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Gendered Spaces: Students' Experiences of the Social School Spaces in High Schools in Hhohho Region, Eswatini

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ABSTRACT

This article makes a social constructionist exploration of student experiences of gendered social school spaces in high schools in the Hhohho region, Eswatini. The study utilsed a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology. Individual and focus group semi structured interviews were used to generate data. The participants were 24 purposively selected students (12 boys and 12 girls) from four high schools in Hhohho region. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 18 years of age. Boys and girls experienced the school's social spaces differently. The social school environments had an impact on the students' academic performance. The teachers' poor treatment of the students, according to the students' complaints, caused them to despise school. They griped about the numerous strict regulations that teachers upheld. The students proposed that teachers should relax their strict restrictions and give the students more autonomy so that the social school spaces would be more responsive, particularly in terms of relationships with teachers. According to the social constructionism theory that guides this study, societal and interpersonal influences shape how people live their lives (Gergen, 1985). The relationships students establish with teachers are what make their lives meaningful.

Keywords: Social Constructionism, Bullying, Masculinity and Femininity

INTRODUCTION

The article examines four urban high school students' narratives of gendered spaces against the backdrop of significant gender disparities in Eswatini's high schools. Alzeer (2016, p. 5) claims that spaces are gendered when they are "made for and associated with one certain gender." Savard (2016, p. 10) defined gendered spaces as settings where "clearly masculine and female behaviours occur." Instead of judging men/boys and women/girls by their inherent nature, a gendered space judges men/boys and women/girls based on their conduct. According to Savard, gendered places decide whether actions taken there are regarded masculine or feminine based on the socially acceptable behaviour for men, boys, and women, respectively. According to Massey (2005), gendered spaces represent a complex and nuanced relationship between place and gender. This article examines four high schools in Eswatini's Hhohho region against the backdrop of the patriarchal society of the Eswatini people to offer a sociological view into what it means to be a girl or boy. It looks at how gendered spaces affect boys and girls as they move through educational settings. By highlighting both girls and boys as a social group that is specifically touched by the intricate and persistent dimensions of gender myths and stereotypes as they occupy the gendered spaces, the purpose is to contribute to ongoing gender discussions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In social constructionism, gender is "created and re-constructed out of human interactions, out of social life, and it is the texture and order of that social life," according to Lorber (1994, p. 54). According to human genitalia (Lorber, 1994), feminine and masculine identities are based on cultural ideologies and represent socially constructed views of what it means to be a girl or a boy in a specific culture and context, respectively (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). However, feminine identities are based on cultural ideologies and reflect socially constructed views of what it means to be a girl in a particular culture and setting (West & Zimmerman, 2009). In addition to social context, structural contexts for gender constructions, performances, and experiences are provided by children's gendered experiences (Chowdhury, 2017). Due to its tendency to promote masculinities while subserviently placing girls, social constructionism offers analytical insights into the intricate processes of gendered spaces and gendered experiences of children (Pitikoe & Morojele, 2017). As a result, this study focused on the students' gendered experiences of the social school spaces in high schools.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A narrative inquiry design was used in this study. The researcher employed narrative inquiry to gather participants' accounts (narratives) about their experiences with phenomena (Cowger and Tritz, 2019). Due to the contextual variables affecting space and the gendered experiences of students in these four high schools, narratives proved useful in this study for capturing the subjective voices of the participants. It was also employed to discuss the significance of the participants' own life experiences (Cresswell, 2016).

GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This research was conducted in four high schools in Eswatini's Hhohho region. With the exception of the east, where it borders Mozambique, Eswatini, officially the Kingdom of Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland) and also known as kaNgwane, is an independent country that borders South Africa and Mozambique. The people of Eswatini share a common language and uphold a traditional, static way of life based on patriarchy and Christianity (Fielding-Miller et al. 2016). The country is divided into four geographically separate regions: Manzini, Hhohho, Shiselweni, and Lubombo. The study was conducted in the Hhohho area, which is home to Mbabane as its capital. The study selected coeducational schools situated in and around Mbabane, the capital city.

STUDY METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

A qualitative narrative approach served as the foundation for the study's methodological framework. Aspers (2019) states that, in qualitative research, a small distinct group of participants is generally examined to gain an in-depth understanding of the topic, hence a research sample of 24 participants was sufficient. 24 students from four high schools in Form 5 (12 boys and 12 girls), all of whom were between the ages of 16 and 18, participated in the study. Face-to-face individual interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data. Focus groups helped with "data triangulation" by enabling the researcher to confirm the remarks made by students in one-on-one interviews (Winslow, Honein and Elzubeir 2002, p. 566). The researcher encouraged the participants to speak freely, naturally, and openly. As a result, questions were asked, and answers were given in response to the

remarks made. Each participant was given the chance to respond to the topics and issues raised while taking into account group dynamics. On average, at each research site, the researcher spoke with one participant. Neuman (2014) affirms that conducting individual interviews with participants enable them to express their thoughts and open up to thorough study, particularly when it comes to personal accounts of their feelings and experiences. The researcher recorded the conversations on tape and taking brief notes as the data was being generated. Participants communicated in both SiSwati and English.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

In this study, thematic analysis was employed. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a systematic process used to classify, analyze, and summarize data in a thorough manner with little organization. Semi-structured focus group interviews and individual interviews were the main instruments used in the researcher's active participation in data gathering. The researcher listened to the audio recordings again and studied the texts in order to classify and categorise the concerns and ideas that were emerging. He repeatedly listened to the voice recordings as he typed out the interviews. The researcher's ability to comprehend the data and make sense of the meanings and patterns that surfaced was assisted by this interaction with the data. From written categories, themes emerged, organize, and link to the study.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations were observed in order to respect the participants' rights (Creswell 2014). The Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini was approached for permission through the Education Director's office. A written consent from the school principals was also secured via a written letter describing the study's goal. Following that, parents and participants received letters of consent outlining the issues of confidentiality, privacy, and voluntary involvement. The participants had a choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research without any penalties for such an action. For the sake of anonymity, pseudonyms have been employed to represent both the schools and the participants in this study. The ethical clearance was granted for this study by the university's ethical clearance committee.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The social school space has a significant impact on how children experience gender and geography. The social school environment, according to FAWE (2018), is comprised of all interactions between students and teachers, students and other students, boys and girls, boys and boys, girls and girls, and school administration and teachers. The students talked about their interactions with the teachers, as well as boy-boy and boy-girl relationships, and how these may be made more gender-responsive.

Lily (focus group) from site A mentioned:

> *Teachers should stop the habit of constantly making up their own rules. They have to stop this dressing down or putting students down and giving out punishments when they are having bad days. The principal should allow us students to write in a suggestion box about how we feel about teachers. It disturbs our learning.*

Celiwe (individual interview) at site C corroborated:

> *Our teachers should be friendly to us as this will help us to work peacefully with them and make us pass. This obsession with power annoys. School ends up boring. Good relations between teacher and learner*

are important. There are too many rules enforced by teachers. They should reduce them, for example, what effect does my hair style have on my academic performance? Few rules and allow us to make some independent decisions.

Musa (focus group) from site D commented:

Rules in our school especially by teachers are too much and of course strict. We have no freedom; we will end rebelling. Teachers should be worried about drug abuse and gender violence not getting worried about our hair styles. School sucks. Teachers should reduce the rules and regulations and focus on bigger problems that the school is going through.

An almost similar response came from Bruce (focus group) from site B:

School is painful thing for me. Yes, school is fun at times, but most of the time it is these group of teachers pushing us around because they have so much unrestrained power. Abasebentise emandla abo kancane (translated as let them use their power sparingly).

From submissions made, both boys and girls spoke out against what they considered minor and irrelevant regulations and rules by teachers meant to control and constrain their behaviour. In this light, school was seen as an unwanted imposition of authority and control that had little to do with fostering effective teaching and learning circumstances. The learners appealed for the removal of the many unnecessary rules and regulations for them to enjoy school. The findings are supported by Alnasseri (2014) in her study of student –teacher relationship in Oman, that removal of unnecessary rules by teachers and presence of trust, support and respect in the school environment improves children's learning. Learners feel free to ask questions and disclose what they did not understand without fear if their relationship with teachers is uniquely warm. According to social constructionism, reality is socially defined, but this reality relates to the subjective experience of daily life and how the world is interpreted rather than the objective fact of the natural world (Schwandt, 2003). As such, the reality of these learners relates to their subjective experience of daily life within the school spaces.

Regarding relationships amongst learners themselves, learners made several submissions.

Boys' social relations and masculinities

The study revealed that boys have to act violently as a way of asserting their masculinity within the school spaces. Boys are depressed because of the bullying that they have to endure most of the times from other boys. The boys feel neglected with no support coming from guidance and counselling department in schools as they feel it only caters for girls. Boys end up acting violently and angrily towards others as a way of dealing with the bullying. This study also revealed that boys within the school spaces provoke each other as a way of testing each other's strength. Those who show signs of weakness are the ones who continue to be abused more. The study found that, the boys abused by other boys' requests the intervention of the school administration to intervene with strict policies to curb the occurrence of these activities. These findings are reflected in the responses given by the participants.

Ayden (focus group) from site A highlighted:

Being a boy means you have to act macho, otherwise you will always get this junk treatment or crap

> *treatment from other boys. Boys do not have ways of dealing with problems because we have nowhere to let out our emotions. We have no one to share our issues with. I go through depression and the only way to deal with it is for me to get angry and often offend other people and become mean to them. Guidance and counselling pays more attention to girls. That should change and focus on boys as well.*

Ayden's response is important in that he associates acting macho with gender-based harassment, and inability to deal with his emotions. He highlighted that there is need to get emotional support, the lack of which is linked to depression. The need for guidance and counselling to focus also more on boys is noted, so that they benefit from it to deal with their problems (Chambers, Tincknell, and Van Loon, 2004; Heyden, 2011; Lai-Yeung, 2014).

Another participant also indicated how boys do surveillance of peers' masculinity, centering on the body, physical strength and the weight of the body. Bullying, happens among the boys. The bullying took place without any provocation. This could be regarded as an attention seeking behaviour and also a claim to occupation of space.

Banele (individual interview) at site B mentioned:

> *Boys have to deal with an issue of the strength they have. As boys, we can just start pushing one another without any justifiable reason and if you indicate that you are injured, upset or hurt by what have been done to you, we will continue doing until you fight back. If you show that you weak, you will be called abusive names. This is stressful and I would like the administrators to put strict policies to stop this abuse that we boys put on each other. We want school to be interesting but the stress of the verbal and physical abuse is too much.*

Another boy mentions the increased pressure exerted on boys to have sex with girls. Lwazi (focus group) at site D commented:

> *It's an interesting thing to have girls at school. You can easily get chicks at school if you are a handsome dude. However, there is pressure that you do more with a chick. For example, kissing alone is seen as not doing enough so you are expected to go beyond it. Some immature guys bow down to this pressure and regret later because of the consequences. This is all because as boys we do not get proper advice while in school. We need more than the guidance and counselling sessions in schools.*

The emphasis here is the expectations of normalising certain behaviours that are constructed into the expectations of boys' behaviour within the school spaces and the peer group's role in the social masculinity practices (Martino and Kehler, 2005). The emphasis also is on proving oneself through displaying masculinity and ability to attract girls if you are handsome, which appear to be requirements for displaying masculinity successfully. Failure to succeed in these, results in risking being subjected to homophobic harassment. Having an atmosphere with drug use may result in violence and failure on part of the users and those affected. This shows that human lives are made through how people interact with one another. The Eswatini Education Sector Policy (2018)

makes it plain that the school spaces should be free from drugs and alcohol as a way of promoting gender-responsive school spaces. Reality is defined by individuals and groups according to social constructionism (Steedman, 2000). As such, the narratives of the learners is their lived realties.

Girls' social relations and femininities

The study revealed that the girls' bodies, their sexuality, and their appearance, were of major concern to their lives. Slim bodies and being pretty conferred a femininity status and carried a social currency. The monitoring of sexual identity and femininities played a vital role in girls' peer group relations and impacted on the quality of their school lives. Martino and Kehler (2005) aver that the body and appearance are a major concern in the lives of girls. Hence, if they are body shamed and called names, this would negatively impact their schooling lives and make the school spaces an unwelcome environment for them to achieve their highest possible potential. Thus, some girls had comments to make.

Ndumo (focus group) at site D asserted:

> *Some girls want to live up to the standards of boys and ending being fake. They do things to get approved by boys. This makes girls subordinate to boys. Girls need to be empowered through all possible ways so that they live for themselves and stop to be intimidated by boys Girls clubs should be made strong in schools. Girls lose their personality since they are cornered to get boys approval. They get rewarded for conforming to being female and being sexually desirable for boys.*

The point that Ndumo makes is important regarding boys' power to intimidate. Boys use their power in intimidating girls and policing girls' sexuality and femininities. Schools need to upgrade their girl empowerment programs to ensure that girls stand up for themselves. Jones, Moss and Tomlinson (2014) noted that, instead of defining girls according to their potentialities, doing so according to sexuality is a sure way of subordinating them to boys.

Gabi (focus group) at site C mentioned:

> *Boys think that they are superior to girls and think they can dictate as to what girls should look like, do and what not to do. If you do not fit in their image, then they start calling you names. This disturbs our social lives and have an impact on our school lives. Schools should be looking into these issues seriously.*

From the narrative, it seems boys have a tendency of surveillance on girls. Body image is connected to the wider issues of how to gain social acceptance for girls by boys. Name calling should not form part of childhood. Children should be taught that words hurt just as much as being hit physically. Calling names carries far into adulthood (Slaatten, Hetland, and Anderssen, 2015). Name calling thus has a negative impact on girls schooling lives. As children interact socially, they reflect the negative judgements they have been told or observed, and if left unchecked, these beliefs can be the basis for life-long prejudices (Brynes, 1998). There is a clarion call for school authorities to look at the issue of name calling by boys, to make school spaces gender-friendly, as enshrined in the Eswatini Education Sector Policy (2018). The social constructionism perspective states that as learners and groups interact together in a society and over time, they form mental representations and concepts about each other's actions. These

concepts or mental representations created through name calling, finally become adopted into shared roles utilised by learners as they relate with each other (Cojacaru, 2010). It might be claimed that responsible education authorities should embrace a pedagogy of difference as a foundation for building gender and school-based reform agendas based on the learners' narratives of their schooling experiences. Learners' voices can be a great source of information about the impact and effects of power relations between boys and girls as they engage with schooling, as seen above. Social constructionism's emphasis on social relations is a foundation on which learners' behaviours are constructed and their lived realities established (Gergen, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

Schools' social spaces should be free from minor and irrelevant regulations and rules by teachers meant to control and constrain the behaviour of leaners. In this light, school could be seen as an unwanted imposition of authority and control that had little to do with fostering effective teaching and learning circumstances. The learners appealed for the removal of the many unnecessary rules and regulations for them to enjoy school. In order to address the negative effects of suppressed emotions by the male child, there is need for programs that address boys' immediate needs, as well as help them respect and care for themselves and their female counterparts. As children interact socially, they reflect the negative judgements they have been told or observed, and if left unchecked, these beliefs can be the basis for life-long prejudices (Brynes, 1998). There is a clarion call for school authorities to look at the issue of name calling by boys, to make school spaces gender-friendly, as enshrined in the Eswatini Education Sector Policy (2018).

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