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'[2] 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'[3] 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.

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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.

CONTEXTUALISING GENDER IN CHILDREN'S PLAY WITHIN POSTSTRUCTURALIST FEMINIST THEORY

'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 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', Sboniso[4], 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.

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].

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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 them[6] .

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 five12-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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