Gender violence in and around schools: Time to get to zero

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ABSTRACT

Gender violence has been identified as a substantial public health and an intractable educational problem. Violence impacts on children's health and has numerous effects on well-being. Understanding gender violence in South African education requires a systematic and consolidated evidence base, tailored theoretical framings and advanced research and interventions around the different ways that schools can benefit children and ensure commitment to gender equality and social protection. In this regard, this paper argues that South African schools are failing. Without a comprehensive strategy to prevent violence in schools, the problem remains intractable. There is a need to develop the evidence base for programming in schools which requires consideration of gender as an analytical category, as co-extensive, with children as actively participating in cultures of violence. Understanding the variegated social and cultural positions of children across and within different school settings has the ability to provide a finer-grained, contextually located analysis of gender violence in schools and in doing so could broaden our meanings, and form a platform for identifying ways to address it. The paper concludes with some implications for school-based policy interventions.

Keywords: *gender violence, schools, children, agency, interventions*

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing concerns in South Africa – violence – is constitutive of gender inequalities, both in and out of the school (Bhana, 2012). Identified as a substantial public health and an intractable educational problem (Human Rights, 2001; Mathews, Abrahams, Jewkes, Martin, & Lombard, 2013), violence against girls in particular (but not excluding boys) and its magnitude has by many measures been one of the striking political and educational failures in the country. The basis of this criticism lies in the fact that of the 64 514 sexual offences reported in during 2011 and 2012, for instance, 25 862 involved children under the age of 18 (South African Police Service, 2013). Of this 40.2% of sexual offences involved children between the ages of 0 and 11 years old. Whilst these statistics are often considered to be underestimated due to low disclosure rates (Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna, Jama, & Puren, 2010), girls' vulnerability to sexual violence is profound, especially in a country where almost 28% of men, according to a population-based study, have perpetrated rape (Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell, & Dunkle 2011).

Violence impacts on children's health and well-being, increases girls' disproportionate vulnerability to HIV and has numerous effects on reproductive and sexual health (Jewkes et al., 2010). The scale of sexual violence against girls has led to increasing calls to stop and prevent violence, although a national strategy remains absent and a missing piece in the challenge towards gender equality in education (Bhana, 2009; Mathews et al., 2013; Moffett, 2006). Research, interventions and debates involving children on preventing and reducing gender violence in South African schools are mostly lacking (Gevers, Mathews, Cupp, Russell, & Jewkes, 2013). Against this backdrop, UNICEF (2012) launched the "Believe in Zero" campaign which aims to reduce violence against children to zero. In the context of silences, missed opportunities and unrecognised forms of sexual/gender violence in and around schools, I argue in this paper, drawing specifically on the South African context, that it is time to get to zero. Getting to zero requires that we increase our research in all phases of schooling, including early childhood settings, primary schools and high schools, and that we improve our theoretical and methodological foci to enhance the commitment to children's well-being and to gender equality.

HOW TO NAME THE PROBLEM OF GENDER VIOLENCE IN AND AROUND SCHOOLS

The process of naming violence is fraught because the field of gender violence in South African education is not well developed, nor is it coherent (Dunne, Humphreys, & Leach, 2006; Leach & Mitchell, 2006; Prinsloo, 2006). Violence is sexual and physical but also is far more expansive and nuanced than this; yet we do not have the full picture, nor the

data nor the evidence to 'name' it (Wolpe, Quinlan, & Martinez, 1997). The World Health Organization (2002, p. 5), for example, defines violence as follows:

> The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood or resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.

It is not possible to simply apply definitions of violence to local contexts. There are several gaps in our knowledge of how gender violence in schools is enacted, mediated, contested and reproduced. Consequently, there is difficulty in naming gender violence in South African schools and what to include in it. Little quantitative measure of the extent of violence exists although recent research acknowledges the problem (Burton & Leoschut, 2013; Mncube & Harber, 2013; Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). In the National School Violence Study, Burton and Leoschut (2013) note that 22.2% of high school learners were found to have been threatened with violence or had been the victim of an assault, robbery and/or sexual assault at school in 2012. This recognition in the literature that schools can be violent places, however, tends to neglect or at times ignore the deep-rooted significance of gender in understanding violence in schools. The Burton and Leoschut study, whilst pointing to the disproportionate vulnerability of boys and girls to violence in schools, does not mention 'gender' in recommendations to prevent the violence. Similarly the Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) study, entitled "The nature, causes and effects of school violence in South African high schools", shows a glaring absence of the word 'gender'. Not only is gender strikingly absent, the focus of research, although not without justification, has often been on sexual violence and girls' vulnerability, tending to ignore gender as an analytical construct, leading to sparse work on boys, schooling and masculinities (Morrell, 1998) and even less attention on homophobic violence in schools.

The problem with a one-dimensional dichotomy is that it is heterosexualised and at times uses racist tropes, as the focus often shifts to black boys as violent against a pitiful black femininity, ignoring the multivalent forces in the production of violence in all South African school settings. To show the fallibility of this argument, on 20 September 2013 it was reported that a Grade 8 white learner at a middle class school, Glenvista High School in Johannesburg, grabbed a chair, and hurled it at his teacher:

> … the boy reaches for the broom that is propped up in the corner and hits the teacher with it … In the background, the pupils can be heard laughing throughout and encouraging the boy to continue attacking the teacher: F**** him up. Go get him … (*Daily News*, 20 September 2013, p. 5).

The learner and the teacher above are both white and in a school which also prides itself on being involved in the national equestrian team in South Africa. Raising the issues of class and race in the above example in the perpetration of gender violence in schools provides a counterpoint to the constant portrayal of black boys in particular as violent. No recognition is given to the ways in which power is invested in, used and deployed in a range of situations and under particular social circumstances which makes violence normative. Gender violence is alive in a range of school settings, including white and black, although the conditions under which race and class are associated in the country increase tensions and vulnerabilities towards working class male violence.

As an analytical construct, gender violence must move beyond the binarisms of male/female and black/white divides to understand the dynamic and relational construction of masculinities and femininities as well as the heterosexual norms which render those children outside of it vulnerable to violence. An analysis of gender violence in schools that takes heed of the dynamic nature of gender and the dimension of sexuality, rather than considering it as something to do with girls only or with blacks and heterosexuals only, is important if we are to unravel many of the missing dimensions in school violence in South Africa whilst at the same time recognising the propensity for violence under conditions of economic and social uncertainty. Central to this understanding is how boys and girls actively participate in, reject, adjust to, mediate and reproduce gender, not simply as subjects of power but as agents, with capacities to engender violence. The example at Glenvista points to how masculinities are actively being constructed within schools, against schooling authorities and in support of collective learner masculinity. We need to understand much more about these dynamics in order to understand how to prevent violence.

Naming gender violence is made especially complex by the fact that gender is co-extensive. Bajos (2013), referring to Kergoat (2001), argues that there is a need to consider gender as 'co-substantial'; an intermingling of power relationships. This means thinking about violence as complexly interdependent on multiple variables such as patriarchy variations in culture, race and class, which impact upon how masculinities and femininities are played out at school. Schools are not immune from the social context in which they are located (Leach, 2003; Leach & Humphreys, 2007). The *World report of violence against children* (Pinheiro, 2006) describes the nature and extent of violence in and around schools. It includes a focus on bullying, corporal punishment and gender violence in the home, the family, schools, places of work and the community. This seminal report makes an important contribution to recognising the social context of violence – violence in schools often reflects "the levels and patterns of violence in countries, communities and families which in turn, reflect prevailing political and socio-economic conditions, social attitudes, cultural traditions and values, and laws and law enforcement" (Pinheiro, 2006, p. 111). At global level a strong case has been

made to understand and address gender violence in and around schools, but no such work has been done in relation to the development of intervention strategies that put gender central to educational programmes. There is an urgent need to strengthen our responses by generating evidence-based research that can name the violence and improve educational programmes to enhance the health and well-being of children. Understanding gender as dynamic, underpinned by sexuality and linked to wider social structures is vital to violence prevention.

Outside of education, there is increasing literature which seeks to place gender, gender inequalities and the norms which produce gender relations of domination and subordination as key to addressing the scourge of violence (Jewkes et al., 2011; Shefer et al., 2008). Yet for all its merits, with a few exceptions, the realisation that gender is at the heart of understanding and addressing violence in and around schools has yet to be adequately integrated into school-based research and prevention programmes.

GENDER VIOLENCE IN AND AROUND SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

There have been several pioneering studies attempting to address gender violence in South African schools that provide an understanding of the dynamic nature of gender, as actively produced, intricately related to sexuality and critical to wider social structures, inequalities and resources (Bhana, 2012; Leach & Mitchell, 2006; Morrell, 1998). Such work is premised upon efforts to ensure gender equality in schools, with the hope that schools can provide spaces in which to raise awareness to break down inequitable gender relations. This work, however, is piecemeal, small scale and done by very few South African scholars. Raising significant questions about the nuanced nature of gender violence in schools, a small body of research has focused on the gendered processes in school violence. Part of this development is based on the scourge of HIV, girls' disproportionate vulnerability and the role of education in preventing disease.

Explaining the gendered contours of violence in schools, South African scholars point to the constructions of masculinity and femininity premised upon relations of power, within the broader social context, which are lopsided, advantageous to and reproductive of masculine power (Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Morrell, Bhana, & Shefer, 2012; Morrell, Epstein, Unterhalter, Bhana, & Moletsane, 2009). Morrell (1998) has established a clear connection between men, boys and school violence. Adapting Connell's (1995) hegemonic theory of masculinity, Morrell sets the scene for an examination of school violence as the monopoly of males. Corporal punishment, learners' violence against teachers, sexual harassment of girls in schools by male teachers and peers as well as girl on girl violence

are some of the reported forms of violence (Mncube & Harber, 2013). Drawing from a large intervention development study, based on a curriculum called *Respect 4 U*, Gevers et al. (2013) in their Cape Town study focus on intimate partner violence amongst Grade 8 teenagers. Their study suggests that teenagers from 12 to 15 years are already engaging in risky sexual behaviour requiring interventions with skills to prepare for negotiating sex and making decisions. Researchers have noted the complexity of violence in studies of teenage sexuality and heterosexuality, showing that gender inequalities and violent gender relations are sometimes considered to be part of romantic cultures and violence within sexual relations is accepted and accommodated (Bhana & Anderson, 2013; Shefer & Foster, 2001) Nonetheless, a comprehensive understanding of gender violence in South African schools remains embryonic, but there is much that can be learned from the pioneering interventions and evaluations of interventions such as the *Respect 4 U* curriculum*.*

Bhana (2005; 2012) has put violence and gender relations in primary and high schools on the agenda, showing how boys and girls are both agents and victims of violence from as early as age 6. The manifestation of toxic masculinities at an early stage of schooling has led to increasing calls to start addressing gender relations and gender equality early, from age 6. Bhana's work has increased awareness of the problem of violence in schools and the value of early interventions, which also include the need to involve boys as part of the solution. In developing a more complex understanding of violence, we also know that violence is not only the area of male power, but girl on girl violence has been established as an area of necessary work in South Africa (Bhana, 2008).

As far as schools' regimes of violence are concerned, we do know that schools are key sites for the production and reproduction of gender relations and inequalities. How gender violence is played out, however, is very different in different contexts and different schools. We do not know the meanings that South African children across schools give to violence, their experiences, how gender inequalities flourish and the social conditions under which gender violence is complexly intertwined with race and class. In short, our vocabulary of gender violence in schools in South Africa is still growing. We need a far more comprehensive repertoire of gendered meanings, forms and techniques and expressions of violence in school.

TIME TO GET TO ZERO

We need to develop the evidence base for programming in schools which requires consideration of gender violence as co-extensive and children as active agents in diverse school contexts within a multifaceted understanding of power. In other words, gender violence in and around schools cannot be discussed without attention to its co-extensive

formations and the social and economic conditions and processes that produce them. Understanding the schooling of violent masculinities, boys and the effects on girls is a vital part of interventions. All these patterns have to considered, requiring a multisectoral approach in violence prevention.

We need to develop a framework of longitudinal and cross-sectional data across the provinces in the country. This must include priority data that gives us a better scope of the size and shape of the problem. Rich qualitative and ethnographic studies have shown to yield findings on specific aspects of the gendering processes in schools and could provide 'thick' knowledge to develop interventions (Bhana, 2002). This requires both political will to fund such endeavours and research capacity development at academic institutions focusing on gender and schooling. There is a critical need for an advocacy base, cross-cutting in focus, that emphasises children's well-being, health and gender equality and the health and social benefits that could accrue by investing in young lives.

Finally, all violence is gendered, and violence prevention in schools must be steeped in gender as a dynamic process since it relates to broader social conditions. Learners, parents, teachers and communities need to understand how gender is deeply embedded in and produces violence. This might include raising awareness and knowledge of gender and the gender norms which make boys and girls both vulnerable to violence and perpetrators of it. *Stepping Stones* is one such programme that attempts to target gender inequalities in violence prevention and HIV work (Jewkes, Wood, & Duvvury, 2010). The programme is informed by and remains faithful to a gendered perspective that takes heed of the issues raised in this paper, including gender as a social construct, as shifting, gender beyond the male/female dichotomy and gender as co-extensively produced and reproduced by broader social structures and inequalities. In this programme questions are asked about why people behave in the ways that they do; the impact on gender relations and inequalities; and how to change. Evaluations of this programme do not show dramatic transformation, but some change in developing non-violence is reported as a result of increasing assertiveness skills amongst women and challenging men to reconsider the conditions which provide them with power.

As noted earlier, *Respect 4 U* is a school-based intervention programme that draws from the *Safe Dates* programme in the USA and the *Stepping Stones* programme in South Africa. Whilst *Respect 4 U* is an ongoing intervention amongst Grade 8 learners in Cape Town, there is a growing realisation that such a programme based on enhancing skills in negotiating sex and rooted in gender power relations and dynamics might offer possibilities for changing behaviour in relation to intimate partner violence.

However, for all the merits of working in schools, such work alone will not solve the problem. Gender violence prevention must be situated within a multipronged intervention approach addressing the social and cultural context that gives rise to violence. It is time to act, time to get to zero and time to put boots on the ground and address the scourge that limits children's freedom, health and well-being in South Africa. As Pinheiro (2006, p. xi) notes:

> [v]iolence against children is never justifiable. Nor is it inevitable. If its underlying causes are identified and addressed, violence against children is entirely preventable.

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