

Disciplining the Boys: Construction of Violent Masculinities in a South African High School

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Abstract

This article sets out to determine how the processes of school discipline and the meanings and practices found within the school's gender regime contribute to help form school boys' masculinities in a co-educational secondary school in Durban, South Africa. A qualitative research design was used to engage intersubjectively and dialogically with the boys in ways that generated insights that were central to the configurations of masculinities in relation to school discipline. The two main research instruments used to generate data were classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. Accordingly, the data generated took the form of field notes and verbal evidence. This study utilised inductive analysis to analyse and synthesise data. Ten boys and seven teachers were purposefully selected to be the main research participants in this study. Three interviews were conducted with each of the main participants. However other boys and teachers were also interviewed, particularly boys that were involved in violent incidents or confrontations; these interviews were informal and unstructured. The results indicate that rigid disciplinary measures and harsh strategies of control create a school climate that normalises and thereby legitimises enactments of violent masculinities. These violent masculinities serve to break down school order which is an opposing objective of the school's discipline policies and practices. The school discipline practices in this particular school seem to be at a crossroad, resulting in outcomes contradictory to what were expected. The handling of discipline was at the core of a school gender regime that bolstered and perpetuated a particular brand of masculinity in its assertive, intolerant, blustering and violent form. This study recommends that schools should develop new caring discourses and practices which counter the hegemony of violent discourses.

Keywords: control, discipline, high school, masculinity, South Africa, violence

Introduction

Concern has been expressed in South Africa and elsewhere about the broad problem of violence; in particular, violence in schools has lately become a focal point of policy and media attention. Schools have no immunity from problems associated with discipline and violence. In South Africa one discipline policy instituted in an attempt to improve the behavioural climate in schools is set out in the Department of Education's 'Alternatives to Corporal Punishment' (1996). At Sunville Secondary School (research site) there has been resistance to this policy, resulting in teachers increasingly adopting an authoritarian approach to handling discipline – engaging learners in power struggles that serve only to escalate the violence (Khoja-Moolji 2012). This violence is often bound up with particular constructions of masculinity, and subscription to violent configurations of masculinity in school settings has become a crisis situation for education in general.

This study examines the connectedness between punitive discipline measures and configurations of violent masculinity at school level. Drawing from its findings, the study also makes recommendations for intervention that can reduce violence in schools, highlighting critical decisions that need to be made regarding school discipline, especially in relation to violent school masculinities.

Generally, literature that interrogates complex phenomenon such as school violence tends to focus on context variables such as the individual, the family, media or community risk. Some researchers have focused, for example, on individual characteristics that were found to increase violent behaviour in schools. These include aggressive reaction patterns, physical strength, weak self-control, impulsiveness, and irritability (Bjorkqvist 1994; Agnew 2005; Henry 2009). Other studies have shown that factors such as family conditions, neighbourhood and community, poverty, racial composition and residential stability may reinforce aggression and violence among school-going youth (Barker 2005; Kreager 2008; Harding 2009).

Studies that have attempted to understand violence among school boys by focusing on the construction of masculinities include (Oransky &

Marecek 2009; Langa 2010; Morojele 2010; Clare 2012; Mncube & Harber 2012). However, only a few have considered how school discipline and control measures may relate to the construction of masculinity and violence; these include Morrell (2001), Hamlall and Morrell (2009) and Khoja-Moolji (2012). This article picks up on the third of these by focusing on aggressive disciplinary measures and masculinities, analysing how these measures are contributing factors in school violence.

Violence and disruptive behaviour in South African schools has escalated to a level of severity that has become difficult to manage. There has also been a growing concern to understand the root cause of violence in schools and to find constructive ways to reduce it, and if possible prevent it entirely (Morrell 2002; Aitken & Seedat 2007; Johnson *et al.* 2011). There are a number of troubling issues in education that relate to boys, men and their place in gender relations. Discipline problems and violence in schools most often concern boys, for it is boys who are mainly associated with them and enact them (Martino 1999; Lindeggar & Maxwell 2007; Hamlall & Morrell 2012). While no study will ever have a simple way of measuring the relative influence of different institutions, there seems to be a good case for considering schools as one of the major sites of masculinity formation. To understand this we must explore the structures and practices by which the school influences the construction of masculinities among its pupils (Connell 2000). After all, gender is embedded in the institutional arrangements through which a school system functions.

There is extensive literature on school violence that seeks to ‘explain’ the connection between masculinity and violence (Connell 1989; 1996; 2000; Morrell 1998; 2001; Skelton 2001; Gibson & Lindegaard 2007). While contexts where violence in school is studied vary, masculinity is connected with all of them and understanding these connections is necessary and important in the context of school discipline. In many cases when schools are faced with disruptive and aggressive behaviour, a standard response has been punishment, suspensions, sanctions, and numerous other punitive measures to get learners to conform to school rules and regulations. Granted, disciplinary procedures and attention to school security are important in maintaining order and ensuring school safety, but harsh and punitive disciplinary strategies do not always serve to reduce or discourage aggressive and disruptive behaviour among and between learners (Khoja-Moolji 2012). It is against this background that my study sought to address the following research question:

What is the relationship between heavy-handed approaches to discipline, constructions of masculinity, and heightened violence and aggression in the behaviour of boys?

The present paper is based on a three-year ethnographic study conducted in Sunville Secondary School which is situated in Chatsworth, a suburb of Durban, and is presented here as part of this broader project which examined how conflict and violence feature in the construction of masculinities.

Schooling the Boys: Violence and Masculinities

Connell (1989) argues that schools have unwittingly become masculinity-making devices. This is because ‘gender is embedded in the institutional arrangements by which a school functions’ (Connell 1996: 213). This manifests itself in each individual school’s particular hierarchy, rules, and criteria of evaluation and judgement, and many of the parameters are set by a formal regime which has a whole life and meaning all of its own. It includes not only relations and interactions between pupils, but also the informal relations between pupils and teachers. It is in this context that schools can actively promote violence (e.g. through inflicting corporal punishment), even though they are supposed to be peaceful, stable and supportive environments (Harber 2002; Maphosa & Shumba 2010).

The literature which examines the intricacies of the methods boys use to construct their gender identities (Mac an Ghail 1994; Sewell 1997; Martino 1999; Skelton 2001; Reay 2002; Smith 2007; Watson 2007) also points out that the relationship between teachers and pupils can be seen as an area of strategic importance in the production of masculinities. Other writers – Connell (1989) and Walker (1998) – argue that a violent discipline system invites competition in ‘machismo’ among boys, and sometimes between boys and male teachers. More recent work has suggested that rigid educational systems, particularly systems that focus more on maintaining order than on engaging students in meaningful ways, reinforce behaviour that chafes at authority (Barker 2005; Hamlall & Morrell 2009; Khoja-Moolji 2012). All these studies point to the link between a rigid system of discipline and violent male competition and aggression.

Boys’ investments in and subscription to aggressive, violent, compe-

titive, masculinities are often associated with them challenging authority and disputing policies of control (Skelton 2001; Walker 1998; Gibson & Lindegaard 2007). The enactment of this particular type of masculinity has become a crossroads issue for education seeking to promote peaceful, democratic and respectful learning environments.

Theoretical Framework

As a means of explaining/exploring configurations of masculinity that are constructed in a school setting in the maintenance of discipline, this study adopts a social practice approach, particularly that offered by Connell (1989; 1995; 1996; 2000). Connell maintains that although there are many different modes of masculinity it is nonetheless possible to identify certain configurations of masculinity on the basis of general social, cultural and institutional patterns of power and meaning, and to discern how they are constructed in relation to each other. Following Connell, these masculinities are identified as hegemonic, complicit, subordinate and marginal, although it would be naïve to assume that boys' behaviour will fit neatly into these conceptualisations.

In any institution such as a school there will be a hierarchy of masculinities, and generally one form of masculinity gains ascendancy over the others and becomes dominant (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman 2002). As Connell puts it (1995), the hegemonic form becomes 'culturally exalted' or 'idealised'. Hegemonic masculinity makes its claims and asserts its authority through a variety of cultural and institutional practices, and although it does not necessarily involve physical violence, it is often underwritten by the threat of such violence (Kenway & Fitzclarence 1997; Stoudt 2006). Hegemonic definitions of masculinity create boundaries, furthermore, which serve to delineate what appropriate maleness should be within the social arena.

These theoretical explanations offer a useful way of understanding the manner in which boy's behaviour is shaped by their constructions of masculine identity. From a social constructionist perspective, men and boys are active agents in constructing and re-constructing dominant norms of masculinity. This concept of agency, the role boys play in exerting power and producing effects in their behaviour, is central to this study.

Method

A qualitative research design was used to engage intersubjectively and dialogically with the boys in ways that generated insights that were central to the configurations of masculinities in relation to school discipline. The two main research instruments used to produce data for this study were classroom observation and face-to-face interviews. The data generated took the form of field notes and verbal evidence.

I observed classroom and school practices of keeping discipline, interactions between teachers and learners, and the nature of, and manner in which, school policies were implemented, especially to control learner behaviour. Much of this involved observation in an ethnographic format. To obtain insights into how the school's policies and practices influenced the gender regime, especially violent practices on the part of boys, I interviewed teachers and learners (boys) using semi-structured and informal interviews. The interviews and in-depth observations were conducted between 2006 and 2008.

I identified 10 boys who became the main research participants in this study. All the boys were in Grade 10, aged between 15 and 17 years. Four were African¹, four were Indian and two were coloured. All the boys came from a working-class background and lived in and around Chatsworth. These boys were identified, from classroom observations of conflict situations with teachers and learners in the classroom and the playground, as frequently found to be involved in violence and to be breaching school rules. Such identification was confirmed by referring to the disciplinary records of the school. I conducted three semi-structured interviews with each of the boys in the study. Each of these interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes. Informal and unstructured interviews were also conducted with other boys, particularly boys who had been involved in violent incidents or confrontations.

In the selection of teachers as study participants, I used purposive sampling. The criteria used were experience and seniority. I interviewed

¹ I use the racial classification created by colonialism and apartheid but still in use in post-apartheid legislation as a means of effecting redress of injustice and inequality. The categories, which remain controversial and contested but still have social reality, are: white, Indian, coloured (people of mixed descent or birth) and (black) African.

seven teachers: four female and three male. Other teachers who had been involved in confrontations with boys were also interviewed informally. I conducted interviews with teachers in order to examine their agency in shaping the school's gender regime and their role in shaping the construction of masculinities among boys.

This study utilised inductive analysis in which 'patterns, themes and categories emerge from the data rather than being developed prior to collection' (Marlow 1993: 324). In my analysis of observations and interviews, I focused on recurring regularities in the data which represented patterns of meaning in describing and understanding constructions of masculinity.

In what follows I describe the rigid school practices and structures that were used to maintain discipline among the boys. These practices contributed to a gender regime which mobilised around a hegemonic form of masculinity associated or implicated with violence.

School Disciplinary Practices in the Construction of Masculinity

Sunville had many mechanisms in place to control behaviour and maintain discipline. The school is enclosed by a solid wall and is patrolled by two guards armed with whips. There are surveillance cameras monitoring the 'hot spots' and learners are constantly being hauled to the office by the guards for infringing school rules or entering 'no-go' areas. Sanctions, suspensions and expulsions are common. Sometimes the police were called in when more serious incidents occurred (e.g. stabbings, drug peddling and extortion of money), which either the teachers or the security guards (or both) believed they were unable to deal with effectively, and boys were sometimes arrested. The guards have also been known to handcuff boys when taking them to the office. They run their whips along the rails to intimidate learners and force them to comply.

These control mechanisms are examples of direct violence that draws on the culture of hegemonic masculinity at Sunville. Through these control mechanisms the school normalises violence that is embedded in regulations and policies. This type of culture and climate promote education for control rather than education for critical consciousness. Morrell (2001) argues that this zero tolerance approach fosters discourses of violence that promote violence to the extent that they prevent other discourses from emerging, or at

least force them into the margins where their ability to offer people a different language or behaviour is limited. Research into authoritarian, harsh disciplinary systems and the construction of masculinity – for example Swain (2005) and Khoja-Moolji (2012) – contends that stringent disciplinary structures at school reflect an association of masculinity with violence.

At Sunville the zero tolerance approach to handling discipline was highlighted in the morning assemblies where learners were constantly cautioned about the consequences of infringing school rules. The principal often spelled out disciplinary action that would be taken if certain school rules were infringed. In one of the assemblies the principal made an announcement that the guards would now carry a ‘sjambok’ (whip). Boys who jumped over the school fences to enter the school and who were not in full school uniform would run the risk of being ‘sjambokked’ (whipped) by the guards. Many boys subsequently did jump over the school fences, were caught, and suffered the consequence of being whipped by the guards. The boys often retaliated, resulting in violent confrontations.

It was apparent that the school’s heavy official emphasis on conformity and respect for authority did not always have the desired effect. In response to threats of draconian action, many boys made comments in the interviews such as ‘They must first catch us’ and ‘I will show them what I can do’. Many boys saw the school’s threats as a challenge to which they responded with anti-authority actions which in turn reinforced their attitude of toughness and elevated their status among other learners in the school.

A considerable number of boys took the discipline system as a challenge and made a heavy investment in ideas of toughness and confrontation. The reaction of the boys to the principal’s threats and to actions of teachers and security guards in the maintenance of discipline, as indicated above, reflects Connell’s (2000) contention that a heavy-handed approach to discipline serves to stimulate the display of exemplary, hegemonic masculinity and in many cases promotes recourse to violence.

The harsh and punitive discipline strategies disciplinary structures at Sunville legitimise a particular kind of masculine subjectivity, in the end simply creating a school climate that approves violent configurations of masculinity rather than seeking to foster positive pro-social behaviour, and in this sense placing these masculine configurations ‘at a crossroads’. The performance and preservation of this masculinity often (but not in all cases) involves boys engaging in anti-authoritative behaviour which promotes

recourse to violence (Harber 2002; Maphosa & Shumba 2010). The current school practice in handling discipline does not appear to be effective. Sunville's educational discipline policies and practices thus raise issues about effective behavioural strategies in that they promote violent masculinities which compromise the maintenance of school order.

While many of the teachers subscribed to the view that in order to maintain discipline and control of the boys it was necessary to use physical force and aggression there were also teachers, male and female, who did not subscribe to the methods of control that I describe below. There were teachers who did promote peaceful and non-violent behaviour among learners and who themselves acted in non-violent ways as an example to learners. Further, not all boys reacted to teacher aggression in a similar fashion or subscribed to the particular versions of hegemonic masculinity at Sunville.

I found that the hard line approach to disciplining learners was especially overt when I observed teachers and learners during the breaks. When boys got into a fight or scuffle, the fight usually stopped when a teacher intervened. Female teachers never intervened when boys were fighting, while the male teachers that intervened always used physical aggression when separating or stopping a fight. They often slapped and pushed the culprits around. These flawed teacher-pupil interactions have been noted as frequently contributing factors in provoking violence in schools (Mills 2001).

I interviewed a male teacher ('Mr Roy'²) immediately after he had intervened to stop a fight on the school grounds. His response was, 'This is the only language they understand – in these situations you have to clobber one or two'. He said this with great pride and his body language and facial expression showed satisfaction that he had handled the problem adequately and 'sorted out these fighters'.

Teacher-learner relations of the kind described above produce a masculinising practice that endorses violence. Morrell's (2002) suggests that when men see violence as a choice which demonstrates their masculinity this leads boys to regard violence as a key area in masculinity making. It is in these interactions with teachers that boys get the information that tells them how they are supposed to be and act as a boys and future men. This was confirmed by many boys at Sunville who admired teachers who were hard and aggressive in handling difficult situations. Boys commented in interviews

² Fictitious names are used in all cases for persons at the school.

that 'Mr Desmond' was a tough 'ou' (man, guy) and that they must not mess with him. Boys also said that they 'smaaked' (liked, admired) 'Mr Chats', a male teacher who was physically well-built and often used physical force to get boys to conform or to deal with volatile situations among boys. The teachers who adopted aggressive, intimidatory management strategies did not, however, seem to be aware that they were helping to create a particular type of masculine ideal that encouraged violence, aggression and force. Many of the teachers would in fact often celebrate the use of intimidation and aggression in handling discipline problems with boys. Where counselling and pastoral care of learners is limited issues of discipline are likely to be handled insensitively or mechanistically, and Devine (1996) suggests that distancing of teachers from pastoral care in the discipline process is a factor that creates and fosters a culture of violence in school.

Male teachers at Sunville (though not all) often used violence to stop violence among the boys. Violence was regularised under the guise of intervention. Male teachers in particular seldom used non-violent means to deal with schoolboy fights, thereby entrenching the cultural context where violence was regarded as the most appropriate means to end conflict in the school. The consequence was that boys emulated this mentality and readily resorted to force and aggression among themselves.

An example from my field notes records an instance of boys emulating a male teacher's aggressive response to a boy who was experiencing difficulty handling a machine in a welding workshop.

Teacher: 'You must put on an apron and go and work in the kitchen. We do not want sissies in this workshop'. The teacher aggressively shoved the boy away. The other boys joined in the pushing and shoving and sang in chorus, 'kitchen boy, kitchen boy'. The teacher made no attempt to stop them.

According to Humphrey (2008), when boys are consistently exposed to the presence of violence in their interactions with teachers and peers, violence becomes an element of the boy's transition to adulthood. As was the case in Humphreys's study, many of the boys at Sunville wanted to be seen as men and regarded violence as a legitimate means of achieving this aspiration. Different cultures, different societies and different communities have different mandates of what it is to be a man, but common to all of them is a

cultural mandate to prove yourself, and define what kind of man you are, and to do so in a public way. At Sunville this imposed specific obligations in relation to defence of one's identity and dignity. Teachers' handling of discipline played a significant role in charting the ways recognition of manhood was earned in the context of the school.

It is important to understand that in the enactment of a particular masculinity, while individuals do the acting, they do so within institutional settings and thus their actions cannot be understood in purely voluntarist terms, or (in other words) out of context. The setting of this study was a high school in which tough, aggressive forms of masculinity were celebrated by teachers and learners alike, and the school was an agent in shaping the way boys handled conflict and violence *vis à vis* shaping masculinities. A major problem in many schools is that the schools not only neglect to educate learners about masculinity in a way that would curb violent interpretations of it, but all too often actively encourage such violent interpretations (Mncube & Harber 2012).

However it is important to recognise that violence in schools is far more complex than simply what male teachers do to 'innocent' boys. A host of variables, such as individual, family, media and community risk contexts, aggressive reaction patterns, physical strength, weak self-control, impulsiveness, irritability family conditions, neighbourhood and community, poverty, racial composition and residential stability, have potential to reinforce aggression and violence among school-going youth (Agnew 2005; Barker 2005; Kreager 2008).

In the school context of this study I was not able to map particular kinds of disciplinary measures with particular types of violence, but it is important to note that variables such as ridicule, embarrassment and criticism by teachers, insensitivity, rigid monitoring, sanctions, suspensions, expulsions and physical force and aggression in trying to control and discipline boys certainly influenced the way in which boys handled conflict within the school arena. These harsh measures were more likely to steer boys' handling of conflict towards violent resolutions and they implied masculinities aligned with negative values of confrontation, hostility and belligerence instead of positive values of non-violence, democracy and peace. Within the cultural milieu of this school a good case can be made that the harsh disciplinary measures played a major role in shaping this violent mentality.

Conclusion

This study centred on the way in which the Sunville school gender regime, in relation particularly to order and discipline, influenced boys' behaviour in the construction of their masculinity. Its findings indicate that frequent use of aggressive discipline measures by teachers, combined with the boys' own investment in this culture of violence, produced a climate of hostility at the school. Attributes such as hardness, readiness to confront antagonists and fighting prowess were key elements in the construction of hegemonic masculinity, and use of force and aggression to settle disputes was a key feature of the boys' micro-culture. This was often built around the masculinities of some of the school's teachers who had investment in using violence to generate respect and maintain control.

In a climate where teachers were not automatically accorded respect by virtue of their position, physical force was often used to command respect and confirm authority. For the boys, use of violence was a way to assert their masculine identities in a complex and hostile school environment. Rigid disciplinary measures often led to frustration on the part of the boys leading them to challenge school authority and dispute policies of control, often in violent ways.

At Sunville, masculine investments in violence on the part of both teachers' and pupils lent high status to 'tough' forms of masculinity and contributed to a broad school culture of hostility. There being a number of causal factors for violence in schools, this paper argues that the school context (in this case, of rigid rules and policies combined with displays of teacher aggression against learners in imposing discipline) has a major influence on the prevalence of violent masculinities.

The key issue emerging from this study is that the teachers' disciplinary approach suggested to learners that it was legitimate for them to aspire to 'hard man masculinity', which led in turn to violent confrontations between learners, and in some instances even between learners and their teachers. The dilemma here is that stringent, hard line approaches to maintaining discipline accelerate anti-school behaviour, and this raises serious doubt about the wisdom of approaches to school discipline that are likely to increase and fuel violent mentalities and behaviour, especially among boys, rather than a creating a more positive and peaceful climate. These violent conceptions of masculinity set at naught any violence

prevention programmes seeking to promote peaceful learning environments. This presents us with a crossroads issue for education in general. In an era of educational accountability there is a strong argument for questioning the efficacy and the effect of this school's discipline regime.

Intervention programmes to address school violence need to begin with identification of the school's dominant masculinity and of other masculinities operative at the school. Appropriate strategies can then be developed to tackle violent behaviour by offering boys alternative non-violent versions of masculinity. Programmes need to be offered with activities that help teachers to perceive the effects that aggressive discipline strategies have on shaping violent masculine identity. On this point, Mills (2001) recommends that teachers adopt a respectful approach towards boys rather than the arrogant, severe demeanour which they are commonly associated with. Male teachers in particular should abstain from aggressive displays of dominant masculinity in their handling of discipline problems. It is important that school violent intervention programmes be developed in which learners and teachers confront the linkage between violence and dominant forms of masculinity. My intention in this study has been to build on and add to existing understanding that schools in their discipline policies and practices are in danger of endorsing and legitimising the cultural violence of hegemonic masculinity. Although a dominant form of masculinity exercises immense power, it remains a social construct and is therefore subject to interrogation and change. Schools need to implement a progressive education policy to convert a human rights discourse into emancipated reality. In other words we need to develop new caring discourses and practices which counter the hegemony of violent discourses.

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