Special Issue Editorial

Youth, violence and equality: Perspectives on engaging youth toward social transformation

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Childhood and youth are developmental stages representing both opportunities and challenges. Although youth, to a large degree, represents a time of risk exacerbated by inequalities of gender, age, class, sexual orientation and other differences, it may also represent a time of transformation and an important opportunity for engaging toward social change. This special issue emerges out of a collaborative project titled, “Engaging South African and Finnish youth towards new traditions of non-violence, equality and social well-being”, funded by the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) and the Academy of Finland. While this special issue focuses on work in the South African context, the collaborative project asked questions about both the South African and the Finnish contexts in an effort to address questions such as, to what extent work (research and practice) with youth addresses the key imperatives of (un)employment, age, generational tensions, violence and gender inequities in these two contexts. It also asked about the dominant discourses on youth, sexuality, gender, race and other forms of social difference informing work with young people. The project brought together researchers and activists working on issues of gender and sexuality; violence; income, racial, cultural, gender/sexual, health, age/generation, and other forms of social (in)equality; and social well-being among young people in the south and north. We approached this work through a transdisciplinary framework with the aim of critically reflecting on and learning lessons about policy, practices and programmes on engaging young people towards social change.¹

Research with young people has documented intersecting concerns of relationship inequalities, sexual and other types of violence, and discrimination, with associated negative outcomes such as sexually transmitted infections and reproductive health concerns (Bhana & Pattman 2009; Msibi, 2012; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2013). Dominant and continuing patterns of male control over sexual encounters and women’s sexuality are emergent

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across a range of contexts and fuel continuing patterns of violence (Shefer & Foster, 2009). Within this work, and across a range of local-global contexts, heteronormativity has been problematised as the site for continuing inequalities.

At the same time there has been a proliferation of interventions for young people, including school-based interventions, community-based programmes and activism. Critical research has shown how some of the intervention work with young people may be limited through a focus on risk and the reproduction of problematic or missing discourses on sexuality and sexual agency, female sexuality in particular. HIV intervention in South Africa, for example, has focused on imparting knowledge about HIV and sexual risk, placing emphasis on changing individual behaviour while ignoring the social contexts in which young people are located. A further critique of such interventions is that they lack a consistent and critical focus on gender and gendered power dynamics. In addition, current intervention work has tended to represent one-dimensional images of young men/boys and girls/women failing to attend to the complexities of young people’s lives and the multiplicity of identifications they may have with femininities, masculinities and other intersections of identity.

The importance of engaging young people around issues of gender and sexuality is therefore evident, but there is also an imperative to move away from research centred on viewing young people’s lives through a risk paradigm toward a shift in focusing on what young people themselves deem as important and to understanding the multiple and intersecting contexts in which they are located. Shifting away from the risk paradigm framed through an adult ‘eye’ might enable us to attend to the positive aspects and identifications young people might have with gender and sexuality, desire and pleasure. Additionally, the experiences of those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning (LGBTIQ) young people are also largely excluded from research. More work is needed on diverse groups of young people and their gendered and sexual experiences, lives and social contexts.

In this special issue we reflect on the dominant discourses emerging on young women, young men and young sexualities in current research, activist and programmatic interventions, with a focus on the range of continuing problems of violence and on efforts that might contribute to social transformation and equality.

In the first paper in this issue, Boonzaier and Zway draw on work from a participatory research project with young women who identify as lesbian or bisexual. Within the increasing attention given to work in the local context on black lesbian lives and subjectivities, they specifically address the silencing of work with young people, focusing on a group of young women between 13 and 17 years of age who identify as lesbian or bisexual. The
A participatory photovoice project aimed to not only foreground the knowledge of the young women themselves, but also to challenge the almost inevitable linking together of black lesbian subjectivities with the notion of risk (such as risk of ‘corrective rape’), an issue especially relevant in work with young people and sexuality. Boonzaier and Zway make the argument that centring the notion of ‘risk’ “tells only one kind of story about the lives of young people who identify as LGBTIQ and feeds into heteronormative discourses and the pathologisation of those deemed ‘other’”. The work shows how the young women resist not only the discrimination they experience from teachers and others, but also the construction of their lives as defined by ‘risk’ and victimisation. Their photo narratives and discussions about their lives illuminate the complex negotiations of identity they engage in, in the face of circulating narratives of safety, violence and community.

The issue of safety (and lack thereof) within a particular university community re-emerges in the paper by Ngabaza, Bojarczuk, Masuku and Roelfse, titled, ‘Empowering young people in advocacy for transformation: A photovoice exploration of safe and unsafe spaces on a university campus’. Ngabaza and colleagues similarly attempt to challenge the widespread focus on risk and sexual danger in local and global work on campus safety by foregrounding, in a participatory photovoice study, the young people’s own constructions of safety and lack of thereof. The authors draw on photo narratives about safe and unsafe spaces on campus collected by a third-year undergraduate class. The researchers in the study interestingly gave the students access to other students’ photo narratives, providing them an opportunity to reflect on how their own constructions of safe or unsafe spaces on their campus may resonate (or not) with those of other students in their classroom. Students also presented their findings to the class and the work was exhibited for the entire student body and other stakeholders at the university to advocate for participatory discussions about injury and violence prevention – amplifying the importance of the social change element so fundamental to photovoice methodology. The findings show that a range of social identifications, notably based on gender, race, citizenship and class intersect with students’ constructions of what may be deemed a safe or unsafe space offering a broadened understanding of safety and implications for violence prevention on campus.

The issue of exclusionary violence and bullying on the school playground is addressed by Emmanuel Mayeza in the following paper. Mayeza asks about the construction and policing of gender on the school playground, specifically in relation to the performance of masculinity amongst footballing boys at an under-resourced school in the Durban area. Mayeza expands the notion of where learning about gender takes place to beyond the classroom, positioning the playground as a key learning site “where children constantly regulate, monitor and evaluate each other’s gendered performances”. The author takes a child-centred ethnographic approach with the six- to ten-year-old children in the study,
arguing that adult-child power relationships should be democratised in order to engage with children as experts on their social lives. The work shows that children’s gendered performances on the playground (specifically through the notion of who is allowed or not allowed to play football) are monitored and policed through violence and bullying. Football acts to symbolically produce and police distinctions between girls and boys, and hierarchies amongst boys, limiting children’s possibilities for play. Mayeza importantly provides prevention implications and, amongst them, argues that teachers should attend to the important operations of identity that manifest themselves on the playground and that a relevant life orientation programme should foreground children’s own knowledge and understanding about gender, bullying and gendered violence.

Learners’ experiences of the Life Orientation curriculum is an issue picked up by Shefer, Kruger, Macleod, Baxen and Vincent in the final paper in this issue, which analyses the talk of Grade 10 learners in nine diverse schools in the Eastern and Western Cape. Shefer and her colleagues’ research responds to the problems already identified in the sexuality education curriculum in Life Orientation in South African schools, specifically its silencing and the lack of ability to effect positive changes in the sexual and reproductive health and gender and sexual norms and relations of young people. The work finds that the lessons young people receive in sexuality education through Life Orientation reproduce the very discourses and practices that are meant to be challenged. The researchers find that young people construct the messages they receive around sexuality as punitive and disciplinary, involving ‘danger, disease and damage’. These messages at the same time silence a discourse of sexuality as pleasurable and potentially empowering, inhibiting the development of sexually agentic young people. Importantly, teaching about sexuality is also found to reproduce the very gender binaries that are implicated in a range of negative sexual and reproductive health problems, gendered relations and violence, specifically the idea that men are powerful and potentially dangerous and women are vulnerable and must take primary responsibility around sexual relationships. Shefer and colleagues end with envisioning a sexuality education that serves the needs of young people, acknowledges their own sexual agency and ultimately contributes to transformation toward gender equality, non-violence and well-being.

REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE ARTICLES FOR THINKING ABOUT VIOLENCE AND FOR DEVELOPING PEDAGOGIC INTERVENTIONS WHICH ENGAGE WITH THIS.

There is a history of scholarship, influenced by feminism and queer studies, which has raised concerns about the prevalence of forms of violence relating to gender and sexuality in everyday social relations in the home, school and workplace. This work draws attention to
the operation of gender power relations in various social contexts and how these underpin, produce and are exemplified in forms of violence. It also critiques the ways such relations are naturalised and normalised through patriarchal and heteronormative discourses. Following this line of critical enquiry, the articles in this volume pose questions about the nature of violence and what gets recognised and defined as violent or not.

They do so by engaging with particular groups of young people who are marginalised in various ways through normative constructions of gender, sexuality and youth. In this research the young people are addressed as potential authorities and knowledge producers about their social worlds and, at the same, are encouraged to reflect upon themselves and their everyday lives through their participation in various kinds of research activities including photovoice, drawing activities, loosely structured interviews and combinations of these. How these research activities were used to generate data about the participants, and how the researchers tried to engage with them as active agents with desires and vulnerabilities and as multidimensional and sexual beings, carry important implications, we suggest, for developing appropriate pedagogic interventions for highlighting and addressing forms of violence.

These include homophobic bullying and misogyny and the symbolic significance football holds in school, the gendering of safe and unsafe spots on campus and how these circumscribe the movements of various students. They also include the ‘violence’ perpetrated by particular kinds of public discourses and intervention and educational programmes, such as forms of life orientation in schools, which criticise sexual violence by problematising teenage sexuality per se and especially teenage women who express sexual desire and teenage women who identify as lesbian. Such interventions and forms of education contribute to stereotypes of men as subjects and women as objects of (hetero) sexual desire and to gendered forms of policing identities and marginalisation through sexuality.

In contrast, the kinds of participatory research practices in these articles may exemplify models of good pedagogic practice or ways of relating to and engaging with young people to explore and address social issues and social problems, and the significance they attach to these in their narrative accounts as particular and diverse learners or students.
REFERENCES


Original Contributions

Young lesbian and bisexual women resisting discrimination and negotiating safety: A photovoice study

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing focus on the problem of ‘corrective rape’ in South Africa, representations of black lesbian women have largely become about victimhood. The increasing media focus on ‘corrective rape’ has also resulted in the ‘hyper-visibility’ of black lesbian bodies. These representations of victimhood can be problematic, as they erase the agency, political activism, pleasure and multi-dimensionality of black lesbian lives. Furthermore, although there has been increased attention on the lives of black lesbian women, the experiences of black lesbian youth remain marginal. In this paper we present findings from a participatory, photovoice project with young, black lesbian women in the Western Cape. The project involved the development of photo stories and the collection of interview and focus group data from 14 young women between the ages of 13 and 17 years who identify as lesbian or bisexual. We discuss the young women’s experiences of violence and discrimination at school, and how they resist that discrimination. We also discuss how the young women construct and negotiate safety in their community, zoning in on the young women’s agency in their resistance and negotiation of safety, and their defiance of dominant narratives of victimhood. We further discuss how the photovoice methodology can be used as an empowering method to research issues around violence and safety with young people and those who may be stigmatised or marginalised.

Keywords: photovoice, black lesbian youth, discrimination, resistance, safety.

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INTRODUCTION

The rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people in South Africa are enshrined in the constitution, which protects against discrimination based on a variety of identities, including sexual orientation, and is considered to be one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. However, this often does not translate into protection in the lives of all citizens (Nel & Judge, 2008).

Despite progressive legislation regarding the protection of sexual-minority rights, attitudes towards homosexuality in South Africa remain overwhelmingly negative (Roberts & Reddy, 2008). In a review of the trends around attitudes towards homosexuality in the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) from 2003-2007, Roberts and Reddy (2008) showed that the percentage of respondents who believe that sex between people of the same sex is ‘always wrong’ remained relatively steady, ranging between 82%-85%. In addition to pervasive negative attitudes towards homosexuality in South Africa, there are also high levels of homophobic victimisation (Baird, 2010; Rich, 2006; Wells, 2006; Wells & Polders, 2004). Homophobic victimisation furthermore intersects with other forms of oppression, such as racism and sexism to create multiple forms of, and levels of discrimination (Nel & Judge, 2008).

Those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning (LGBTIQ) have to negotiate their identities and identifications in a heterosexist, heteronormative and homophobic context. For young people, this may pose special challenges. The ‘coming out’ process is often seen as central in the formation of gay and lesbian identities (Cass, 1979; Savin-Williams, 1990; Smuts, 2011), and adolescence is the time when many gay and lesbian young people will ‘discover’ their sexuality, or ‘come out’ for the first time (Savin-Williams, 1990). Adolescents who identify as LGBTIQ may face additional challenges in resolving this developmental conflict due to the stigma they may face in a heteronormative society which is often hostile towards same-sex desire and gender non-conformity (Rivers, 2002).

In this paper we argue that, while the reality of the risks faced by LGBTIQ young people should be an important site of research, theorising and activism, we also need to find ways of doing research that foregrounds new narratives about the lives of young people. We argue that a one-dimensional focus on risk is problematic as it denies people’s agency and their everyday experiences of survival and pleasure and tells a single story, particularly about black women as perpetual victims.
BLACK LESBIAN WOMEN AND THE PROBLEM OF ‘CORRECTIVE RAPE’

Perhaps the most visible of risks faced by lesbian women is the issue of ‘corrective rape’. Despite the fact that black lesbian women bear a range of additional burdens of racist discrimination and economic disempowerment (Holland-Muter, 2012), it is the issue of ‘homophobic rape’ that has captured media attention in South Africa and internationally. This refers to the practice of targeting and raping lesbian women, specifically black lesbian women, with the apparent suggestion that their sexual preferences may be ‘corrected’. Given that the rape of black women who identify as lesbian cannot be analysed outside of the continuing high levels of gender-based violence in South Africa, it is not unreasonable to assume that the practice is widespread, and anecdotal evidence suggests the same (Holland-Muter, 2012; Muholi, 2004; Nel & Judge, 2008). However, there is currently no official ‘hate crimes’ category in which crimes against LGBTI people can be classified, so no official statistics on the prevalence of this crime exist.

The rape of lesbian women is often analysed through the lens of gender; it is most often butch3 lesbians who take on a masculine role who are most at risk of victimisation, though this is not to say that femme/feminine women are not victimised (Muholi, 2004; Swarr, 2012). A common perception is that butch lesbians want to be men, and are taking over the role of men (Swarr, 2012). Thus, butch lesbians are argued to pose a threat to the traditional gender order and to heterosexual men in particular (Matebeni, 2013). In addition, butch lesbian women are also known to have sex with straight women, and thus they are furthermore perceived to be ‘stealing’ those women from heterosexual men (Swarr, 2012). This victimisation is then seen as a way to enforce the traditional gender order.

With the widespread acknowledgement of the problem of homophobic violence, the portrayal of black lesbian women has largely become about victimhood and their risk of being victims of ‘corrective rape’ (Matebeni, 2013; Morrissey, 2013; Swarr, 2012). However, these kinds of portrayals also have the effect of making invisible the agency women have and the political organising occurring amongst black lesbian women in township spaces (Morrissey, 2013; Swarr, 2012). Furthermore, it also serves to erase the multiple and intersectional identities that shape women’s everyday experiences (Matebeni, 2013). These portrayals

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2 ‘Corrective rape’ is a term originally coined by activists to refer to hate crimes targeting black lesbian women in particular. It is, however, a problematic and contested term, as it implies that sexuality is something that can be ‘corrected’ and also shifts blame from the perpetrators to the victims, for ‘transgressing’ traditional gender norms (Matebeni, 2013).

3 Some lesbian women identify within a butch-femme sub-culture. Although this is a simplistic explanation due to space constraints, women who identify as butch tend to take on a more masculine role, in actions, dress and mannerisms, whereas femme lesbians tend to take on a more feminine role (Kheswa & Wieringa, 2005).
of black lesbians as perpetual victims also deny their everyday experiences of survival and pleasure, as opposed to victimhood. Although research with adult lesbian women has started to look at the ways in which viewing women through a lens of ‘risk’ can be detrimental (Morrissey, 2013; Swarr, 2012), most of the research with adolescents still deals with risk and victimisation, with a focus on homophobic victimisation in schools and increased vulnerability to mental health problems.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND HOMOPHOBIC VICTIMISATIONS

South African, school-based victimisation studies with lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) adolescents indicate that they experience victimisation and harassment by peers, with verbal slurs being the most common form of victimisation and some incidents of physical assault also being reported (Msibi, 2012; Wells & Polders, 2004). Gendered identities appear to play an important role in victimisations as well, as gender non-conforming individuals are most likely to experience victimisation and harassment.

In addition, researchers have raised concern about gay and lesbian learners’ reports of victimisation from teachers and administrators in the form of verbal abuse, physical assault and public humiliation (Butler, Alpaslan, Strümpher, & Astbury, 2003; Msibi, 2012; Wells & Polders, 2004). A recent example of discrimination by school administrators, as evidenced by the recent case of a school in Tembisa, Johannesburg that threatened to expel seven lesbian learners for refusing to wear skirts, indicates the problematic heteronormative assumptions that underlie discrimination and how they are linked to gender expression (DeBarros, 2014).

In another study, Nell and Shapiro (2011) conducted informal interviews and focus groups with LGBTI youth from a variety of different racial, gender and class identities (though most were black, gay and male) in Gauteng for an unpublished report commissioned by The Atlantic Philanthropies. They found that LGBTI youth faces similar challenges to other South African youth, but that these challenges are compounded by experiences of discrimination and alienation in the family, at school and in religious settings, as well as threats of violence in their communities. However, despite these challenges, many of the young people they interviewed also found spaces where their identity was affirmed, specifically in LGBTI spaces and organisations and by getting involved in LGBTI activism.

These findings from research with young people are echoed in other qualitative studies that have been conducted with school teachers around their views of homophobia and how they approach the issue in school (Bhana, 2012; Francis, 2012). These studies found that teachers often repress conversations about sexuality in general and actively silence
conversations around homosexuality specifically. This silencing of diverse sexualities is further highlighted at a curriculum level, where same-sex sexualities are barely dealt with at all in most Life Orientation textbooks that are used in South Africa (Potgieter & Reygan, 2012). All of these factors contribute not only to individual learners feeling isolated and excluded, but also to a heteronormative culture within schools that invisibilises alternative sexualities (Butler et al., 2003; Msibi, 2012). Furthermore, the silencing of talk about sexuality at school is problematic as it means that opportunities to engage with young people in a more youth-centred, participatory and open way are missed, particularly engagement with young people who may hold homophobic attitudes and who tend to act on them.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND VULNERABILITY TO MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

International research has shown that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) adolescents have higher rates of mental health problems than heterosexual youth (Marshal et al., 2008, 2011). Homophobic victimisation in all its forms, as well as the promotion of a heteronormative culture in schools, families and other spaces, can have adverse effects on LGBT young people, and may lead them to feel rejected and isolated. Adverse effects can include academic difficulties, as well as increased vulnerability to various mental health problems such as depression, suicidality and substance abuse (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013; Marshal et al., 2008, 2011; Polders, Nel, Kruger, & Wells, 2008). In addition, victimisation in school years is also linked to increased vulnerability to mental health problems in adulthood (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011). Although there is not much published literature on the mental health of LGB adolescents in South Africa, anecdotal evidence suggests that they may face similar challenges (Nell & Shapiro, 2011).

Despite a large body of international evidence linking homophobic victimisation to mental health problems, there have been some inconsistent findings that suggest that mental health problems are related to victimisation in general, rather than homophobic victimisation in particular (Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013). These findings may suggest the importance of moving away from viewing LGB adolescents as inherently ‘at risk’ for mental health problems due to their sexual orientation, and to rather focus on preventing victimisation in general. Savin-Williams (2001) further argues that the link between sexual orientation and poor mental health has resulted mainly from problematic research designs that compare LGBT youth to heterosexual youth, when this ignores that LGBT adolescents are not a homogenous group and it also sets non-LGBT youth up as the norm against which comparisons are made.

Other research has focused on the role of family support in the mental health outcomes of adolescents. LGB adolescents who come out to their parents may face rejection due to
religious or cultural values that denigrate same-sex sexualities, or due to heteronormative assumptions that parents hold (Kowen & Davis, 2006; Padilla, Crisp, & Rew, 2010). Parental rejection is linked to the internalisation of negative beliefs about homosexuality, more difficulty in the coming out process, as well as more stress in trying to conceal their identity, which may lead to poorer mental health outcomes (Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen, & Lindahl, 2013). However, family and peer support and acceptance can also act as a protective factor against mental health problems (Bregman et al., 2013; Padilla et al., 2010). Kowen and Davis (2006), for example, in their interview study with young lesbian women in South Africa, found that the women experienced much isolation and feelings of alienation from family and peers at school, but at the same time they also gained support from friends, which resulted in resilience in coping with the challenges they faced. Families and peers therefore play an important role in how adolescents experience and understand their gender identities and sexualities, in both positive and negative ways.

Adolescence is an important time for identity formation, with ‘coming out’ seen as an important step in identity formation for adolescents who identify as lesbian. Lesbian adolescents face additional challenges, such as isolation and alienation from most structures that would normally be supportive, including the family, school and peers. While victimisation rates are high for LGBTI people and black lesbian women in particular, the differing contexts (e.g. family and school) in which young people act out their identities may pose further risks – a focus on risk alone tells only one kind of story about the lives of young people who identify as LGBTIQ and feeds into heteronormative discourses and the pathologisation of those deemed ‘other’.

In this paper we draw from a larger project that explored the representations of gender and sexuality amongst diverse groups of young people in South Africa, using participatory methodologies. We address the following question: How do lesbian and bisexual young women choose to represent their experiences of gender and sexuality through photovoice and how do these stories challenge or maintain dominant narratives about young people of diverse sexualities?

**METHODS**

Photovoice, a participatory action research (PAR) method, has been identified as an innovative way through which to engage with young people (Kessi, 2011; Wang, 2006). We used the method, which involves training participants in photography and facilitating a process in which they represent their experiences on their own terms (Wang & Burris, 1997) to address the question of how adolescent women who identify as lesbian represent their experiences of gender and sexuality.
We approached the research from a feminist intersectional stance, interested in the ways in which intersecting identities and structures of power result in differing experiences and locations. At the level of representations, we are also interested in how particular representations, which are either foregrounded or obscured, serve ideological and political interests.

We recruited 14 isiXhosa-speaking young women between the ages of 13 and 17 years, 12 of whom identified as butch lesbians and two as bisexual. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the Triangle Project, an NGO based in Cape Town that focuses on LGBTI rights. The research took place in a community approximately 70 kilometres from Cape Town.

The process we followed in this photovoice study entailed meeting participants 10 times over a five-month period. These included four focus group discussions about their lives as young lesbian and bisexual women and their experiences in their community, and framing their photo stories and their experiences on the project. Participants also received photography training from a professional photographer and were given a camera to use for one week. They each produced a written narrative to accompany the photographs they took. Each participant was interviewed once and was asked to tell her own story. A public exhibition of photo stories was planned and managed by the participants and the community group they belong to.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the appropriate university body and informed consent and assent negotiated with parents and the participants themselves. All names and identifying details have been changed to ensure anonymity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

STORIES OF DISCRIMINATION AND RESISTANCE

In this paper we focus on narratives of resistance in participants’ stories of their experiences as lesbian and bisexual young women, specifically how they ‘speak back’ to dominant narratives of black lesbian lives. Despite the many challenges that the participants faced in relation to discrimination at school and alienation in various settings, there were also many stories of resistance that emerged in the young women’s narratives. These stories involved resistance to actual discrimination, particularly at school, as well as resistance to dominant, one-dimensional narratives of black lesbian victimhood.

Most of the young women who identified as lesbian wore ‘greys’ (grey pants considered to be the ‘boys’ uniform’) to school. For these young women, wearing ‘greys’ was felt to be
an essential part of their identities as butch lesbians. The ‘greys’ also served as a physical marker of their lesbian identities to themselves and to others in a school context in which they were expected, as young women, to wear dresses or skirts. However, wearing ‘greys’ to school also resulted in a great deal of discrimination and victimisation from teachers. The school uniform seemed to be the cause of conflict between teachers and some of the participants. Participants described incidents of being ‘chased’ out of school by teachers (and therefore missing school), verbal abuse (e.g. being called ‘dogs’), public humiliation, and some incidents of physical abuse (e.g. being slapped by a teacher). In addition to incidents of abuse towards individual learners, many participants also talked about a strong discourse of ‘separate development’ from some teachers, who suggested that lesbian learners should be taught separately, by lesbian teachers.

Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach (2006) suggest that schools create their own ‘gender regimes’ through formal and informal school traditions, rules and codes of conduct that are governed by gender. In township schools such as those attended by the participants, the ‘gender regime’ may be further reinforced by conservative religious and cultural understandings of gender roles (Msibi, 2012). Although not specifically mentioned by Dunne et al. (2006), the uniform forms a central part of the regime through it being a physical marker of ‘gender difference’. Thus, although the abuse and discrimination that the participants faced seemed to be centred around the wearing of the ‘boys’ uniform’, it is important to bear in mind that this conflict was not about the uniform itself, or school rules about the uniform. Rather, it was about what the uniform represented: a supposed transgression of the schools’ ‘gender regime’.

Some of the participants wrote about their experiences at school in their photo stories and also took photographs to represent their experiences. Through publicly exhibiting this aspect of their stories, the young women drew attention to the victimisation and discrimination that they experienced. For example, Sesethu (aged 17) presented a photo story of herself in ‘girls’ uniform’, juxtaposed with one of her in a ‘boys’ uniform’:

At school there was this day a teacher came to me and ask are you a boy or what, I did not answer her because she knows me. Then she take me to another

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4 The national guidelines on school uniforms allow each school to decide school uniform policies for that particular school. Schools may treat refusal to wear the approved school uniform as a disciplinary matter. In the participants’ school, the principal allowed lesbian learners to wear ‘greys’, but individual teachers continued to discriminate against lesbian learners.

5 The ethical requirements of our institution require that we blur participants’ faces in order to maintain their anonymity. Although we have adhered to this requirement in this paper, we are deeply uncomfortable about rendering the participants invisible and potentially reproducing the power dynamics that marginalise young people who do not identify as heterosexual and we surface the tensions between ‘giving voice’ and institutionalised ethical requirements.
teacher, they were asking me a lot of questions which are not good. I was very angry because I did not like the way they were talking with me. When I listen to them seriously they are talking about me wearing a grey pants which they say is for boys. I was very shocked because I have been wearing this grey since 2010, but they were not talking. In my mind I had this unanswered question which is why they don’t want me to wear this now, what about those passed years. There was this day the same teacher called me to her class. Then she said where do I belong in the register, she was asking that do they put me under boys’ side or girls’ side. I said to her how can you ask me that because you are the teacher, girls are in the same side. She said to me I must take my pants off she wants to see what I am hiding behind those pants. I did not take my pants off so she chased me out of school. (Sesethu)

The above extract from Sesethu’s photo story highlights how the school uniform has become the site of discrimination against lesbian learners because it is a physical marker of their identities. However, it is also evident in the extract that the ‘greys’ have become a symbol for something much larger: the subversion of the traditional gender binary which the teachers feel the need to police. Thus, the teacher asks her whether she belongs in the girls’ column or the boys’ column, and what she is “hiding behind those pants.” It therefore seems that the ‘greys’ have become a physical marker or symbol of a stigmatised identity (‘lesbian’) that is seen as threatening to the traditional gender order and the school’s ‘gender regime’. Msibi (2012) points out that such behaviour on the part of teachers reflects the intersection of sexism and homophobia, with teachers wishing to enforce sexist traditional gender roles (‘girls wear skirts’), but also with a focus on how this is linked to homosexuality.
In her photo story, Sesethu wonders about what has changed this year that has caused the teachers to focus on the uniform. Another participant, Mandisa (aged 17), elaborates on this point and provides potential reasons for what some of the participants perceived as a sudden change from teachers regarding the uniform:

I don’t know what is it, or since [name removed] is the deputy principal now she wants to shine or maybe to be noticed in her position now, or I say because there are lots of us now that is why we are easily noticed, ‘cause last year there were few of us. We were not this much, or that is why we are noticed there is too much of us, and we also go together, in fact we know each other, there is no way that we wouldn’t go together.

Mandisa’s extract above points to some of the possible power dynamics that may fuel discrimination against lesbian learners. Although she partially attributes the discrimination to the deputy principal’s desire for power, her primary attribution seems to focus on how lesbian learners have become more visible in school through larger numbers and through being seen together in groups. It is possible that greater visibility, which is marked by large numbers of girls wearing the ‘boys’ uniform’, has resulted in the perception that lesbian learners are more of a threat, and therefore need to be policed. In this way, the uniform has become a symbol of the greater visibility of a ‘threatening’ identity. Msibi (2012) suggests that fear of contagion or the ‘spread’ of homosexuality contributes to the discrimination against queer learners by teachers, who feel that if they ‘police’ gender non-conforming behaviour, they will prevent queer learners from influencing others. It is therefore possible that the greater numbers and visibility of lesbian learners may have fuelled a fear of contagion, which resulted in the ‘sudden’ use of violence and discrimination by teachers. This fear of contagion may also be at play in some teachers’ desire to separate lesbian learners from the rest of the school.

International literature has highlighted schools as highly gendered spaces, where gender is strictly policed and compulsory heterosexuality is actively promoted (Dunne et al., 2006). In South Africa, previous research has similarly shown that gay and lesbian learners experience a great deal of victimisation from teachers and peers, including verbal abuse, physical abuse and public humiliation (Butler et al., 2003; Msibi, 2012; Rich, 2006; Wells, 2006; Wells & Polders, 2004). Msibi (2012) demonstrated the particular challenges that queer learners in township schools face, and how gender policing and the promotion of compulsory heterosexuality through physical and verbal violence create a climate of fear at school. The literature also points to the potential detrimental consequences of the kind of victimisation that the young women in this study experienced, including increased vulnerability to depression and other mental health problems (Burton et al., 2013; Polders
et al., 2008), suggesting that the victimisation learners experience may have an impact on how they experience themselves, and how they construct their identities.

STORIES OF RESISTANCE TO DISCRIMINATION AT SCHOOL

Although the participants experienced a great deal of discrimination at school, they also actively resisted. Through these acts, participants simultaneously resisted dominant representations of black lesbians as passive victims (Matebeni, 2013; Morrissey, 2013). Participants’ resistance to the discrimination they experienced took several forms. Many initially attempted to talk to teachers themselves. This strategy being unsuccessful, the participants found alternative ways for their concerns to be heard. Some enlisted the help of supportive caregivers and the LGBTI organisation that they were part of, who came to the school to advocate for them. Akhona (aged 16) enlisted the help of her mother:

Like I must also wear a skirt, then I told the teacher no I can’t wear a skirt like he said; I must go and come back when I realise I want to be a real girl. Like it was quite hurting to me like, I wanted to be at school. Every time I entered the class, but I didn’t give up. I just told my mother and then my mother called the teacher and told him all the story. That I can’t. It’s like I don’t feel comfortable. But now the teacher is fine with me.

Another participant, Fezeka (aged 15), described how the strategy to enlist the assistance of members of the LGBTI group was successful in allowing them to wear their ‘greys’ after group leaders came to the school to talk to the teachers. Despite being unable to engage with the teachers themselves, these young women narrated their stories in a way that demonstrated their resourcefulness in accessing support. In all of the narratives, the discrimination against the young women was resolved after the intervention by another adult. These stories highlight the need to focus on age/youth when thinking about these stories of discrimination. Dunne et al. (2006) have highlighted how gender in schools is regulated through institutional power relations linked to age and authority. The institutional power relations between teachers as authority figures and learners as ‘youth’ meant that the participants’ needs regarding the school uniform were not taken seriously until an adult intervened. In addition, these narratives further highlight how the young women’s experiences of discrimination and resistance were directly affected by their status as ‘minors’ and their dependence on their parents. In the extracts above, the participants had supportive adults or organisations that they could turn to for assistance. It is likely, however, that their experiences would have been radically different if they did not have these resources available to them.
It is interesting to note that in all of the narratives of resistance presented above, the stories ended with a favourable outcome for the young women, with them being allowed to wear the ‘greys’. The structure of the narratives is similar, with the young women experiencing discrimination, then taking an action (telling a parent/organisation), which ultimately leads to a favourable resolution of the situation. By narrating their stories in this way, the young women construct identities in which they have agency to change discriminatory practices in their lives.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF VIOLENCE, SAFETY AND COMMUNITY

In this project we chose not to ask specifically about rape or hate crimes against lesbian women, unless participants’ raised the issues themselves. However, issues of rape, safety and violence were brought up in the first group discussion, prompted by the question: “What is it like to be a lesbian teenager in (your community)?”

Participants’ constructions of violence and safety in their community were often conflicting and contested. Although they often reiterated that there had never been any hate crimes against lesbians in their community, talk about hate crimes and violence against lesbians was prevalent. For some participants, the fact that there had been no reported hate crimes in their community meant that it was ‘safe’. For others, the fact that they experienced harassment on the streets meant that it was not ‘safe’. Some participants also alternated between the two positions in their own narratives. The following interaction demonstrates some of the contestations around safety:

Khetiwe (aged 17): …So it’s like, let me just say it, there’s no problem there, they don’t have here and, all that kind of stuff. [Ja so people are calm about it.]
Floretta: [So you feel safe]
Khetiwe: Ja I feel safe
Nokuthula (aged 16): In that case I don’t feel safe here, there’s no place where I can say it’s safe here in my place, because, probably having faced some challenges and problems around, but it’s not easy for us to kiss our girlfriends in street because people complain about it we have complaint saying it’s devil thing ((noises of agreement)). ((To Khetiwe)) if you haven’t got that I have got that, and even if you walk with a person, you can’t like, touch them in a setting where you should, where you should like, walk as a group of friends or something. It’s not easy here and the rape part it’s out there, people might not say it but they have been raped, although they might not say it to you, or come out about it. There’s a hate everywhere, no-one likes to accept the fact that we are there, we can’t hide ourselves but, although we trying to tell them that we there, we facing problems. So we not safe everywhere.
In the extract above, Khetiwe and Nokuthula provide conflicting opinions on what it means to be safe as young, black lesbian and bisexual women. Khetiwe suggests that she feels safe because there have been no incidents of lesbians being raped that she knows of. On the other hand, Nokuthula does not feel safe due to the harassment that she experiences, and the underlying assumption that lesbians have probably been raped. In the extract, the prominence of rape and murder of lesbians as a ‘standard’ for safety or lack of safety is notable. It is interesting to note how Nokuthula shifts in her use of pronouns from talking about herself as an individual to an understanding of herself as part of a collective ‘community’. Her statements that “there’s a hate everywhere” and “so we not safe everywhere” may point to how the prominence of hate crimes against lesbians in South Africa has resulted in a generalised fear, and acknowledgement that as members of this collective, they too are not safe.

These contestations around what it means to be safe were echoed in individual narratives. There seemed to be some polarisation of opinion, with some participants such as Fezeka (aged 15) saying that they felt completely safe and had never been threatened: “I’m not scared. I even walk at 11 or 10 o’clock. Never even had a boy or the old man saying he will rape me or something. It’s safe.” On the other hand, many of the participants described experiencing incidents and threats of violence. Khanyiswa (aged 13), for example, described the harassment that she experienced on the streets in her community.

Or when I’m walking with my girlfriend and boys would say “oh no these things” and they just wanted us to turn back and they would throw stones on us and we were scared of boys and we are not boys but we are girls and they will just hurt us very bad but I would just ignore them ‘cause I’m use to them now. (Khanyiswa)

Apart from stories of harassment such as Khanyiswa’s, many of the participants also described frustration that they could not hold hands or show affection towards their girlfriends in public for fear of such harassment. Nandipha’s (aged 17) photo story further exemplifies the ambiguous constructions around safety:

Same applies in the community when you passing by with boys they calling you a name because you walk with your girlfriend. At the same time I feel great being a lesbian in (my community) because we walk free there because no person has died with a murder because she’s homosexual. But at the same time I feel bad because you just can’t carry your girlfriend in the street. You must walk and act as friends as it is not. But all I will say is that (my community) is the best community ever. (Nandipha)
Nandipha’s photo story, including her photograph above, is a particularly powerful example of contested constructions of safety. It could be argued that Nandipha’s story reflects an internalisation of contested narratives of safety in her community as part of her own narrative and identity (Taylor, 2006). This story was presented at the public exhibition, and it is possible that her last sentence may be for the benefit of maintaining the dignity of her community to a public audience that included members of the community. Her story additionally brings attention to how constructions of community, violence and safety are inextricably linked.

CONSTRUCTING SAFETY IN A CONTEXT OF THE OMNIPRESENT THREAT OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Despite the contestations about what it means to be safe, stories about rape and threats of rape were prominent. Even in narratives where participants believed it was safe in their community, rape and murder often seemed to be the ‘criterion’ according to which safety was evaluated. Thus, even when participants were talking about lack of rape or murder of lesbians, rape and murder were ever present in the narratives.

Some participants wrote about threats of rape that they frequently experienced when walking in their community. The following are extracts from Sindiswa’s (aged 16) and Lindiwe’s (aged 13) photo stories:
For me life as a young lesbian I would not say it is easy because every day I have to face challenges. Most of the times the streets you will find that guys are ganging up on me, they teasing me about the way I am that I am a lesbian. Sometimes when I am walking alone I would bump into a guy he would be like “I wish I could sleep with you so that you will realise that you are not a boy and stop what you doing, and start act like a girl”. Many people especially guys when they see a lesbian like a butch one it’s like they see someone they could rape. (Sindiswa)

Here in (my community) there are young gangsters who always attack young girls from school. Those gangsters also liked to do silly comments and I couldn’t ignore them because they always said things I am afraid of, including rape. Gangsters believed that if you are a virgin lesbian, once they sleep with you will stop being a lesbian, which is a lie. Butch lesbians are the ones who always get comments from young boys because butch lesbians date beautiful chicks and attracting chicks. (Lindiwe)

Through displaying their photo stories at the exhibition, the young women drew attention to the common threats of violence that they experienced. Although only Lindiwe mentions it directly as something that she is “afraid of”, both of the extracts suggest that fear of rape is a frequent experience for the participants. These findings are in line with previous South African research, which has shown that threats of sexual violence against lesbians in townships are common (Swarr, 2012).
Additionally, both Sindiswa and Lindiwe begin to unpack how they make meaning of the rape threats against them, with both of them mentioning that threats of rape are directed predominantly towards butch lesbians. Identifying as butch lesbians themselves, the young women simultaneously construct themselves as potential victims of rape, in addition to simply describing their daily experiences of harassment. Sindiswa’s and Lindiwe’s narratives suggest an understanding of some of the power dynamics that make them and other butch lesbians threatening to men. Butch lesbians are often perceived as threatening because they symbolically claim the privileges associated with masculinity (Gunkel, 2010; Matebeni, 2013; Swarr, 2012; Swarr & Nagar, 2003). Thus, they are seen to be taking over the role of men, as the man in Sindiswa’s narrative suggests when he says she must “realise that (she is) not a boy.” Furthermore, butch lesbians are often perceived to be in competition with men because they commonly date ‘straight’ women, who may also be dating men (Swarr, 2012).

NEGOTIATING SAFETY IN PUBLIC SPACES

Although many of the participants experienced harassment and threats of violence in their community, they also developed strategies to manage their safety in public spaces. This involved a careful negotiation of their ‘public’ selves (Matebeni, 2011). In the following extract, Mandisa (aged 17) describes how she negotiates her identity in relation to the harassment that she experiences:

Like with no reason you see boys like mocking like even if we are just walking, especially if we are a group, they will pass remarks but we don’t entertain them. Even if I walk alone they sometimes mock at me, if I’m not scared of that person I respond to that person but if I’m scared of him I just keep quiet. Even if you are walking with your girlfriend they will never keep quiet, they talk. We shouldn’t hold hands together while walking, you must just walk, and look like you are just chatting.

Mandisa appears to be highly attuned to her environment, and responds to the harassment she experiences according to what she judges to be safest in the moment. Thus, she narrates a story in which she needs to ‘hide’ her identity to maintain her safety, but also demonstrates her resistance by responding to her harassers when it is safe to do so. Like Mandisa, many of the participants mentioned that they did not hold hands with, or kiss, their partners when they were in public, and rather pretended to be friends. This was frustrating for them, and many expressed anger that they had to ‘hide’ in order to avoid harassment and threats of violence, though they too confronted their harassers when they thought it was safe to do so. Thembeka (aged 17), in contrast, mentioned that being more visible and ‘known’ in the community aided her negotiation of safety:
“Like if you’re known in (the community), then the people don’t have a problem with you, like they don’t really have a problem, in my experience.”

Although the participants who identified as butch lesbians constricted their behaviour when necessary, they could never fully ‘hide’ their identities, as these were made visible through their embodiment of masculinity. This therefore creates a paradox, as Matebeni (2011) and Swarr (2012) suggest: the visibility that they desire as butch lesbians through their embodied masculinity may simultaneously make them more vulnerable to violence. Thus, the young women needed to constantly monitor their environments and negotiate their identities, attempting to strike a balance between being ‘known’ and staying ‘hidden’. The participants’ narratives reflected this dialectic, echoing a body of literature suggesting that lesbian women are constantly negotiating their identities in relation to the spaces in which they find themselves (Bagnol, Matebeni, Simon, Blaser, Manuel, & Moutinho, 2010; Gibson & Macleod, 2012; Matebeni, 2011; Smuts, 2011; Swarr, 2012; Swarr & Nagar, 2003).

Furthermore, the participants’ narratives and photographs demonstrated how their experiences of violence, safety and community were intimately linked to poverty and marginalisation. In the community in which the research was conducted, about 48% of people live below the South African poverty line (Bland, 2011 as cited in Grundlingh, 2011). Continued structural racism and economic inequality as a legacy of apartheid and colonialism mean that many black people continue to be impoverished (Swarr, 2012; Swarr & Nagar, 2003). Thus, it is important to consider the intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality and other identities and how these shape everyday lived realities (Bowleg, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991; Swarr & Nagar, 2003). The participants’ experiences of living in
poverty were particularly prominent in some of their photographs. Sindiswa (aged 16) took photographs of where she lives, which is a poor area close to the research community:

Mandisa (aged 17) also took a photograph of the informal settlement where she used to live (she now lives in an RDP house with her grandmother). She described deep feelings of shame about living in an informal settlement, and how she did not want her friends to visit her.

Swarz and Nagar (2003) highlight how the lived experiences of violence and safety in townships are intimately linked to poverty and everyday struggles for survival. The poor living conditions which are evident in the photographs (lack of safe transport, inadequate housing, lack of adequate sanitation, lack of lighting, etc.) shape how the young women negotiate their environments in order to maintain safety, and are also likely make them more vulnerable to future violence as young lesbian women (Swarz & Nagar, 2003).

Thembeka (aged 17) took a photograph to represent the poverty and the resultant fragmentation of her community. Her description of the photograph is below:
Oh yeah, and then there’s that other one of …the biscuit …and that one I can say it really, it represent hmm, the poverty, and me also just saying that poverty, black people are related to poverty and something like that. And because it’s broken in pieces, so I would also say that it represents the breaking up of a community, the non-unity that the people have yeah.

Above, Thembeka constructs her community as “broken” and fragmented. She also demonstrates an understanding of the politics of race and class in South Africa. Akhona (aged 16) narrated a similar story of a ‘broken’ society, specifically mentioning problems such as substance abuse and rape. Thus, the participants narrated how the fragmentation of communities linked to poverty and racism also has a direct impact on violence and safety.

Like Akhona, some of the participants mentioned the problem of sexual violence and its impact on safety and the community by. Although lesbian and bisexual women are often targeted and threatened with sexual violence specifically because of their sexual and gender identities, this violence also takes place within, and cannot be separated from, a broader context of high levels of sexual violence and violence against women (Matebeni, 2013; Swarr, 2012). Some of the participants talked about their experiences with sexual violence outside of discussions about the threats they endure because of their sexual and gender identities.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we report on a participatory photovoice project with young women who identify as lesbian and bisexual, with an interest in answering questions about their experiences of gender and sexuality and their resistances to dominant narratives about their lives as young black women of diverse sexualities. Although the young women reported experiences that fit in with dominant narratives about LGBTI youth victimisation, the participants challenged these dominant narratives of victimhood by demonstrating how they asserted their agency and resisted discrimination. They employed a variety of resources at their disposal to challenge the discriminatory practices of teachers at their schools. Participants’ stories of discrimination do, however, point to the need to work with teachers on creating safer, more inclusive environments for learners with diverse sexual and gender identities, especially given the finding from other research showing how talk about sexuality is silenced at schools.

This research shows that, with some intervention from parents and community organisations, teachers ended their overt discrimination against lesbian and bisexual learners. A clear
recommendation for educational policy emerging from this and other research (Francis, 2012) is that the teaching of sexual diversity should be deeply embedded in the curriculum, not only through Life Orientation programming, but also across the curriculum. An embedding sexual diversity teaching is especially important so that the informal gender and sexuality curriculum that continues to hold sway and fuel discriminatory practices may be properly disrupted.

Furthermore, the young women’s constructions of safety, violence and community included contested representations of what it means to be safe as a young black lesbian woman. Although, at times, participants constructed their community as ‘safe’, rape and murder were prominent in their talk, and emerged as the criteria against which safety was measured. Throughout participants’ narratives, but particularly in their stories about safety, violence and community, the issue of visibility was foreground and highlights the young women’s complex negotiations of identity. On the one hand, walking on the streets with girlfriends or other lesbian friends, or being together in groups at school was described as fuelling discrimination from teachers or harassment from men on the streets. On the other hand, some participants also described feeling safe if they were known (or visible) in their community. What these narratives of violence and safety illustrate, is the potential of the young women to challenge stigma discrimination by being visible and present through their embodiment of butch lesbian identities. On the other hand, the young women simultaneously walk a tightrope because the greater visibility comes with risks and requires of them to be hyper-vigilant and aware of their surroundings because of the constant threats of violence and the harassment they experience.

This research has foregrounded young lesbian and bisexual women’s representations of their own experiences, finding that the photovoice method was useful to engage with young people. Through the method, the young women in this research chose to foreground representations of themselves as active and able to resist the discrimination they experience. While recognising their experiences of discrimination, these narratives of resistance were cast to specifically speak back to dominant representations of them and their lives as young, black lesbian women living in a South African township.

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Empowering young people in advocacy for transformation: A photovoice exploration of safe and unsafe spaces on a university campus

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ABSTRACT

Globally and locally, research conducted with young people about safety on university campuses focuses primarily on risk and danger, particularly sexual danger. In this body of scholarship, the voices of young people are often elided. Our study intends to address both of these concerns, firstly by foregrounding the voices of students themselves through a photovoice method, and secondly by emphasising the ways in which safe and unsafe spaces are mediated by group and social identities. The aim of the study was to explore how students’ perceptions of safe and unsafe places are mediated by group and social identities. A group of third-year students at an urban South African university used photovoice, a methodology that encourages participation and empowerment of young people in transforming their communities, to conduct a study identifying and photographing spaces they perceived safe and unsafe in and around campus. Narratives explained these photographs. The paper draws from this project, whose findings show that the construction of safety on campus is mediated by different factors of marginality within the student body including gender, class, citizenship and race among others. These findings are not only significant in raising concern about issues of safety on campus, but they also draw the attention of university stakeholders to these concerns, giving students a voice to be agents of transformation.

Keywords: Campus safety, university students, gender, citizenship, race and class.

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INTRODUCTION

Campus safety is an important part of a student’s overall university experience. A considerable amount of research has been done on how students experience feelings of being safe and unsafe on university campuses globally, with most of the literature focusing on social groups like female, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students on campus, and of late sexual harassment of students, crime and security. In South Africa, literature exploring safe and unsafe spaces on campus is very scant. Available literature seems to approach safety from different angles, such as exploring risk and protective factors to ensure prevention of injury on campus (Rodriguez, Kramer, & Sherrif, 2013), and safety and security in halls of residence, particularly focusing on issues of sexual assault (MacKay & Magwaza, 2008). Scholarship also covers issues of coercive sexual practices and gender-based violence (Clowes, Shefer, Fouten, Vergnani, & Jacobs, 2009; Gordon & Collins, 2013; Hames, 2009), as well as victimisation, with high numbers of female students indicating that they have either been sexually harassed or abused on university campuses (Sass, 2005; Smit & Du Plessis, 2011). These studies reiterate that, with the overwhelming prevalence of sexual violence in South Africa in general, female students’ safety in universities remains an issue of concern. Evidence further shows that experiences of fear around gender-based violence constrain daily behaviours and activities of those concerned (Dosekun, 2007). Yet female students are expected to tolerate, as well as manage violence, which tends to restrict their movement on campus (Day, 1994) and interferes with the overall quality of their campus experience. In reacting to this fear, female students have adopted what Currie (1994, p. 33) terms ‘avoidance strategies’, which include walking in groups when necessary, carrying weapons and approaching campus security guards to be escorted. These tactics seem to instil female students with a sense of safety (Currie, 1994).

Due to the scarcity of studies on safety and unsafety on South African university campuses, it is difficult to refer to statistics that show the representation of male and female students in this regard. Literature on American universities seems to accord female students more attention than male students. In one such study, David and Sutton (2011) found that 50% of female students felt unsafe walking alone on campus during the day. Bryden and Fletcher (2007) further noted that female students have also indicated their fear of walking alone on campus even if they do not specify the time of day. This fear is intensified when students are in a particular space, which shows that spaces matter in how students feel safe or unsafe on university campuses.
This is not to suggest that male students do not experience feelings of unsafety. Studies conducted by Ratti (2010) and Hales (2010) on American university campuses show that male students are twice as likely as female students to experience violence on campus, and it is indeed not surprising that they also indicated feeling unsafe, particularly at night. Violence experienced by male students ranged from harassment by faculty staff to physical assaults by other male students (Clearly, Schmieler, Parascenzo, & Ambrosio, 1994). Like female students, male students have resorted to carrying weapons and moving around in groups.

Studies pertaining to students’ safety on campus are significant to universities, and any information that contributes to knowledge on students’ well-being is paramount for prevention of injury. This study foregrounds prevention of injury as university students explore how perceptions of safe and unsafe places are mediated by group and social identities.

METHODS

A key element of this study was the potential to empower young people to transform their community, the university campus, through adopting a photovoice approach. Photovoice is an action research participatory method where participants take pictures to express their subjective experiences on the issue being researched. The participants ‘identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique’. Its feminist orientation gives voice to the voiceless as it encourages transformation in the process (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). A third-year undergraduate class took photographs on and around campus of spaces that they perceived to be safe and unsafe. Each photograph was explained in a 250-word narrative. Students shared their data with three other fellow students and each student had at least 16 photographs and narratives to analyse. Thematic data analysis was conducted as students drew on their fellow students’ photos and narratives to generate codes, searching for emerging themes, defining and naming them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Some of the students volunteered to present their findings in class and some photos and narratives were exhibited at the university library for the attention of the university stakeholders and the entire student body.

This paper draws on 64 photographs and narratives from this group of students who volunteered to present their work, and foregrounds how the constructions of safety/unsafety and possible ways of managing and preventing safety and unsafety are mediated by the identities of the student body.

The students had to be ethically considerate throughout the study. Due to the sensitivity of taking photographs, students had to ensure that they obtained informed consent and
permission to use or publish images of human subjects who were visible in the spaces photographed. Students also completed informed consent forms agreeing to the use of their own data for publication purposes.

Students focused on the intersection of gender, space and identity, underscoring how space shaped different notions of safety and unsafety for different social groups on campus. For the sake of this paper, participants' voices will be presented in a way that attempts to define some of these categories, but it should be noted that this way of defining participants and understanding their identity remains superficial. Further layers can still be explored for a more nuanced understanding of students' identity. We will consider sex, nationality and race in referring to the participants, as these categories feature prominently in the themes we discuss.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SAFE/UNSAFE ON CAMPUS

The way students perceived and constructed their feelings of safety and unsafety was mediated by multiple identities, in ways that justify drawing from an intersectionality theory for a more nuanced understanding of their constructions of safety and unsafety. Intersectionality is very appropriate to probe below single identities, allowing questions that seek to investigate how certain positions occupied by students affect and shape their perceptions and constructions of safe and unsafe spaces on campus (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Students' perceptions show the intersection of multiple categories of identity. Some of these categories were used ‘for the construction of inclusionary/exclusionary boundaries that differentiate between self and the other’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199), as students found safety in historically categorised racial groups. Using an intersectionality framework would undoubtedly encourage the examination of these categories of identities and differences (Cole, 2009), highlighting how these categories shape experiences of feeling safe or unsafe on campus. At the same time, relying on one category to understand students' experiences would be ‘incomplete and biased’ (Cole, 2009, p. 173), as students' experiences are shaped by multiple categories. Students unpacked multilayered dimensions of gender, nationality, race and class, to mention a few, as they cited how they experienced feelings of safety/unsafety in different spaces on campus.

RESULTS

The paper draws from a study that foregrounds the potential to empower students to transform their environment, as university students explore how perceptions of safe and unsafe places are mediated by group and social identities. A key theme emerging out of this process include how gender, citizenship, race and class intersect with other categories of students' identities in the construction of safe and unsafe spaces at a university campus.
GENDER AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SAFE AND UNSAFE SPACES ON A UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

Gender had a fundamental role in how students constructed their experiences of safe and unsafe spaces on a university campus. It was also quite apparent that social space ultimately produced gendered identities. One such space was the campus bar popularly known as the ‘The Barn’ and the adjacent parking lot students commonly referred to as ‘Condom Square’. Participants, particularly female students, felt that the crowds at ‘The Barn’ posed a threat to their safety, as they were especially anxious about being possible victims of violence and sexual harassment. Students felt in danger because the clientele of ‘The Barn’ included people outside of the campus community and because of the intoxicated nature of the patrons.

In their narratives students described personal experiences of violence in this space, as shown in the following excerpts:

My predator was black, middle-class and early 20s. I never know which men get violent when you say no; he was one of those men, he insisted to buy me a drink, while his voice raising and deepening, when I said no, he called me a bitch and a whore, likely to impress his friends and he crossed the room to them. It seemed like his immediate response was to belittle me, making me feel valuable, as they stared at me, undressing me, whispering so I may hear them discussing my body with pelvic gestures. (black², female, local student)

South African communities remain tainted by the history of apartheid, and people are still defined by the racial groups. This paper will use this group identity to identify participants, as it is commonly used in South Africa.
As a female student I do not feel safe in such an environment because a lot of the time guys become aggressive and often try to follow you to your room. (black, female, international student)

Whilst female students cited a number of cases of violence against women, some indicated that interpersonal violence made the space unsafe for female and male students alike:

I have witnessed male students fighting, witnessing that fight made me feel unsafe to walk there alone because I thought I was going to get hurt ... I have heard stories about Condom Square, whereby a female student was gang raped by drunken male students. My female friends and I have seen condoms lying around this area, which shows that male students practise sexual activities in an open space or maybe rape has occurred. (black, female, local student)

In addition to these personal experiences of violence, students gave second-hand accounts of female fellow students who also had been victims of violence in this space. The following female participant gave this account of violence outside ‘The Barn’ in the adjacent ‘Condom Square’. She said:

Some of my fellow classmates reported that men would sometimes sit in the trees where they cannot be seen by passers-by, and attack them by jumping from the trees … the loud music which comes from the bar prevents the women’s screams from being heard when they are attacked. (Coloured, female, local student)

Gender clearly mediates the feelings of fear felt by students at “The Barn” and “Condom Square” because of the sexual nature of the attacks that occur there. Students also cited violence prevention strategies associated with both “The Barn” and “Condom Square”, such as walking in groups or avoiding the place altogether:

... it is important for me to walk with my group of friends at night because I feel unsafe. (black, female, local student)

I avoid going to The Barn in the evenings and only go there to get food when there are few people. That way I do not get into any situations that make me feel unsafe. (black, female, international student)

Young women mostly go to The Barn in groups as they feel safer than when they go there by themselves. The Barn seems to be an unsafe place for most females who live on campus. (black, female, local student)
“The Barn” and “Condom Square” were not the only spaces on campus that students felt unsafe because of their gender. Participants were also concerned that they would face gender-based violence in the campus residence halls. Some of the senior female students who lived in mixed-gender residences cited feeling vulnerable, anxious and in constant fear of possible sexual attacks by male residents:

... as a young female it makes me feel uncomfortable living opposite the male bathroom. It makes me feel/unsafe because I do not know how they look at me as a coloured girl. (Coloured, female, local student)

As much as I may feel safe in my room some other women within my residence feel unsafe as there has been a lot of ... violence within our residence. (black, female, local student)

Gender-based violence is a serious concern on all South African university campuses and particularly in halls of residence (MacKay & Magwaza, 2008), and as the narratives show, it is of particular concern at this university. A similar fear of gender-based violence was also expressed by female students in a study conducted at another South African university (Gordon & Collins, 2013). These findings are in line with those of Gordon and Collins (2013) that fear of violence evoked anxiety in female students and forced them to be constantly alert, anticipating danger they associated with men. Living in a constant state of anxiety and fear as a result of potential danger makes one constantly feel unsafe. This can be detrimental to students’ standard of living, affect academic performance and cause health-related issues. A few years back a student was violently murdered by an intimate partner in one of the halls of residences at this university (Hames, 2009). Perhaps such incidences contribute to students’ constant state of awareness. Feelings of vulnerability among female students were further cited when students referred to transportation to and from campus.
Such students either used commuter taxis or trains. In both instances students indicated they felt unsafe and vulnerable in these spaces. Participants described their experiences commuting to campus:

The lack of safety and ridiculous fear embedded in me as a female on trains is due to the fact that hardly police patrol the trains, when its dark ... I was robbed, almost raped and abused inside a train on my way to campus. (Coloured, female, local student)

This is a photo of the place where I get the bus every morning 6:00 am to get to campus ... the number of people being robbed and raped is high ... (Coloured, female, local student)

As raised in other studies about student safety on university campuses (Ratti, 2010), students in this study equally emphasised the significance of the time of day in the way spaces produced gendered identities. The shift from day to night transformed students’ experiences in some of these spaces, showing how spaces that were initially cited as safe are transformed into unsafe spaces. Gender continues to be a central factor in such experiences. Isolated and poorly lit areas were threatening to both female and male students, as seen in the following excerpt referring to a student pathway adjacent to the campus bar and parking lot:

I have a phobia to walk in that area because I feel unsafe. Firstly, the area is a pathway where there are no lights and you cannot see who is in front or behind you. Secondly, the fans that are in that area are so loud that one cannot hear who comes behind you so it is easy for someone to sneak up on you. (black, male, international student)

At the same time, when referring to well-lit areas such as the campus courtyard, another student said:
As for the evening the Quartyard still holds that feeling of security … for two reasons: the area is illuminated … and the fact that I know that security is not far away. (Coloured, female, local student)

As can be seen in the narratives above, the transition between day and night transforms feelings of safety to those of unsafety.

THE INTERSECTION OF CITIZENSHIP AND RACE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SAFETY

The student body at this university is diversely represented by multiple national, ethnic and racial categories of students. Therefore, it was not surprising that students found that citizenship played a vital role in the way their feelings of safety and unsafety were constructed on campus. International students of various nationalities and ethnic backgrounds experienced spaces differently. In some instances, feelings of safety and unsafety were shaped by broader political discourses. For example, some American exchange students felt that the debates in one of the lecture rooms had an uncomfortable bias against the West, which silenced them in this space, as they were anxious about how their fellow students would react to their opinions. One female, white, international student said:

I sometimes feel very unsafe in lectures. I stand out in a lecture hall. I speak with a funny accent, I dress differently than many … students … I know that I attract attention…topics brought up in lectures often make me feel unsafe to speak my mind. Students voice very strong opinions in class, which sometimes take anti-American turns.
Similar sentiments were raised by a female international student as she described her feelings of fear and anxiety at the campus bar, “The Barn”, because of the xenophobic remarks that drunken students sometimes made:

As an international student at times when people get drunk they make xenophobic comments and this makes it feel like a hostile environment which is uncomfortable. (black, female, international student)

It is not unforeseen that the student raises such a concern of xenophobia at the university, as there is a history of xenophobic attacks and presence in Cape Town (Dodson, 2010). The fact that similar comments are made at the university is therefore, unsurprisingly, a matter of concern. Although international students referred to such experiences, which are linked to broader political issues, they also cited incidents of feeling safe as international students particularly in academic spaces:

... the lecturers do not harbour any ethnocentric attitudes towards international students, which makes the lecture environment a place where I feel I can express myself freely and comfortably. This creates a safe and conducive learning environment for me, and it enables me to do better academically ... being from a different country ... my ideas ... may be vastly different from my South African classmates ... however, these differences in opinion are accepted [in lectures]. (black, female, international student)

The same student also felt safe in the residences on campus for similar reasons. She wrote the following about her experience living in the residences:

Lecture room

The same student also felt safe in the residences on campus for similar reasons. She wrote the following about her experience living in the residences:
There is a great amount of diversity with varying...nationalities blending together and living in harmony, which creates a welcoming, accepting, enjoyable and secure environment for me. (black, female, international student)

While this student presented this cohesive and harmonious community, a number of local students still felt that there was more safety in racial categories, and mistrust of other racial categories was linked to students' feeling of safety and unsafety. This is what one student said about the depicted space:

One day I was walking alone through C-Block on my way to the student centre and I decided to take this route through this space, and a ‘black’ male student came running-walking behind me. Based on other people’s experiences and narratives of ‘black’ males attacking females, I instantly assume that he is going to violate me and fear and anxiety fill up my whole body. (Coloured, female, local student)

What the student found unnerving was not that a male fellow student was walking behind her, but the fact that he was black. The student invokes the image of the ‘hypersexualised black male’ as seen in feminist theorising on race and representation of bodies (Davis, 1981; Lewis, 2011). This kind of thinking about race was further emphasised in another narrative in which the student experienced safety when among students of her racial category. She described the cafeteria upstairs in the student centre in the following way:

As a female student who was classified under the apartheid era as ‘Coloured’ I particularly highlight this space as safe based on my race, because this is a space
where most ‘Coloured’ students hang out… Seeing that this place is mostly occupied by ‘Coloured’ students, it may become an unsafe space for ‘black’ students as they could feel intimidated by the ‘Coloured’ population. (Coloured, female, local student)

In reference to the same space however, one international student said:

I feel safe in this space because the people who are frequently there represent a diverse array of cultural and religious backgrounds…I feel safer in a diverse group. I feel confident that I will not be discriminated against because of my nationality or religious beliefs. (White, female, international student)

Here, local students’ feelings of safety and unsafety are constructed around broader notions of thinking about race in South Africa and the ideological conceptions of racial groups which find their roots in apartheid. This kind of categorisation raises the issue of inclusion and exclusion in students’ perceptions of certain spaces (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Safety in one racial group is juxtaposed to unsafety in the presence of the ‘other’ racial category. Perhaps it is also important to flag that categories of race, nationality and gender as played out here do not only describe students’ differences in perception of spaces, but strongly capture historical and continuing relations of racial and political positions among students (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Unsurprisingly, these types of racial ideas do not appear in the narratives of international students. What complicates such perceptions among students in South African universities is that the institutions continue to be divided largely according to racial categories (Pattman, 2007; Soudien, 2008; Vincent, 2008), which are clearly visible in the manner students associate, or think about race on campus. The student sees safety in being with her racial group, whilst ‘othering’ other racial categories and also thinking that ‘black students’ would not feel comfortable in the same spaces as ‘Coloured students’.

CLASS MATTERS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SAFETY AND UNSAFETY ON CAMPUS

It is difficult to talk about race and yet ignore class, as these categories remain interlinked, the one mediating the other. Even if class was not explicitly visible in students’ construction of safe and unsafe spaces on campus, it was noticeable as students experienced certain spaces as safe or unsafe. The financial aid office, which is expected to liaise with students who need financial assistance, was cited as a hostile space, particularly to the black and Coloured students who are from lower economic classes and felt humiliated and embarrassed in this particular space, as expressed in the following excerpt:

Students have been ridiculed and embarrassed, shouted at than offered assistance they deserve. As a black man who has no one to pay for fees… it [financial aid] was
a relief for me. But my experience has changed after contact with this office. (black, male, local student)

This is an unsafe space when a student’s finances are not properly attended…She goes on to say that: Staff members do not calm students’ fears but instead they make them worse. (black, female, local student)

The discomfort that these students associate with the financial aid office is unique to students with lower incomes, because those from more affluent backgrounds would not need to have contact with the financial aid office. A similar correlation can be drawn between modes of transportation and class. Not all students can afford to buy cars, therefore experiences with public transportation mainly affect lower-income students. In their narratives, it seemed to be a universally unsafe and unpleasant experience. For example, one participant said:

This was not the only instance of transportation-related violence found within the narratives. The sentiment was echoed by male and female students alike. The following is a quote from a male student explaining the dangers of the train station by one of the campus gates:

Often times there are no securities at the station and this leaves one vulnerable to be a victim of crime. What further makes it an unsafe space is that it is accessible to the greater public…this space is poorly monitored…this space is notorious for violence…however it is a place and cannot be avoided as one needs to use this space to get to and from campus. (Coloured, male, local student)

Students with the means to purchase cars have the ability to avoid dangerous situations by driving to campus, thus indicating that the unsafe feeling students had on public transportation was directly mediated by class.

In the case of some international students, there was an intersection between class and citizenship. Cost of living and standards of living differ from country to country, creating the illusion of wealth. For example, one American exchange student felt that her perceived wealth made her stand out among her fellow students:

As an American international student…I stand out in a lecture hall…I take notes on my MacBook and I check the time on my I-phone…I am stared at frequently, but people rarely speak to me, and when they do, it is to question why I am at this university as opposed to … (White, female, international student)

Class affected this student’s feelings of safety in a very different way than it did local students; however, it still played a major role in the student’s comfort and feelings of safety.
DISCUSSION

Students adopted a photovoice approach to indicate ways in which safe and unsafe spaces are mediated by group and social identities at the university. Using photovoice as a research method empowered students to capture spaces and also to voice their concern about spaces of unsafety whilst endorsing spaces of safety. In this way students were able to actively participate in transforming their surroundings. Some of the photographs and narratives were exhibited on campus, a way to advocate for change and to engage authorities in discussion about prevention of injury or possible violence to the student body. Through this study, students had indeed been empowered to transform their environment, as is a key tenet of photovoice research. This is evident in some of the students’ reflections on both the research and use of photovoice as a research method:

I found the whole research process very interesting and exciting as it allowed me to probe deeper into understanding the ways in which I navigate, and other students navigate certain areas on campus and why we feel either safe or unsafe in these areas. (black, female, local student)

Also, using photovoice research methodology was very exciting and made the research a lot easier as I was able to capture the essence of various spaces, and I feel like this made the research feel personal which also contributed to the ease in writing. (black, female, international student)

As a student, conducting this research was highly empowering. It taught me a great deal about my own academic abilities, while introducing me to a research method that I know I will continue to use later in life. (White, female, international student)

In the future, I hope to work in international development, and use the skills that I have learned to better understand the needs of communities that I will be assisting. (White, female, international student)

Students’ experiences of safety and unsafety on campus raise a number of issues about the intersection of gender, sexuality, nationality, race and class, among other factors.

A key factor in the students’ constructions of safety was the association of femaleness with extreme levels of vulnerability. Female students described incidents of fear of possible
attack, particularly from their male colleagues or strangers in various spaces on campus. One such space was the campus bar, raising concern around violence associated with alcohol consumption. Their fear of sexual attacks was heightened by mixed residence halls, poorly lit areas and deserted passageways on campus. Students’ feelings of vulnerability associated with the female body and its potential for violation intensified for some during their daily commute to and from campus. These findings foregrounded gender and power dynamics in what students perceived as safe and unsafe, specifically referencing possible injury to the female body. Research shows that South Africa has some of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world, and most of the literature in this field positions women as victims and men as perpetrators of this violence. At the same time, gender-based violence is seen as an act of power and the fear women experience is ‘a political tool to control all women’ (Gordon & Collins, 2013, p. 94). This body of work foregrounds the victim’s narratives and not the perpetrator’s (Boonzaier & De la Rey, 2004) in ways that seem to validate ‘power and masculine sexual entitlement’ (Gordon & Collins, 2013, p. 100). Since university campuses are microcosms of the larger society, it is therefore not surprising that female students live in perpetual fear of violence. It is worrying, although unsurprising, that in this study most of the male students did not raise concern about fear of violence in the same way that female students did. It should be noted though that male students indeed felt unsafe in some spaces on campus, even if they did not provide specific details on their fear of possible violence.

This research was encouraging because it showcased the agency demonstrated by female students when adopting strategic ways of dealing with this fear and taking measures to prevent possible injury or attacks, by moving in groups or seeking the company of fellow students when venturing into spaces perceived as unsafe. Similar strategic ways of managing fear and anxiety have also been raised in correlated scholarly work elsewhere (Currie, 1994; Day, Stump & Carreon, 2003; Gordon & Collins, 2013).

The intersection of race and gender, as highlighted in the students’ narratives of safe and unsafe spaces, evokes images of the ‘black male’ as both the perpetrator of violence and the embodiment of sexual violence. When a student emphasises that she feared the ‘black male fellow student’ could violate her sexually in one of the deserted passageways connecting buildings, this is disturbing and of concern because, firstly, without being overly essentialist and simplistic, the student’s narrative embodies the myth of the hypersexual black male as shown in colonial discourses on representations of black male sexualities (Davis, 1981; 2006; Lewis, 2011). Although discourses on gender-based violence are generally linked to gender, it is crucial to be critical of those responses that create and perpetuate ‘othering’ discourses (Shefer, 2013) as seen in the example given.

Secondly, a more nuanced understanding of the student’s fear is necessary for the prevention of possible injury. Empirical evidence shows that a number of female students
have been murdered by male colleagues on university campuses in South Africa. In 2008 a black student was strangled to death by her former boyfriend in one of the residences at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Three months later, in the same year, another black student was murdered by her boyfriend in one of the residences at the University of the Western Cape (Hames, 2009). In 2014 a black female student was murdered by her non-resident boyfriend in one of the residences at Rhodes University (City Press, 2014). The murders of the female students on university campuses are not only disturbing, but also send a strong message to university authorities to ensure more strategic ways of preventing further injury, particularly to the female students.

Gender-based violence remains a serious issue in South Africa. Available statistics show that in 1999, 30.6% of women who died from gunshot homicides had been shot by an intimate partner (Abrahams, Jewkes & Mathews, 2010). It is therefore quite disconcerting that the issue of race is evoked in this instance and yet the student’s fear of a possible attack is understandable within the violence-infested microcosm and the particular violence that has a gender dimension. Race continues to be a matter of concern, as some students indicated that they found safety in racial categories, indeed showing that racial categories remain resilient in present-day South Africa (Vincent, 2008). A number of studies have shown that South African universities are still divided according to race (Bhana, 2014; Soudien, 2008), which is highly problematic but also calls for strategies that will consider such responses critically in the prevention of injury to students in these institutions.

The intersection of citizenship with fear of xenophobic attacks can also not be overlooked. As indicated, universities are a microcosm of a larger society and it is perhaps necessary to understand the students’ fear by looking at the concern about xenophobic attacks in the larger society. At the time of working on this paper, xenophobic attacks had erupted in some parts of the country, with foreign nationals’ shops being looted in Soweto, Johannesburg (“Foreigners’ shops”, 2015). The students’ unease is of concern, as it is an evident xenophobic experience which remains a daily experience specifically for most African immigrants in South Africa (Dodson, 2010). It is crucial that universities challenge students in ways that will empower them to stand up against xenophobic tendencies in order to prevent such attacks, not only among the student body but also within the greater community. Finally, juxtaposed to the fear of xenophobia is the spirit of solidarity and unity that some students endorse as a form of safety.

The study draws from a project that used photovoice methodology to capture students’ perceptions of safe and unsafe places on campus and how students’ perceptions were mediated by their multiple identities. The study is of a qualitative nature and therefore not representative of the entire student body. It could be valuable for future research to engage a wider population of the university using photovoice or making use of other methods such
as surveys to explore students’ perceptions of safety and unsafety on campus. Different categories of students’ identities should be taken into consideration, as this study shows the significance of intersectionality in dealing with students' perceptions of safety and unsafety on campus. We explore only a few of these categories in this paper. This area is under-researched, though crucial for the promotion of heightened safety on university campuses. The study also hopes that the university authorities will rectify some of the students’ concerns, such as inadequate lighting and security issues on campus, following the photovoice exhibition that was held at the university’s library. Most importantly, South African universities and this university in particular are challenged to open forums that will deal with issues of race and other challenges raised in this paper for the benefit of all students.

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Exclusionary violence and bullying in the playground: Football and gender ‘policing’ at school

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on an ethnographic study with six- to 10-year-old children at play in a South African ‘township’ primary school, conducted between 2012 and 2014. The ethnography demonstrated how children learn to become particular gendered beings through practices of inclusion, exclusion and ‘policing’ through forms of play. Drawing data from aspects of the ethnography, this paper focuses on boys who gained popularity and status at school through their investment in football, not only as a game which they played every day during break at school, but also as a strong source of identification and a dimension of power. It focuses on these boys who became popularly known as the ‘footballing boys’, and the kinds of exclusionary violence and bullying they utilise to dominate the playground space and ‘police’ gender ‘transgression’. It explores how some of the ‘footballing boys’ construct and ‘police’ gender in the playground through violence and bullying. Findings raise prevention implications for consideration by teachers. Furthermore, the implications of the findings for teaching Life Orientation are briefly discussed.

Keywords: bullying, football, gender policing, play, primary school ethnography, school playground, South Africa, violence, young children.

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INTRODUCTION

In order to demonstrate the relationship between football and violence, I explore the meaning and symbolic significance football carries as a source of identification and disidentification for children I engaged with in my ethnographic study on play. In the ethnography, gender emerged as a key theme in discussions about football. Data indicated that the best footballers, who self-identified and became popularly known as the ‘footballing boys’, symbolised ‘normative’ masculinity associated with both physical and emotional toughness (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2003; Pattman & Bhana, 2010; Swain, 2006). Within the schooling cultural context, where ‘normative’ masculinity is inextricably linked to football performance, boys who are poor at football or who do not play football at all, and boys who skip with girls, cross the powerful symbolic gender borders and are liable to be bullied as ‘gay’ and be ostracised. Girls who play football may be called ‘tomboys’, a label which most of the girls who are called this, dislike, though such girls are often supported by other girls. Furthermore, girls who play football with boys often experience exclusionary violence by some of the ‘footballing boys’, which is aimed at ‘policing’ girls from engaging in football. The policing of gender ‘boundaries’ through the kinds of exclusionary violence and bullying in the playground is also linked to the (re)production of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is a dominant discourse of sexuality that constructs ‘normative’ sexuality as heterosexual in which non-heterosexual sexuality is viewed in a negative light (Francis, 2012; Msibi, 2013; Potgieter & Reygan, 2012). In the study, the way football performance is linked to heteronormativity manifests in the marginalisation and denigration of boys who disidentify with football through being called ‘gay’. This paper focuses on the playground space as a learning site, where children constantly regulate, monitor and evaluate each other’s gendered performances, with football taken as a key symbolic marker of these.

In discussing the implications of this research for teaching, I highlight the need for teaching teachers to change their thinking about the playground as a ‘free space’ and to ‘learn from the learners’ (Pattman, 2013), as I do in the study, on how children learn about gender through practices of inclusion and exclusion through forms of play such as football which, in turn, produce the kind of exclusionary violence and bullying which I explore in this paper. To begin, I provide the background to the school context, as well as the theoretical stance I take regarding how children learn about gender in part through play.

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2 I use the term of ‘policing’ in relation to gender, particularly to highlight how gender ‘borders’ are socially constructed as rigid and fixed in ways which make them difficult and almost impossible to cross.
THE SCHOOL

The primary school that was a research site for my study was located in a ‘black’ and working-class township outside Durban. Although schools are less racialised in the post-apartheid South Africa than during apartheid, most schools in black communities continue to remain predominantly black as they were under apartheid and they are the poorer and most disadvantaged compared to schools in formerly white areas (De Vos, 2013). The racial profile of both learners and teachers at the school was exclusively black. The context of black exclusivity can be understood in terms of the legacy of apartheid. Apartheid was underpinned by the colonial discourse of white supremacy, which enforced racial segregation and unequal treatment of different ‘races’ through legislation (Allen, 2005). For example, education facilities were racially segregated and the schools that catered for oppressed groups suffered neglect in terms of resource and service provision, whilst the educational needs of white schools were prioritised. In particular, the Bantu Education Act (1953) promulgated the provision of inferior curricular, resources and services in schools in black communities.

Compared to the majority of formerly non-black schools outside the black township in which the school in the study is based, learners at this school have fewer opportunities to engage in a wider variety of sporting and recreational activities. Sporting activities for learners were limited to football and netball. These sporting codes were strictly gendered, with football mainly played by boys and netball played by girls only. The school did not have formal sports grounds and depended on the nearby community sports grounds for organised sporting activities. Space for break-time play activities was also very limited, especially in light of the challenge of overcrowded classrooms. During break, children used the open school yard to play different games. Hence, the term ‘playground’ is used here in a broader sense to mean this play space in the school yard which children used for their break-time play activities. In the same way that formal school sports were gendered, children’s break-time and often improvised games were also characterised by boys dominating the play space in the yard with football games, while girls skipped on the periphery. As the data demonstrates, football and skipping are constructed by the children in gendered ways and as polar opposites. This gendering of play makes it very difficult for some boys and girls to cross the ‘borders’ of gender without risking victimisation, especially through the exclusionary violence and bullying which this paper highlights.

3 My view of race is that race is a social and cultural construction rather than a scientific term which denotes real differences between groups of people (Dalmage, 2000; Montagu, 1997; Pattman, 1998). Therefore, I use ‘black’ purely as a social category which classifies South Africans of African ancestry who were the most disadvantaged under apartheid. While the use of apartheid racial categories in the post-apartheid era is contested, such categories continue to be used nationally for purposes of equity, transformation and redress.
‘Common-sense’ understanding about how young children learn about gender is premised on an essentialist view of gender, which naturalises the different ways of behaving for boys and girls. However, drawing on the work of Walkerdine (1981), Francis (1998), MacNaughton (2000), Davies (2003), Blaise (2005), Azzarito, Solmon, and Harrison (2006), Paechter (2007), Bhana (2008) and Martin (2011) who have applied poststructuralist feminist theory to make sense of how young children learn about gender, I use poststructuralist feminist theory through forms of exclusionary violence and bullying. The limitation of an essentialist view of the differences between boys and girls, is that it tends to generalise boys and girls as homogenous groups without accounting for the various kinds of individual differences that exist within the gendered categories (McGuffey & Rich, 1999; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Swain, 2006). For example, in his study on the construction of masculinities among 10- and 11-year-old boys in three different schools in the United Kingdom (UK), Swain (2006) found that there were different patterns of masculinity both between and within each setting that drew on the different cultural and material resources available in each setting. This suggests that there are different ways of ‘performing’, to use Butler’s (1990) terminology, the identities of ‘boy’ and ‘girl’, although some gendered ‘performances’ become more conspicuous and socially acceptable than others (Butler & Astbury, 2007). This is the fact that the essentialist view on gender fails to take into account. That is, in homogenising masculinity and femininity, gender essentialism closes down the possibility of studying the plurality of masculinities (Swain, 2006) and femininities (Bhana, 2008), as shaped by certain social expectations as well as cultural and material resources.

MacNaughton (2000) notes that what distinguishes poststructuralist feminist theory from gender essentialism, is its view of gender as socially constructed; learnt and performed ideas and values taken to define acceptable and unacceptable ways of behaving for males and females within a particular culture or society. As a social construction, gender is not natural, but is socially learned and continually performed in different ways as we interact with different people in different social contexts (MacNaughton, 2000; Martin, 2011; Paechter, 2007; Romaine, 1999; Swain, 2006).

However, working within poststructuralist feminist theory, I do not simply view children’s gendered behaviours in the playground as an imitation or a reproduction of the messages, images and symbols of gender they receive from their society. Rather, while recognising the important role of socialisation in the ways in which children come to identity and behave in gendered ways (Swain, 2006), I engage with the children as the experts on their everyday social lives, identifications, relationships, interactions and behaviours (Frosh et al., 2003;
Martin, 2011; Pattman, 2013). The aim is to explore the particular meanings the different categories of boys and girls attach to their behaviours and interactions during play.

I utilise poststructuralist feminist theory, because it offers a useful analytical tool that counters the limitations of both essentialist accounts of gender, which fix gender to nature, and the sex-role socialisation perspective, which views gender in childhood from an adult-centric perspective that tends to overlook the complex ways in which children themselves construct their gender identities (MacNaughton, 2000). Using poststructuralist feminist theory enables me to view children as active participants in the construction and policing of their gender identities through play.

METHODS

The study adopted a ‘child-centred’ ethnographic approach (Thorne, 1993), which aimed to give voices to the different children in relation to their interests and experiences regarding play. However, beyond giving voices to the children, adopting such an approach allowed for the playground to be explored from the children’s points of view. This revealed the kind of teaching and learning that goes on in the playground regarding gender through football talk and play. Thorne (1993, p. 11) uses the term ‘learning from kids’ to describe the child-centred ethnographic approach, which seeks to democratise adult-child power relations in order to engage with children as experts on their social lives. She argues that to be able to learn from kids,

...adults have to challenge the deep assumption that they already know what children are ‘like’, both because, as former children, adults have been there, and because, as adults, they regard children as less complete versions of themselves...

When adults seek to learn about and from children, the challenge is to resist being treated as an adult with formal power and authority (Thorne, 1993, p. 16).

Taking a child-centred ethnographic approach to learning about gender and play from the children, I tried to establish democratic relationships with the children by constantly resisting being associated with the formal power and authority which the children associated with their teachers. I did this partly by hanging around and interacting with the children in the playground during break, something which the teachers did not do. For example, when I sat or stood on the margins of the playground observing and taking notes while the boys played football, they often tried to encourage me to join in and I always responded positively to these appeals. I befriended the children not through showing them how good I was at football or instructing them how they should play, but rather through playing with them and allowing them to be better than me at the game. This, I think, made me seem particularly
playful, approachable and accessible to the children in marked contrast to teachers who were associated with the classroom and adult authority.

Although playing with the boys enabled them to relate to me more as a friend than as an authority figure, they tended to call me ‘coach’ in ways which reinforced my positioning as an adult male who was more knowledgeable about football than them. Given that ‘coach’ is generally used with connotations of an expert and a leader, boys in my research tended to construct me in this way through expecting me to control how play was conducted. For example, I was sometimes asked to select players to represent the two competing teams of theory to explore how children construct and police gender ‘borders’ in the playground before the games could begin. I was not comfortable with the identification as a coach and the associated responsibilities, which positioned me as an expert and a figure of authority among the children and created obstacles to my aim of establishing democratic relations with the children. Therefore, instead of conforming to the expectations of an adult authority figure, I presented myself as a willing learner and them as the experts who I constantly asked to teach me the rules of the game.

It is also interesting to highlight the gendered way in which the boys constructed the term ‘coach’ in the context of football. Significantly, the term ‘coach’ had strong gendered connotations for the boys, as I learned that they did not call the female teacher, who coached football, ‘coach’. By naming me ‘coach’ they were constructing me as a man and accentuating my ‘masculinity’. Significantly, I was called ‘coach’ frequently by the ‘footballing boys’ and rarely by the girls, even among those who claimed an interest in football. It was as if by calling me coach the boys were expressing themselves as males, and constructing a ‘masculine’ relationship with me.

THE SAMPLE OF KEY INFORMANTS

My sample of key informants emerged in the process of ‘democratising’ my relationships with children through play. By and large, the selection of key informants was a spontaneous process, which depended on the nature of my relationships with different boys and girls and the issues they raised in relation to play when I spoke to them. However, my interactions and relationships with children in the playground tended to be gendered in the sense that it was mostly the boys who regularly played football in the playground during break whom I befriended. What drew my focus to the ‘footballing boys’, was not only my interest in them and their strong investment in football as a key source of identification, but these boys often invited me to play with them. In contrast, I hardly received similar invitations from girls who often skipped on the margins of the playground. My interactions with the ‘footballing boys’ indicated that some boys and girls became victims of exclusionary violence and
bullying for crossing gender ‘borders’ during play. I then developed an interest in exploring the categories of gender used by the children by engaging with those who were seen as ‘transgressing’ as well as embodying particular gender norms. The young people on the margins and in-between became interesting informants for the study.

CONDUCTING SEMI-STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GENDER AND PLAY WITH CHILDREN

In addition to interacting with the children through informal and spontaneous conversations during my observations in the playground, semi-structured conversations were conducted with the children by using a play-related drawing exercise as a child-centred method for stimulating gender-focused conversations. I invited the children to take part in a ‘graphic-narrative exercise’ (GNE), where I gave them drawing resources and instructions to draw pictures of play incidents involving themselves and their friends at school and to then talk about these. To promote conversations about gender and to understand the content of the drawings, I moved from one to the next, asking them open-ended questions about the details of the drawings they were creating or had created. These spontaneous questions, born out of the drawings themselves, inquired into the meanings different children hold for the gendered play incidents they presented in their individual drawings. The significance of this participatory research exercise is that it encouraged the children to reflect critically on themselves and the taken-for-granted gendered identifications, behaviours and interactions they forge and enact through play at school.

While drawings were a significant method to encourage semi-structured conversations about gender and play with the children, not all semi-structured conversations involved drawings. The ‘semi-structured interviewing’ method (Bryman, 2001) was also used as a form of interaction with the children. For example, in order to encourage discussion with the children, I formulated interview questions based on my own observations during play, follow-ups on topics and issues raised by the children during the GNE, and further exploration of topics and themes based on what was said in fleeting conversations during play observations.

The data was subjected to thematic analysis, defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as the systematic study of research data in order to identify themes about certain patterns of thought, experience or behaviour and explain these in terms of how they address the research question(s). In this study, the thematic analysis process involved two main stages. Firstly, the data was studied as a whole in order to code and develop themes inductively (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). Secondly, the emerging themes were subjected to existing research and theoretical literature which informs my work.
RESULTS

This section explores how ‘footballing boys’ use forms of exclusionary violence and bullying to police gender ‘transgression’ in the playground. The following drawing was done by one of the ‘footballing boys’, Sboniso⁴, who participated in the GNE. I refer to his drawing, not only because it represents the common theme of football in the drawings done by boys, but it also produced some interesting insights about how violence operates as a means of asserting and subverting gendered power relations between boys and girls in the playground.

![Illustration 1: Me and my friend playing soccer.](image)

My name is Sboniso, and I’m nine years old. That’s me and my friend, it is break time at school and we are playing soccer. And my friend’s name is Siphesihle. Emmanuel: Oh, I see. But do you only play soccer with boys such as Siphesihle or sometimes you also play soccer with girls?

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⁴ This is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the participant. Throughout the paper pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of people in the study.
In starting the conversation with Sboniso by asking this question, I aimed to explore his reasoning with regard to the symbolic construction of football as a game for boys through which they subordinate girls at the school.

Sboniso: Siphesihle is a boy. I play soccer only with boys.
Emmanuel: Why don’t you play soccer with girls?
Sboniso: Girls don’t play soccer; they don’t know how to play soccer. It’s the boys who play soccer, soccer is for boys. I play soccer with Siphesihle [be]cause Siphesihle is a boy, he can play soccer with me and not girls.

Emmanuel: But are there other games that you play with girls besides soccer?
Sboniso: No, I can’t play skipping rope, that’s what girls play and not us boys.

It is interesting to note that Sboniso spontaneously mentions skipping without having been asked to talk about this. This suggests the symbolism boys in the study attached to football as a source of gendered identification, which is constructed in direct opposition to skipping that is viewed as girls’ symbolic play activity.

Emmanuel: Do you mean skipping is for girls only?
Sboniso: Yes, that’s what girls play all the time. And they like to irritate us when they start their skipping games on our football ground. That’s our playground for football but girls… they want to come and skip here too.

Here Sboniso constructs girls’ skipping activities in the same playground they (boys) use for football games as encroaching on their (boys’) symbolic space.

Emmanuel: If the yard is for boys and football but where must girls play, I mean where should they skip?
Sboniso: I don’t know, but they must not skip where we play football. That’s where we play football and they [girls] must go away… I don’t know why they [girls] always like to disturb us with skipping when we play [football] nicely in the yard. And that’s why we hit them with the ball because we want them to cry and go away.

5 Like all schools in South Africa, the school in the study has a ‘zero tolerance’ policy for violence. Learners who fall victim to violence are encouraged to report this to teachers, and punishment to perpetrators varies depending on the nature and severity of the violence. The matter is heard with the learners involved and sometimes parents of the learners involved are present in the hearing at school. After misbehaviour is established, an appropriate penalty is determined. It can range from an apology, to being assigned specific chores at school, to being suspended from school. However, although corporal punishment was officially banned in South African schools from 1996, teachers sometimes apply it as a means of maintaining discipline and as a penalty for violence offences (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). See footnote 5 in this paper for an explanation for the persistence of corporal punishment in some South African schools.
Emmanuel: But do girls always leave the yard when you try to hit them with the ball?
Sboniso: They always leave, they must leave and that’s what we want. But there is another thing they like to do... When we kick the ball and it goes to hit one of the girls, they will take the ball and run away with it. They will take it and start to play ‘throw and catch’ with it and they won’t give it back to us, we must chase them until we get the ball back.
Emmanuel: So how do you feel when girls take your soccer ball away?
Sboniso: We don’t feel good, because we want our ball, we want to play. But we can’t play anymore...

GIRLS’ RESISTANCE TO BOYS’ DOMINATION IN THE PLAYGROUND

Sboniso demonstrates how boys constantly try to take up the rest of the playground space through football games. Football games dominated the playground, not only in the sense that it took up much space, but it also affected everyone else in the playground. Football involved not only those who participated in the game, but also those who did not, whether they watched it or were squeezed to the margins by the space it took up. To achieve the level of domination and control of the playground, ‘footballing boys’ not only exclude girls from the game of football they construct as masculine, but attempt to exclude girls from using even the marginal portion of the yard for skipping by hitting them with the ball. However, girls’ resistance to boys’ exercise of power through the violence on the playground provides powerful insight into the complex ways in which power relations operate between boys and girls in the study. Girls’ strategies against boys’ domination on the playground express a form of power and agency which challenges the ‘common-sense’ patriarchal form of power in which males are presented as dominant over passive females (Gqola, 2007; Lerner, 1986; Poling, 1996; Sultana, 2011). Indeed, Foucault (1982) argued that power relations between individuals and groups are far more complex than a ‘common-sense’ dominant/subordinate binary. For example, he argued that:

a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that ‘the other’ (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognised and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up (Foucault, 1982, p. 789).

Power relations are complex as they are constantly characterised by a series of oppositions such as ‘opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways
people live’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 780). In the context of this research, the complexity of power manifests in the girls’ different forms of resistance to boys’ exercise of power through exclusionary violence and domination of the playground space. For example, girls resisted boys’ forms of power by encroaching on what was seen as boys’ spaces with their skipping ropes. As active agents (Prout & James, 1997), or ‘free subjects’ in Foucault’s (1982) terminology, girls react not with passivity, but with various strategies of resistance against boys’ exercise of power on the playground. However, girls in the playground, dominated by boys playing football, risk not only being victims of the exclusionary violence by the boys, but they also risk being bullied through the appellation of ‘tomboy’.

PHYSICAL AND SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE INCURRED BY GIRLS IN THE ‘FOOTBALL SPACE’

Although football was symbolically constructed as a game for boys, there were some girls at the school who challenged the perceived masculinity of football. One such girl was Amahle, 10 years old. After observing Amahle’s play behaviour in the playground, I became interested in talking to her. To encourage the conversation, I began as follows:

Emmanuel: I have seen that during break boys mainly play football and I wonder what games do girls play?

In retrospect I think I could have asked this question differently. As it is, it is likely to present me as though I am constructing gender in a certain way and also in some ways questioning the informant who might be aware of the fact that I have seen her play football. I think I could have asked this question in a more open-ended fashion such as: Can you please tell me about the different kinds of games learners at the school play during break? Phrased in this open-ended way, the question could have yielded richer insights into play activities of learners at the school rather than just the games played by girls.

Amahle: We [girls] play skipping rope, but I also like to play football.
Emmanuel: Do you play football with boys or with other girls?
Amahle: Many boys here at school don’t want to play football with girls.
Emmanuel: Why?
Amahle: Because they say we’ll get injured. And many other boys like to say soccer is only for boys. They [boys] won’t let us play with them. They say they don’t play with girls and call us [girls who play football] tomboys.
Emmanuel: How does it make you feel to be called a tomboy?
Amahle: It makes me feel very sad. They [boys] say we are trying to be boys, but we are girls; not boys. I was very angry when they called me a tomboy. I went
home and told my mum about this and she said she’ll come here at school to ask them why they call me a tomboy.

Emmanuel: Is it only boys who call you tomboy for playing soccer? What about other girls, don’t they also call you tomboy?
Amahle: No.
Emmanuel: Why do you think girls don’t call you tomboy?
Amahle: Girls like it when they see us [girls] playing football but boys don’t want to play football with girls. Some boys would just push you because they want you to stop playing football with them. They want you to fall and get hurt and then stop playing! [She said with strong conviction]

The label of tomboy is commonly applied to girls like Amahle who are seen as ‘transgressing’ norms of femininity by playing football. Because football is taken to epitomise the dominant construction of masculinity as physically tough and strong in relation to the dominant construction of femininity which includes passivity and fragility, girls who like football risk being called tomboys which carries connotations of not being a ‘proper’ girl. The label of tomboy is experienced as a form of an insult by Amahle who expressed hurt, pain and anger at the boys who call her a tomboy. The way in which Amahle perceived the label of tomboy as derogatory offers insight into the way the term is used by some of the ‘footballing boys’ as a strategy to ‘police’ girls’ involvement in football in order to reproduce the perceived masculinity of the game. Amahle continued to share her experiences of how difficult it is for her to pursue her interest in football at the school:

Emmanuel: Some boys tell me that they don’t like to play football with girls because girls cry when they get hit by the ball. What would you say about that?
Amahle: It’s not nice to play football with boys. When playing football with boys they’ll step on you, they step on your feet and then you feel lot of pain. And after that, they won’t even say sorry. And sometimes boys would just kick the ball straight to your face!
Emmanuel: Oh no! That must hurt.
Amahle: They hit us with the ball.
Emmanuel: I wonder why they do that.
Amahle: They like to do that when they see me playing better than them, maybe I’ve scored a goal, then they use the ball to hit me with it.
Emmanuel: That’s not fair.
Amahle: They [boys] do that all the time. They also trip us [girls] and hit us with the ball on the face when we play with them. They want us to stop playing football with them.
Here Amahle highlights some of the ways in which some ‘footballing boys’ ‘police’ football as a masculine game. Violence towards girls, such as deliberately hitting them with the ball, is interpreted by Amahle as a subtle form of gender policing which boys direct at girls in football. However, girls do not emerge as passive in these tactics. As Amahle elaborates below, girls often retaliate violently:

Emmanuel: So boys would hit you with the ball when you play football with them?
Amahle: Yes, but when I’m playing soccer with them [boys], I also kick them on their ankles! I kick them and after that when I score a goal they hit me hard with the ball, and when you want to kick the ball the boy will be rough and he’d push you hard and you fall on the ground.
Emmanuel: And when boys have hit you with the ball on the face, what happens after that, is there anything that you do?
Amahle: We [girls] hit them back. We form a group and then we hit them.

Martin’s (2011) research on young boys and girls at play at an elementary school in London reveals the reactionary form which girls’ violence towards boys tended to take on the playground. In the context of this study, the reactionary nature of girls’ violence towards boys manifest in Amahle’s claims that she, as well as other girls, also hit boys in conflicts during play. Girls’ forms of violence towards boys in the playground often emerge as resistance to boys’ exclusionary violence and claims of power and domination. Girls’ forms of violence towards boys, whether provocative or reactionary, are important to observe as they not only illustrate the poststructuralist feminist understanding of femininities (and masculinities) as plural (MacNaughton, 2000), but also challenge the static popular stereotyping of girls as subservient to boys’ expressions of power through violence (Bhana, 2008). However, as demonstrated below, not all boys at the school constructed their masculinities through ‘aggressive football’ which marginalised and excluded girls. One of the boys at the school who constructed his identity through play beyond the domain of football was Bu.

BU AND HIS EXPERIENCES OF BEING BULLIED AS ‘GAY’ IN RELATION TO PLAY

Bu is a 10-year-old 4th grader who I met through the help of the ‘footballing boys’. They identified him when they spoke about the ‘other’ boys whom they perceived as gay for being interested in forms of play normally played by girls at the school. I met Bu for the first time during break in the school yard. Before approaching Bu to introduce myself and my interest in his choice of play activities, I observed him at play over a number of days. During these observations, Bu mostly played skipping and hanged around with girls in the school yard during break. Following the observation of Bu at play, I invited him for a one-on-one conversation in which I aimed to explore his interests with regard to play. I encouraged him
to talk about himself and his play interests at school by phrasing my initial and open-ended question as follows:

Emmanuel: I am interested to know about games that boys and girls play here at school. Are there any games that you play at break?

Again, in retrospect I think I could have phrased this question differently. As it is, it can be seen as directing Bu to identify either as a ‘girl’ or a ‘boy’. A much better phrasing of this question could have been: ‘Could you please tell me about games learners play here at school?’ This, I think, could have opened up a discussion with Bu rather than defining its terms in advance.

Bu: I like to play soccer and skipping rope.
Emmanuel: So when you skip, do you skip with girls or do you skip with boys?
Bu: I skip with girls, and I skip with boys.
Emmanuel: Do boys skip?
Bu: Mm [Nodding].
Emmanuel: Oh, what about soccer then? Who do you play soccer with?
Bu: It’s the boys who play soccer, not girls.
Emmanuel: So do you mean that girls don’t play soccer at all?
Bu: Girls only play ladies soccer. [He uses the term ‘ladies soccer’ as if it is not proper soccer]
Emmanuel: Mm… [Nodding].
Bu: At break, boys play soccer, and girls skip.
Emmanuel: So does that mean when you skip, you skip with girls?
Bu: Yes.

Although Bu mentions soccer as one of his favourite games, during the course of my research at the school I did not observe him playing soccer. However, I did observe him skipping as the only boy among girls on several occasions. Whether he actually does, or likes to, play soccer or not, he certainly does like to skip. However, it is also possible that my initial question might have been received by Bu as reinforcing gender policing, which could explain why he felt the need to respond by saying he plays soccer as well. Otherwise he would become a ‘girl’.

Since there are not many boys who skip at school due to skipping being constructed as ‘for girls’, Bu skips with girls while the majority of the other boys engage in soccer. Below Bu describes how other boys denigrate him by calling him gay for skipping with girls; he also expresses his reactions to being bullied by his male peers at school:
Emmanuel: Is there anything that other learners say or do when they see you skipping with girls?
Bu: Other boys would skip along but others would call me gay… they say skipping boys are gay.
Emmanuel: Is it only the boys who say that or girls say that too?
Bu: It’s the boys.
Emmanuel: What do you think they mean when they call you and other boys who skip gay?
Bu: I don’t know.
Emmanuel: How do you feel when they call you gay?
Bu: I feel sad and I go and tell Miss.
Emmanuel: And what happens after you have told Miss about being called gay?
Bu: Miss then hit them⁶.
Emmanuel: Do they stop calling you gay after they have been hit?
Bu: Sometimes they don’t stop even after being hit.
Emmanuel: And how does that make you feel?
Bu: I don’t feel happy when they don’t stop calling me gay.

Among pupils at the school, the term ‘gay’ is applied to boys such as Bu who construct their masculinity with football. Although Bu is unable to articulate what is meant by gay, being called gay is experienced as humiliating and causes him to ‘feel sad’. Importantly, gay emerges as a vital means of policing how boys should behave in ways that produce and reinforce dominant ‘boundaries’ of masculinity and femininity. Bu, as a boy whose play interests are perceived as not ‘normal’ for boys, finds himself a victim of bullying through being constructed as gay by his male peers at school. Bu’s reaction of reporting the boys who call him gay to his teacher seems quite risky. It seems to reinforce some boys’ contempt for him as a weak boy seeking adult protection in the same way many girls do. However, as my conversation with Bu continues below, I explore the gender of the friends he plays with and how this further invites him the derogatory label of gay:

Emmanuel: Who are your friends at school… are most of them boys or girls?

Bu remains silent for a few seconds, covers his face with his hands, places his face on the desk, then gets up smiling and looking shy, and whispers: ‘They are girls…’

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⁶ In terms of Section 10 of the South African Schools Act (1996), corporal punishment in South African schools is illegal. However, corporal punishment continues to be used to maintain discipline in many public schools in South Africa. Morrell (2001) argues that the reasons for the persistent and illegal use of corporal punishment include the absence of effective alternatives, the historical legacy of authoritarian education practices and the popular assumption that corporal punishment is necessary for orderly education to take place. Furthermore, Morrell (2001) argues that corporal punishment persists because many parents use it in the home and support its use in school.
Even though I was sympathetic and empathetic in my approach to the interview, it seemed difficult for Bu to say this. I think this difficulty was based on his concern that I might also problematise him, in similar ways as does the majority of other males at school, for ‘transgressing’ gender in terms of play and friendship relationships.

Emmanuel: So when you play with your friends who are girls, they don’t say you are gay or do they?
Bu: The girls that I play with are the ones who don’t say that I am gay. The girls I play with are my friends and they don’t call me gay.

Bu has more friends who are girls than those who are boys and this does not help him in terms of creating increased opportunities for social bonding with other boys. However, Bu mentioned to me that one of the reasons he plays mostly with girls is because many boys at his school do not allow him to play football with them. He told me that: ‘… when I want to play football with boys, many of them would say no. They say I’m gay and they don’t play with gays’. Plummer (2001) argued that one of the reasons why boys do not associate with boys who are called gay, is that they fear they will also be called gay. When Bu is rejected by the ‘footballing boys’, he finds friendship in the company of girls; this can be seen as further identities outside the dominant discourse of masculinity that connects perceived normative reinforcing the kind of bullying he experiences from some of his male peers at school.

DISCUSSION

Violence, in terms of the kinds of exclusionary practices and bullying in the playground, emerged as one of the key themes in my interactions with the children about games they play at school, especially football. These interactions challenge popular teacher constructions of the playground as a ‘free space’ where children can engage in spontaneous activities as opposed to the classroom where they are taught. They highlight how football operates as an important means for the symbolic construction of what constitutes ‘normative’ masculinity and femininity and the policing of these identities through forms of violence and bullying. The playground emerges as a space, like the classroom, where children are regulated, monitored and evaluated, but in the playground this is in relation not to their academic ‘work’ performances, but their gendered performances, with football taken as a key symbolic marker of these.

The learner experiences of the playground indicates that boys who do not play football, but choose to skip, are bullied through being called ‘gay’. The term ‘gay’, rather than being used to indicate same-sex desire, is used on the playground as an insult to describe boys who are constructed as feminine or ‘unmasculine’, in part due to their disidentification with
football. To be ‘gay’ is to be seen to be lacking, in one way or another, the attributes of ‘normative’ masculinity that is associated with football performance and a sole interest in male homo-social friendship bonding. However, the children’s playground usage of the term ‘gay’ is not immune to the dominant discourse of heteronormativity. It can be argued that the bullying of boys who play games considered as feminine through being called gay and ostracised highlights sentiments that cannot be simply detached from certain expressions of homophobia. Indeed, Plummer’s (2001) research on how homophobia features among primary school children found that homophobic terms such as ‘faggot’ and ‘gay’ featured significantly in boys’ everyday conversations about gender ‘transgression’ in playgrounds and in other social contexts.

Girls who play football may be called tomboys, a label which most of the girls who are called this, dislike and find derogatory, though such girls are often supported by other girls. This illustrates some level of acceptance and tolerance of ‘girl-transgressors’ as opposed to the prevalent negativity surrounding boys constructed as gay in relation to football (Frosh et al., 2003; Jordan, 1995; McGuffey & Rich, 1999; Plummer, 2001). Indeed, the acceptability of ‘transgressions’ for girls but not boys was also noted by McGuffey and Rich (1999) in their US-based observation study with five 12-year-old children at play at a summer camp. McGuffey and Rich (1999) found that although the gender ‘boundaries’ for girls and boys were equally clear, the consequences for girl-transgressors were not as unpleasant as those experienced by boy-transgressors. While boys were generally criticised by the other boys for ‘transgressing’ gender during play, girls who challenged gender expectations in the playground did not experience much criticism from the other girls. On the contrary, girls’ ‘transgressions’ in the playground were often praised and validated by the other girls.

Exploring gender ‘transgressions’ in the playground and the treatment of gender ‘transgressors’ provides insight into the young children’s everyday constructions of gender, as well as their investment in gender polarisation. This also helps to make visible the fluid nature of gender as opposed to the essentialist static view of gender. If the boys play football because they have a ‘football instinct’ or if girls skip because skipping is in their blood, then the numerous observations of gender ‘transgression’ documented in this study would not have surfaced. Rather than taking the gender ‘boundaries’ in children’s play as reflective of natural differences, interests and abilities between boys and girls, I argue that boys and girls play in the gendered ways and police each other’s gendered behaviours because they have learnt that, in their school, to present and position oneself as a ‘normal’ boy involves an expression of commitment and skill with regard to football, and that a ‘normative’ way of being a girl involves expressing commitment to skipping. Boys and girls are socially compelled to play within the ‘boundaries’ of masculinity and femininity because it is difficult to ‘transgress’ these without incurring different forms of repercussions, not least the exclusionary violence and bullying.
Girls who ‘transgressed’ the perceived masculinity of football were not only liable to being bullied by being called tomboys, but they also risked being victims of exclusionary violence perpetrated by some of the ‘footballing boys’ in their quest to dominate the playground space and exclude girls from the football games. Indeed, in their London-based study on 10 to 11-year-old boys’ and girls’ constructions of their varying levels of engagement in football, Clark and Paechter (2007) found that the predominantly marginal positioning of girls on football grounds was mainly due to the dominant ‘masculine’ construction of the game of football. They highlight how the stereotypical construction of football as a masculine game allows boys to exclude girls by constructing them as physically (and emotionally) weak and fragile and therefore unfit for football.

However, girls are not always passive in relation to the exclusionary violence. Indeed, drawing on Foucault’s (1982) understanding of power as complex and multidimensional, this study illuminates how power relations between boys and girls manifest in complex ways through violence in the playground. While the study documents how boys constantly assert and position themselves as powerful over girls through exclusionary violence, the manner in which girls also react with forms of violence rather than passivity forms part of the study results. For example, although boys generally claimed domination in the playground through football games and through hitting the girls with the ball, girls utilised different forms to resist and challenge this domination. Girls reacted violently towards the boys by ‘hitting them back’ and ‘kicking them on their ankles’. Indeed, the literature documents various ways through which girls resist domination by boys in the playground. For example, Walkerdine (1981) observed teacher-supervised gender-mixed play at a nursery school in the UK. She highlights how this provided opportunities for particular kinds of gender-polarised performances. Games were often structured by the teacher in ways that emphasised gender differences and the assumed power of males over females in an imaginative role-play of ‘doctors and nurses’ in which the ‘nurses’ (girls) were asked to ‘help’ the ‘doctors’ (boys). She also reports on girls’ forms of resistance to being constantly positioned as subordinate to boys. In the ‘doctors and nurses’ game, one of the girls took on and played the role of a mother in relation to the male doctors, and undermined the dominant power of males by infantilising them and asking if they had ‘eaten their greens’ and done their domestic chores. Furthermore, in her research with seven- to eight-year-old children at play at a primary school in Durban, Bhana (2005) documented how girls challenged boys’ domination in the playground by enacting sexualised games in which they lifted their dresses to show off their panties. The boys abandoned the play space as they found this practice disgusting and contaminating to their construction of masculinity which involved a clear separation from girls.
PREVENTION IMPLICATIONS

The symbolic construction of football as a means of (re)producing and policing the polarity between boys and girls, and the hierarchies among boys, are problematic because it limits possibilities for both boys and girls with regard to play (Clark & Paechter, 2007; MacNaughton, 2000; Martin, 2011). Furthermore, it encourages boys to assert themselves as powerful and tough through forms of exclusionary violence towards girls who play football, as well as to construct boys who show a dislike of football and who play with girls as gay.

One of the possible ways in which the teachers could address the violence between boys and girls, is by being visible in the playground during break. The surveillance effect of teacher visibility in the playground could help to prevent the gendered violence from starting in the first place. Another way teachers could address the playground violence among their pupils, is to constantly warn them that violence, in whatever form, is unacceptable and is not allowed at the school. It would also be useful for the teachers to constantly encourage children to always report any form of violence they experience or witness at school during play and in other contexts. However, in conversations with some of the boys who were bullied as gay for playing games constructed as for girls, it seems that reporting this form of abuse encouraged further denigration of these boys. They were (re)produced by the bullies as not ‘properly’ masculine for being dependent on teachers for help on social matters that happen in the playground; outside the classroom rather than facing the social challenge themselves. Therefore, for teachers to be able to intervene meaningfully in terms of addressing the violence and bullying in the playground, would require them to begin to shift their view of the playground as a ‘free space’ as opposed to the classroom where academic work takes place. The teachers have to be able to see the playground not as the opposite of the classroom, but as a site in which a great deal of identity work goes on, and they have to be able to see football at the school not as simply a game and also not as a game that is naturally imbued with masculinity. They have to be able to see the policing of gender through exclusionary violence and bullying in the playground, and see it as a problem.

Furthermore, the exclusionary violence and bullying in the playground raise pedagogic implications with respect to the Life Orientation programme. This is a compulsory learning area for all learners in South African schools and is described by the Department of Basic Education (2011, p. 8) as a ‘holistic approach to the personal, physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social development of learners’. The Life Orientation programme can play a vital role in terms of challenging the ‘normative’ gender expectations which underpin the violence and bullying in the playground. For example, a good Life Orientation
education programme would address the topic of bullying with special reference to the label of gay levelled at boys who cross gender ‘boundaries’ during play. Furthermore, the fact that boys understand being called gay as an insult without knowing what it means to be ‘gay’, presents an important educational opportunity for Life Orientation teachers. I argue that a good pedagogic approach to a Life Orientation programme would seriously take the children’s own understandings and experiences of gender and gendered violence and bullying in the playground into consideration as one of its key topics for classroom discussion, which is presently not the case.

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‘… a huge monster that should be feared and not done’: Lessons learned in sexuality education classes in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Research has foregrounded the way in which heterosexual practices for many young people are not infrequently bound up with violence and unequal transactional power relations. The Life Orientation sexuality education curriculum in South African schools has been viewed as a potentially valuable space to work with young people on issues of reproductive health, gender and sexual norms and relations. Yet, research has illustrated that such work may not only be failing to impact on more equitable sexual practices between young men and women, but may also serve to reproduce the very discourses and practices that the work aims to challenge. Cultures of violence in youth sexuality are closely connected to prevailing gender norms and practices which, for example, render women as passive victims who are incapable of exercising sexual agency and men as inherently sexually predatory. This paper analyses the talk of Grade 10 learners in nine diverse schools in two South African provinces, the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape, to highlight what ‘lessons’ these young people seem to be learning about sexuality in Life Orientation classes. We find that these lessons foreground cautionary, negative and punitive messages, which reinforce, rather than challenge, normative gender roles. ‘Scare’ messages of danger, damage and disease give rise to presumptions of gendered responsibility for risk and the requirement of female restraint in the face of the assertion of masculine desire and predation. We conclude that the role which sexuality education could play in enabling young women in particular to more successfully negotiate their sexual relationships to serve their own needs, reproductive health and safety, is undermined by regulatory messages directed at controlling young people, and young women in particular – and that instead, young people’s sexual agency has to be acknowledged in any processes of change aimed at gender equality, anti-violence, health and well-being.

Keywords: Life Orientation, sex, sexuality education, young people, heterosexual practices, gender equality, violence, health, danger.

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that South African society is characterised by high rates of gender-based violence. It is further acknowledged that gender-based violence cannot be confronted at the level of policing alone. The role that gender inequality, intersecting with other forms of social inequality, plays in reproducing unsafe, inequitable and violent, coercive sexual practices has been widely illustrated (Abdool Karim, 1998, 2010; Harrison, 2010; Harrison, Xaba, Kunene, & Ntuli, 2001; Jewkes & Morrell, 2010, 2012; Shefer, 2015; Shefer & Foster, 2009).

In South Africa, high rates of coercion and violence in intimate relationships between young people, along with HIV infection rates, have given rise to a range of policy initiatives aimed at youth. Schools in South Africa have been targeted as spaces that can play a role in challenging coercive and violent sexual and gender practices, and practices that are associated with high rates of HIV infection as well as with unwanted early pregnancies (Morrell, Epstein, Unterhalter, Bhana, & Moletsane, 2009). One prominent example is the introduction of Life Orientation [LO] (Department of Education, DoE, 2003) as a learning area which incorporates sexuality education and aims to provide learners with the tools to critically examine gender stereotypes and inequities. This emphasis is evident in the National Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Framework Strategy 2014 to 2019 (Department of Social Development, 2015), in which a commitment is made to strengthening responsive policy and planning with regard to sexual and reproductive health and rights amongst young people.

The LO learning area, particularly the sexuality education component, has been seen as one way in which knowledge, skills and values directed at challenging HIV, normative gender roles and coercive and violent practices in relationships between young people (Bhana, Brookes, Makiwane, & Naidoo, 2005; Prinsloo; 2007; Van Deventer, 2009) can be promoted and disseminated by way of the formal curriculum. The aims of Life Orientation, as outlined in the National Curriculum Statement, include fostering understandings of the ‘influence of gender inequality on relationships and general well-being: sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, violence, STIs including HIV and AIDS’ (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 12). Specifically, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement

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2 Curriculum transformation in South Africa led to the development of Life Orientation (LO) as a new learning area, which has as its main focus equipping and enabling learners to develop skills, competencies and values to successfully navigate a rapidly changing and transforming society, irrespective of their socio-economic background, race, gender, physical or intellectual ability. Apart from the holistic social, personal, intellectual, emotional and physical development, a central concern of the LO curriculum is addressing inequities in society through exposing learners to confront stereotypical views on gender roles and responsibilities, gender differences, power relations, masculinity, femininity, and gender influences on inequality in relationships and general well-being.
(Department of Basic Education, 2011), highlights the content for Grades 10-12 as that which deals with gender roles and responsibilities, gender differences, power and power relations, masculinity, femininity, and hegemonic gender influences on relationships.

Yet, current research has revealed that schools may be serving to reproduce dominant gender norms rather than challenging them, with the LO curriculum having little effect on changing behaviour as intended. Authors argue that little attention is paid to sexuality education in the early years of schooling (Bhana, 2007), a trend reflected in the international arena and underpinned by schools’ investment in notions of childhood sexual innocence (Allen, 2007). Furthermore, studies show that young pregnant and parenting women are highly stigmatised at schools, judged for stepping out of prescribed youthful femininity, and that LO sexuality education may be reinforcing rather than challenging such problematic responses (Bhana, Clowes, Morrell, & Shefer, 2008; Bhana, Morrell, Shefer, & Ngabaza, 2010; Ngabaza, 2011; Nkani & Bhana, 2010; Shefer, Bhana, & Morrell, 2013). Rather than a space for learners to confront stereotypes and challenge hegemonic discourses and practices, LO sexuality education has been shown to be characterised by a moralistic response hinging around abstinence and the disciplining of young sexuality (Epstein, Morrell, Moletsane, & Unterhalter, 2004; Francis, 2013; Francis & DePalma, 2014; Morrell, Moletsane, Karim, Epstein, & Unterhalter, 2002). Also of concern are findings that flag teachers’ discomfort with teaching sexuality education and the use of traditional didactic pedagogies, which serve to produce and reproduce discourses aimed at disciplining and regulating the sexual practices of young people, and young women in particular, instead of facilitating the agentic and positive sexualities that are the prerequisite for young people being able to negotiate and practise sexual relationships that are free of violence and affirming, rather than threatening of their lives and well-being (Adonis & Baxen, 2009; Baxen, 2008, Francis, 2013; Macleod, 2009; Motalingaoane-Khau, 2010; Pattman & Chege, 2003; Rooth, 2005).

In this paper we present findings from a national research project on Life Orientation sexuality education, particularly interviews and focus group discussions held with learners. Our focus here is on these learners’ reported experiences of LO sexuality education, which we argue depict sexuality education messages as serving to confirm and reproduce precisely the negative gender and sexual stereotypes that are implicated in the perpetuation of intimate relationships characterised by violence, coercion, feminine disempowerment and inequality.

**METHODS**

This paper draws from a research project that applied a critical gender lens to an analysis of sexuality programmes at selected schools in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape
provinces of South Africa³. Framed within a feminist qualitative research methodology, the larger study data included the curriculum and materials used in sexuality education, as well as the reported experiences of learners, teachers and school authorities of LO sexuality classes through interviews, focus groups, diaries and observations of sexuality education classes.

The study was conducted at nine public schools in the two provinces which represent the diversity of the former apartheid categorisations applied to secondary schools: two formerly white schools (ex-Model C⁴, both single sex girl schools), four schools that were formerly designated for coloured learners and three schools that were formerly designated for black learners. While such apartheid terms are contested, they continue to be drawn on for equity purposes nationally, and we use these here since they still have salience in South African communities and continue to be markers of class and other categories of social privilege. Although some schools are more racially integrated in contemporary South Africa than they were previously, this is less the case in poorer communities which continue sharply to reflect historical divides.

The component of the study we report on drew on data generated from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with learners. Twenty-one focus groups included seven male groups, seven mixed gender groups and eight female groups. The focus group discussion addressed the following key issues: learners’ reflections on their learning and experiences of sexuality education in Life Orientation classes; how sexuality education in Life Orientation classes compared with how parents talk about sex and sexuality at home; challenges in and out of school regarding sex and sexuality and how sexuality education dealt with these. In-depth, individual follow-up interviews were conducted with 21 male learners and 36 female learners. The individual interviews attempted to explore issues emerging from the focus groups in more depth and focused on reported practices of sexuality, relationships and reproductive health issues, including pregnancy and termination of pregnancy. All interviews and focus groups were recorded with the permission of participants, transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary. Ethical clearance was obtained from the three institutions to which researchers were

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³ The study was a 3-year SANPAD funded research project entitled ‘Life Orientation sexuality programmes and normative gender narratives, practices and power relations’.

⁴ Former Model C schools are schools that were reserved for white learners under apartheid (Roodt, 2011) but which began, in a limited way, to offer places to black learners in the dying days of apartheid. White schools were given the option to select from three different models: A (the school would become private and receive no state subsidy), B (the school remained a state school but could admit black students up to a maximum of 50%) or C (the school would receive state funding only for its staff, but could raise its own further budget through school fees and enroll 50% black learners (Motala & Pampallis, 2005). The majority of English medium schools opted for Model C, while most Afrikaans schools chose Model B. (Hofmeyr, 2000). After 1994, the model system was dismantled and a single, unified state system came into existence.
affiliated at the time. Permission to access schools was granted by the relevant authority in the Department of Education in each province and researchers worked closely with Life Orientation teachers who facilitated access to those learners who were willing to participate at the various research sites. Signed parental consent was obtained for the participation of learners younger than 18. Participants completed informed consent forms and were informed that their participation was voluntary. All participants were aware that they could leave the research study at any time without prejudice.

Guided by qualitative thematic analysis informed by discourse analytic readings (Braun & Clarke, 2006), our analysis here presents the dominant discourse prevalent in the sexuality education that our participants reported experiencing. In particular, we draw out discourses that reveal the way in which sexuality education, while directed at the safety of young people, tends to reproduce certain narratives that undermine gender change and efforts to achieve more equitable, non-coercive sexual practices, particularly within heterosexual relationships. In this paper we present these discourses as dominant ‘lessons’ that learners report that they have learned in LO classes.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

LESSON ONE: YOU SHOULD BE AFRAID OF SEX BECAUSE IT IS DANGEROUS, RISKY AND POTENTIALLY DAMAGING (AS OPPOSED TO PLEASURABLE AND MEANINGFUL)

The strongest thread emerging in the stories that participants tell about sexuality education, is that they are taught that sex is ‘dangerous’ and risky, with the potential to have negative, even devastating consequences. The negative consequences of sexuality that are emphasised include: illness and disease, such as HIV; life consequences, such as the impact of an unwanted pregnancy; and personal harm consequences such as direct violence, including rape. For many learners in this study, and especially women learners as will be unpacked later, sex is constructed in the negative, with little association with pleasure, and inevitably linked with the consequence of unwanted pregnancy and disease:

F1: And I have been told that there is nothing fun about having sex while you are still in high school. It just brings down everything that you do now because you are gonna get pregnant at the end of the day … it is just not worth it …. (Female focus group)5

5 Pseudonyms are used for individual interview quotes. Conventions for the referencing include: Int – the interviewer; F1 – female participant in focus group, M1 – male participant in focus group; [] left out or explanatory text; = – speaker interrupts conversation; underline – emphasis; … – text omitted by authors. Italics are inserted where we wish, as authors, to stress, particular phrases that emphasise the analytical point we are making.
F5: /U::hm/, some of the things they teach us; = /mhh/ = they warn us about certain things, what to do and what not to do = /mhh/ = that is why I am saying it is relevant = /ok/.

F3: I learnt that, if I slept with someone right, there are things I can do to protect myself from diseases = /ok/ = and pregnancy. (Female focus group)

F1: In sex education we learnt about HIV and Ukwabelana Ngesondo (STIs) and how they are spread, sexual relations, we learnt about the consequences of having sex during one’s period, that one could contract AIDS. The teacher told us that there is a chance for one to contract AIDS if one has sex during one’s period; however it’s unlikely that one could fall pregnant as menstruation is the body’s way of releasing waste (biological waste pertaining to the female reproductive system). We also learnt that during sex that vaginal fluid comes into contact with semen and thereafter the chance of contracting AIDS is greater.

F2: The teacher emphasised that what causes infection is that vaginal fluids mix with semen and as soon as this happens if one of the two is infected by the AIDS virus or STI then the infection takes place.

M3: It helps us with matters such as the spreading of diseases such as HIV...it advises us against such matters .... (Mixed gender focus group)

...like the Principal always tells us, … we shouldn’t have sex because it can lead to a lot of damage to you. (Female participant, individual interview)

...sex you don’t learn about. ... then you got to see scenarios like [inaudible], a person maybe is raped and then that is what the media taught me basically, then you got to watch movies where maybe a child was being sexually abused by her step dad. Those things are like the basic things, otherwise every other thing you never got to learn about. (Female participant, individual interview)

Not only was there silence surrounding sex, but throughout the experiences shared, when discussions were held, young people are reportedly being taught about sex in a framework of regulation, interspersed with warnings and threats of the risks and associated consequences. The negative words associated with sex are striking: nothing fun, gonna get pregnant, warn, protect, disease, spread, consequences, contract, death sentence, danger, damage, sexual abuse.

While it has been important for feminist and health researchers and educationists to show how heterosex is bound up with male power and normative violence such as coercive sex and date rape, it is also of concern that violence and damage are a kneejerk association of sex. Clearly absent from Life Orientation classrooms was an emphasis on the complex
feelings and experiences typically associated with sex. Participants certainly do not relate being told or asked about pleasure and possible positive physical and emotional experiences that they may have during sex, an erasure that has been illuminated by other local research (Chapin, 2000; Flaake, 1993; Lesch & Kruger, 2005; Shefer, 2015).

While it is also understandable that sexuality education has as its goal the prevention of unsafe and coercive sexual practices, learners in this study report that the sexuality education predominantly assumes the form of warnings with sex inevitably constructed as a ‘huge monster’ to ‘be feared and not done’. The warnings presuppose a youth population that is not yet sexually active and also not juxtaposed with discourses of desire, pleasure and responsibility to be safe:

M1: What I can say is that for me most of the lessons that revolved around sex were very leave the research study at any time without prejudice.

Guided by qualitative thematic analysis informed by discourse analytic readings (Braun & negative, negative in the sense that sex was portrayed as a huge monster that should be feared and not done. As far as I am concerned I wish that the priority be being safe instead of being forced to scare and directly or indirectly looking down upon those who have done it as being reckless or not respecting their bodies cause what has happened has happened so let us rather be taught about being safe than being scared off cause you know sir with us if you say this is bad we will try to find out the truth and in that process of finding the truth we become reckless cause safety was never a priority

M2: For me l think I was like taught to be afraid of having sex, I think I said before that for me sex was scary.

M1: My experience of my LO teacher and this kind of lesson was that he was very open but he always made sure that we are afraid of having sex cause he will tell us of all the painful and bad things about sex, he even had pictures or posters that show these terrible diseases that we will have gonorrhoea. (Male focus group)

Learners repeatedly refer in these extracts to the dominant discourse by adults that instilled fear of sex, rather than one that included more positive words typically associated with human sexuality, such as joy, pleasure, desire, fulfilment and excitement. Missing, as Michelle Fine notably pointed out, is a ‘discourse of desire’ (1988) – or what Louisa Allen later referred to as ‘missing discourse of erotics’ which would acknowledge that young people have ‘a right to experience sexual pleasure and desire’ (2004, p. 152). Learners in the present study clearly articulated a longing for sexuality education which would provide them with safe sex options beyond abstinence. In its present form, sexuality education instead continues to reduce young women to a position of victimisation rather than as ‘subjects of sexuality, initiators, as well as negotiators’ (Fine, 1988, p. 30). Allen (2004) thus calls for a reformulation of the
curriculum to acknowledge young people as sexual subjects who have a right to knowledge about their own bodies and to experience sexual pleasure and desire.

LESSON TWO: YOUNG MEN ARE POWERFUL, YOUNG WOMEN ARE VULNERABLE (AND SHOULD BE RESPONSIBLE)

While the discourse of danger, disease and damage (and the absence of a pleasure discourse) was evident for both young men and young women in their experience of how sexuality and sex were addressed in Life Orientation classes, it seemed that the message conveyed and received were also gendered – both in terms of content and form. In the talk of participants, there were indications that in LO classes there was a tendency for normative gender roles to be re-inscribed and rationalised. Indeed, in some contexts gender stereotypes were directly promoted:

> We also did an activity in LO, and like Meneer [male teacher] said, the man is the head – if I can put it that way – in the home. He rules over everything. So for me it’s like the man is the one that asks for sex and things…Like when we girls were speaking, it was always but I don’t want to have sex now like – how can I put this – a boy’s thing and a girl’s thing, then the teacher will always take the boys’ side. He will always agree with what they say, but he never heard the girls’ side of the story. So it was almost like – how can I put this – almost like we’re on different sides. (Female participant, individual interview)

Striking is not only how the female participant feels obscured and silenced in this class, she views the teacher as actively ‘taking the boys’ side’; as we argue, reinforcing hegemonic masculine roles – in which a type of powerful brotherhood is created.

The relational aspect of gender categories (male is defined in relation to female and vice versa) ‘produces and sustains binary opposites that may be invoked in stereotypical ways: masculinity/femininity; strong/weak; active/passive; hard/soft; rational/emotional’ (Kehily, 2002). LO sexuality education classes do little to undo this dualism. One of the consequences is that heterosexuality is normalised while homosexual people and homosexual practices are constructed as aberrant or deviant. This ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1980) is, as Epstein, O’Flynn and Telford (2003) have shown, sustained and naturalised in educational institutions. On the rare occasions when non-heterosexual sexual identities are part of the sexuality education conversation, it takes the form of ‘tolerance’ for ‘difference’, occluding the fact that heteronormativity is itself a form of violence, rendering illegitimate sexual desire across a range of spectrums of sexual expression.
and serving to construct an environment that allows for the perpetuation of marginalisation, exclusion and homophobic violence (Vincent & Howell, 2014).

Within this binary, heterosexual framing of sexuality, in contrast to the message that men are, and should be, powerful, women were positioned as bearing the consequences of sex and therefore as responsible for managing sexual encounters. Consequences took the form of women literally being left ‘holding the baby’, and of reputational damage.

F4: because we (girls) are told not to have sex because we are going to get pregnant, and the boys won’t get pregnant, so we are told, don’t have sex, don’t have sex, because you normative gender roles to be re-inscribed and rationalised. Indeed, in some contexts will fall pregnant and you will... =
F2: = You will be the one with the baby.
F4: And they will make you pregnant and then they will leave. (Female focus group)
F4: Like, what we have been taught is that when you are busy with your boyfriend, there are things that you do and things that you don’t do. If I am a virgin, I must choose one person and not date this one and that one, if maybe I see that he is also dating. This spoils you as the girl and at the end you are the one that is being finished, not him. (Female focus group; our emphasis)

The gendered nature of consequences is clear in these extracts. Boys will leave when pregnancy occurs, and their reputation will not be damaged.

As seen in the extracts above, the language of consequence is powerfully interwoven with the logic of responsibility – inevitable risk and consequence construct inevitable responsibility that is highly gendered, with young women carrying the weight of responsibility:

So we’re basically, they’re really trying to make us aware of those kind of things because girls they have to take on more responsibilities once they fall pregnant than boys ...Because boys you know they just go to school every day you know those kind of things, so we sort of we’re more at risk than they are. (Female participant, individual interview)

F1: My mother tells me, in our house it is almost as if you may not have a relationship with a boy or so. So, my mother always tells me the dangers of what boys do, and the difference that boys do not get pregnant, but that girls can get pregnant. That is what she always tells us in the home, she tells me and my sister, and then she tells us that we must not get involved with boys because it can be dangerous and so.
A wide literature has shown that youth sexuality is predominantly constructed as inherently dangerous in formal sexuality education (Burns & Torre, 2004; Fields, 2008). In multiple ways, the discourse of danger and risk gives rise to an emphasis on protection and responsibility. Strikingly though was the extent to which both were gendered, serving to reinforce a problematic gender divide, legitimising stereotypic gender roles and practices, while also reproducing a gendered construction of responsibility and blame that are central components of what Linda McClain has described as a ‘conservative sexual economy’, which has as its central components sexual abstinence until (heterosexual) marriage and girls and women as gatekeepers who are ‘responsible for the proper regulation of boys’ and men’s sexuality’ (2006, p. 66). In the present study, young women reported being told that they are the ones responsible for protecting themselves and their partners, but this discourse of responsibility coexists with a contradictory framing of women as passive victims. On the one hand, young women are positioned as the ones who need to exercise agency and need to police, regulate and constrain both their own sexuality and that of their male partners, lest they, the young women, suffer the consequences of young sexuality. Yet, at the same time, the dominant heterosexual framing of female sexuality depicts women as sexually passive, helpless, and powerless in relation to sexual decision making. Such lessons are fraught with contradictions between young women’s agency and vulnerability – ‘you have agency to protect yourself’ but you are vulnerable and ‘at risk’.

Not only did the young women in the study report being portrayed as responsible for their own safety and avoiding ‘ruined lives’, but they were also set up as accountable for the larger ‘system’, for maintaining the dominant moral and institutional framework of society as the following participant’s narrative suggests:

… honestly speaking I feel like the whole teenage pregnancy is really, really, really bringing down our system in education and stuff because more girls are falling pregnant and STI’s and stuff like you that … Our education and uhm, uhm, there are many diseases contracted during that time and it is not going well. I think we as teenagers we need to protect ourselves and not being out there doing all this kind of stuff that put you in risk because you still got a future ahead of you and you still need to think about that and the money, I mean the money that goes into this school thing that your parents have to pay it is just not worth it. (Female participant, individual interview; our emphasis)

What was evident in learner talk was that the LO classroom did not only reproduce particular notions of sex as disease-inducing and dangerous, silencing those of pleasure and desire
accompanied by safety, but it was also the site for the reproduction and reinforcement of dominant discourses on heterosexual practices. Young women were expected to imbibe the message of self-regulation, ‘self-control always’ while young men could be reckless, or initiators of sex, without the responsibility to be safe. A young woman puts it this way in a focus group discussion:

Int: OK, so, you’re saying that it’s normal for the boy to initiate sex. The girls need to be the ones who have to wait for the boy to come and ask them.
F1: Yes, because if we girls initiate the sex, then we are going to be seen as a B I T C H [spells out the word].
F8: Sluts.
Int: OK, so, if you ask for sex from your boyfriend, you’re going to be seen… or from a guy, you’re going to be seen as a bitch?
Participants [in unison]: Yes, or a slut.
Int: OK, a slut, and a bitch. So, in some ways there’s also pressure on the girls to be a certain way, hey? Boys have more freedom.
Participants [in unison]: Yes, it is.
Int: Is it like this in your school and community?
F2: Yes. That’s how it is.
F1: Girls are more closely guarded than boys.
Int: So, girls have to watch… you have to watch yourselves?
F6: Yes. Self-control always. (Female focus group; our emphasis)

While the participants in this extract were not talking about LO sexuality education classes, but rather general social and cultural understandings, the taken-for-grantedness in their discourse was striking, highlighting the overlap of the messages that they receive in the LO classes and those referred to above.

Further evidence of the reproduction of normative gender responsibility in LO classrooms emerged through the inadvertent message that young women should be silent about the topic of sex. In other words, they should not only be silent about their desire in the context of sexual encounters (as discussed above), but they should be silent about sex and sexuality in general. The teachers seem to convey nonverbal messages that discourage open communication (Brock & Jennings, 1993; Simanski, 1998). As the participant below reported, this seems to be exacerbated when the teacher is a man speaking with young women about sexuality. Male teachers may be unaware of the extent of their own discomfort and how their avoidance of certain topics can serve to reproduce gendered norms.
We don’t actually talk about it. The menere [male teachers] that give us LO, they are all shy… so they don’t want to speak to the girls about it [sex]. So we mostly do exercises, play outside and so. We never have classes about sex and so. (Female participant, individual interview)

Although this participant tries to excuse the male teachers (they are shy), young women certainly got the message that they were not allowed to openly discuss their sexuality or their sexual behaviour in Life Orientation classes. The sexual desire, feelings and practices of young people seem to be taboo topics in the classroom. Gender shapes possibilities in the classroom, with male teachers being described as unable to adequately communicate with female learners due to their discomfort about talking about sexuality. The young woman in this case articulates that she finds being silenced in this way hurtful, and also indicates that she and other girls resist being silenced and do talk about sex when they are on their own:

It actually hurt me a bit, but then I got over it …then we girls spoke about sex and things, because we don’t let it get us down. (Female participant, individual interview)

Further, these participants expressed a pronounced interest in sex and a desire to have a space within which to talk about sex openly. While the young women indicated that they are not only interested in the mechanics of sex but also in sexual and intimate relationships, there is reportedly no space in the classroom to talk about this. According to them, there is no space to talk about feelings and desire.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study reveal that dominant discourses about gender and young sexuality are presented to learners in the form of direct and indirect ‘lessons’ in Life Orientation classes. Arguably, sexuality education reproduces certain discourses that undermine gender change and efforts to achieve more equitable, non-coercive sexual practices, particularly within heterosexual relationships. These include, as emerge here, a continued foregrounding of punitive and disciplinary messages founded on ‘danger, disease and damage’, which are also gendered. These messages serve to bolster the reproduction of gender stereotypes and unequal heteronormative sexualities. Such messages arguably also serve to promote a negative construction of young sexualities, which are powerfully associated with negative and punitive consequences, and are also strongly gendered so that women are set up as the ones who primarily bear the consequences and are held responsible for preventing young sexual practices. These findings concord with Lesch and
Furphy’s (2013) research that shows how the discourses to which young South Africans are exposed at school are both limited and limiting.

It seems that teachers and schools in general are still invested in the belief that ‘scare tactics’ will steer learners away from sex and that their goal is to regulate young people’s sexual activities. It is clear that these kinds of messages hold little resonance for young people and may in fact, as intimated by participants, have effects contrary to the intentions of teachers.

Sex education should rather be aimed at developing sexually agentic men and women who are able to manage their own sexual health (Macleod & Vincent, 2014). Discourses of ‘danger’ and silencing may work for a limited time, but they do not facilitate self-reflexivity and a sense of control over one’s own body and sexuality. Young people should be empowered sexually by being offered spaces for reflection, helping them to articulate their thoughts and feelings regarding sex and sexuality. Young men and women should be allowed to consider their bodies and sexuality positively as a source of satisfaction and pleasure. LO classes have the potential to powerfully impact on how young people think and feel about their sexuality. However, if young sex is simply constructed as risky, as something to be scared of, with young men seen as powerful and potentially dangerous and young women as vulnerable and having to take responsibility, then sex talk in classrooms can in no way accommodate other constructions of sex and sexuality – those that the learners are possibly most interested in and can relate to most.

In conclusion, we argue that educational efforts to work with young people on sexuality, health and well-being will continue to flounder unless we acknowledge the importance of young people’s active agency in any processes of change with respect to imperatives of gender equality, anti-violence, health and well-being. A key priority is to destabilise the authority of adults and their ‘civilising’ project in regulating young people’s sexual desires and practices, as currently enacted in both research and practice with/on young people.

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Road traffic injuries (RTIs) constitute a substantial and growing public health burden across the world, and more so for countries on the African continent. Several countries from the WHO African Region rank among countries with the highest road fatality rates in the world. Particularly high rates have been reported for Nigeria and South Africa (33.7 and 31.9 deaths per 100 000 population per year, respectively) and together with five other countries (Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda), account for approximately two-thirds of all road deaths in the region (WHO, 2013b).

In recognition of the persisting burden of RTIs across the world, the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 64/255 of March 2010 declared the period 2011-2020 as the Decade of Action for Road Safety (WHO, 2011). The strategy aims to stabilise the growing burden, and then reduce the forecasted level of RTIs during the 10-year period through a range of recommended actions at national, regional and global levels. The strategy includes five ‘pillars’ of activities focused on building capacity for road safety management, improving the safety of traffic-related infrastructure, further developing the safety of vehicles, enhancing the behaviour of road users and improving post-crash care. An ambitious target has been set to save 5 million lives and prevent 50 million serious injuries over the 10-year period.

Global Status Reports on Road Safety (GSRRS) with specific indicators for the five pillars to the Decade of Action have been used by participating countries as a key tool for monitoring progress. Current indications are that progress, in many regards, is slower than anticipated. For example, under pillar one, findings from the second GSRRS showed that of 182 countries, only 112 countries have time-based road traffic fatality targets and only 62 have non-fatal targets (WHO, 2013b). In the African region, most countries still lack comprehensive policies in priority areas such as the protection of vulnerable road users, investment in public transportation, and key risk factors such as speed control, drink-driving and the use of restraints (WHO, 2013a).

In this special issue, as we reach the mid-point of the Decade of Action, we aim to focus on the progress, challenges and successes in realising the Decade of Action’s aim of stabilising and reducing road traffic injuries in countries on the African continent. We are particularly keen on receiving submissions from the abovementioned seven countries that are most affected. Submissions may relate to any or more of the five pillars to the Decade of Action and may include a focus on epidemiology, interventions and policy development. Perspective type papers are also welcome.

Please submit your contributions to the Editor-in-Chief, African Safety Promotion: A Journal of Injury and Violence Prevention at the Violence, Injury and Peace Research Unit, Medical Research Council, PO Box 19070, Tygerberg 7505, South Africa, or via e-mail to nancy.hornsby@mrc.ac.za. The deadline for abstracts for articles is 31 January 2016. Contributions are to be prepared according to the journal guidelines, see: http://www.mrc.ac.za/crime/aspj.htm. For further enquiries, please contact the Guest Editor, Dr Anesh Sukhai (anesb.sukhai@mrc.ac.za).

REFERENCES


The University of South Africa, the South African Medical Research Council, and the Psychological Society of South Africa are pleased to release the First Announcement of the 6th International Conference on Community Psychology (ICCP2016). ICCP2016 will be held at the International Convention Centre, Durban, South Africa, 27-30 May 2016. The theme of the conference is Global Dialogues on Critical Knowledges, Liberation and Community. The conference theme seeks to accord representation, voice and space to theories and enactments of community psychology that contribute to robust debate and conversations about the identity and representational forms of community psychology, the critical roles of community psychologists, and the epistemological and ontological diversity present in global enactments of community psychology. As such, the conference aims to stimulate global dialogues that seek to disrupt hegemonic influences, call into question that which is construed as critical knowledges, and reflect on the meanings of liberation and community. The conference programme will consist of keynote addresses; oral and poster presentations; symposia; thematic panels; roundtable discussions; innovative presentations; social events; cultural activities; and the opportunity to engage with exhibitors.

Abstract submission opens in August 2015 and closes on 8 January 2016.

Please visit the conference website (www.iccp2016.ac.za) for more information.