the main perpetrators of violence. Hegemonic masculine boys dominated various school spaces, including the playground, from which girls were largely excluded. Other studies in the Global North, such as Renold's (2005) ethnography of girls' and boys' sexualities have highlighted the manner in which sexual violence in the school playground has been perpetrated by boys as a key demonstration of masculine power. In other words, broadly speaking, the literature on violence in schools has mainly focused on patriarchal structures and sexual and physical violence perpetrated by boys against girls, instead of investigating the way girls address violence through non-normative positions of femininities.

Bhana & Mayeza (2019b) offered insight into how girls contested normative versions of femininity by using violence to defend themselves from hegemonic masculine boys who bullied them. The authors argued that in examining the ambiguous and complex nature of femininity, acting against boys worked to endorse and reproduce violence as a key expression of power. This reproduction of violence was achieved through girls' complicity in it and also under the guise of

empowering their femininities. In this study, the fact that girls employed violence against boys' calls into question the notion that femininity should be equated with passivity.

I also found that boys' passive resistance to girl violence was complex and contradictory. While, according to participants, girls were the perpetrators of violence against boys, the primary reason for boys' resistance stemmed, as the excerpts below show, from binary gender discourses based on the dictum "boys should not hit girls" since girls were constructed as inherently weak:

Zee: We talk nicely to them [girls] because if we talk grumpy they will think that we are abusing them. I just do not want to hit girls because when I hit them they are gonna get hurt badly. I will just tell her to stop it... because we can go to jail and that is women abuse.

Kanelo: If you fight with the girls—it's part of the rules—you can't hit the girl. They put them [the male] in jail. You can't hit a girl. You are not showing respect.

Lungelo: We [are] not allowed to touch girls.

Keylan: You are not allowed to hit a girl. It's like a law. If I hit Shiven now I cannot go to jail but if I hit a girl I will go to jail. It's right to fight with boys but you can't fight with girls. You can get arrested. I think it was my neighbour, he was fighting with his girlfriend and he was in jail for one year. You are not showing respect to a woman: A woman brought you into the earth, you not showing respect to them.

Researcher: Who made the law [that boys should not hit girls]?

Vihaan: Jesus.

Kanelo: The police.

Lungelo: My teacher.

Atif [Indian, 9]: My mother and father said that I must not hit a girl.

Rishay: My aunty said that there's a saying that you can't hit girls.

Evident here, in the individual interview sessions, is that boys condemned violence against girls for various reasons, including the fear of being arrested, the need to maintain respectful relations with girls, and their association of femininity with the nurturance of life. Zee's fear that he might

harm a girl was a clear manifestation of his understanding that a boy is dominant. He clearly bought into notions of unequal gender relations and the view that girls are inherently weak—despite the fact that it was the girls who perpetrated violence onto him.

Gender relations and power dynamics between boys and girls were highly complex, as these excerpts suggest. It is useful, here, to bring in Bhana and Mayeza's (2019a) study based on how young boys negotiate and reject violent masculinities at a South African primary school. They found that boys rejected violence against girls because it did not constitute a source of power. While girls sought to dominate boys by perpetrating verbal and physical violence against them, boys rejected violence against girls because they believed that girls were inherently weak. This belief kept girls in a subordinate position regardless of their violent actions. My participants learnt through various social networks that they should not hit girls, including the home, conveyed by parents and family members, as well as teachers, religious leaders, and the larger community. Channon (2013, p.7) points out that the underlying message conveyed from society implies that "men's bodies are strong, women's are not, so men hitting women is fundamentally unfair". The implication is that encouraging boys to avoid violence against girls subsequently entrenched the assumption that violence against boys is permitted. This is apparent in Keylan's narrative where he stated "It's right to fight with boys, but you can't fight with girls". I argue that this is particularly problematic as it encourages male domination and violence. Furthermore, participants interpreted "boys cannot hit girls" simply as a rule to follow—there was no evidence that they understood the underlying problem of gender violence. Simply rejecting violence against girls—but not against boys—does not make boys any less violent.

The boys also spoke about how teachers dismissed girls' violence based on essential, binary understandings of gender. Siya, a 9-year-old black boy, shared his experience:

They [girls] hit me; I can't do them anything because if you hit a girl it would cause problems. They will tell ma'am [the teacher] and ma'am won't believe me coz they are girls. If they hit me I go to the class and tell ma'am, like two days ago one girl hit me and I told ma'am, that girl lied to ma'am and said I tramped [kicked] her leg so ma'am really believed the girl.

Siya's belief that reciprocating girls' violence would result in worse problems led him to report the incident to his teacher—who failed to address the issue. It was evident that Siya's teacher understood violence differently based on whether the victim was a boy or a girl. Siya spoke about the inequality he felt from his teacher's reaction to the incident. Instead of addressing his problem, his teacher viewed the girl as a victim. When violence by girls against boys is normalised and invalidated by those in authority, such as teachers, it can become a routine behaviour (Lombard, 2012). Teachers' dismissal of boys as victims of violence is documented in studies conducted by Dytham (2018) in England and Horton (2011) in Sweden. Dytham's study, which examined the interactions between 13–14-year-old girls and boys at a secondary school, found that teachers' dismissal of violence perpetrated by girls was often shaped by social discourses which positioned females as weak and men as strong and aggressive. Additionally, Horton (2011) argued in his research on school bullying that while it is often assumed that the perpetrator of violence is more powerful than the victim, and since girls are seen as weak, it becomes acceptable for girls to inflict harm on boys. Subsequently, he noted, boys may detest violence from girls because aggression towards females is largely perceived negatively as compared to violence against boys. Indeed, these discourses were evident throughout my fieldwork and served to promote and further entrench gender inequalities and unequal power relations.

### **“He's Half Angel, Half Demon”: The Fluid Navigation of Masculinities**

In this final section to the chapter I demonstrate the fluid ways in which boys negotiated their masculinities. While some boys were able to shift seamlessly between multiple versions of masculinities, others sought to denounce the hegemonic, violent form by projecting themselves exclusively in caring and peaceable ways. My aim is to highlight the multiplicity of masculinities practiced by boys. The extracts below, from individual interview sessions, describe how boys were able to shift between different versions of masculinities depending on different situations:

Rohan [Indian, 9]: Luthando [a black boy in his class, aged 8] is good and bad, both.  
Like he's half angel, half demon

Vihaan: There's two ways, there's a good way and a bad way. I'm naughty and then I'm good. Like when somebody troubles me I just get nervous and I start behaving differently. I start being naughty.

Rohan's description of Luthando as half angel and half demon indicates the fluid ways in which Luthando could enact his masculinity based on being good and being bad. This fluidity was also evident among non-hegemonic boys who sought to stand up to perpetrators of violence instead of being silent, passive victims. For example, in an individual session, Keylan recounted the following incident involving two 8-year-old Indian boys, Priyan and Sohan:

When anyone should swear, Priyan he [would] keep quiet. Then one day when Sohan swore at him, he hit him and slapped him. Priyan just woke up and punched him on his stomach and kicked him. He flew on the ground and everyone was just looking at Priyan because he never hit anyone in his whole life. He was sick and tired of everyone just teasing him and swearing [at] him and he wasn't doing anything. They couldn't say anything because they were shocked. He never even hurt a fly in his life. That's why we thought, when he punched and kicked him, Sohan was crying. His hand was bleeding. Sohan would always come and call us the F [fuck] word and Priyan would tell me. Priyan would have left him but then he will keep on doing the same thing.

Evident in Keylan's story is that passive boys have the potential to react violently in order to resist and contest power that is exercised over them. Power dynamics, as Keylan illustrates, can thus be altered when non-hegemonic boys contest violence used against them. Because of Priyan's resistance, the power balance shifted from the perpetrator to the victim, rendering Sohan powerless. This is yet another facet of how complex and contradictory the enactment of masculinity can be, and how it is intrinsically linked to shifting notions of power. This resonates with Foucault's (1978) conceptualisation of power as a fluid concept such that the dynamics of power can shift through acts of resistance. Keylan further noted that it was important for Priyan to defend himself to avoid being a victim of repeated bullying by Sohan. Given Priyan's general passive behaviour, reacting in a violent way might have been the only way to defend himself.

This predicament is highlighted in a study by Carrera-Fernández et al., (2016) which focused on gender bullying at a secondary school in Spain. It found that boys usually escaped bullying by responding bravely to provocations in violent ways in order to prove their masculinity and avoid further humiliation.

Other participants also drew on their agency to project their masculinities in diverse ways. This is indicated in Kanelo's reply, in an individual interview, to a question about his favourite television programme, Worldwide Wrestling (WWE):

Kanelo: WWE and action moves excite me because it's not like normal fighting, it's like you can do their moves. Some of their moves are cool. We might learn how to fight. They only punch and kick. They [also] do head butts and sometimes they do funny things... I'm banned from watching it coz, when I was younger, I was playing wrestling and, when my brother was sitting, and I'd just do wrestling moves on him. But now I still watch it, but I don't do those moves anymore.

Kanelo's description of wrestling shows how he used it as a resource to learn hegemonic masculine concepts which he considered to be "cool". Young boys are not supposed to view wrestling programmes due to age restrictions, and Kanelo concluded his story by saying that although he continued to watch wrestling, he no longer engaged in violent behaviour. Earlier I demonstrated the way media shaped boys construction of sexuality and encouraged swearing (see page 154). In this instance, policed by his family, Kanelo sought to move away from negative, violent behaviour and was able to bring about significant change in his behaviour, drawing on his agency to stop practicing wrestling moves. While he earlier positioned his masculinity in hegemonic and violent ways by reproducing violent behaviour—conveyed, in part, through trying to wrestle his brother—he was able to realise the negative outcomes and learnt to negotiate his masculinity in non-violent, more responsible ways. This implies that there is potential for boys to change and develop in responsible ways—through drawing on the fluid nature of masculinities.

Indeed, several participants emphasised, in individual interviews, the importance of the peaceful, caring versions of their masculinities:

Vihaan: One day I didn't have pen, I asked everybody and they did not want to lend me [one] and then Kanelo was behind me and he lent me a pen.

Keylan: If people don't have lunch, for example, Vihaan, I share with him... Like one time Shiven never bring his lunch and I shared with him. So I felt sorry for him. I punch Vihaan but the next day, if he doesn't have lunch, I share. Like Shiven stabbed me with the pencil and the next day we were friends.

Shiven: Keylan shares with me. If I have something nice I give [some to] Vihaan. I even give him money because we feel sad. Yesterday, when we saw Vihaan was alone, and then when he came to take his lunch he was looking for his lunch but he had no lunch. If I have extra, I give it to Vihaan.

Rohan: When Bonga [black classmate, aged 9] dropped his lunch down, Dinesh [Indian classmate, aged 9] helped him by giving him one slice of his lunch. That's very kind.

Ulwazi: I'm kind. If you need something I will help you out. Boys, sometimes they fight, you see them fight then the next thing you see them together. They forgive each other.

Zee: I always see some boys, they fight, [but] the next day I see them being friends.

In different circumstances, participants occupied different subject positions. For example, in the context of defending a friend, achieving masculinity based on strength and toughness, reacting to conflict, and engaging in swearing as various means to display hegemonic masculinity, was desired. However, in the context of hunger and lacking material resources the boys positioned themselves in alternate ways based on care and kindness. This is evident in the narratives above where Vihaan revealed that Kanelo lent him a pen in the classroom while Keylan shared his lunch with Shiven and likewise Shiven shared with Vihaan and Dinesh shared with Bonga. The boys expressed compassion towards each other through the act of sharing and nurturing friendships.

Notwithstanding racial tensions that evoked power inequalities in Indian and black boys' interactions, as I discussed earlier (see pages 146–147), boys came together to assist each other. Conflict might be apparent in their social relations; however, alongside conflict there is also understanding, sympathy and a shared solidarity. Drawing on caring, egalitarian notions of masculinity, Indian and black boys developed a closer bond, in times of need, by caring and sharing with each other, signifying that racial tensions can be overcome—at least on the micro-level. The peaceable and caring projections of black boys and the relations they shared with Indian boys underscore the importance of dismantling entrenched stereotypes, for example of black boys as inherently violent, or Indian boys as bossy.

Zee and Ulwazi further affirmed how boys have the capacity to forgive easily. This value is significant as it can mark an important shift away from racial stereotypes that have left races in tension with each other in post-apartheid South Africa. Their capacity to forgive can contribute to the development of unity amongst black and Indian boys.

I also found that some boys deviated from normative hegemonic expressions of masculinity entirely, choosing to embrace values of peace over violence:

Ayaan: The thing that's more important is that you need to be kind and you need to help people.

Atif: In our religion [Islam] we not supposed—like if violence is happening—we are not supposed to get involved, like we must stay out of it if it's something bad.

Rohan: If you help another child, God will be very happy with you.

These boys sought to denounce violence by adopting non-violent subject positions, drawing on their moral and, in the case of Atif and Rohan, religious principles. They thus supported a culture of non-violence and adopted a set of values that was located outside the dominant hegemonic discourses of masculinity. Elliott (2016) describes, in her study, the value of non-violence and the rejection of hegemonic dominance in favour of the integration of values of respect and care is part of a positive model of masculinity.

In addition, Rohan sought to help boys who exhibited violent ways by attempting to reform them. He shared his thoughts and concerns:

Everyone is made equally. Well, sometimes a bully, like my friend Sayush [Indian, 8]—see, he was like Bonga, pushing and spitting on people, but I changed him. I gave him a talk on how would he like it if someone spat on him and then a few weeks later he changed. Now he's a very good boy, he's clever. Sometimes when people become bullies it's either something's going on at home or someone is bullying them. Then they say, you know the old saying, "If you can't beat them, join them", and Sayush might have done that. Bonga might have been bullying him and he joined the bully. Maybe Sayush was bullied by a bigger boy and maybe he said in his mind that if he can't beat then he must join them and then now he became a bully, but I changed him. All bullies have something to change. Sayush, you know why he was a bully, because there was something at home. See, his parents—maybe he didn't like his mother because his mother was only scolding him—so I said why don't you write a card for your mother and say sorry, now he loves his mother, he only talks about his mother.

Rohan also expressed his desire to help Bonga:

Bonga, that's not actually his real parents because I don't know what happened to his father, but maybe that's why he is a bully—he can't find his father, maybe that's why. Ma'am, he is very sad. If I was like, maybe, like 12 years [older], I'll be his father—well not really his father, but I'll help him. Like, I'll tell my mother to pack an extra slice so at school if he doesn't have lunch, I'll give him a slice. They should talk about their problem. You can't bully people; you talk about your problems. Bonga will finally speak out and now he will feel much better because everybody will know and treat him better. See I'll treat him better and he will treat everyone else better.

Rohan was steadfast in his endeavour to assist hegemonic boys to change for the better by identifying the forces that contributed to violent masculinities, as is evident in how he noted that a significant move towards non-violent behaviour involved understanding the broader issues that boys faced that made them particularly vulnerable to perpetuating violence. He helped the boys by advising them on ways to overcome their problems and encouraged good qualities such as asking Sayush to write a card of apology to his mother. Instead of judging Sayush and Bonga and reacting to them in negative ways, Rohan adopted an alternate viewpoint by seeking to understand their lives better, recognising that even (or particularly) bullies have weaknesses, and he sought to develop solutions to assist them and listen to them.

Rohan's narrative indicated that it was possible for both non-hegemonic and hegemonic boys to come together in building social relations where they were able to gain one another's support. This brings to mind McCormack's (2011) study of inclusive masculinity among secondary school boys in the United Kingdom which found that emotional support between boys was a fundamental platform through which they gained assurance and advice from their friends. He further noted that the process of social fluidity allows socialising with a range of learners, and that this is a crucial part of friendship in a space where boys can speak openly about their concerns without being feminised or subordinated. Way's (2019) research on friendships among a racially diverse group of adolescent boys in the United States also demonstrated that boys are keen to share their secrets and express their vulnerabilities; however, she argues that although boys share similar emotional and social capacities to girls, they live in a society which assumes that boys do not have emotional and social skills. The values, encouragement and progressive thinking that Rohan displayed as a 9-year-old boy indicate that young boys can, indeed, understand social relations and find solutions, independently, marking a significant shift away from viewing children as blank slates possessing little, or no, agency.

Notwithstanding Rohan advocating for non-violence, he and his peers were nevertheless victims of verbal teasing:

They make fun of us, they say "Hey there goes the three kind jollies [cheerful ones]", and they laugh but I don't like that. Brayden, Sayush [Rohan's friends] and I, we all

feel very sad. I mean, imagine if they were us, how they would feel, they will feel very sad. But they don't feel it, they laugh and laugh... Some people, they are kind, they are good but they ask their parents or teachers for a reward, but you don't need a reward for kindness.

At times rejecting dominant ideals meant that boys had to endure being subordinated and teased. Characteristics such as being kind and cheerful made them vulnerable to teasing as they are outside the norms of hegemonic masculinity. The teasing and laughter made them feel sad and disappointed because the perpetrators failed to self-reflect and acknowledge the pain inflicted onto others by their hegemonic behaviour. Renold's (2004) ethnographic study on 10–11-year-old primary school boys' construction of gender and sexuality in the United Kingdom recommended the need to challenge traditional macho concepts of masculinities and help boys to develop alternate, softer versions—and my findings support this fully. However, Renold raised concerns that such recommendations pose great challenges due to the subordination that boys would have to endure while going through this process: Non-hegemonic boys fall victim to various derogatory labels, such as losers, wimps, sissies and nerds, which have also been documented in other ethnographic studies on gender and sexuality in young children (Kostas, 2021; Swain, 2006b; Thorne, 1993).

Rohan and his peers remained steadfast in their values and enacted their agency by projecting their masculinity in non-hegemonic ways, choosing peace over violence. Moreover, rather than merely rewarding boys for being kind, Rohan called for violent boys to reflect on their actions, and to place themselves in the position of being subordinated in order to advance change in their lives.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates the pervasiveness of violence in the primary school, showing how boys employed a range of violent practices to construct and affirm their hegemonic masculinity. However, violence was not an inevitable outcome for all boys. Depending on different situations,

many boys negotiated their masculinities by shifting between hegemonic and caring versions. Some sought to denounce violent, hegemonic masculinity entirely.

The findings demonstrated that violent practices included non-verbal taboo hand gestures, swearing, and discriminatory remarks used as means to humiliate others. Hegemonic boys' investment in violent practices and sexual learning—within a variety of spaces—challenged dominant discourses of childhood sexual innocence. For example, spaces within the school such as the toilet walls were a significant platform through which many boys learnt a range of swear words, had the opportunity express their sexuality, disclose heterosexual relationships and convey sexually explicit words which spurred curiosity and sexual learning among themselves and their peers. The internet was another significant platform through which my participant, Keylan gained sexual knowledge. His access to the internet was often unsupervised, and age restrictions unheeded, which pose great risks as misinformation and sexually explicit content was conveyed to underage minors.

In order to forge a masculine status based on strength and emotional resilience, many boys also engaged in physical violence as a critical measure to protect and affirm a macho masculinity. However, while boys endorsed violence against other boys, their relations with girls in the school were complex and ambiguous. Boys experienced forms of verbal and physical violence from girls in their class, yet rather than seeking to exert power through reciprocal violence—as they did with other boys—they sought to maintain non-violent relations with girls. Their resistance to girls' violence was underpinned by prevailing discourses of male power which place great importance on the need to protect girls, thus affording girls a subordinate position, under the guise of respect, regardless of their violent actions against boys. The implication (intended or not) was that while violence against girls was taboo, violence against other boys was permitted. Boys therefore need proper guidance and clear messages regarding not only gender violence, but violence in general, in order to fully engage in transformation towards gentler, more caring forms of masculinity.

My findings also highlighted the multiplicity of masculinities practiced by boys. Non-hegemonic masculine boys were not simply silent victims of violence; instead, some sought to stand up to

the perpetrators in varying ways. Acts of resistance contributed to shifting notions of power which brings to mind Foucault's notion of power as a fluid concept. The violent methods endorsed by boys in response to provocations and bullying indicate that there is a need to encourage boys to develop alternative methods to resolving conflict and to challenge norms that work to suppress and subordinate others— as comes across strongly in Reichert and Keddie's (2019) study on how schools can foster healthy masculinities.

Within the context of hunger and lack of resources, many boys adopted alternate non-hegemonic subject positions as they demonstrated the values of care towards their peers in need. Boys shifted from hegemonic to counter-hegemonic positions in their endeavours to help each other. Despite racial tensions between Indian and black boys—underpinned by the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, as well as contemporary socio-political tensions—boys' demonstrations of values based on care and forgiveness, and their drive to bring about positive change in the lives of others, worked to challenge their own conceptualisations of racial tensions and promote caring friendships between Indian and black boys in the school.

Notions of care were also evident in how some boys sought to embrace peaceful relations, and deter others from hegemonic models of masculinity. They sought to denounce violence by adopting non-violent subject positions, sometimes drawing on the moral or religious influences in their lives. This highlights the possibilities there are for young boys to embark on non-violent projects. Stahl and Keddie (2020) argue that boys are largely positioned as toxic and hegemonic and that this deters them from exploring their alternate, emotional sides. Indeed, a significant move towards non-violence involved understanding the broader issues that some boys faced which made them vulnerable to engaging in and perpetuating violence. Some boys' demonstration of values of peace and humanity indicate that young boys have the agency to construct themselves in responsible ways—and this finding marks the need for a shift away from viewing children as blank slates who are unable to construct meaning in their lives. Moreover, acknowledging the voices of young boys and listening to their solutions to violence is an important step to understanding the factors that make it possible for them to engage in caring, respectful and non-violent relationships. The next chapter examines how young boys construct and negotiate heterosexual masculinity, nuanced by race and class.

## **Chapter Eight: Race, Class and Masculinities: Boys Negotiating Heterosexual Masculinity in the Primary School**

### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter I focused on how primary school boys negotiated hegemonic masculinities that were invariably violent. Yet, although violence was a key mechanism for achieving masculine power, it was not an inevitable outcome, as some boys were able to challenge hegemonic concepts and adopt more caring versions of masculinity. In this chapter I turn my focus to explore how boys constructed heterosexuality. As established in Chapter 2, overlapping layers of identities—race, class, culture, and sexuality—contributed to multiple versions of masculinities. My analysis in this chapter is thus framed by these interrelated concepts, and I show how they are integral to shaping the ways in which Indian and black boys interact, negotiate power relations and navigate racialised and classed subjectivities, all of which impact on how heterosexual masculinities are produced and negotiated. In addition, while several studies on young masculinities have noted that sexuality in the primary school is often avoided in research—largely due to dominant societal perceptions that associate childhood with sexual innocence (see Bhana, 2020; Robinson et al., 2017)—in this chapter I show that boys are active sexual agents who engage in various heterosexual practices, nuanced by race and class, which serve as markers of successful masculinity.

I begin by detailing boys' investment in symbolic practices, body language, branded clothing and the male provider role, and how these are employed as key strategies for gaining power. I demonstrate that race and class are key variables which shape the negotiation of heterosexuality. My findings further foreground how racialised perceptions provided a significant standpoint around which heterosexual violence was either sanctioned or contested, always in complex ways. Thereafter, I examine how boys' subjectivities of masculinities, in particular how being an ideal boy meant conforming to normative displays of heterosexuality. Close proximity to girls subjected some boys to forms of violence characterised by homophobic insults, thus revealing the regulatory mechanisms through which heterosexual masculinity was produced and policed.

## **Race, Class and Embodied Heterosexual Masculine Practices in the Primary School**

In this section I demonstrate how boys constructed their masculinities and performed them through embodied practices as they strove to achieve heterosexual appeal. Race and class featured strongly, particularly in how material wealth contributed to the ways in which some boys advanced their heterosexual status while, for others, a lack of material resources compromised theirs. Assumptions about race were integral to how heterosexual violence played out. Indeed, racial perceptions and stereotypes constituted a significant platform where heterosexual violence was either sanctioned or contested. I discuss these findings under the following sub-themes:

- 1) Achieving a Heterosexual “Cool Masculinity”
- 2) Negotiating Heterosexual Desire in the Nexus of Race and Class Structures
- 3) Negotiating Heterosexualised Violence and Race
- 4) Gifts, Flowers and Chocolates: Boys, Heterosexuality and the Provider Role

### *Achieving a Heterosexual “Cool Masculinity”*

This theme describes how boys participated in embodied practices, a term coined by Swain (2003), in his study of young masculinities in the United Kingdom, to describe the various ways in which the body is used as a powerful tool and as a symbolic resource to establish heterosexual masculine prowess. Most boys in my study drew on resources such as clothing, tattoos, and hairstyles, as well as on physical attributes such as being strong and tough, as ways to construct and perform “cool masculinity”—which was also associated with heterosexual attraction.

Responses such as the following were typical:

Ayaan: [Indian, 8]: Most boys want muscles because they want girls to like them, or maybe they want to become fighters.

Siya: [black, 9]: They want to be strong because some girls will like them.

Lungelo: [black, 9]: She [his girlfriend] always pays attention to me, and because I have muscles and six-packs.

Kanelo: [black, 9]: To have a girlfriend you have to be smart, you can have strength, and a six-pack like a good fighter.

Lebo: [black, 9]: Ma'am it goes like this, when you are handsome, you are handsome, it goes like that. Girls like boys who are handsome.

To these boys, essential heterosexual masculine attributes are bodily strength and a good physical appearance. To them, the ideal norm is based on being tough, strong, and romantically desirable. Embodied physical attributes such as having well-defined abdominal muscles were thus highly prized—indeed, according to Ayaan, Siya, Lungelo, and Kanelo, having such esteemed physical attributes were the best way to attract girls. To these boys, a strong physical body and good looks was the best way of achieving the ultimate goal: relations with girls.

Ulwazi (a 9-year-old, black boy) and Keylan (an Indian boy, also aged 9) also talked about how girls were not interested in boys who failed to embody the desired hegemonic masculine features:

Ulwazi: They don't like ugly boys that are skinny ... [and] looking like a *para* [drug addict]... [or] a criminal street boy [or like] they live in the streets, sweeping the street.

Keylan: They don't want goojjy, goojjy, jelly, jelly! [to be soft]. If you wear nice clothes, you have to look decent. You can't dress up untidily [and] look like a *para*...the *hoonga rats* [drug addicts]. That's why I dress decently and neatly because I don't want to lose my girlfriend.

To Keylan, projecting aesthetic appeal in dressing neatly and looking decent was of paramount importance to maintaining his relationship with his girlfriend. Like Ulwazi, Keylan believed that girls were unimpressed with boys who had physically weak bodies, and were not interested in boys who resembled *paras*—drug addicts or street boys. Boys desired physical bodily strength and honed muscles. Renold (2005) also found that being a “proper” boy involved engaging in and projecting a visibly heterosexual masculine identity: only boys who were seen to be tough, cool, and good looking were romantically desired.

Despite Keylan's and Ulwazi's negative attitudes towards *paras*—by which they meant all the

kinds of puny males who indulged in substance abuse, they nevertheless sought to imitate activities such as smoking in order to construct a “cool” masculinity. For example, during my field observations I noted the following:

Field notes: Date: 15 May 2018 Time: 12:47 Place: Assembly area during recess

While on ground duty I noticed Ulwazi, Kanelo, Shiven, and Keylan exiting via the South gate which was open due to the dismissal of the Grades 1 and 2 learners. I alerted the security guard to immediately send the boys back into the school as I had identified them as Grade 3 learners. When they arrived, I noticed several packets of sherbet [a sweet effervescent powder] in their hands, which they purchased from the vendor [street seller], located outside the school gate. After alerting them about the dangers of leaving the school premises and the importance of following the school rules, I questioned them as to why so many packets of sherbet were purchased. While some of them tried to hide behind each other, to avoid my question, Shiven explained that it was purchased not for the purpose of consumption but rather to imitate the act of smoking [to engage in pretend smoking]. He went on to explain that they drew in the powder with a little straw and then blew the powder out of the straw, which exited in a burst of powdery smoke. This created the impression of smoking. Later that day I learnt that a Grade 6 teacher had confiscated several packets of sherbet for the same reason.

During their individual interviews, I engaged the boys in discussions about this practice.

Vihaan (an Indian boy, aged 8) explained the following:

Researcher: Why did Shiven purchase so many packets of sherbet?

Vihaan: Sippy sherbet [the name of the brand], he thinks it is like drugs. Ya, he acts like he's on drugs, he pulls it and he opens his mouth for the smoke [dust] to come out. Keylan also bought that thing and smoked it on me, on my face, and then I had to go wash my face. I came back and then he was smoking it on the girls, to show off, I think, because Keylan acts like a big professor and then he comes and he says

“Hey! I’m a drug addict!” and he’s smoking. When I say I’m going to tell teacher, he hits me with his lunch bag. Because he was the first one to do that, when he saw another person doing it, then he did it and he taught the other boys. He told me a Grade 6 boy or something [showed him]...One day he was going to the vendors and Keylan thought he could lie and say that he is a prefect and then say “I left my prefect badge at home,” so he does that. In Grade 2 he brought R30 [US\$2]; to school. He bought 30 sherbets and then the teacher confiscated them. He bought the one with the straw. The one with the toy is 50 cents.

Vihaan explained that the effervescent powder was an important resource because, to the young boys, it imitated smoking. Keylan showed off his so called “smoking skills” by emitting the powdery dust in girls’ faces, copying what he had seen older boys doing. Emulating the actions of older boys was another way of earning status and power within the peer group.

Vihaan also explained how purchasing the powder involved the boys breaking school rules by leaving the school premises. While the school might be seen as site of bio-power—in Foucault’s (1978) sense, in that he saw institutionalised practices involving power over the movements and gestures of individuals as contributing to docile bodies—the boys in my study broke school rules and challenged the power that schools have over learners by venturing outside the school gates and thus compromised their safety and risked getting into trouble.

It is important to note the contradiction between Keylan’s and Vihaan’s accounts, in that Keylan spoke about how he did not want to look like a drug addict (a *para* or *hoonga* rat), while Vihaan claimed that Keylan often tried to pass himself off as a drug addict by conspicuously engaging in smoking-related behaviour (albeit only sherbet). Keylan did not want to adopt the physical image of a weak, sick addict; rather, he sought a hegemonic masculine image of which imitating the act of smoking was, from his perspective, an integral part of establishing his masculinity. Keylan also perpetuated violence in an attempt to achieve hegemonic masculinity, subjecting Vihaan to physical violence because he threatened to report Keylan’s behaviour to the teacher. What is also noteworthy is that the boys chose to purchase the sherbet that came with the straw—because they desired the smoke effect—instead of opting for the cheaper one which came with a toy. In

constructing and performing masculinity, these 8–9-year-old boys thus moved away from childhood concepts such as desiring toys and, instead, participated in smoking-related behaviours associated with hegemonic masculinity.

Zee, a 9-year-old black boy, described how boys also used other resources in order to create the desired affect of smoking:

Sometimes they are taking the sherbet out from the sherbet bag and they put [in] the chalk [chalk dust from the chalkboard] and take the straw and smoke it. They can even take it out [exhale] through their nose. Yes, first of all they pull it out and then they blow it together as a gang. I don't know what they are trying to prove, that they are good in this? I think when they grow up they will do drugs.

Zee's account of boys using chalk to emulate smoke reminded me of an occasion when a Grade 4 learner reported to his teacher in the staffroom that the boys in his class were "smoking chalk". This made no sense to us in the staffroom until after my interview with Zee, who explained that the boys' intention was largely to prove, within the peer group, that they were competent in the practice of blowing out chalk. In achieving a "cool masculinity", it should be noted, these boys were compromising their health and well-being: Lin et al's. (2015) research on the effects of chalk use on air quality in Taiwanese classrooms found that the calcium sulphate and carbonate in chalk dust can cause irritation to the eyes, skin, lungs, and respiratory tract, and can lead to severe health problems over time.

Other boys in my study also associated the imitation of smoking-related behaviour with being "cool" and attracting girls. For example, when asked why boys desired to emulate the act of smoking, responses such as the following were common:

Siya: [black, 9]: Maybe that's for acting cool, too, because when they take out the smoke [sherbet dust] it's for acting cool, too, because they don't really like it, they just smoke it.

Rishay: [Indian, 8]: [They do it] to act like they [are] smoking because some boys want to show girls that they can smoke.

Kanelo: It's the vape [electronic cigarette]. And maybe if you are at a party and you are smoking vape, you see a lot of girls will come to you, many girls—even if you [are] just alone sitting there.

Keylan: Even the boys from my house smoke; they put the grass [cannabis], put [it] in the paper, burn and smoke it. The vape is very expensive.

Ulwazi: They think it's fun. They want the flavour because they have money and they put weed [cannabis] sometimes. It shows you have money. Keylan said he smokes. Every time he is taking the pages [from his notebook], lighting the papers and smoking [to imitate smoking].

Emulating smoking was clearly a key resource in constructing a cool hegemonic version of masculinity. It therefore became an embodied practice, which boys such as Siya and Rishay associated with appearing cool and attracting girls. While studies exploring children's perceptions of gender norms and ideologies in the context of smoking behaviours are limited, Rugkåsa et al.'s. (2003) findings regarding 10–11-year-old children's perceptions of smoking behaviours in Northern Ireland revealed that boys often practiced smoking as a way of constructing a cool and glamorous masculinity which gave them a sense of maturity and enhanced self-esteem. My participants' use of substances such as sherbet and chalk dust to emulate smoking-related behaviour and construct cool masculinities resonates deeply with the conventional notions of masculinities depicted in Rugkåsa et al.'s study. For some boys, imitating smoking can also be a way of compensating for certain flaws they perceive in their masculinity and, for others, a way of enhancing status within the peer group (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003).

Keylan, Ulwazi, and Kanelo mentioned vaping—using electronic (battery-powered) cigarettes also known as E-cigarettes—as another resource which boys used to construct their desired masculinity. Ulwazi and Keylan mentioned that vape was expensive and used only by those who were economically well off. It was therefore a symbol denoting class and economic status. Similar perceptions were evident in Hess et al.'s (2017) study on the perceptions of E-cigarettes

among youth in California, in which participants described how vape was common among affluent high-income people, and an important marker of social identity and appearing cool and trendy. Kanelo revealed that, as with the smoking-related behaviour discussed above, vaping also attracted the attention of girls and was therefore sought after as another means of achieving hegemonic heterosexual masculinity.

Although the boys spoke about their insights regarding these smoking-related practices, they did not talk about their own involvement in them—even though I had caught Ulwazi, Kanelo, and Keylan leaving the school premises to purchase sherbet powder. Instead, their responses were about their observations and perceptions of other boys' actions. Vihaan and Zee went further, highlighting their rejection of smoking-related practices:

Researcher: Do you think little boys want to smoke?

Vihaan: I think so. I don't want to do that, I don't copy because I don't want to be smoking when I'm small, and whenever I buy sherbet I do take [consume] it, I do eat it but I don't smoke it.

Zee: I won't do it because my father will kill me.

Vihaan and Zee thus indicated that they sought an alternative version of masculinity which involved distancing themselves from popular practices such as these. Vihaan showed a sense of agency, evident in his response “I don't want to do that, I don't copy”. It therefore became evident that not all boys engage in—or aspire to—all aspects of hegemonic masculinity: they have the agency to position their masculinity in alternative, non-hegemonic ways. This also implies that practices which some boys consider to be cool may not necessarily be considered as cool by others. Boys were therefore able to exercise personal agency and construct alternative subjectivities—although these were also shaped by external forces, such as parental authority, as Zee described so eloquently. As a result not all boys sought to act cool through the practice of smoking-related behaviours as some boys contested such acts due to their personal agency and others due to familial values or parental control.

In the next section I present findings which demonstrate how boys, in their pursuit of heterosexual attraction, resisted the school’s formal dress code in order to fashion a cool look by wearing expensive, branded clothing.

*Negotiating Heterosexual Desire in the Nexus of Race and Class Structures*

In their pursuit of being attractive to girls, boys also resisted the school’s formal dress code in order to fashion a cool look by wearing expensive, branded clothing. In Swain’s (2002) study on how young children fashion their identity through clothing, he argued that strict school uniform regulations can restrict boys from displaying their masculinity. This means that when uniforms are enforced, a space opens up within which wearing fashionable branded clothing becomes a key resource to achieving peer status and to resist school regulations. My findings support Swain’s: I observed that in their pursuit of a desirable “cool” masculinity, most of my study participants invested heavily in branded clothing, fancy trainers, and hairstyles which went against the school’s formal dress code.

During my field observations I tabulated the following with regard to the clothing and footwear that boys invested in:

**Table 9:** The school’s formal dress code versus the dress code adopted by some 8–9-year-old boys

Schools Formal Uniform and Dress Code of Conduct for Boys	Clothing Sometimes Worn by the Boys at School
white formal shirt	branded/coloured t-shirt
grey formal pants	track pants
black school shoes	Takkies [trainers] with LED (Light Emitting Diodes)
tie (optional)	some with tie, some without
short haircut (no hair gel allowed)	gelled hair, hair lines, hair flicks

plain black/white shorts and t-shirt (Physical Education only)	branded shorts and t-shirts
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The interview sessions allowed me to form a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the boys' strong investment in fancy clothing, hairstyles, and footwear as important resources for the expression of masculinity. Many boys had shaved off hair lines which they described in the interviews as being imitative of football players, explaining to me that this was a "cool look". This finding resonates with a South African study by Shefer et al., (2018) in which the authors observed that fancy clothes, accessories, and a stylised body were essential components through which masculine identities were constructed and performed. I, too, found that achieving a "cool" masculinity through material resources and a stylised body was, for my participants, an integral part of the process of procuring heterosexual relationships.

While both black and Indian boys contested school rules by wearing *takkies* (trainers), the black boys raised concerns in the focus group discussion that their less elaborate *takkies* failed to gain the desired level of heterosexual appeal when compared to those worn by the Indian boys, whom, they said, were able to achieve heterosexual power because of their superior access to material wealth:

Lebo: Sometimes they [Indian boys] wear cool *takkies* to school. Some of them dress nice and they will steal your girl. Girls like them because sometimes black girls say "I don't want to play with you anymore, the Indian boys are so beautiful". They think that they are beautiful. The Indian boys are so rich that's why the girls they like them.

Researcher: You all wear *takkies* as well?

Ulwazi: Yes, but they [Indian boys] wear *takkies* that are always colourful, you step [and] they are colourful [because of LED lights].

It was not only clothing that elevated Indian boys' popularity. According to Lebo, black girls also considered them to be physically more attractive than black boys. The Indian boys' particular clothes and shoes represented heterosexual power and appeal that they used to impress

girls, and which placed black boys at a disadvantage. Several of my black participants went further, arguing that material wealth was a kind of heterosexual skill:

Kanelo: The Indian boys have the girls. Maybe they have a skill. The world is turning on us, ma'am. It's betraying us. The world doesn't want us to get girlfriends.

Researcher: Do you think that if you were Indian, you would get girlfriends?

Kanelo: Obvious[ly] ma'am, just like this! [Clicks his finger]. That skill that they have, money, ay, ay, too much money ma'am, black people are poor!

Ulwazi: They bring like R100, R400 [US\$7–27], we are like empty.

Kanelo and Ulwazi's lack of certain material resources had a great impact on their perceptions of being able to achieve heterosexual appeal. Kanelo's words: "black people are poor" invokes the stereotype of black poverty, and the fact that he associated having money with having the skill to attract girls indicates his belief in the imperative of power embedded in class and wealth in the advancement of heterosexuality. He also mentioned that the world was "betraying" them because of these material and economic inequalities, and he invoked the racial stereotypes, inherited from apartheid, that served to subordinate certain groups of people—and continue to do so decades into South Africa's democratic regime. Kanelo also stressed his belief that if he were Indian he would definitely get a girlfriend since Indian people have "too much money". Kanelo therefore viewed race as a fixed essence that defines individuals and places them in particular, rigid boxes. This is clearly problematic on many levels—and not least because in the school there were some Indian boys who hailed from disadvantaged backgrounds and were, for example, part of the school's feeding scheme<sup>18</sup>, and some black boys who could afford LED *takkies* and branded clothing, as I noted during my field observations.

Kanelo and Ulwazi therefore had to navigate their heterosexual masculinity amid socioeconomic conditions which they understood as rendering them—and, collectively, their race—marginalised

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<sup>18</sup> The National School Feeding Scheme was established in 1994 by former President Mr Nelson Mandela to combat hunger faced by poor and marginalised communities (Mayeza & Bhana, 2020). Ranked as Quintile 5, the school under study is not part of the National Feeding Scheme. However, the school embarked on its own initiative to provide nutrition to learners who were identified as indigent. There were a total of 20 learners who were provided with lunch from feeding scheme at the time of this study.

and disadvantaged. The following section demonstrates how the intersections of race, sexuality, and violence constituted a significant standpoint between Indian and black boys around which heterosexual violence was at times sanctioned and at other times contested.

### *Negotiating Heterosexualised Violence and Race*

In order to defend their heterosexual relations, many participants engaged in physical violence with other boys whom they perceived as physical threats. However, their perceptions were highly racialised in that black boys perceived Indian boys as weak. Furthermore, some endorsed violence against them, while others resisted such violence. Indian boys, on the other hand, constructed black boys as inherently strong and chose to resist using violence against them. Zee noted the following in his individual interview:

Researcher: Have you been in a fight?

Zee: My girlfriend is Indian ma'am. Her ex [is Indian]. One day he complained to his friends and he came with his gangs to try and hit me. I called my gang. I'll tell them don't talk to her. Sometimes, her ex says I must leave her alone, then I fight with him, I punch him and say I won't do that ever!

Researcher: Are you afraid of black boys?

Zee: Yes, because black boys are strong and Indian boys are weak. I always see black boys fighting and they always win.

It was evident that Zee held a fixed notion of Indian boys as inherently weak and black boys as inherently strong. Drawing on such racialised assumptions, he asserted his power by standing up to the Indian boys through the use of physical violence in order to protect his heterosexual relationship. He endorsed violence against Indian boys by positioning them as weaker, while from his observations of black boys always winning a fight, he constructed them as stronger. Helman and Ratele (2016) argue, in their study on the construction of gender in families in South Africa, that violence is often constructed as normative among black men. Indeed, social, cultural, and economic factors shape the practice of violence in unequal ways in the South African context. However, assumptions that black males are inherently violent and strong not only

contributes to facile and damaging stereotypes but also serves to mask how violence exists in all levels of all societies. While Zee may see strength as inherent to black boys, his particular experiences have not yet exposed him to the possibility that there might be strong Indian boys and also weak black boys.

In my own observations I noted that black boys were most often chosen to participate in the sporting activities that required physical strength, such as tug-of-war. After a victory in tug-of-war, I observed that boys raised their t-shirts above their heads to show off their bodies. Ayaan explained in a focus group that some boys, including Lebo, raised their shirts to show off their “six-packs”—in other words, in order to boast about having strong abdominal muscles. Ayaan concluded “I think they are trying to make us frightened”. Since Ayaan did not have a particularly honed, muscular body, he felt that black boys showed off their bodies in order to scare those who did not have a six-pack as they did. This further reinforced the notion of muscular strength as belonging specifically to black males while also highlighting how the body was used in ways to perpetuate unequal power relations.

However, not all black boys endorsed violence against Indian boys:

Researcher: How do you feel when the Indian boys steal your girlfriend?

Ulwazi: I feel sad. We don't sleep at night.

Kanelo: And what's more is the stress.

Researcher: And if a black boy steals your girlfriend?

Kanelo: Okay, it's fine if they speak to her, it's fine, but I won't allow them to, like, hug her. We can argue very much. Like, seriously, I feel like someone stabs me. I just feel angry, I just feel like punching him. . . . And if you find that boy, you feel like hitting him coz [because] they took your own girlfriend. When it's a black boy I feel angry coz it's like he is betraying us because we are both in the same race. [With the Indian boy] I don't want to cause a fight because I will get into trouble but the black boy, I know like it doesn't matter with him.

Lebo: Some of the Indian boys, they cannot fight. That's why we don't fight—coz we are going to hurt them.

The importance of maintaining heterosexual relations was particularly evident in Ulwazi's and Kanelo's responses, especially regarding the stress they experienced over fearing the loss of their girlfriends. Ulwazi, Kanelo, and Lebo assumed Indian boys were unable to fight, and so did not view them as physical threats. However, although Zee sought to enact hegemonic masculinity by engaging in physical fights with Indian boys, other black boys sought to resist using violence against them precisely because they believed that the Indian boys could not fight, and feared hurting them. In other words, although nearly all the black boys I worked with positioned Indian boys as not being a physical threat, not all black boys endorsed violence against them.

There was thus a paradox evident in black boys' perceptions of Indian boys: on one hand they saw them as the holders of heterosexual power because they perceived them as having more money and thus the resources to wear more expensive clothing (see page 183), but on the other hand their lack of physical prowess rendered them powerless. As my fieldwork progressed paradoxes such as this increasingly highlighted how power is not fixed and cannot be ascribed to a particular race or class.

Keylan, in an individual interview, also indicated how he mediated violence along racial lines:

Researcher: Did you fight with an Indian boy for a girlfriend?

Keylan: I did, with an Indian boy, yes. It was last year, the boy was getting on my nerves, he was only saying that I'm stealing your girlfriend and then one day I saw both of them holding hands and I went and I hit that boy and he started crying.

Researcher: What if you saw her with a black boy?

Keylan: I wouldn't have hit, I wouldn't care . . . if it's a black boy that steals my girlfriend, I won't hit them, but if it's an Indian boy, I will make a fight with him. Even if I get in a fight with an Indian boy it doesn't really matter to me but if I get into a fight with a black boy then it matters . . . because they can fight, I'm scared.

This excerpt sheds light on how Keylan mediated violence along racial lines. Highly evident is his perception that Indian and black relations are shaped by varying degrees of domination and subordination, and that racial encounters at school are governed by this. It is important, here, to again stress how the legacy of apartheid legislation continues to permeate race relations in South

Africa (see Chapter 2). Indeed, the political, historical, and socioeconomic conditions that pervaded Keylan's life constituted a significant force which was pivotal in how he negotiated the use of violence: race and class were key dimensions through which heterosexuality was positioned and heterosexual violence was played out.

The findings further revealed the extent to which socioeconomic class advanced heterosexual success through the male provider role discussed under the following theme.

*“Gifts, Flowers and Chocolates”: Boys, Heterosexuality and the Provider Role*

Displaying financial strength and having monetary resources featured as key aspects in participants' (perceptions of) the achievement and sustainment of heterosexual relationships. Conforming to the orthodox role of provider was a major social pressure that black and Indian boys alike experienced in constructing their heterosexual masculinities:

Kanelo: They [girls] want to use us . . . like gifts, chocolates. Ma'am, you know, this one time I didn't have money and she [his girlfriend] needed it and I didn't have money and she just said “It's over; I can't be with you anymore”. The day after, she went to the Indian boy and I saw them holding hands. I was heartbroken. I cried the whole night. They want the *moola!* [cash], I realised that what can I do? He has cash, he has everything. It's over!

Ulwazi: If you don't have money, they say they don't want you, but if you have money, they say they want you. When the money is finished, they leave. They want chocolates, they want money, they want that flowers. Then they don't want flowers, they want you to buy slabs of chocolates. If you don't take care of your girlfriend then they are going to break up with you and go to the Indian boy and the Indian boy gives her more money.

From observations throughout my fieldwork it became evident that boys took it upon themselves to act as providers both in the initiation stage and advancement of their relationships with girls. For example, girlfriends—or prospective girlfriends—were given flowers and chocolates on

special occasions, such as Valentine's Day and birthdays. However, during the individual interview discussions, several participants talked about the complexities involved in negotiating a provider role that could accommodate girls' demands and socioeconomic factors and material resources featured strongly as essential elements that boys believed were necessary to sustain heterosexual relations—as is evident from the excerpts from Kanelo and Ulwazi's interviews. Being unable to provide was particularly frustrating for the boys, especially when they were dumped and rejected for failing to do so, and their lack of economic resources compromised their hegemonic masculinity status which they strived so hard to achieve. Ulwazi also raised concerns about the complex ways he felt he had to behave in order to maintain his relationship, noting that girls' desires were often inconsistent, going, for example, from wanting flowers to not wanting flowers and then demanding chocolates. From his interview it was evident that although he tried hard to provide for his girlfriend, he felt frustrated and pressurised to maintain the role of a provider. Morojele (2011) asserts that masculinity discourses position boys as natural providers hence without the financial power to support and provide in heterosexual relations, boys often face shame, distress and ridicule.

Kanelo and Ulwazi both believed that Indian boys' masculinities were exalted above less solvent boys: those who could provide financially achieved a higher social ranking and could more easily attract and keep girlfriends; those who were unable to provide sufficiently failed to gain a space in the dominant masculine hierarchy. In other words, the construction and performance of masculinities was associated with fixed notions of boys as natural providers—an ideology held by both boys and girls. Girls used their agency to reject a boy for not being able to provide—incidentally highlighting another way in which girls upset socially constructed notions of femininity as being passive and docile. Indeed, given their active agency in rejecting boys, girls played a significant role in regulating and shaping how masculinities were constructed.

However, while black boys held the notion that Indian boys were desired because they were wealthier, Keylan felt that girls would reject any boy who was unable to provide, and he made no connection to race:

Money this, money that, *ka-ching* [sound like a cash register]! I broke up three or four times because of money; they [girls] just use you for the money, when the money is finished, they go...They will leave you for any boy who has money. Girls only think about the money. Before I should bring lots of sweets, Jaide [a girl in his class] should ask me, I should give them about two packets of sweets, and then, bye bye [they leave].

Boys such as Keylan, Kanelo and Ulwazi created their own subjectivities of heterosexuality based on their individual experiences and specific social context. While some black boys perceived that girls desired Indian boys because they had more money, Keylan believed that girls would reject any boy who was unable to provide. Race and class featured strongly, showing that masculinities and heterosexual competition (as well as violence) were negotiated in racialised and classed terms.

This section of the chapter has outlined the factors which boys felt were fundamental to achieving a desired “cool” masculinity. Race and class featured strongly, showing that masculinities and heterosexual competition (as well as violence) were negotiated in racialised terms. Next, I examine how dominant notions of sexuality reflected perceptions of a compulsory heterosexuality, mediated by both Indian and black boys as an important component to the construction and performance of masculinities.

### **Policing Heterosexual Masculinity**

The participants in my study understood boyhood and heterosexuality as inherently constructed, and regulated the behaviour of non-conforming masculine identities through homophobic and discriminatory attitudes. I have divided this analysis into two broad themes: 1) Fear of the Feminine: Disparaging “Gay”, Upholding Heterosexuality and 2) Boy’s Perceptions of and Responses to Non-conforming Identities.

#### *Fear of the Feminine: Disparaging “Gay”, Upholding Heterosexuality*

While research conducted in secondary schools in South Africa documents anti-gay behaviour in boys’ peer groups (Msibi, 2012; 2018), primary school studies also provided evidence on how

even young children draw on the term “gay” with the intention to verbally target those who fail to conform to hegemonic masculine practices (Mayeza & Bhana, 2020; Mayeza, 2018). In order to affirm their heterosexual masculine positions, I found that both my black and Indian fieldwork participants shared similar anxieties about associating closely with girls in non-romantic ways because of the fear of being called “gay”:

Researcher: Are you friends with girls?

Keylan: Boys don’t want to be friends with girls because people call you names. They call you gay.

Shreyan [Indian, 9]: No, like [if] a boy just goes up to a girl and says “Let’s play,” other boys will just start laughing at him. They will think that he doesn’t want to play with boys because he is like a girl; they will start laughing at him.

Kanelo: To talk like girls, play with girl toys, playing and taking a tea cup, a small tea cup and sipping. Ay, if I did that they will say “Hey you playing with girls, hey you [*isi*]tabane! [gay]”.

These responses demonstrate boys’ fears regarding the risk of being labelled “gay” for playing with girls in a platonic way. According to Msibi’s (2012) study of homophobic responses to queer youth in South Africa, language is a powerful tool through which discrimination is perpetrated in schools. Msibi noted how derogatory IsiZulu words like *isitabane* and Afrikaans words like *moffie* (gay) were used to refer to those who were perceived to be unmanly. Words such as “*isitabane*” and “gay” were also raised by my participants in relation to their fears of being teased should they engage closely with girls and behaviour usually associated with femininity. Because of this fear, my participants sought to distance themselves from any such behaviour, and avoided non-sexualised friendships with girls which might place them in a subordinate position.

Displaying emotions of vulnerability was also considered feminine, as Ayaan revealed in his individual interview:

Researcher: Do the other boys see you cry?

Ayaan: No, they will laugh at me and make me cry more. I feel okay, but when I go home, I feel embarrassed. I feel like I just want to go home and cry. At home I'm weak. They will tease me because then they will think that I'm not strong enough to handle it and then they will think that they won and they'll carry on doing it [teasing]. But when they do it, it's hurting. Sometimes I just wish that when they do it I can just ignore it, but I can't.

Researcher: Did you ever cry at school?

Ayaan: Yes, in the toilets, and I locked the door so that no one can look, no one can see anything.

Ayaan feared that expressing his emotions through crying would undermine his masculine status. His home, however, was a safe space where he could express his emotions without compromising his masculinity. This indicates the fluid and dynamic nature of masculinities: at home Ayaan could express a gentle, emotional version of masculinity, while at school he sought to conceal his emotions by acting tough in the presence of other boys. This finding resonates with Kostas (2021) study on children's negotiation of gender in the United Kingdom where he described how overt displays of emotions were seen as a deviation and transgression from dominant notions of masculinity—and diminished masculine power.

Other boys in my study spoke about how showing emotions such as crying would also undermine their ability to attract girls. According to Keylan:

I never, ever cried in Grade 1. I never, ever cried in Grade 2. I never, ever cried in Grade 3—because, once a girl sees you cry, it's your biggest weakness you can show a girl. It's like—to cry, it's your biggest weakness.

Crying in the presence of girls would destroy the carefully nurtured image of a strong, tough masculinity. For Keylan, concealing his emotions in the presence of girls was essential in order to avoid compromising his heterosexual status—and from as early as Grade 1, too, which highlights how protecting his heterosexual masculinity was of central importance to him from a very young age.

In my fieldwork observations I consistently noted that heterosexuality, violence, male power, and the subordination of some boys perceived as being feminine featured strongly in the daily interactions between boys—and boys who were seen to be gentle and fragile were labelled as “gay”. For example, an extract from my field notebook illustrates that boys passed comments such as “You kick like a girl” when they failed to display signs of physical sporting prowess during football practice, and boys who chose to read stereotypical feminine books such as fairytales which involved princesses and books about baking and cooking were often teased as being “gay” or “girly”. Renold (2005) argued that sexuality underpins most of young children’s everyday social interactions, and it was evident from my fieldwork that the body in sport and the mind in class also shaped the manner through which boys’ social interactions occurred.

Zee and Ayaan both revealed, in individual interview sessions, how their peers sought to regulate their masculinity according to hetero-normativity:

Zee: I don’t play with girls because when my friends see me playing with girls then they call me words like *stabane*. My friends, if someone complains, they say “How! Come on man, stop being a girl, be a man and grow up”. My friend Kaide, he complains to the teacher a lot, like a girl.

Ayaan: My friends say that I’m a girl because I play with girls and, most of the time, I play with girls’ stuff. They say “You are a girl!” and sometimes they say I’m an idiot.

Boys were faced with the pressures of living up to ideal notions of boyhood—as is evident in Zee’s account of how his peers regulated his masculinity, commanding him to grow up and be a man. His friends considered reactions such as complaining to the teacher to be childish. Zee’s friends’ commands to “grow up” suggested that moving away from behaviours considered as childish and behaviours which they associated with femininity was of central importance to boys: they sought to achieve maturity in the construction of their masculinities. In addition, Ayaan’s closeness to the girls at school placed his masculinity in question. Boys sought to police his behaviour through verbal teasing. This is because constructing dominant versions of

masculinities, as other studies have found, involves a constant negotiation and policing of heterosexual boundaries (see Mayeza, 2018; Morison et al., 2021).

Ayaan's peers also encouraged and helped him to declare his interest and secure a girlfriend:

Ayaan: When I was making a Valentines card my friends were questioning me to tell her [the girl he liked] that I like her, and forced me, and then when I walked back she said she's also going to make a card, so I heard that. She only made a card for me and she gave me a rose.

Researcher: Did the others see that?

Ayaan: Yes, they clapped [laughs]. They said "well done, way to impress a girl!"

Researcher: Do you get teased for liking her?

Ayaan: No, most of them helped me to make a card for her.

Ayaan's experiences point to the contradictory and complex ways in which boys' policed heterosexuality. While Ayaan noted how some boys used verbal teasing in their attempt to regulate his non-conforming behaviour, they also shifted to praise and applause when Ayaan engaged in heterosexual practices. In this way Ayaan, who had previously been subordinated for associating too closely with feminine concepts, transitioned to a dominant masculine position because of his success in securing the (sexualised) attention of a girl.

My fieldwork also found that not all boys were passive recipients of verbal insults directed at what their peers assumed to be feminine behaviour. While most boys were concerned with constructing a masculine image by disparaging femininity, Vihaan challenged Keylan for questioning his masculinity in a focus group discussion:

Keylan: You are a boy; you must act like a boy. Mustn't act like a girl. You are a man; you must act like a man.

Vihaan: Then why do you tease me [that I am] a girl?

Keylan: Because you act like one. He is, like, so soft, ma'am.

Vihaan: That doesn't mean that I am a girl. I am a human being, I'm a boy!

It is clear from this excerpt that Keylan saw Vihaan's behaviour as feminine and gender transgressing, and, on this basis, he sought to police Vihaan's masculinity by advising him to act like a man. The use of the word "man" suggests a mature construct of masculinity, thus indicating Keylan's desire to move away from feminine behaviours which he considered to be unmanly. In comparison to Ayaan, who felt subordinated due to the teasing he experienced for associating closely with girls, Vihaan challenged Keylan's verbal insults by asserting his identity as a boy. While studies have noted the subordination and vulnerability that boys experience for behaving in ways that are not compliant with normative hegemonic projections (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Morison et al., 2021; Swain, 2006a), Vihaan utilised agency in defending his identity—and did so with great confidence—showing that he was not passive when his masculinity was challenged. As noted in Chapter 3, multiple masculinities do exist, and boys such as Vihaan, who embraced softer versions, were able to challenge dominant notions of masculinities.

#### *Boy's Perceptions of and Responses to Non-conforming Identities*

As I have established, heterosexual masculinity is based on a sociocultural ideology that masculinity and femininity imply separate, distinct, and oppositional sets of behaviours and social roles. Based on this ideology, schools, and their learners, reinforce gender binary understandings which place immense pressure on children to conform to hetero-normative standards. The findings below highlight some of the reasons why some boys sought to police the boundaries of heterosexual masculinity, and their responses to non-conforming identities:

Researcher: How do you feel about boys who play with girls?

Lungelo: I feel like crying because they only make themselves [*isi*] *tabane* [gay], then sometimes we call them *stabane* because they [are] acting like girls. I don't know why they [are] acting like girls. I don't like when they come to me, I just ignore them. When they talk to me, I just ignore because I don't like to speak to them. I hit them because they only say "ooh ooh ooh!" they only talk [like girls] when you call them.

Lungelo here affirms his disapproval of boys who displayed feminine characteristics. He repudiated these boys in exclusionary ways while also enforcing physical violence onto them based on their feminine characteristics. According to Samudzi and Mannell (2015) despite the constitutional protection of all genders and sexual orientation in South Africa, social and masculine norms continue to perpetuate violence against non-conforming identities. This was evident in Lungelo's response where he used physical violence to articulate his disapproval of boys who behaved like girls. His attitude was characteristic of homophobia which, according to Epstein (1997), is a form of violence fundamental to policing the behaviour of non-conforming boys while also locating non-normative masculinities at the bottom of the hierarchy.

In their individual interviews, participants were engaged in a conversation about whether they would be friends with boys who played with girls at school. Following further probing they said:

Researcher: Would you be friends with boys who play with girls?

Keylan: No. It's like they rub all their influences [on]to you. . . . People will call you gay!

Kanelo: It's complicated. I don't get them, and it's, like, why are you gay? It's, like, how is this possible, how is this boy—if he's not attracted to you, how would you get close to him if he's not attracted to you? That's what I mean. Hey it's complicated. If my brother is gay, I'm feeling disappointed because if people know that he is gay then people will say to me "Hey! there's that *stabane*, hey there's that *stabane* over there".

Lungelo: It is wrong because a boy can't get a child because only girls can do it. That doesn't make any sense because boys must love girls.

Keylan held the assumption that associating closely with non-conforming identities would influence him to be "gay", and he feared that he would also be labelled as "gay". Kanelo, too, raised concerns that if his brother were to be "gay" then, by association, he too would be perceived as "gay". These findings correspond with Msibi's (2012) study which notes how learners feared associating closely with queer learners because of the risk of being perceived as "gay". He claimed that heterosexuality is maintained through the notion of fear—the fear of

being contaminated by those who are queer, the fear that Keylan and Kanelo voiced. Consequently, it is possible that the negative connotations of viewing homosexuality as a contagion fuel the isolation of non-conforming identities. Kanelo and Lungelo perceived that to be a *real* boy, sex, sexuality, and gender had to be firmly aligned or else their masculinity did not make any sense. Msibi (2012) argued that when these concepts become disentangled masculinity was questioned. In other words, most boys expect all boys to perform their masculinities within accepted understandings—and any deviation works to threaten hetero-normativity. Non-conforming identities were considered aberrant—and abhorrent, as Lungelo and Kanelo indicated.

While various heterosexual practices defined boys' masculinities, as demonstrated earlier in this chapter, close proximity to girls and associating with concepts of femininity subjected boys to homophobic teasing, thus highlighting the complex and sometimes contradictory ways through which heterosexual masculinity was policed. However, as Ayaan demonstrated, boys who had previously been subordinated for associating closely—but platonically—with girls were able to shift from a subordinate position to a position of heterosexual dominance through securing successful sexualised relations with a girl. Again, it was evident that power and dominance are fluid and forever shifting.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I demonstrated the diverse ways in which a group of Indian and black primary school boys constructed their heterosexual masculinities amid the influence of specific racial, political, economic, historical, and cultural conditionings. According to Frosh et al. (2002), the overlapping layers of identities such as race, class, culture, and sexuality contributes to multiple versions of masculinities. The data have shown how these variables intersected to shape Indian and black boys' social interactions, their negotiation of power and their racialised and classed subjectivities which constituted a significant force in boys' negotiation of heterosexual competition and violence in diverse ways.

I demonstrated how most boys sought to define their masculinity in a range of ways, including drawing on symbolic practices, body language, and branded clothing which ascribed kudos and was employed as a key strategy for gaining heterosexual power. In defiance of the school's formal dress code, boys created their own opportunities to express their identities through how they dressed, in ways that were constituent towards the construction of their masculinities and that were key in achieving heterosexual status.

Race- and class-related tensions featured strongly in the relations between Indian and black boys as they negotiated their heterosexuality. The majority of my black participants felt that Indian boys achieved heterosexual power through having material wealth, and in contrast, they had to navigate their sexuality in the face of material deprivation, which they considered to be disadvantageous. However, this sense of powerlessness was tempered by their sense of superior physical strength. There was therefore a paradox evident in black boys' perceptions of Indian boys: on one hand they saw them as the holders of material wealth and heterosexual power but on the other hand their lack of physical prowess rendered them powerless. Hence, power was not fixed; nor was it contingent on race or class. Socioeconomic status was seen as a key element to achieving heterosexual relations—those who could provide financially gained a higher social ranking, while those who could not failed to gain space in the dominant masculine hierarchy. It was clear that both Indian and black boys' racialised subjectivities were largely contextually produced—and that they constituted a significant lens through which heterosexual violence was either sanctioned or contested.

While I paid particular attention to the social processes through which heterosexual practices were negotiated, my findings also revealed how Indian and black boys adopted similar heterosexual subjectivities that transgressions—or failing to live up to the heterosexual masculine norm—was regarded as aberrant. Both Indian and black boys demonstrated homophobic attitudes in their endeavours to police non-conforming masculine behaviours. However, some boys exercised their personal agency to challenge hegemonic masculinity. Young boys were therefore key sexual agents responsible for shaping the way heterosexual masculinities were constructed, performed and challenged.

According to Frosh et al. (2002), the process through which racialisation occurs, whereby particular discourses are attached to “blackness”, “whiteness”, or “Asianess”, cannot but be

embroiled in the way masculinities are experienced. There is a need for Indian and black boys to transcend racial divides and stereotypes and stretch against the enduring legacies of apartheid by advancing towards a shared solidarity. Providing a platform for boys to reflect on and engage with issues of class, race, and gender will mitigate the prevalence of gender inequalities and racial stereotypes.

In the next chapter I examine boys' construction and negotiation of masculinities in the context of families.

## **Chapter Nine: “Be a Man”: Boys’ Talk about Gender in Families**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter offered insights into how race and class structures intersect with masculinities to create hierarchies of power as boys navigated the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality. Boys’ desire to invest in expensive clothing, to conform to the orthodox provider role, and their inclinations to use violence in order to engender heterosexual relationships were imperative to how they performed masculinity and gauged their success. While boys negotiate their masculinities within a range of social contexts, including the school, the neighbourhood, and religious institutions, a large body of research on childhood gender and sexuality that has demonstrated the pivotal role of families in the gendering of young children (Kane, 2012; Helman & Ratele, 2016; Solebello & Elliott, 2011; Stacey & Padavic, 2020). Indeed, in my study, the family emerged as a key organising site for the production of masculinity in my participants’ narratives. Initially I did not set out to examine gender formation in families, but the qualitative and ethnographic nature of my study led to a focus on the construction of masculinities within the context of families, which I found was a fundamental site that shaped boys’ gendered and sexual subjectivities. In this chapter I therefore give prominence to an analysis of the data drawn from the interview sessions in which families were foregrounded. I demonstrate how their families shaped the way the boys came to make sense of their gender identities, and this enabled me to provide broader and deeper insights into the social construction of masculinities. A key aim of this chapter is also to demonstrate young boys’ agency in the negotiation of masculinities and to underscore, again, how the broader historical and social forces of race, class, and culture intersect with dominant gender discourses within the context of families to enable plural versions of masculinities.

I begin by discussing how my Indian and black research participant’s families reinforced traditional and normative ideologies of gender that shaped the manner in which the boys constructed and negotiated meanings of masculinities. Notwithstanding racial and cultural differences in South Africa, both Indian and black participant’s parents shared similar concerns regarding the importance of regulating boys’ sexualities according to hetero-normative standards. Additionally, my findings demonstrate how many participants’ fathers played a

significant role as male role models who inculcated hegemonic concepts of masculinity in the boys, which some—but not all—boys accommodated and aspired towards. I show, too, that corporal punishment within the home served as a key masculinising practice. I conclude by arguing that while boys were deeply influenced by family in relation to the reification of gender binaries and hegemonic patterns of gender roles, sexuality, and violence, their performances of masculinities were not entirely reiterative of these norms. Instead, some of them actively challenged, negotiated, and resisted dominant norms—and this, I argue, disrupts widespread assumptions that children are merely passive to gendered messages.

### **Negotiating Masculine Practices in the Home**

Research on masculinities in South Africa conducted by Bhana (2016a) and Helman and Ratele (2016) has indicated that the family home is a key site where children construct gender on a daily basis. Young people first acquire gender norms and role expectations within the home, through direct and indirect communication with their parents and family members. The role of the family is therefore vital since it inculcates social norms through sanctioning what it believes to be appropriate behaviour—and punishing what is not. My findings show that gender norms built on binary thinking whereby men are economic providers and women nurturers prevailed in many of the Indian and black boys' homes. While some boys prized the male provider role as an important role on which to model themselves, others sought to challenge this dominant economic definition of fatherhood. Boys shared their experiences in their individual interviews, and exchanges such as the following were common:

Researcher: What does your father do?

Zee [black, 9]: My father buys my school bag, shoes, school uniform and pays my school fees. He is a businessman... My mother said “Vusi [Zee’s father] please take care of the baby”. Daddy said, “No, go with him to the hospital”. My father can’t make the baby’s food, he can’t make it. Mum looks after our house but sometimes men also need to look after the house.

Lebo [black, 9]: My father does not cook.

Ulwazi [black, 9]: When I want things he [father] buys [them for] me and takes me to the beach and sometimes he don't tell me, [we] just dress up, take a bath and [we] go...my mum doesn't do anything.

Vihaan [Indian, 8]: My dad takes care of me and he buys me things and he also takes me wherever I want to go.

Shiven [Indian, 8]: He is also my role model [because] he gives me spending money. He took me to Cape Town and he takes me everywhere, even with his trucks—he takes me to work.

The prominence of men as economic providers in these boys' lives was evident. From their perspectives, the role of the father was the sole provider for the family, responsible for their schooling expenses and to meet their economic needs. In South Africa the expectation for fathers to be (solely) economic providers remains deeply rooted within the dominant masculine norms which are also a legacy of apartheid. Morrell and Jewkes (2011) argued that economic provision has historically been associated with hegemonic masculinity and fatherhood, to the extent that a good father is defined by the extent to which he can financially provide for his family (see Chapter 2). This was a prominent finding in my fieldwork. For example, in the above extract Shiven indicated that his father was his role model and that this was based on his economic provision for the family. Additionally, Vihaan regarded financial provision as a form of care, stating, "My dad takes care of me and he buys me things". Whilst there has been much attention in recent research to the increasingly important role of "involved fathers" who engage in childcare and nurturing in contemporary South African society (Helman & Ratele, 2016; Hunter et al., 2017), participants' fathers continued to contribute to their children's well being by earning money as means to support the family. In other words, my fieldwork found that the historical positioning of men as economic providers and women as caregivers was still all pervasive in parenting, and the conventional discourse of fathers as the providers prevailed in the participants' homes.

In the context of Indian families, Rabe's (2018) study on the history of fatherhood in South Africa reveals that, historically, Indian families were strongly characterised by nuclear family units, with fathers taking on the role of the breadwinner. Indian boys were groomed to be

breadwinners and future heads of the household like their fathers. In my study it was evident that Shiven considered his father to be his role model simply because he was able to meet the financial needs of the family, and it was the main reason he held his father in high regard. While Brown (2016), in her research on the significance of the male provider role in the development of boys' masculinities in the United Kingdom, argued that it is vital for financial provision to be seen as an essential form of care and nurture, Riggs and Bartholmaeus (2020) demonstrated how showcasing men as providers can be problematic in that it may facilitate notions of male power and privilege, and, by extension, female subordination. Furthermore, if being breadwinners and providers is seen as the only essential aspect to fatherhood and the only socially valued version of successful hegemonic masculinity, then this, too, is, as I show, a highly problematic and fixed view of masculinity.

Ulwazi's words indicate that his father was able to meet his needs in terms of taking him out and purchasing items he requested, conversely, he said that his mother "doesn't do anything". Even though his mother was the primary caregiver, Ulwazi failed to acknowledge her role as valuable since she did not contribute financially to the household. His clear, albeit simplistic, perception acts to further entrench her role as caregiver and his father's as sole provider (Ratele & Nduna, 2018; Trivedi & Bose, 2018).

Viewing their fathers as economic providers was seen as a positive model for most boys, but it also reinforced male power and privilege because of the unequal gendered division of labour in the household. The above excerpts indicate that fathers also played other important roles beyond that of economic provider in their sons' lives, but these were not perceived by participants in a gender equal way whereby both parents could share similar roles as primary caregivers. This finding resonates with Hunter et al.'s (2017) review of masculinities and primary-care giving fathers, in which they stated that the gendered division of labour in the household may be limiting as it works to position men and women as dichotomous and unequal within the household. As a result, children may construct their identities within discourses characterised by unequal gender relations, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles which they come to internalise as normative constructs. Such discourses, Hunter et al. (2017) argue, also contribute to a continuous cycle of binary notions of gender which limit any shift towards gender equitable

realisations, particularly among young boys whose identities are constructed within and around normative gender roles. Because of this, ideologies of care become limited to men being financial providers as they distance themselves from other forms of care. This notion resonates with Zee's extract regarding his father's lack of involvement in childcare.

However, not all boys in my study passively accepted the male provider role as a normative expression of masculinity. Zee, for example, whose father was the sole provider in his household, advocated that his father should also embrace other roles when he said "Sometimes men also need to look after the house". Zee therefore held an alternative view of fathering which acknowledged that men's roles in the household should not be confined to that of a provider. He was able to problematise and move beyond the economic definition of fatherhood by advocating for men's involvement in nurturance as an essential form of care.

Ulwazi, in an individual interview, sought to construct himself in more fluid ways, drawing on alternative male practices in the household:

Researcher: Do you help your mum at home?

Ulwazi: Yes, I take the pins for her and take the sewing needle—that makes you sew the dress with [the sewing equipment].

Researcher: Do your friends [at school] know that you help mum to sew?

Ulwazi: No, I don't like to tell everyone. If I tell them not to tell anyone and they tell the other classes, then my friends laugh at me. They will make a joke of me.

It was evident that Ulwazi did not strictly comply with rigid masculine practices; instead, he chose to assist his mother with sewing—a task that in South Africa is traditionally associated with women. However, he also feared that failure to comply with conventional masculine norms would result in verbal insults and shaming at school. He was therefore involved in a complex negotiation of masculinities where, in order to maintain his masculine position, he navigated between alternate positions by assisting his mother at home, while striving to protect his masculine identity at school. Bhana (2016a) argued that boys' notions of masculinities came with the need to achieve masculine status and acceptance within their peer group. Failure to comply

with conventional “boy” practices resulted in verbal insults such as being called “sissies”. Boys therefore disparaged feminine concepts as a way to avoid being teased or subordinated. Notwithstanding Ulwazi’s keen interest in assisting his mother and challenging traditional sex-roles in the household, he concealed his engagement with so-called feminine practices in the fear that his hierarchal standing within his peer group would be disrupted. Ulwazi was thus able to shift in and out of performing varying versions of masculinities depending on different contextual situations—and this, I argue, indicates the fluid nature of gender.

### **Families and the Mediation of Heterosexual Masculinity**

Like gender, sexuality is socially constructed and based on norms which govern “proper” masculine behaviour linked to heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). To date research, globally, has indicated parents need to socialise children’s gender and sexual behaviours according to normative gender ideologies and compulsory heterosexuality (Helman & Ratele, 2016; Kane, 2006; Martin, 2009; Solebello & Elliott, 2011; Stacey & Padavic, 2020). In this section I show that the family is an important site where meanings of heterosexuality and masculine norms are promoted and reproduced. Despite racial and cultural differences, both Indian and black participants revealed how their parents played a key role in promoting heterosexual relations while discriminating against those located outside heterosexual norms. The boys highlighted the following in their individual interviews:

Researcher: Do your parents tease you for having a girlfriend?

Shreyan [Indian, 9]: Yes, my uncle, and my grandmother. When I come from school they say that teacher phoned and said that you have girlfriend [at school].

Keylan [Indian, 9]: My dad does sometimes, he like just teases me. He kept on asking if I have a girlfriend and he will ask me again and again until I fall asleep.

Sohan [Indian, 8]: My grandfather calls me SS because I got two girlfriends whose name start with an S. The other one was in my previous school.

Researcher: Are your parents aware of your girlfriend?

Ulwazi: My mum knows, she laughed. I don’t want everyone to know about it coz [because] now it’s my mum’s and my secret.

Kanelo [black, 9]: My parents know. When I was little my mother used to say I won't have a *makoti* [bride] with fat cheeks. Sometimes our brothers influence us to go and get the girlfriends; they say you are stupid because you don't have a girlfriend, go, go, go!

These findings highlight how the boys' families were actively involved in the mediation of normative masculinities by promoting heterosexuality. It was evident that Keylan's father constantly probed him about having a girlfriend, while Sohan revealed that his grandfather encouraged his multiple relationships through his teasing. Often, the desire to have multiple girlfriends is an imperative construct that boys draw on to affirm their dominant position and to achieve status within the peer group hierarchy (Dunne et al., 2006). Stacey and Padavic's (2020) study on parents' gender and sexual expectations of children in the United States revealed that, due to the pressure of accountability—which involves the possibility of parents being held responsible for their children's sexual and gender non-conformity—parents place much emphasis on upholding conventional gender norms and find it imperative to encourage heterosexual behaviour.

Kanelo's brother also placed immense pressure on him, in verbally abusive ways, to pursue a relationship. This resonates with Msibi's (2012) study where he argued that the naturalisation of heterosexuality perpetuates the widespread use of violence in the form of teasing and homophobic harassment. His focus was on secondary school learners' experiences of homophobia in South Africa, and he demonstrated how verbal teasing was employed as a fundamental way of regulating sexualities in order to preserve hetero-normativity. My findings support this, showing that the regulation of masculinity extended beyond schooling in that families encouraged dominant discourses of sexuality by using verbal teasing as a key mechanism to police and promote heterosexuality.

In addition, Ulwazi, Kanelo and Keylan, in a focus group discussion, revealed how parents sought to regulate their sexuality by warning them against homosexuality.

Researcher: How would your parents react if you were gay?

Ulwazi: Ma'am they will hit you one way. They will be disappointed because they be like—if you start to be gay, and you saying gay things and funny things like speaking gay language and girl language, they will tell you [to] go with him, or you [are] not welcome [to live] in this house anymore.

Kanelo: My father says "*Mina nje angifuni umfana oyistabane,*" [I don't want you to be a gay boy] and then my father also says "*Uke ulingeubey istabane uzongitholakahle,*" [If you dare become a gay, I'll show you]. If you love him go with him, we are not allowing him. Never ever a boy! They want us to have a real wife, not like a husband wife.

Keylan: Definitely, they will say if you love them you must go somewhere else. Go under your own roof, you can't stay under my roof!

The boys all described how their parents would police the boundaries of sexuality by discouraging homosexuality through threats of physical violence and exclusion from the home. As I noted in Chapter 3, against the broader context of South Africa's historical and sexual landscape, heterosexuality was essential to the (re)production of hegemonic masculinities and femininities, and non-conforming identities challenged the normative gender order (Judge, 2017). I found that masculinities were shaped—in the context of the home—along hetero-normative lines. Most participants said that they were constantly under pressure to conform to compulsory heterosexuality. In the extract below, for example, it is evident that Keylan's response toward non-conforming identities was based on the premise of compulsory heterosexuality:

Researcher: Will you be friends with a boy at school who is gay?

Keylan: No! You are a man; you must act like a man.

Masculine behaviour and norms based on ideal ways of being a boy that were entrenched within the home shaped Keylan's construction of masculine subjectivities and resulted in his negative attitude towards non-conforming masculinities in school: he rejected those who failed to comply with hetero-normative standards, and thus he himself also policed non-conforming masculinities.

To conclude, as this section shows, both Indian and black families were structured along ideologies of heterosexual masculinity as a normative male construct which they sought to promote. Boys such as Keylan internalised these messages as the norm, and this shaped the manner in which he constructed subjectivities of—and responded to—non-conforming masculinities. In the section to follow I demonstrate how boys witnessed, experienced, and accommodated hegemonic masculinity within their home.

### **Men, Fathering, and Hegemonic Masculinity**

In this section I demonstrate the ways in which hegemonic masculinities were regulated in the context of the home. Participants' fathers played a significant role in encouraging hegemonic masculine behaviour that prized qualities such as physical strength and resilience. While I have shown how some boys challenged the all-encompassing nature of the breadwinner positioning of fatherhood, other participants sought to reiterate masculine norms in the home by modelling themselves on their fathers, whom they viewed as practicing ideal ways to perform masculinity. I discuss these findings under the two sub-themes: 1) "Be a Man": Race, Culture and Hegemonic Masculinity; 2) Male Power in the Household and Boys' Desire to Role Model Hegemonic Masculinity.

#### *"Be a Man": Race, Culture, and Hegemonic Masculinity*

In KwaZulu-Natal gender roles still strongly reflect the historical processes that led black men to dominate in their households through the gendered division of labour (Reid & Walker, 2005). Young men were initiated into manhood through activities such as cattle herding and stick fighting in preparation for their role as head of the household. In this socio-cultural context, young men internalised gendered messages that reinforced traditional notions of what being an ideal man entails. Historically, and as a result of apartheid, black and Indian boys' experiences of growing up were shaped differently. For example, in a group discussion comprised only of black boys, participants talked about their fathers on rural farms and how they used sticks to engage in battle. They explained how their fathers encouraged strength and toughness:

Kanelo: Mostly our fathers, they say that we must be a man... They toughen you up [through fist fighting].

Ulwazi: They [fathers] also take you to the other boys and give you sticks and then they say fight with the sticks. At 7-years-old, they give you the sticks and say fight with the sticks and if you lose they say that you are not tough. They take the sticks and say that it's going to make you like your father and if you cry then they hit you and say "Why are you crying? If you cry you won't be tough".

Kanelo: I haven't [experienced stick fighting] because there are no farms here from where I come [from the town]. The only way to be tough is fighting with your fist. You don't do those farm things, it's in the township [the rural, farm areas]. Here [in the town] you just like to relax and when it's a fight, it's like fists. You don't use sticks and all like the farm people.

It is evident from these excerpts that traditional practices are still prevalent in contemporary KwaZulu-Natal, and remain significant in the socialisation of young boys such as Ulwazi and the boys in his community. Ulwazi claimed that the practice of stick fighting resulted in young boys' developing ideals that were based on constructing themselves in physically powerful ways, similar to their fathers. According to Carton and Morrell's (2012) study on African masculinities in South Africa, although stick fighting was used to prepare young men for self-defence and war, it also led to the idealisation of aggression and male power which helped young men to earn respect within the community and became brave and courageous. Stick fighting was also a key heterosexual practice where males could demonstrate their masculine prowess in the presence of women (Carton & Morrell, 2012). The practice of stick fighting, as described by Ulwazi, thus promoted traditional concepts of hegemonic masculinity as it reinforced traditional male power through the display of strength, resilience, and male competition.

Ulwazi and Kanelo's fathers sought to reinforce masculine norms by encouraging their sons to emulate hegemonic masculine practices linked to fighting prowess as a marker of male power. Ulwazi further explained that through the practice of stick fighting boys were also encouraged to develop emotional resilience. Important to note here is that Kanelo and Ulwazi's performances of masculinity differed. Ulwazi came from a rural township and was familiar with farm life and

stick fighting, while Kanelo was growing up in the town, where physical prowess was demonstrated through fist fights. However, strength and toughness were compulsory components of masculinities promoted within both their lives.

Traditional and sociocultural contexts also shaped black participants' perceptions of sexual relationships as they assumed that their parents would not accept relations with girls who belonged to a different race.

Ulwazi: My parents won't accept an Indian girl because she will have to go [up] to the mountains and fetch the water, and then clean the whole house, and then cook food every day.

Researcher: Can the Indian girl do that?

Kanelo: Maybe it will be too much of a burden for her coz [because], like, being a black person's wife is really hard.

Indeed, I repeatedly found that racial and socioeconomic subjectivities constituted a significant force in black boys' negotiation of heterosexual relations with girls. Ulwazi's words highlight this assumption that an Indian girl would not be able to adjust to the rigours of farm life, and this also reflects the fact that most Indian learners at the school reside in well resourced, semi-urban areas in the town. Due to the cultural background and socioeconomic constraints of living in under-resourced farm areas, Ulwazi felt that his parents would oppose an interracial relationship. Kanelo concurred stating that being in a relationship with a black man was not easy because of arduous household tasks. Such socioeconomic constraints thus shaped the heterosexual subjectivities of these boys, and they also negotiated race relations based on racial subjectivities. Bhana (2016c) argued, in her study on students' negotiation of race and sexuality at a South African university that, despite the transforming racial and social circumstances in post apartheid South Africa, sexuality works as a symbolic site for extending racial boundaries. The policing of sexuality along racial lines suggests the continuity of racial patterns in heterosexual relations.

*Male Power in the Household and Boys Desire to Role Model Hegemonic Masculinity*

My findings also revealed how some participants witnessed alcohol abuse and aggression among some of the males in their family, and others spoke about how they believed that alcohol use entrenched hegemonic masculine behaviour. For example, Rishay (an 8-year-old, Indian boy) and Keylan expressed the following in their individual interviews:

Rishay: When my dad comes from work, sometimes he is tired, and he buys drink [alcohol], he drinks it and then he loses his mind... like he goes crazy [violent].

Keylan : He was so angry... he was so drunk that he came—my mother is so annoying she still keeps on talking to him when she knows [that] he is drunk—and for no reason he broke my burglar guard and the window in my room. When he gets too drunk he gets so annoying. One day my mother and my father bought a new flat screen TV. It was their anniversary, I think, and the day after that my mother told him something about wasting a lot of money on the TV [so] he took the whole TV and he threw it off the balcony. If I say something, like, against his mother, he gets so angry for no reason. One day I just said that he talks a lot and then—he was drunk that day—he just took the car keys and went out of the house and I don't know where he was gone, we looked everywhere. We searched the entire Stanger [the town] that whole night and in the morning, when the owner of the bar opened the shop, they found him sleeping over there. That's why now, me and my mother, we don't tell him anything.

Rishay and Keylan associated alcohol consumption with the violent, antagonistic traits which they observed in their fathers. Rishay spoke of how his father lost his mind when intoxicated, while Keylan described his father's aggression and impulsive reactions such as throwing the television off the balcony. Keylan also blamed his mother, to an extent, for his father's violent behaviour stating "My mother is so annoying she still keeps on talking to him when she knows [that] he is drunk". In Keylan's view, his mother was, in part at least, responsible for the behaviour of his father. To Keylan, his father's behaviour merely reflected conventional hegemonic concepts of masculinity characterised by aggression, anger, alcohol abuse and

patriarchal power. In Jewkes et al.'s (2015) study of hegemonic masculinity among men in South Africa, they too found that men displayed hegemonic masculinity by demonstrating toughness, strength and aggression through a repertoire of daily acts of violence within the home which ultimately affirmed the power they had in the home setting. Keylan's father dominated the household to the extent that he expected other members in the family to remain passive and accommodate his violence. This is apparent in Keylan's words "That's why now, me and my mother, we don't tell him anything".

According to Klann et al.'s. (2018) research of how fathers shape the gender development of their sons in the United States, fathers' modelled masculine norms and communicated sexist ideologies through paternal authoritarianism, with the result that boys viewed the world through a power, hierarchy and gendered lens. Authoritarianism is embedded in several discourses where adherence to a set of beliefs, traditionalism, hierarchal levels of power and social dominance are maintained as means of preserving hegemonic structures. Because of their authoritarian beliefs, fathers act in gender stereotypical ways as they communicate messages of traditional gender norms to their children. This resonates strongly with my fieldwork: witnessing his father's dominance and his mother's submissive role shaped Keylan's understanding of the gender expectations of men and women in a patriarchal family structure. To him, male domination in the home, including regular alcohol abuse and the ensuing violence, was normal.

While Rishay and Keylan did not describe any forms of violence being inflicted on their mothers, Zee spoke of how his uncle battered his aunt under the influence of alcohol:

Zee: My uncle, he drinks a lot [and] when he comes back at night [from the bar] holding a bottle of beer, he hits my aunty.

Researcher: Do you think that alcohol makes men violent?

Zee: Yes, because maybe when they drink something strong, it will, it can make them strong.

Researcher: How can we help your uncle?

Zee: By not giving him money because when he has money that's how he buys alcohol.... My uncle doesn't use his money wisely, but my father buys my school bag, shoes, school uniform and pays my school fees.

Many studies have demonstrated that excessive consumption of alcohol among black South African men can be linked to an aggressive and macho version of masculinity which leads to the perpetuation of sexual and physical violence against women (Jewkes, 2002; Kalichman et al., 2007; Mvune et al., 2019). This resonates with Zee noting that alcohol abuse entrenched male power and physical strength within his uncle. He further linked excessive alcohol abuse to money, claiming that his uncle did not manage his money wisely due to his alcohol addiction. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that not all men were irresponsible in the context of managing their money, using his father as an example, who paid for his educational needs. While Zee was able to problematise his uncle's aggressive performances, Keylan saw his father's behaviour as reflecting hegemonic masculine characteristics that he wanted to emulate.

Following further probing Keylan said:

Keylan: I want to follow in my father's footsteps. I want to be like him. I want tattoos like him. When my father was small [young] he should drink [alcohol] and he should smoke. I want to be like him. And when he was 8-years-old he had his own gun [toy gun], like how I have now... It's not wrong even if my father does wrong things, I will always follow him. I want to be like him. Even if he does something wrong [like] go to jail then I must [also] go to jail. If he does something bad, I also want to do something bad and go to jail. I want to do whatever he does. It was my dream. It's better than all my dreams, it's better. I don't even want to be rich; I only want to be like him. That was my dream. My uncle should always joke and say "he is going to [be]come like his father, he's going to [be]come like his father, and you all better keep bail money ready".

Researcher: What if you really go to jail some day?

Keylan: I wouldn't mind because my father also felt it, so it's my turn to feel it now, so I won't mind coz [because], ma'am, I always wanted to feel what my father felt. I

just want to experience his life. I know I'm not forced to—no one ever forced me to be like him... Ma'am if my father dies, I'll definitely be like him. Say like if I turn 10 and my father dies, I must be like him, definitely, one hundred percent! No matter what he does, even if he goes to jail now he will still be my role model, even if anything happens, he will always be my role model.

Despite his father's negative habits and associated violence, Keylan aspired to model similar hegemonic performances; to have tattoos, smoke and abuse alcohol just as his father did. These are practices that afford males a physical image of achieving ideal masculinity, as Morrell and Richter (2004) point out. They argued in their study on fatherhood in South Africa that while extensive research on biological fathers offers sufficient proof suggesting that biology affords a special connection between fathers and their children, it does not, however, ensure that biological fathers will yield positive fathering outcomes. Notwithstanding the move towards new visions of fathering (see Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2020; Elliott, 2016)—ones that will yield positive outcomes in terms of care giving and egalitarian values shaping the lives of children—it remains that fathers can also be irresponsible, negligent and cruel. Keylan viewed his father as an ideal role model without acknowledging the consequences of his father's negative actions—in contrast to Zee, who was able to acknowledge his uncle's violence and lack of responsibility in managing his money, and his father's apparent lack of nurturance in the household.

Often, fatherhood entails passing on regulatory behaviour (Kane, 2012), and Keylan's uncle, it seems from Keylan's words, agreed that he would follow in his father's footsteps by stating "He is going to [be]come like his father...and you all better keep bail money ready". Instead of encouraging alternate masculine performances, his uncle reinforced the idea that Keylan would (and should) be similar to his father. In her study on parents' and their children's construction of gender, Kane (2012) revealed that from an early age children learn attitudes, values, and behaviours modelled by parents and which they perceive to be normal or acceptable. They begin to construct and express their identity accordingly so that they can fit into the family and related social networks. In addition, Moosa and Bhana (2019) stated that male role modelling is based on the way normative constructions of masculinities reinforce masculine power to uphold the gender order among women, men, girls, and boys. Given the gender power imbalance and

stereotyped images of what being an ideal man entails, male role modelling has been widely critiqued for its essentialist and rigid understandings of men and masculinities.

Keylan went on to say:

Keylan: For my 9th birthday I got a knuckleduster, a real iron one. One day my uncle and my father were having a fight. My father took my knuckleduster, the iron one, and gave [hit] him; his two teeth fell on the floor. Knuckledusters are hard ma'am. [At school] Shiven poked me with the pencil in my mouth, when I was in Grade 2. The pencil went through and through... During the break, I hit Shiven and his tooth started to shake and it was bleeding. Then I told him you see what happened to me, you will learn your lesson... I will hit them and hit them and hit them and hit them and hit them until they start to bleed and then I will slap them.

Researcher: Can boys learn to be good?

Keylan: I don't think I will change. I don't because, ma'am, I am not that small [young], I mean I was in Grade R, I should keep on swearing and nobody should tell me anything there because we learnt it from small so now it's so hard to change.

In Keylan's narrative it was evident that his parents promoted violence by giving him a knuckleduster. He also witnessed physical violence in his home between his father and uncle. Keylan reproduced the same violent behaviour at school, almost knocking Shiven's tooth out. Several studies have highlighted that gender ideologies and principles of masculinities originating within the family are reflected at school and how this may contribute to negative schooling outcomes and the construction of hegemonic versions of masculinity (Bhana, 2013; deLange et al., 2012; Parkes, 2007). This was clearly evident in Keylan's case.

Keylan also asserted that gender ideologies and hegemonic behaviours were shaped when very young, suggesting that he felt he lacked the agency to resist violence and move away from violent discourses. His words "I should keep on swearing and nobody should tell me anything

there”, imply that from a young age his behaviour was left uncorrected, and that it was not seen by his elders as problematic. He was also fiercely defensive about his father:

Keylan: Whenever someone should talk about him and say “Hey your father is so stupid, your father is ugly”, I should just take a chair and hit them. My big cousin from high school, she got both her parents and, ma’am, when my father was gone to Sappi [to work] and that same day she reminded me [about it] and I took that chair, the hard wooden chair and I broke it on her legs.

Researcher: What if someone says something bad about your mother?

Keylan: Not so, but if they even tell my father to shut up, I’d just hit them, even if my cousin just says “Oh your father is arguing with your mother, he is so silly”, I’ll hit them. I’ll just take anything and hit them. One day I poured paraffin on my cousin and I told her, “If you even say one word about my father, I’ll light you”, and I was holding the lighter in my hand.

Rishay also reflected on an occasion when his classmate, Josh [Indian, aged 8] defended his father:

Jia [a peer] took Josh’s father’s name [teasing him] and she said “I don’t like to travel [to school] with that stupid James [Josh’s father]”. She called his father like that so Josh was hitting all of us for nothing because he thought that we all were laughing at his father.

It was evident that Keylan and Josh held their fathers in high regard and defended them, even to the extent of being violent to girls. Indeed, these boys sought to uphold and align with the dominant powerful masculinity they aspired to considering that fathers played an important role as financial providers in the household. It was evident, too, that Keylan attached more importance to his father than his mother, defending him (as did Josh) if he perceived his peers to be insulting him.

Parkes (2007) study on South African children's experiences of violence in their neighbourhood found that by witnessing men resolve conflict through violence in the home, boys may come to internalise that engaging in violence is the only suitable way to resolve conflict and the only appropriate way of proving that they are masculine. Ultimately, the level of violence that boys experience within the home and the exposure to hegemonic forms of masculinities displayed by their fathers may negatively impact on their lives as they may also develop into adults who do the same (see, too, Morrell, 2001b). Keylan's father embodied hegemonic notions of masculinity characterised by anger, aggression, alcohol abuse and violence while also maintaining a patriarchal role within the family. This, as is clear from Keylan's words, shaped how Keylan constructed his own masculine identity as he desired to embody and perform similar hegemonic masculine patterns as his father.

### **Corporal Punishment in the Home: Mothers as Disciplinarians**

While most participants' fathers played a significant role in shaping how boys understood masculinity, their mothers, too, played an important role, particularly as disciplinarians in the home. Corporal punishment in the home has recently come under the spotlight in South Africa, resulting in a move towards protecting the rights of children, not only in schools, (see the South African Schools Act 84/1996) but also in the home. In 2019 the South African Constitutional Court ruled that corporal punishment is a violation of children's right to dignity and of their physical integrity, and prohibited any form of corporal punishment within the home. However, corporal punishment emerged as a salient feature in my study, with both Indian and black boys claiming that it was prevalent in their homes, as these excerpts, some drawn from individual interviews and some from focus group discussions, illustrate:

Researcher: How do they [parents] discipline you?

Shiven: My mother, usually by hitting me, taking my things, not [letting me] watch TV, taking my tablet.

Vihaan: Once my brother hit me and my mother caught him, my mother took out the wooden spoon, put his hand on the table and hit him on his knuckles.

Yash [Indian, 9]: My mother, she always hits... with the belt. My mum cut the stick from outside and she gave [hit] me on my leg.

Siya [black, 9]: She hits me the most...sometimes when I'm naughty, when I don't fold my clothes and put them away.

Keylan: Mum hits with the belt, with the chairs, with the phone charger—that thing leaves marks on your hand. Ma'am, I should get cut. Sometimes I get [a] hiding [but] I don't feel anything because I've been beaten up so much... [like with] the rose stick [branch] with all the thorns. Shiven, you remember when I had that black mark I showed you on my head? That was with the rose stick.

Researcher: And your father?

Keylan: My father doesn't say anything but mostly my mother. She mostly tells me when I'm doing wrong. My father, he doesn't care.

Siya: My dad is really strong but sometimes he is afraid of my mother.

Shiven: He [my father] is kind, that's why he gives me spending money. Every time my mother should hit me I should phone my father and I should tell him and my father should not like my mother to hit me. My father says if you are going to hit him then he is going to go dumb.

Research on gender violence in South Africa has often problematised men as the main perpetrators of violence mainly due to binary gender ideologies where men are regarded as hegemonic and dominant and women as submissive (Hearn, 2002; Jewkes et al., 2015; Ratele, 2016). While my findings have shown that most men were indeed dominant and hegemonic in the households, however in the above extracts women emerged as the main perpetrators of physical violence on children. Participants described the various ways through which physical punishments were inflicted onto them by their mothers at home. Hunter and Morrell's (2021) research on corporal punishment in South Africa found that harsh methods of discipline were a gendered practice in that boys were believed to be strong enough to endure physical punishment which was associated with hegemonic masculine characteristics of resilience. This was echoed by Keylan who said that he had become immune to pain because of the amount of physical punishment he had already endured.

Most of my participants came from traditional, patriarchal family contexts within which men were largely the economic providers in the household while women were the primary caregivers

who were responsible for managing most aspects of the children's lives, including discipline in the home. This prevailing sociocultural context promoted a gendered hierarchy and patriarchal value system. As Rabe (2018) argued, family relationships in South Africa are shaped by the political and historical past where, largely because of the migrant labour system, men were unable to play a meaningful role in child rearing, and hence it was largely relegated to women's domain. In addition, Jamieson et al., (2018) in their study on family violence in the South African context, argued that men's lack of involvement in child rearing resulted in an increased level of stress placed on women as caregivers; hence it was more common for women to engage in harsh parenting practices such as corporal punishment. This is not to suggest that all mothers resort to violence in their homes, but it is important to highlight that in their key role in care and nurturance, harsh methods were employed as an appropriate strategy to instil discipline. In other words, although corporal punishment is often situated within a gender binary where men are generally seen as perpetrators of violence based on dominant constructions of masculinity as authoritative and disciplinarian, the fact that women are sometimes the main perpetrators of corporal punishment in the home highlights just how untenable and short-sighted the gender binary really is. With regards to girls, a report by UNICEF (2019) noted that corporal punishment is employed by adults as a way to maintain order and girls often fear the repercussions of deviant behaviour or going against their elders hence, they tend to be obedient in the home.

According to Khan and Ratele (2020), women in South Africa experience high levels of domestic violence in the form of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at the hands of controlling and threatening male intimate partners. Considering South African research which examines the factors that contribute to women's use of corporal punishment in the home, Jamieson et al. (2018) found that children were more likely to experience corporal punishment in a family context in which social norms support violence against women. In other words, women who experienced domestic violence were more likely to use corporal punishment to discipline their children.

According to the boys themselves, although Keylan's father displayed aggressive hegemonic male behaviour, it was evident that in the context of enforcing discipline he chose to remain

uninvolved. Shiven's father, however, did not support corporal punishment in the home—and Shiven internalised the positive messages of masculinity that this invoked for him. This further disrupts the normative discourses that situate men as violent and women as passive.

The participants were clear about their feelings towards corporal punishment:

Shiven: I think that when they hit us they are making us naughtier. They are just hitting us for nothing and not telling us anything.

Keylan: They are not even telling you to stop doing that and they [are] just hitting you. They should talk, not to hit, "Stop doing that and try to change", not just come and hit us!

Vihaan: It will work. Like say "Stop doing what you are doing, it's bad, it's wrong, you have to learn".

The boys' narratives suggest that it is important to listen to young children as they try to convey messages about how they would prefer to be disciplined. Disciplinary violence, in Shiven, Keylan and Vihaan's opinion, results in persistent misbehaviour as it fails to offer any guidance or teaching about values: if parents fail to clearly verbalise the misbehaviour they are trying to correct through discipline, children may struggle to understand what they are supposed to do. Conversely, if messages about discipline are clearly conveyed, children are more likely to accept them (Lansdown, 2020). These boys called for non-violent methods of discipline, saying that they would prefer talk and encouragement towards positive behaviour instead of the infliction of physical punishment. The fact that they sought to speak about violence in the home suggests their desire for a non-violent home environment.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown how the family is crucial in the making of gender and sexuality and in how young boys understand masculinities. My findings demonstrate how hegemonic norms are engaged as young Indian and black boys negotiate the doing of masculinity in reflective and agentic ways that work to challenge and resist dominant gender norms. Some of these young boys negotiated their masculinity by challenging the role of the male as the sole provider in a

family. They recognised the possibility of engaging in alternative male practices based on nurturance and on actively pursuing alternative gendered roles. However, some nevertheless constantly strove to uphold masculine norms in situations where great importance was placed on protecting their masculine identity. For example, while Ulwazi engaged in a task traditionally associated with femininity at home, in the school he sought to conceal his engagement in feminine practices in order to avoid verbal abuse from peers.

My findings also highlighted how heterosexuality was presented as natural—if not compulsory—in families. Both Indian and black participants' families shared similar concerns regarding the importance of conforming to hetero-normative standards. Their families sought to erase non-conformity by encouraging heterosexual relations and warning boys against homosexuality, and their fathers played a significant role in the presentation of hegemonic masculine behaviour based on physical strength and resilience to pain. While some boys challenged the reductionist breadwinner definition of fatherhood, others sought to model themselves on the hegemonic performances their fathers gave, which they viewed as ideal ways to perform masculinity.

Fathers' roles were varied and sometimes contradictory, as I have demonstrated. Despite their hegemonic behaviour, some fathers for example did not support violent methods of discipline in the home, while other fathers preferred to remain uninvolved in the disciplining of the boys. My participants noted that their fathers fulfilled their role as the sole providers while their mothers' role as the primary caregivers was seen to include the responsibility of enforcing discipline in harsh, violent ways that challenged passive notions of femininity. In response to corporal punishment, the boys raised concerns that the harsh disciplinary methods resulted in an escalation of bad behaviour and suggested that alternative non-violent methods be used to discourage unwanted behaviour. In Lansdown's (2020) research on strengthening child agency to overcome neglect and malnutrition among children, he raises the concern that in most cultures around the world adults fail to listen to children's views and perceptions. This means, he argues, that adults are likely to miss important information regarding the scale and impact of violence in the lives of children.

While concerns of men and their construction of hegemonic masculinities are increasing, drawing on Connell's (1995) conceptualisation of masculinities as plural and fluid, as established in Chapter 3, helps to situate young boys as active agents who have the potential to challenge and deconstruct what is presented to them instead of projecting their identities in rigidly traditionally masculine ways. In the homes of these young boys the ideal would be a shift in the behaviour of men away from being problematic masculine role models towards engaging in gender equitable performances that promote peaceable gender relations and care.

Children, as I have demonstrated again and again throughout this thesis, are able to construct meaning within their sociocultural context: they have the capacity to resist and alter cultural ideals and harmful discourses. Making the effort to consider the broader, social platforms that shape masculinities in violent, hegemonic ways is of paramount importance to interventions that aim to empower boys to broaden their understanding of masculine behaviour and attitudes, and to (re)configure their identities in alternative, non-violent ways. Moreover, acknowledging the voices of children—their concerns, feelings, and experiences—and evaluating their choices, is fundamental to informing child-centred practices at home and at school, and to promoting non-violent, egalitarian constructions of masculinity.

## **Chapter 10: Masculinity, Sexuality and Violence in School: Insights from Foundation Phase Teachers**

### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter I demonstrated how the family home was a highly charged gendered and sexualised arena within which dominant versions of masculinities were apparent; indeed, families played a significant role in conveying and promoting masculine concepts. In this chapter I turn my attention to the school, which also played a key role in inculcating and reinforcing the gender and sexual norms that informed how my research participants constructed their masculinities. I seek to offer a nuanced understanding of masculinities through the narratives of FP teachers (who teach 8–9-year-olds), by presenting their observations and their experiences of their learners. I focus, in particular, on how teachers' perceptions of masculinity, sexuality, and violence have implications for the ways in which the boys constructed their subjectivities, and navigated their masculine trajectories.

I begin by examining teachers' perceptions of sexuality in the early years, which informed the way gender and sexuality was regulated at the school. According to Curran et al., (2009) children's expression of sexual knowledge is considered to be unnatural and teachers often police gender and sexuality thus resulting in the inevitability of heteronormativity in the school. I show that traditional subjectivities regarding childhood sexuality led to the teachers refuting the primary school as a site where children constructed their sexuality. Hence, the teachers were unable to recognise the prevalence and occurrence of sexual discrimination and homophobia, and this contributed to the problem of gender violence. While the teachers failed to acknowledge children as active sexual agents, they did connect boys' violence with their need to procure and achieve masculine power.

Notwithstanding this awareness, there were contradictions in teachers' solutions to addressing violence. This was evident in how teachers managed discipline simply by inculcating values instead of addressing the inequitable power relations through which violence was entrenched as a means to project a desired hegemonic masculinity.

I conclude the chapter by highlighting male teachers' concerns regarding the problem of hegemonic masculinity. I focus, in particular, on their endeavours to encourage more gentle versions of masculinity by seeking to be positive role models, and how this also serves to undermine discourses in which males are viewed as exclusively violent and dominant. All data presented in this chapter are drawn from individual interviews with teachers.

### **“Young Boys of 9 are still too childish”: Teachers’ Perceptions of Sexuality in the Primary School**

Several studies conducted in primary schools have pointed to the key ways in which young children construct themselves as heterosexual subjects (Mayeza & Bhana, 2019; Morison et al., 2021; Renold, 2005; 2007; Robinson, 2013; Thorne, 1993). In Chapter 8 I argued that the young boys in my study were active agents who constructed and negotiated their heterosexuality through a variety of masculine practices. Notwithstanding boys' heterosexual endeavours and the violence they perpetuated in response to non-conforming sexualities, I found that teachers were largely unaware of the extent to which sexuality permeated the lives of learners in the school. Some teachers claimed that heterosexual relations were performed in innocence, while others sought to disrupt heterosexual relations by encouraging more platonic relations, thus attempting to limit boys' heterosexual experiences. Responses such as the following were typical:

Researcher: Do the boys [aged 8–9] know about girlfriends?

Mrs Janvi: Yes, in a very innocent way. They don't know about girlfriends and all—they tell you, “I like that girl” or “I've got a girlfriend”—like maybe somebody in their family or friends. But it's all done very innocently.

Mrs Mrinal: Yes, they do maybe out of innocence, I would say. But they are exposed to certain words as well. They know the words like kiss and love and sex, and all of that: they are quite aware of it.

Mr Singh: I think for Grade 3s, it's a lot of puppy crushes, like “Aye, I like this girl,” and you know, but I don't think the Grade 3 child—boy or girl—is over-tempted to go and touch somebody [in a sexual way] and all this, I don't think so. That's what I'm saying in [about] the Grade 3s, and when they start becoming bigger in the Grades 5, 6

and 7 [it is different]. But Grade 3s and 4s are okay... just innocent. So they know about it [sex and sexuality], but it's not on a serious level. You won't expect them to run to the corner and hold hands and all, but it's just like small, innocent fun, which is okay.

Mr Luhle: I have come across a boy kissing a girl, where they will just be sitting and the boy just kisses her. I have no idea what he was thinking in his mind. They were just sitting and colouring in and he just decided to kiss her and let go of her and [then] she pushed him, [and] he looked shocked, like, "Why did she push me?" But it was very funny.

Researcher: Should they have girlfriends?

Mrs Neha: No, definitely they are too young. In a joking way I do tell them that they are still too young, they need to finish school and then they need to get into a relationship. If they are in a relationship, they cannot concentrate on their school work. I tell them that schoolwork is a priority at the moment.

Mrs Ella: Well we talk about it, we say you can give a girl a hug—she is your friend, just like how you hug your sister, that kind of relationship—but not anything more than that. When there is an incident like that I always tell them that they are too little for that.

Most teachers thus viewed boys' heterosexual behaviour as innocent and did not consider it to be serious. However, as I demonstrated in Chapter 8, it became clear early on in my fieldwork that children are aware of sexuality from a young age and that they are also aware of diverse sexualities. This is a finding supported by several other studies (see, for example, Blaise, 2009 and van Leent & Ryan, 2016). Indeed, the hegemonic discourse of childhood innocence that is so prevalent in South Africa tends to dismiss and normalise boys' violent behaviour (Bhana, 2016a; Prinsloo & Moletsane, 2013). It is clear that teachers such as those cited above were operating within such discourses, believing that heterosexual relations were more about informal or platonic feelings, such as "puppy crushes", and that Grade 3 boys were incapable of perpetrating sexual violence.

There are studies, however, that proves otherwise. For example, Swain's (2003) study on young masculinities revealed how the naturalisation of heterosexuality perpetuated misogynistic ideals. This resonates with my findings: Mr. Luhle, for example, dismissed the incident of the boy who kissed the girl in the classroom by saying "It was very funny". In so doing, he failed to acknowledge the incident as a sexual violation to the young girl who rejected the boy's sexual advances by pushing him away after he had kissed her. This has serious implications for young boys as it teaches them that they can get away with such actions: it makes it highly likely that they will continue to engage in such behaviour, as Gansen (2017) found in her study on the gendered and sexual socialisation of pre-school children in Michigan. Indeed, following Gansen—and several other scholars who have disrupted the notion of childhood innocence in primary schools, including Bhana (2016a), Renold (2005), MacNaughton (2000), Mayeza & Bhana (2017) and Thorne (1993)—I argue that failing to identify certain offences as violent merely because of a belief in the notion that children are still young and therefore innocent, serves to normalise violence in the school.

On a different level, teachers also sought to disrupt heterosexual relations by encouraging boys to establish friendships and platonic relations with girls—Mrs Neha and Mrs. Ella above are good examples. In this way they played a key role in regulating and policing sexuality while simultaneously failing to acknowledge that children are active sexual agents from a young age (Blaise, 2009).

Based on their belief in childhood innocence, teachers also felt that 8–9-year-old boys were too young to learn about sexuality. According to Mrs Mistry, for example, "Nine year olds are still their mother's baby and they don't have many thoughts [about sexuality], most of them, they are still too childish... And when you introduce them to sexuality at that age they are still so immature and obviously to them it's a joke". However, Depauli and Plaute (2018) demonstrated so well in their study of parents' and teachers' attitudes and expectations towards sexuality education in Austria, that teaching and learning about sexuality begins in early childhood. This is because children are aware of sexuality long before they can act on it, and hence require the skills to understand their emotions, bodies, and relationships from an early age. Acting on such evidence, the South African Department of Basic Education (2019) announced that

developmentally appropriate sexuality education will be delivered to children as young as 5-years-old, to help them understand the basic facts about social relationships and their bodies, and to recognise inappropriate behaviour. The intention is that they will receive the information, values, and skills to enjoy their sexuality and ultimately contribute to destabilising harmful gender norms and promote gender equality (Mayeza et al., 2021; Shefer et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2019).

Despite the state's commitment to delivering successful sexuality education, and while South Africa is currently testing with selected provinces its rollout of CSE for learners as early as Grade 4 (Ubisi, 2021); significant challenges lie in negative attitudes towards CSE among teachers and parents. Teachers' and parents' are plagued with tensions and anxieties stemming from broader social and cultural discourses which maintain that sexuality among young children is dangerous, irrelevant, and developmentally inappropriate with much controversy directed in particular at the age at which it should be introduced, the amount of time that should be dedicated to the topic, and the content that should be discussed with children (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Robinson et al., 2017). Mrs Mistry's attitude cited above, that 9-year-old children were still immature and too "childish" to learn about sexuality, was representative of this stance.

Yet, as I have clearly shown in previous chapters (Chapters 7 and 8 in particular), the various practices that young boys engaged in such as producing sexual graffiti, engaging in violence as means to protect heterosexual relationships, and bullying those who displayed non-conforming sexualities, there was clearly a great need for initiatives such as CSE. Teachers' perceptions of young boys as innocent blinded them to the fact that boys were indeed sexually knowing and key sexualised agents in the school. This is particularly problematic because it means that the inequalities and violence entrenched within heterosexual practices remain unaddressed and, Ngabaza & Shefer (2019) point out, it is unlikely that CSE can be effectively implemented while discourses of childhood innocence are so prevalent and pervasive.

When I asked teachers if they had come across homophobic bullying or homosexual learners, responses were along the following lines:

Mrs Mrinal: Not that I've experienced. Not that, our school, I mean from all the classes I've taught I've not seen that because our children are too small [young] to even identify it yet, maybe later in the years, but I've not experienced that.

Mrs Janvi: No, nothing in this school. Generally, children just get on very innocent[ly] with each other. They don't worry about colour, they don't worry about what gender or how [what sexual orientation] the child is. But as they grow bigger, I think that is when they learn... when they hear their peers talking or the family talking, then it starts. But children are innocent, they will play with anyone.

As I have shown (see Chapter 8), the boys in my study were alert to diverse sexualities and engaged in homophobic teasing, yet the teachers claimed that the children were innocent of such matters. Although teachers reported that sexual issues were largely pervasive in the high school, among older children, most were unaware that homophobia was pervasive in the primary school. In Bhana's (2012) study on addressing homophobia in South African schools, she argued that teacher perceptions of the primary school as an asexual setting can deter interventions towards the creation of a non-homophobic school environment. In Mrs Janvi's extract it was evident that she held the assumption that young children were unknowing of sexual orientation and hence they established "innocent" relations with each other. Following Bhana (2012), Mrs Janvi's perceptions can have implications for addressing possible homophobia in the school which may go unnoticed.

In addition Mrs Mistry, who had encountered non-conforming identities, sought to regulate the boys' masculinities and bring them back into line with hetero-normative standards:

Mrs Mistry: There was one child in Grade 7. He used to dance wearing saris [traditional Indian clothing] and wigs, like females, that's like transgender, but I think as he is growing, this age [11–13-years-old] learners are a bit harsh to others as well. They laugh, they make fun. It started at a young age. He had very feminine characteristics, you know, like he will play with girls, even his hand gestures were very feminine. But now he realised that children are laughing at him so he does not

dress like that anymore. Initially it was a joke and he loved it, he loved the attention of it.

Researcher: Do you promote sexual diversity?

Mrs Mistry: It's difficult—no, I think we are still old school [conservative]. We grew up in that society where we also look at them [homosexuals] differently and I guess they have their fun, but I won't promote it.

Researcher: If you noticed an 8–9-year-old boy displaying feminine behaviour, what would you do?

Mrs Mistry: Discourage him! Definitely discourage him, and I think I will call him and talk to him. I know a child who only plays with girls; he is teased. I had to call him and speak to him because when he goes to high school the kids there are worse off.

Drawing on her traditional views of sexuality Mrs Mistry thus attempted to alter the young boy's non-conforming masculinity and encourage him to align with normative heterosexual standards in the fear that he would be teased in high school. She did not consider homophobia serious in the primary school and, instead of working against discrimination there, she sought to disrupt the gendered behaviour of the young boy. She also downplayed the possibility that young children can be transgender, claiming that non-conforming practices were simply fun and a joke for them. Teachers are essential for the removal of discrimination in schools (Allen, 2020; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019); however it is evident that although government policy supports sexual diversity and learning about sexuality, issues of sex and sexuality are nevertheless silenced in the school. Indeed, although a majority of teachers claim that they support sexual diversity as required by South African legislation, a wide range of studies have provided evidence that teachers' continue to silence non-normative identities (Bhana, 2014; 2015; DePalma & Francis, 2014; Francis, 2019; Msibi, 2012). Ngabaza et al., (2016) argued that teachers' resistance to evidence of their learners' sexualities arises from social discourses which shape their own moral codes and sexual perceptions. Many teachers (such as Mrs Mistry in my study) subscribe to conservative, authoritarian, and hetero-normative discourses of gender and sexuality that act as a barrier to the sexual development of young children. Moreover, Levine (2002) argued that denying children the opportunity to be sexual and attempts to suppress their sexuality places them at risk to sexual

dangers and makes them ignorant to important information regarding their bodies and their sexuality. In their study of parents' perceptions of sexuality education in Australian primary schools, Robinson et al., (2017) found that children were considered too emotionally and cognitively immature to comprehend complex issues of sexuality despite sexuality informing much of their lives from a young age. They caution that this discourse of sexual innocence works to restrict and regulate children's sexuality, including their access to sexual knowledge. My study fully supports this finding: by discouraging the possibility of alternative sexualities, the school emerged as a site where the sexuality of young children was highly controlled and policed by teachers.

### **“You Can't Have Two Bulls in One Kraal”: Teachers' Awareness of Violence and Power Relations among Young Boys**

Much research in primary schools has highlighted hegemonic forms of masculinities that are characterised by power and authority as a significant factor behind acts of violence (Bartholomaeus, 2012; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021; Moosa, 2021; Swain, 2004; 2006a). These studies found that boys displayed hegemonic masculine characteristics associated with male dominance and supremacy in order to gain power over other boys and girls. The following interview extracts illustrate teachers' awareness and understandings regarding young boys' struggles for authority and masculine power:

Researcher: What are some of the reasons for boys' violence at school?

Mrs Neha: They want to show that they are macho, they are strong, and I'm stronger than you, mostly to other boys, not so much to girls.

Mrs Mrinal: They feel that they have to sort the problem out themselves and obviously if I hit the other person, you taunt me, I taunt you; it's like “Hey! I'm like a bully now! You can't hit me and I must keep quiet now”. So they want to assert themselves, to show dominance, to say “Hey you hit me, I will hit you back”.

Mrs Joseph: The boys don't apologise. They feel their right is right and they want to be right and they will want to argue and make that point. They don't want to apologise and take no for an answer or they don't like to be corrected. They are violent. You can

see incidents, even in the classroom, where they are taking objects—sharp objects—and poking one another. And there's a lot of kicking and punching, biting, a lot of bullying. Even some of the girls, I've noticed, are violent; they used to kick the boys. Mrs Ella: Well, we have very well behaved boys. On the other hand we also have boys that can be bullies; they just feel that they are bigger and they can dominate the little ones. It happens mostly during the break time because in class they are busy with work. We also have girls that can be bullies. Previously we used to find that girls were quieter than boys, more reserved, but I think now they also are very feisty.

Mr Luhle: You know it starts with something stupid: fighting games, competition in play—you know you have that saying “You can't have two bulls in one kraal<sup>19</sup>”. You have a male who is very out there, who is very commanding, he has very good leadership qualities but because those leadership qualities weren't directed in the right path, you see him now exercising it in other ways—gangsterism. There are lots of gangs on the [play] ground.

These excerpts resonate with the findings presented in Chapter 7 regarding how the dynamics of violence among young boys is connected to the establishment of masculine prowess. They indicate these teachers' awareness of the gendered nature of violence, characterised by boys' need to achieve and defend their masculine power and physical prowess. Mrs Joseph and Mrs Ella also noted that girls, too, were increasingly engaging in violence, which they mainly aimed at boys, simultaneously highlighting the gendered nature of violence as well as indicating that girls were moving away from being victims of violence by adopting increasingly non-normative feminine positioning in the school. Beyond schooling contexts, girls are no longer seen as passive, for example, popular media culture and novels now feature young female heroines who are rebel leaders and fighters which serve as examples of female empowerment and destabilises gender subordinating narratives that undermine the agency of females. A greater representation of female characters in media and movies allow for more opportunities for females to be depicted outside of traditional and stereotypical gender roles (Aley & Hahn, 2020).

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<sup>19</sup> A kraal refers to an African village with traditional hut homes that are enclosed by a fence. It is also an enclosure for sheep or cattle.

Mr Luhle focused on boys' violent behaviour as indicative of them competing to taking on leadership roles. His comment: "You can't have two bulls in one kraal" illustrates this sense of competition vividly. He added that when boys' impulses to achieve power are not channelled to the right path, they tend to fall into negative pursuits (he used the example of gangsterism). Carrera-Fernández et al., (2016) in their study of adolescent boys' perceptions of gendered bullying and constructions of masculinities through violence in Spanish schools, came to a similar conclusion: boys are in constant battle to achieve power, and brawls often occur as they strive for a position in the masculine hierarchy.

As I established in Chapter 7, power is deeply rooted in hegemonic masculinity. It operates through the dominance of one over another (Connell, 2002). Many teachers in my study believed that this power struggle was the most significant underlying factor entrenching violence among boys at school.

Teachers also raised concerns that boys rarely reported incidents of violence to them due to the importance they placed in upholding their masculine status:

Researcher: Why don't the boys' report violence?

Ms Ntuli: They think that they can solve the problem. That's what I noticed. They think that they can sort the problem by fighting each other.

Mrs Mrinal: We have to teach them that [to come and report violence to the teachers], but you see they don't know that yet...They don't understand the concept that if somebody hits me, I must come and report it to the teacher. They feel that they are inferior if they do that. The other person, you know, feels that they are inferior. They don't want to be seen as the aggrieved, like a sissy, because generally if you go to the teacher then boys say "Oh you are a sissy, you going to complain" but [instead] they box [fight] it up [out]. So that is why they want to react in that violent way, but we need to teach them, you have to reason.

Ms Ntuli and Mrs Mrinal were both concerned that boys attempted to resolve violence on their own by engaging in physical retaliation. Reporting violence to teachers, Mrs Mrinal's

perspective suggests, would result in boys compromising their hegemonic masculine position. In their study of how primary school teachers within a township setting in South Africa construct meanings of gender and how they respond to violence, Mayeza and Bhana's (2017) teacher participants noted that boys were considered as weak if they relied on teachers help to resolve incidents of violence in school. They further added that using violence to resolve violence results in reproducing violent gendered cultures. My findings resonate closely with Mayeza and Bhana's study where I too found that teachers were concerned about boys' retaliations to violence. Mrs Mrinal's solution was that teachers should speak to boys, teaching them that they do not have to use violence to conquer violence, and encouraging them to report incidents as an effective strategy to reduce violence. This is indeed a key step to addressing violence as pointed out by Mayeza and Bhana (2017) unless teachers recognise and address the consequences of not reporting violence it is not likely that learners will report violence to their teachers owing to the fear of victimisation.

### **Violence beyond the School: Socioeconomic Contexts, Home and Media**

Teachers also highlighted that boys were exposed to violence through violent content in the media and violence in the environment in which they live. Indeed, violence was ever-present within their lives, as it is in the lives of young children worldwide, existing in all contexts, including schools, families, workplaces, communities and neighbourhoods (Maternowska et al., 2020; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2017). Parkes (2015) argued that most often there is a focus on school violence instead of considering the broader sociocultural and political contexts where violence is constituted. However, many teachers in my study connected children's violence directly to their growing up in a culture of violence in the broader social context. According to Mr Singh:

Violent behaviour stems totally from the society that we are in. If I'm in a society, living in Groutville, Stanger [a rural area in KwaDukuza] and my parents don't have water and lights and they want to protest, I'm watching my dad going to protest, shouting and taking the sticks or whatever he is doing, burning the tyres—already that violence has ensued. Now, I'm also watching my father being confronted by the police

and fighting back because that is how protests occur. Protests are gone violent now and uncontrollable. So it's from society and it's coming from where you live.

Mr Singh pointed out that the violence and protests in which boys' fathers engage results in them internalising that violence and reproducing it themselves. While most learners come from affluent areas in close vicinity of the school, a few come from other areas of KwaDukuza, such as Groutville, where protest action is common. For example, in 2018, the Groutville community engaged in a violent protest against the KwaDukuza Municipality over electricity outages. Protesters barricaded roads with burning trees and tyres. One protester was shot in the leg, and a security guard was shot in his back by an unidentified person (Dlamini, 2018). In recent years there have also been protests in rural areas of KwaDukuza about poverty, economic hardship, and the (lack of) provision of low-cost housing. These broader political tensions, as Mr Singh argued, result in children internalising violent messages.

Several teachers also emphasised the link between boys' violence and their home situations:

Mrs Mrinal: Remember sometimes we are not aware of what children go through at home, we just see them in the classroom with 30 other children. I know of a child that said "Ma'am, my daddy hit my mummy", and it was affecting the child in school. In his work I could see that he wasn't concentrating, he wasn't doing his work. I asked "What's wrong?" and he said "No, I'm worried". His father was angry in the morning and his mother did something, so his father smacked her. So, you know, it's sad. Now remember he had to come with that from home.... I spoke to a child right, I asked him on the [play]ground, I said "Why do you behave like this? Why do you always like to fight, why do you always like to hit?" He said "No, I like to be gangster like my father". See, he said that: "I like to be a gangster like my father!" so that will tell you that he already knows what his father does so that he wants to be like that. Boys generally have their father as their role model, right, they have their dad as their role model and then he thinks "If my dad can do that then I too can do that". Remember, he is exposed to it all the time and that colloquial term [is so true]: "Monkey see, monkey do".

Mr Singh: A lot of them are witnessing their mothers getting beaten up at home and that leads to a violent child [who believes that he] can come and bully another female because your father is kicking your mother and hitting and shouting at her—we get a lot of aggressive males that are doing that. So that boy has grown up with one [sole] structure [belief] that girls are soft targets and the males are always right.

Mrs Mrinal's observations of the young boy's lack of concentration in the classroom and of another boy's behaviour on the playground led her to investigate the cause of their behaviour, and to determine that it stemmed from their home situation. According to UNICEF (2017) report 1 in 4 children under the age of 5 worldwide resides in a home where the mother is a victim of intimate partner violence. Studies have also shown that witnessing violence in the home places children at greater risk for developing depression and anxiety due to the perception of the dangers that exist within their environment, and shapes young children's perception of the world as dangerous and hostile (Bacchini & Esposito, 2020; Parkes, 2007). Furthermore, as I demonstrated in Chapter 9, exposure to male violence in the home results in boys viewing males as all-powerful and women as passive recipients of male power—and as I have shown (as have many others, see, for example, Parkes, 2007; 2015), boys tend to model themselves on their fathers' behaviours, reproducing them in the school.

While Mr Singh spoke about how socioeconomic constraints and struggles for resources entrenched violence in rural settings, other teachers, such as Mrs Rita, noted that more affluent families' access to technology and media also contributed to boys' exposure to violence:

The [more affluent] parents are more career-orientated; they are focused on climbing the corporate ladder—whether it's the mother or the father. They are so caught up in social media that, even when they come home, the children are a part of the furniture—they become a part of everything else around. They don't notice and focus on their child, and that is the reason why the children are behaving violently, in a way: to get the attention of the parent. But little does the parent realise that the children are wrong—they always come to fight with the teacher because they don't see the children doing anything wrong. When they get home from work the children are sitting in front

of the TV, with the cell phone and the ipad, so they feel the children are well-mannered, well-behaved. They don't see the other side, what we see in schools.

Most of the participants in this study came from lower-middle class backgrounds, where parents were very much career oriented. Mrs Rita's claim that, due to the working nature of most parents, children's practices and violent behaviour were ignored or unacknowledged, is an important one. It became evident, during my fieldwork, that parents' lack of awareness regarding their children's violent behaviours posed challenges for teachers trying to address violence in the school, especially when there is little or no support from them.

Several teachers connected boys' violent behaviour to the material they were exposed to through various media outlets:

Mrs Neha: Parents have busy lives, parents are working, they come from work and they got no time to supervise the children. They are left in front of the TV to be occupied. Parents feel that the TV is a babysitter and most of them have access to the internet. They have tablets, they watch violent movies on the tablet and they know how to use all these gadgets where there's no supervision.

Mrs Janvi: The small boys, I think they are not supervised whilst watching TV and they have spoken about sex, you know, not really knowing the deeper meaning of it, but telling it to you that they have been watching certain programs with technology....But a lot of parents find it easier to just give them technology, give them the tablet and let them watch or play whatever game because then the parents are free to do their own stuff.

Mrs Mrinal: TV is a babysitter, right? TV is a babysitter and this often happens. Parents have to do something, and parents are busy on their cell phone and say: "Go watch TV, go watch TV!" They are not worried what their children are watching, which channels they are going onto.

Mrs Rita: The media, and the kind of movies these children watch as well, and the play station—sometimes it's not age appropriate. It's for older boys but, because they have older siblings, they are playing the same games. Also, the parents don't monitor

what they are buying, they don't look at age. They also watch WWE and they want to be the super heroes that they see on TV. They feel that if they are doing that they are fighting and being those characters. They want to be super heroes themselves.... So, whatever they are seeing at home, they are bringing to school as well.

According to Fitzpatrick et al.'s, (2016) study on children's early exposure to media violence, parents are significant gatekeepers of children's exposure and access to media. The teachers quoted above were adamant, however, that many of their learners' parents left their children unsupervised with a range of devices, thus enabling them to be exposed to a range of violent or sexually explicit content which influenced how they spoke and behaved in the school. These devices were also a significant tool used by parents to occupy learners at home. Teachers claimed that due to the socioeconomic conditions in the home where boys were exposed to a variety of resources, they were able to construct violent masculinities. As argued by Fitzpatrick et al. (2016), movies, music videos, and television programmes are all vehicles that convey gender stereotypes and early exposure to media content with high levels of violence is likely to result in the development of harmful gender stereotypes which children may normalise.

Notwithstanding teachers' views on the negative impact of media on young boys' constructions of violence, in Chapter 7 of this thesis I presented findings which demonstrated my research participants' potential to navigate their identities in more responsible ways. Nonetheless, while boys may have the potential to act in responsible ways, parents and guardians still have a critical role to play acting as what Fitzpatrick et al. (2016) refer to as gatekeepers of their children's exposure to undesirable media content.

While teachers were able to highlight the concerning factors that contributed to boys' violence at home, they faced challenges in addressing boys' violent behaviours in school. In the next section I discuss the challenges and strategies that teachers experienced in their efforts to discipline the boys at school.

## **Enforcing Discipline: Teachers' Perspectives on Corporal Punishment**

Since the ban on corporal punishment in schools, teachers felt despair and anxiety regarding alternative methods of discipline (Mayisela, 2018). Corporal punishment became a norm in the South African education system during the apartheid era, particularly because of the authoritative nature of Bantu Education (Mahlangu et al., 2021; Morrell, 2001a). Under the Bantu Education system, teachers were trained to use rote methods of teaching, act as authoritarians, and employ corporal punishment as a means to train children to conform to suppression. It was a patriarchal system in which senior positions were held by men. With South Africa's transition to democracy, the country became committed to human rights, and part of this was the abolition of corporal punishment in schools (Hunter & Morrell, 2021; Mahlangu et al., 2021; Mayisela, 2018), which meant that teachers have had to develop alternative methods of disciplining learners. Teachers shared their concerns about the challenge:

Mrs Rita: It's hard to discipline boys because, in the teaching profession, our hands are tied. So discipline is becoming an issue. Whether it's verbally—well, there's no physical contact [allowed]—but even verbally, as well, you got to watch what you say to them. Because of that, our discipline is becoming a problem. I think it's throughout the schools; it's not only in our school. So discipline is becoming a problem and is becoming an issue where we are finding that we are hitting against a wall because parents don't believe that their children are naughty and they are ill-mannered.

Mrs Mrinal: Now remember, knowing how strict I am, you know it's really an upward battle to discipline them because you know we are not allowed to even touch them. I have to call him to stand by me. Of course we don't inflict corporal punishment on them; however, whether it's a girl or a boy you are grounded [in methods of enforcing punishment].

Mrs Neha: Disciplining boys? Well I will say giving them extra work, making them sit in front of the class, isolating them from the other children—because corporal punishment is not allowed, so we got to use other methods. Giving them responsibility and keeping them occupied all the time, so that they will get out of mischief [are some of the strategies that can be used].

Mrs Ella: In class I don't have a problem because I make sure that they are with me. If they get out of hand then they do get demerits and that happens with boys and girls.

Mrs Rita and Mr Mrinal each have more than 25 years of teaching experience, while Mrs Neha and Mrs Ella have been in the profession for almost 35 years. This means that in the past corporal punishment was employed as a method to discipline. Indeed, prior 1994, corporal punishment was a fundamental part of school life for learners and teachers alike; it was a key teaching tool to manage classroom behaviour (Mahlangu et al., 2021; Mayisela, 2018; Morrell, 2001a). Studies have found, however, that for many teachers' corporal punishment remains a key disciplinary option, mainly due to the feelings of helplessness they have when trying to deal with violence in the school (Hunter & Morrell, 2021; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013), and that it is still pervasive in South African schools. Most of the female teachers in this study voiced this sense of helplessness, as is evident from Mrs. Rita's responses: "Our hands are tied" and "Our discipline is becoming a problem" and Mrs Mrinal's: "It's really an upward battle to discipline". Such responses imply that teachers find discipline to be a problem now because of the prohibition of corporal punishment. The continued use of corporal punishment illustrates how masculinity and power are entrenched through violence and reinforced within the school system—which in turn reinforces the idea that masculinity can be controlled only through violence (Hunter & Morrell, 2021). Lwo and Yaun (2011) pointed out that teachers fail to construct appropriate strategies to deal with boys' behaviour as they put too much emphasis on the prohibition of corporal punishment instead of considering the positive side to the ban which marks a new era in learner discipline, and offers teachers an opportunity to inculcate human rights values and promote peaceable relations.

Mrs Neha and Mrs Ella, however, had both developed alternative strategies for disciplining learners, such as ensuring disruptive boys were kept busy with various tasks and isolated them from others in the classroom. The demerit point system was also employed as a strategy to manage discipline—this is a system of punishment given to learners as a penalty for misconduct and unwanted behaviour. Parents are called to a meeting with the teacher to discuss misconduct when learners accumulate a total of five demerit points. Foucault (1977) argued that in schools boys' actions are closely monitored and that they are under strict surveillance as they are

expected to conform to the normative dictates of the schooling system. Hence, boys experience oppression as a way to control their behaviour. They are identified as the problem, rather than addressing the gendered relations of power. My findings resonated with Foucault's argument as I found that while the demerit point system might have worked to keep boys well-behaved, addressing their violent masculinities were not evident in teachers' interventions. Hence, although teacher authority and surveillance may deter boys from engaging in violent behaviour, in the lack of teacher supervision, for example on the playground, boys are free to perpetrate violence (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017).

Most of the teachers complained about boys' behaviour, saying that they were often naughty and ill-mannered. Reflecting on my observations and interactions with teachers, I noted the following in my field notes:

Field notes: Date: 29 January 2018 Time: 07:05 Place: The staffroom

It is a week since I welcomed my new class of Grade 3 learners. I spent much time initially getting to know them and making them feel comfortable in the new classroom environment. My approach to discipline was based on exploring their strengths and weaknesses and developing ways to assist them, drawing on positive reinforcement, encouragement, praising good behaviour, seeking apology, and demonstrating caring attitudes towards each other.

My interaction with their previous Grade 2 teachers was unfavourable. The Grade 2 teachers often complained about how disruptive the class was and pinpointed several boys in the class who they labelled as naughty, rude, and ill-mannered. They often said to me "Wait until you meet Keylan", or "Shiven is so naughty, I don't know how you are going to manage with him", or "Kanelo is so badly behaved". Instead of getting to know children from a clean slate, teachers attached harmful labels onto them which sought to shape the way others would perceive them. Most of the time teachers would label boys and complain about how naughty they were in the classroom. They would discuss their behaviour openly in the staffroom even in the presence of pre-service teachers. This often led to teachers creating a negative perception towards particular

boys in the school. They further expressed their desire to inflict corporal punishment onto them as a method to discipline. However, most teachers did not engage in physical methods of discipline. Instead, they drew on verbal methods by saying to boys “You are so naughty”, or “You cannot behave”, and sometimes labelling them with inhuman terms. For example, Mr Singh noted in his interview: “We have teachers in school that call children monkeys, then they use their own language and call them *bandar*’s which also means monkey” [in Hindi].

Notwithstanding many teachers’ rejection of physical punishment as a method to enforce discipline due to the need to comply with policy rules and regulations, most did, however, engage in verbal methods of punishment by labelling and insulting boys, which nonetheless contravenes policy and the professional conduct of teachers (SACE, 2020). While Indian migrants have undergone significant changes since the time of their arrival in South Africa such as adopting the English language as their first language (Desai, 2019; Vahed & Desai, 2010), it was evident that some teachers continued to have a deep connection to their ethnic heritage, and strove to continue using their native language—hence some used Hindi words like *bandar* [monkey] to insult learners. Haavind et al., (2014) vividly demonstrated in their study on the experiences of subordination faced by Chinese American elementary school girls in the United States how language can be employed to inflict violence on others, and this resonated clearly with my study, where teachers used verbal insults to embarrass learners, even if they were largely unaware of the meaning of those words. According to Nearchou (2018) verbal punishment does little to maintain discipline in the school. Instead, using insulting words impacts negatively on learners’ self-esteem while being ineffective in addressing learners’ misbehaviours. Moreover, labelling learners as violent can result in persistent misbehaviour as it fails to offer any positive encouragement (Lansdown, 2020). It also infringes on the rights of learners to learn in an environment that is safe and respectful.

Returning to the challenges teachers faced when disciplining boys, Mrs Joseph shared the following:

With the boys, to discipline them it's a bit difficult because they have a mind of their own. When you want to discipline them and talk to them, they just don't want to listen. With this generation I have noticed Grade 3 boys are very advanced compared to our years [in the past]. They know a lot, and they are very naughty and not disciplined.... I have noticed, even with manners—there are no manners. Now there's no respect and where they can even just call the teachers by their names, not addressing as ma'am or sir.

It is evident from the above that Mrs Joseph felt a sense of powerlessness due to her failure to discipline the boys effectively. Mrs Joseph also raised concerns that boys lacked morals and values such as respect, which was different to how boys were in the past—and this is supported by the fact that boys were now addressing teachers by their first names, also suggesting a shift in the dynamics of power between children and teachers. Prior to 1994, learners were expected to obey rules and respect to teachers' authority (Mayisela, 2018; Morrell, 2001a). Violent practices along with racial segregation were a way of moulding learners' behaviour and ensuring class divides. Schools were also constructed as coercive, violent institutions of control which promoted colonial agenda structured to produce non-white workers for the white colonialist (Adzahlie-Mensah & Dunne, 2019). The fact that the boys Mrs Joseph encountered failed to obey her suggests that teachers need to shift away from the traditional educational structure, established in the colonial and apartheid era, that relied on corporal punishment to ensure learners' compliance, and instead adopt a more holistic approach that seeks to understand boys' behaviour and their reasons for behaving in the ways that they do.

### **Teacher's Views on Addressing Violence in School**

In the discussion earlier (see page 230), I showed that teachers were well aware of boys' need to uphold their sense of masculinity and achieve masculine power, which was key to their perpetration of violence. In this section I demonstrate that while some teachers spoke of the need to inculcate values such as respect and equality in their learners, they failed to address the underlying gender inequalities in which unequal power relations were entrenched and held in

place through the use of violence. Indeed, addressing issues of sexuality and promoting sexual diversity did not feature at all in their responses. According to Mrs Mrinal:

We try to sort out this problem [violence] at an early age, from like Grade R, where you identify these kinds of children and then you work with them, you talk to them. Boys are equal [to girls], I don't treat them differently because once you start doing that then you have major problems. For me, I think it's equal because we live in that democracy now. There's no discrepancy between girls and boys so we have to start learning that as well. I impress on them that we are one big family, that's what we are. We are here to help each other, we are here to support each other, we are here to respect each other in spite of our colour, creed, religion, race—we are one big family.

Mrs Mrinal emphasised the need to inculcate values of respect and support, and the importance of learners developing platonic relations with one another. She also mentioned the need to address the problem of violence from a young age. Her views resonated with Keddie's (2003) ethnographic study on how a group of 5–8-year-old boys define, regulate and construct their masculinity in Australia, which noted that it is important to address the gender ideologies which perpetuate violence in the early years of primary schooling. However, in his study on conducting boyhood programmes on issues of gender and violence in Australian high schools, Mills (2000) argued that simply empowering boys without considering gender power does little to confront the main issue of boys' privileged position of gender power in schools; rather, it is likely to contribute to protecting that privileged position. Mills therefore contends that teachers should acknowledge the ways in which boys are socially privileged through existing gender relations within which power is entrenched.

I found that teachers were, on the whole, largely unaware of the homophobic attitudes amongst some of their learners, and they also sought to correct non-conforming behaviour. For example, while Mrs Mrinal mentioned that learners should respect each others' "colour, creed, religion, race", she did not mention respect for diverse forms of sexuality. Mrs Mrinal, as with the other teacher participants (for example, Mrs Mistry and Mrs Janvi) were largely unaware that sexuality

played a significant role in the construction and perpetuation of violence in the school. Hence, issues of homophobia and subordination in the school would remain unaddressed.

In his endeavours to address violence, and in contrast to Mrs Mrinal, Mr Singh spoke about the ways in which boys were socialised around harmful hegemonic norms which encouraged them to be violent. He claimed that part of the reason why boys adopted violent characteristics was because teachers and parents promoted hegemonic traits:

We have this norm and the thing that is instilled in our head that we must always toughen—we always want to toughen the boy, he must be tough, he must learn to be a boy. But we have parents and teachers that want the boy to be a totally macho guy. Let me tell you, ma'am, we need to build our sons up to show them they must have some softness; they must have some compassion. We are teaching our children, some of them, to just be this alpha male, and that's what they end up doing in society.

In South Africa, there is a lack of male teachers in the FP of teaching (Moosa & Bhana, 2020). This is largely because FP teaching is traditionally recognised as a feminised profession, and essentialised discourses impede men's involvement in the profession. Male teachers who do teach in the FP are often positioned as authoritative and strict. They usually take up management positions and leadership roles and are called upon to address discipline problems, mainly through the use of corporal punishment (Moosa & Bhana, 2017; Palmer et al., 2020). In this way, male teachers uphold masculine norms and promote male power. Mr Singh, however, did not support the construction of boys' identities informed by hegemonic masculinity which normalised "macho" male characteristics. He pointed out that hegemonic traits were promoted by parents and by society in general, and that the socialisation of young boys into violent ways will shape how they behave in society in the future. In acknowledging the negative behaviours associated with masculinity, Mr Singh demonstrated a progressive approach to addressing male violence, and he proposed that boys be encouraged to demonstrate alternative, gentle versions of masculinities rather than the macho norms. His response suggests that teachers can take a lead in changing the way society thinks and talks about gender.

Mr Luhle and Mr Singh both mentioned the importance of promoting alternative, caring ways of interacting with boys:

Mr Luhle: With the boys I feel I must be very much gentle with them because I feel maybe with the fathers; maybe they get the toughness at home. I have seen Leah with her father. I can see a female who doesn't have a tight [strong] relationship with her father—it's more of a dictatorship... I can show her that you can talk to me. You can talk to me because she needs to have a healthy relationship with a male figure, not just a teacher, but a male figure.

Mr Singh: I think we need to show the young boys that they must learn to love. We as teachers need to instil in boys that there are so many different ways of loving, and learn to show love because [otherwise] they are going to grow up in a loveless society here.

Mr Luhle and Mr Singh expressed the need to demonstrate values of care as a way of addressing discipline among boys and girls. Referring to how many learners come from homes where their fathers display dominant masculine behaviour, Mr Luhle argued that adopting notions of care and approaching children in a gentle manner would help to counterbalance such negative influences. He stressed the need for young boys and girls who witness authoritative, violent masculinities, for example, from their fathers, to develop alternate subjectivities of thinking about men instead of constructing a damaging, hegemonic perception of all men. In this way young boys will construct their masculinity in ways that will enable them to form healthy relations with other boys, girls, men and women. Mr Luhle's and Mr Singh's notion of instilling the values of love and care indicates the shifting nature of masculinity where male teachers are able to challenge orthodox representations of masculinity. According to McGrath et al.'s (2019) study on the importance of having both female and male teachers in primary schools, they argued that if male teachers' project alternative masculinities based on the notions of care, children can realise that not all men are violent and macho, and that alternative, caring masculinities are possible. They can also learn from a young age to understand how to better interact with men.

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that teachers were instrumental in the promotion of masculinities. Teachers' observations and experiences of interacting with 8–9-year-old boys offer a nuanced understanding regarding the prevalence of violence in the boys' lives. Because of the strength of traditional norms regarding sexuality and the discursive positioning of childhood as synonymous with the notion of innocence, most teachers did not recognise the extent to which sexuality permeated the lives of young children. Because of a deeply rooted belief that children are sexually unknowing, teachers believed that their heterosexual desires were simply innocent “crushes”, and they tended to dismiss behaviour patterns that could have been associated with sexuality. They also sought to encourage platonic relations between boys and girls based on the view that children were too young to comprehend sexuality. Despite the findings I presented in Chapter 8, which illustrated how boys were indeed highly sexualised, teachers tended to ignore the possibility that boys were capable of perpetrating sexual violence. Such attitudes served to promote and normalise acts of sexual violence by the boys at school—a finding that has been stressed in other studies, too (see Renold, 2005, for example).

Some teachers also sought to regulate the behaviour of learners who displayed non-conforming masculinities. Teachers were generally unaware of the prevalence of homophobic attitudes in the school, but those who did interact with non-conforming masculinities sought to encourage boys to move towards hetero-normative positionings in order to avoid discrimination. This is particularly problematic because, as Bhana (2012) argued, the construction of heterosexuality as the norm and the silencing of sexually diverse learners signifies a betrayal of South Africa's democratic principle of respect for sexual diversity. I found that teachers' attitudes towards sexuality were largely informed by traditional normative discourses. Failing to address discrimination in the school, and teachers' disregard for sexual diversity implies that homophobic attitudes towards non-conforming masculinities and inequalities will remain unproblematised in the school.

While teachers dismissed sexuality in the early years, their narratives about violence indicated that they drew connections between violence, masculinity, and power. Several teachers spoke

about the power struggle that was entrenched in boys' relations to each other, and how this was also linked to their need to uphold masculinity and achieve a desirable position on the masculinity hierarchy. Participants' also revealed how boys sought to dominate and compete with each other in ways characteristic of hegemonic masculinity where power is deeply rooted. Their responses contributed to an understanding of how violence was enacted in the school as a means to maintain masculinity. Teachers' acknowledgement of violence as being associated with hegemonic power is significant as it can work towards developing interventions to address violence in schools (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017).

Teachers also provided insights into the lives of young boys, drawing on their interactions and observations of the learners. It became evident that masculinity and violence was shaped within the broader socioeconomic and political environment in which the boys lived. Moreover, learners were exposed to violence from media content and also witnessed violence perpetrated by family members, particularly fathers. Some teachers raised concerns that boys sought to model themselves on the hegemonic behaviour displayed by their fathers—this was a key focus of Chapter 9, where I showed that boys held their fathers in high regard and desired to emulate them in negative ways as well as positive ways. This resonates with Parkes (2015), who argued that being immersed in a setting where males are seen as the perpetrators of violence can impact on the way children construct and create subjectivities of masculinity based on male power. Nonetheless, while the broader social environment promotes a culture of violence which may impact on the way boys construct their masculinity, it is important for teachers to also acknowledge children as participatory actors who can bring about significant change in their lives and thus build on developing their agency to resist violence and transform their realities (López et al., 2020).

Teachers also raised concerns that parents lacked awareness regarding the violent behaviour of boys. Parents' busy working lives meant that children were exposed to harmful media content unsupervised. Several participants pointed out that this gave boys the opportunity to explore sexual and violent content—a point which I discussed in more depth in Chapter 7. This chapter also discussed how, since the abolishment of corporal punishment; teachers have grappled with finding effective methods to discipline boys. Rather than considering the positive rationale of the

ban which involves establishing mutual respect between teachers and learners and inculcating human rights values, teachers' reliance on corporal punishment reinforces the notion that masculinity can be controlled in violent ways (Naong, 2007). Their positioning of boys as violent and their use of verbal methods to discipline learners, contravenes education policy as well as the regulations regarding the professional conduct of teachers (SACE, 2020). While the male teachers in this study were able to problematise boys hegemonic behaviour and offered solutions to assisting boys navigate their masculinity in peaceable ways, the findings show that there is a need for female teachers to adopt a more holistic approach to discipline, that also seeks to examine the rationale behind boys' violence and develop methods to address their behaviour instead of simply labelling boys as violent—which can also result in them internalising harmful gender norms.

Teachers spoke about the need to inculcate better moral values within their system of discipline, but were unable address boys' violent masculinities and their privileged position in school. This indicates that there is a need to help boys to reflect on their masculinities and the inequitable power relations that are entrenched in their violent practices. Indeed, male teachers contested the construction of boys' masculinities in relation to hegemonic discourses and proposed that boys should be encouraged to adopt gentle and non-hegemonic versions of masculinities. The male teacher participants sought to be role models for types of masculinity based on notions of care, thereby showing children that men have the potential to project non-hegemonic ways which can help them form healthy relations with people, drawing on an understanding that not all men are violent. Male teachers' concern to embrace alternative caring versions of masculinity worked towards contesting hegemonic masculinities, showing that they can be disrupted and replaced in the quest for a non-violent school culture.

## **Chapter 11: Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

A dominant perception in society is that children are innocent to concepts of gender and sexuality and thus unable to discuss such topics. For this reason primary schools are often considered to be solely sites for teaching and learning—although supported by policies such as CSE which aim to promote sexual knowledge and diversity—discussions about gender and sexuality are avoided (Bhana, 2012; Blaise, 2005). My focus on young masculinities, in this thesis, has captured boys’ active investment in gender and sexual cultures, unbound from dominant adult discourses which have traditionally sought to closet or ignore children’s sexual knowledge and experiences. My engagement with the boys in this study led me to find that they are, indeed, knowledgeable about both gender and sexuality, and this finding shakes the very foundations of monolithic accounts of children as sexually unknowing. Boys experienced ongoing struggles to get their masculinities right, influenced by a range of social discourses regarding what they should and should not do. The pressures to be the right kind of boy resulted in their complex and active negotiation of masculinities. Indeed, they were authorities of their own social lives, and they sometimes conformed to—and sometimes actively contested—the “rules” of masculinities in a range of different contextual situations.

The insights I gained about boys’ masculine experiences underscore the need to revisit the ways in which children are perceived in terms of what they think and what they know. Recent studies on gender in childhood have moved towards a more progressive theorisation of young boys and girls. For example, Mayeza and Bhana (2020) alerted our attention to boys’ engagement in hegemonic masculinity in the primary school, following an incident where a Grade 2 boy carried a loaded firearm to school with the intention to harm another learner. An emotional and psychological evaluation of the boy followed after the incident, with the aim of diagnosing and “fixing” his violent personality. While not undermining the importance of psychological interventions, the authors emphasised the need to also consider the interplay of economic, social, and cultural circumstances which are central in the shaping of masculinities.

According to recent statistics, 688 primary school girls (aged 9–10) in South Africa gave birth in 2020 (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Statistics such as these accentuate the need to rupture outdated discourses that revolve around notions of childhood passivity, and which make it difficult to realise children’s active investment in gender and sexuality. Throughout this study I have therefore foregrounded boys’ agency in the construction of their masculinities and have demonstrated how broader historical and social categories of race, class, culture, and traditional values intersect with dominant gender and sexual discourses across various social spaces to enable boys’ plural negotiations of masculinities. In the sections that follow I reflect on the central findings of my study and discuss how they contribute to the developing body of research on young masculinities in South Africa. I end by offering suggestions for potential interventions that could be employed in schools—and in society more generally—as well as suggestions for future research.

## **Key Findings**

### ***Masculinities and Boys’ Negotiation of Violence***

One of the most pronounced and pervasive of my findings was the active ways through which boys engaged in violence as a fundamental way to construct and validate their masculinities. In Chapter 7 I demonstrated that violence was engendered in the early years of schooling and that boys were not vulnerable recipients of violence. Indeed, boys struggled to achieve hegemonic masculinities by exercising power associated with violence. This involved inflicting physical and verbal violence onto other boys as means to defend and affirm their masculinities and to avoid being labelled frail and timid. The normative hegemonic discourses based on ideal ways of being a boy often contributed to unequal gender relations where femininity and non-conforming masculinities were denigrated.

Race and skin colour were also factors that shaped identity and engendered violence. Indeed, racial and social conflict were prevalent in boys’ negotiation of violent masculinities and this, as I demonstrated, was in large part a result of the racial stereotypes inherited from South Africa’s apartheid past. For example, some Indian boys were discriminated against and subordinated by other Indian boys on the basis of their having a darker skin tone. It also emerged that Indian boys

were concerned that black boys would react in physically violent ways if they swore at them. These concerns were also shaped by historically-rooted perceptions of black males as inherently violent. Many of my black participants, however, undermined homogenous stereotypes of them as violent through the ways in which they negotiated their masculinities, striving to be peaceable and to avoid violence. These findings highlight how it is almost impossible to comprehend the early makings of masculinities without acknowledging the broader contextual issues related to historical processes. This is a finding that has also been stressed by other scholars (Bhana, 2016a; Frosh et al., 2002).

While racial and class-based subjectivities shaped boys' negotiation of violent masculinities, Indian and black boys also came together in challenging times, offering support to one other. Their negotiation of hegemonic power was not static: they achieved power in specific conditions that prevailed in their lives, and were stripped off it at other times, often owing to socioeconomic constraints or their failure to live up to normative masculine expectations. Power was thus made and remade in different situations and contexts.

Girls also policed boys' behaviour and perpetrated physical violence onto them, and this, too, illustrates the complex power relations in children's interactions, and that power was not always in the domain of boys. Although the focus of this study is not on girls, the findings point to the need to examine girls' performances of violence in ways that show that they are not always helpless victims of male power.

My fieldwork drew attention to the diverse models of masculinities that exist outside of the normative hegemonic notions which have traditionally been linked to men and violence in South Africa. Many boys sought to construct their masculinities in caring, peaceable ways, and advocated for non-violent masculine projections. Some boys also endeavoured to help hegemonic, violent boys by seeking to understand the social factors that contribute to their violent masculinities and offering support to them. Connell's (1995) theorisations of masculinities as fluid and shifting were highly significant here, helping me to redirect my analytical gaze toward examining how discourses of masculinities are malleable. In this way I was able to show that essentialist depictions of gender or race and hegemonic practices of

violence were not homogeneously experienced by all boys. These findings imply that it is crucial to understand boys' investment in male power, dominance, and subordination in their early making of masculinities.

### ***Young Boys and Their Construction of Heterosexual Masculinities***

The school was a key social and cultural site for boys to redefine their masculinities in a range of spaces where they could perform, hide, share their knowledge of, and negotiate their gender and sexuality. In Chapter 7 I demonstrated how boys illustrated their sexual knowledge by creating sexualised drawings on the walls of the boy's toilets—knowledge that they gained from popular media culture. Chapter 8 highlighted the various ways through which boys embraced heterosexual scripts in the process of enacting their masculinities. Heterosexuality was a pervasive and normalising force that regulated their sexuality and their relationships in ways that constrained or empowered their masculinities. Boys actively invested in heterosexual masculinity, finding pleasure in it but also having to navigate compulsory heterosexuality in complex and risky ways. For example, negotiating heterosexual competition amidst socioeconomic constraints and idealised notions of the male body, and venturing beyond the school gates and risking their health to embody a “cool” masculine image.

Conflict arose against the backdrop of boys' social realities marked by their lack of material resources. For example, Indian boys were considered to be economically well off by black boys and therefore they could win girlfriends while the latter had to navigate their sexuality in the face of material deprivation, which they understood as rendering them disadvantaged in their pursuit of girlfriends. Indeed, the intersections of race and socioeconomic factors provided particular contours for the perpetuation of physical and heterosexual violence. Boys were competitive with one another over girls, and their behaviour and appearance were geared to being attractive to girls and aggressive towards rivals. It was also evident that the provider role manifested in the need to give presents to girls in order to secure heterosexual relationships.

Heterosexualised pressures to be the “right” kind of boy, and the subordination and exclusion of boys perceived to be feminine, also featured strongly in daily interactions between boys. Even

subordinated boys, however, challenged verbal abuse aimed at them by utilising their agency to affirm their non-hegemonic identity. For example, boys who were teased as soft or unmanly challenged these assumptions through their own confidence in embracing softer versions of masculinities. This finding resonates with Connell's (1995) notion of fluid and plural version of masculinities.

These findings draw our attention to how young boys are sexual beings and highlight the need to abandon dominant framings of children as “too young” to understand sexuality. I exercise caution, however, in that while boys spoke about girlfriends, homosexuality, and their awareness of sex as being focused on heterosexuality, their narratives may not necessarily carry the same meanings for themselves as they do for adults. I found that although my participants may have desired mature projections of their identities, this did not mean that they shared an adult logic of sexuality. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that understandings of children as blank slates are flawed: as I have demonstrated, they are actively involved in and knowledgeable about sexuality.

### ***Boys' Construction of Masculinity in the Context of Families***

My study led to a broader analysis of masculinities which extended beyond schooling to the context of families within which gender and sexual discourses—often positioned within essentialised binary notions—were reproduced. This shaped the masculine subjectivities of young boys as they sought to reiterate, challenge, or contest particular gender discourses, drawing on their agency.

It was evident that discourses of hetero (sexuality) were dominant in the context of families. Boys were pressured, often in verbally abusive ways to pursue heterosexual relations. Parents also sought to regulate boys' sexuality by warning them against homosexuality and they policed the boundaries of sexuality by discouraging homosexuality through threats of exclusion from the home and through physical violence. Boys thus internalised heterosexuality as a normative way of being a boy and this resulted in them responding in negative and exclusionary ways to boys who failed to comply with hetero-normative standards in the school.

The various local contexts from which the boys emerged, along with the traditional values they drew on through their families and society more broadly, shaped their subjectivities of masculinity in diverse way. For example, black boys living in farming contexts were socialised into hegemonic masculinity through the practice of stick fighting, while black boys from urban areas practiced their masculinity through fist fights. Although some boys prized male power and sought to reinforce and reproduce the hegemonic concepts demonstrated by male figures such as their fathers in the home, other boys challenged hegemonic definitions of fatherhood by advocating for men's involvement in nurturance and care. Interestingly, most participants said that their fathers did not support corporal punishment and that it was their mothers who inflicted harsh physical punishments on them. This finding suggests the fallibility of fixed and essentialist understandings of women's and men's roles in the household. As I demonstrated, boys desired a peaceful home environment, calling for non-violent methods of discipline and claiming that physical punishment did not offer them any guidance or teach them about values but, rather, resulted in their relentless misconduct. This perception could usefully be directed towards informing practices and strategies to mitigate the occurrence of corporal punishment in the home and also at school.

### ***Teachers' Perceptions and Responses to Childhood Gender, Sexuality, and Violence***

Several studies have found that teachers operate within the discourse of childhood innocence hence boys violent and heterosexual behaviour often goes unnoticed in the primary school (MacNaughton, 2000; Renold, 2005). In Chapter 10, I sought to provide a broader perspective on young masculinities through an analysis of teachers' views and perceptions of childhood gender, sexuality, and violence. Indeed, popular assumptions of childhood innocence contributed to the reason why teachers in my study refuted the primary school as a sexual site. Teachers believed that heterosexual relations were more about platonic feelings for girls, and that primary school boys were too young to speak about girlfriends or hold any knowledge of sexuality. Moreover, teachers failed to recognise and address sexual discrimination and boys' sexual approaches to girls.

Renold (2005) argued that teachers are often blind to abstract notions of gender which is why boys' engagement in sexual harassment is often ignored. This has serious implications because by not reporting or responding to sexual incidents, as Renold pointed out, teachers convey a message that sexual abuse is tolerated, and this contributes to the ongoing problem of violence. It is also vital that teachers render visible the active ways in which boys perform their gender and sexuality if they are to ensure that hegemonic practices and gender inequalities are fully addressed.

Although the teachers in my study failed to acknowledge children as sexual agents, they did connect boys' violence with the need to achieve masculine power. They also connected boys' violence to the broader social context: the boys' communities where violence was pervasive, their homes, and exposure to unsupervised media content. Indeed, the South African Schools Act (1996) abolished the use of corporal punishment in schools, and prescribes that the authority of teachers be used to foster the development of mutual respect between learners and teachers in order to create a positive learning environment. This has meant that teachers have had to come up with alternate means of disciplining learners that do not compromise their rights. Some of the teachers in my study felt that they now lacked authority and power in their classrooms, but most employed various other strategies—such as the demerit system—and sought to isolate trouble makers and ensure they were kept busy with various tasks in the classroom. However, although these strategies helped to keep boys well-behaved in the classroom, they failed to address the underlying power inequalities and boys' hegemonic behaviour, especially on occasions when boys perpetrated violence outside of the classroom.

The teachers emphasised the importance of inculcating the values of respect and equality in their endeavours to address violence however, sexual diversity did not feature in their responses—largely due to their lack of awareness regarding children's constructions of sexuality and how violence is perpetuated in boys' negotiation of sexuality. Nonetheless, my findings revealed that FP male teachers displayed caring attitudes and were sensitive to boys' constructions of hegemonic masculinities. They proposed that teachers take the lead in changing the way society talks about gender and that they should encourage boys to construct themselves in gentler ways in order to facilitate gender equitable versions of masculinities.

Teacher participants in this study were well aware of how hegemonic masculinity was constructed against wider structural constraints but they also need to consider children as significant agents of change who have the capacity to respond positively towards the violence and inequalities they experience. Way (2019) proposed in her study on young masculinities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that we re-imagine young boys by facilitating their voices and encouraging them to share their pleasures and challenges, thereby moving towards freeing them from their vulnerabilities and struggles. This is a fundamental starting point for school stakeholders to plan and apply effective interventions in order to encourage non-violent masculinities which can ultimately help facilitate safer school environments for all learners.

While the main findings of my study confirm and endorse the theories that have been widely presented in various scholarship on young masculinities (see Bartholomaeus, 2013; Bhana, 2016a; Paechter, 2007; Renold, 2005; 2007; Swain, 2004; 2006a), they also shed light on important factors that should be taken into account, such as the impact of unique socioeconomic contexts, the local dynamics in which boys are situated, the specific age of the participants, and their racial profiles. Indeed, the different ways of being boy were shaped by the school culture (policies, teacher perceptions, peer interactions); wider structures, including family beliefs, attitudes and values; and popular media culture, all of which shaped how boys experienced and constructed their masculinities in plural and heterogeneous ways.

Renold (2005) suggested that using boys' own experiences as a starting point to informing interventions is important as these can support boys to navigate their masculinities in positive ways. It requires all school stakeholders (the principal, members of the school governing body, teachers, and parents) to take seriously what boys have to say about their lives, their challenges, their experiences, and their silences—and, above all, to understand that identity is shaped by social and political power but that it is also fluid and open to change.

### **Key Recommendations**

Based on the findings of my study, in this section I offer possible interventions to address boys' masculinities within and beyond the primary school:

### *Inside the School: The Need for Gender-Centred Teacher Training Programmes*

It was evident that teacher participants in this study perpetuated normativity through their perceptions of gender and their silences around sexuality which, as Kelly-Ware (2016) pointed out, can limit boys' agency. In response to this, Higher Education Institutions in South Africa and the Department of Basic Education should equip teachers with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills needed to promote gender equality and to put gender and sexuality in primary schools on the agenda as early as FP. This can be realised through teacher training and professional development programmes, such as those organised by SACE. Teachers should be trained to advise boys as mentors, and schools should also engage specialist staff, such as guidance counsellors, school nurses, and social workers, to examine and address the social factors which underpin boys' violence (UNESCO, 2017; Unis et al., 2021).

Given the prevalence of homophobic attitudes and discrimination against non-conforming identities evident in my findings, there is a need for teachers to work towards promoting sexual diversity. However, cultural and social values seem to sit in tension with the democratic rights of children, and this perception constrains efforts towards addressing homophobia and promoting sexual diversity in the school. According to Bhana (2014), teachers who claim that their personal beliefs and societal values restrict them from promoting sexual diversity and gender equality are violating their professional and ethical code of conduct. For reasons such as this, teacher training and development programmes should focus on addressing the social, cultural, and historical ideologies which shape teachers' attitudes and also the attitudes of learners in school. In order to do this, teachers should first reflect on their own biases, and carefully examine their own prejudices and the gender normative discourses which might constrain their ability to promote sexual diversity (Unis et al., 2021).

The Life Skills curriculum in the FP should make reference to homosexuality and sexual diversity; so far the focus is solely on teaching implicit knowledge. For example, according to the Department of Basic Education (2012, p. 5) the Life Skills programme should encourage learners to be "sensitive to the issues of diversity, such as poverty, inequality, gender, language, age, disability and other factors". However, these principles are not fully realised since teachers

struggle to integrate topics around sexual diversity into the curriculum because their own views and beliefs shape the kind of knowledge they chose to convey (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). Life Skills teachers in the FP should be trained to provide sex-related knowledge to help learners develop the emotional and social skills needed to establish democratic relationships and the type of sexual citizenship that challenges sexual discrimination (Warin, 2018). Feminist-orientated theories of childhood, rooted in social understandings of children as active makers of gender and sexuality, are essential if teachers are to recognise the need to work against the discourse of sexual innocence which is so deeply entrenched in the normalisation of gender inequalities (Ngabaza et al., 2016).

### *Addressing Gender Violence in School*

Although some interventions are in place to address the issue of violence in South African schools, often missing is a thorough understanding of the nature of gender violence (Bhana et al., 2021). In this study I analysed violence through an intersectional lens, drawing on how gender, sexuality, violence, and socioeconomic conditions intersect to shape boys' negotiation of hegemonic masculinity. It is important to address violence from an early age so that young children can challenge violence and also recognise what constitutes violence (UNESCO, 2017). A significant starting point is that teachers understand gender, sexuality, and male power, and how masculinities are regulated and maintained in the primary school. Gender-focused educational programmes which aim to challenge gender inequalities and disrupt male discourses of power should therefore be implemented (Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017). Within these programmes a fundamental impetus for change lies in supporting boys to open up conversations around the issues of gender and to reflect on their reasons for tolerating—or provoking—violence.

Teachers should increase their visibility on the playground to identify incidents of violence and address them immediately. They should make it clear to learners that violence, in whatever form, is unacceptable and not permitted inside or outside of school. Boys should be encouraged to develop alternate ways to respond to conflict, such as reporting the violence they experience or witness to the teacher. Schools should also encourage children to report gender discrimination

that they witness or experience and reported cases should be taken seriously. The barriers that lead to boys' reluctance to report school violence should be acknowledged and schools should develop ways to create a safe and inclusive environment which will allow learners to report incidents of violence.

In schools' efforts to solve the problem of violence, forms of disciplinary action should never resort to the use of corporal punishment—which they often do, despite the legislation. Violence enforced through corporal methods is not simply a punishment for transgression of school rules, it is more than that. Morris and Perry (2017) argued that it is a social act which serves to maintain the historical hegemonic structures which are part of what teachers—especially those who have been in the profession for a long time—need to overcome. Teacher participants in my study utilised verbal insults and the demerit system to punish learners. This reinforces a hierarchal system of power and threat, instead of encouraging learners to be responsible for their own actions and behaviour. As a way forward, teachers should ensure that learners are disciplined in ways that are corrective and educative instead of punitive and insulting. Continued efforts to address and eliminate corporal punishment are needed by the Department of Basic Education (Mayeza & Bhana, 2020). Given the findings of how girls used physical violence against boys, interventions need to work with all children, and it is also vital to understand the complex and paradoxical ways in which girls and boys position themselves. Associating power and dominance only with masculinity fails to account for the ambiguous and contradictory ways through which power is marked in gender relations (Bhana, 2008).

Teachers also have a fundamental role to work with boys who already have developed the capacity to recognise that violent masculinities are harmful (Keddie, 2020). Boys who are willing to speak out against violence should be included in initiatives and programmes designed to address violence and support their peers to express their masculinities in non-violent ways. The growing concept of care is particularly useful to the South African context as a key step towards destabilising harmful notions which ascribe violence as an inherent feature of South African masculinities (Mayeza & Bhana, 2021).

School-based intervention programmes should also build a culture of mutual respect and dignity, and inculcate the values of love and empathy in order to promote respectful and peaceful relationships among children at school as emphasised by many scholars (Jearey-Graham & Macleod, 2017; Keddie, 2020; Robinson, 2013, Ollis et al., 2021). Teachers should also encourage boys to engage in critical self-reflection, which involves learning how to empathise with individuals who are oppressed. Indeed, Epstein (1993, p. 130) argued that “very young children can engage with difficult issues and reflect on their own feelings and reactions, provided they are given the appropriate opportunities, encouragement and scaffolding to do so”. Self-reflecting on one’s vulnerability and actions as well as the feelings of others could mark a significant move towards developing solidarity and compassion with others. This can be a productive starting point to open up gender transformative conversations with boys which can help them to better understand themselves and their relations with others.

### ***Outside the School: Broader Social Spaces as Important Sites for the Making of Masculinities***

Given the social pressures that boys experience in the construction of their masculinities, I argue for context-specific interventions in the early years of primary school. It is essential that schools develop an inclusive understanding of the social realities of learners and how race, age, socioeconomic class, and tradition intersect to shape boys’ behaviours and perceptions of masculinity at school. Efforts aimed to address violence also require an understanding that the violence that transpires in school is influenced and shaped by violence beyond the school (Parkes, 2015). Interventions should therefore target parents, families, and communities, and collaborate with teacher unions, media houses, social health workers, and law enforcement officers to address violence in all spheres of boys’ lives (Maternowska et al., 2020).

Parents play a major role in the gendering of young boys and this emerged strongly in my fieldwork in the way boys constructed and performed masculinity around rigid hegemonic and heterosexual norms. Children should be supported in efforts to alter harmful cultural ideals and discourses (Keddie, 2020). School authorities and all stakeholders should partner with parents to create new meanings about diversity, address gender norms and stereotypes, and the binary divide that leads to harmful masculine behaviour and unequal gender relations. Schools should

also understand parents' concerns regarding boys' construction of gender and sexuality and should work with them to broaden—rather than narrow, as they presently do—children's construction of masculinities in positive ways.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

My study focus was only on 8–9-year-old, Grade 3 boys. While research on gender and sexuality in the early years is well established globally (Bhana, 2016a; Gansen, 2017; Gansen & Martin, 2018; Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1993; Xu, 2020), there has been little ethnographic focus on young masculinities in the early years of schooling in South Africa. As Alloway (1995, p.19) argued, “eight's too late, to begin thinking about issues of gender”. To this end, future research in South Africa should broaden perspectives of young masculinity by examining gender and sexuality among all ages (5–10-years old) in the FP of schooling. This should include recognising a range of masculinities, including boys' performances of caring masculinities and how they can be actively involved in advocating for peaceful and democratic relationships. Although eradicating violence in the primary school is priority, how this is understood and conceptualised by primary school teachers is a field that is understudied (Mayeza & Bhana, 2017). The views and perceptions of teachers and how they contribute to the construction of masculinities is thus an important area for future research.

Future research should also focus on the socialisation of masculinities in the context of families. In South Africa, colonialism and apartheid constructed black manhood within a legacy of structural violence (Pyke, 2020; Ratele, 2014). There is therefore a need for historically and contextually situated studies to help understand how the legacies of apartheid continue to influence family life and masculinities in South Africa. Indeed, South African scholars have argued that attention to the social categories of race, culture, class, and sexuality and how these elements intersect with gender remain a neglected area of research in primary schools (Bhana, 2016a; 2020; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021; Pattman & Bhana, 2021). Hence, in-depth studies on how wider structural factors combine to shape boyhood in Southern contexts are needed.

## Conclusion

My focus on young masculinities led me to find that boys constructed their masculinities by engaging—as active agents—in a range of gender and sexual practices. In coming to this finding, I critiqued the dominant framework of essentialism and childhood passivity. My study offers a rich Southern perspective on boys’ lives, considering the local manifestations of masculinities in the context of school, families, media, and in their interactions with peers. Boys structured their masculinity along the dominant hegemonic pattern, but they were not always dupes of masculine power. Drawing on their personal agency boys rejected dominant, monolithic ways of doing masculinity and showed great appreciation for moral codes. It was evident that boys’ constructions of masculinities were complex and nuanced and they negotiated their masculine identities in thoughtful ways, influenced by so many shifting factors. Indeed, failing to engage in meaningful dialogue with young boys about gender and sexuality is short-sighted and a missed opportunity that may render interventions useless. I argue that collaborated approaches between masculinity, early childhood, and broader social structures can yield important theoretical insights into the construction of young masculinities for future research and practical interventions to address harmful masculine practices.

Throughout this thesis I expressed the need to work with young boys to promote nurturing masculinities. It is important to stress that some boys had already assumed caring masculinities on their own accounts, and this provides a positive model of masculinities that can lead to healthier and more peaceful outcomes in adulthood. In closing, I quote from an interview with my participant, Rohan, which highlights how critical it is to conduct research with young children, and the power that they have to advocate for change in others. This is ultimately what humanity—in particular the principles of *Ubuntu*<sup>20</sup> in South Africa—stands for:

You don’t need a reward for kindness; kindness is its own reward.... When I grow up I’m going to own two shops: an orphanage for children without mothers and fathers, and I’m going to own, like, a shop that helps people talk about their problems and

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<sup>20</sup> The South African concept of *ubuntu* means “humanity towards others”. It is a philosophy which emphasises the values of respect, care, kindness, universal brotherhood, and unity (Morrell & Swart, 2005; Piper, 2016). *Ubuntu* is significant to the reconstruction of post-apartheid South Africa; it implies that we are one in diversity.

change their life of anger to a life of love.... Boys who are violent, I'll try to change their love for violence into a love for kindness.

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## Appendix 1a: UKZN Ethical Clearance Certificate



11 May 2018

**Ms Diloshini Govender (207515813)**  
School of Education  
Edgewood Campus

Dear Ms Govender,

**Protocol reference number: HSS/0393/018M (Linked to HSS/1197/013)**

**Project Title: Young boys constructing and performing masculine identities: An ethnography of grade three boys at a primary school in KwaDukuza**

### Approval Notification – Expedited Application

In response to your application received 07 March 2018, 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 discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

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

Yours faithfully

.....  
Dr Shamila Naidoo (Deputy Chair)

/ms

Cc Supervisor: Professor Deevia Bhana  
Cc Academic Leader Research: Dr SB Khoza  
Cc School Administrator: Ms Tyzer Khumalo

---

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

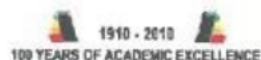
Professor Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

Telephone: +27 (0) 31 260 3587/8350/4557 Facsimile: +27 (0) 31 260 4600 Email: [ximbap@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ximbap@ukzn.ac.za) / [snymam@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:snymam@ukzn.ac.za) / [mohunp@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:mohunp@ukzn.ac.za)

Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)



## Appendix 1b: UKZN Ethical Clearance Certificate (Change of Title)



26 June 2020

**Ms Diloshini Govender (207515813)**  
School of Education  
Edgewood Campus

Dear Ms Govender,

**Protocol reference number:** HSS/0393/018M (Linked to HSS/1197/013)  
**New Project Title:** Young masculinities: An ethnography of 8-9 year old primary school boys

### Approval Notification – Amendment Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application and request for an amendment received on 24 June 2020 has now been approved as follows:

- Change in title

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form; Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an 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 discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully








.....  
**Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)**

/dd

Cc Supervisor: Professor Deevia Bhana  
Cc Academic Leader Research: Prof N Amin  
Cc School Administrator: Ms Mbalenhle Ngcobo

---

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building  
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000  
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587

Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>  
Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

## Appendix 2a: Permission to Conduct Research in KZN DOE Institutions



education

Department:  
Education  
PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL

Enquiries: Phindile Duma

Tel: 033 392 1063

Ref.:2/4/8/1536

Ms D. Govender

P.O. Box 3309

Stranger

4450

Dear Ms Govender

### PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"YOUNG BOYS CONSTRUCTING AND PERFORMING MASCULINE IDENTITIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF GRADE THREE BOYS AT A PRIMARY SCHOOL IN KWADUKUZA"**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 23 May 2018 to 09 July 2020.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers below
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

  
Dr. EV Nzama  
Head of Department: Education  
Date: 23 May 2018

KWAZULU-NATAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Postal Address: Private Bag X9137 • Pietermaritzburg • 3200 • Republic of South Africa

Physical Address: 247 Burger Street • Anton Lembede Building • Pietermaritzburg • 3201

Tel.: +27 33 392 1063 • Fax.: +27 033 392 1203 • Email: Phindile.Duma@kzndoe.gov.za • Web: www.kzneducation.gov.za

Facebook: KZNDOE... Twitter: @DBE\_KZN... Instagram: kzn\_education... Youtube: kzndoe

Championing Quality Education - Creating and Securing a Brighter Future

## Appendix 2b: Permission to Conduct Research in KZN DOE Institutions (Change of Title)



education

Department:  
Education  
PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL

Enquiries: Phindile Duma/Buyi Ntuli

Tel: 033 392 1063/51

Ref.:2/4/8/4156

Miss Diloshini Govender  
P.O. Box 3309  
**STANGER**  
4450

Dear Miss Govender

### PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **“YOUNG MASCULINITIES: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF 8-9 YEAR OLD PRIMARY SCHOOL BOYS”**., in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 06 July 2020 to 10 January 2022.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma/Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

  
Dr. EV Nzama  
Head of Department: Education  
Date: 06 July 2020

...Leading Social Compact and Economic Emancipation  
Through a Revolutionary Education for all...

#### KWAZULU-NATAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Postal Address: Private Bag X9137 • Pietermaritzburg • 3200 • Republic of South Africa

Physical Address: 228 Pietermaritz Street • Ex-NED Building • Pietermaritzburg • 3201

Tel.: +27 33 3921063 • Fax.: +27 033 3921203 • Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za • Web: www.kzndoe.gov.za

Facebook: KZNDOE...Twitter: @DBE\_KZN...Instagram: kzn\_education...Youtube:kzndoe

### Appendix 3a: Informed Consent–School Principal



Dear Sir

#### Permission to conduct a research study in the school

I am writing to request your permission to conduct a study of how boys construct and perform gender at school. The research project is titled: “Stop the Violence: Girls and Boys in and Around Schools”. My supervisor’s name is Deevia Bhana. The project aims to investigate how grade three boys construct and experience their lives as boys and how they attach meaning to their lives through their daily actions within the primary school. Every day newspaper reports show us that gender violence is a problem in some schools and has negative effects for some learners. This project therefore explores how violence is entrenched within particular notions of masculinity. This project will involve interviews with learners, teachers and school managers, as well as observations of learners’ interactions in schools, including in classrooms and playground.

My study will fall under this project but will focus on boys. The title of my study is: **“Young boys constructing and performing masculine identities: An ethnography of grade three boys at a primary school in KwaDukuza”**

All participants in the school and the name of the school will be anonymized. In the various publications that will result from this study I will not use participants’ real names or the names of the school. They are also free to withdraw from the project at any time during or after data collection, without penalty.

Whilst every precaution will be taken to maintain the confidentiality of the participants in every group, there will be limits of confidentiality. Participants will be informed that should there be a disclosure/s which indicates that their well-being/other learners’ is being compromised or at risk, the researcher will seek their consent in addressing the matter.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Diloshini Govender

██████████

Email: [dilogovender@gmail.com](mailto:dilogovender@gmail.com)

Project Leader: Prof. Deevia Bhana

Tel: (031) 260 2603

**Permission to Conduct Study**

I..... (Full names of PRINCIPAL/) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I grant permission to the learners and teachers participating in the research project and give permission for the school to be used as a research site.

The times and dates of the research will be at the sole discretion of the principal.

I understand that the participants' and the school are at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL

\_\_\_\_\_

DATE

## Appendix 3b: Informed Consent–Parents



Dear Parent/Guardian

### **Request for permission for your child/ward to participate in a research study**

I, Diloshini Govender (student number: 207515813), am a PhD (Gender Education) student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. As part of the requirements of the degree, I am required to complete a research thesis. This letter requests your permission to allow your child to participate in a research project entitled: “Stop the Violence: Girls and Boys In and Around Schools”.

This project is about how grade three boys construct and experience their lives as boys, and how they attach meaning to their identity as young boys within the primary school. Every day newspaper reports show us that gender violence is a problem in some schools and has negative effects for some learners. This project explores how violence is entrenched within particular notions of masculinity. My study will fall under this project but will focus on boys and masculinity.

The title of my study is **“Young boys constructing and performing masculine identities: An ethnography of grade three boys at a primary school in KwaDukuza.”**

If you choose to allow your child/ward to participate in this research, he will be invited to participate in a focus group, and later in an individual interview. The completion of the process will take about forty minutes for the focus group discussion and about thirty minutes for the individual interview. This will be conducted at times when the learner is available to participate in the study, without interfering with his learning in any way. The focus group and interview will be audio-taped with you and your child/ward’s permission. The data collected will then be transcribed, and kept in a secure location, and destroyed after a period of five years. Participation is completely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your child/ward and your child/ward has the right to withdraw himself at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained at all times, in the analysis of the data and the completion of the thesis. Universal principles such as honesty, justice and respect will direct my research.

If you would like further details pertaining to the validity of the study then you are most welcome to contact Professor Deevia Bhana, my supervisor of the study on [bhanad1@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:bhanad1@ukzn.ac.za) or on 031 260 2603.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Yours sincerely,

Diloshini Govender

████████████████████

**Parent's Informed Consent Reply Slip**

I, ....., in the capacity of parent/guardian of ....., hereby consent voluntarily to allow my child to participate in the above-mentioned study.

.....  
SIGNATURE OF PARENT/GUARDIAN

.....  
DATE

*Additional consent, where applicable:*

I hereby provide consent to:	Please tick	
Audio-record my child/ward's interview	YES	<input type="checkbox"/>
	NO	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Appendix 3c: Informed Consent/Assent–Participants

Dear Participant



#### **Request for permission to participate in a research study**

I, Diloshini Govender (student number 207515813) am a PhD (Gender Education) student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This is a formal invitation to request you to participate in a research project entitled: “Stop the Violence: Girls and boys in and Around Schools”.

This project is about how grade three boys construct and experience their lives as boys, and how they attach meaning to their identity as young boys within the primary school. Every day newspaper reports show us that gender violence is a problem in some schools and has negative effects for some learners. This project therefore further explores how violence is entrenched within particular notions of masculinity. My study will fall under this project but will focus on boys and masculinity.

The title of my study is: **“Young boys constructing and performing masculine identities: An ethnography of grade three boys at a primary school in KwaDukuza.”**

I will require you to participate in a focus group which will take approximately forty minutes, and an individual interview which will take approximately thirty minutes. The interviews will be audio-taped with your permission. They will then be transcribed and made available to you to ensure that the correct information has been captured. The data collected will be kept in a secure location, and destroyed after a period of five years. I will be careful to use the information that you supply in a manner that will ensure your anonymity. In order to protect your identity, I will use a pseudonym in my transcripts and my research report. If you are uncomfortable at any time you are at liberty to stop the interview and withdraw from the study. Universal principles such as honesty, justice and respect will direct my research.

Whilst every precaution will be taken to maintain the confidentiality of the participants in every group, there will be limits of confidentiality. You will be informed that should there be disclosure/s which indicates that your well being/ other learners are being compromised or at risk, I will seek your consent in addressing the matter.

If you would like further details pertaining to the validity of the study then you are most welcome to contact Professor Deevia Bhana, my supervisor of the study on [bhanad1@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:bhanad1@ukzn.ac.za) or on 031 260 2603.

Thank you for your co-operation.

Yours sincerely,

Diloshini Govender

██████████

**Participant’s Informed Consent/Assent Reply Slip**

I ..... (Full names of participant)  
hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of this research  
project and I consent/assent to my participating in the research project.

I understand that I am liberty to withdraw from the project at any time should I desire.

.....  
SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

.....  
DATE

***Additional consent/assent, where applicable:***

<b>I hereby provide consent/ assent to:</b>	<b>Please tick</b>	
<b>Audio-record my interview</b>	<b>YES</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<b>NO</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Appendix 4a: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule (Learner Participants)

### Individual and Focus Group Questions

1. Who are your friends? Who do you play with? Why? Are boys and girls friends? Why?
2. What do you think of boys and girls? Are they similar/ different? Why?
3. Are you friends with girls? What do you think of them? Do you play with girls? Why? Why not?
4. Do you know boys of your age who have girlfriends? Who? Why do boys of your age have girlfriends? What do you think of boys who have girlfriends?
5. What games do you play on the playground? What do you enjoy doing at school?
6. Who is popular in school/your class? Why do you think so?
7. What sport do you play? Why? Who do you play with? Do all learners play this sport?
8. Are girls allowed to play with you in the playground/ sport field? Why/ Why not?
9. Do you know of anyone who is violent? Who does it? Why? Tell me about your experiences. Where did it happen? How?
10. Is there any bullying at school? Is there any name calling?
11. Would you be friends with a boy that is violent? Why?
12. Do the boys that are violent have a lot of friends? Why? Why not?
13. Would you be friends with a girl that is violent? Why?
14. What would you do if your friends are fighting or being violent?
15. What would you do if a boy took something that belongs to you?
16. What would you do if a girl took something that belongs to you?
17. Who is your hero? Why? Tell me more? Would you like to be a hero? Why? Would you describe a person who abuses/is violent as a hero? Why?
18. Who is your role model? Why?
19. What television programmes or movies do you watch? Who is your favourite character? Describe them? Why? Would you like to be like him/her?

## **Appendix 4b: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule (Teacher Participants)**

What do you understand about gender?

What can you tell me about the behaviour of grade three boys?

How do girls behave? Why?

How do you discipline the boys?

How do you discipline the girls?

Are boys and girls treated differently or the same? Why?

What activities do boys enjoy?

What activities do girls enjoy?

Do you account for gender in your activities? How?

Do you separate boys and girls when lining up? Why?

What code of sport are you involved in?

Do both boys and girls play this sport? Why/ why not?

Do you encourage boys/girls to play this sport? Why/ why not?

Why are the boys and girls separated during the breaks at this school?

Are girls and boys separated in registers /lining up/ activity groups? Why/ why not?

Do grade three boys know about girlfriends? Why/ why not?

Do grade three boys talk about or have girlfriends?

Should they have girlfriends? Why/ why not?

Do you talk to learners about relationships? Why/ why not?

Are the grade three boys violent?

What types of violence have you observed with the grade 3 boys in the classroom?

Are the boys violent to other boys? How?

Are the boys violent to girls? How?

What do you think are the main causes of violent behaviour?

What do you think are the implications of violence among young grade 3 boys?

What can be done to stop or prevent grade 3 boys from violent behaviour?

## Appendix 5: Turnitin Originality Report

### Turnitin Originality Report

- Processed on: 14-Jan-2022 3:41 PM CAT
- ID: 1741646575
- Word Count: 93056
- Submitted: 1

PhD Full Thesis By Diloshini Govender

Similarity Index  
2%

### **Similarity by Source**

Internet Sources:

1%

Publications:

1%

Student Papers:

0%

## Appendix 6: Editorial Certificate

Sarah A. Bologna Editing  
Professional Academic Copyediting  
20 December 2021

### Editorial Certificate

This document certifies that the manuscript listed below was edited for English language, grammar, punctuation, word choice, and spelling by a Sarah A. Bologna, a professional copyeditor.

**Manuscript title: Young Masculinities: An Ethnography of 8-9-Year-Old Primary School Boys**

Author: Diloshni Govender.

Signed:

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the editor.

Dr S. A. Bologna  
Sarah A. Bologna Editing

This document certifies that the manuscript listed above was edited for proper English language, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and style by a highly qualified native English-speaking editor at Sarah A. Bologna Editing. Neither the research content nor the author's intentions were altered during the editing process. Please note that the author has the ability to accept or reject suggestions and changes, and to rework the edited draft. To verify the final edited version, or if you have any questions or concerns about this edited document, please contact [sabologna@gmail.com](mailto:sabologna@gmail.com).