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Masculinity and violence: Gender, poverty and culture in a rural primary school in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study draws from focus group discussions with primary school boys,girls and their teachers to examine how violence is experienced at a rural school in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study draws attention to 'amaphara' masculinity' as conceptualized by Hunter (2021) and stick fighting as key to understanding the local expressions of violence and its problematic relationship with girls and 'other' boys.Examining these practices, and the wider sociocultural contexts in which they are embedded, we argue is vital for gender violence prevention in rural schools.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we investigate violence at the intersection of gender, poverty and culture in a rural primary school in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. Specifically, we examine learners' and teachers' experiences of violence at Ananzi Primary School (APS, pseudonyms used throughout) in the Imfume district of the province, bringing to light ways in which social forces mediate masculinities and power. Researching gender violence and schooling in rural schools is not common in South Africa (Pini et al., 2014)—perhaps because rural schools are considered inconsequential in relation to the emerging body of research on gender, sexuality and violence in urban settings (Bhana et al., 2021). Thus, with very few exceptions (Bhana, 2016; Moletsane, 2018), gender violence research in South African schools remains urban-centric.

Mayeza and Bhana (2020) primary school study demonstrates how the intersection of economic despair, unemployment and fragile family structures produces food insecurity and vulnerability in an urban setting. In such contexts, boys' bodies are key sites for the enactment of violence. Age, body size, strength and toughness are deployed to engender violence and create hierarchies between and amongst boys and girls (Mayeza and Bhana, 2020). Attention to urban gender violence and schooling has provided rich insights into both boys' and girls' challenges in relation to, and their use of, violence shaped by factors such as sexuality, class, and gender (Ngidi and Moletsane, 2018; Parkes, 2015). However, contextual factors in rural areas affect (differently) how violence is experienced. Indeed, developing appropriate interventions to end violence must be based in, "and driven by, the realities" (Bell, 2012: 283) of all children's lives. Our paper demonstrates how masculinity, economic marginalisation and cultural norms interact with boys' and girls' experience of violence at a rural primary school. We outline the context of violence and its intersecting relations of power by focusing on the experience of schooling and the formation of identities under specific social and cultural conditions at APS.

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on gender, sexuality and violence in sub-Saharan Africa (Johnson Ross and Parkes, 2020; Le Mat et al., 2019). Evidence from studies in several sub-Saharan African countries, including South Africa, suggests that gender and sexual violence, aggressive masculinities and girls' subordination are experienced more harshly at schools located in poorer communities (Leach et al., 2012; Parkes, 2015; Parkes et al., 2020; Vanner, 2018). While girls are often the recipients of violence in these contexts, boys are not immune to the experience of violence as both users and recipients of the violence (Mayeza and Bhana, 2020). Although it is common (and useful) to expect schools and teachers to address violence, we argue that specific and complex sociocultural and economic conditions in rural contexts affect the construction of violence and masculinities; thus, it is vital to embed interventions in supportive contexts reaching into and beyond schooling (Skovdal and Campbell, 2015). Experiences of violence in schools require an interrogation of the wider social, cultural and economic conditions in order to understand how these contextual factors impact social factors inside the school.

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2. Violence at the intersection of rurality, masculinities, culture and poverty

KwaZulu-Natal province is one of the three poorest provinces in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2017). Children often lack basic necessities, live in fragile female-headed households, are unable to access food, and rely on child support grants and old age pensions distributed to the household. Statistics South Africa (2021) reports significant levels of economic and social distress, widespread poverty and unemployment in rural areas of the country. Our paper contributes to an understanding of violence and schooling in the context of APS, which is distinctively rural and marked by historical processes, structural disadvantage and compliance with narrow constructions of gender and sexuality.

The legacies of apartheid and historical inequalities continue to affect the experience of violence and material disadvantage, bringing together race, class and gender in specific ways to rural contexts in South Africa. Under apartheid, areas such as Imfume formed part of the Ingonyama Trust Act that placed land under traditional leadership and chieftaincy, which are deeply entrenched in the province. Historically produced conflict arises from land shortage and disputes around land ownership (Wright, 2008), as well as political tensions between the African National Congress (ANC), the governing party, and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which is aligned to traditional leadership and the preservation of Zulu cultural norms and identities. These historical forces, combined with the migrant labour system and demand for cheap labour supported by apartheid policies, meant that black men in particular were uprooted from rural to urban areas. They were not allowed to formally settle in the urban areas where they worked. Instead, they were allotted cheap accommodation in hostels and informal settlements, thereby disrupting their traditional way of life and gender norms (Mfecane, 2018; Sideris, 2004).

Under traditional systems, power was vested in chieftaincy with strict adherence to gender and generational hierarchies whereby older men held power over younger men, women and children (Hunter, 2010). In this system, race, class and gender coalesced with cultural and patriarchal norms to produce male entitlement and women's relative subordination (Jewkes and Morrell, 2012). Customary practices related to *inhlonipha* [respect] operated alongside gender to produce asymmetrical relations of power mobilised around male power. Economic success was based on acquiring cattle, building a homestead and having several wives (Hunter, 2010). This gender and cultural project started early in life. Boys and girls were inducted into gendered and cultural rituals based on binaries and differentiation. Girls were expected to be demure, respectful and chaste as they prepared for life as virginal brides and wives (Harrison, 2008). Boys were introduced to cattle herding and stick fighting as they prepared for life as adult men and heads of the household (Carton and Morrell, 2012). Moletsane (2018) finds that these gender and cultural norms, although changing, continue to shape how girls' subordination is understood in rural areas of the country.

These cultural norms in patriarchal settings, superimposed onto contexts of unemployment and poverty, produce unequal relations of power. Economic deprivation undermines an idealised masculine status. The formation of *amaphara* [deficit/parasitic] masculinity arises in these turbulent socioeconomic contexts where the use of violence becomes a powerful resource to reclaim masculine power (Connell, 2017; Jewkes and Morrell, 2018). *Amaphara* masculinity is not particular to rural settings as Hunter (2021) shows. However, the ways in which it takes shape and is experienced is reflected by the particular context—such as in Imfume, as presented in our study, and through which the experience of violence materialises.

Due to the legacies of apartheid laws and inequalities, rural communities in South Africa reflect challenges and characteristics distinctive to their context. In contemporary KwaZulu-Natal, the effects of apartheid in rural contexts tie gender, race and class together in ways that continue to produce male dominance and control over women. Intersecting burdens of poverty, gender and race are compounded by the experience of violence in communities (Nussey, 2021). As we argue further, unemployment, social inequalities and masculinities are interconnected in the experience of violence at school. While gender violence occurs across social class settings, men who are marginalised in the context of race and class inequalities and unemployment often use violence against women and other men to intensify domination and address their feelings of emasculation (Hunter, 2010, 2021; Morrell, 2001; Silberschmidt, 2001).

Masculinities and their localised expressions are helpful in understanding the experience of violence at APS. Hegemonic masculinity, as Connell (1995) suggests, is a version of masculinity that holds power at a particular point in time but coexists with other forms of masculinity that do not place value on aggression and violence (Morrell et al., 2012b). A key element in the construction of hegemonic masculinity is the emphasis placed on violence and, in South Africa, this remains a powerful factor in scholarship around gender, violence and inequalities (Ratele, 2016). The concept of hegemonic masculinity seeks to define an ideal way of being masculine that is associated with the quest for power and status and which "guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 1995: 77). The concept establishes a "patriarchal dividend" that sees hegemonic masculinity as privileged over other forms of gender identity that are not aligned with the dominant ideal.

While hegemonic masculinity is a valuable theoretical tool to understand power dynamics, it is not without criticism (Bartholomaeus, 2013; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2019). Bartholomaeus (2013: 291) suggests that even when masculinities are aligned with evolving and caring capacities that undermine hegemony this does not necessarily mean new versions of masculinity as even caring capacities are complexly located within enduring gender norms with regard to idealised masculinity. In other words, subordination is not based on a binary distinction from hegemony (Connell, 1995). A key debate that has ensued in understanding masculinities is whether men who are deemed to be subordinate in relation to race, class and sexuality, for instance, can also be seen as hegemonic (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Can black men in poverty, for example, who are seen to be subordinated, also take on hegemonic masculinity? Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that masculinity is dynamic in nature. It is fluid and multifarious and cannot be contained to any given society. In other words, there is more than one version of hegemonic masculinity and these exist at local, regional and global levels. This is crucial to understanding the operation of hegemonic masculinity in a context like Imfume, where black men who are subordinated in relation to race, class and gender are considered powerful within the local operation of power.

Mfecane (2018) argues that Western frameworks for theorising hegemonic masculinity, while useful, are inadequate for understanding masculinity in a South African context. Localised customary practices, for instance, are important in understanding manhood (Carton and Morrell, 2012; Mfecane, 2018). Amongst the Zulu, stick fighting is a customary practice that is used as self-defence, to assert domination but also as a heterosexual tool to show prowess and strength to females (Carton and Morrell, 2012). However, within these customary practices, there is hierarchy amongst men. Should a male not abide by practices such as circumcision, he would be referred to as *usisi* [sissy], which calls masculinity into question (Mfecane, 2018: 37). Stick fighting created "homosocial bonds…which in turn reinforced peer ranking that inevitably set some boys apart" (Carton and Morrell, 2012: 42).

In contexts such as Imfume, social forces serve as a platform for greater involvement in, and exposure to, crime (Dunne et al., 2021). In these contexts, chronic poverty coupled with high unemployment give rise to the emergence of masculinities such as *amaphara.* This is a term used to refer to "petty thieves addicted to *whoonga/nyaope*" (Hunter, 2021: 59). "Whoonga," also known as "nyaope," refers to a drug that consists of toxic ingredients such as rat poison which is mostly consumed in poorer communities in South Africa (Hunter, 2021). Hunter's (2021)

contextualisation of *amaphara* reinforces the intricate connection between large-scale social and economic disruptions and their effects on the lives of marginalised black men who often resort to violence as means of survival in areas of extreme poverty. The children who come to the school in our study are not separate from these broader sociocultural historical and contemporary patterns through which hegemonic masculinity is framed. They have long begun the process of growing up, and these gendered processes are interwoven with their experiences at home, in the community and at school.

3. Methods

The data from this study form part of a wider qualitative study entitled, "Stop the Violence: Boys and Girls in and Around Schools," which seeks to examine how violence and inequalities are produced, avoided and rejected as children and young people negotiate gender and sexuality in South African schools. Adult perspectives, including those of teachers, are key to this project in relation to supporting gender equality and ending violence as gender and sexuality unfold in the lives of young people. Our study was conducted at APS, which is located in the community of Imfume, a rural area in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. All learners' and teachers' names are pseudonyms. Like many other rural areas, Imfume is characterised by extreme poverty, unemployment and illegal activities reflecting the legacies of inequalities produced by apartheid and sustained by contemporary patterns of inequality. The school's lack of infrastructure and resources reflects the poor economic conditions of all 302 learners (all classified as black) who attend it. APS is funded by the state and is a no-fee school classified under the Quintile 1 ranking. This ranking qualifies APS for the National Schools' Nutrition Programme (NSNP), which feeds learners.

3.1. Research design

Our study presents an understanding and experience of violence through the voices of males and females in mixed-sex focus groups, which presented an opportunity for participants to discuss a wide range of issues that were then debated within the group. These focus group discussions yielded rich data. Focus groups provide insight into the co-constitution of knowledge within a group dynamic. As noted elsewhere (Sim and Waterfield, 2019), focus groups cannot generate all the perspectives of individuals within the setting, which points to some of the limitations of this approach. To minimise this, the researcher, who was trained in qualitative methods, was sensitive to participants' voices, limited domination and remained aware of power dynamics so participants were not deprived of opportunities for discussion. This moderation ensured participation by all members of each group and that the discussions were not dominated by one individual. The focus group discussions provided a rich platform for debate, particularly amongst the learners.

The study was conducted using separate mixed-sex focus group discussions for learners and for teachers. The learner focus group constituted boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 14 years, and the teacher focus group included both males and females (all of black ethnicity) between the ages of 27 and 55 years. Focus groups allowed for the emergence of individual and combined perspectives, and permitted participants to deliberate concerns of violence. The platform created through focus groups allowed teachers and learners, within their respective groups, to engage, dispute and challenge each other on issues concerning violence; this was integral to the study and would not have been achievable through individual interviews (Cohen et al., 2018).

Learners were interviewed during the second break, and teachers were interviewed after school hours using classrooms as venues. All focus group discussions were conducted and audio taped by a researcher in English, which is the medium of instruction at APS. Focus group interviews for teachers and learners lasted approximately 60 and 40 min, respectively, and were later transcribed. The topics examined in both focus groups included learners' and teachers' understanding of violence and their interpretations of violent incidents and personal experiences at school. The questions put to the focus groups were semi-structured to guide the discussions and allow for further probing. These questions were: "What do you understand by violence?" "Do you have cases of violence in your school?" "What could be the actual trigger or cause of violence?" "How does your school deal with violence?" "What do you think can be done to prevent violence in school?" The purpose was to enable learners and teachers to discourse as authorities about violence and they were encouraged to speak and reflect on their personal issues within these expansive questions.

3.2. The sample

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted in order to understand school violence in a context of rural poverty and economic deficiency. The key criterion in participant selection was to recruit male and female learners and teachers. Including both male and female interpretations was paramount in understanding the enactment of violence in Imfume. The coeducational characteristic of APS ensured that gender diversity was represented in the sample. The project was announced to learners by their teachers, who also assisted in the recruitment of learner participants for the focus group.

3.3. Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct research at the school was sought from the Department of Basic Education in KwaZulu-Natal as well as from the school principal. For learners, parent/guardian-signed consent forms were compulsory before commencement of the research. All participants knew that their identity would be protected through the use of pseudonyms and that they were at liberty to withdraw their participation at any stage of the study. Participants were assured that the data would be used solely for the purpose of research. An important consideration during the conduct of our research was the issue of sensitivity, particularly if learners and teachers were themselves victims of violence. Access to the school counsellor and district social worker was made available in the event of any discomfort or psychological distress.

3.4. Trustworthiness and rigour

To prevent data from being compromised, and to secure credibility in the study, we introduced member checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to ensure that our research was trustworthy and a true reflection of the phenomenon presented (Shenton, 2004). In doing so, all focus-group audio recordings were first transcribed verbatim and, thereafter, printed copies of transcripts were issued to participants to provide an opportunity for review and verification. During this review process, participants were made aware that they could correct or omit any misrepresentations in the data. Such measures ensured accuracy in the perspectives of participant responses.

3.5. Data analysis

Data were examined thematically through Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic coding, which involved the identification of patterns or themes in the data. Elements of data were manually colour-coded according to relevant themes. An inductive approach was adopted to enable development and refinement of themes further—which all authors worked towards, collaboratively. This analysis provided us with the ability to reflect on, and gain greater insight into, the perspectives of learners and teachers on enactments of violence at school. An incorporation of previous research (Mayeza & Bhana, 2020) into the data also strengthened our understanding of the themes that emerged. Two themes are presented in the next two sections.

4. Learners on *amaphara* masculinity

The derogatory term *amaphara* is derived from the term "parasites" (see Hunter, 2021: 59 above, who argues that the term provides a window into the lives of young marginalised black South Africans). The context in Imfume brings together race, gender, class and location in producing *amaphara* masculinity. Poverty, unemployment and inequalities intersect in the performance of an "*amaphara masculinity*" that prioritises crime and violent masculinity, and which we analyse in this section.

Race and class in South Africa remain, albeit with changes, intimately tied to lack of skills, education and unemployment such that the black working-class majority in the country remain marginalised (Todes and Turok, 2018). Economic malaise, a critical shortage of jobs and aggravated poverty in Imfume mean that low-skilled, black working-class men and women confront the intransigent effects of poverty and history. These overlapping burdens of poverty, race and class inequalities are aggravated by political violence. Conflict has arisen around the state's efforts to expropriate land for public good and restitution especially as traditional authorities retain power, claim ownership and demand compensation for the re-allocation of land (Branson, 2016). As we will show, the broader political, social and economic context particularly associated with vulnerability, poverty and marginalisation, produces male weakness and heightens the use of violence and crime to mediate the effects of broader structural inequalities. *Amaphara* masculinity is thus contextually located as unemployed, disadvantaged men who prioritise crime and violence as a means to access resources and social dominance, and is profoundly implicated in the experiences of the young people interviewed:

Mandla (male): But these boys [*amaphara*] also worry us as boys. Mam, *amaphara* sometimes come to school during break time and demand our pocket money. One day these boys took another boy's cell phone. we don't report everything to teachers [others laughing]. you will appear as a coward Mam, and the boy who lost his cell phones didn't report to the teachers because as learners we are not allowed to carry cell phones at schools.

Olwethu (male): They enter through the gate because it is not locked and there is no security guard and some of them are friends with other boys in our school.

Amaphara are older men who are not legally part of the school institution but reside within the community. Hunter (2021: 60) states that "*amaphara* are compared to rats because of the small items they both take for survival." In Imfume, *amaphara* enter schools to take small items they can sell, either to feed their drug addiction or for survival purposes. It must be noted here that the use of *amaphara* masculinity is not based on individual patterns of behaviour that are unique to men and boys in poverty. *Amaphara* masculinity refers to patterns that reach into the broader social and economic context and is in tension with personal and collective patterns of male conduct. The boys above give us insight into the ways in which economic powerlessness, race, gender and class in Imfume produce masculinity that is specific to the circumstances and seeps into the school context. Men in Imfume experience high levels of unemployment and struggle to obtain work; they live in continual precarity (Gibbs et al., 2014). Not all men adopt the position of *amaphara.* Similarly, not all boys at school are violent. The construction of *amaphara* masculinity in the broader context co-constitutes with dominant elements of masculinity such as entitlement, aggression, and violence to reaffirm masculine status and power. The school is inseparable from the broader race and class context and this complex interrelationship suggests the value in understanding how broader structures of power intersect with the experience of violence at school. As noted earlier, learners at APS emerge from similar low-income households although variations in income do exist. Some households rely on social grants while others may rely on other forms of income including part-time work and other low-skilled economic activity. Whilst *amaphara* might have access to a social grant or occasional work, they spend their earnings on whoonga and resort to criminal acts to sustain their drug habits. In essence, learners at school may not necessarily be more privileged than *amaphara*, however, their use of drugs complicates the use of violence and intimidation to achieve resources in an already deprived context.

The experiences of boys at the school were that pocket money and cell phones provided a resource for *amaphara* who were able to establish dominance and fear. While it was possible to report these crimes to teachers, such reporting was seen as cowardly and less than manly. To avoid being subjugated as a "coward," boys simultaneously reaffirmed masculinity based on dominance and fear, as some girls confirmed:

Anele (female): They [*amaphara*] just demand things, we are all afraid of them.

Bhana (2012) and others working in the context of sub-Saharan Africa (Leach et al., 2012; Parkes, 2015; Porter, 2015) have argued that girls' fear of boys and men is not simply a reproduction of their helplessness, as articulated by Anele above. Rather, girls have developed a sophisticated understanding of their vulnerability in social and cultural circumstances where male privilege and entitlement is valorised. As Bhana (2012: 353) notes, girls' vulnerability, without denying their agency, is rooted in "material, symbolic and discursive forces which effectively limit their opportunities and freedoms, diminishing their agency and calling into question the social conditions which allow sexual and gender violence to flourish in South Africa". An entanglement of fear and vulnerability is evident both in and out of school, suggesting the coextensive organisation through which *amaphara* masculinity flourishes and has effects for schools where girls, especially, face sexual risk and violence:

Pearl (female): Eh Mam, *amaphara* sometimes come into school for girls and boys at school. One day we were a group of girls from school passing by the bus stop, these boys demanded money from us. Some of us managed to run and escape, Mam, but another girl was left behind, held by hand by one of the boys. She said these boys wanted to rape her but she screamed and they allowed her to go but she was very scared.

Bongi (female): These boys [*amaphara*] try to rape girls if they walk alone at night or if they walk alone in the bush.

In contexts of chronic poverty and distressed conditions, Gibbs et al. (2014) report that young men often draw on hypermasculinity where sexual prowess, violence and domination are prioritised. Noting the concerns raised by Harrington (2020), our intention here is not to pathologise *amaphara* masculinity in the context of extreme marginalisation. However, the formation of masculinity is inseparable from the wider social context in which it is forged, questioning both the ideological norms through which masculine entitlement is produced as well as the conditions that permit *amaphara* masculinity to flourish. What is evident, both in and out of school, is the connection between structural inequalities and violence as a continuum. Instead of focusing on individual behaviour the sociocultural, political and symbolic forms of violence, are interrelated and calibrate with each other (Bourgois, 2004) to produce *amaphara* masculinity. APS is not separable from the social context, and boys' and girls' experiences highlight the coming together of structural, material and gendered inequalities associated with male vulnerability and the expression of hypermasculinity and violence. As noted below, the children emerge from fragile households, far removed from idealised Western notions of family:

Spha (male): Boy fights are always very serious. a fight can start in class and continue outside of the school gate and sometimes even in areas where we live.

Olwethu (male): Usually, when boys fight, parents are called to the principal's office because their fights are more dangerous. One boy brought a knife to school after fighting with another boy. Luckily, he told other boys that he has a knife in his bag and they told our class teacher.

Mandla (male): Some learners do come with their parents but others don't because they don't have parents. Some learners, Mam, here at school stay alone as children in their homes and some stay with their grandparents because their parents have died or maybe working in

Durban.

The formation of violent masculinity is an entanglement with broader social structures of power. Boys and girls emerge from poverty-stricken contexts where parents are absent (working as migrant labourers) and, common amongst their experience, is the phenomenon of child-headed households. Household circumstances, such as these in Imfume, exacerbate the propensity to do violence and curtail opportunities to end it, especially in the absence of support from families. Inside the school, evidence of male entitlement and sexual harassment coalesced with *amaphara* masculinity, increasing girls' vulnerability and exposing the early formations of masculine privilege, entitlement and violence:

Ncamisile (female): One day during break time I was coming from the toilet, a group of boys from Grade 7 were standing next to the toilets. As I passed them one of the boys stood in front of me as I approached them; he grabbed my hand and he said he wanted to talk to me. He then asked for my name and I didn't respond, he also said I was going to be his girlfriend. I told him I didn't want to talk to him and he threatened to hit me.

Violence is not static. It is vibrant, fluid and operates dynamically across the context in and out of the school. Ncamisile points attention to a well-established finding that the expression of heterosexual masculinity is key to becoming a "real" boy at school (Allan, 2019; Frosh et al., 2002; Renold, 2005; Stahl and Keddie, 2020). Sexual harassment and the threat of violence take place amongst peers and, in turn, support dominant norms through which *amaphara* masculinity is produced. These prescribe the performance of masculinity based on the subordination of women and girls, sexual entitlement and the threat of and use of violence; and this occurs within a broader context of materiality, masculinity and cultural norms that sanction male power. Boys use sexual harassment in the school site, as described above, to establish and jockey for power amongst and in the presence of their male peers, promoting compulsory sexuality involving oppressive conditions for girls (Renold, 2005). The perpetration and threat of violence produces limited agency for young girls and, combined with fear, their everyday lives are regulated by constant vigilance around their vulnerability. They do have an acute sense of their positioning within gender relations; however, as Jewkes and Morrell (2012) illustrate, their agency in such contexts is limited. The overall climate and the production of *amaphara* masculinity must be read against men's own social and cultural contexts, which are shaped by the entanglement of structural inequalities, poverty, history and cultural norms validating male power (Gottzén et al., 2021 Hunter, 2021).

5. Teachers on stick fights, culture and violence

Research on Zulu masculinities and male violence in South Africa elucidate how the socialisation of young boys is encouraged through practices such as stick fights (Carton and Morrell, 2012). Although stick fighting is practised as a form of sport that traditionally prepared young men for war and self-defence, it also propagates masculine identities that prize aggression and conquest (Carton and Morrell, 2012). In the case of Imfume, stick fighting was found to be common amongst learners as teachers shared their perspectives of violence at school:

Nompilo (female): One parent once said when he was called in by the school because his son was involved in fight: "It's better because boys only used their hands, no weapons were used," and he went on to say, "It is normal for boys now and then to be involved in fights." He went on to say even him when he grew up, boys used to be involved in stick fights and it was not a serious issue.

Sabelo (male): I also grew up in a rural area, where there was stick fights amongst boys. In fact, adults would stand and watch stick fights and they would not regard as violence. Even now when boys hit each other and we call in parents some of them don't take the matter seriously and interpret this as violence.

From the above excerpt, stick fighting is portrayed as a harmless practice for the purpose of enjoyment, and normalised. For centuries, the practice of stick fights has been a famous custom of "peer-based male socialisation" in South Africa (Carton and Morrell, 2012: 31). While the notion of stick fighting may appear violent from Western perspectives, it has particular cultural significance amongst the Zulu. The customary significance of stick fighting pleased Zulu kings and can be traced back to the period of King Shaka's reign as founder of the Zulu nation (Coetzee, 2000). Stick fighting is an opportunity for young men to become courageous and earn respect in the community. According to Carton and Morrell, boys did not reach manhood through cultural rites such as circumcision, which is a compulsory ritual amongst the Xhosa, for example; rather, "they crossed another ceremonial threshold over a longer period of time through stick fighting" (2012: 40). In this way, stick fighting as a customary practice normalised masculinity. However, the practice is not without problems given that it has been perceived as violence and the reproduction of violent masculinity (Laband, 2014; 2017; Wright, 2008). As reinforced by Ratele (2017), black masculinity is understood within sociocultural ideologies that illuminate strength as powerful and where violence is an essential constituent of masculinities. Carton and Morrell (2012) claim that stick fighting symbolises a valuable custom for generations of young Zulu boys, which valorises masculinity. These cultural ideologies are embedded in young boys and drive them to perceive that fighting is normal and an important prerequisite to be considered manly. If boys do not practise such sports, they are not considered worthy of being a man. Fights and stick fights thus operate on a blurred continuum where hegemonic masculinity is achieved through the display of physical strength and violence. Sabelo reinforces this when he says that he grew up in an area where stick fights were common amongst boys.

Family household dynamics, cultural norms and economic status also have effects on how masculinity is played out (Pyke, 2020; von Fintel, 2021):

Zama (female): You see like in my class there is Themba. when Themba speaks, he speaks anyhow with learners and also uses vulgar language. other learners will report him to the teacher. Even when you call him and speak to him and try to stop such behaviour, he seems to not see anything wrong with his behaviour. But when I met his father on one parents' meeting, he displayed a similar behaviour then I understood why his son Themba behaved that way.

Themba, who is associated with an important member of the Imfume community, is a challenge for teachers at APS. His association with powerful members of the community shows how power is engendered through cultural and historical processes that affirm status and privilege. In the classroom, Themba feels entitled to power and respect through verbal abuse. Respect is an important Zulu cultural norm and is premised on hierarchies including status, age and gender (Irvine and Gunner, 2018). As a young boy who carries important status in the community, he identifies with such privilege even at APS. Hence, respect is complicated. Older female teachers' power and status is threatened by a younger male who carries significant cultural status in the community. Morrell et al. (2012a) argue that where both teachers and learners use violence to defend, contest and defend power, one of the factors that complicates an understanding of violence is the ways in which younger boys disrupt age, gender and generational hierarchies by challenging teacher authority and power. Such is the case with Themba. When hegemonic masculinity is challenged, Themba resists the authority of his teacher through verbal "toughness" which is an essential component of hegemonic masculinity at schools and a cultural resource dominated by boys (Eliasson et al., 2007: 587).

Although teachers are acutely aware of the traditional cultural norms that exist in rural communities, they find themselves in a tenuous position because they are both embedded in, and expected to resist and intervene against, the norms that reproduce male entitlement, gender inequalities and violence. It is important to consider the ambivalence experienced in relation to ending practices at school that engender violence, and supporting the cultural norms on which such practices are

predicated. Bhana et al.'s (2009) study found that while gender equality amongst teachers was supported, male isiZulu-speaking teachers still expected respect from female teachers in line with cultural norms that validate Zulu masculinity. Similarly, Sabelo's familiarity with, and the normalisation of, stick fighting that aligns with broader cultural practices produces tensions for intervening in and ending violence.

6. Conclusion

In locating experience of violence in the context of a rural primary school in South Africa, we have shed light on the interplay of masculinity, gender, culture and poverty—pointing to the complex connection between schooling, violence and broader social contexts. An advantage of our approach to understanding masculinity as located in and produced by sociocultural-structural contingencies is that we address the problem of violence within and beyond schooling. In the context of deep poverty and unemployment, the use of drugs and social malaise, customary practices are reworked to defend hegemonic masculinity through the expression of violence. Violent gender relations in schools must, therefore, be understood in the broader sociocultural and economic contexts and expressions of masculinity.

We have sought to explain two interrelated ways through which masculinity is produced. Firstly, we have focused on *amaphara* masculinity as embedded in and weaving through unemployment, poverty, male weakness and drug use that contribute to the formation of a parasitic/crime-ridden masculinity (Hunter, 2021). In the *amaphara's* search for economic resources, the boundaries between them and the school are fluid, connecting the broader rural experience with the experience of violence and crime in schools for both younger boys and girls. We argue further that *amaphara* masculinity is not fixed. It takes different forms in the experience of violence in schools. Boys reinforce gender inequalities and violence at school. Inside schools, boys are younger and may not do drugs but, through dominant expressions of masculinity, they reproduce the same effects, that is, fear and girls' marginalised status within gender relations. Alongside Hunter (2021), we argue that addressing violence and masculinity at rural schools such as APS requires attention to gender ideologies and constructions of masculinity based on cultural norms, as well as to tensions in the political economy and broader context where working-class black men, in particular, remain on the peripheries and in extreme poverty.

Secondly, our analysis has shown how cultures of violence embedded in customary practices, such as stick fights, entwine with poverty, patriarchy and masculinities to reproduce a climate of violence amongst learners at APS and in the broader context of Imfume. We argue that structures embedded in patriarchal discourses are paramount to understanding violent relations at APS and in the community. Although stick fighting was normalised historically to assert masculinity, and not simply as engendering violence, primary school boys use historical notions of stick fighting and male power to produce violent relations. In addressing such violence, interventions by both the school and community might be fruitfully considered. Connell's (1995) conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity has contributed to our understanding that social inequality and power relations are important factors in identifying the contexts that create and sustain formations of masculinity such as *amaphara*. However, universal theorising and conceptualisations of masculinity, as critiqued by Mfecane (2018), are not sufficient in practical terms because they lack localised applicability to South Africa.

In order to address the issue of violence at APS, we recommend a shift in the way theory is developed around, and applied to, rural schooling contexts. Our study offers conceptual implications for researching issues of violence in rural spaces and calls for more African centred theories, as asserted by Mfecane (2018), in order to understand masculinity and gender in their local contexts. This would involve looking "at our subjects in their full and proper context" (Mfecane, 2018: 9). How masculinity shapes and is shaped by local, cultural and social contexts has not been sufficiently addressed in research on violence and masculinity in rural school contexts (Moletsane, 2018). The distinct experiences at APS linked to local context problematise the simplistic uptake of Western explanations of masculinity and violence in school settings, as well as what counts as risk and appropriate interventions. The perspectives from learners and teachers at APS illustrate the multifaceted nature of cultural norms and their intersections with masculinity in understanding the experience of violence at school. In particular, these perspectives underline how valuable local knowledge and practices are in shaping interventions. The dynamic ways through which gender, race, class and culture intersect in the experience of violence are vital to inform local responses to the global issue of violence in schools (Kyegombe et al., 2017; Leach et al., 2012).

A second recommendation follows from our analysis that understandings of violence by social actors in schools (both learners and teachers) reflect larger socioeconomic difficulties, cultural norms and poverty prevalent in the wider community. Therefore, any efforts aimed at addressing violence at school would require support from the broader community including families, households and parents as well as the local chieftaincy (Bhana et al., 2009; Parkes, 2015). The complex nature of violence at APS illuminates the necessity for teachers and schools to create strong associations with the community in order to address violence at school. Teachers like Londeka, supported the importance of parental involvement and suggested that "parents should be involved in their children's education, be aware of what is and what is not acceptable at school". Systematic efforts through leaders of the community must be devised with an understanding of locally embedded attitudes and cultural practices. Faced with external shocks including unemployment, it is important to work with local customary practices, including women and girls' subordinate role, when engaging with local chieftains to promote a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of culture and its relationship with masculinity and violence. Working with chieftains and rural households to actively engage with cultural norms, gender inequalities and violence is critical in addressing the dynamic nature of culture and masculinity. Examining these dynamics, and the wider sociocultural contexts in which they are embedded, is imperative to fully grasp local practices and strategies for managing and changing gender ideologies, cultural norms and social relations. There is an additional need to pay attention to child-headed households. As documented in research from South Africa (Haley and Bradbury, 2015; Richter and Desmond, 2008), child-headed households require specific support and interventions based on care and protection, bringing in the broader community to extend and take responsibility for this cohort of children.

Interventions should also highlight the need for recognising boys' and girls' reflective capacities and critical thinking as well as recognition of their agency (DeJaeghere, 2016). For instance, envisioning a school that abolishes patriarchal/cultural systems that lead to violence requires innovative strategies. In doing so, the establishment of gender-informed programmes for young males could focus on ways to disassemble toxic masculinity, respect of healthy boundaries with peers and ways to earn respect without violence (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). These could include incorporating other practical strategies such as the Good School Toolkit (GST) proposed by Kyegombe et al. (2017). The GST is based on violence prevention strategies in primary schools, which are facilitated by teachers through changing schooling cultures and addressing gendered ideologies and norms in ways that are more flexible in relation to male power and female subordination. This intervention encourages desired behaviour amongst learners through rewards and praise (Kyegombe et al., 2017). Training for teachers on the use of the GST requires support workshops to be implemented by the Department of Basic Education.

As pointed out earlier, the dearth of research in rural areas remains problematic (Pini et al., 2014). Our study not only addresses this gap but also addresses violent masculinities in the nexus of school, culture, poverty, race, class and rurality. Addressing violence in rural school contexts illustrates the importance of acknowledging the connected

relationship between schools and the broader social community—and acknowledging too, that cultural norms and intergenerational customs interrelate with poverty and masculinity to produce violence. Such understandings are pivotal in both understanding and addressing gender violence and masculinities in rural schools.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Deevia Bhana: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing, Formal Analysis. **Raksha Janak**: Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing, Methodology. **Daisy Pillay**: Writing – review & editing. **Labby Ramrathan**: Writing – review & editing.

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