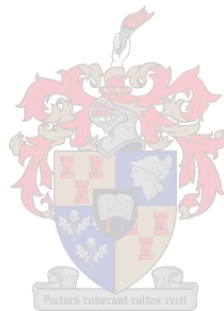


**Playing gender in childhood: how boys and girls construct and experience schooling and play in a township primary school near Durban**

By

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Dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Sociology)



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Date.....

26 October 2014



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My family, with much love, for being my source of moral support and courage. To each and everyone of you, especially my mother, Mlungu Mayeza, and my late father, Bhi Mayeza: may his soul rest in peace, this study is dedicated.

## **Abstract**

Research on how children learn to behave in gendered ways has focused on a ‘top-down’ process of socialisation which positions children as passive recipients of gender norms of the societies they inhabit. In contrast, this ethnographic study explores gender as constructed and experienced by children themselves with a specific focus on play as a means through which social identities are produced. This study focuses on children between the ages of six and ten and explores how they construct and experience being ‘boys’ and being ‘girls’ through play in a township primary school near Durban. This research is influenced by the emerging perspective in academic ways of thinking about childhood; identified by Prout and James (1997) as the ‘New Sociology of Childhood’ (NSC). Departing from the traditional socialisation ways of thinking about children’s social worlds from the perspectives of adults, the NSC views children as active agents in society whose social lives, behaviours and relationships are worthy of study in their own right. In this study, I engage with children’s agency by adopting a critical child-centred methodological approach to explore symbolic meanings the young boys and girls in the study attach to play. In adopting this research approach, this study generates new understandings about ways in which South African boys and girls in the study construct and experience schooling and play. Findings raise various implications for ways of working with children, both in research and in education, in ways which engages with their own constructions of the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity through play.

## **Abbreviations and acronyms**

DoBE: Department of Basic Education, South Africa

GNE: Graphic-Narrative Exercise

HIV/AIDS: Human Immunodeficiency Virus / Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

KZNDoE: KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education

NSC: New Sociology of Childhood

REC: Research Ethics Committee

SA: South Africa

SABC: The South African Broadcasting Corporation

TV: Television

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**Children who appear in this study**

To protect identities of children in the study all names used are pseudonyms.

<b>Girls</b>		<b>Boys</b>	
<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>
Abenathi	10	Abonge	10
Amahle	10	Andile	6
Amanda	10	Anele	9
Aphiwe	9	Ben	9
Ayanda	9	Bhekani	10
Bongi	9	Bho	9
Busi	10	Bonga	6
Gugu	10	Bu	10
Kediboni	9	Fana	9
Lizi	10	Goffrey	6
Neli	9	Khule	9
Nomcebo	10	Langan	10
Palesa	9	Lindani	9
Phe	6	Lindo	10
Phili	6	Mandla	10
Sah	10	Mavu	10
Sindi	10	Nathi	9
Sindiswa	10	Nhlaka/Nhlakanipho	9
Sli	10	Nku	10
Sma	10	Ntokozo	10
Sne	6	Phako	9
Thah	10	Phiwe	9
Thembeke	6	Sabelo	10
Thembi	9	Sanele	10
Yellene	10	Sbo	9
Zama	6	Sbonelo	9
Zinhle	9	Sboniso	9
Zinne	10	Siphesihle	9
		Sizwe	10
		Spha	9
		Thabo	9
		Thabo	6
		Vusi	6
		Wandile	9
		Zakhele	8
		Zamani	9



**Teachers who appear in this study**

In order to protect identities I created pseudonyms for all teachers who appear in this study. Titles are original but surnames are pseudonyms.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Surname</b>	<b>Grade</b>
Ms	Cele	4
Ms	Madlala	3
Ms	Mevi	4
Ms	Mkhize (student teacher)	R
Ms	Mzobe	4
Ms	Ndaba	R
Ms	Vezi	R

**Key to transcripts**

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
...	Conversation/observation not quoted in full; some portions have been edited out.
[Comment]	Outlines background information such as context, non-verbal expressions, emotional tone and other details of how people behave in the research encounters.
<i>Italic</i>	Emphasis is given by the researcher.
BLOCK LETTERS	Emphasis is given by the participant(s); oftentimes this is followed by an exclamation mark.
<i>Italics</i>	The speaker uses home language, rather than English. The home language of both the participants and researcher is IsiZulu.
//	Whenever the home language is used it is put in <i>italics</i> and followed by this symbol; then the English translation.

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## Chapter One

### Exploring how boys and girls construct their identities through play at school

#### Introduction

This ethnographic study explores how young children, between the ages of six and ten construct their identities, with a particular focus on gender, through play in a black<sup>1</sup> township primary school near Durban, South Africa. It investigates boys and girls' interests and investment in different forms of play and how they draw on these as sources of identification, disidentification and dimension of power in school. In developing an understanding of the relationship between childhood play and identity, I am influenced by the work of poststructuralist feminist researchers such as Walkerdine (1981), Thorne (1993), Francis (1998), MacNaughton (2000), Davies (2003), Blaise (2005) and Martin (2011) who have applied poststructuralist feminist insights to investigate children's constructions and experiences of masculinity and femininity. These researchers examined the complex ways in which children construct and negotiate gender, and reproduce and resist relations of power through everyday social interactions, including play.

Like some of the authors mentioned above, my research is influenced by what Prout and James (1997) call the 'New Sociology of Childhood' (NSC), a paradigmatic shift in ways of thinking about children as the passive products of socialisation or as adults-in-the-making. One of the key pillars of the NSC is the emphasis on children as active agents who construct their identities, attach meanings to their actions and negotiate relations with others in particular social and material contexts, marked by cultural and material resources, popular discourses and expectations. In this study, I try to explore the social worlds of children, as they construct and experience them in a primary school near Durban, by developing ethnographic and interview methods which attempt to engage with children's agency by addressing them as 'authorities' about their lives. More specifically, my aim is to observe boys and girls' play, identifications and relationships in the school, and encourage them (and their teachers) to reflect upon and talk about experiences and understandings of school, play and gender in particular, and, in Pattman's (2013) words, to 'learn from the *learners*' as schoolchildren are called in South Africa.

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<sup>1</sup>My view of race is that race is a social and cultural construction rather than a scientific term which denotes real differences between groups of people (Montagu, 1997; Pattman, 1998; Dalmage, 2000). Therefore, I use 'black' purely as a social category which classifies groups of people in South Africa who were disadvantaged and marginalised under the political system of apartheid.

## What inspired this study?

This study was motivated by a postgraduate course on gender, which I took in 2010, in which we, the students and teacher, engaged in ‘collective memory-work’ to explore our memories of childhood and gender. Following the work of Haug *et al* (1987), Crawford *et al* (1992), Onyx (2001), McLeod and Thomson (2009) and Pattman (2012), who applied the retrospective method of collective memory-work to investigate a myriad of social issues, we worked together as a group of co-researchers remembering, writing and comparing narratives in class relating to our childhood and themes which were selected by the class and then collectively and critically reflecting on these.

In the collective memory-work exercises we undertook, much emphasis was placed on being critically self-reflexive. We took seriously and used our childhood constructions and experiences of gender and play as research resources, and at the same time questioned taken for granted assumptions we made in these about gender and childhood. One of the story themes we chose was *playing with people of the opposite sex*. We did not take for granted the gendered childhood games and friends in people’s stories but questioned these by asking, for example, why people spoke about their friends in the stories they told in ways which assumed that such people must be of the same sex. We questioned why playing with people of the same sex seemed natural among people in the research group. We asked why certain games, toys or interests were seen as intrinsically masculine or feminine as if they held, by their very nature, a special affinity for boys and girls. We also questioned how we, as children then (and now through the essentialising stories we told) contributed to the construction of masculinity and femininity as if they were fixed essences. Also, we questioned why people spoke about their romantic relationships in their stories in ways which assumed that such relationships involved people of the opposite sex. In posing the questions about why people were making these assumptions we started to deconstruct the category of gender which people took for granted in the ways they invoked it in their stories.

Collective memory-work and my experience of this encouraged me to think critically about and redefine my job as a salesperson in the toy section of a large, local department store which I undertook during university student vacations. Selling a variety of toys, I remembered the manner in which they were displayed more according to gender than any other variable such as age or utility, and how as an inductee I was trained to meticulously separate these displays. Typical boys’ toys such as *Superman* and *Spiderman* figurines and costumes, aircrafts and vehicles emphasised adventure. On the other hand, girls’ toys such as *Barbie* and other baby dolls and their clothes and accessories, tea sets and other kitchen items, jewellery, glitters and tiaras teach and reinforce caring, nurturing and beauty.

My participation in collective memory-work encouraged me to think about how my work in the toy section produced gender, rather than taking it as an essence we have. Indeed, I was not just selling toys in my work but I was actively participating in the production of gender polarities. For example, by making sure that the parents did not ‘make mistakes’ in terms of gender and the toys they bought, in some ways, I was ‘policing’ the gender boundaries. The social category of gender becomes real (that is, it comes to be seen as an essence we have which makes us behave in certain ways) through being given material forms, in part, by me placing toys on different shelves by gender. The only way we know gender is through the category, and the only way we know the category is through the physical form it takes.

As a result of my experience of engaging in collective memory-work on this course, I developed an interest in children’s play as a site for the production of gendered and other identifications. In this study I explore childhood and play in greater depth through conducting ethnographic research which engages with the significance and symbolic meanings which boys and girls attach to play and their emotional investments in these.

### **Research questions**

This ethnographic study is underpinned by the following research questions:

- 1) How do boys and girls and teachers in a township primary school near Durban define play, or particular forms of play, in relation to ‘work’, the school and each other?
- 2) What significance do particular forms of play hold for them and the ways they position themselves in school?
- 3) What symbolic meanings do boys, girls and teachers attach to different forms of play in school?
- 4) Do forms of play operate in the school context as sources of identification and exclusion as well as dimensions of power and inequality? If so, how?
- 5) How do gender and age and other variables affect children’s constructions and experiences of forms of play in school?

### **Key research themes and my relation to these**

An understanding of the relationship between childhood play and identity construction (with a particular focus on gender) requires critical reading of the key concepts of childhood, play, gender and socialisation. This section introduces these concepts in the context of my research. I also

discuss some of the methodological concerns and challenges posed in a study which seeks to address boys and girls as the experts and authorities about themselves in order to explore their constructions and experiences of schooling and play.

### *Childhoods*

Experiences of childhood differ significantly as mediated by social factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, culture and polity which, whether individually or in combination, work to construct varying meanings and experiences of childhood. It is for this reason that Rogers (2003) postulates that we need to speak about childhoods in a plural form rather than reifying a singular definition, as being a child means different things in different societies. Montgomery (2003) builds on this understanding of childhood as complex and dynamic by highlighting that meanings of childhood are not static but are constantly subjected to changes and modifications over time. This study, therefore, disrupts and broadens the common-sense view of a child as homogenous and universal. Rather than reifying the stereotypical view of a ‘child’ as the opposite of what is defined as an ‘adult’, it aims to contribute a different perspective to existing research on childhood social identities by exploring how being ‘boys’ and being ‘girls’ is constructed and experienced through play by the young children at a black, working class township school in contemporary South Africa.

Childhood is a social category which ‘produces’ rather than simply describes particular children, with children being constructed and positioned in certain ways, through popular cultural discourses of childhood, which place children in specific relations with adults. Such discourses carry certain (culturally specific) expectations about *how* adults and children should relate. How children are defined by gender and other variables, such as social class, age and race, and are positioned through particular discursive and material practices such as forms of play, clothes and toys, is a key theme I wish to explore in this research study. Children are not, however, simply the products of discursive practices, but actively construct their identities and position themselves in relation to adults and other children, through their everyday interactions with them. In trying to engage with the agency of children in my study I want to explore the significance which they attach to particular variables such as gender, social class and age (and their intersections) as well as particular social practices, and notably forms of play, as sources of identification and disidentification and dimensions of power and inequality.

## *Gender*

Like childhood, gender is produced through particular discursive and material practices, such as games which often come to be constructed as masculine and feminine and as symbolically imputed to males and females (Thorne, 1993; Frosh *et al*, 2003; Martin, 2011). I am interested in exploring this in relation to my own study with children and play which focuses on boys and girls and addresses, in part, the role of play in contributing to or subverting particular relational constructions of male and female.

In this study I engage with gender as a social construction rather than a biological essence which makes us behave differently as males and females (Butler, 1990; Romaine, 1999; Cranny-Francis *et al*, 2003). Viewed as a social construction, gender refers to the different kinds of social behaviours, roles, attitudes, attributes and values considered appropriate for males and females in a specific society. Engaging with gender as a social construction also means moving away from the stereotypical view of masculinity and femininity as singular and homogenous, to a focus on masculinities and femininities as plural and fluid ways of ‘doing’ the identities of ‘man/boy’ and ‘woman/girl’ (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995; MacNaughton, 2000).

In this sense then gender is conceptualised as something we do rather than have, and building on this idea, it has been suggested that there are multiple ways of ‘doing’ gender and different versions of masculinity and femininity which are influenced by race, class, age, sexuality and other variables. Such theories have questioned assumptions that gender identities are unitary and power is located in males rather than females, adults rather than children, and argued instead that gender (and age) power relations operate in complex and contingent ways.

## *Socialisation and Gender*

Many contemporary feminist writers, such as Francis (1998), Davies (2003) and MacNaughton (2000), have taken issue with theories, such as ‘sex role’ theory, which associate gender with relatively fixed norms and values learnt through top-down processes of socialisation, (as critiqued above) which are seen as making people behave in predictable and polarised ways. Instead they focus on how gender is actively constructed, negotiated and performed in everyday forms of interaction in particular cultural, material and historical contexts.

The literature suggests that young children learn to perform socially accepted ways of being boys or girls through various gender socialisation processes which include play (Etaugh & Liss, 1992). In the context of this study, socialisation refers to the social processes whereby children learn to become masculine or feminine in their behaviours in accordance with the social expectations of the

society in which they live (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). Drawing on the work of these writers and Corsaro (1997) and Craig (2000), who argue that children's behaviours are not just a consequence or an end product of socialisation, in this study I address children not as passive objects of socialisation, but rather as active participants in the gendering of their identities. Indeed, childhood gender socialisation is a complex process that involves interactions between children themselves and children with significant others in their social networks, including parents, teachers and peers (MacNaughton, 2000). Even though children are constrained by different kinds of gender norms in their societies, they are agential beings who reinforce and challenge gender norms (Berk, 2003; Martin, 2011).

### *Play*

Departing from popular understandings of play which connect play with childhood and present this connection as natural (Colley *et al*, 1996; Smith, 2010; Woodyer, 2013), my research engages with play as a relational category which produces various kinds of boundaries in terms of social identifications. A relational category implies or contains its opposite in that each makes sense in relation to the Other. In the context of school I am interested in exploring how play is invoked and delineated in relation to *work* and the effect of this binary on relationships formed in school, and I draw on literature on how play operates as a means through which social identifications such as childhood and adulthood, male and female are produced as different and as relational opposites (Etaugh & Liss, 1992; Thorne, 1993; Blaise, 2005; Martin, 2011). In chapter five I document and analyse the ways in which play is constructed and experienced by girls, boys and teachers in my study. Chapter five also explores how teachers in the study view and engage with play in their everyday classroom practices in ways which carry implications for the polarisation of gender. I came to understand my own interactions with children in the playground as 'playful', and I elaborate on this in chapter four and how I was perceived and positioned by boys and girls.

### *Methodological concerns and challenges*

The starting point for my fieldwork was to deconstruct my presumed adult-male position of authority, and establish what Frosh *et al* (2003) refers to as 'child-centred' relations with the children. This was designed to encourage the children to talk openly with me, as an adult researcher, about themselves and their interests in their schooling environment. In chapter four, I reflect on my own childhood experiences of learning to be deferential to adults. I reflect on this aspect of my childhood because it provides useful insights as to why and how children in the study tended to relate to me in deferential ways as an adult. As I reflect on my childhood past to make sense of the power dynamics in my relations with children in the study, I highlight some of the difficulties

incurred in trying to engage with children as authorities in relation to their interests and concerns. In chapter four, I demonstrate not only how I tried to avoid being viewed and positioned as a figure of formal authority by the children, but also how complicated this was given powerful symbolic associations children and teachers make with adulthood which connected with the ways they understood and presented themselves.

### **The Research Setting: Sun Shine Primary School**

The setting of this study is Sun Shine Primary<sup>2</sup>, a mixed-gender junior primary school located in a black, working class township near central Durban. Catering for children from Grade R<sup>3</sup> (five-to-six-year olds) to Grade 4 (nine-to-ten-year olds), Sun Shine Primary was established in 1961 as a public primary school to provide foundation-to-intermediate phase education to children in a black township situated about 13 kilometres west of Durban. At the time of the research at the school in 2013, the learner population was calculated at 733, of which 60 percent were girls and 40 percent boys. Sun Shine Primary has 18 classrooms with class sizes ranging from 30 to 40 learners. In 2013, the annual school fees were the relatively low sum of R200.00. However, less than half of the parents/guardians pay schools fee in full and on time. This is partly due to the poverty which characterises the family backgrounds of the majority of pupils attending the school. The racial profile of both learners and teachers at the school is exclusively black.

Racial dynamics in South African schools are shaped by the legacy of apartheid<sup>4</sup>. While the demise

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<sup>2</sup> This is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the school on which the study is based.

<sup>3</sup> Grade R is the reception class at the primary school; R denotes Reception.

<sup>4</sup> Apartheid is an Afrikaans term which means separateness. The political system of apartheid in South Africa (1948-1994) was underpinned by the colonial discourse of white supremacy which enforced racial segregation through legislation (Allen, 2005). Through the Population Registration Act (1950), apartheid government used skin colour as a key marker of race. Under apartheid, a South African was classified as white, black or Indian. And later, a fourth category of coloured was introduced to classify the offspring of racially mixed parents. The Population Registration Act (1950) was an all-encompassing legislation, which determined peoples' rights and opportunities in every sphere of life. The four major racial groups were seen as fundamentally different from each other and this perceived difference was used to justify their separation. The separation of the race groups was enforced through the Group Areas Act (1950). Under this Act, the racial groups were required to live in different and racially exclusive residential areas. The race groups were treated differently in which whites were privileged in all aspects of life. While the other race groups, the non-whites, endured many forms of disadvantage and marginalisation. For example, apartheid schooling institutions were racially segregated in which non-white schools suffered neglect in terms of resource and service provision compared to white schools whose educational needs were prioritised. In particular, the Bantu Education Act (1953) promulgated the provision of inferior curricular, resources and services in schools in black communities. The context of black exclusivity, poor educational and recreational resources which characterise Sun Shine Primary is the legacy of the separate development project of apartheid. While South Africa has transitioned from apartheid to democracy since 1994, the use of apartheid racial classifications continue in the democratic dispensation. This continuation is deemed necessary by the democratic government as it provides a primary source of identifying those who suffered injustices under apartheid for purposes of redress and transformation in the new order.

of apartheid in 1994 witnessed the official dissolution of racial segregation across society, a discrepancy is observed in the patterns in which racial transformation is occurring in the schooling sector. For example, Hunter (2013) describes the racial changes taking place in post-apartheid schooling as characterised by the emergence of ‘formerly white/Indian/coloured schools’, while ‘formerly black schools’ are currently not available. The pattern of racial mixing in South African schools after apartheid therefore takes a one-way direction which involves some children from black townships migrating to formerly white/Indian/coloured schools. However, the reverse is not the case. Black township schools remain black as they were during apartheid. Mazibuko (2007) argues that the persisting poor educational standards and material constraints at black township schools do not encourage parents of non-black children to send their children to these schools. Furthermore, the parents of black children who can afford the higher school fees charged by former non-black schools send their children to these schools outside the townships in which they reside in the hopes that their children will receive good quality education. In line with what Mazibuko (2007) found at another black township school in South Africa, some of the pressing challenges confronting the staff at Sun Shine face include low rates of payment by parents/guardians, crimes such as burglary and theft of school property, overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of educational resources such as a library and a lack of formal recreational facilities within the school premises. Compared to the majority of formerly non-black schools outside the black township in which Sun Shine is based, learners at this school have fewer opportunities to engage in a wider variety of sporting and recreational activities. The available sporting facilities are of poor quality and are not reserved for the use of school children but are open to the wider community and other schools within the township.

Sporting activities for learners at Sun Shine are limited to soccer and netball. These sporting codes are strictly gendered, with soccer mainly played by boys and netball only played by girls. The school does not have formal sports grounds and depends on the nearby community sports grounds for organised sporting activities. Space for break-time play activities is also very limited especially in light of the challenge of overcrowded classrooms. During break, children use the open school yard to play different games. In the same way that formal school sports are gendered, children’s improvised games are also characterised by boys dominating the space in the yard with football games while girls skip on the periphery.

The unique racial and socio-economic context of Sun Shine Primary presents an interesting research site for a study of this nature. Although there is an existing body of research on children’s constructions of gender identities through play (Thorne, 1993; Jordan, 1995; Francis, 2000; Renold,



2006; Paechter, 2007; Martin, 2011), the majority of these studies were based in diverse contexts in the US, UK and Australia. As such, they do not provide an understanding of different childhood constructions and experiences of gender in other diverse social contexts. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to contribute to the existing body of research by investigating how young children in a black and working class township primary school in South Africa construct being boys and being girls through play.

### **Structure of the dissertation**

This dissertation is divided into eight chapters which address different themes regarding how boys and girls construct and experience schooling and play at the school.

The current chapter, *Exploring how boys and girls construct their identities through play at school*, outlines the scope and nature of the research study. The chapter begins by exploring how my experience of engaging in collective memory-work and working with toys motivated me to conduct this kind of study. Research questions and themes which inform this study are outlined in the introductory chapter which also describes the contextual background of Sun Shine Primary as the research site where this kind of research is new. Finally, the chapter presents the structure of the dissertation and the focus areas of each chapter.

Chapter two, *Thinking about Gender and Children's Play within the Poststructuralist Feminist and New Sociology of Childhood Perspectives*, discusses the poststructuralist feminist and NSC theories which I draw upon in my analysis of young boys and girls' constructions and experiences of schooling and play. To illustrate these theories, I review research studies which have applied these particular theories to understand the complex ways in which gender and gender power relations operate in children's social worlds. Chapter two will also explore the literature on play and childhood which informs my research.

Chapter three, *Research with children: an ethnographic approach*, describes the methodology employed by this research study. I demonstrate how my view of children as active agents in gender identity construction informed the ethnographic design and the specific ethnographic and interview methods I adopted in the field. This chapter also highlights and discusses some of the unique ethical issues and dilemmas which emerged in the process of conducting this research, particularly in terms of gaining young children's consent to participate and maintaining confidentiality/anonymity. Another critical ethical dilemma raised in this chapter relates to the question of ownership of the sociological data that the children participated in producing.

In chapter four, *Putting Myself in the Picture*, I reflect critically upon myself as an adult male, conducting research with young children in a school environment where adults (teachers) that are exclusively female and position themselves as figures of formal authority over children. I document how and why I resisted being positioned as a teacher with formal authority by the children, even if the teachers reinforced my position of authority by constantly assigning me roles that placed me in positions of adult-power. I document how and why I was constructed differently by the teachers and the children, and explore what these different social constructions of me suggest about them and their constructions of adulthood, childhood, gender and power.

This chapter also documents how I was constructed by other adults outside the school, in a doctoral research training programme in which I was a participant, in ways which problematised my gender *as a man* doing this study, and I critique these as powerful illustrations of ‘common-sense’ and essentialist ways of thinking about gender which produce and reinforce sharp boundaries between ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ which in turn, impose limitations on what males and females can do and be.

Chapter five, *Gendered and gendering play in class and in the playground*, extends Thorne’s (1993:64) definition of the concept of ‘borderwork’ which she uses to describe children’s gendered ways of behaving in her primary school ethnography of play in the US. This chapter documents the different forms in which ‘borderwork’ manifests and operates in children’s play within the school setting of my study, and in relation to this, discusses the gendering of particular forms of play notably football and skipping, and the symbolic significance which specific boys and girls attached to these. The sharing of the play yard for the gendered games of football and skipping provided opportunities to explore the dynamics of gender power relations as boys constantly want to dominate the space, while girls resist these claims.

In class, play is also generally gendered, but a more striking observation was the gender polarity that differentiated between the ‘construction area’ which is dominated by boys who exclude girls, and the ‘fantasy area’ which is dominated by girls, who exclude boys. As I describe at length in chapter three, my ethnographic study combines observations with conversations with the children. Talking with these young children about their choices, interests and investments in different forms of play in which they engage as boys and girls yielded interesting insights on identity construction. Furthermore, in demonstrating how gender borderwork operates in the context of my study, this chapter critiques teachers’ constructions of children’s play in terms of ‘free-choice’.

Chapter six, *Children's understandings and experiences of being called 'gay' and 'tomboy' in relation to play*, explores children's constructions and experiences of 'gender transgression' in their play at school. I use the term 'gender-transgressive' to describe forms of play which are generally perceived by many children as violating gender norms and values. MacNaughton (2000) argues that 'gender transgressions' are interesting to observe because they serve to illustrate the poststructuralist feminist theory which defines gender as the fluid, multiple and complex ways of displaying masculinities and femininities. Drawing on this understanding of gender helped me view gender in the children's play in ways that transcend the common-sense essentialist understanding of gender as fixed and homogenous essences. Furthermore, I found that documenting, rather than overlooking, the individual differences in the children's behaviours during play allowed me to better understand the concept of agency as it manifests in young children's social worlds (Prout & James, 1997). Agency is illuminated in the observation of how some children challenge, rather than simply conform to, the stereotypes of gender in their play behaviours and social relationships at the primary school. However, the research data I draw upon in this chapter also demonstrates that 'gender-transgressive' play carries specific negative consequences for boys and girls who are constructed as 'transgressors'. This chapter focuses on boys and girls whose 'transgression' is designated in the category 'gay' or 'tomboy', and seeks to explore how they experience and deal with these appellations, in a context, in which these operate to 'police' gender 'borders'.

In chapter seven, *'Charmer boys' and 'cream girls': intersections of gender, sexuality and popularity through play*, I explore how sexuality features in the ways in which children at the school construct their gender identities through play. By demonstrating that play is pivotal in the ways in which children in the study construct themselves not only as gendered but also as (hetero)sexual subject beings, the chapter challenges the common-sense discourse<sup>5</sup> of sexual innocence among primary school age children (Pattman & Chege, 2003; Bhana, 2002; 2005; 2007; Blaise, 2009).

Chapter eight, *What did I find and where do we go from here? Summary of the research findings and implications for future practices*, is the final chapter of the dissertation. In this concluding chapter, I highlight the key findings which emerge from my analysis of the empirical data. I also

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<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the work of Foucault, Smart (1985) and Veyne (2010) define discourse as a shared knowledge within a given culture or society through which people perceive their behaviours and relationships. Many different discourses operate within a given society and at a given time. These discourses often compete against, and contradict, each other (Hollway, 1984). Blaise (2005) also highlights that different discourses occupy different positions of power within a given society. Thus, powerful discourses come to be viewed as 'truths' which guides people's attitudes and ways of thinking about society: why it is the way it is, how it came to be the way it is and how it ought to be (Hollway, 1984; Smart, 1985; Blaise, 2005; Veyne, 2010).

raise some of the implications of these findings for developing ways of engaging critically with children in research and opening up opportunities for mixing which cuts across popular forms and practices of gender polarisation among children during play. This chapter also discusses how the kinds of child-centred relations I established with the children during the course of this study could be emulated by the teachers as part of a model of good pedagogic practice in life orientation classes.

### **Summary**

In introducing this study, this chapter focused on my motivation for undertaking this work. The research questions, themes, contextual background of the school under study as well as the structure of this dissertation are outlined in this chapter.

My analysis of how the young children construct and experience being boys and girls through play in school is informed by the poststructuralist feminist theory and NSC. The following chapter focuses on these theoretical frameworks and their critical explanations with regard to how children learn to perform gender through play. I illustrate the arguments underlying these theories by reviewing and drawing on selected research studies that use them to understand the complex and dynamic ways in which children engage with gender in their everyday forms of social interaction, with a specific focus on play.

## Chapter Two

### **Thinking about Gender and Children's Play within the Poststructuralist Feminist and New Sociology of Childhood Perspectives**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter situates this study on gender and children's play within the New Sociology of Childhood (NSC) and poststructuralist feminist theoretical lenses. In combination, these lenses provide a useful set of analytical tools to understand the complex ways in which the young children give meaning to themselves as gendered beings. However, a distinction between the two theories can be useful in terms of shedding light on why I choose to use them in the way I do in this study. While the poststructuralist feminist theory focuses broadly on gender as socially constructed and fluid rather than fixed to biology, the NSC emphasises the need to conceptualise children as active agents in society. In this study, I apply the conception of children as active agents to highlight and make sense of the roles that they themselves play in the construction of their own gender identities with a specific focus on the significance of play in this social process. In other words, while I utilise the poststructuralist feminist theory as it enables me to view gender identities as complex and multiple rather than fixed and homogenous, the NSC helps me to understand the different ways in which children actively participate in the social processes of gendering of their identities. This chapter therefore describes and discusses these two theoretical lenses as applied in the context of this study. In doing this, I constantly draw examples from existing research studies to illustrate the issues and concerns raised by these theories. More specifically, I review the research literature which highlights that, children, as active agents in society, do not passively absorb the gender norms of the societies they inhabit. I engage with the literature which demonstrates how children themselves are active participants in the gendering of their own identities through play. By drawing on these kinds of research studies which take a child-centred approach to understand gender, this chapter aims to demonstrate what exactly it means to say that children are active agents in the construction of their gender identities.

#### **Poststructuralist feminist theory: understanding gender as socially constructed**

In chapter one I defined the concept of gender and explained what I mean when I say that gender is socially constructed. In defining gender as socially constructed, I argued that gender is learnt and performed rather than an essence that we possess (Butler, 1990). Within this definition, gender refers to the ways of behaving and presenting oneself in accordance with the social expectations and discourses about what constitutes masculinity and femininity in a particular society (Cranny-Francis *et al*, 2003). Writing about what it means to be male or female in South Africa, de Waal (2013:6)

observes that ‘underscored by a de facto patriarchy, South African attitudes towards gender are strictly binary and vulgarly imprisoning. A vagina means ‘girl’, while a penis means ‘boy’ - with the attendant controls of passivity vs. strength that attend this dichotomy’. Children learn to behave, present and position themselves in gendered ways through a myriad of socialisation processes which begin very early in life (Romaine, 1999). For example, Yelland and Grieshaber (1998) argue that:

...gendering occurs as an integral part of the routines of everyday life. The construction of gender is a systematic social process that begins at birth and is continually shaped, moulded and reshaped throughout life, according to the sex of the new-born (Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998:1).

As Yelland and Grieshaber (1998) point out, becoming a boy or a girl is a social process which begins a moment a child is born and pronounced a boy or a girl. This process involves children learning about gender norms through various messages which differentiate between behaviours which are seen as acceptable and unacceptable for a boy or a girl in a particular culture or society. The literature suggests that, children learn the gender norms of their societies, by means of messages from significant others such as parents, other family members and teachers (Martin, 2011). By gender norms I mean the culturally varying social prescriptions and expectations which regulate how males and females ‘should’ behave in ways that show that they understand the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity.

Traditional understanding about how young children learn to perform gender is premised on essentialist assumptions of gender which naturalise the different ways of behaving between boys and girls. However, drawing on the work of MacNaughton (2000), Davies (2003), Blaise (2005), Azzarito *et al* (2006), Paechter (2007) and Martin (2011) who have applied poststructuralist feminist theory to make sense of how young children learn about gender, I reject the established essentialist assumptions, and instead, use the poststructuralist feminist theory to understand the dynamics of gender in children’s play. Poststructuralist feminist theory is critical of the essentialist understanding of gender which constructs the learned differences in behaviour between boys and girls as a manifestation of presumed innate differences between the two sexes. For example, a gender essentialist regards boys as naturally stronger and tougher both physically and emotionally, in contrast to girls, who are seen as naturally fragile, weak and less physically active. The limitation of these essentialist accounts of the differences between boys and girls is that they tend to generalise boys and girls as homogenous groups without recognising that various kinds of individual differences exist within the gendered categories. Furthermore, as Martin (2011) points out, the danger in following essentialist explanations of gendered behaviours among children as reflecting

natural differences between boys and girls is that they justify and promote gender differences and inequalities among children in the early years. Instead of relying on the established essentialist assumptions of gender, I view children's gendered behaviours from a poststructuralist feminist perspective which provides a useful alternative theoretical tool to explain gender in childhood in ways which counter and transcend the naturalised polarisation of masculine and feminine ways of behaving among children at play. I also use the poststructuralist feminist theory because it provides a useful discourse to explore how young children themselves give meaning to themselves as gendered subjects and the significance of play in their constructions of their gendered selves.

MacNaughton (2000) notes that what distinguishes the poststructuralist feminist theory from gender essentialism is its view of gender as socially constructed; learnt and performed ideas and values taken to define acceptable and unacceptable ways of behaving for males and females within a particular community. As a social construction, gender is not natural, but something that is learned and continually performed in different ways as we interact with different people in different social contexts (Butler, 1990; Romaine, 1999; MacNaughton, 2000, Paechter, 2007; Martin, 2011).

Writing about gender as a social construction, Butler (1990) maintains that:

...the gendered body is performative, it has no ontological status apart from the various acts, gestures, movements, enactments which constitute its reality. Such acts, gestures and enactments are performative in the sense that the essence that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (Butler, 1990:136).

For Butler (1990), gender is socially produced in the sense that it refers to the socially learnt and continually practiced masculine and feminine roles and ways of behaving that create the impression of a natural masculinity or femininity. Butler's (1990) understanding of gender as a performative act, as something we do and display, which creates the fiction that we possess fixed and homogeneous essences of masculinity and femininity illustrates how children (re)produce the fiction of a unitary masculine or feminine identity through play. For example, in her research with young children at play at a London nursery school, Martin (2011) documents patterns of how children new to the school learn and adopt gendered play behaviours by observing the play activities and group organisation of older and more established pupils and reproduce these gender norms in their own play patterns. Martin's (2011) analysis of young children's use of play spaces reveals patterns of how children construct and maintain gender polarity in the ways they organise themselves during their play. Martin, (2011:24-25) documents how newcomers often reproduced older children's gendered play behaviours or tried to join the existing gendered playgroups and play areas, activities and patterns they found among senior pupils.

As Martin's (2011) research has demonstrated, play forms an integral part of the gender socialisation processes whereby different forms of play and toys are often defined in gendered ways as suitable for boys or for girls. For example, dolls are seen as toys that are specifically for girls, in contrast to most toy vehicles that are seen as for boys. It is through defining children's toys in accordance with common stereotypes of gender and socialising boys and girls to these differences that established stereotypes of gender opposites, differences and inequalities are produced and reinforced from the early years (Martin, 2011). However, working within the poststructuralist feminist theory, I do not simply explain children's gendered behaviours as an imitation or a reproduction of the messages, images and symbols of gender children receive from significant others and through other mediums. While recognising the important role of socialisation in the ways in which children come to identity and behave in gendered ways, in this study I aim to engage with children as the experts about their social lives, identifications, relationships and behaviours. The aim is to explore the particular meanings children attach to the kinds of play activities and roles they engage or disengage in and the social relationships they forge as young boys and girls at the primary school.

MacNaughton (2000) distances poststructuralist feminist theory from both the essentialist and sex-role socialisation theories. She explains that poststructuralist feminist theory is not only critical of the essentialist view of gender as natural but is critical of the sex-role socialisation theory which tends to position children as passive recipients of the gender norms applicable in the societies in which they live. The sex-role socialisation theory posits that children learn gender by listening and observing messages, gestures, images and symbols of gender from their surroundings and significant others and simply imitate and reproduce these in their behaviours and relationships during play and in other social contexts. While the poststructuralist feminist theory concurs with the view that gender is learnt and performative rather than natural and static, it extends this argument by highlighting that the social processes of learning gender are complex, rather than a simple 'top-down' socialisation process. Thus, the poststructuralist feminist theory argues that gender socialisation involves children as active participants who negotiate rather than simply absorb the gender norms provided in their societies (MacNaughton, 2000). One of the limitations of the sex-role socialisation theory is that it treats children as if they are 'dry sponges' who simply absorb the gender norms of their societies without examining the kinds of roles that children themselves play in gendering their own identities. The danger of adopting the sex-role socialisation theory to explain gender in children's play patterns is that it removes the possibility of thinking about and addressing the question of why children conform to some social expectations of gender while choosing to



disregard others (Martin, 2011). Neither does the sex-role socialisation perspective allow us to explore the question of how and why children perform different versions of masculinities and femininities as they interact with different people in different contexts. However, the main limitation of the sex-role socialisation theory lies in its failure to address children as active agents and find out from them how they construct and experience being boys and being girls, a key question I aim to address in this study with a particular focus on play.

I utilise the poststructuralist feminist theory because it offers a useful analytical tool that counters the limitations of both biological accounts of gender which fix the ideas of masculinity and femininity to nature, and the sex-role socialisation perspective which views gender in childhood from a macro perspective of socialisation while overlooking the ways in which children themselves construct their gender identities. Using poststructuralist feminist theory enables me to view children as active participants in the construction of their gender identities. However, in my engagement with children as active agents in gender identity construction I also draw on the NSC which focuses on the concept of agency in childhood in more detail.

### **New Sociology of Childhood: conceptualising children as active agents in society**

Traditional research on childhood social identities tends to be adult-centric. By ‘adult-centric’ I mean that the perspectives of adults who research childhood often take precedence over the voices and perspectives of the children themselves (Craig, 2000). Children’s own understandings and the meanings they attach to their behaviours are thus taken for granted and overlooked. In explaining the marginalisation of children’s voices in the literature on childhood it is often argued that it is difficult to investigate children’s perspectives. In part, this is because children are generally viewed as not yet full people with a limited level of proficiency in reading, writing and talking that is required to fully understand the practice of research and provide trustworthy research information (Fromme, 2003). Although this argument may seem convincing, some of its underlying assumptions have been subject to criticism by scholars who advocate for the conceptualisation of children as agential beings who are full members of society (Thorne, 1993; Prout & James, 1997; Carsaro, 1997; Burman, 2008). These scholars advocate for a paradigmatic shift in academic ways of thinking about children, from being reduced to not yet ‘grown-ups’ to being conceptualised as competent and active social actors whose views on the human world are worthy of study in their own right (Burman, 2008). Prout and James (1997) term this new way of thinking about childhood the ‘New Sociology of Childhood’ (NSC). Prout and James (1997:8) highlight the view of children as active agents in society:

Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own

social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just passive subjects of social structures and processes.

Conceptualising children as active agents suggests a shift from the future to the present, from viewing children's social behaviours as preparation for later adult life to focusing on the meanings they attach to their everyday social behaviours, relationships and interactions. Corsaro (1997:18) uses the interesting concept of 'interpretive reproduction' to highlight the view of children as agential beings in society:

The term interpretive captures the innovative and creative aspects of children's participation in society. The fact is that children create and participate in their own unique peer cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns. The term reproduction captures the idea that children are not simply internalising society and culture, but are actively contributing to cultural reproduction and change.

The concept of interpretive reproduction highlights that children are active agents rather than passive objects in society (Bühler-Niederberger, 2010). While recognising agency in childhood, interpretive reproduction also suggests that children are not entirely free from the influences of the society and culture in which they live. As Corsaro (1997) points out, by their very participation in society, children are constrained by existing social structures which set limits on their exercise of agency. Therefore, in this study I explore how do young children at Sun Shine Primary construct their gender identities in ways that reinforce and challenge the fiction of unified and unitary masculinity and femininity through play.

In the NSC perspective, children's social worlds are viewed in their own right, independent of adults' perspectives. In this way, the NSC seeks to shift the focus in childhood research from asking whether or not children are able to correspond to the scientific standards of adult researchers, to asking whether or not child-centred research approaches can be developed in order to investigate aspects of childhood from the points of view of children themselves. Several researchers influenced by the NSC ways of thinking about children have tried to address children's agency in research by utilising different kinds of inductive approaches. For example, Mitchell *et al* (2005) encouraged children's participation in research by giving them disposable cameras with which to document 'safe' and 'unsafe' spaces at their primary school in South Africa. The pictures helped Mitchell *et al* (2005) to identify toilets as unsafe spaces for girls where they experienced forms of harassment and abuse. By encouraging boys to set the agenda for interviews in a study on young masculinities in London, Frosh *et al* (2003) were able to identify and explore issues and concerns which were pertinent to the lives of these young boys. Furthermore, Pattman and Chege's (2003) study on HIV/AIDS in education in southern Africa found that establishing friendly and non-judgemental relations with the children encouraged them to talk openly about their accounts and experiences of

gender and sexuality in ways they had never done before with an adult. These studies raise the possibility of researching childhood in ways which take the views and experiences of childhood from the points of view of children themselves into account. In order to explore gender as understood by children, this study draws on these existing studies. The following section focuses on the literature on play, drawing on poststructuralist feminist writers, which influences my work.

### **What is play? How I position my own work in relation to theories of play and childhood**

In this study I engage with play as a relational category, rather than an essence which exists in its own right. Below I review the literature which illustrates how play operates in our society as a relational category which is constructed in relation to childhood, adulthood, work, educational development and gender socialisation.

#### *Play in relation to the presumed boundary between childhood and adulthood*

Premised on a binary thinking discourse, play shapes varying meanings attached to childhood and adulthood and contributes in shaping the common-sense and oppositional understanding of the categories of childhood and adulthood (Ailwood, 2003). There is a strong tendency in academia and in popular narratives to essentialise play and construct it as a hallmark of childhood in opposition to adulthood. For example, Monigham-Nourot (1987:15) argues that childhood play is ‘free’ in the sense that it is not controlled by adults, and is characterised by intrinsic motivation, attention to means rather than ends, non-literal behaviour, fun, enjoyment and freedom from external rules. Furthermore, when the literature speaks about play in relation to adulthood, often this is in the context of organised, serious, revenue-generating and competitive games (Ball & Loy, 1975; Byl, 2006), as opposed to fantasy, spontaneous and invented games which are associated, in contrast, with childhood. Woods (2007:4-5) notes that play in adulthood mainly defines games of sport and other recreational activities which are organised, competitive and help people relax and divert from work. While adults’ play is usually competitive and goal oriented, play for children is spontaneous and engaged in for its own sake (Smith, 2010). However, the distinction between play in childhood as non-literal practices, in opposition to play in adulthood as motivated by specific goals, is sometimes not very clear. That is, play in childhood may constitute organised and competitive games of sport; adults also do play for fun or entertainment; outside the contexts of being competitive or playing in order to attain specific goals (Starbuck & Webster, 1991).

Additionally, the stereotypical boundary between adulthood and childhood which is partly constructed through play does not only manifest through organised and serious games being associated with adulthood. But, furthermore, play in adulthood can be used with connotations of sexuality. Thus, given the common-sense construction of sexuality as one of the key characteristics

of ‘normal’ adulthood, in opposition to the dominant construction of childhood as marked by sexual innocence, when play is used with reference to sexuality this is usually in the sphere of adulthood. In this way, play interacts with sexuality to construct and reinforce the presumed boundary between childhood and adulthood. The understanding of play as carrying different meanings for adults and children is adult-centric in the sense that it speaks to the common-sense nostalgia which fails to engage with play as experienced by players themselves. Hence, rather than contributing to the reification of the stereotypical boundary between childhood and adulthood by constructing children’s play as spontaneous in opposition to adults’ play seen as purpose-driven, or viewing sexuality as an exclusive domain of adulthood in relation to children seen as sexual innocents, this study explores how children and teachers as adults in the school setting construct and experience forms of play they engage in, organise or supervise.

### *Play in relation to work*

Conceptualised as a relational category, it becomes difficult to think about play without relating it to other ‘non-play’ activities which may be seen as work. For example, Smith’s (2010:10-12) list of activities he considers not playful includes rule-governed games and work. In this context, work is seen as similar to games with strict rules in the sense that both work and games involve following established instructions or procedures and forms of rewards are attained for work performed and games won. For Smith (2010:11), such games and work cannot be seen as playful because play is ‘free’ from external constraints and specific outcomes. According to Smith (2010), play is engaged in because it is fun and enjoyable, and not because it generates income or other forms of rewards for the player. Thus, if an activity is performed for rewards then that activity cannot be defined as play but as work. Work, in this context, describes a myriad of productive activities that people do in order to attain specific outcomes or earn a living.

In engaging with play in relation to work, James and James (2012:91-92) problematise the dichotomy of work/play and suggest that conceptualising play simply as the opposite of work reifies adult-centric logic which renders children’s play a less-important status compared to the superior status attached to work performed by adults. Furthermore, Starbuck and Webster (1991) problematise the stereotypical boundary between play and work by arguing that ‘children’s work is play’ and that some professionals, such as child psychologists, use forms of play as part of their everyday practice. In a similar vein, play formed an integral part of my methodological approach in this study. That is, in order to establish rapport and democratic relationships with the children aimed at encouraging them to talk openly with me as an adult about themselves and their experiences of schooling and play, my fieldwork at the school involved playing with different groups of children.

Thus, the playfulness of my research work at the school can be seen as an important example of the intersectionality of play and work. Therefore, while the literature on play often makes a distinction between play and work (Huizinga, 1950; Smith, 2010), my experience of conducting this research study challenges such a distinction and suggests that the popular dichotomy of play/work is fluid rather than fixed (Starbuck & Webster, 1991; James & James, 2012).

### *Play in relation to childhood learning and development*

Literature on the relationship between childhood play and development dates back more than 100 years. For example, Gross (1898) viewed play as a social practice that prepared children for adulthood. Gross's (1898) view of play finds great support among contemporary early childhood development professionals. For example, Michelet (1986) argues that children learn many things about themselves and the culture in which they live through play. In their research on children's imaginative forms of play, Bodrova and Leong (2003) as well as Paley (2004) point out that appropriately organised play is beneficial to the development of children's social and cognitive skills. Wolfe (2002) and Hewes (2007) articulate the understanding of play in relation to learning and development by arguing that play supports children's learning and overall healthy growth. Furthermore, Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) argue that play does not only facilitate the development of foundational social competencies, but it also contributes to advances in verbalisation, vocabulary, language comprehension, attention span, imagination, concentration, curiosity, problem solving strategies, cooperation, empathy and group participation.

However, it was Piaget (1896-1980) and Vygotsky (1896-1934) who were among the early scholars who explored the relationship between play and learning development in early childhood. Although both Piaget and Vygotsky argued for the importance of play in aiding child learning processes, their approaches to play tended to differ. On one hand, Piaget (1951) understood play as primarily concerned with the simulation of previously observed events. Piaget (1951) saw play as primarily imitative in which a child at play was seen as simply imitating what she/he has seen, heard or done in the past. For Piaget (1951), when children play, they act out what they have learnt about the society in which they are members. Hence, in this view, play becomes a measure of the extent to which a child has mastered knowledge about certain roles and behaviours associated with different groups of people in a given society.

Vygotsky (1966), on the hand, theorised that play enables players to express their creativity. For Vygotsky (1966), play allows children to put into practice their imaginations and interpretations of the human world and their place in it. Play, for Vygotsky (1966), portrays both the child's social

reality and his/her agential creativity as ordinary objects are transformed, and given new meanings in imaginary forms of play in which they engage. In Vygotsky's view, play is not just an expression of pre-existing knowledge as implied by Piaget (1951). Rather, a child's play activity involves recreating and reworking past experiences thus producing new knowledge (Vygotsky cited in Smolucha, 1992:51). I find Vygotsky's conception of play quite interesting as it resonates with the conception of children as active agents in society which influences my research. Vygotsky's focus on children's play as characterised by children actively contributing to their own cognitive development by constructing their own understanding of the human world interlinks with the NSC and its view of children as active agents and purposeful beings who make sense of their world and contribute substantially to their own social development (Berk, 2003).

While the relationship between childhood play and learning development is popular in the literature (Wolfe, 2002; Paley, 2004; Hewes, 2007), further research still needs to be conducted to make concrete and clearer the presumed positive relationship between play and learning processes. For example, Bodrova and Leong (2003) argue that benefits of play in child education are not always easy and practical to understand and assess. Although the literature on early childhood development points to the importance of play in child learning, not many teachers have sufficient practical knowledge about how to organise play-based learning activities for their children (Myck-Wayne, 2010). Some scholars are also less optimistic about play as 'essential' in child development. For example, Smith (2010:216) argues that when viewed critically, current play research does not 'prove' that play is 'essential' for child cognitive or social development, or that it is superior to other activities or experiences. For Smith (2010), play is not necessarily 'essential' for child educational development, but as fun and often harmless activity, play can be one of the useful means of teaching young children about the human world. How teachers at Sun Shine Primary engage with play among the children they teach is one of my major concerns in this ethnography.

#### *Play in relation to children's constructions of gender identities*

My research is influenced by the work of Thorne (1993), Francis (1998), Frosh *et al* (2003) and Martin (2011) who engage with play as a powerful means through which children construct gender identities. Engaging with play as a particular resource upon which children draw to construct themselves as gendered beings implies that the common-sense view of play as free, spontaneous and essential to childhood is challenged. For example, Gadamer (1984) essentialises the stereotypical connection between childhood and play by arguing that a child-centred view of play with its emphasis on the player's experiences, intentions and feelings tends to overlook the essence of play itself. For Gadamer (1984:92), play has its own essence, and for this reason, it is play itself

(and not the player and his/her motivations) that should be investigated. Challenging this view, I argue that Gadamer's focus on the 'essence' of play does not address childhood agency, a major pre-occupation in my research and deflects attention from the meanings which children attach to the forms of play in which they participate. The problem with a focus on the essence of play is that it reinforces the presumed natural connection between play and childhood, and doing so overlooks the meanings children attach to the forms of play in which they engage. Criticising Gadamer's (1984) understanding of play as intrinsically linked to childhood, my research focuses on play as a fertile site for the production of gender in which children are active role players who constantly 'police' and regulate each other's behaviours along the lines of gender stereotypes. In the context of this study, to think about and treat children as active agents in gender identity construction means acknowledging that children, just like adults, are constrained by long-standing gender norms. However, at the same time, they actively construct and negotiate gender and gender power relations through different forms of everyday social interactions, including play (Thorne, 1993). Influenced by the NSC, this study explores how children at Sun Shine Primary construct being boys and being girls through play. In part, this involves exploring the patterns in which children deal with gender norms and associated pressures to conform to these; I explore how the young children reinforce and challenge gender norms through their play. The following sections present a thematic review of selected research studies which serves to illustrate what it means to view gender in children's play from the NSC and poststructuralist feminist lenses.

### **Children constructing gender boundaries through play**

The concept of gender boundaries is used to describe the complex social mechanisms which children use to establish differences between and among themselves as boys and girls. In this study my focus is the role performed by play in constructing these differences. There is widespread evidence of the gendered nature of children's play behaviours in the literature (Thorne, 1993; Kehily, 2007; Petrone, 2010; Martin, 2011). For example, in her US-based ethnographic study of elementary school children at play, Thorne (1993:64) uses the term 'borderwork' to conceptualise children's gendered play patterns and the strategies they used to reinforce gender borders in their play. She highlights the gender segregation that characterised children's play:

walking across a school playground from the paved areas where kids play jump rope and hopscotch to the grassy playing field and games of soccer and baseball, one moves from groups of girls to groups of boys. The spatial separation of boys and girls constitutes a kind of boundary, perhaps felt most strongly by individuals who want to join an activity controlled by the other gender (Thorne, 1993:64).

Thorne (1993) identified the different ways in which borderwork manifested among these children. For example, some borderwork took the form of contests where gender homogenous groups played against each other. Another form of borderwork was observed in children's cross-gender rituals on the playground which involved boys and girls playing together but always in gender homogenous groups such as the boys who chased girls (Thorne, 1993). In another ethnographic study with young children at play at a nursery school in London, Martin (2011) documents how children construct gender differences through their playground games. For example, Martin (2011:48) demonstrates how girls constructed skipping as an activity only for girls. Martin (2011) found that girls did not allow boys to join in their skipping games; they justified this by constructing boys as people who are naturally poor at skipping. Martin's (2011) interactions with the girls who were skipping revealed that the general rule in skipping games was that one had to be a girl to join in. Clark and Paechter (2007) highlight how the stereotypical construction of football as a masculine game allows boys to exclude girls by constructing them as weak and poor at football. The construction of different forms of play in such gendered ways produces and reinforces differences, rather than commonalities, between boys and girls. However, other researchers have observed that gendered differences and divisions exist not only between the sexes but also within individual gender groups. For example, Frosh *et al's* (2003) study, which focused on 11-14 year-old boys and their constructions of being boys in London, found that football played an important role in the construction of hierarchies and divisions within the category of boy. Some boys were teased or ridiculed and constructed by their peers as not 'properly' male and thus as effeminate and 'gay' for showing little interest or ability in football. In similar vein, Petrone (2010) documents how some young boys in a play park in the US were produced by their peers as 'girly' and inadequate as males for failing to master a level of skill in skateboarding. Games such as football and skateboarding contribute to the fiction of a unitary masculine identity, with associations with masculinity, physical toughness and heterosexuality (Connell, 1995). As I elaborate below, identities of masculinity and femininity are not homogeneous or fixed to nature as implied by essentialist and sex-role socialisation perspectives on gender. Rather, from the poststructuralist feminist stance, the identities of boy and girl are understood as multiple and fluid (Francis, 1998; Davies, 2003; Paechter, 2010). This multiplicity and fluidity manifests in the ways in which borders of gender are frequently 'transgressed' through play, a practice which Thorne (1993) conceptualises as 'border crossing'.

While children mostly adhere to gender boundaries within play, some choose to transgress the boundaries of masculinity and femininity. Gender transgressions in relation to play can take many different forms depending on the social setting, gender typing of games and people involved. For example, McGuffey and Rich (1999) use the concept of a 'gender transgression zone' to describe



the process of gender boundary transgression among the 5-12 year old children they observed during play at a summer camp in the US. This area of activity where boys and girls conduct heterosocial relations in the hopes of either expanding or maintaining current gender boundaries in child culture is where gender transgression takes place. A boy playing hand-clapping games (e.g., patty cake) or a girl completing an obstacle course that is designed to determine ‘manliness’, are instances of transgressions in the ‘gender transgression zone’. McGuffey and Rich (1999) found that, gender transgression for boys involved boys who played stereotypically feminine games such as jump rope, and for girls, it involved playing games constructed as for boys such as football. Children’s ‘transgressions’ of gender norms are important for poststructuralist feminist theory because they reveal the multiplicity of identities of boy and girl in ways which challenge the naturalisation and homogeneity of these identities implied by the essentialist and sex-role socialisation understandings of gender. The poststructuralist feminist perspective on gender maintains that gender is not a way of being that children passively learn from significant others as postulated by sex role socialisation (Blaise, 2009; MacNaughton, 2000). Instead, emphasis is placed on how gender norms are negotiated and performed as children interact with different people and in different contexts (Walkerdine, 1981; Thorne, 1993; MacNaughton, 2000, Frosh *et al*, 2003, Azzarito *et al*, 2006). However, as Butler (1990:140) argued, ‘we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right’; children who transgress gender boundaries often incur various repercussions for play behaviours which are seen as violating normative ways of doing boy or girl through play. As I elaborate below, these repercussions work to discourage gender transgression, thereby reproducing the boundaries of gender during play.

### **‘Policing’ of ‘gender transgression’ during play**

Children who ‘transgress’ gender boundaries often experience various forms of unpleasant and emotionally damaging treatment by their peers. Throughout this study, I use the concept of ‘policing’ to describe the various strategies children use to maintain boundaries between and among themselves as girls and boys. In this sense, the policing of gender helps to reproduce the view of masculinity and femininity as unitary and homogenous identities. The literature suggests that there exist a myriad of strategies to police gender in childhood. These range from verbal messages and physical signs of disapproval, to fear of being insulted, mocked and alienated. For example, McGuffey and Rich (1999) observed that boys who transgressed normative ways of doing boy through play faced rejection and other forms of bullying by their male peers at the camp. They were subject to verbal abuse through teasing and name-calling. McGuffey and Rich (1999) note that boys who played stereotypically feminine activities such as jump rope or who generally played with girls were labelled ‘faggot’ or ‘gay’ and harshly rejected by other boys. For McGuffey and Rich (1999)

the rejection of some boys constructed as gay or faggot due to their interest in forms of play perceived as feminine is a form of homophobic practice whose social function is to deter other boys from transgressing the norms of masculinity for fear of name-calling and rejection. Plummer (2001) observes that homophobia is particularly applied to boys who do not show an interest in team games that are stereotypically constructed as masculine such as football. Homophobic bullying, where boys assert themselves as tough hegemonic males through teasing and ridiculing other boys whom they construct as weak and effeminate because they do not play football or are slight in build are common cultural practices reported in Frosh *et al* (2003), as well as in other school based studies of boys and masculinities (Nayak & Kehily, 1996). In their research on young people's constructions of gender identities at school, Nayak and Kehily (1996) observe that young people's homophobic performances and expressions took the form of name-calling which manifested in elaborate and imaginative games in which the boys labelled 'gay' were treated as aliens and constantly faced mockery and rejection. These practices emerge as a powerful means to police and regulate gender transgression among boys. Among girls gender transgression is policed and regulated in a different way.

In her study on the ways in which 9-11 year old children construct the term 'tomboy', Paechter (2010) found that this term was commonly applied to girls who played football; it was used in ways which disassociated these girls from a 'feminine' identity. Paechter (2010) notes that 'tomboy' was constantly constructed in opposition to the term, 'girly girl' which was used in the construction of what was seen as 'normative' way of 'doing' the identity of girl. For example, Paechter (2010) observes that performing girl in a 'normative' way involved wearing skirts and make-up and not excelling at sports constructed as masculine such as football. In contrast, girls who were constructed by their peers as tomboys, or who self-identified as tomboys, constructed themselves in ways which deviated from the constructions of what it is to be a 'girly girl' (Paechter, 2010). In similar vein, McGuffey and Rich (1999) found that when boys played football with a 'transgressing' girl, they masculinised her through the label of tomboy which is used with connotations of being a 'weird' girl. However, McGuffey and Rich (1999) found that although the gender boundaries for girls and boys were equally clear, the consequences for girl-transgressors were not as unpleasant as those experienced by boy-transgressors. While boys are generally criticised and stigmatised by other boys for transgressing gender during play, girls are not stigmatised by other girls for challenging gender norms on the playground (McGuffey & Rich, 1999). Based on her observations and experiences as a teacher at primary schools in Australia, Jordan (1995) found that enormous pressure is placed on boys (compared to girls) to conform to stereotypical gender norms. This put a heavy strain on young boys to live up to gender norms. She found that boys are often expected to validate their

masculinity through engaging in fights and playing ‘boy’ sports and games. Failure to subscribe to these gendered behaviours often led to rejection and name-calling towards boys who behaved in ways seen as deviating from the perceived ideal of a ‘hegemonic male’ (Jordan, 1995). Connell (1995) used the concept of hegemonic masculinity to describe a myriad of social processes that reinforce the dominant discourse of gender which elevates and privileges the power and status of masculinity over femininity. Messner (1994:209) explains that the attraction of sports in the construction of hegemonic masculinity derives from young males finding the ‘rule-bound structure of games and sports to be a psychologically ‘safe’ place in which they can get (non-intimate) connection with others within a context that maintains clear boundaries, distance, and separation from others’. Most boys support hegemonic masculinity in relation to subordinated masculinities and femininities because it not only gives boys power over an entire sex (that is, girls), but offers the opportunity to acquire power over members of their own sex (Connell, 1995:79). Different kinds of masculinities often have differential access to power, practices of power and the effects of power (Haywood & Macan Ghail, 2001). However, as Foucault (1982) argued, power is complex in the sense that it is always characterised by resistance by subordinated groups. Applying Foucault’s (1982) conception of the complexity of power to the study of gender in children’s play, the literature indicates that girls are not subservient to boys’ claims of power. Rather, while girls emerge as people who are marginalised by the forces of hegemonic masculinity, they are also actively engaged in acts of resistance to boys’ forms of exercising power on the playground.

### **Dynamics of gender power relations in children’s play**

In recognising primary schools as sites of historically varying contradictions that actively construct gender identities, Thorne (1993:199) argues that ‘power is central to the social relations of gender’. Indeed, researchers influenced by poststructuralist feminist ways of theorising gender in childhood have emphasised the complex ways in which gender power relations operate in children’s cross-gender play interactions (Walkerdine, 1981; Bhana, 2005; Martin, 2011). These researchers argue that power does not rest in the sphere of boys who simply exercise it over passive and conforming girls. Rather, the significance of these researchers’ work lies in how they demonstrate the complex ways in which traditional male-centred gender power relations are reproduced and challenged in children’s play. For example, Walkerdine (1981) observed teacher-supervised gender-mixed play at a nursery school in the UK. She highlights how this provided opportunities for particular kinds of gender polarised performances. Games were often structured by the teacher in ways that emphasised gender differences and the assumed power of males over females in an imaginative role play of ‘doctors and nurses’ in which the ‘nurses’ (girls) were asked to ‘help’ the ‘doctors’ (boys). She also reports on girls’ forms of resistance to being constantly positioned as subordinate to boys.

In the ‘doctors and nurses’ game, one of the girls took on and played the role of a mother in relation to the male doctors, and undermined the dominant power of males by infantilising them and asking if they had ‘eaten their greens’ and done their domestic chores. In her research with seven-to-eight year-old children at play at a primary school in Durban, Bhana (2005) documented how girls challenged boys’ domination on the playground by enacting sexualised games in which they lifted their dresses to show off their panties. The boys abandoned the play space as they found this practice disgusting and contaminating to their construction of masculinity which involved a clear separation from girls. Gendered play rituals and practices like these emerge as girls’ powerful forms of resistance to boys’ claims of power and domination over girls during play. However, the sexualised nature of the strategy the young girls in Bhana’s (2005) study used to challenge boys’ domination on the playground is more interesting as it overturns the common-sense assumption that reifies sexual innocence among primary school age children. Drawing evidence from the literature, the following section explores other ways in which sexuality features in young children’s social worlds.

### **Cultures of sexuality in children’s playground games**

The work of poststructuralist feminist scholars such as Epstein (1997), Renold (2000; 2006), Bhana (2002; 2005; 2007) and Blaise (2009) has shown how children’s constructions of ‘normative’ gender identities often intertwine with the dominant discourse of sexuality. Pattman and Chege (2003:151) define sexuality as follows:

sexuality concerns the way we think about others and ourselves as sexual beings. This is not derived exclusively from our biological make up. Rather, our sense of others and ourselves as sexual beings depends upon popular social ways of conceptualising and representing sex, gender and sexual relationships.

Dominant constructions of childhood present primary school age children as non-sexual beings; sexuality is exclusively associated with constructions of adolescence and adulthood (Piper, 2000). However, evidence from research informed by poststructuralist feminist ways of thinking about gender in childhood indicates the manner in which sexuality is embedded in the ways children construct their gender identities through play. Renold’s (2000) ethnographic study of children’s constructions of gender identities at two primary schools found that heterosexuality underpins much of children’s everyday social interactions. However, Renold (2000:309-310) highlights the different ways boys and girls become subject to the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality, whereby, to ‘be’ a ‘normal’ girl or boy involves the construction and positioning of the self as a conforming (hetero)sexual being. Bhana’s (2002) ethnography of the constructions of gender among school children from grades one to two in Durban reveals the ways in which children construct their

gender/sexual identities through a patterned cross-gender kissing game called ‘kissing catches’ on the playground. She observes that teachers found this sexualised game inappropriate and it was subsequently banned at school. Due to the banning, when the children spoke about it, Bhana (2002) was warned not to tell the teachers that they continued to play it despite the prohibition. McGuffey and Rich’s (1999:614) study in the US reports on young boys’ sexually degrading comments about girls. McGuffey and Rich (1999) argue that these kinds of comments are often used by boys as a benchmark to convince peers and friends that they are sexually mature, active, knowledgeable and definitely heterosexual. Bird (1996) understands the sexual objectification of girls as one of the common ways in which boys assert themselves as heterosexual beings. Against the background of these studies which indicate how children’s constructions of ‘intelligible’ gender identities are tied to notions of heterosexuality, this study explores how sexuality features in young children’s constructions of the identities of masculinity and femininity through play.

### **Summary**

This chapter explored the positions held by the poststructuralist feminist and NSC theories with regard to gender and childhood. The poststructuralist feminist theory engages with gender in a way that critiques the essentialist view of gender as something which we ‘have’ that makes us behave in preordained ways. The poststructuralist feminist theory is critical of the sex-role socialisation theory for focusing on gender as socially produced without addressing masculinities and femininities as plural and dynamic identities which are mediated by complex power relations. In criticising the essentialist view of gender as a biological essence and the sex-role socialisation assumption of gender as something that is homogenous and unitary, the poststructuralist feminist theory focuses on how multiple versions of masculinities and femininities are constructed and performed relationally through everyday forms of social interaction such as play among children. The contribution of the NSC to this argument is its focus on the reconceptualisation of childhood, from viewing children mainly through their relations with adults to engaging with them as active agents in society who attach meanings to their behaviours, cultures and relationships. By applying the concept of agency in relation to the study of children’s constructions of gender identities, the NSC offers a useful analytical tool to explore how young children construct and assert themselves as gendered beings through play.

Examples were drawn from different research studies influenced by these theories in the way they engage with gender in children’s play. Several themes were identified. Firstly, children produce and police their gender identities through forms of play. Secondly, because gender relations are not based on natural inclinations, gendered forms of play and relations among children are often subject

to transgression. Children's transgressions of gender norms in play are very interesting for poststructuralist feminist theorists because they show us that gender is a social practice rather than a biological fact. As particular kinds of social practices of being male or female, gender identities are not fixed and static; rather, they are complex, multiple and fluid. However, as gender transgressions happen during play, they are constantly policed by peers through various means such as rejection, name-calling and homophobia. The denigrating and degrading manner in which boys and girls who 'transgress' gender norms are often treated by their peers at school is a powerful strategy to police and discourage transgression, thereby reinforcing conformity to the dominant discourse of gender polarity. Thirdly, the literature indicates that gender in children's play functions not only as an important source of identification for children, but is also a dimension of power. Dominant and patriarchal gender power relations are asserted and inverted through play. Last, but not least, the literature suggests that children's constructions of gender identities involve constant references to (hetero)sexuality. In asserting and producing themselves as 'normal' boys and girls through play, children insert themselves in heterosexualised subject positions. This critical literature on childhood social identities is an important resource that I draw on in making sense of the empirical material gathered for this study.

While the NSC advocates for the conceptualisation of children as active agents in society, how can we address children as active agents in sociological research? This important question is explored in the following chapter which focuses on the kinds of child-centred research methods utilised to investigate young children's constructions and experiences of being boys and girls through play in the unique schooling setting.

## Chapter Three

### Research with children: an ethnographic approach

#### Introduction

The kind of research I am doing *with* children seeks to position them as active participants with whom I work as co-producers of knowledge in the research process (James & James, 2012:10; Pattman, 2013:122). Writing about methodological approaches which seek to engage children as active agents in research in order to explore aspects of childhood from the perspectives of children themselves, Prout and James (1997:8) argue that:

ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood. It allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research.

My key aim to address children as experts on their everyday social worlds and learn from them about their lives and identities informed my decision to use ethnography as the research design for this study. This chapter describes the ethnographic approach by focusing on the following themes and questions:

What is ethnography and why and how is it used in this study as a research design?

Who are the key informants and why and how were they selected to be part of the study sample?

What is participant-observation and why and how is it applied in this study: who and what was observed, and what forms did participation take?

Ethical considerations and dilemmas in participatory research with young children;

Recording, transcribing, coding, validating and analysing the empirical data.

The chapter begins by defining the method of participant-observation as well as the ethnographic design within which this method is located.

#### **Ethnography as a research design: towards ‘learning from kids’**

Thorne (1993:11) uses the term ‘learning from kids’ to describe a child-centred research approach which seeks to democratise adult-child power relations in order to engage with children as experts on their social lives. In this kind of research, the researcher works *with* the children as co-producers

of sociological knowledge. Thorne (1993:16) observes that to be able to learn from kids,

...adults have to challenge the deep assumption that they already know what children are 'like', both because, as former children, adults have been there, and because, as adults, they regard children as less complete versions of themselves... When adults seek to learn about and from children, the challenge is to resist being treated as an adult with formal power and authority.

Taking a child-centred approach to learning from children the meanings they attach to gender and how these manifest in or shape and influence their play behaviours, I tried to establish child-centred relationships with the children. I tried to democratise the relations I established with the children by constantly resisting being associated with the formal power and authority which the children associated with their teachers. I did this by hanging around and interacting with the children on the playground, something which the teachers did not do. Rather than approaching the children as an adult-male figure of authority, I treated them with respect and constantly inverted their deferential way of relating to me as 'Sir' or 'Mr Mayeza' by asking them to address me by my first name, Emmanuel. I participated in the children's playground activities as an amateur interested in learning from them about their games.

Originating in the discipline of social and cultural anthropology, ethnography involves the study of the particular meanings that members of certain 'ethnos' or social/cultural groups or communities attach to their everyday social behaviours, practices, interactions, activities, events and affairs (Erickson, 1984; Grant & Fine, 1992; Henning *et al*, 2004). As Grant and Fine (1992) point out, to be able to understand a culture from the perspective of an insider, researchers need to immerse themselves in the cultural and social lives of the people under study. This often involves a researcher taking up roles as both an observer and participant in the setting (Henslin, 2001). In conducting this study at the primary school, I took on the dual role of observer and participant in which I directly observed children at play, but also participated in their activities from time to time and as was necessary in order to gain insight into the meanings children attach to themselves as boys and girls. This dual role fits the definition of participant-observation.

Kawulich (2005) defines participant-observation as a method to collect data in qualitative research whereby a researcher aims to learn about a culture or social practice by combining observations with a myriad of other forms of participatory research. For DeWalt and DeWalt (2002), observing peoples' social behaviours in their setting, talking to them and participating in their activities defines the practice of participant-observation. Using participant-observation as a method, I documented not only what was happening on the playground during break or in class during



playtime sessions, but spoke with different children as they played and explored their views about the relationship between play and gender. Participation took two forms. Firstly, it involved me observing and interacting with the children as they played, both in and outside the classroom. Secondly, it involved the children participating in various research exercises which involved them drawing and telling stories about themselves and their play behaviours at school. These participatory research exercises enabled me to work with the children to produce sociological knowledge. The children were active participants who produced data in the form of drawings and narratives. My role was to introduce the children to the research exercises and encourage them to participate. I encouraged talk about gender by constantly picking up on topics that the children raised through their drawings and stories and I posed questions to further explore these issues. The following section provides an overview of the sample of key informants for this study and the process of sample selection.

### **How my sample of key informants emerged in the process of doing the research**

The inductive nature of my research implied that the selection of key informants developed in the process of interacting with different people in the school setting. I use the term ‘key informants’ to describe the particular group of children that were ‘official’ participants in this study. Being a learner at the school automatically positioned a learner as a potential participant, especially in relation to the unstructured observations and fleeting conversations during play. However, the sample of key informants consisted of children whose parents/guardians granted informed consent for their child to participate in the study. Only children whose parents gave informed consent were allowed to participate in the semi-structured participatory research exercises conducted as part of the study. Therefore, although every pupil was likely to be observed during play in the school yard, not every single pupil was a key informant. By and large, the selection of key informants was a spontaneous process which depended on the nature of my relationships with different boys and girls and the issues they raised in relation to play when I spoke to them. The children who populated this study are those with whom I developed close relationships during open-ended observations on the playground when I began my fieldwork at the school. My relationships with children in the playground were gendered in the sense that it was mostly the boys who regularly played football on the playground during break whom I befriended. What drew my focus to these boys was not only my interest in them and their strong investment in football as a source of identification. But these boys, which I like to call ‘footballing boys’ to highlight the way they engaged with football as not just a game they played but a key signifier of masculinity, often came to me to invite me to play with them. In contrast, I hardly received similar invitations from girls who often skipped on the playground. I elaborate on how and why I established different kinds of relationships with boys and

girls on the playground in chapter four.

Significantly, the children that I befriended and hung around with a lot during open-ended observations on the playground automatically became my potential key informants, provided informed consent was received from their parents/guardians. My interactions with the children with whom I established close relationships indicated that boys and girls were teased and ridiculed for not being 'proper' boys and girls, notably boys, in their interests and activities on the playground. As a result of such findings, I became interested in exploring the categories of gender which the children used by engaging with people who were seen as 'transgressing' as well as embodying particular gender norms. Therefore, the sample of key informants included both my 'friends' who constructed their gender identities in 'normative' ways through play as well as pupils who my 'friends' categorised as 'other' for playing outside the perceived normative boundaries of masculinity and femininity. Engaging both 'gender-normative' and 'gender-transgressive' boys and girls at Sun Shine enabled a diverse sample that was representative of different social categories within which children position themselves and are positioned by their peers at the school. Although not every pupil at the school was a key informant, the diversity in terms of gender and age in the group of children who populated this study suggests that different children's constructions and experiences of gender through play are represented in the analysis of the findings from chapter five to seven. This is important to note as it militated against the potential bias related to selecting key informants based on the interests, qualities and characteristics they share with the researcher (DeMunck & Sabo, 1998). As an adult male, and having been a young boy, I tried to diversify my sample of key informants by including not only my 'friends' (a category which I develop more in chapter four), but boys who expressed a dislike of football while showing interest in perceived feminine forms of play such as skipping, as well as girls who skipped and those who expressed interest in forms of play perceived as masculine at the school.

The manner in which some children came to be key informants, based on their diverse and contrasting interests and choices in relation to play, resonate with the elements of a purposive sampling method. Maxwell (1997) defines purposive sampling as a type of non-probability sampling strategy in which individuals have to possess certain qualities and characteristics determined by the researcher in order to be considered potential participants. Patton (2001:116) adds that, in purposive sampling, decisions regarding the number and characteristics of key informants largely depend on the researcher's own judgement regarding their suitability for the study; taking into account their ability to provide the information required to address the research question. The purposefully selected and diverse sample of boys and girls at the primary school

enabled different children's constructions of gender through play to be explored in this study.

Although young boys and girls populate the study sample as they provided insights into what gender means in their social worlds, some of the teachers at the school also formed part of the sample. I invited some teachers who taught different grades to participate in semi-structured interviews in which their views and perceptions on gender in children's play were explored. As elaborated in chapter five, one of the key findings that emerged from these interviews indicates a contradiction in that teachers constructed play in terms of 'free-choice', while the data from interactions with pupils during play illuminate ways in which play is constrained by social expectations regarding gender.

### **Ethical issues and dilemmas in the research process**

Ethics in social research are guidelines or standards that outline how researchers should engage with their (potential) participants in ways that are sensitive to their rights to voluntary participation after they have been informed of all the possible risks and benefits associated with participation in a study (Babbie, 2001; Orb *et al*, 2001; Strydom, 2002). Against this background, Research Ethics Committees (RECs) tend to focus mainly on conducting research in an 'ethical manner' and this involves, in part, putting measures to protect research participants from any form of harm in the research process. In my case, to gain ethical clearance from my university faculty REC meant convincing the REC that permission from the school authorities was attained and that informed consent/assent forms were prepared for all potential participants in my research. For these consent forms to be acceptable to the REC, they needed to stress that participation was voluntary and that the identities of participants were to be protected. Below, I outline these ethical concerns in relation to my study as well as the challenges I encountered in relation these. As I do this, I point out what I see as some of the limitations of what constitutes ethics in research as defined by the REC in relation to my own research.

#### *Negotiating access to the schooling site*

The process of negotiating entry to the school site began with a formal application to the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (KZNDoE) seeking permission to conduct the study at Sun Shine Primary. This application was approved. The school principal also granted permission for the study. However, I also needed to obtain further informed consent/assent from different groups of people in the setting.

*Gaining informed consent/assent*

The purpose of the ethical principle of informed consent/assent is to provide potential participants with the necessary information in relation to the study so that they are able to make a voluntary and informed decision on whether to participate or not (Babbie, 2001; Strydom, 2002; Henning *et al*, 2004). The informed consent/assent letters/forms given to potential participants outlined the nature and scope of the study and the autonomy of participants and highlighted that participants' identities would be treated in a confidential manner through the use of pseudonyms. I described what would be expected of the potential participants if they chose to be part of the study. Potential participants were informed that signing informed consent/assent forms indicated that they understood the study and voluntarily chose to participate; however, they were free to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

However, a person who signs an informed consent form must be legally and psychologically competent to sign contractual documents (Strydom, 2002:65-66). As children are considered not yet 'grown-ups' and therefore lacking legal capacity or competence to commit themselves contractually (SA Child Justice Act 75/2008), it was necessary that I obtain parents or legal guardians' informed consent before the children participated in the semi-structured exercises. I wrote a letter to the parents/guardians with information about myself and my contact details, as well as the nature and scope of my research. I provided space for parents/guardians to insert their details and sign and return the forms to me if they agreed to their child's participation in the study. Parents/guardians were instructed to cut off and retain the information section on the study and my details for their records and only return the section of the letter where they completed their details, the details of the child-participant and their signature and the date. Potential key informants were instructed to return the signed section of the informed consent letters/forms to their respective class teachers, and I collected these from the teachers. Ninety percent of the informed consent letters/forms issued to parents/guardians were returned with signatures of consent, while some were returned without signatures and others were not returned at all. Both of the latter cases were taken to signal a lack of consent and the child concerned was removed from the sample of potential key informants.

Following the receipt of parental/guardian informed consent, all the children who were key informants were asked to individually sign informed assent forms to indicate that they understood what the study was about and what participation would entail. These forms were designed and presented in a child-friendly layout which was colourful with images of young people at play and were written in accessible language. I did not simply give children the forms to read and sign on their own; rather, I remained present to assist them and answer their questions. I read and re-read

the assent form to them and explained the details to ensure that they understood the content. I allowed them to ask questions about the study and the form itself after which I told them that if they were willing to participate in the study they needed to tick a 'YES' box on the form and write their names in the space provided. It was explained that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, even after having expressed assent, without any consequences. Although I told the children that they were free to leave the study, no one left. But, instead, I often had more participants than anticipated. Partly, this was due to some of my official participants who invited their friends to our research meetings. Indeed, the friendly and playful relations I developed with the children encouraged them to be generally more eager to be in the study than to withdraw. Furthermore, all teachers who participated in the study were required to read, complete and sign informed consent before participating in interviews.

### *Protecting confidentiality/anonymity*

In the context of this study, the concepts of confidentiality and anonymity are treated as synonymous in the sense that they both define the researcher's responsibility to protect his/her participants' identities and personal information in any form of dissemination of the research findings (Strydom, 2002). In order to protect confidentiality/anonymity, pseudonyms are used for both the participants and school. Furthermore, the township in which the school is based is also assigned a pseudonym. It is a small township with only one junior primary school, a senior primary school and a high school. By identifying the name of the township, it would have been easy for anyone to identify the junior primary school in the study. However, the drawings produced by the children as research data raised some complexities in relation to confidentiality/anonymity.

The ethical principle of ensuring confidentiality/anonymity became complicated when some children wanted their drawings published with their biographical names. This would have divulged their identity, violating the confidentiality/anonymity guaranteed in the assent/consent agreement. In keeping with the principles of ethical research, the drawings are treated in a confidential manner by concealing the artists' biographical name and a pseudonym is created to disguise a child's identity when writing about the child who created a particular drawing. Malchiodi (1998) comments, that, children's drawings should be considered confidential expressions shared by a child while acting as a key informant in a research study. However, as elaborated below, the children's drawings also raised another ethical dilemma in relation to control and ownership.

### *The question of ownership of drawings*

The question of ownership of the drawings produced by the children as part of the activities in the

research study raised another ethical dilemma which I had not considered before undertaking the study. The following extract from my research diary highlights the way in which this question emerged during fieldwork and how I responded to it:

It would have been really helpful had I been clearer with the children about what will happen to the drawings before they began drawing. As a researcher and facilitator in the process which created the drawings I did not think that questions will be raised by the children in relation to my claim of ownership of the drawings. However, when some of the children questioned my instruction to them to leave behind the drawings they created at the end of the participatory research session made me realise how I have taken for granted the ownership of drawings to my favour without considering how children who authored the drawings might feel about this. That some children wanted to retain the drawings emerged after I have instructed the group of participants to leave drawings behind at the end of the research exercise in which children drew pictures of themselves at play and through which I stimulated talk with them about their perceptions of gender and how these inform their play patterns. Not all children in the research group were happy to leave their drawings with me. Recognising this concern and taking it seriously as an ethical one, I called everyone to settle down then I began explaining that I needed to have copies of the drawings for purposes of my research and that these copies were likely to be published as part of the findings of the study. I then asked if there were others who also wanted to retain their drawings besides the two girls who started the conversation about the ownership of drawings when they approached me with questions such as: 'why are we leaving our drawings behind? Can we ever have them back to us?' Few more hands were raised, I then wrote their names down and explained that I needed to take all the drawings so that I could scan them so that I could have copies for myself and return the original drawings to their respective authors. This confusion would have been avoided had I explained clearly to the children what was going to happen to the drawings at the end of the session, this would have enabled me to explore and understand their opinions and feelings about this rather than taking it for granted that as a researcher I have all the control and ownership of the data produced in the research (12/03/2013).

It is interesting that these young children did not passively accept what I said but questioned my instruction to leave their drawings behind. This exemplifies the children's expression of agency as they negotiated their interests in relation to the ownership and control of the drawings with me as an adult. The children's agency described in the above diary note was manifested in the way in which they enlightened me about how complex data ownership can be in participatory research with children. It forced me to reconsider my assumption, that as the researcher I owned the data. Although some of the children wanted to retain their drawings, I needed to retain the drawings as they formed part of the ethnographic data for the study. In retrospect, and in line with Malchiodi's (1998) advice, the issue of ownership of drawings should have been addressed in the informed assent form and information sheet that children were required to understand and sign before committing themselves to the study. As some of the children wanted to keep their drawings, I saw it as my ethical responsibility to respect their wishes and interests. Therefore, I scanned the drawings to make copies for myself and the original drawings were returned to the children who requested them.

*Limitations of popular understandings of what constitutes ethics in research*

The way in which the REC tended to reduce ethics in research to informed consent and confidentiality when I applied for ethical clearance is problematic. For example, as discussed above, as my data included drawings created by children, children's desire to be known in their drawings and how to respond to this in relation to the ethical principle of confidentiality is an ethical issue which emerged in the research process and which was not considered by the REC. Also, my research was motivated by ethical concerns to encourage voices to young people to talk about their concerns and interests. This raised a number of ethical issues which relate to homophobic bullying, gender-based violence and my own position as a researcher which I had not anticipated before my research. Furthermore, the unpredictability of my research which follows from my concern to engage with the children as authorities meant that it was impossible to predict what they were going to say in my interactions with them. One of the key issues which emerged in my research was the significance which children attached to sexuality as a source of identification and popularity as well as unpopularity (in relation to 'homophobic' bullying). Yet, I did not say to the REC that I was going to explore this in my research. My ethical concern to address the children as the authorities about their lives and learn from them about how they construct their social world encouraged me to listen and take seriously what they were saying rather than ignoring them on the basis of ethics as defined by the REC<sup>6</sup>.

**Overview of the ethnographic fieldwork**

My ethnographic fieldwork at the primary school involved three main activities: direct observations of children's play in and outside the classroom, informal and semi-structured conversations with children which were stimulated through drawings (Stuart & Smith, 2011) and semi-structured interviews with some of the teachers. Each of these methods and the different forms of data they produced are described below.

*Observing children's play in and outside the classroom*

In conducting observations of play, the stance I took was that of an observer-as-participant (Adler & Adler, 1994). Observing and interacting with children at play, rather than being a completely detached observer, enabled me to document not only the children's play behaviours in the setting

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<sup>6</sup> The criticism towards popular understandings of ethics in research as presented in this section should not be seen as directed towards the University of Stellenbosch Research Ethics Committee as this body is constituted to enforce the regulations of the national Department of Health. The restrictions on research with children have now been relaxed by the Department of Health and the 'vetting' of such research proposals have become the ambit of Departmental Ethics Committees, where constructions of what constitutes ethical research can be discussed in a much more contextual manner.

but to explore the meanings the players attached to the different forms of play they engage in as resources of gendered identifications and dimensions of power. Henslin (2001) highlights the advantage of combining observations with forms of participation in the social activities of the people under study as follows:

the advantage of a sociological method that includes participation of some sort by the researcher, or one that at least includes detailed observation, is that the researcher can understand an actor's own construction of reality – how he/she sees him/herself in the context of some life situation – and thereby gain insight into *his/her* motivation for a particular act (Henslin, 2001:9-10).

My interactions with children in the playground context took two forms. Firstly, I interacted with them through informal and fleeting conversations. Conducting 'interviews' with children in the playground context posed several difficulties and constraints. For example, it was difficult to conduct long and sustained conversations with the children who hardly remained in one position for a long time but constantly moved about the playground. However, what made the playground a particularly difficult context in which to conduct 'interviews' with children was not only the fact that children moved around a lot, but the playground was also very noisy. The noise from children's activities, shouting, chanting and talking in the playground during break made it difficult for me to hear clearly what was said in my conversations with them especially when they were in a group and spoke to me at once and over each other. One of the approaches which I developed as I attuned myself to the dynamics of the playground and particular children as they moved about and made lot of noise was to have my voice recorder switched on at all times, and not relying on note taking alone to record the conversations. Furthermore, I used my camera to take pictures of objects, spaces, behaviours, activities and relations among children in the playground and used these photos in my interactions with children in more formal classroom settings as a means of encouraging them to reflect on and talk about the playground in terms of how and why they behave and position themselves in the ways they do as kinds of boys and girls in the school.

Secondly, and as I elaborate in chapter four, I actively participated in the children's play activities; this enabled me to deconstruct my presumed adult-male position of formal authority, build rapport and democratise my relationships with children in the setting.

I visited the school for observations three days a week from Tuesday to Thursday and also on Mondays and Fridays when necessary for research activities, such as an appointment with a particular teacher for an interview. In addition to the weekends, Mondays and Fridays when I was normally not at the school were used to transcribe the recorded conversations and work on the other forms of data already collected; this included reviewing, expanding detail and coding the field notes



recorded in my research diary. My observations of children at play in the school yard took place in three instances: in the morning before the start of classes, during break and after the school day ended when children in lower grades waited for their siblings in senior grades whose school day ended about an hour later. The early morning observations lasted about 30 minutes, from 7h15 to 7h45. Although I normally arrived at school at 7h00, children normally started to appear in the play yard from around 7h15 and disappeared immediately the school bell was rung at 7h45 for prayer assembly, with the first period for the day starting at 8h00. During break, I also observed play for 30 minutes. I approached observations in the play yard with an open-ended question: what is happening in the yard? Struck by the highly gender-differentiated manner in which the play activities, spaces and social interactions were organised among children, I observed and documented the different types of games boys and girls engaged in both as individuals and as gender-homogenous groups. I observed and documented how boys and girls constantly constructed, maintained and transgressed gender borders through their play. I documented different forms in which 'gender-transgression' manifested between boys and girls and explored peers' reactions to the play behaviours perceived as transgressing 'normative' ways of 'doing' boy or girl through play at the school. I observed when, where and in what contexts boys and girls played together and explored the dynamics of power relations which commonly characterised cross-gender interactions in the play yard.

Inside the Grade R class where I observed indoor play behaviours for about 45 minutes each day I was at the school, I documented what and how children were playing during 'free play' sessions. Observing classroom play interactions during 'free play', I documented how children constructed different areas of play, toys and roles in gendered ways which produced constraints and limitations in relation to play opportunities for both boys and girls. I observed how children constructed certain areas of play and toys as for boys and for girls and documented how these gender boundaries were 'policed' by children in order to keep boys and girls apart during play. At the same time, I observed when and how the gender boundaries were occasionally transgressed by some of the children, and the consequences were documented.

To gain information-rich research data on gendered patterns in play, it was necessary for me not to only observe children at play but interact with them through encouraging spontaneous and informal conversations as they played. These were largely spontaneous chit-chats at particular moments. Following the observations of children at play, further semi-structured conversations were conducted in order to explore how they give meaning to the gendered patterns observed in their play patterns. Observing and engaging children in semi-structured conversations enabled me to gain

insight into how children perceive themselves as gendered beings and the significance of play in how they construct gender differences.

### *Conducting semi-structured conversations with the children*

In addition to informal conversations with children at play, semi-structured conversations were conducted with the children where a play-related drawing exercise was used as a means to stimulate gender-focused discussions. Children's drawings as symbolic expressions of thought, opinions, emotions and experiences are widely recognised in childhood interdisciplinary research (Anning, 1997; Malchiodi, 1998; White, 1998; Wright, 2007; Campbell *et al*, 2010). However, in this study drawing activities were used as a child-centred research method to explore how the children construct their gender identities through play at school (Stuart & Smith, 2011). I invited the children to take part in a 'graphic-narrative exercise' (GNE) where I gave them instructions to draw pictures of play incidents involving themselves and their friends at school and then talk about these. Although I did give an instruction regarding what the drawings needed to be about, the children had great leeway and control in terms of what kind of play episode, real or imagined they chose to draw and talk about. For example, the size of figures, colours, contexts and contents of their drawings were largely determined by the children themselves. The children were provided with blank A4 size white sheets of paper, lead pencils, colour pencils, and crayons and I gave an instruction to 'draw a picture of yourself playing your favourite game with friends at school'. Thereafter, each child was given an opportunity to describe and explain his/her drawing. To promote conversations about gender and to understand the content of the drawings, while the children were busy with their drawings I moved from one to another asking them open-ended questions about the details of the drawings they were creating or had created. These spontaneous questions, born out of the drawings themselves, inquired into the meanings different children hold for the gendered play incidents they presented in their individual artworks. The significance of this participatory research exercise is that it encouraged the children to reflect critically on themselves and the taken for granted gendered identifications they forge through play. Beyond this, this form of participatory research exercise encouraged the children to produce knowledge about everyday playground cultures at the school (Gross & Hayne, 1998; Mitchell *et al*, 2005; Stuart & Smith, 2011). Using drawings provided the children space for their voices with regard to the meanings they give to the identities of boy and girl and the significance they attach to play in this meaning making process.

While drawings were a significant method to encourage semi-structured conversations about gender and play with the children, not all semi-structured conversations involved drawings. The 'semi-structured interviewing' method (Bryman, 2001) was also used for forms of interaction with the

children beyond direct observations in play contexts. For example, in order to encourage discussion with the children I formulated interview questions based on my own observations during play, follow ups on topics and issues raised by the children during the GNE exercise and further exploration of topics and themes based on what was said in fleeting conversations during play observations. However, conducting semi-structured interviews with children was not always easy. For example, in my interactions with children I found that it was difficult for many of them to concentrate throughout the duration of interviews. Some of the signs I noticed among the children which I saw as indicating their short concentration span included constant yawning, restlessness, talking to each other about random things, playing, making excuses to leave interviews such as by asking to go to the toilets in groups. Significantly, my observation during semi-structured interviews with different people in the study indicated that the concentration span of children was often shorter compared to that of teachers with whom I sustained interviews with longer duration without interruptions. Below I elaborate on the nature and scope of the interviews which I conducted with some of the teachers in the school setting.

#### *Conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers*

Following observations and interactions with the children, I engaged some of the teachers in semi-structured interviews in order to explore their views and perceptions in relation to gender in children's play. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in different contexts either in a group of three to four or, where teachers could not sit in a group due to teaching responsibilities, individually. Bryman (2001:314) defines a semi-structured interview as a form of interviewing in qualitative research in which the interviewer approaches an interview with one or two open-ended questions with which to initiate discussion and subsequent questions to the interviewee depend on how he/she responds to the initial question. In other words, a semi-structured interview is flexible in the sense that although the interview is initiated by an interviewer posing an initial open-ended question, the types of issues and topics discussed in the interview are largely directed by the interviewee, with the interviewer encouraging further talk by investigating points raised by the interviewee. The emphasis on the interviewee controlling the content and direction of the discussion in a semi-structured interview suggests that a semi-structured interview is participant-centred and, as such, produces in-depth and subjective understandings in relation to the topic under study (Henslin, 2001). In this study, I approached the semi-structured interviews with teachers with two initial questions: how do teachers view gender in children's play? And, how is play constructed by teachers at the school? These questions served as a guide to focus the scope and nature of the discussion on the particular aspects of interest to the study. However, in order to sustain the discussion, I formulated my subsequent questions by probing and pursuing the points the teachers raised in response to each of

my initial questions in single or separate interviews. For example, in a group interview with three Grade R teachers in which my focus was to explore how the teachers construct play in their classroom, I promoted discussion by phrasing the initial question in the following way:

Emmanuel: It's interesting the way play features so greatly in this classroom compared to other [senior] classes in the school. I wonder why there is so much emphasis on play in this Grade R class; something I don't see as much in the other classes?

Ms Ndaba: They [the young children] always learn something through play. Here we have different play areas from which children learn and develop different skills as they play...

This extract forms part of the themes which emerged from my interviews with the teachers that points to the significant valuing teachers attach to play as a form of a child-centred pedagogy. However, as shown in chapter five, the effects of how teachers construct play as 'free' and pedagogical produces and reinforces the gender polarised ways in which the children organise themselves during play. As the above interview extract illustrates, I often rephrased my initial questions in language teachers could relate to. Thus, instead of asking teachers 'how do you *construct* play', I rephrased and deconstructed the question by using practical examples from their own classroom setup, comparing this with other classes at the school in relation to the degree of emphasis placed on play. To make it easier for the teachers to understand the question and respond with useful information, the initial questions were not posed in their exact phrasing in my mind, which may have been regarded as abstract by the teachers, especially if they do not have a background in sociological theories of gender. Apart from posing the initial questions, and focusing the interview on the issues and concerns of the study, at the beginning of the interview I often briefed the teachers about the study, explained its purpose and briefly commented on my key observations made up until that point in order to set the scene for the initial interview question on which the discussions revolved. One of the ways I found useful to formulate probing questions in order to sustain discussions in my semi-structured interviews with the teachers was to frequently ask the teachers to provide examples and illustrations so that they could elaborate on the points they were raising. As discussed below, with permission from the teachers, all semi-structured interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, and transcribed and analysed along with other forms of data from interactions with children in the study.

### **Keeping and analysing the research data**

In this section, I describe how I used my research diary, digital camera and voice recorder as tools to document different forms of data during my ethnographic fieldwork at the schooling site. I also describe how I worked on my collected data; beginning with writing detailed field notes,

transcribing the recorded discussions, coding themes from the transcripts of discussions and analysing and writing the findings in ways that represent how schooling, play and gender is perceived and experienced by different people in the setting.

### *The research diary*

Throughout my fieldwork I kept a diary which I used to document different children's behaviours and interactions during play. However, I often found it challenging to observe children's play behaviours, interactions and relationships while simultaneously writing about these in detail. I could not write very well without looking at what I was writing. By looking down at my diary page every time I wrote about an episode in action I missed some details of the continuing and constantly changing children's activities and interactions on the playground. For this reason, I rarely wrote detailed notes in my research diary during my observations; instead, I wrote brief notes which I expanded on after the observed play episode or interaction. I relied on both my brief field notes and my memory to reconstruct and expand details which I did immediately I returned home after each day of fieldwork at the school. The brief diary notes I managed to take during observations also served as a way of encouraging me to remember and write as much detail as possible about observed behaviours, interactions and relations among and between boys and girls during play.

The research diary was not only used to document children's play observations, but in semi-structured conversations with children and interviews with teachers in order to complement the recordings. For example, in addition to recording the interviews with teachers, I took note of key points raised by the teachers in relation to their views and perceptions of gender in children's play and how these (re)produce, rather than challenge, the observed gender polarised ways in which children organise and behave in their play. While note taking in the interview process was initially intended to serve as a backup in case of technological malfunction, the note taking exercise encouraged me to listen attentively to what the teachers were saying which allowed me to formulate relevant probing questions based on the issues and topics raised by the teachers in response to the initial question.

### *The digital video camera*

Observations of how the young children reinforced and challenged boundaries of masculinity and femininity through play were not only recorded as field notes; I used a digital video camera to take pictures and video clips during play observations. However, this was not without its problems. In the initial stages of my fieldwork, using a camera tended to encourage children to identify me as an adult-other in ways that objectified me as a figure of authority. This was the kind of identification I

wanted to disassociate from in order to democratise my relations with the children so that they would 'open up' in conversations with me as an adult who was interested in them and their social lives. When I entered the Grade R classroom carrying my hand-held digital video camera and started shooting the children at play, the moment children noticed that I was holding a camera and pointing it in their direction they stopped focusing on their play activities and excitedly focused on me and my camera. Most did not hesitate to pose for a photo shoot with some passionately asking me to focus my camera on them and competing for the attention of the camera. Everyone wanted to be in the front line of the group photo they requested I shoot. Using a camera to capture the dynamics of gender in children's play was therefore somewhat problematic as it objectified me as an adult-other or someone who was just a cameraman or photographer rather than a child-centred researcher.

As objectifying as it came to be, I needed to use my camera to capture the ways in which gender 'plays out' in children's playground cultures. I needed to find ways to use the camera without disturbing the play and in ways that did not reproduce my construction and positioning as an authority figure. Subsequently, I sat down with the children, especially the Grade R class where I spent most of my time doing classroom based play observations, and I introduced the camera to the children. I explained how it worked and all of its functions and parts. I explained to them why and for what purpose I wanted to shoot some of their activities and interactions in the class. I emphasised that it was important for me to make and keep records of them and their behaviours, interactions and relations during play. Having gained permission from teachers and parents to use my digital video camera for data recording purposes, it was also important that I also gained the children's assent. I asked them whether or not they were happy with being recorded using a video camera which also had an audio recording function. They all agreed and I promised them that everyone would be given a photo to take home. Following this explanation, the children seemed less interrupted by the camera and were less likely to stop playing to request a photo shoot whenever I came to their play and social circles with a camera in my hand to listen to and join their conversations.

While I was explaining the camera to the children, they were given an opportunity to ask me questions. One of the questions was whether or not they would see the pictures and watch the recordings at the end. I assured them that this would be the case. However, rather than waiting for the end of the fieldwork to playback all the recordings, from time to time children asked for a playback or review of the recordings; they seemed very excited to review the recordings in which they featured. At times, I encouraged further discussions about the gender themes emerging from

the review of the camera recording sessions. In other words, the camera was not only used as equipment to capture the children's behaviours during play but was a means of generating discussions with the children in which I explored their constructions of gender identities through play. For example, after showing the boys a video clip recording them playing football in the school yard, I encouraged them to critically reflect on gender in their play in the following way:

Emmanuel: I wonder why girls are not in this football video, I wonder why girls are not playing football together with you?

Sboniso: No, we don't play with girls. Girls don't play football, girls skip.

Sanele: Girls skip, and we don't skip. We like football, that's our game.

Ntokozo: Girls skip all the time.

Emmanuel: Would you play football with girls if they wanted to?

Ntokozo: Girls can't play football.

Emmanuel to Ntokozo: And that's because...?

Ntokozo: Girls don't like football, they like skipping.

Sboniso: Girls don't know how to play football right, they'll use hands on the ball [Laughs].

Sanele: Everyone knows, football is for boys, and not girls.

Emmanuel to Sanele: Why is football for boys and not for girls?

Sanale: I don't know.

Emmanuel to Sanele: Would you play football with girls?

Sanele: No.

Emmanuel to Sanele: Why not?

Sanele: It's not their game. And they'd cry when hit by the ball [Mocks a girl's crying face].

Sboniso and Ntokozo: [React with laughter and then further perform their own mocking of a girl's cry in which they use saliva to mark tears. There is more laughter and ridicule of girls which show their inabilities in and unsuited qualities for a perceived masculine game of football].

I encouraged gender-focused conversations such as this through reviewing picture and video recordings with the children. Camera-stimulated conversations originated from and built on themes about gender which I captured on camera and further explored by engaging the children in order to explore the particular meanings they attach to the taken for granted gendered patterns which marked their play behaviours and other social interactions at school.

### *The digital voice recorder*

Spradley (2001) and Greeff (2002) advise that it is important to record interviews as this produces a more complete record of the interview than note taking. As already described, although I did write brief notes during semi-structured discussions with the children and teachers, all of these discussions were recorded. However, in keeping with principles of ethical research I gained participants' permission before using the digital voice recorder. This involved explaining why I was using a voice recorder as well as taking notes. I told the participants that what they said was very important and was being taken seriously through the very act of recording the conversations. I

explained that I needed to record the interviews so that I could listen to them later and note exactly what they said; thereby avoiding the possibility of misrepresenting their views and understanding of gender and play. However, as noted below, recording the interviews was not the end of the process of producing rich data; transcribing the recordings in a way that did justice to both the content and contextual form of the interview was equally important.

### *Transcribing the voice recordings*

My engagement with children as active agents who attach meanings to their behaviours and interactions informed how I transcribed my conversations with them in ways which record both what was said and how it was said. In other words, my approach to transcription aimed to produce transcripts that represent what participants said, while at the same time providing an overall picture of the social context within which the interaction occurred. In transcribing my recorded conversations with the children and interviews with teachers, I aimed to represent not only what was said but also how participants behaved and presented themselves in the research encounter, thereby producing data-rich transcripts which incorporate both content and form. This required that I record participants' emotions and other behavioural patterns during the course of the interview/conversation. Emotional tone is noted in brackets at the end of the expression to which it is linked. Laughter is noted in brackets whenever it occurs during the interaction. My observations of certain behaviours such as mockery, disruptiveness or obedience among boys and girls during conversations are noted in brackets at the end of a particular transcription and these also form part of the research data, thereby providing a holistic understanding of the interaction. Transcripts are produced verbatim and summarising, paraphrasing or rephrasing what was said is avoided. However, given that some of my participants sometimes spoke in their home language, IsiZulu, I translated this into English but wrote the original expression in the home language first in italics, followed by an English translation for the understanding of the wider audience. Transcribing my recorded interactions, I simultaneously began coding themes as they emerged from the transcription process.

### *Coding*

Coding the themes from the transcripts of conversations and interviews involved careful, line-by-line reading of the transcripts and diarised observations in order to identify and categorise expressions and episodes that are similar in meaning. In essence, coding involved sampling the research data in terms of its relevance to my main research question of how children construct themselves as boys and girls through play and how they are positioned by the categories they use. I



coded my data in terms of how different games, play areas and toys are constructed as for girls or as for boys. I coded in terms of how boundaries of gender were constructed, maintained and transgressed by children during play and the possibilities and constraints in relation to forming and sustaining cross-gender friendships among children in the setting. I also coded in terms of how sexuality is imbricated in the ways in which the children construct their gender identities through play. Furthermore, I coded in terms of how teachers and children in the setting construct play differently. After the different categories of codes were created, the next step involved studying the categories in order to explore forms of relationships between and across the categories. The categories of codes that linked were merged and the merging of the associated categories revealed the major themes of gender in the play that permeated the study.

*Validity: checking the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data*

According to Henslin (2001:16), when research is inductive in the sense that it aims to represent the social world from the perspectives of people under study, the data should be subjected to some form of validity check to verify its accuracy and trustworthiness. In the context of this study, validity is used to mean the strategies undertaken to ensure that the findings are accurate in terms of representing the social world from the viewpoints of people in the study (Creswell, 2009:192). In other words, validity in the context of my study meant ‘doing justice’ to what the different people in the study say in terms of how they construct their social identities and relations with a particular focus on play. In this regard, I drew and combined data from multiple sources including participant-observations, drawings and narratives about play, photographs, interviews and other recordings to paint a coherent picture of how gender, among other variables, operate through play as a source of identification and dimension of power among children in the setting. The different themes in this study were formulated through examining the different sources of data. In Creswell’s (2009:193) terms, this measure of validity is called ‘data triangulation’. For Creswell (2009), when themes are established based on converging multiple sources of data, the process of ‘data triangulation’ serves the purpose of checking the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. For example, I did not take observations of play at face value. But, following these I engaged children in conversations to explore meanings they attached to what they did, or did not do, when they played. Through talking to different children about their play behaviours I found that they attached gendered meanings to their games, with boys for instance, investing in football as a symbolic signifier of what it means for them to be ‘properly’ masculine.

Another method I used to validate the accuracy of the findings was encouraging children and teachers in the study to review the interview transcripts in order to verify accuracy. For example, in

reviewing transcripts of interviews with teachers allowed them to validate the transcripts as ‘truths’ in terms of how they constructed play among children in the school setting. Additionally, the process of reviewing the transcripts often gave me an opportunity to ask the teachers further questions which produced more data. For example, after transcribing my interviews with teachers I found that they constantly used the phrase ‘learning through play’ without describing what it means. Reviewing the transcripts with the teachers gave me an opportunity to ask them to elaborate on this and other phrases and terminologies they used when they spoke about play in the schooling context. Thematic analysis and the writing of the ethnography followed the coding and validity processes.

### *Thematic analysis and writing the findings*

The different categories of codes outlined above were then subjected to thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as a systematic study of research data in order to identify themes about certain patterns of thought, experience or behaviour and explain these in terms of how they address the main research question. The themes that emerged from the process of coding the research data indicate that the themes that form the basis of my data analysis developed inductively (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). As Braun and Clarke (2006) describe, inductive thematic analysis is a ‘bottom-up’ method of analysing data which is concerned with producing themes from the research data itself, as opposed to a ‘top-down’ or deductive approach where themes are drawn from theory and data is collected in order to fit some predetermined themes or to explain already existing theories. However, inductive thematic analysis does not mean that theory is absent in the process of analysing the findings. Theories form an important part of research because they help us explain findings (Creswell, 2009). While my aim in this study is to do justice in terms of representing how the children construct and experience boyhood and girlhood through play, their constructions of the gendered self are not explored in isolation but in relation to findings from previous research studies in this field. Therefore, in this research study, data analysis occurred at two levels. Firstly, it began with studying the research data as a whole in order to code and develop themes inductively. Secondly, the emerging themes were subjected to existing research and the theoretical literature and analysed in terms of how they draw and build on the existing body of knowledge in the field of childhood gender identities at play (Thorne, 1993; McGuffey & Rich, 1999; Frosh *et al*, 2003; Bhana, 2005; Renold, 2006, Martin, 2011).

For example, in analysing my research data I draw and build on Thorne’s (1993) concept of ‘borderwork’ that she applied to make sense of children’s gender-differentiated play patterns on a US primary school playground. She documents that, even where play was gender-mixed, children formed gendered groups such as boys chasing girls. I draw and build on Martin’s (2011) finding

that new children at a nursery school in London learned to position themselves in gendered ways by observing and following the gendered behaviours of their senior peers and then behaving in ways which portrayed their mastery of knowledge of play roles and practices constructed as masculine or feminine at their school. I also draw and build on McGuffey and Rich's (1999) conception of 'gender transgression' which they used to describe spaces and contexts in which they observed young children transgressing boundaries of masculinity and femininity in their play at a US based school camp, as well as Frosh *et al's* (2003) finding that young London boys' investment in the game of football is a symbolic signifier of what it means to 'do' boy in a 'normative' way. In her participant-observation research with children on a South African playground, Bhana (2005) documents how sexuality and gender power relations manifest among young children through a ritualised sexual game in which girls pulled up their skirts to show their panties to boys as a strategy of putting boys off the play spaces girls wanted to use for their own games. In similar vein, Renold's (2006) work with young children at play illustrates how sexuality features among children. She documents children using romantic subject positionings of 'boyfriend' and 'girlfriend' and enacting 'date' episodes in their social interactions at a primary school in the UK. Therefore, in analysing and writing the findings I not only present the data describing the patterns of thought and behaviour among children in the study but the data is subjected to these and other relevant studies conducted by other researchers in different social contexts in both South Africa and in other countries.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the ethnographic methods, research processes and procedures followed in undertaking this ethnographic study into children's constructions of the gendered self through play. The chapter began by locating the methodology of the study within an ethnographic design; and outlining and describing the rationale for the research design and methods utilised. I discussed how I negotiated entry to the school and described the ethnographic methods of participant-observation, informal conversations and semi-structured conversations with the children involving drawings, as well as semi-structured interviews with some of the teachers in which I explored their perceptions of gender and play. The questions of who the participants are, and how and why they were selected were addressed along with the ethical considerations pertinent to this study. The use of data recording equipment including the research diary, digital video camera and voice recorder as means of documenting and exploring gender in children's play and patterns of thought was discussed. Finally, the chapter highlighted the inductive thematic analysis of the research data, including the methods of transcribing, coding and writing the research in ways which seek to do justice to children's agency in gender identity construction through play. However, existing research and the

theoretical literature was also invoked in the process of explaining and writing the research findings.

The following chapter focuses on the relational dynamics of this research study, particularly how different people constructed me, both as an adult and as a man, conducting research with children in the primary years of schooling. I examine how I was constructed differently by different people, both in the school setting and other contexts. In highlighting the different social constructions of me as an adult male conducting this study, I aim to explore what these different constructions suggest about the popular constructions of gender, adulthood and childhood in South Africa. I also put myself in the picture by reflecting critically on myself as an adult male doing this study and the kinds of unconscious relations and identifications I established with different children and what these say about me and gender.

## Chapter Four

### Putting Myself in the Picture

#### Introduction

In this chapter I focus on myself as a young adult male researching children in the early years of schooling, how the different people I encountered in the course of my research constructed me and what these constructions say about them and their assumptions about gender and age. I also explore my own identifications as a young adult male researcher and my own assumptions about gender which influenced how I conducted my research and who I tended to focus on in the school setting. This chapter therefore highlights and elaborates on these relational dynamics of my research encounters. To do this, I draw and reflect on the research data which illuminates:

- a) my attraction to children as an adult, interacting with them on the playground and the significance of this in democratising the relations I established with them;
- b) how different boys and girls related to me and what this said about them;
- c) my tendency to focus on boys rather than girls during fieldwork and my failure to recognise this;
- d) my relations with boys who were popular because they were good at football, and displayed their skills every day in the football games which dominated playground space;
- e) my childhood memories of marginalisation through the symbolic construction of popular masculinities through football;
- f) teachers' constructions of me as an adult;
- g) ethical concerns about me as a man undertaking this research expressed by some of my colleagues in a research training programme and what these suggest about them and their assumptions about gender, more broadly, and about men more specifically.

#### Reflecting on my own childhood experiences of learning to be deferential to adults

When I arrived at the school, pupils generally associated me with formal authority which deserved their utmost respect. They were constantly advised by their teachers to 'behave themselves' and engage and relate with me in a polite and respectful manner. When I entered classrooms in the morning, children stood up to greet me with 'good morning Sir/Mr Mayeza and how are you this

morning?’ and remained standing waiting for my reply with an order to sit down. When I entered the school gate in the morning there was occasionally a pupil standing there to open the gate for me and politely greet me with ‘good morning Mr Mayeza’. Children spontaneously and politely addressed me as Sir, Mr or *Malume* // uncle and hardly ever addressed me by my first name even after I introduced myself as Emmanuel. This was exactly the kind of identification I was uncomfortable to be associated with as it positioned me as a stereotypical adult authority figure, which presented obstacles for the kinds of child-centred and friendly relations I wanted to establish with the children. I wanted to position them as authorities about their lives and identities and find out from them how they construct and experience being boys and girls and the significance they attached to play within their schooling setting.

I could understand the children’s spontaneous deferential way of relating to me by reflecting on my own childhood and how we were taught and expected to be deferential towards adults. Growing up in a black, Zulu community in the province of KwaZulu-Natal I learnt and came to appreciate that being a ‘good’ child was a blessing to his/her parents and family, and that this meant respecting the ordained authority of all adults which took the form of being obedient and quiet when among adults, always asking for permission, greeting adults you pass and many other practices that expressed respect. I was not expected to share the same space or table with adults because I was not meant to listen to and be part of their conversations. When I happened to be among adults, as a child, I was expected to remain quiet which made it even more difficult for me to respond eloquently when I was asked a question. I was not expected to complain or question adults’ instructions. I remember that as children we needed to give way to adults on the road or paths, and if we were playing on the streets that play needed to stop to make way for adults to pass; we could only resume play after the adults had passed through. These are some of the signs and expressions of respect which the children at Sun Shine showed to adults, and especially to teachers at school. As an adult male at the school, children tended to relate to me as a formal authority figure with whom they needed to engage in a formal and respectful manner. Being identified by them as an adult with power and authority over children posed difficulties for me in trying to engage with them in ways which positioned them as potential authorities. A key concern of mine was to encourage the children to ‘open up’ to me in conversations about themselves, and to this end I tried to present myself as an interested, friendly and playful adult in my interactions with them.

### **Learning to be child-centred: ‘playing’ with children and children ‘playing’ with me**

When I sat or stood on the margins of the playground observing and taking notes while the boys played football, they often tried to encourage me to join in and I always responded positively to these appeals. For example, it was not uncommon for the boys who played football such as Ntokozo

to shout, ‘coach; coach... you can’t get the ball, come and get it...come and let’s play; let’s see if you can..., let’s see if you can get the ball. Come let’s play!’ My consistently positive reaction to such appeals were followed by humour as boys laughed at me every time they managed to kick the ball to me so that it passed through my legs to the possession and control of another player. My fouls, whether deliberate or accidental, provoked laughter not only among boys who appropriated me to their games but also among the girls who mainly remained on the margins. The humour that I evoked from the children when I ‘played’ with them, especially when they ‘beat’ me seemed to contribute significantly to ‘democratising’ my relations with them. I befriended children not through showing them how good I was at football or instructing them how they should play, but rather through playing with them and allowing them to ‘beat’ me at the game. This, I think, made me seem particularly playful, approachable and accessible to the children in marked contrast to teachers who were associated with the classroom and authority.

Although playing with the boys enabled them to relate to me more as a friend than as an authority figure, they tended to call me ‘coach’ in ways which reinforced my positioning as an adult who was more knowledgeable about football than them. Given that coach is generally used with connotations of an expert and a leader, boys in the study tended to construct me in this way through expecting me to control how play was conducted. For example, I was sometimes asked to select players to represent the two competing teams before the matches could begin. Furthermore, even when I was playing with the boys I was sometimes consulted to solve conflicts in the game such as when a goal was scored but denied as legitimate by the defending team.

I was not comfortable with the identification as a coach as this positioned me as an expert and a figure of authority among the children, creating obstacles to my aim of establishing democratic relations with the children. Therefore, instead of conforming to the expectations of an adult authority figure I presented myself as a willing learner and them as the experts who I constantly asked to teach me the rules of the game. However, it is also interesting to note the gendered way in which the boys constructed the term of coach in the context of football. The following dialogue illustrates boys’ investment in the construction of a football coach as a role for males which they disassociate from their school female football coach.

Significantly the term coach had strong gendered connotations for these boys, as I found out when I asked them why they did not call the woman teacher, who coached football, ‘coach’:

Emmanuel: Who is coaching you football here at school?

Fana: Miss, Miss Vezi.

Emmanuel: OK, but you're calling her Miss. Do you also call her coach like you call me?

Fana: No, we don't like to call her coach. We call her Miss, we call her Miss all the time.

Emmanuel: Why don't you call her coach? She is your coach; she's coaching you football; doesn't she?

Fana: All teachers here at school we call Miss, she is Miss. She is not like you... she is not a boy. You're a boy, and we like to call you coach. Miss is not a boy, you're a boy.

Emmanuel: Yes, I know that she is a girl but still she is your coach.

Fana: But many boys here at school don't like to call her coach.

Emmanuel: I wonder why?

Fana: Because... she's not a boy.

By naming me 'coach' they were constructing me as a man and accentuating my 'masculinity'. The boys constructed football coaching as a masculine role and activity in which the title of coach is more suitable for me as a man than their school's female football coach who they hardly addressed as such. Significantly I was called 'coach' frequently by the boys and rarely by the girls, even among those who claimed an interest in football. It was as if by calling me coach the boys were expressing themselves as males, and constructing a 'masculine' relationship with me.

It was mainly the girls who approached me for help, compared with the boys who approached me with friendly invitations to participate in their playground activities. The help which girls asked for was usually for me to mediate in relations with other children, often boys.

I remember a young girl who came to me crying and when I asked what has happened in order to understand why she was crying, she said that there was another boy who would not move off the swing known to be for girls which she wanted to use herself. My reaction to her was with empathy but I then told her to go and tell Miss Ndaba, her class teacher who was inside class to deal with that boy who made her cry (8/3/2013).

As articulated in the above diary note, some children approached me to act as a mediator when conflicts emerged on the playground. I assessed each case individually and I did intervene where the kind of intervention required did not require me to impose forms of disciplinary measures. When children approached me to report about incidents of misbehaviour or conflict in the playground, drawing on Thorne (1993), I often referred them to their teachers in an effort to distance myself from a position of a formal authority figure that imposes disciplinary measures. These approaches for assistance, guidance and support can be understood as feeding into the popular constructions of childhood as dependent on adults (Montgomery, 2006).

Previous research by scholars such as Thorne (1993), Bhana (2002) and Martin (2011) highlights the different ways children react to adults in stereotypically children's spaces. The children in the study reacted with keen interest and curiosity to me as an adult on the playground where other



adults were generally invisible. As I was observing children's break time play and social interactions in the yard with my research diary open and while busy writing, the children generally seemed intensely interested in me and my writing activity. For example, when I was observing activities and interactions on the playground, I was often approached by some of the children with questions of interest and curiosity:

What are you writing there?  
Are you drawing pictures, let me see, I can draw too...  
Are you doing your school work?  
Are you doing your homework?  
Are you writing our names down?  
Are you writing about us?  
Can you please show us what you're writing?

Whenever children seemed curious and enquired about my presence among them on the playground and asked about what I wrote in my research diary I was always open and honest and explained that I was writing about them: the different types of games they played, where they played, who they played with and why. I explained to them that I was observing and documenting these patterns because I found them interesting. Some children approached me to tell me their names and requested that I write them in my diary, and when I wrote a name some of them also wanted to check that I had spelt their names correctly; I was always willing to let them see if their names were actually written down and spelt correctly. My presence on the playground as an adult interacting with children was significant in terms of establishing friendly, informal and interactive relations with them; the kinds of child-centred relations which enabled me to explore the children's own experiences and constructions of play, their identifications and relations in the school setting.

### **Teachers' constructions of me as an adult with child-like tendencies**

Teachers in the school setting constructed me: a) as an unusual adult who was less authoritative but friendly and playful with the children, and sometimes more critically b) as an adult who was supposed to be like a teacher, a figure of authority over the children. For example, when I entered Ms Mzobe's Grade 4 classroom she thought I had come to ask to speak to the children. Nonetheless, the following dialogue extract highlights how she constructed the children as my friends and not hers, despite my being an adult just like her:

Ms Mzobe: Oh, you want to talk to your friends! [Expressing surprise]  
Emmanuel: Yes, but later. In the meantime I would like to take a seat and attend the lesson with them.  
Ms Mzobe: OK, no problem...

The playful relations I developed with the children prompted Ms Mzobe to construct my relationship with the children along the lines of friendship as opposed to a teacher-pupil relationship marked more explicitly by power differentials. However, because I was bigger than the children, I was viewed as a different and even strange adult at the school. For example, as Ms Mzobe was leaving her classroom for another class and felt the need to introduce me to the next teacher, she said, ‘Ms Cele; you have a *big* student today’ [I raised my hand from the back row to be identified]. She continued in a lower tone of voice: ‘He’s doing his research ...’ [I could not hear the rest of the conversation because Ms Mzobe turned her back to the class as they continued with the conversation presumably further discussing me].

Initially, inverting adult-child boundaries at the school made me feel a bit awkward and uncomfortable and I did think about what the children and teachers might have thought about me and my rather unusual behaviour, such as when I took a seat at a child’s small desk and interacted with the children on the playground during break rather than having tea indoors with the teachers. Disassociating myself from the usual adult position of authority at the school meant that in classrooms, whenever I was offered a seat at the teacher’s table at the front of the classroom I rejected this and, instead, opted to take a seat among the pupils, sometimes sharing desks with them. Given that free spaces in classrooms were not abundant, I usually used the space normally occupied by pupils who were absent. When there was no free space, I took a spare chair from the teacher’s table and placed it among the children’s desks, usually against the wall on the back row aisle or on the side, but always avoiding being at the front. In my classroom observations I did not keep an official, permanent seat but constantly changed seats depending on the availability of free space. In effect, by not maintaining a permanent seating position in the classroom, and avoiding occupying the teacher’s table at the front, I tried to distance myself from the teacher authority figure.

However, teachers sometimes gave me roles and responsibilities which positioned me as a teacher and a formal authority in relation to the children. For example, when I was observing in classrooms I was sometimes given marking work by some of the teachers. Although this is not how I desired to relate to and be viewed by children, as a teacher and their superordinate, I did the marking because I felt that by refusing to help in this way, I risked being viewed by the teachers as not useful or helpful in my presence in the classroom; this could have impacted negatively on my good and supportive relationship with the teachers. Besides being occasionally asked to mark children’s workbooks, I was asked by some of the teachers to take charge and maintain order in class when they left the classroom. I was often instructed to write down names of pupils who were ‘misbehaving’ which usually meant ‘failing’ to sit down and keep quiet. When asked by teachers to

take these positions of authority I did not refuse because I wanted to show my gratitude to teachers as gatekeepers who let me sit in their classrooms and observe and talk to children during ‘free play’ and when ‘working’. Also, as I was interviewing teachers themselves about their views on children and play in their school I wanted to build a friendly relationship with them even if I was perceived as very different from them in terms of the kinds of relations I had with the children.

I engaged with children in the playground and cultivated ‘playful’ relations with many of them partly through being incorporated by them, and especially the boys, into their play. Furthermore, by turning my research materials and practices into play, more children were incorporated into my research. For example, as noted in the previous chapter, the camera which I kept during my fieldwork in the school documented not only what the different children were doing in the playground. However, children’s interests in the camera and in being photographed and video recorded resulted in the camera functioning not just as a tool for gathering data, but also as a vital ‘plaything’ through which research discussions with the children were stimulated.

My ‘success’ in establishing what I call ‘playful’ relations with children in the playground which encouraged them to engage with me and reflect upon themselves, their interests, identifications, anxieties, friendships and their play was ironically demonstrated in my failure to keep ‘order’ or control when I was asked by teachers to do so on occasions when they had to leave. The following extract from my research diary focuses on one such occasion:

For today, the most challenging part in the school was when I had to take charge and supervise the Grade R class when Ms Ndaba, the class teacher, went out to attend some staff meeting in the principal’s office. She asked me to read a story book for the children in order to keep them occupied so that there would be silence and order in the class until she returned. So I had to move from where I was sitting among the children to take authority in the teacher seat in front of the classroom. Phew, I couldn’t control the amount of chaos that erupted the moment Ms Ndaba left the classroom! All along the children were seated quietly on the mat, but most children just stood up and roamed around the classroom the moment Ms Ndaba left the classroom. Some children stood up to ask to go out to the toilet. Some asked to drink water and within seconds the classroom corner sink was crowded with children competing over a turn on the water tap. Meanwhile, quarrels and fights started and I was constantly approached to intervene. The level of noise went quite high with the shouting, screaming and laughter as some children were chasing each other and running around the classroom as if they were outside playing on their own. Some went to the play areas, took toys and started playing around excitedly, and did this regardless of them knowing that toys were not to be touched unless announced by teacher that ‘it’s playtime!’. Those who asked to go out to the toilet also asked me to roll them some tissue paper, and others asked for the tissue in order to wipe their wet noses. The children knew the class rule that only one person can go out at a time and that they have to take turns with going out, but with me acting as teacher they wanted to go out in groups of three to four at the same time. I could not bear their nagging even when I have told them that they needed to wait and could go out after the other person had returned. The class just went too chaotic

and out of control for me. I really had a difficult time trying to maintain order and to keep the children seated quietly which is what Ms Ndaba trustingly tasked me to do.

The children could not do what I ordered them to do which was to sit down quietly even if I threatened to hit them with plastic ruler, in fact they were even more excited by the very idea that I wanted to hit them. It seemed to be a lot of fun for the kids to run around the classroom with me chasing them with a ruler, as they laughed mockingly and in ways that encouraged me to continue chasing them. This is in contrast to how I have seen the children promptly reacting whenever Ms Ndaba picked up a ruler and hit twice or thrice on the table or on the chalk board in which everyone knew that that signalled her request for order and calm in which the children observed accordingly. Children were so unsettled that I could not even begin with reading them the story book until at least Ms Ndaba returned which was about 20 minutes later. And that Ms Ndaba was on her way back to the class I came to notice by the sudden change of behaviour in children. This was in their quick assembling back on the mat which was accompanied by repeated shouts and whispers: 'There she is, look she's coming, Miss is coming, shush! Everyone...' I heard as I witnessed all the children try to quickly sit down silently before Ms Ndaba could enter the classroom. I actually started reading them the story properly when Ms Ndaba was back in class and I told her that I could not even start reading because of the loud noise and chaos by the children in her absence. She shouted at them very seriously such that I even felt as having somehow betrayed the kids: 'Grade R! What happened to your manners? Didn't I tell you that you should behave and sit quietly for Sir to read you a story! You need to respect Sir...', Ms Ndaba said vehemently. Though both boys and girls ran riot when Ms Ndaba went out, it was the boys who were noisier than girls. Also, boys took the lead in messing about and creating riot and unrest in the classroom (2/10/2013).

What this traumatic occasion for me, revealed was not only how differently the children constructed me from their teachers, but also how the classroom and the playground came to be understood and experienced by them as quite different and even opposite spaces. In the playground where I showed an interest in the children, I was liked and even admired by many children, with some of the boys bestowing on me the label of 'coach' which in their eyes was a high accolade. But when I was expected to control them and their movements in the classroom, it seemed as if they turned the classroom into the playground, running around and making lot of noise, and laughing at me in a way which I experienced as 'mocking', as I sought to exert 'control'.

Within the poststructuralist feminist framework, the above observation is particularly interesting because it demonstrates the fluidity of the taken for granted adult-centred power relations between adults and children (Walkerdine, 1981). Although I was an adult whom the teacher assumed possessed the same power she exercised in relation to children in the class, I was rendered powerless by the young children who trivialised and disregarded my presence as an adult and authority figure. These children, I suggest, were occupying positions of power and powerlessness in their different social interactions with different adults (Walkerdine, 1981). The common adult-centred power relations between adults and children constrain and subordinate children (Davies, 2003), and the young children's riotous behaviour in the absence of their authoritative teacher might

be seen as their way of expressing their autonomy and agency constrained in the classroom by the relationship they establish with their teacher.

Dixon (2011) describes the classroom, in her study of primary schools in South Africa, as a space which ‘produces docile bodies’ through forms of regulation and control which, it seems, come to be invested in the very identity of the teacher, as constructed by the children. In their eyes I was not a real teacher, as I demonstrated in the playground, and my attempts at trying to be one, only seemed to invite them to resist the classroom as a site of control and regulation by teachers.

### **Identifying with boys in research on children**

In my interactions with children on the playground I tended to identify more generally with boys, particularly those who played football regularly. Besides the general feeling of belonging among boys and being more comfortable in their company than among girls, my tendency to focus more in my field research on boys than girls was encouraged by the boys themselves, who made more playful approaches to me than the girls. For example, while boys approached me to play football with them, girls did not approach me to skip with them, though they did approach me when they needed my assistance. The fact that girls often approached me to seek assistance rather than to invite me to participate in their games, suggests that, most girls in the study regarded me as a resource for help rather than a possible playmate or friend.

It was when I was discussing my field research with my research supervisor who asked me about the gender of the children I was talking to at the school that I came to realise that I was unconsciously interacting more with boys than with girls even though the study did not specify a focus on boys. My failure to recognise that I was not engaging with girls as much as I was with boys in a study about children is sociologically interesting because it illuminates the often taken for granted gendered identifications and relations we make in our everyday social interactions. Butler (1990) argues that gender identifications in societies where these are polarised are often taken for granted and that people come to see and define themselves as essentially male or female through repetitive gendered performances. Following Butler’s (1990) argument about the performance of gender which becomes naturalised through repetition, my spontaneous identification with the boys shows how easy it is, even for researchers of gender, to take for granted our gender identifications and how we may be implicated in the processes of producing the myth of a natural gendered order by identifying, without even reflecting on this, with the research participants we classify as similar to us in terms of gender.

Following my supervisor's comments on the focus I was giving to boys over girls, I made a conscious effort to engage with more girls in my research. This enabled me to explore how gender (among other variables) influenced what people did and how they played and interacted in the playground and in other contexts. Furthermore, in giving equal focus to boys and girls enabled me to explore different girls' and boys' investments in the very category 'boy' and 'girl' and the sorts of symbolic meanings they attached to these. Indeed, within the poststructuralist feminist framework upon which I draw in this study, gender is defined as a relational category (Butler, 1990; Paechter, 1998; 2007) with 'boy' and 'girl' as particular kinds of identifications deriving meaning from each other and constructed and performed in relation to each other (MacNaughton, 2000; Davies, 2003; Pattman & Chege, 2003; Martin, 2011).

However, although I focused on girls and how they construct femininities through play, there were gendered differences in my forms of interactions with boys and girls in the study. While my interactions with boys tended to be spontaneous, those with girls were mostly deliberate and planned. Interactions with girls needed me to be proactive and demanded more effort on my part. In contrast, boys were proactive in approaching me to be part of their playgroups and social circles during break at school. Furthermore, my interactions with girls were more conversational in nature and involved minimal participation in their playground activities compared with my interactions with boys which involved both playing and conversing. For example, I interacted with boys on the playground by playing football with them. This did not happen with girls with whom I interacted on the playground through talk such as when they approached me for assistance or when they were curious about what I wrote in my research diary.

The irony embedded in my tendency to relate more generally to particular boys who gained popularity at school because they were good at football and played football regularly in the playground is that, in my own childhood experiences in early schooling, I was not very popular because I did not play good football. Although I played football during break at school, I was not considered good enough to be part of a school football team. Neither was I a popular player at break time football games. I was often the last person to be chosen for a team in break time football matches. Sometimes I was not chosen at all and had to stand and watch others play. It was only when conducting this study, as an adult, that I came to experience being liked and very much wanted by the popular 'footballing boys' to participate in their games on the school playground. I enjoyed the attention I was receiving from the young footballers because it made me feel important and popular in ways which I never experienced as a boy at school. It is interesting to note how it was possible for me as an adult who does not play good football to play with popular 'footballing

boys' in ways which were not possible for me as a young school boy. As an adult I attained easy access to the popular 'footballing boys', not by showing them how to play good football, but by allowing them to show me how to play good football. My access to the popular 'footballing boys' emerged as a kind of privilege which was not easily available to other boys in the study who displayed lack of interest and poor abilities in football. These boys were often symbolically constructed by the popular 'footballing boys' as not 'real' boys in ways that tend to subordinate and marginalise them through derogatory labels such as *inkomo* / cow, sissy, girly and gay. As chapter six elaborates, these kinds of labels are often more likely to be incurred by boys who do not show interest and skills in football but instead opt to engage in other forms of play considered as for girls such as skipping. Like the boys in the present study who are 'othered' through the symbolic construction of popular masculinities through football, below I elaborate further on how this study triggered similar memories of marginalisation from my own childhood.

### **Symbolic construction of popular masculinities through football: reflecting on my childhood experiences of schooling**

I was popular with boys as an adult male who showed interest in them in the playground many of whom imputed to me 'masculine qualities' by calling me coach and befriending me in a way which seemed to reproduce the importance they attached to football as signifier of masculinity. However, ironically I empathised much more with those boys who were marginalised and teased and whose masculinity was questioned precisely because they were considered as failures with regard to football. Their experiences of marginalisation and victimisation (which I elaborate in chapter six) resonated with my own childhood experiences of rejection and mockery which arose from my inability to display appropriate skills in football. I remember in particular feeling publicly humiliated during my fourth grade, when the school resident football coach was putting together a team and was recruiting boys from each of the classes. When he got to my class he began looking around and started calling out names. Most boys were eager to be called but for me it really did not matter. He called out all the names of the boys he knew were good at football and could represent the school in matches with other primary schools. As I expected, he did not call my name. This did not surprise or upset me, but I did feel sad and humiliated when a girl in my class raised her hand to say something to the coach after the nominations. She said that there is someone else who plays football 'very well' and you (coach) have 'missed' him. When she pointed to me and mentioned my name the class and the coach erupted with laughter. Then the coach said 'no, I don't want him' in a very assertive voice and left the class for the laughter to continue.

This girl's sarcastic comment and the humour that it evoked left me feeling odd and somewhat

incomplete as a boy because of my inability to play good football. The feeling of estrangement I felt among my peers due to my poor football skills resonates with the emotions expressed by some of the boys I spoke to in my current study who spoke about being teased by other boys at school for their lack of interest in football and/or for engaging in skipping games with girls which was constructed as its relational opposite. However, it is interesting to note how my adulthood enabled me relatively easy access to interact with both boys and girls on the playground in ways that are not always possible for many young boys and girls in the study.

Against the background of the strict boundaries of gender in the children's play, if I had been one of the boys at the school and not an adult doing research, I could not have interacted with the girls in the ways I did without being problematised by my peers. Although I also empathised with the girls who were often mocked and ridiculed (as I expand in chapter five) for their presumed ineptitude at football in ways which seem to define being female as being uninterested in and incapable of playing football. The extent of my empathy tended to be shallow rather than deeply seated in shared and common experiences which I felt I had with the boys who were teased and marginalised for not being 'proper' boys for their lack of footballing ability. My gender-bias in the emotionality and identification with different pupils in the study was no doubt reinforced by the fact that as a young school boy it was the norm that one interacted socially mostly with people of one's own gender and the inscribed gender boundaries and divisions meant that girls' experiences of girlhood do not resonate deeply with me in profound ways, as do those of the boys.

It is also interesting to note how my tendency to identify and empathise with boys compares with the work of Thorne (1993), who documented her different ways of identifying with boys and girls in her ethnography of play at a primary school in the US. As a female researcher, Thorne (1993:24-26) identified more directly with girls who awakened her childhood self as an unpopular but 'average' girl at school. While her observations with girls allowed her to revisit her girlhood past through memory, boys did not remind her of these experiences; she related to the boys in a more detached and much less direct way and only as a mother. Thorne's (1993) direct identification with girls and my own strong identification with boys is an interesting comparison as it highlights the importance of social researchers critically reflecting on their own constructions and experiences of gender and how these may influence the kinds of identifications they make with different people in the research process.



## **Being problematised as a man doing this study**

When I presented my research proposal as a candidate in a research training programme which I was invited to attend outside the university, many of my colleagues (fellow PhD students and academic staff supervising these programmes) reacted with scepticism. This is captured in the comments below extracted from the recorded and transcribed conversations which formed part of the research proposal presentation:

Colleague 1 (Female): I'd like to know what is the inspiration behind the study ... do you perhaps have children yourself? I would expect a woman to research gender dynamics in young children's play...

This colleague points to what she sees as a fundamental incongruity: me as a man researching children in a primary school. Such a response is based on the assumption that primary schools are spaces to which only adult women ought to contribute with nurturing and caring for young children. That she questions and problematises my masculinity in research involving children, assumes 'common-sense' and polarised way of thinking about gender in which working with young children, caring, nurturing and showing affection are conceived as feminised roles. Working within the poststructuralist feminist domain, MacNaughton (2000) argues that such taken for granted polarisation of gender is problematic partly because it limits what males and females can do. Some of my colleagues elaborated on the 'ethical' problems they saw in me as a man conducting research with children in a primary school.

Colleague 2 (Female): How will you deal with the sensitivity around being a man and researching with young children? You will have issues with teachers and parents, I mean they will need to know exactly what you will be doing with kids on playgrounds. And I doubt that many parents will give consent to a man that they don't even know to interact with their kids...

Colleague 3 (Male): How will you get around ethical clearance for researching with young kids, not all parents will be happy to give you consent – it's a high risk study, from an ethics perspective, but I think it is interesting theoretically. It may be just that you are not the right person to do this.

Colleague 4 (Female): You need to think carefully about the ethics of your research. Ethical issues are very real for your study, and it is also controversial with a high risk of failure...

Colleague 5 (Male): As a man, how will you deal with the sensitivity of researching young children in the age of paranoia in relation to paedophile and sexual crimes and violence toward young children and women in the hands of men in South Africa ... As a parent I'll be very reluctant to sign a consent letter from a Mister I don't even know who wants to interact with my child in some research about gender...

Emmanuel to colleague 5: But would you still be that reluctant to give consent for your child to participate in this study if the researcher was Mistress and not Mister as in my case?

Colleague 5: I'd still be reluctant and concerned about the safety of my child but not as much as I would be if it is Mister that is requesting my consent to interact with my child in a research like yours.

The domination of early schooling by female teachers combined with the popular construction of children as vulnerable may provide insight as to why I produced these kinds of ethical concerns for my colleagues. While the concern over parental permission is understandable in the South African context where sexual crimes against women and children at the hands of men are rife, I also feel that these ethical concerns were exaggerated with the effect of 'policing' and regulating me as a man. Child protection, safety and well-being are every parent's priority especially in an age of escalating children's rights abuses, often at the hands of men. But the effect of this gendered discourse of protection and application of different ethical standards to men and women researchers is to reproduce nurturing and caring for children as female attributes and men as potential aggressors in relation to sexuality and children. I felt very strongly that different ethical standards were being applied to me than would have been the case if the researcher was a woman.

Contrary to the ethical problems constructed by my colleagues, I did not experience problems in gaining the necessary permission to conduct my research at the primary school, and instead the parents I met as well as the children I engaged with in my research seemed very positive about my research. The contradiction between the ethical problems raised by my colleagues and the supportive response from the school authorities and parents is worth noting. This suggests that my colleagues' admonitions and concerns about negative community reactions to me as a man doing this research reflected their own anxieties (based on gender essentialism) and their own projections of these on to the broader community. Indeed I want to argue that far from being problematic on ethical grounds, I was able to act as a positive role model and through the relations I established with the children demonstrate how nurturing and caring could be displayed as much by adult males as females. For I was an adult male engaging with both boys and girls in the playground and trying to develop friendly and caring relationships with them in which I conversed with them about their interests and concerns. By conducting a study perceived as feminine, I set out to challenge the common-sense, but inaccurate, gender stereotypes that build on and reinforce gender polarity. As a man researching young children at play I deconstruct the common assumption that working with children is genetically a women's role and interest. Furthermore, I show that masculinity does not refer to a coherent and unitary social identity; rather multiple versions of masculinity exist (Johansson & Klinth, 2008). My masculinity in this study models and represents a different version of masculinity which is less dominant and authoritative, but more democratic and child-centred.

## Summary

In this chapter, my aim was to put myself in the picture by critically reflecting on my adult male identity and how this shaped the kinds of relations I established with different people in the research process. I began this chapter by reflecting on my own childhood respectful ways of relating to adults and highlighted how I used this personal experience as a resource to understand children's candid ways of engaging with me as a formal authority figure in the study. I demonstrated how presenting myself as a playful and friendly adult on the playground helped to deconstruct my presumed position of authority in ways that democratised the relations I developed with the children. Deconstructing the usual adult-child power relations was informed by my concern to position children as the experts about their social lives and identifications. However, I also highlighted how tricky it was to disassociate myself from the position of power in the schooling context where adults generally hold and exercise power over children. I noted, for example, how teachers' tendencies to assign me their roles and responsibilities reinforced my positioning as a figure of authority among the children. Nonetheless, my playground interactions with the children enabled them to relate to me quite differently from the way they normally relate to their teachers in class. Children tended to behave in less obedient and disciplined ways with me than they did with their teachers even when I was assigned a role of authority in the classroom.

As a male researcher, I found it easier to engage boys than girls with whom I tended to interact with deliberate effort rather than spontaneity. Not only did I tend to relate and identify more comfortably with boys than girls, but it was mainly the boys who evoked certain memories from my own childhood experiences of play at school. Indeed, my childhood experiences of marginalisation through the construction of popular masculinities through football were triggered by my observations and interactions with different boys, rather than girls.

Finally, I reflected on how and why my gender as a man doing this study elicited so much scepticism and concern among my colleagues in a research training programme. As noted, one of the productive ways in which I deal with this scepticism is by examining what it tells us about my colleagues and their investment in the common-sense discourse of gender polarity which limits possibilities for both men/boys and women/girls. Ironically, the 'man problem' was presented as an 'ethical one'. I argue that this was unethical because they were not taking responsibility for their views which were informed by their polarised ways of thinking about gender. I also argue, indeed, that one of the unintended positive outcomes of my research was to show that nurturing and caring for children was not something which only adult women could display, but that men, too, could demonstrate this.

The following chapter explores how play is constructed in different and contradictory ways by children and teachers at the primary school. The chapter draws on and engages with the research material which illustrates how the different constructions of play at the school produce and reinforce the discourse of gender polarity in the early years.

## Chapter Five

### Gendered and gendering play in class and in the playground

#### Introduction

This chapter explores what the boys and girls at Sun Shine Primary see and define as play and what they do when they play and why. In exploring the children's constructions of play, I draw on and combine the data derived from ethnographic observations and conversations with children during play as well as extracts from my research diary. I also engage with the data that derives from what I call graphic-narrative exercise (GNE) which can be described as a child-centred and participatory approach to research with children (Pattman, 2006). The GNE aimed to encourage the children to reflect upon themselves through drawing pictures about forms of play in which they featured as the main characters. These drawings formed the basis for providing more data through discussing them with the children. I encouraged the discussions by constantly asking the children questions based on the content of their drawings and picking up on the issues which the children raised when describing their drawings. I also encouraged discussion by picking up on the connections which the children were making, for example, between the games they played and the significance they attached to these games in the multiple ways they constructed their gender identities.

I also draw on the data from interviews with some of the teachers in the study which explore their constructions of play. In exploring the teachers' constructions of play, I aim to examine whether, and if so, how these may be (re)producing gendered subject positions and identifications for the children.

Therefore, drawing on a range of ethnographic data, this chapter aims to address the following questions:

- a) How do the young children construct being boys and being girls through play at school?
- b) How do power relations operate between the boys and girls in their play at school?
- c) How do the teachers construct play and in what ways do their constructions of play reproduce or challenge the stereotypes of gender in the children's play?

The following section introduces the concept of play and discusses how it is constructed by teachers and children in the context of this research study.

**Break and playtime: how is play constructed at the school?**

In conversations with some of the teachers at Sun Shine it seems that, to a large extent, play derives its meaning in relation to what they construct as work. Work is associated with what happens during curriculum time in the classroom. In this context, play is associated with freedom of expression in which children choose what they want to do outside the classroom during break. However, in addition to playing at break time, Grade R pupils also had a playtime period which allowed them to play during curriculum time in class. Grade R teachers associated playtime with children being able to learn independently through ‘free play’ using the different toys provided in different play spaces within the classroom. Although the Grade R teachers defined children’s playtime behaviours as ‘free play’, children generally spoke about play as something they do outside class. The classroom space was perceived by the children as regulated and controlled by teachers even during playtime. Although the teachers claimed they did not intervene when the children were playing in class, their surveillance and authority in the classroom accompanied by the general construction of the classroom as a working space seemed to underpin children’s construction of play as activities they perform outside of the classroom. The following diagrams present play as defined by teachers and how it features in the school’s daily learning routines:

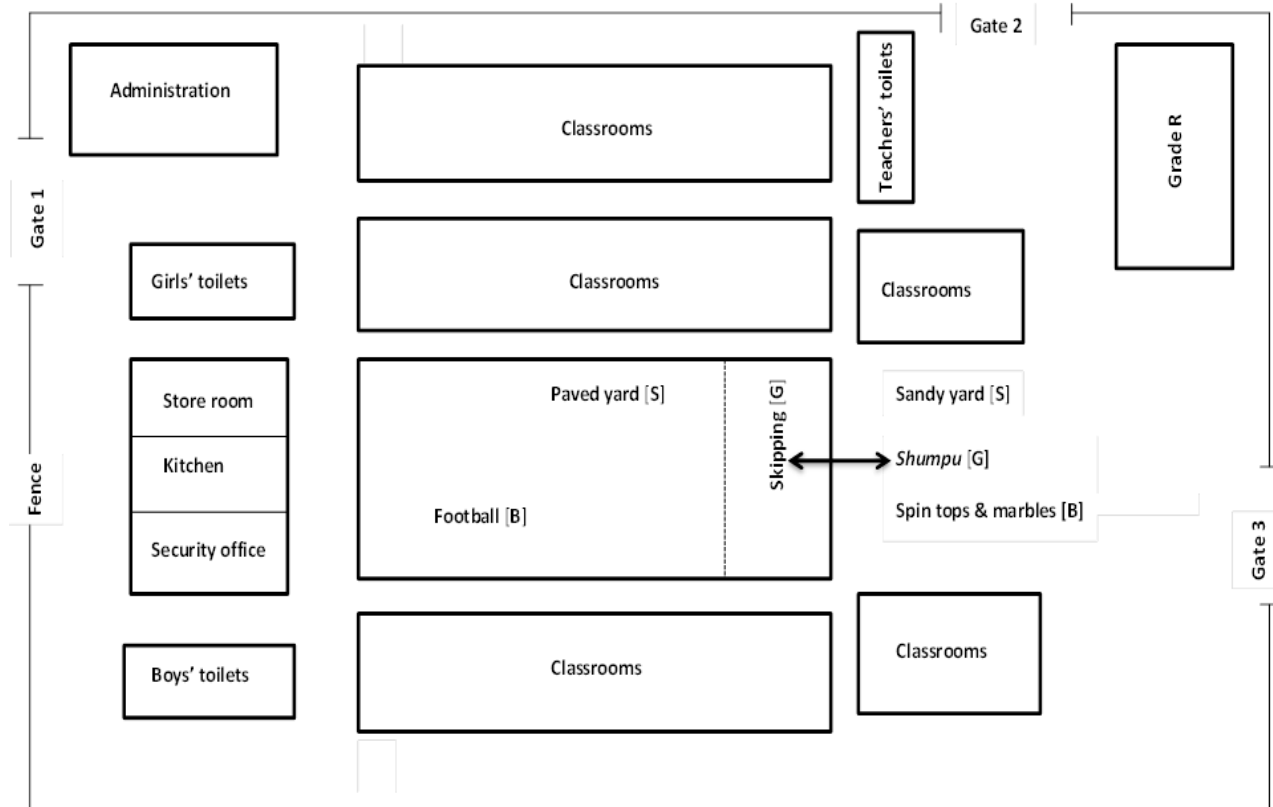
**Diagram A: Grade 1 to 4 timeline**

07:40	Bell: Day starts
07:40	Greeting, prayer, register
08:00	
08:00	Curriculum time
10:30	
10:30	Break
11:00	
11:00	Curriculum time
13:30	
13:30	Bell: End of school day

**Diagram B:** Grade R timeline

07:55	Bell: day starts
07:55 08:25	Greeting, prayer, register, birthdays, weather, news
08:25 09:55	Curriculum time
09:55 10:15	Break
10:15 10:45	Curriculum time
10:45 11:15	Playtime
11:15 12:15	Curriculum time
12:15	Bell: End of school day

The allocation of break and playtime in the two timetables create the impression that play only happens during strictly defined ‘play’ times. However, this is not the case. Although play in the classroom is restricted to the playtime period, children played outside class not only at break time but also in the morning before the start of curriculum time and in the afternoon after the end of the school day. For example, Grade R children played at school in the afternoon while they were waiting for their school mates and siblings in mainstream grades whose school day ended an hour and fifteen minutes later. The following diagram maps the gendered patterns in which play was organised by children outside class, on the playground. At any given moment most children played the games noted in the following diagram:

**Diagram C:** Sketch Map of Sun Shine Primary School**KEY**

S: A space.

B: A game or an activity dominated by boys. Grade 3 and 4 boys dominated football on the paved yard which they constructed as a 'football space'. Grade 1 and 2 boys mostly played spin tops and marbles on the sandy yard. Grade R pupils used their own separate space for play which is enlarged in Diagram D which appears on page 75.

G: A game or an activity dominated by girls. On the paved yard it was mainly Grade 3 and 4 girls who engaged in skipping. The sandy yard was dominated by Grade 1 and 2 girls who engaged in the game of *shumpu*<sup>7</sup>. However, girls' games were less strict on age differentiation compared to the boys. That is, girls occasionally swapped between *shumpu* and skipping on the yard.

<sup>7</sup> *Shumpu* is one of the popular indigenous games traditionally played by girls in most black townships in South Africa. At this school, girls played *shumpu* on the gravel level ground which is about 20 metres long and 15 metres wide. The game of *shumpu* is played by two teams, attackers and defenders, which are made up of an equal number of players varying from six to 12. The size of the ball is similar to that of a tennis ball. The ball is improvised and is made using waste newspapers and shopping plastic bags. The newspaper is dampened with water and crushed to form a ball shape which is then wrapped using plastic bags. The attackers score points by running between the two strips that mark *shumpu* ground while avoiding being tagged by the ball which defenders use their hands to pass between themselves. Players in the attacking team fall out of the game when they are tagged by the ball. Attackers who get tagged by the ball are dismissed without being replaced. When the defenders have managed to tag all the players in the attacking team, they take on the attacking position. Therefore, the depleting number of attackers is a motivation for defenders because this increases their chance of becoming attackers. Usually, the game of *shumpu* is not timed. The children's *shumpu* games happened during break and ended when the bell rang to signal the end of break time. Attackers earn themselves accumulating team points when they run between the two strips without being tagged by the ball. Total running score usually ended in a 100 mark or at any other point depending on



↔ : This arrow indicates the usual pattern of movement of girls between skipping and *shumpu*. The vertical dotted line in the paved yard represents how this space was divided by the children to accommodate the different games. It should be noted that the position of the dotted line represents the disproportionate division of the yard, in which football took up much of the yard space and marginalised skipping.

Diagram C indicates how football games dominated the playground in the sense that they took up much space and affected everyone on the playground. Football involved not only those who participated in the game but also those who did not, whether they watched it or were squeezed to the margins by the space it took up. It was mainly played by Grade 3 and 4 boys and the star performers became well known at the school and more conscious of putting on a performance to impress others in the setting. Frosh *et al's* (2003) study of 11-14 year-old boys at schools in London found that, football was constructed symbolically as tough (physically and emotionally) and as masculine in much the same way as the 'footballing boys' I spoke to about football, especially when I asked them about girls and why football was mainly played by boys. Boys in this study spoke about football not just in terms of play, but also in terms of their emotional investment in football as a medium through which they perform versions of masculinity. They also constructed masculinity relationally through the denigration of girls and their presumed fragilities which make them fail at football.

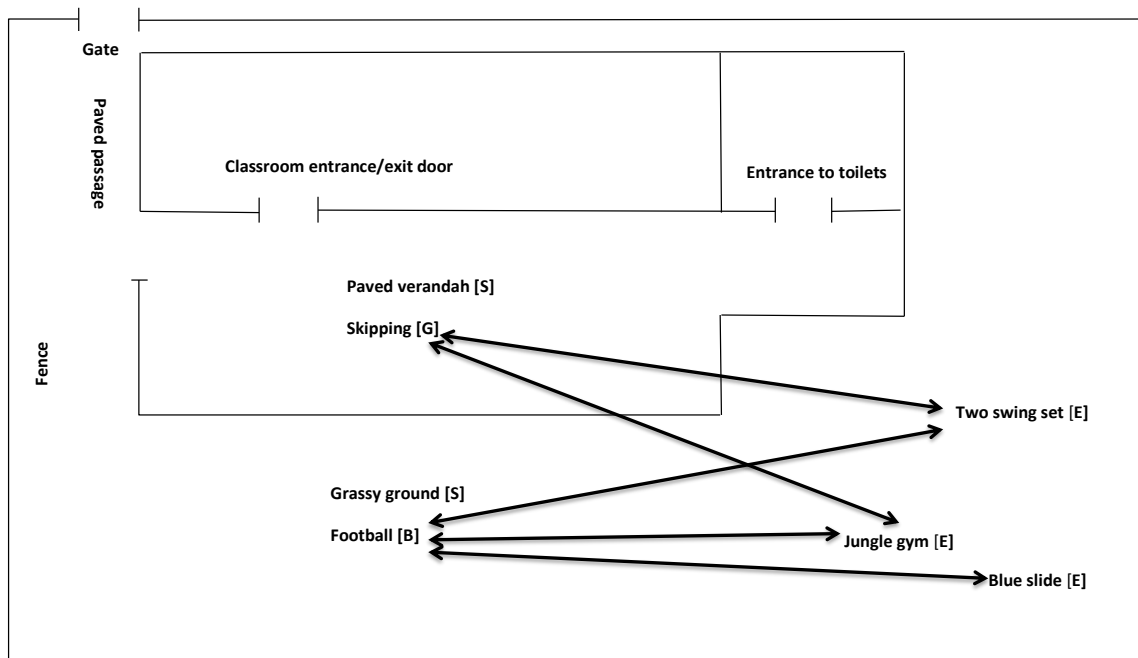
Diagram C highlights the spatial and material constraints with regard to play at Sun Shine Primary. These constraints are problematic because they limit opportunities for play among pupils at the school. However, it is important to note that the context of poverty of play spaces and resources at the school has more effect on girls than boys. That is, boys dominate the available play yard at school through football games which marginalise girls. The lack of formal sports facilities within the school grounds results in the school's sports programmes being practiced outside the school using poorly maintained community based sports facilities. The school context of Sun Shine Primary characterised by sheer poverty of play resources does not help to encourage the young learners to develop their potentials with regard to sports (Mayeza, 2011). The lack of sport resources at Sun Shine Primary, a black township school, is one of the manifestations of a long history of systematic marginalisation and neglect of black schools under apartheid (Spaull, 2012). The spatial and material constraints regarding play faced by black learners at Sun Shine Primary would be unlikely to be found in any of the formerly white schools in South Africa which inherit affluence from apartheid (Mazibuko, 2007; Spaull, 2012; Hunter, 2013).

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the agreed upon point mark and interval negotiated before the beginning of the game. Attackers claim victory when they reach the agreed upon point mark.

Diagram C also indicates that the flow of movement in the yard was not only gendered but was mediated by age. That is, the football games in the paved yard were mostly played by boys from grades 3 to 4; the same grades applied to girls in skipping. Marbles and spin tops were mostly played by younger boys in grades 1 and 2, and the same grades applied to girls in the game of *shumpu*. However, it should be noted that age was not a major factor among girls compared to the boys who identified through football by distancing themselves both from girls and younger boys. Nonetheless, play on the paved yard was gendered and the space was generally dominated by mainstream and older pupils at the school. Diagram D below sketches play spaces and activities observed among much younger pupils doing Grade R at Sun Shine.

**Diagram D:** Sketch Map of the Grade R Playground



**KEY**

S: A space.

B: A game or an activity dominated by boys.

G: A game or an activity dominated by girls.

E: Playground equipment which often provided some opportunities for boys and girls to mix during play.

↔ : These arrows indicate the usual pattern of movement of children between the games and playground equipment.

Diagram D represents the Grade R yard reserved for younger children’s play during break. As in Diagram C, Diagram D also indicates the gendered pattern in which play took place in the Grade R playground, with girls dominating the paved verandah with skipping, while boys dominated the

grassy ground playing football. Although both boys and girls played on the jungle gym, boys often dominated the upper level of the play structure. To reach the upper level of the jungle gym, children needed to successfully climb up the roped ladder from the ground to reach the upper surface and getting back on the ground was either achieved by sliding down, jumping from the top or using the same ladder. Very few girls managed to execute this manoeuvre which results in the slide being constantly dominated by boys. The slide is connected to the jungle gym; this means that to be able to slide children must first climb up to the top of the jungle gym through a ladder. Observing the Grade R playground, I documented that the majority of the girls I observed on the jungle gym sat under the shade of the upper shelter of the jungle gym, with very few successfully making any attempt to climb to the top of the jungle gym. Many girls rolled and fell back in their attempts to climb to the top of the jungle gym. This was a source of great amusement for the boys who rebuked girls from the ladder, saying they were 'too slow'. The Grade R yard has a two swing set, one dominated by boys and the other by girls. However, the significance of the gender division on the swings gained increased meaning when I began to receive constant complaints from girls who reported that boys were using both the swings and would not give the other to them as 'it should be'. I think the girls complained to me about boys wanting to dominate both the swings because they saw me as an adult with formal authority who was on the spot to intervene in such conflicts. I also think that the girls complained to me because they thought that I would take their side because of the friendly relations and conversations I was having with them. However, when such complaints were reported to me, I often referred them to teachers. I reacted in this way because I did not want the children to relate to me as an official authority in the way they relate to their teachers.

Although the teachers generally constructed play as free from adult compulsion; children were not spontaneously acting out natural desires and inclinations in their play behaviours during break. That is, children's decisions about what to play, with whom they played and where to play were informed and constrained by social expectations regarding gender. In the playground children were playing but they were also learning about what kinds of behaviours count as masculine or feminine and how to position themselves within these. While teachers associated learning with the curriculum time activities which happened in the classroom, a great deal of social learning and identity work happened on the playground. Indeed research such as Plummer's (2001), Frosh *et al's* (2003) and Petrone's (2010) has pointed to the forms of gender 'policing' that occur among young people during play. Policing in this context refers to the ways children regulate each other's behaviour through preventing boys and girls from accessing gendered spaces and games and by teasing, ridiculing and denigrating boys and girls who are perceived as engaging in behaviour that is seen as transgressing gender boundaries. While children's behaviours are certainly constrained and

regulated by teachers in class (Dixon, 2011), children are also active social agents who regulate and control each other's gendered behaviours during play (Martin, 2011). Therefore, play emerges not simply as free expression which occurs outside curriculum activities in the classroom associated with work. Much social learning in terms of gender identity-work and negotiation occurs on the playground, outside the classroom curriculum space. How this happens is the focus of the following sub-sections.

### **'Girls skip, and they don't play football': learning from the children about how gender polarities operate on the playground**

The following observation from the Grade R playground illustrates how these pupils understood and experienced skipping and football as games for girls and boys, respectively:

It is break time on a typical sunny Thursday morning and I am with children outside class on the playground. Some girls are skipping on their paved classroom verandah while others are seated and still eating. Sitting at the edge of an empty grassy playground where swing and slide are positioned Thabo, Vusi come up to the grassy ground of the yard with a soccer ball which they quickly start to kick between themselves. Zakhele who has been playing in the jungle gym joins the three boys and they form a triangular shape kicking the ball between themselves. Thembeke, with a sandwich in her hand, leaves the majority of other girls on the paved verandah and walks around the three boys [trying not to interrupt them or perhaps avoiding getting hit by the ball] to stand next to me and for few moments we both watch the three boys playing football, she turns to look at me [I am her height when I am seated] and says '*Nelethu elamantombazane ibhola likhona // We [girls] do have our own ball as well*'.

Emmanuel to Thembeke: Why don't boys and girls play football together?

Thembeke: Girls skip, and they don't play football.

Emmanuel: Why girls don't play football?

Thembeke: Haibo! You don't know...? [Surprised] Girls don't play football...

Emmanuel: No, I don't know anything. Why girls don't play football?

Thembeke: Boys don't want to play football with us, girls don't play football. It's the boys who play football.

Emmanuel: But you said girls have their own ball, did you mean soccer ball or a different ball?

Thembeke: Our ball is for 'throw and catch' games, that's what we play 'throw and catch', not football... [be]cause it's for boys! Boys play football all the time. [She walks back to the verandah and after some few moments I see her skipping with along other girls]

The above observation/conversation exemplifies one of many ways through which children constructed play along gendered lines within their schooling environment. Saying that 'we have our own ball as well' indicates that Thembeke is aware that boys seem to be dominating the playground

space through playing football. When she said that I felt as if she was reading my mind because the invisibility of girls in the football game was something I was thinking about as I was observing and writing in my research diary. In starting the conversation with me about the ball in the particular way she does, she is making girls visible by claiming that they have their own ball. Thembeke enlightens me about the ways in which gender boundaries operate among pupils during play at the school. She enlightens me that boys play their own ball together and that as girls they have their own ball and they play separately; this helps to explain why she opts to stand next to me and together we watch the boys playing football. Rather than joining the boys, she returns to the verandah and begins to skip with other girls. Her knowledge about what boys and girls can and cannot play with a ball may have prevented her from joining the boys engaged in football. After Thembeke had left me and gone to skip I became interested in talking to footballing boys such as Thabo, Vusi and Zakhele as well as girls who skip, but I reasoned that initiating conversations with children while they were playing would both be inconvenient and difficult as it could disturb their play. Therefore I needed to find a more suitable context and environment within which I could have conversations with different children to explore how they construct and experience play as well as the significance they attach to the forms of play they engage in as mediums through which they construct their gendered identities. As noted in chapter three, as a means of serving such purposes some children at the school were invited to participate in what I term a graphic-narrative exercise (GNE) which formed the basis for gender-focused conversations with the children. However, before I draw on the forms of data produced through the GNE exercise, I reflect on how forms of gender polarisation manifested during the research exercise itself.

### **How forms of gender polarisation were exemplified in the research process**

Children were invited to participate in a GNE research exercise in which I asked them to draw pictures of play incidents involving themselves as the main characters and then tell stories about their drawings in which they feature alongside their friends or playmates engaged in their favourite games on the school grounds. The children's drawings and the stories they told about their drawings were used to promote conversations with them to explore how they perceive themselves as gendered beings and the meanings and significance they attach to play in the ways in which they engage with their gendered selves. Before engaging with the content of the children's drawings, I reflect on the nature of the relations observed between boys and girls in the GNE research exercise. To demonstrate the nature of such relations I draw on my research diary:

Today was rather more interactive because of the GNE exercise I conducted with a gender-mixed group of pupils in which my aim was to engage in participatory research with the children in which I wanted them to reflect on how they defined play and their interest and engagement in certain

forms of play. Ideally I had wanted to sit with the boys and girls in a circle as I envisioned this would be useful for establishing sense of equality both between the boys and girls themselves and between children and myself as a researcher. Unfortunately the secluded tiled classroom without tables but with only small chairs and stacks of stationary material boxes I was given to use for this research exercise meant that I could not arrange and do as planned. The three small tables I borrowed from Grade R class were designed for four pupils and therefore I could not make an egalitarian circle, two of the three tables have to be separate to allow four children to sit on each. When children entered the room girls congregated to a table on the left while boys filed to the table on the right. It surprised me that the girls and boys spontaneously formed gender homogenous groups regardless of them coming from different classes. When others settled down on their chosen tables I observed occasions where a child entering the room late taking some few moments to look carefully at both tables and if it is a girl she then joined the left table where a girl or girls sat. If it was a boy he joined other boys in the table on the right or the one in the middle which was also occupied by boys. During the drawing and storytelling session I was moving from the two boys' tables from the right to a girls' table on left. No single boy went to the girls table unless they wanted a particular colouring pencil or crayon not available in the boys' tables, and this is something boys did frequently. Girls did not move from their table to take graphic art materials from boys' tables, they used what was made available to them. Girls did not leave their table to take colouring materials from the 'boys' table but they only moved from their table when going out to toilet or to drink water as they asked me to excuse them ... (12/03/2013).

The above observation provides important insight into how the social categories of boy and girl operate among the children, not only as sources of identification but also as social categories that are invested with a differential of power. On entering the room for the GNE research exercise, the children quickly established gender boundaries through sitting separately as boys and girls in much more rigid ways than I observed in class where there was some mixing in terms of gender as seating was ordered by teachers. The fact that the gender boundaries appeared to be more rigid among children in my GNE research exercise than in class may be because in the exercise children were free to sit according to their own choosing. In class, seating arrangements were mostly structured by the authority figure of a teacher. In the GNE research exercise I observed that children who came to the room later needed to first ascertain the gender boundaries in order to be able to follow established patterns without positioning themselves 'inappropriately'. The established boundaries of gender not only served to help children identify where they should sit but were also invested with a power differential which is evident in the undermining manner in which boys behaved towards girls, constantly taking artwork materials from the table dominated by girls without asking their permission. At the same time, the girls' passivity in relation to boys' behaviours which can be seen as a form of exercise of power is evident in their docile and quieter selves in which they hardly questioned boys taking artwork materials from their tables and did not move to 'boys' tables to take art materials. It can be argued that the girls in the GNE research exercise positioned themselves within the discourse of emphasised femininity which constructs and normalises male domination of a subservient and compliant female (Connell, 2002). However, as my conversation with the

following participant illuminates, girls are not always subservient to boys' claims of power; rather, girls emerge as active agents who utilise a myriad of strategies to oppose forms of domination by boys at the school.

### Football as boys' symbolic game

The following drawing was done by one of the boys, Sboniso, who participated in the GNE exercise. His drawing was chosen not only because it represents the common theme of football in the drawings done by boys. I also refer to his drawing because it produced some interesting insights about how power relations operate between boys and girls on the playground.

#### Illustration A: Me and My Friend Playing Soccer ball



My name is Sboniso, and I'm eight years old. That's me and my friend, it is break time at school and we are playing soccer. And my friend's name is Siphesihle.

Emmanuel: Oh, I see. But do you only play soccer with boys such as Siphesihle or sometimes you also play soccer with girls?

In starting the conversation with Sboniso by asking this question I aimed to explore his reasoning with regard to the symbolic construction of football as a boys' game at the school. The symbolic construction of football as a game for boys at Sun Shine emerged in my earlier conversations with Nomcebo and Busi. When I saw Sboniso's drawing of himself in which he plays football with another boy rather than a girl at school I wanted to pick up on the construction of football as 'masculine'.

Sboniso: Siphesihle is a boy. I play soccer only with boys.

Emmanuel: So that means you don't play soccer with girls?

Sboniso: No, no... I don't! [Shaking head]

Emmanuel: Why don't you play soccer with girls?

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

Emmanuel: But are there other games that you play with girls besides soccer?

Sboniso: No, I can't play skipping rope, that's what girls play and not us boys.

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

Emmanuel: Do you mean skipping is for girls only?

Sboniso: Yes, that's what girls play all the time. And they like to irritate us when they start their skipping games on our football ground. That's our playground for football but girls... they want to come and skip here too.

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

Emmanuel: If the yard is for boys and football but where must girls play, I mean where should they skip?

Sboniso: I don't know, but they must not skip where we play football. That's where we play football and they [girls] must go away... I don't know why they [girls] always like to disturb us with skipping when we play [football] nicely in the yard.

The first line of Sboniso's: 'I don't know' resonates with the boys in Frosh *et al's* (2003) study who constructed girls' play as less significant than the games played by boys. For example, like Sboniso who says 'I don't know', the boys in Frosh *et al's* (2003) study presented girls in a negative light and gave responses like 'I don't care' and 'they *just* talk' when they were asked about what girls do in relation to play.

Emmanuel: When girls skip in the yard they disturb you?

Sboniso: Yes, and that's why we hit them with the ball because we want them to cry and go away.

Emmanuel: Really? Do you hit them with the ball?

Sboniso: Yes ... and then they leave [Smile]



Emmanuel: But do girls always leave the yard when you try to hit them with the ball?

Sboniso: They always leave, they must leave and that's what we want.

Emmanuel: Mm [Nodding]

Sboniso: But there is another thing they like to do...

Emmanuel: What is it?

Sboniso: When we kick the ball and it goes to hit one of the girls, they will take the ball and run away with it. They will take it and start to play 'throw and catch with it' and they won't give it back to us, we must chase and chase them until we get the ball back.

Emmanuel: Really, do girls actually do that with your soccer ball?

Sboniso: Yes, and sometimes they take it to a teacher inside class and they tell the teacher that we hit them with the ball and when go and ask for the ball from the teacher she won't give us the ball because she'll say we hit girls with it.

Emmanuel: So how do you feel when girls take your soccer ball away and give it to teachers who won't give it back to you?

Sboniso: We don't feel good, because we want our ball, we want to play. But we can't play anymore...

### **Girls' resistances to boys' domination on the playground**

Sboniso demonstrates how boys constantly try to take up the rest of the playground space through football games. To achieve this level of domination and control of the playground, boys not only exclude girls from the game of football they construct as masculine, but attempt to exclude girls from using even the marginal portion of the yard for skipping. However, girls' resistance to boys' exercise of power in the yard provides insight into the complex ways in which power relations operate between boys and girls at the school. Girls' strategies against boys' domination on the playground express a form of power and agency which challenges the common-sense patriarchal form of power in which men are presented as dominant over passive women (Lerner, 1986; Poling, 1996; Gqola, 2007; Sultana, 2011). Indeed, Foucault (1982) argued that power relations between individuals and groups are far more complex than a common-sense dominant/subordinate binary. For example, he argued that:

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

Power relations are complex as they are constantly characterised by a series of oppositions such as ‘opposition to the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live’ (Foucault, 1982:780). In the context of this study, the complexity of power is manifest in the girls’ different forms of resistance to boys’ exercise of power on the playground. For example, girls resisted boys’ forms of power by reporting boys to adult figures of authority. Girls challenged boys’ domination of space by encroaching on what is seen as boys’ spaces with their skipping ropes. Another strategy of resistance was playing a ‘girls’ game with the football and therefore challenging the symbolic construction of football as ‘masculine’. The different forms or strategies of resistance by girls to boys in this study illustrate the complexity of power relations as articulated by Foucault (1982). As active agents (Prout & James, 1997), or ‘free subjects’ in Foucault’s (1982) terminology, girls react not with passivity but with various strategies of resistance against boys exercise of power through football on the playground. Power is therefore not simply confined to boys who exercise it over docile girls (Bhana, 2002). Rather, girls have possibilities of exercising power in relation to boys and these are manifest in the strategies they use to challenge boys’ exercise of power through dominating the space through football.

When girls take the soccer ball away from boys and either use it for their own ‘throw and catch’ game or take it to the teachers, boys forfeit both their soccer ball and enjoyment of the game. If girls are able to terminate the boys’ football game with which they dominate the yard, girls emerge as powerful and momentarily in total control of the contested yard space. Although it is the boys who provoke behaviours that lead to girls interrupting and terminating boys’ football games, Sboniso expresses feeling overpowered and stressed when girls’ strategies of resistance put an end to their football game. However, it should be noted that although girls are able to utilise strategies against boys’ domination of the yard, girls’ claiming power is not automatic but is earned after a series of acts of resistance to boys’ expressions of power and control. Girls only momentarily dominated the yard after they had managed to successfully seize the boys’ soccer ball, a seizure which comes as their reaction to boys’ rebuking them for skipping in their effort to move them out of the yard as boys construct them as disturbing their football game. I want to draw on another artwork by one of the boys who participated in the GNE research exercise. I refer to his drawing because it produced an interesting conversation which provides another perspective on the way in which football is constructed among children at the school. That is, not only as a boys’ symbolic game or a dimension of power between boys and girls, but also as a social device that creates hierarchies and polarities within the category of boy and between boys and girls.

## Denigration of girls and boys who play with girls

The following drawing is by another boy called Ntokozo. I refer to his drawing, as well as the conversation that follows from it, in order to further elaborate the dominant construction of football at the school not simply as a game for boys, but also as a game that is taken to symbolise what it is to be a 'real' boy, in opposition to girls who are presented as poor at football and other boys who are constructed as 'gay' for playing with girls, not least at skipping.

### Illustration B: My Friends and I Playing Football at Break time



This is me, my name is Ntokozo. I'm 8 years old. I'm playing football with my friends at school. It's break time! We are playing soccer on the school yard with my friends. I am not the goalkeeper, I don't like to be a goalkeeper. Sbonelo is the goalkeeper. I'm the one kicking the ball. That's me kicking the ball. I like to score goals. I score many goals when we play soccer. My team wins all the time. I score goals for my team. Soccer is fine, it's awesome! We play soccer every day at school with my friends.

Emmanuel: Why don't you like to be a goalkeeper?

I started the conversation with Ntokozo by putting this question to him because I found it interesting how he introduced his dislike of being a goalkeeper, and I wanted to find out why.

Ntokozo: It's boring, you don't play like others. You just stand there, and I don't like that. I want to play.

Emmanuel: I see. But do you always play football with boys or you also play it girls?

Ntokozo: No [laughter]... Boys don't play soccer with girls.

Emmanuel: Really! Why do you think boys don't play soccer with girls?

Ntokozo: I don't know. Girls just don't like football, and they can't play football.

Emmanuel: Oh, really?

Ntokozo: [Nodding].

Emmanuel: What makes you say girls can't play football?

Ntokozo: Girls are too weak, they just get tired quickly and they can't run fast when playing football. Girls only watch, they watch us [boys] playing football, but they don't play. And, sometimes they cheer at us, and that's all.

Emmanuel: [Nodding].

Ntokozo: Yeah, football is played by us, it's played by boys. Girls play their own games...

Emmanuel: What games do girls play?

Ntokozo: Girls like play skipping rope, they skip all the time.

Emmanuel: Do all boys in the school play soccer or are there boys who also skip?

Ntokozo: There are others, gays, who you can see skipping like girls.

Emmanuel: So boys who skip are gays?

Ntokozo: Yeah, if you are a boy it's not right to play girls games. I don't skip with girls because I'm a boy.

Emmanuel: But the boys who skip are boys too, are they not boys?

Ntokozo: The boys who skip are gays and they are not like us, we are real boys and we always play soccer, not skipping like we are girls.

Emmanuel: Mm...

Ntokozo: We never skip with girls; we only play soccer.

Football emerges not only as a significant medium through which boys construct their masculinity but as a means that serves to produce internal hierarchies and divisions within the social category of boy. In other words, through football, boys like Ntokozo are able to construct themselves as 'real' boys in ways that suggest their being different both from girls in general whom they construct as physically 'too weak' to cope with the presumed increased endurance demands of football and from other boys they construct as gay for being interested in skipping. The social category of gay, raised spontaneously by Ntokozo, has derogatory connotations and seems to be applied to boys who are seen as not exemplifying in their play the necessary prerequisites of masculinity. In other words,

play in this sense becomes a device to examine and assess the ‘performances’, to use Butler’s (1990) words, of boys in particular and whether they measure up to the necessary standards of masculinity. Furthermore, gay in this context is not a label applied to other boys with presumed same sex desires but to boys who are seen as not properly masculine. Specifically, because football is constructed as for boys and as a form of play with demanding physical standards in opposition to skipping which is constructed as for girls, boys who skip risk incurring the label of gay not least from their male peers at school. In this way, football and skipping are constructed as symbolic polarities. To further explore how the category of gay is constructed by children at the primary school, I interviewed Ntokozo with three of the boys whom he plays football. The following group interview with the four boys who were amongst the most popular for being good at football demonstrates their strong attachment to football as an important signifier of what they perceive constitutes being a ‘real’ boy. Constructions of what it means to be a ‘real’ boy through football are made in opposition to ‘other’ boys constructed as not ‘properly’ male in which they are identified through the label of gay for expressing interest in perceived feminine forms of play such as skipping. To initiate the conversation with the boys I sought to ‘trouble’, using Butler’s (1990) terminology, their fixation with football as for boys by posing the question:

Emmanuel: I can tell that you like soccer very much. But I wonder if girls do also play soccer here at school?

Ntokozo: There are girls who play football. But they play their own football, not with us [shaking his head]. No, we don’t play football with girls.

Emmanuel: Why don’t you [boys] play football together with girls?

Spha: When they get hit by the ball they cry and then they go to report us to teachers ... they get us in big trouble, we can get punished for hurting a girl with a soccer ball. That’s why we don’t like to play soccer with girls.

Thabo: Girls just don’t know how to play soccer. Like, the other day when they joined us [boys] playing soccer, they messed up our game, they started to pull us back by grabbing us by our school shirts when we dribble away with the ball, you know when you run and trying to score a goal, they pull us by our clothes...

Sizwe: We don’t play soccer with girls because... because boys and girls are different. When playing soccer with girls they cry when they fall on the ground we use for soccer, and they cry when they are hit hard by the ball.

The emotional tone which characterised this part of the conversation was that of ridicule and mockery as the boys tried to describe girls’ poor footballing knowledge and skill which they say underpins their exclusion of girls from football at school.

Emmanuel to Sizwe: Are you saying that boys don’t cry when they fall or get hit by the ball?

Sizwe: No! Boys don't cry, we can stand pain and girls can't stand pain. Girls are easily hurt and they can't stand pain. They cry a lot. And they [girls] grab soccer ball with their hands and run with it and they think they can score a goal by throwing the soccer ball in the goal poles...they just don't understand that soccer is played by feet, they like to use hands a lot, they think it's netball...

Thabo: Girls can't play soccer because the soccer ball is too heavy for them, like... they can't even kick the ball to go further.

Emmanuel: Mm, OK. But I wonder if all boys are good at football?

Thabo: Lot of boys play soccer...

Sizwe: But others play other things. You can play soccer, rugby, cricket. Others run and swim.

Emmanuel to Sizwe: So all those are sports for boys?

Sizwe: Yes.

Spha: All of us here, we like football. We play it in the morning, at break and after school. We play football all the time.

Emmanuel: You said you don't play soccer with girls, because of the different reasons you've already said. But are there some boys you also do not play soccer with, and if there are, then please tell me about them?

Spha: There are other boys who don't like soccer; they don't play soccer with us. They just want to skip and play *shumpu* with girls. That's what they like to play, they play girls' games. They play with girls all the time. They're gay! [Laughter]

Sizwe, Thabo and Ntokozo: [Also react to Spha with more laughter after he mentioned the word 'gay'.]

Emmanuel: And you don't play soccer with them, I mean the boys who say are gay, because...?

Sizwe: No, no, we don't play with gays, they like girls' games. Their friends are girls. They must keep playing with girls all the time, not with us!

Ntokozo: They [boys perceived gay] like to play with girls and we don't like to play them. Their friends are girls and they skip and play *shumpu* but not football.

Spha: All of us here we are *real* boys; we play soccer. The *other* boys; they are gay and they like to skip with girls.

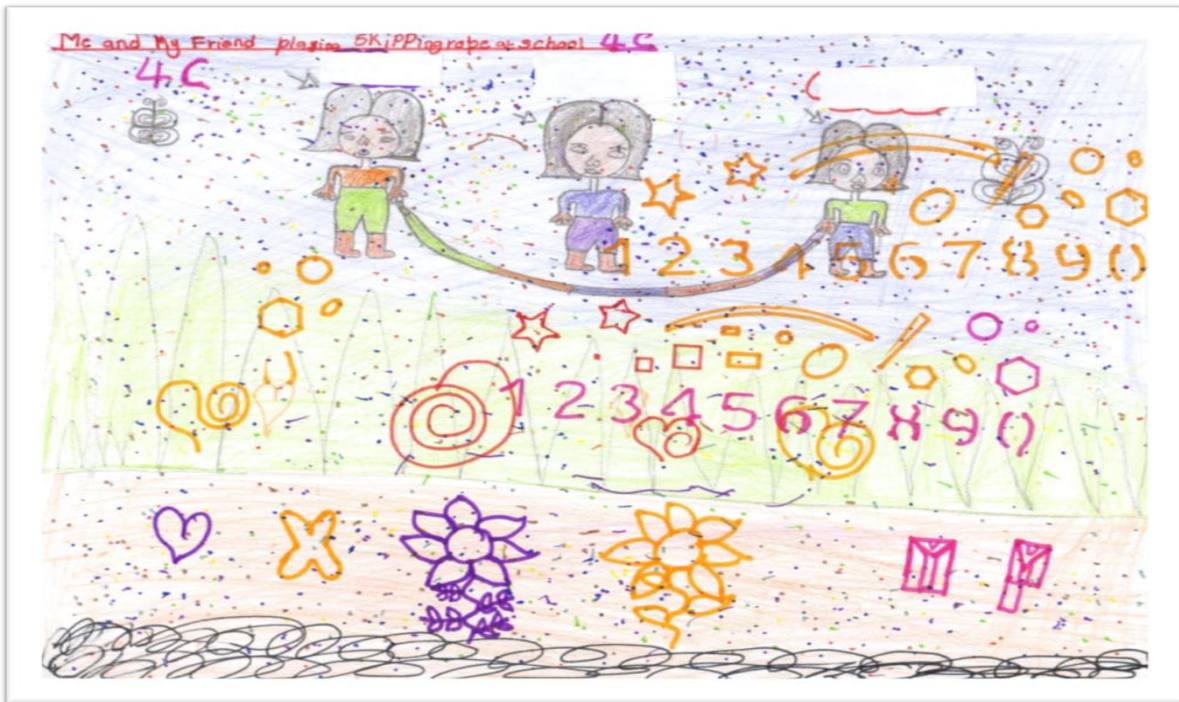
To construct themselves as 'real' boys as opposed to 'gay' the footballing boys draw on the dominant discourse of masculinity which associates physical and emotional toughness with constructions of what being 'properly' male constitutes. As indicated in Frosh *et al* (2003) the significance of football in the ways in which boys construct themselves as both physically and emotionally strong in relation to girls who are constructed as weak permeates the above conversation. By drawing on football, the young boys construct and position themselves within the

discourse of masculinity which associates males with bravery, risk-taking and physical and emotional toughness compared to constructions of femininity which present girls as weak. How the young boys present girls as weaker than them is embedded in their constructions of girls as people who 'hurt easily', 'cannot stand pain' and 'cry a lot'. For the young boys, it is these qualities they associate with girls that make them unfit for football; in constructing girls in this way boys work to produce and reinforce the presumed masculinity of football. Because of the dominant construction of football as a signifier of what it means to be a 'real' boy, boys who do not like football but rather show an interest in perceived feminine forms of play such as skipping are likely to be feminised through the label of gay. How boys construct their masculinities through play reveals the significance attached to football as a source on which boys draw in order to identify and position themselves as 'real' boys in relation to other boys constructed as gay for engaging in forms of play that are perceived as feminine. Football among the young boys emerges not only as a game which embodies some elements of Connell's (1995) conceptualisation of 'hegemonic masculinity' that dominates, subordinates and negates everything that incurs perceptions of femininity; it also emerges as a vital device that footballing boys use to distance themselves from other boys they consider to be 'gay' for their lack of interest in football and for transgressing the norm of same sex friendships in playing with girls most of the time at school. In this way, through football, divisions and hierarchies within the social category of boy are made visible among the boys at Sun Shine.

### **How skipping becomes gendered as for girls at the school**

However, it is not only the derogatory construction of boys who skip as gay that helps to maintain the gender polarity between skipping and football. Girls also reproduce this gender polarity in part by not allowing boys who want to play with them at skipping. The following dialogue which emanated from a girl's drawings of skipping highlights one of the powerful ways in which girls at the school reproduce skipping as their symbolic play activity by refusing boys access to skip. The following drawing which shows girls skipping was done by a girl named Nomcebo. I present it here because it exemplifies the common theme of skipping in many drawings done by girls who participated in the GNE research exercise.

### Illustration C: Me and My Friends Skipping at School



Emmanuel: Yeah! Very bright, very colourful and very beautiful as well! Your drawing is beautiful and I like your use of colour. So your name is...

Nomcebo: Nomcebo

Emmanuel: Nomcebo! So Nomcebo can you please tell me about your drawing?

Nomcebo: These are my two friends holding the rope on the either sides. And that's me in centre. My friend's names are Aphiwe and Kediboni. They are holding the rope for me to start skipping. We love playing skipping rope at break here at school. Skipping is our favourite game, and we like to skip every day. Many girls like to skip here at school.

Emmanuel: OK, but do boys also skip or only girls skip?

Nomcebo: Only girls skip.

Emmanuel: So when you skip it is always you and other girls and no boys?

Nomcebo: Yes, we don't like to play with boys. Sometimes when they come and want to play with us we always say NO! [She said this with emphasis and strong emotional tone]

Emmanuel: Why do you say no?

Nomcebo: We don't like to play with them. Boys play soccer, that's their game and they must leave us alone when we are skipping.

Emmanuel: And girls do not play soccer then?

Nomcebo: Yes, girls don't play soccer. We like to play skipping rope.

Emmanuel: And what about you, do you play soccer?



Nomcebo: No!

Emmanuel: Why not?

Nomcebo: I'm a girl, and I don't like soccer. Girls are not supposed to play soccer.

Emmanuel: Why?

Nomcebo: It's a game for boys.

This conversation provides interesting insight into the symbolic significance children in the study attach to skipping and football in their constructions of gender polarities. As a girl, Nomcebo cannot even imagine herself playing football because it is heavily constructed as a game for boys (Frosh *et al*, 2003; Clark & Paechter, 2007; Martin, 2011). Nomcebo's drawing of herself and her friends skipping exemplifies girls' investment in skipping as a game that epitomises what it means to be a girl at Sun Shine. This implies that girls should play skipping rope with other girls and not football which is constructed as for boys. Nomcebo explains her disassociation with football by saying that 'I'm a *girl*, and I don't like soccer'. She further argues that 'girls are not supposed to play soccer' because 'it's a game for boys'. It is in this dominant view that a gender binary of skipping as a feminine game and football as a masculine game is produced and reinforced as 'normative' ways of being and expressing understanding of oneself as a boy or a girl among pupils at Sun Shine. Nomcebo provides an important example to illustrate how girls 'police' or maintain the presumed femininity of skipping by refusing to allow boys to participate in the game: 'we don't like to play with boys. Sometimes when they [some boys] come and want to play with us we always say NO!' She goes on to explain that 'boys [should] play soccer, [because] that's their game and they must leave us alone when we are skipping.' In this way, Nomcebo constructs a gendered binary between skipping and football in two ways. One is that girls actively refuse to skip with boys. The other is by naturalising the binary in that because she is a girl, she dislikes football. It is also interesting to note how girls present skipping and not football as an activity where cross gender interaction could occur. This illustrates the significance girls attach to football as a symbolic game for boys.

While many girls such as Noncebo constantly work to construct themselves in 'normative' ways through distancing themselves from the presumed masculinity of football and engaging in skipping and only with other girls, other girls' construction of being girls through play is informed and shaped by their parents. Below, I draw on Busi's artwork and the conversation based on it, to illustrate how girls' play behaviours at school are influenced, not only by their peers at school, but also by conditioning from outside school.

### Reasons girls give for not mixing with boys at skipping

The conversation that followed from the drawing below is fascinating in the way the young artist draws on parental teachings about gender to explain the polarities of gender on her primary school playground.

#### Illustration D: Skip(ing) Time



My name is Busi and I'm eight years old, my friend's name is Sne.

We are playing skipping rope in the school ground with Amanda.

In the picture it's me and my friends and we are skipping. I get the skipping rope from my older sister at home. Amanda is not my best friend but she want to skip with us every time but we are not her friend. She plays with boys.

But she also likes to come and skip with me and Sne.

At home I don't play skipping rope with boys because [because] my mum will hit me with a stick!

But when I'm here at school I do skip with boys because my mum is not around and she can't see me skipping with boys.

Emmanuel: Why would your mum hit you if you skip with boys?

Busi: My mum says boys are rough and I must not play with them because they will hurt me and I will come home with bruises all over my body.

Emmanuel: But you said you skip with boys at school, are boys rough to you when skipping with them?

Busi: No, but my mum says I mustn't play with boys. She says I'm a girl and I must play with other girls only and not with boys. She will hit with a stick if she sees me playing with boys, she doesn't like me to play with boys.

Emmanuel: You said you skip with Amanda but you also say that she is not your friend and you also say she plays with boys. I wonder whether is it because she plays with boys that make you say she is not your friend?

Busi: Yes, that's because she plays football with boys. She is a girl and she must only skip with us girls and not play football with boys. Girls play skipping rope and not football.

Emmanuel: So does that mean that girls skipping with boys is OK but girls playing football with boys is not OK?

Busi: Yes, I skip with boys but I don't play football with them. Amanda plays football with boys and that's wrong...

Emmanuel: Why do you think it is wrong for girls to play football with boys?

Busi: Because... Football is for boys. And boys are rough and you'll get hurt a lot when playing football with them. They'll make you fall on the ground and you'll get up with bruises on your face and legs. And when I get home with bruises my mum will say 'yeah, you deserve it, why are you playing football with boys? I told you must not play with boys.' And the boys will laugh at you, they won't even say sorry; they'll just laugh at you. See, that's what will happen to you if you are a girl and you play football with boys. And that's why I don't want to play football with boys.

The way Busi changes in this conversation with regard to the way she positions herself in relation to her mother and the boys at school is worth noting. Initially she says she does not play with boys at skipping because her mother would beat her with a stick, because she says boys would hurt her. In the middle of the conversation, Busi talks about her own construction of football as a game for boys in which playing football is something she sees as 'wrong' for girls. Here we get the impression that her construction of football as a game for boys is what prevents her from mixing with boys through play. However, at the end, Busi talks about not mixing with boys through play not just because she is afraid she will get beaten up by her mother but because she shares her mother's worries about the roughness of boys. Below I engage with some more ironies I picked up from the above conversation with Busi.

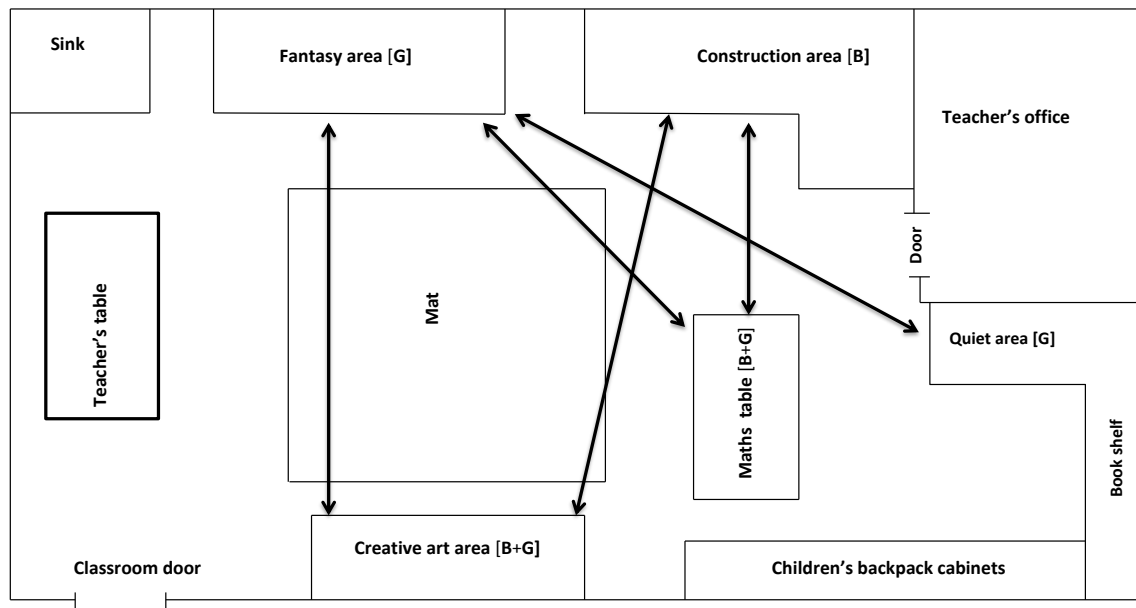
In claiming that she does not play with boys at home but does so at school, Busi gives the impression that the school provides its pupils with an increased level of freedom in terms of possibilities regarding play. She argues that she does not play with boys at home because her mother will hit her with a stick, but she claims to play with boys at school as she is away from her mother who wants her distant from the games considered as boys' games. Busi's mother constructs Busi's femininity through play in ways that constrain her to playing games constructed as for girls and always only playing these with other girls, distancing herself from boys and games constructed as for boys. However, I find it somewhat puzzling that although Busi reports a level of freedom at school which allows her to skip with boys, which she is unable to do at home because her mother will hit her, her drawing above shows her skipping with girls even at school, as though her mother was there to 'police' how she plays. In other words, if school was experienced as more allowing of

‘gender-transgressive play’ as Busi presents it, one would expect Busi to include the boys she claims she skips with in her drawing. Instead, she includes Amanda, a girl she claims is not one of her best friends. It can be argued that Busi does this in order to represent the widespread gender homogeneity of play at the school, thereby reifying the dominant construction of skipping as for girls that Busi plays with even if they are not the best of friends. Busi’s mother constructs boys as rough, which provides substance for Busi to keep her distance from boys whether in skipping or football. Busi’s mother’s construction of boys as rough players and threatening to hit Busi with a stick for mixing with boys during play illuminate some of the common strategies to sustain gender boundaries that produce boys and girls as different and keep them separate.

While Busi presents her mother as discouraging her from mixing with boys during play, she herself also discourages other girls like Amanda from their interest in football and presents football as a game for boys and not girls, which provides the basis on which she constructs girls’ involvement in football as anomalous. For instance, she argue that ‘Amanda plays football with boys and that’s *wrong*’; Busi constructs skipping as for girls and football as for boys but considers boys venturing into skipping more acceptable than girls like Amanda who engage in football that is constructed as for boys. However, Busi’s criticism of footballing girls is an exception. The following chapter on the practices and dynamics of ‘gender transgressive play’ demonstrates that girls at Sun Shine generally speak a language of support and encouragement in their reactions to girls viewed as transgressing gender boundaries by engaging in football.

### **Policing gender through play in the classroom: ‘girls play in the fantasy area and the construction area is for boys’?**

Gender boundaries in the Grade R classroom were clearly visible and constructed as normative both by children and teachers; these were especially striking during the daily one hour period dedicated to child-directed learning practiced through ‘free-choice play’ in which children are allowed to make free choices regarding play with the different play resources provided. Below is a sketch floor plan of the Grade R classroom which shows how different play areas are positioned within the classroom, highlighting how children construct different areas of play in terms of gender.

**Diagram E:** Sketch of the Grade R Classroom Floor Plan**KEY**

**B:** Boys dominate this area, **G:** Girls dominate this area, **B+G:** Boys and girls mix in this area. The arrows indicate the typical pattern of movement from one play area to another during playtime in the classroom.

**Notes**

The fantasy area consists mainly of toy kitchen items such as stoves, microwaves, pots, pans, plates, cutlery and mini tea sets. This play area also includes baby dolls, women's clothes, and other domestic toys such as washing machines which children use in their imaginative forms of play which happens in this play area.

The construction area consists of Lego bricks, wooden blocks and construction logs. Toy vehicles, aircraft and popular TV superhero figurines, such as *Superman* and *Spiderman*, also form part of the toy materials provided in the construction area.

The creative art area is an area in the classroom where children go if they want to spend their playtime engaged in drawing and colouring activities.

The quiet area is an area where children go if they want to read books or solve puzzles during playtime.

On the maths table there are educational toys, as defined by the teachers, which focus specifically on encouraging children to practice numeracy as they play. For example, an abacus is one of the objects which are placed on the maths table.

The mat in the centre of the classroom is for children to sit on during formal lessons. During the less formal or less teacher controlled 'learning through free play' period, the mat was usually occupied by very few children who often engaged in solitary forms of play using toys taken from the main play areas in the classroom.

Observing in the Grade R classroom during playtime, I was particularly struck by the gendered and oppositional manner in which the fantasy and construction areas were constructed by the children. For example, when I was observing and interacting with the children as they were playing, I left boys in the construction area to observe what the girls were doing in the fantasy area. After a few moments of observing the girls engaged in a form of socio-dramatic play in which one of the girls, Zama, took on the role of mother, with other girls being her kids for whom she was busy preparing food in the 'kitchen'. I was suddenly approached by a boy named Bonga, who wanted to orientate me to one of the popular toys in the fantasy area, the house. The following conversation/observation involving Zama and Bonga documents one of the ways in which the girls constructed the fantasy area as theirs and how they policed this area from being accessed by boys:

Bonga [Stands next me for few seconds, he looks up at me with a smiley face and says]: *Malume // uncle, do you know that this house can open, and I know how to open it up. Do you want to see it opens up?*

Emmanuel: Sure, if you can; please ... [I watch Bonga reaching for a large pink mansion placed in the fantasy area. He begins to explore its parts, the doors, lights and windows. However, within few moments he is interrupted by Zama's yelling].

Zama to Bonga: What are you doing, what are doing with our house! We don't play with boys! Please leave the house alone, please go away! Leave us alone... [She briskly grabs Bonga's hands off the house so that he stands behind her. Standing behind Zama for few moments I see him kneeling on the mat and grabbing a toy truck which has been lying on the mat, he starts moving the toy vehicle around on the mat alone].

Emmanuel to Zama: Why can't Bonga play here, along with you?

Zama to Emmanuel [In a lowered but assertive voice]: *Thina asidlali nabafana // we don't play with boys, ... [Only] girls play in the fantasy area and the block area is for boys [she points towards the construction area located adjacent the fantasy areas].*

Emmanuel: [I leave Zama and the rest of the girls in the fantasy area and I follow Bonga where he went to play on the mat]

Emmanuel to Bonga: Why did Zama not want you to touch the house?

Bonga: I don't know, girls think they own everything. They say all the toys there [Pointing at the fantasy area] are for girls and they won't let boys touch their toys.

Emmanuel to Bonga: How do you feel about the way Zama stopped you from showing me how the house opens-up?

Bonga: I don't feel right!

Emmanuel to Bonga: Because...?

Bonga: Because, Zama, she thinks that house is only for girls. But that's not right; because Ms said all the toys here, in this class, are for all of us.

The above observation/conversation highlights two main insights regarding the ways in which children engage with gender in their 'free play' in the Grade R classroom. Firstly, as an outsider I was able to learn from Zama that being a boy meant playing in the construction area and not in the fantasy area constructed by girls as their symbolic area. Zama polices the 'feminine' construction of the fantasy area by rebuking Bonga who wanted to explore a toy in the fantasy area. Zama's negative reaction to Bonga highlights the significance girls attach to the fantasy area as 'theirs' in which boys need to keep distance. This allows them to prevent boys from accessing play in this area. Therefore, while the teachers construct the playtime period as 'free' in the sense that they do not influence the children's play choices, the children police each other's playtime behaviours along gendered lines. Indeed observing Bonga engaged in solitary play with a toy vehicle on the mat after having been rebuked by Zama, this cannot be simply explained in terms of 'free choice' as the teachers' construction of playtime would suggest. Bonga's solitary play on the mat can be understood as an alternative he considered after having been banned from his choice of playing with the house constructed as belonging to the fantasy area and therefore as for girls.

Secondly, the interaction between Zama and Bonga illustrates the complexity of gender power relations among children, where power is seen as not only concentrated in boys but girls also emerge as bearers of power who exercise it both over other girls as well as boys in certain social contexts. In rebuking Bonga following his attempt to play in the fantasy area, Zama exemplifies girls' exercise of power over boys in play areas constructed as for girls. Zama's expression of power towards Bonga inverts the common-sense construction of girls as passive, docile and subservient in relation to boys which draws on and feeds into the two related dominant discourses of patriarchy and emphasised femininity that favour male power in relation to a subservient female. Furthermore, Bonga's compliance rather than resistance in response to Zama's exercise of power also serves to invert common-sense assumptions about masculinity as dominant and tied to construction forms of play, thereby illustrating the fluidity which feeds into the social constructedness of the gender boundaries that characterise children's play. The way in which Zama chases Bonga from the fantasy area that she constructs as for girls exemplifies some of the common strategies children utilise in their efforts to maintain the boundaries of gender that keep girls and boys apart during playtime, as elaborated in the following observation:

'It's playtime Grade R! Now you can go to your favourite play areas...', said Ms Zezi; speaking out loud as children were already making noise as they quickly moved from the mat they were sitting quietly during lessons to begin play. Observing children scattering to the different areas of play my attention is caught by Phe who I see quickly going to the construction area before many boys could crowd the area. When she gets to the construction area she takes a toy truck with a trailer carrying wooden block pieces and she starts playing around with it on the mat. After few moments of Phe's solitary play with the toy truck, I see Goffrey leaving other boys in the construction area he walks

directly towards Phe. He stands and watches her playing with the truck and then he says to her 'that's my truck! Give it back to me'. Phe replies by saying 'no, no it's not your truck', she then picks up the truck which leaves blocks on the mat as she quickly stands up holding the truck to her back with her right hand. Angered by Phe's holding the car, Goffrey forcefully pulls the truck from Phe's hands. Phe tries to resist giving the truck away, she bring the toy to the front and applies both hands to it, and she screams out 'No, no it's not your truck' but Goffrey is determined to get the truck from her. He pulls it harder until Phe let go of it. Goffrey takes the truck but he does not play with as Phe was doing instead he takes it back to the construction area and places it under the table. Few moments later, Andile, one of the boys playing with blocks in the construction area along with Goffrey, takes the truck, places a couple of Lego bricks in the trailer and pushes the truck around the construction area. I see Phe sitting down alone on the mat and crying. Another girl who was working in the creative art area, Phili, notices Phe in tears and sitting alone on the mat, she goes to her and I see the two girls chatting briefly and after that Phili approaches me:

Phili: *Malume* // uncle Phe is crying, she is crying...

Emmanuel: Why is Phe crying?

Phili: Goffrey took her truck. She was playing with the truck and Goffrey took it from her. It Goffrey who took it, there he is over there [Pointing at Goffrey who is busy building tall structures with blocks and logs in the construction area with other boys].

Emmanuel: Please call him here [Phili goes to Goffrey and comes back with him, Phe also joins us].

Phili: *Malume* // uncle this is him, this is Goffrey. *Uyena lo okhalise u-Phe* // He is the one who made Phe cry.

Emmanuel to Goffrey: Why did you take the truck from Phe? See, she is crying now because you took the truck from her. Why did you do that?

Goffrey: She knows... it's not for girls, everything that's there [Pointing to the construction area] is for boys, it for us... See there; Andile is playing with truck. Andile is a boy and he must play with the truck. Phe is not a boy; all the toys there are boys.

Phe: You're lying. Ms said we must play with anything that we like...

Goffrey: No, no [Shaking head].

Emmanuel to Goffrey: Why are you saying no? Do you mean Ms did not say that everyone can play with anything they like?

Goffrey: *Amantombazane adlala wodwa laphaya nabafana badlala bodwa laphaya* // Girls play by themselves over there [Pointing to the fantasy area] and boys also play by themselves over there [Pointing to the construction area].

Phili to Phe: Lets go and tell Ms, when Ms comes back we are going to tell her about you [Pointing to Goffrey] and you know what Ms is going to do, she'll hit you! [Phili holds Phe by hand and they both walk to the creative art area to begin working on colouring books].

While the earlier observation involving Zama and Bonga demonstrated how girls protect the perceived femininity of the fantasy area by excluding boys like Bonga, similarly, for Goffrey, the construction area is for boys and he takes it upon himself to ensure that it remains a boys' space



where girls like Phe are not allowed; even to take toys from the area to play with them on the mat. After the two girls had left us for art activities Goffrey continued to illustrate how play in his classroom is differentiated according to gender by saying that dolls are the ‘right’ play objects for girls as opposed to toy vehicles that he constructs as for boys: ‘girls play with their dolls in the fantasy area, and boys don’t play with their dolls. It’s not right for boys to play with dolls; we [boys] play with trucks’. When I asked Goffrey why was it that only the girls should play with dolls and not boys, he replied by saying that this is ‘because, boys will become gay!’ While the earlier conversations in this chapter highlighted the construction of boys who skip as gay, ‘gay’ emerged as a common derogatory label which acts as a powerful means through which boys ‘police’ each other’s gender behaviours during play at school. Specifically, the label of gay emerged as a form of criticism directed at boys who construct their gender identities in ways that are considered counter-hegemonic as they defy common-sense social expectations regarding what counts as a ‘normal’ way of being a boy such as by engaging in forms of play constructed as for girls such as playing with dolls and skipping. The observations regarding how gender boundaries are constructed and maintained by children in the Grade R class as exemplified by Zama and Bonga, and Goffrey and Phe suggest that play is not as ‘free’ as teachers construct it. Rather, it is heavily constrained by common-sense assumptions regarding the binary constructions of masculinity and femininity which work to limit boys’ and girls’ play possibilities. Playing within the perceived normative boundaries of masculinity and femininity is problematic as it does not help to ‘open up’ a wide range of possible play opportunities for boys and girls, thereby (re)producing the dominant discourse of gender polarity rather than that of gender equality among children from the early years. In the following section I draw on extracts from interviews with the early years teachers in which I discuss their views on the fantasy and construction play areas and the gendering of these.

### **How do teachers view the gendered play in the fantasy and construction areas?**

The classroom observations/interactions with the children at play which revealed strict gender polarity between the construction and fantasy areas encouraged me to interview the teachers on their views on these two gendered areas of play. To initiate the discussion in a group interview with three teachers who taught Grade R, I asked the following open-ended question:

Emmanuel: It’s interesting the way play features so greatly in this classroom compared to other [senior] classes in the school. I wonder why there is so much emphasis on play in this Grade R class; something I don’t see as much in the other classes?

Ms Ndaba: They [children] always learn something through play. Here we have different play areas from which children learn and develop different skills as they play. In other words, you see, the different play areas have their own learning objectives. In the fantasy area, for instance, it’s the kitchen and there are dolls as well. In the fantasy area, it mostly imaginative play, children there are

able to act out certain roles such as being mothers or carers and often I see them in cooking and serving food, and housekeeping roles. These imaginative roles are important for children's thinking skill development. And generally, the play materials in the construction area, where children build structures such as bridges and houses using blocks of different sizes and shapes, helps children to learn and develop their fine motor skills, problem solving skills and mathematical reasoning skills as they try to fit and match shapes of blocks and bricks. Over there, we have a creative art area where they draw and paint and so on. And there, in the quiet area, children read books and solve puzzles. The creative art and quiet areas are usually quiet areas and are for solitary play...

Emmanuel: [As Ms Ndaba was explaining I realised that the initial question was perhaps too broad for the gender focused discussion I envisioned]. I interrupted:

Emmanuel: Uhhm... thanks Ms Ndaba, and I am really sorry to interrupt. That is really important what you saying about how the different play areas sought to aid and support children's learning development in a number of ways as you have said. However, in the past few weeks that I have spent with the children in this class especially during classroom free play period I have noticed that the play areas appear to be gendered in some patterned way. What has been your observation regarding how boys and girls behave during 'free play' in this classroom?

Ms Vezi: You see here [pointing to the fantasy play area] you will often find girls. It is unusual to see a boy here. Only on rare occasions you might find just one or two boys in the fantasy area. As you can see, the fantasy area is poor in terms of resources, if, maybe there were other play objects [stereotypically deemed as appropriate for boys] which could maybe attract boys to the fantasy area... I mean playthings that could allow boys to play roles of being fathers in the same way that girls are able to imitate their mothers' housekeeping and cooking roles with the help of the available play materials which support the acting out of such roles then I think we might see many boys coming to play in the fantasy area.

Emmanuel: What about the construction area then?

Ms Vezi: It's mostly boys who play in the construction area. You see, during free-choice playtime we can't force them to go and play in a particular area and not in another, this is because free-choice play is a period that allows them freedom to make their own free-choices about what or where they like to play. However, if there is a girl who we see wishes to play in the construction area. We always try to encourage and support girls like that rather than discouraging them by saying 'no' the construction area is for boys only. The FREE playtime period is about children making their own play choices, and for us as teachers is to support whatever choices children make. During free-choice play we encourage children to play with anything they like and we don't direct children to go and play in certain areas and not in others because they are boys or girls. Maybe I need to say that free playtime activities are different from play activities we organise for children where they play according to our instructions and under our guidance rather than choosing freely what and where to play as they do in free play which we can't control but allow them to play as they wish and for us there is to support play choices they themselves make.

The way in which the early years teachers construct the classroom play as free and pedagogic seems to reinforce the gendering of the fantasy and construction areas. That is, the teachers' understanding of 'free play' as reflecting children's spontaneous impulses and desires may serve to obscure forms of gender policing that happen during play. For example, the policing of play along gendered lines was evident in the Zama rebuking Bonga who tried to play in what she constructed as the girls

space. The interaction between Goffrey and Phe also revealed that the policing of gender boundaries happens more frequently among boys and girls during the classroom playtime period than teachers construct in terms of children playing according to their individual free choice. Therefore, there is a contradiction between the way play is constructed by the teachers and how it is experienced by the children. On the one hand, playtime is constructed by the teachers as a curriculum period that allows children opportunities to explore different forms of play guided by their individual interests and choice. On the other hand, my observations/conversations with children during playtime document the ways in which play is constrained by social expectations regarding what counts as masculine or feminine. Therefore, intentionally or unintentionally, understandings of free play as practiced by teachers in this classroom may serve to reinforce formal and informal forms of gender policing among children which reproduce the gender polarity between the construction and fantasy areas of play.

Teachers strictly adhere to the assumption that they should not intervene in children's play as this would redirect play from the ideal of being free and child-centred to being structured and teacher-centred; a subversion that it is believed, would negatively affect the presumed learning outcomes associated with child-directed play. However, from a gender perspective, I argue that teachers detaching themselves from children's play in order to present play as spontaneous and free as far as possible places teachers in positions where they are unable to intervene in the play in ways that would allow the children to explore the many different play options available in class in order to benefit fully from the learning opportunities associated with the different forms of play. In essence, when teachers are removed from children's play contexts, they are not able to recognise the gender-based exclusionary practices and unequal gender power relations that characterise children's presumed free-choice play. When I raised the particular observations involving Zama and Bonga as well as Goffrey and Phe with the teachers it emerged that such conflicts between boys and girls were not uncommon among the pupils in this Grade R class. Ms Vezi recalled that she had previously dealt with 'gender transgression' cases that children had brought to her attention:

Vezi: As I said before, boys like to think that the construction area belongs to them and the girls also think that because it's a 'kitchen' then as girls they like to think that they own everything in the fantasy area. So what you saw between Zama and Bonga and between Goffrey and Phe is something that we deal with almost on a daily basis. And we try to always intervene in situations like that. I remember, not very long ago, it was last week Friday, one girl came to me to report that a boy was taking a toy spatula from the 'kitchen', in the fantasy area; she said to me 'Ms he's taking the spatula, he's taking the frying pan...' So you see, for her she does not see it as 'correct' for a boy to play with kitchen items like that. And I said to her 'Yes! Let him play too, if he wants to cook, let him do so... Let him also play with you, let him take the spatula and frying pan and play too, he also likes to play with that, let him play' Let me tell you this: children learn about the things

that are for boys and things that are girls from home, you know that normally girls are bought dolls and boys are bought cars, you see, obviously this thing originates from home and they come to school with that mentality and then they create 'no go areas' during play.

Although Ms Vezi acknowledged the boundaries of gender in children's play, she distanced herself and her colleagues from playing a role in (re)producing these boundaries. However, an examination of the structuring of the play areas, especially the contrast and difference in toy provision between the construction and fantasy area, demonstrated that teachers are not immune to processes that (re)produce the boundaries of gender in children's play. Drawing on the dominant stereotypes of the types of toys considered as for boys or as for girls, the different nature and types of toys teachers provide in the construction and fantasy area produce and reinforce the boundaries of gender observed among children during play. In other words, if teachers provide stereotypically feminine toys in the fantasy area, such as dolls and a 'kitchen', and stereotypically masculine toys in the construction area, such as vehicles and building blocks, that structuring constructs the fantasy area as for girls and the construction area as for boys, contributing to the gendered choices that children make during play. This implies that girls and boys play choices and behaviours cannot be simply explained in terms of free choice in the way the teachers explained them. It can be argued that most girls play in the fantasy area, as do most boys in the construction area, because children want to position themselves 'correctly' in the existing gender structures. For example, through its different toy kitchen items, dolls, and fluffy and pink playthings the fantasy area is seen by girls as 'home' which provides them with opportunities to enact expected feminine roles. Indeed, in popular discourse, the kitchen serves as a classic symbol of femininity. Therefore, when teachers construct the fantasy area in ways that model a typical kitchen they circumscribe where boys and girls can and cannot play in ways that (re)produce the discourse of gender polarity from the early years. Rather than seeing how their structuring of the different play areas feeds into the dominant stereotypes of gender which encourage children to organise themselves according to gender expectations during play, the early years teachers invoked gender socialisation processes at home as informing how and why their pupils play according to dominant stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Ms Ndaba further explained that:

I totally agree with what Ms Vezi is saying. The [gendered] play choices that children make are based on how they have been socialised as young children from home. Colour, for instance, is an important factor influencing whether a toy is used by boys or girls. They [the Grade R pupils] already know that pink things are for girls and that blue is for boys. You see, that pink mansion and those baby dolls dressed in pink in the fantasy area over there, in their minds, those pink toys are for girls and not boys. Traditionally, colour pink is associated with girls. And normally, at home they see that it is mothers or aunts or sisters who care for small babies, not boys, brothers or men. In playing with dolls, girls imitate female carers, and they learn at the same time, child-rearing skills, typical female roles they will most likely take up when they become mothers in future. This tendency of girls mostly playing with dolls in this class is based on the patriarchal culture and

values instilled from home.

### **My own reflections and criticisms of the teachers' views**

In articulating their views on gender in the children's play, teachers tended to disassociate themselves from any responsibility in contributing to the reproduction of gender polarities or encouraging forms of gender policing among children. For the teachers, children's gendered play behaviours are a reflection of a patriarchal social system that children are born into and grow under, whereby roles, positions and responsibilities are intensely arranged and evaluated in terms of gender. Like Ms Vezi, the way Ms Ndaba explains why pupils play according to common-sense gender stereotypes learnt at home can be located within the sex-role socialisation perspective on how children form their gender identities. The sex-role socialisation perspective engages with gender as learnt social behaviours via a myriad of social processes, such as through play, in which, as Ms Ndaba argues, parents normally buy dolls and pink toys for girls, as opposed to cars and blue items for boys as they are taken to epitomise masculinity. As MacNaughton (2000) has demonstrated, the sex-role socialisation perspective on how children learn about gender tends to represent children as passive objects of socialisation in which how they passively absorb 'messages' of gender imposed on them by their parents as well as other significant people in their upbringing is compared to dry sponges simply absorbing water. Engaging with childhood gender from the sex-role socialisation perspective, as do the early years teachers, is adult-centric in the sense that it denies children agency; it is not interested in finding out from the children themselves what meanings they give to the social categories of boy and girl, and how these may inform the gendered ways they organise during play. Within the sex-role socialisation perspective, gender is understood from the point of view of adults, such as parents, who socialise children into norms of gender without engaging them to find out what being boy or girl means for them, therefore denying children space to air their voices. While sex-role socialisation explanations in relation to gender in play are dominant, this does not mean that biological explanations of gender in children's play are foreign amongst the early years teachers:

Emmanuel to Ms Mkhize [teacher in training]: Since I have been in this classroom, especially during playtime, I have observed a consistent pattern in the manner in which boys and girls congregate to different play areas and that some areas are dominated by boys and others are dominated by girls. For example, I have seen over the past couple of weeks that it is mostly the boys who play with playthings from the construction area; while the majority of girls are found in the fantasy area. I wonder why girls do not usually play with building blocks in the construction area?

Ms Mkhize [Raising her voice over children's classroom playtime noises]: We would like to see them rotating between the different play areas but you know... it's just natural, girls are not

interested in the construction logs and building blocks. They like their puzzles and colouring books, as you can see for yourself [Pointing to the three girls who sat on the mat together solving a puzzle].

The early years teachers' understanding of children's gendered play behaviours reveals a combination of two different perspectives on gender. The first, based on culture and upbringing, is exemplified by Ms Vezi and Ms Ndaba's sociological determinism arguments in which children's gendered play behaviours are viewed as a product of their gender socialisation. Children are seen as simply reproducing what they have learnt about gender from home. The other perspective, as exemplified by Ms Mkhize, is based on biological/essentialist accounts of gender in which children's gendered play choices are viewed as a manifestation of presumed innate differences between boys and girls. However, like Francis (1998), MacNaughton (2000) and Martin (2011), drawing on the poststructuralist feminist perspective on gender in which learning gender is viewed as a complex process which involves children engaged as active participants rather than passive objects of gender socialisation allows me to uncover the limitations embedded within both perspectives. The poststructuralist feminist view on gender is critical of the sex-role socialisation perspective, which Ms Vezi and Ndaba draw on, for denying children's agency in the processes of learning about, and performing, gender. In other words, since the early years teachers understand children's expressions of gender in their play as the product of their gender socialisation, children's gender is viewed from the point of view of adults who do not engage with children to find out how they construct being and 'doing' boy and girl. Furthermore, the feminist poststructuralist position criticises the view of gender as biology for overlooking the myriad of social processes through which gender is produced. It is not that girls are 'naturally' not interested in construction play activities as suggested by Ms Mkhize; my interactions with the children at play showed that girls generally refrain from or are unable to play with building blocks and other construction toys because these are stereotypically defined as embodying masculinity. As such, they are constructed as 'inappropriate' for girls who should construct and practice femininity through collaborative play in solving puzzles as well as enacting caring and nurturing roles through playing with dolls and kitchen toys in the fantasy play area that is constructed as feminine.

That children's gendered play patterns reflect presumed natural differences between boys and girls is a common-sense assumption I challenge. I argue instead that it is not that girls are born with a natural interest in the toys in the fantasy area or in solving puzzles in the quiet area as suggested by Ms Mkhize. Rather, like Ms Vezi and Ndaba, I argue that the young children behave in the gendered ways they do because they have learnt that certain roles, behaviours, games and spaces are appropriate for boys or girls. However, going beyond Ms Vezi and Ndaba's fixation with sociological determinism, I further invoke poststructuralist feminist insights and argue that it is not

enough to simply say that children's gender behaviours are a product of how they have been socialised. As I do in this ethnography, teachers need to engage much more with children at play and talk to their pupils in order to find out why they play in the gendered ways that they do, thereby exploring ways to 'open up' a wide range of play possibilities for both boys and girls. In my observations and interactions with the children at play, I gained insight not only into how children construct forms of play and play areas in terms of gender, but how the children constantly work to reproduce and maintain gender boundaries in their play so that boys and girls remain separate most of the time.

I find gender boundaries in children's play to be problematic for three main reasons. Firstly, as highlighted earlier, gender boundaries in play reduce play possibilities for both boys and girls. When play is organised according to gender, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for boys and girls to fully and freely explore and enjoy the different play activities at school. While girls miss out on the learning opportunities presumed to be available in the construction area, boys miss out on the educational skills presumed attainable through imaginative and socio-dramatic forms of play with the toys found in the fantasy area. This leads to the second point that when pupils play within gender boundaries, this can have implications for their learning development through play as strongly argued by the early years teachers at the school. The teachers maintained that children learn and develop various educational competences through the forms of play they engage in; however, my observations and interactions with the children that saw them constructing and maintaining gender boundaries in their play suggest that not every child is able to benefit from the learning opportunities associated with the different forms of play and play areas. In other words, the rigidity of gender boundaries among children at play regulates who is able to learn and who is able to acquire what kind of a skill depending on the individual child's identification in terms of gender. Thirdly, I view the gender boundaries in children's play as problematic in the sense that they seem to be buying into the dominant discourse of gender polarity which could shape the children's later life patterns. The gender policing of play areas and interests I documented among children in this study may encourage these young boys and girls to see themselves mainly along the lines of difference rather than commonality. I argue that it is in the discourse of gender difference that gender inequality is produced. In the context of the democratic South African state, the future effects of the gender boundaries in children's play emerge as particularly problematic when viewed in relation to the gender equality objectives enshrined in the country's Constitution (1996). The implications of my research findings for addressing gender in children's play are developed and discussed in chapter eight.

## Summary

In summary, this chapter engaged with the question of how young children at Sun Shine Primary construct and experience being boys and girls through play. Observing and interacting with the children at play illuminated behavioural patterns which highlight how children constantly work to construct and maintain gender boundaries in their play; both in and outside the classroom. While boys frequently dominated the play yard through their football game, girls spent their break time skipping, which took up marginal space in the yard. Inside class, play was also generally gendered. More striking in the Grade R class was the gender polarity that differentiated between the construction area dominated by boys and the fantasy area dominated by girls. Playing in the construction area enabled boys to learn about and perform stereotypically 'normative' ways of being boys through toys which emphasise physical strength, adventure and construction work. Conversely, girls mainly played with dolls and kitchen based toys in the fantasy area; this allowed them opportunities to learn about and practice what 'normative' femininity entails: caring, nurturing and doing domestic chores particularly within the space of a kitchen.

This chapter documented not only how children construct boundaries of gender in their play but how these are maintained and transgressed. The processes and strategies in relation to behaviours that transgressed the presumed rigidity of gender boundaries illuminate some of the complex ways in which gender power relations operate among children during play. The complexity of gender power relations is evident in the observed cross-gender interactions in which not only did boys exercise power over docile and passive girls but girls emerged as bearers of power in relation to boys in certain contexts and situations. The chapter's empirical material demonstrated the ways in which girls expressed agential power through constantly resisting boys' domination, especially on the playground. Girls also claimed absolute power and domination in the fantasy area that they constructed as theirs which gave them the power to exclude and rebuke boys who wanted to transgress the presumed 'femininity' of this area. Inverting the dominant discourse of patriarchy in which power is often presented as a hallmark of men/boys in relation to subordinate women/girls, the strategies girls utilised against boys' exercise of power during play provide a more complex picture of how gender power relations operate among children in ways that transcend the usual gender power binary of male hegemony contrasted with female subordination.

Strictly playing within the boundaries of gender does not offer children greater possibilities in relation to play; furthermore, gendered play also negatively impacts the child-centred pedagogy practiced through play in the Grade R class. Intentionally or unintentionally, through their engagement with play as a means of a child-centred pedagogy in which they provide stereotypically



gendered toys in different play areas, the Grade R teachers contribute to the (re)production of the gender boundaries witnessed in children's play. The contradiction between how teachers construct play as 'free' where it is viewed as reflecting children's individual choices, and how play is actually experienced by children as heavily shaped and constrained by social expectations regarding 'normative' ways of being boys and girls is problematic. The construction of certain toys and games in terms of gender does not allow children to engage sufficiently in different forms of play in order to benefit from the learning and development presumed by teachers to be attainable through play.

While this chapter highlights how some children resist conforming to gender expectations as they attempt to transgress the boundaries of gender in their play, these processes of gender transgression are not explored in great detail. The following chapter focuses on children's gender transgression patterns, especially among children who construct their gender identities in 'subversive' ways through play. The chapter explores the forms that gender transgressions take among boys and girls as well as the reactions that 'gender transgressors' provoke from their peers at school. Importantly, the chapter considers the kinds of strategies 'gender transgressors' use to negotiate and deal with the predominantly negative evaluations they receive from their peers for transgressing the boundaries of gender, and further demonstrates how negative reactions towards 'gender transgressors' work as a vital strategy for 'policing' gender boundaries both in play and friendship relationships among pupils at Sun Shine. The following chapter examines the ways in which pupils at Sun Shine construct and engage with the category of 'gay' in relation to another category of 'tomboy' associated with girls who engage in football and are thus constructed as transgressing the presumed normativity of skipping as well as other games considered to signify what it means to be a 'normal' girl.

## Chapter Six

### **Children's understandings and experiences of being called 'gay' and 'tomboy' in relation to play**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter introduced the term 'gay' and how it is invoked by the boys at the school who invest in football as a standard of masculinity. This chapter focuses on boys who are constructed as gay for being interested in forms of play which are commonly perceived as feminine and it aims to find out how they experience and respond to being constructed in this way by peers at the school. Furthermore, this chapter will focus on girls who get called 'tomboy' for being interested in football and will explore their views and experiences of being constructed as tomboy in relation to play at school. This chapter, therefore, focuses on the young girls and boys of Sun Shine Primary who get called tomboys and gays in relation to play and explores how they experience and deal with these appellations. To explore the dynamics in the social constructions of tomboy and gay, I will focus on three cases. Firstly, I will explore gender 'transgression' in football by focusing on two boys and a girl playing football and how they are constructed by their peers and how they respond to these constructions. Secondly, I will focus on Thabo and the unusual circumstances in which he admitted being called gay. And thirdly, I will focus on Bu and his experiences of being constructed as gay for being interested in skipping which he played with girls. To engage with these cases, I draw on the multifaceted data which includes pictures drawn by children about play, conversations with the children focusing on the drawings, and conversations exploring different children's experiences of play as well as observations of their play patterns at school. It should be noted that as I draw on these different forms of empirical data to explore what it means to 'transgress' boundaries of gender for young children in the study, my aim is not to reproduce the idea of gender transgression. Rather, I am interested in how to research, engage with and write about 'gender-transgressive' forms of play in ways which do not take for granted the adherence to gender norms which produce these forms of play as transgressive. In focusing on young children who challenge gendered norms in their play and incur the labels of gay and tomboy, this chapter seeks to give voice to this minority group of children to report on their experiences of being denigrated at school through the appellations of gay and tomboy.

### **‘Gender transgression’ in football: two boys and a girl playing football**

In the process of conducting this research study I developed the term of ‘gender-transgressive’ play which I use to mean the various behaviours amongst children in the study which seem to challenge the ‘normativity’ of same sex play and friendships. Among children in the study ‘gender-transgressive’ play took many different forms which also invited different repercussions. To explore these, I begin by focusing on an interesting drawing by a boy who is not one of the popular footballers introduced in the previous chapter but engages in his own football game with one other boy and a girl. I use the following drawing because it illustrates a common form of ‘gender-transgressive’ play in which the symbolic construction of football by the boys, as not just a game which happens to be played by more boys than girls but also an important signifier of masculinity, is challenged.

#### **Illustration E: SOCCER TIME**



Me and my friend Anele play soccer everyday at school on the yard. My friend Amahle, she is a goalkeeper. Anele scored a goal and he is celebrating the houl [whole] day and he keeps laughing. They [other boys from my class] like to say to me that playing with girls is not allowed and I get very angry [when the boys say that] but we keep playing with Amahle and it's lots of fun playing soccer with her.

In light of the significance of football as a game which signifies masculinity which, as described in the previous chapter, dominated playground and marginalised girls, Wandile's behaviour in playing football with Amahle emerged as unusual and transgressive. Although Amahle is presented by Wandile as a friend with a common interest in playing football, she is not constructed as equivalent to the two boys. She is positioned as the goalkeeper and she is smaller than her two male playmates in the picture. When I asked Wandile why Amahle was a goalkeeper and not himself or his male friend Anele, he replied by saying that 'I don't like to be a goalkeeper because you don't play more in the game like others... [As a goalkeeper] you just stand there in the goalposts and you don't get to play more like others in the playground'. Wandile views the position of a goalkeeper as subservient to other inner field positions of play. Indeed my observations/interactions with some popular footballing boys in the school suggest that being a goalkeeper is not a position which most boys like; as Wandile argued, this is because being a goalkeeper positions one on the margins of the playground which implies less participation than other inner players. Furthermore, the low status construction of a goalkeeper became evident through the way in which this position was often relegated to boys who were considered not very skilled in football; these were boys who were not likely to be among the first top players to be chosen to represent competing teams in football games at break. Portraying Amahle in the picture as having a less involved role and position as goalkeeper can be read as reinforcing the construction of football as a boys' symbolic game in which, as boys, Wandile and Anele dominate the game. Although Amahle is part of the football game with the two boys, the picture shows the ball between the boys while Amahle, in addition to being smaller which could imply that she is insignificant or inferior compared with the boys' bold and dominant appearance, is further positioned on the margin of the playground away from the ball in the boys' possession.

Although the previous chapter indicated the symbolic significance of football as a boys' game in which Wandile is 'rightly' engaged in the picture, the fact that he plays football which involves a girl's participation is seen by his male peers as 'transgressing' the norms of masculinity. When I asked Amahle about how other girls react to her playing soccer with the boys (Wandile and Anele) she said that the other girls do not see this as a problem at all and that even though most of her friends are girls, she loves soccer and mostly plays it with boys at school because not many girls like soccer. However, Wandile playing with Amahle is deemed inappropriate by the other boys in his class who see this as being girly, yet not so much for Amahle even though she is a girl engaged in a game constructed as for boys. The messages of disapproval Wandile receives for playing soccer with Amahle highlight the greater level of pressure generally experienced by boys to conform to social expectations regarding gender than girls (Jordan, 1995). Wandile and Anele are seen as

violating norms of masculinity by playing their own smaller version of football with a girl, even though the girl is subordinated by positioning her as a goalkeeper.

Wandile said that, '[although] ... the other boys like to say to me that playing with girls is not allowed, and I get very angry [about this]...we keep playing with Amahle and its lot of fun playing soccer with Amahle'. This is important because it not only illustrates one of many ways in which children police gender boundaries in their play, but highlights Wandile's agential power as he resists social expectations which reinforce gender homogeneity in friendships that limit opportunities for cross-gender friendships to guide and determine his choices regarding who he plays with and does not play with at school. However, this is not only about Wandile's agency; all three children show agency as they do not simply allow social expectations regarding gender to determine their play behaviours and relationships but negotiate between these, in the process calling into question the rigidity of gender boundaries that generally characterise play and play relations at the school. As Corsaro (1997) and Prout and James (1997) have argued, as active agents who attach meanings to their play behaviours and relations, children think and behave as individuals rather than as a homogenous collective. Wandile demonstrates personal agency as he defies gender norms in his football playmates' characteristics and resists verbal messages of disapproval from his peers who blatantly oppose girl playmates in a game of football.

### **How Wandile and Anele construct Amahle**

In my conversations with boys at Sun-Shine about how they construct and experience being boys, football emerged not only as an important signifier of what it means to be 'properly' male but football competence also emerged as a key requirement for girls in order to gain membership of the boys' playgroup as well as friendship. However, boys were quite clear that there is a difference between girls who were athletic in football and the girls they constructed as 'tomboys' because, besides their interest and competence in football, they were perceived to have 'masculine' qualities such as showing too little concern about their physical appearance, spending most of their leisure time with boys, and being constantly in 'trouble' for engaging in fights at school. How boys construct the tomboy social category in relation to 'normal' girls through football is captured in the following conversation with Wandile, the author of the drawing in Illustration E, along with his male friend, Anele, featured in the drawing:

Emmanuel to Wandile: I see that you have drawn a picture of a girl in your drawing about play. Is Amahle the only girl you play soccer with at school?

Wandile: Yes, Amahle is the only girl we play football with. She can play soccer. She is good at

football; she does not use hands like other girls do ... other girls cry when they fall on the ground. She knows how to play soccer and she knows how to defend too, and she can score goals.

Emmanuel: Do you only play soccer with Amahle or are there other games you play with her?

Wandile: We like playing with her, and she likes to play with us too. She's our friend. She comes to play soccer with us, but sometimes she plays skipping rope with girls. There are other girls that Amahle likes to bring with her when she comes to play soccer with us and we tell them to stand on the side of the playing yard to watch us play, and can choose a team they would like to support. They [girls] have to watch us play and see how soccer is played...

While listening to Wandile describing how he constructs Amahle differently in relation to other girls at school, I was interrupted by Anele who whispered '...but other girls are tomboys'. This shifted my attention to Anele and prompted a conversation about how tomboy is constructed by these two young boys:

Emmanuel: I am sorry to interrupt you Wandile, OK but I will come back to; alright. I think I heard the word 'tomboy' coming from you Anele, and I wonder what tomboy means?

Anele: A tomboy is a girl who is trying to be boy.

Emmanuel to Anele: OK, but how do you see a tomboy?

Anele: You'll see she's a tomboy when she spends lot of time with you and she even plays soccer with you even if she does not know you...

Emmanuel [Looking at Wandile for a response]: So, what about Amahle? You said you sometimes play soccer with Amahle?

Wandile: Yes, Amahle plays soccer with us but she is a girl, she is a *normal* girl and not a tomboy. Tomboys are [girls] trying to be boys, they speak in a strong voice. They always wear bigger pants and don't put belt on and people can see what they wearing under their pants you know like a 'nigger'... They try to be boys and do wrong things like robbing people. They like to fight with boys, and they smoke too. They exercise to make their muscles big and strong, they are tough girls...

The way in which these two boys talked about tomboys suggests that they are critical of them, particularly for 'trying to be like boys' beyond just liking and being good at football. Although she likes soccer that is constructed as for boys, Amahle receives positive remarks from Wandile and Anele who admire her for her skill which on its own does not make her a tomboy as she still keeps her female friends and also engages in games constructed as for girls such as skipping. Playing soccer with boys does not qualify girls as tomboys if they construct their femininity by avoiding football exercise and other behaviours associated with boys such as fighting, smoking and wearing pants that fall below the belt line.

It is interesting to note that Wandile draws on the discourse of masculinity which defines soccer as a signifier of what being a 'proper' boy constitutes: not being teary. Boys draw on football as a source on which to identity and position themselves as different from girls that they construct as fragile and poor at football. In their construction of girls in this way, Wandile and Anele present Amahle differently in relation to other girls at the school. Presenting Amahle as being good at football sets her apart from other girls who the boys generally construct as physically and emotionally fragile and poor at football. However, despite her interest and skill in football, Amahle is not constructed as a tomboy; this is because, to the boys, 'she is normal' in the sense that she still has girls as friends who she occasionally skips with. Amahle does not play with boys all the time, and she does not fight or smoke or wear pants all the time, which are the characteristics Wandile associates with being a tomboy. The way in which Amahle is constructed by the boys as a 'normal' girl who is simply good at football contradicts how young children construct the category of tomboy in research by McGuffey and Rich (1999). In their US-based study into how five-to-12 year-old boys and girls negotiate gender relations in their play, McGuffey and Rich (1999) found that the term tomboy is applied to girls who engage in games constructed as for boys and who keep the company of boys most of the time. Furthermore, McGuffey and Rich (1999) report that girls were required to perform gender in ways considered 'masculine' in order to gain acceptance into boys' social groups. However, McGuffey and Rich (1999) also found that in performing gender in perceived masculine ways through play, girls not only gained membership of boys' playgroups, and access to games and play spaces constructed for boys, but also incurred the label of tomboy from the very same boys they wanted to impress and befriend. Although Amahle is not constructed as a tomboy by her two male friends, Wandile and Anele, she does experience forms of criticisms from other boys at school for playing football. The following conversations with Amahle alone and with her female friends with whom she shares a common interest in football illuminate how these girls are often discouraged, not least through the label of tomboy, by the majority of boys from playing football.

### **How Amahle says she is viewed by other girls**

The one-on-one conversation I conducted with Amahle following the conversation with Wandile and Anele was prompted by my interest in talking to Amahle by herself to explore her experiences of playing football with boys and how other girls reacted to her interest in football. Amahle confirmed that she likes soccer very much. However, she also mentioned that she does not play as often as she would like with the boys at school because many boys do not allow her to play soccer with them; they say that she is a girl and she must play games constructed as for girls as do the majority at school. She reported feeling very upset about the negative reaction from the majority of boys at school and finds this unfair and discriminatory. She mentioned that she plays more soccer

with boys outside school. When I asked her how other girls react when they see her playing soccer with boys, she said that girls generally support her. '*Abasholutho, bayangijabulela nje k'phela, bayangi*-supporter // they [other girls] don't say any [negative] things, they just support me.' I also probed further:

Emmanuel: What do you mean when you say they [other girls] support you?

Amahle: They clap their hands and shout Amahle! Amahle! Amahle! ... and they like to do that when I score a goal or when I'm just dribbling with a soccer ball playing football with boys... [Speaking softly with a smiley face].

Emmanuel: What about boys at school, do they clap for you and shout your name as does girls?

Amahle: *La e'skolenin abanye abafana abafuni ukudlala ibhola namantombazane* // there are other boys here at school who do not want to play soccer with girls. They [boys] say girls don't play soccer, they always like to say that when there are girls who want to play with them... They like to say I must go and skip like other girls and I must not play with them. They say [that] they don't play with girls and because I'm [a] girl I must also play with other girls.

Emmanuel: How do you feel about that?

Amahle: Upset, I feel upset.

Emmanuel: You said other girls support you when you play soccer with boys, but do all girls support you?

Amahle: No, other girls don't like to see me playing soccer.

Emmanuel: Why is that?

Amahle: They say I am a girl, and girls don't play soccer.

Amahle does not play soccer as much as she would like to during break at school. She says that this is because many boys at her school do not want to play soccer with girls. However, she also suggests that it is not only boys at the school who police her interest in football. She highlights some girls' complicity in the popular construction of football as a symbol of masculinity. Although Amahle acknowledges that girls generally support her, she argues that 'other girls don't like to see me playing soccer ... [because] they say I am a girl, and girls don't play soccer'. This mix of reactions prompted me to further explore girls' perceptions of other girls who play football at the primary school.

### **The risks girls who play football incur**

I observed Amahle engaged in football at school and her football games commonly took two forms. On the one hand, as shown in Wandile's drawing, on some occasions she played with boys as the



only girl. However, on other occasions she played football with other girls at school. The latter usually occurred in the context of outsourced football coaching support to the primary school girls interested in football, as their school did not cater for girls' football. While a boys' soccer team existed and was supported within the school, girls were not afforded the same opportunity; girls' soccer was not one of the school's formal sport codes. Girls were limited to netball, compared with boys who could choose between soccer, cricket, basketball or rugby. After observing Amahle's play behaviour on the playground I became interested in talking to her. To encourage the conversation, I began in the following way:

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

Amahle: We [girls] play skipping rope, but I also like to play football.

Emmanuel: Do you play football with boys or with other girls?

Amahle: I play football with boys.

Emmanuel: Who are the boys that you play football with?

Amahle: I play soccer with Anele and Wandile. Many other boys here at school don't want to play football with girls.

Emmanuel: Why?

Amahle: Because they say we'll get injured. And many other boys like to say soccer is only for boys. They [boys] won't let us play with them. They say they don't play with girls and call us [girls who play football] tomboys.

Emmanuel: How does it make you feel to be called a tomboy?

Amahle: It makes me feel very sad. They [boys] say we are trying to be boys, but we are girls; not boys. I was very angry when they said tomboy to me. I went home and told my mum that there were boys who called me tomboy here at school and she said she'll come here at school to ask them why they call me tomboy.

Emmanuel: Is it only boys who call you tomboy for playing soccer? What about other girls, don't they call you tomboy also?

Amahle: No.

Emmanuel: Why do you think girls don't call you tomboy?

Amahle: Girls like it when they see us [girls] playing football but boys don't want to play football with girls. Some boys will push you *ngamas'bomu ngoba* // deliberately because they want you to stop playing football with them. They want you to fall and get hurt and then stop playing! [She said with strong conviction]

Incurring the derogatory label of tomboy as well as boys' perceived intentional roughness towards

girls when they play football are two important reasons for girls' lack of involvement in football at Sun Shine. The label of tomboy is commonly applied to girls like Amahle who are seen as transgressing norms of femininity by playing football. Because football is taken to epitomise the dominant construction of masculinity as physically tough and strong in relation to the dominant construction of femininity which includes passivity and fragility, girls who like football risk being called tomboys which carries connotations of not being a 'proper' girl. The label of tomboy is experienced as a form of an insult by Amahle who expressed hurt, pain and anger at the boys who call her a tomboy. The way in which Amahle perceived the label of tomboy as derogatory offers insight into the way the term is used by some of the boys as a strategy to police girls' involvement in football in order to reproduce the perceived masculinity of football. Although football presents itself as an endurance game which demands some level of physical strength and stamina which are qualities typically associated with dominant constructions of masculinity, as Amahle suggests, some of the boys she played football with capitalised on the physical demands of the game and deliberately adopted aggressive behaviours towards girls in order to discourage their participation, thereby protecting the perceived masculinity of football. Amahle continued to share her experiences of how difficult it is for her to pursue her interest in football at school:

Emmanuel: Some boys tell me that they don't like to play football with girls because girls cry when they get hit by the ball. What would you say about that?

Amahle: It's not nice to play football with boys.

Emmanuel: Why do you say that?

Amahle: When playing football with boys they'll step on you, they step on your feet and then you feel lot of pain. And after that, they won't even say sorry. And sometimes boys would just kick the ball straight to your face! [Here she is referring to boys other than Anele and Wandile.]

Emmanuel: Oh no! That must hurt.

Amahle: *Basishaya ngamasibomu* // they hit us with the ball deliberately.

Emmanuel: I wonder why they do that.

Amahle: They like to do that when they see me playing better than them, maybe I've scored a goal, then they use the ball to hit me with it.

Emmanuel: That's not fair.

Amahle: They [boys] do that all the time. They also trip us [girls] and hit us with the ball on the face when we play with them. They want us to stop playing football with them.

Here Amahle highlights some of the ways in which boys police football. Aggression towards girls such as deliberately hitting them with the ball is interpreted by Amahle as a subtle form of gender

policing which boys direct at girls in football. However, girls do not emerge as passive in these tactics. As Amahle elaborates below, girls often retaliate aggressively:

Emmanuel: So boys would hit you with the ball when you play football with them?

Amahle: Yes, but when I'm playing soccer with them [boys], I also kick them on their ankles! [Again, she is referring to her experiences of playing football with boys other than Anele and Wandile]

Emmanuel: Do you really do that?

Amahle: Yes, I kick them and after that when I score a goal they hit me hard with the ball, and when you want to kick the ball the boy will be rough and he'd push you hard and you fall on the ground.

Emmanuel: And when boys have hit you with the ball on the face, what happens after that, is there anything that you do?

Amahle: We [girls] hit them back.

Emmanuel: Really! Do you hit boys?

Amahle: Yes, *siyabahlanganyela* // as girls we form a group and then we hit them.

Martin's (2011) research on young boys and girls at play at an elementary school in London reveals the reactionary form which girls' aggression towards boys tended to take in the playground. In the context of this study, the reactionary nature of girls' aggression towards boys is manifest in Amahle's claims that she, as well as other girls, also hit boys in conflicts during play. As noted in the previous chapter, girls' forms of aggression towards boys in the playground often emerge as resistance to boys' claims of power and domination. As they deliberately use exaggerated aggression as a strategy for policing girls' involvement in football, boys provoke girls' aggression towards themselves. However, girls tend to form a group which then mobilises to hit a particular boy. For example, when I asked Amahle if they, as girls, really hit boys her quick response was a confident 'Yes' but she added that, '*siyabahlanganyela* // as girls we form a group and then hit them [boys]'. This shows that violent behaviours towards boys tend to be carried out by girls in a group rather than an individual girl hitting a boy. Girls' forms of aggression towards boys, whether provocative or reactionary, are important as they not only illustrate the poststructuralist feminist understanding of femininities as plural (MacNaughton, 2000), but challenge the static popular stereotyping of girls as subservient to boys' expressions of power through violence (Bhana, 2008). While boys' aggressive behaviours towards girls in football can be seen as representing a subtle form of policing girls' participation in football, the use of the term of tomboy emerges as boys' overt expression of disapproval of girls' involvement in football. By engaging in conversations with boys who

disapprove of girls' involvement in football, as well as with some of the girls who play football, the following section explores how 'tomboy' is constructed among children at Sun Shine.

### **How Amahle and other girls who like playing football experience and deal with the appellation of tomboy**

The disjuncture between identifying one's self as a girl while being identified as not a 'proper' girl through the label of tomboy by peers is experienced as hurtful by some of the girls who have an interest in playing football. In the following group conversation with Amahle and four other girls, I explored how these young girls construct and experience being girls through football in a schooling social context where football is constructed as symbolically masculine.

Emmanuel: I have heard that many boys here at school don't like to play football with girls. Is that true?

Girls: Yes! [Chorus]

Emmanuel: Why do you think boys don't like to play football with girls at school?

Amahle: *Bathi sizoba abafana* // they say we will become boys.

Emmanuel to Amahle: Boys say you will become boys too if you play football?

Girls: Yes! [Chorus]

Lizi: And they like to say we will be tomboys.

Emmanuel: Really, do they say that to you?

Girls: Yes ... [Chorus].

Zinhle: They say we will change and become boys!

Sindiswa: Sometimes they call us gay.

Gugu: No, no, it's us [girls] who call them [boys] gay.

Lizi: We ask to play [soccer] with them and they say fine, then we play with them. Then we score goals and we beat them, we have more goals than them, then they start to tell us to go away. They tell us to go away and they say we will change and become boys *uma siqhubeka sidlala ibhola nabo* // if we continue to play football with them.

Emmanuel: Do boys really say that?

Amahle: Yes, they say we will be tomboys.

Sindiswa: But sometimes they say gay to us.

Lizi: Can I please correct this, if girls try to be like boys they are called tomboys and boys who are trying to be like girls are gay.

Emmanuel to the Group: Is that true, do you all agree with what Lizi is saying?

Girls: Yes [Chorus].

Emmanuel: So do you get called tomboys too? I ask this because you have told me that you do play football even with boys?

Girls: Yes [Chorus].

Emmanuel: Who call you tomboy?

Girls: *Abafana* // it's the boys!

Emmanuel: So it's always the boys who call you tomboys and other girls don't call you tomboys?

Amahle: Girls don't call other girls tomboys.

Emmanuel: Really?

Girls: Yes!

Emmanuel: And how do you feel about being called tomboy?

Amahle: *Angibi nandaba; noma bengibiza nge-tomboy kodwa ngizoghubeka ngilidlale ibhola*// I don't care, it really doesn't matter to me whether they call me tomboy or not but I will continue playing football.

Sindiswa: *Ngiphatheka kabi ngoba ngiyazi ukuthi angisiyo leyonto* // I feel upset because I know that I am not a tomboy.

Zinhle: I go and tell Miss, and sometimes Miss will hit them with a stick but sometimes she will shout at them and tell them not to say that again.

Lizi: *Ngiphatheka kabi kodwa angibi nandaba nalokho* // I do feel upset but I don't worry about it too much, I forget about it easily.

Gugu: *Umfana ongibiza nge tomboy nami ngimbiza nge gay* // A boy who calls me tomboy I also call him gay!

Girls: Laughter

Emmanuel: So it is only the boys who call you tomboy, and the other girls don't say anything when they see you playing football?

Amahle: We are just friends with girls. We call each other friend, and we do 'high five' to each other when we greet or when a girl has scored a goal... [Smile].

Zinhle: Many girls don't play football, they just want to stand on the sides to watch boys playing football. They just watch and cheer for the players, and for us too when we are playing.

Sindiswa: Girls just like to support and clap hands for boys when they play soccer.

I quote at length from this conversation because I find it engaging and interesting in relation to the issues it raises about the gendered nature of policing gender through the category of tomboy. The conversation illustrates how girls who construct their girlhood through play outside the perceived

‘normativity’ of skipping or *shumpu* by engaging in football risk being constructed as ‘tomboys’ mainly by boys at the school. The conversation also illuminates the different strategies the young girls use to deal with being constructed as tomboys for playing football. Although the girls generally reported feeling hurt about being called tomboy, there seems to be some variance in terms of how they receive the label of tomboy. For example, while Sindiswa expressed her distress at being called tomboy, saying, ‘I feel upset because I know that I am not a tomboy’, for Amahle, being called tomboy is not a big issue. She illustrates this point when she remarks that ‘I don’t care, it really doesn’t matter to me whether they [boys] call me tomboy or not but I will continue playing football’. This emerges as a powerful form of resistance in which Amahle asserts her right to play football. Meanwhile, Gugu’s statement that she reacts to being called tomboy by saying that ‘a boy who calls me tomboy I also call him gay’ is fascinating. It throws light on how the categories of gay and tomboy are manifest in the children’s social interactions both as means to make sense of and police boys and girls whose play behaviours are considered as transgressing norms of gender. Furthermore, Gugu and Lizi object to Sindiswa who points out that girls also incur the construction of gay by clarifying the distinction between the categories of gay and tomboy. In doing so, they shed some light on the particular ways in which these categories are understood and operate in the young children’s social worlds. For example, when Lizi corrects Sindiswa that girls are called tomboys and boys are called gay if their play behaviours ‘transgress’ perceived normative ways of being a boy or a girl, she says: ‘...if girls try to be like boys they are called tomboys and boys who are trying to be like girls are gay’. While this clarification is useful, it is also important to understand that Sindiswa only said ‘*sometimes* they call us gay’; this can be read as suggesting that the insult ‘gay’ is also levelled at girls beyond the usual category of tomboy that Lizi and other girls in the group seem to be most familiar with. This suggests that the categories of gay and tomboy are not as distinct as they may appear to be at first glance, as girls are identified by the label of gay which has similar connotations as constructions of ‘tomboyness’ in the young children making sense of perceived masculine qualities and traits in some girls’ play behaviours and interests. The following section focuses on the term of gay and explores how it is used and understood by the young children in the gendering and policing of identities through play.

### **Policing cross-gender play and friendships through the appellation of gay**

I refer to the following conversation with Anele in order to demonstrate the way in which the term ‘gay’ is used by the young children as a strategy for policing not only gendered games but also cross-gender friendships.

Emmanuel to Anele: You said you play soccer but are there other games you like? What about

skipping for instance?

Anele: I don't play skipping rope because it's a girls' game. Like when people see you skipping with girls they would ask you: are you a GIRL now? And they call you by things you don't like, ... they say you gay.

Emmanuel: Who says that, who say you are gay?

Anele: It's boys. It's not girls who call you gay it's the other boys who you use to play with, and they say you gay when they see you playing with girls and not with them anymore. Girls don't say that when you play their games with them but it's the other boys who'd say you gay when you play with girls and not with them. Sometimes, when they see you playing with your friend who's a girl, like Amahle, they like to say she is your girlfriend, ... and that's how fights start, [be]cause I would punch that person who says that to me... They just say it's your girlfriend, even if they don't know that the girl you play with could your sister. Whenever they see you walking with a girl they'd say you trying to get her to be your girlfriend. Like when you are walking with a girl who is about your age they'd say you are lovers; but they don't know maybe she's just your friend or your sister...

In this conversation Anele highlights the difficulties of having cross-gender friendships among children in his schooling context characterised by a culture in which gender is constantly policed. Because of the dominant boundaries of masculinity and femininity among pupils at Sun Shine, cross-gender friendships become difficult to create and maintain. The conversation with Anele highlights how boundaries of gender in the young pupils' social world impact negatively not only in terms of reducing play possibilities for both boys and girls, but in reducing the possibilities of creating and sustaining cross-gender friendships among pupils in ways that (re)produce gender polarity in the early years. Same sex friendships are constructed as 'normative' and encouraged in opposition to cross-gender friendship interactions which are constructed as anomalous and responded to with negativity (Kovacs *et al*, 1996). Befriending and playing with people of the opposite sex invites criticism and rejection from one's own same sex peer group, which manifests in derogatory labels of gay towards boys and tomboy towards girls who transgress 'normative' constructions of masculinity and femininity through play. In particular, the label of gay emerges as likely to provoke conflict between boys who are labelled as gay and those who label their peers as such. Furthermore, Anele illustrates how cross-gender friendships are easily constructed in romantic terms when he explains how befriending a girl often results in her being considered his girlfriend. Within the early schooling context, where sexuality is constructed as taboo, suspected romance among pupils invites 'trouble' with teachers; this is not something that any learner wishes for him- or herself. Contrary to the popular discourse of childhood which constructs sexuality as a hallmark of adolescents and adults in ways which produce primary school age children as non-sexual, in the next chapter I will explore how children at Sun Shine Primary construct themselves as gendered and sexual beings through play. At this juncture my focus continues to be on different children's experiences of being called gay in relation to play at the school.

### **Thabo and the unusual circumstances in which he admitted being called gay**

To explore why some children at Sun Shine get constructed as gay and how they experience this, I quote from a group interview with Ntokozo (introduced in the previous chapter) and his friends in which one of them, Thabo, admitted being called gay at school even though he did not play with girls but played football consistently with boys.

Emmanuel: Earlier on, you said that boys who do not like soccer and who play with girls most of the time and spend their break with girls would be called gay. But I wonder if there is someone among us who has been called gay before?

After a brief moment of silence Thabo raises his hand and starts talking:

Thabo: Yes, it's me. I have been called gay...it was when...the other day we were playing soccer on the school backyard, one other boy kicked the ball over the fence of the school and it went to the bushes on the other side. Because I was youngest there, one of the older boys told me to jump over the fence to fetch the ball and I said no; then he called me a mama's boy, and another one called me gay and told me to go away and not come to play soccer with them again...they said I should go and play skipping rope with girls...

Thabo told me that the older boys he referred to were in Grade 4 while he was doing Grade 2 at the time of the incident he described. However, I also noticed that it was not easy for Thabo to admit that he had been called gay in the group. This is based on the hesitation he showed before he spoke up. Moreover, his voice lacked the confidence and boldness he showed when he spoke earlier. When he spoke about being called gay, Thabo spoke very softly, almost in a whisper and his facial expression showed humiliation and sadness. On the other hand, his revelation invoked humour on the part of the other boys in the group. When Thabo said that he had been called gay, the other boys reacted with shock and surprise, but also smiled and laughed mockingly.

Emmanuel to Thabo: How did that make you feel?

Thabo: I was very upset. They said I must go away and they called me by that thing [gay], and I went to the stairs and sat there all alone, I was bored because I wasn't playing [soccer] anymore.

Emmanuel to Thabo: Being called gay really upset you then?

Thabo: *Ja* // Yes, they mean you are a girl, they are calling you a girl...

Emmanuel to the Group: Can anyone please tell me, what is gay?

Sizwe: It's a sissy-boy!

Spha: They [gays] are the other boys who don't want to play soccer with us [boys], and they always play with girls ... I don't know why they don't play [soccer] with us, I really don't know why. They just don't play soccer with us; but they like playing with girls. Girls are their best friends... Some boys like to play with girls because they know that if they hit a girl she won't hit them back and they know that if they hurt us [boys] we would fight back.



Ntokozi: Gay is a boy who likes to be a girl so they play with girls a lot. They [gay men/boys] wear skirts and high heel shoes like girls. They leave their hair to grow too long and braid them, they wear makeup and lipstick, walk like they are modelling ...speak in girls' [high pitched] voice... But I just wonder why would they call you gay if you have girl's voice, what if that is your natural voice?

Sizwe: *Ja* // Yes... I know there are other boys who fake a girl's voice when they speak and laugh, but you can tell if it's his natural voice if he speaks in that voice all the time...

This particular conversation was characterised by lot of giggling and hilarity among the boys especially when a 'gay characteristic' was mentioned or demonstrated. For example, particular hand movements were enacted by some of the boys to show me how boys and men they considered to be gay often signed when they spoke. Gay boys' and men's high pitched tone of voice were simulated and the ways in which boys/men they constructed as gay typically walked like female television models were also demonstrated comically.

While earlier conversations with girls revealed how tomboy is used to construct girls who like football as 'masculine', the above conversation indicates how gay is used as an equivalent of tomboy to construct boys who disassociate themselves from football as effeminate and 'feminine'. However, gay is not only used to give meaning to boys who associate with forms of play considered as for girls and lacking interest in football; it is also applied to boys who do not express a level of bravery as illuminated by Thabo's experience. It is important to note that, contrary to popular understandings of gay as associated with male homosexuality (Cranny-Francis *et al*, 2003), gay is used and understood in the children's social world not as a form of criticism of boys who are suspected of having same sex desires, but to describe boys who construct their masculinity, through play, outside the domain of football and in so doing, transgress the norm of same sex friendships among pupils in their break time activities and relations at school. Applied outside the context of male same sex yearnings, gay among pupils at Sun Shine emerged as a common label used to make sense of 'gender-transgressive' play behaviours and relationships patterns particularly among boys. Although gay appears to be used without recognition of male same sex desires, the label of gay emerges as a form of abuse, insult and criticism levelled towards boys who construct their masculinity outside the perceived normativity of football, bravery and interest in male homo-social friendship bonding.

Boys such as Thabo who admitted they had been called gay by other boys at school report feeling upset, ridiculed and angered by the label. Since the label of gay is received negatively by those so labelled it can be seen as resembling the way in which homosexuality is generally viewed as a deviant form of sexuality in relation to heterosexuality that is constructed as natural. That is, how

the term gay signals disapproval of ‘gender-transgressive’ play among boys can be seen to indicate forms in which homophobia<sup>8</sup> ‘plays out’ and is produced in the young pupils’ everyday social interactions. Indeed, Plummer’s (2001) study on how homophobia features among primary school children found that homophobic terms such as ‘faggot’ and ‘gay’ featured significantly in boys’ everyday conversations about ‘gender-transgressive’ play and other behavioural patterns. Plummer (2001) maintains that although such terms do not necessarily carry meanings of same sex yearnings in the early years of schooling, they are not immune to the discourse of heteronormativity which produces gender boundaries and heterosexuality as normative and natural while negating ‘gender-transgressive’ behaviours and homosexuality. How homophobia operates among the young footballing boys is illuminated in their constant urge to distance themselves from boys who construct their masculinity through playing games considered to resemble constructions of femininity.

The literature shows that homophobia takes many forms which can range from subtle homophobic gossip, to jokes, acts of violence, and exclusion as well as many other ways of showing contempt for ‘gender-transgressive’ play and other behavioural patterns (Kehily, 2001; Frosh *et al*, 2003; Dlamini, 2006). The comic ways in which the young boys engaged with the social category of gay can be seen as a form of expression of homophobia. In other words, through imitating ‘gay’ behaviours and tendencies the young boys were not simply showing me how they identify if a boy or man is gay or not; because these explications invited humour they served to illustrate how ‘gayness’ is communicated in ways that provide a source of amusement in boys’ social circles such as the context of the research group itself. The hilarity and humour which characterised this group conversation exemplify the expression of a subtle form of homophobia in which acts and behaviours that subvert stereotypes and expectations regarding dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity are presented as uproarious. The boys’ behaviour during this conversation, particularly on the topic of their constructions of gay can be seen as exemplifying their common exertion of masculinity through making fun of boys perceived as feminine in their behavioural patterns, interests and mannerisms. Two of the boys mentioned as examples of boys they perceived as gay in their behavioural patterns were Bu and Lindo.

### **Bu and his experiences of being constructed as gay in relation to play at school**

Bu is a ten year old 4<sup>th</sup> Grader who I met through the help of the ‘footballing boys’ who identified him when they spoke about the other boys whom they perceived as gay for being interested in

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<sup>8</sup>The term ‘homophobia’ is used to refer to irrational contempt of homosexuals and homosexuality (Plummer, 2001; Dlamini, 2006; Butler & Astbury, 2007).

forms of play normally played by girls at the school. When I met Bu for the first time it was on the yard during break at the school. Before approaching Bu to introduce myself and my interest in his choice of play activities I observed him at play over a number of days. During these observations Bu mostly played skipping and hanged around with girls on the school yard during break. Following the observation of Bu at play I invited him for a one-on-one conversation in which I aimed to explore his interests in play. I encouraged him to talk about himself and his play interests at school by phrasing my initial and open-ended question in the following way:

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

Bu: At break?

Emmanuel: Yeah...

Bu: I like to play *shumpu*, soccer and skipping rope.

Emmanuel: Oh, so you skip as well?

Bu: Yeah...

Emmanuel: So when you skip, do you skip with girls or do you skip with boys?

Bu: I skip with girls, and I skip with boys.

Emmanuel: Do boys skip?

Bu: Mm [Nodding].

Emmanuel: Oh, what about soccer then? Who do you play soccer with?

Bu: It's the boys who play soccer, not girls.

Emmanuel: Is it only the boys who play soccer at school?

Bu: [Nodding].

Emmanuel: So do you mean that girls don't play soccer at all?

Bu: Girls only play *ladies soccer*. [He uses the term 'ladies soccer' as if it is not proper soccer]

Emmanuel: Mm... [Nodding].

Bu: But at break, boys play soccer, girls play *shumpu* and others they skip.

Emmanuel: So does that mean when you skip, you skip with girls?

Bu: Yes.

Emmanuel: What do you like about skipping?

Bu: I like to do the fall-over.

Emmanuel: What?

Bu: Fall-over, when we skip, we also do fall-over.

Emmanuel: How do you do that [fall-over]?

Bu: You jump, and jump and then you turn over.

Emmanuel: I would like see how you do that sometime. So; you like skipping then?

Bu: Mm [Nodding].

Although Bu mentions soccer as one of his favourite games, during the course of my research at the school I did not observe him playing soccer. However, I did observe him playing *shumpu* and skipping as an only boy among girls on several occasions. So whether he actually does, or likes to, play soccer or not, he certainly does like to skip. However, since there are not many boys who skip at school due to skipping being constructed as for girls, Bu skips with girls while the majority of the other boys engage in soccer. Due to his skipping interest which he performs with girls, footballing boys, as dominant and dominating in the school play yard, single out and position Bu to the status of how boys generally treat and relate to girls as their subordinates. Below Bu describes how other boys construct him as gay for skipping with girls; he also expresses his reactions to being constructed as gay by his male peers at school:

Emmanuel: Is there anything that other learners say or do when they see you skipping with girls?

Bu: *Abanye abafana bayayidlala ingqathu kodwa abanye bathi abayidlalayo ba-gay* // Other boys would skip along but others would say skipping boys are gay.

Emmanuel: Really, do they say that?

Bu: Mm [Nodding].

Emmanuel: Is it only the boys who say that or girls say that too?

Bu: *Abafana* // It's the boys.

Emmanuel: Is it only the boys?

Bu: Yes [Nodding].

Emmanuel: What do you think they mean when they call boys who skip gay?

Bu: I don't know.

Emmanuel: Do they say that all the time when you skip?

Bu: Mm [Nodding].

Emmanuel: Do the other boys also say gay to you when you skip?

Bu: Mm [Nodding].

Emmanuel: And how do you feel when they call you gay?

Bu: I feel bad. I feel sad and I go and tell Miss.

Emmanuel: And what happens after you have told Miss about being called gay?

Bu: Miss then hit them.

Emmanuel: Really?

Bu: Yes [Nodding].

Emmanuel: Do they stop calling you gay after they have been hit?

Bu: *Ngesinye isikhathi babuye bangayeki* // sometimes they don't stop even after being hit.

Emmanuel: Mm... And how does that make you feel?

Bu: *Lokho kungiphatha kabi* // I feel unhappy when they do not stop calling me gay.

Emmanuel: What do think they mean when they call you gay?

Bu: *Angazi* // I don't know.

Among pupils at the school the term gay is applied to boys such as Bu who construct their gender identities outside the dominant discourse of masculinity that connects perceived normative masculinity with football. Although Bu is unable to articulate what is meant by gay, being called gay is experienced as humiliating and causes him to 'feel sad'. Bu says he does not know what the other boys mean when they call him gay, and it may very well be confusing for him as a boy to not be identified as 'properly' masculine by his male peers at school. Although he cannot articulate what gay means, he certainly experiences the label as derogatory and hurtful as it associates him

with constructions of femininity positioned as subordinate in relation to what Connell (1995) termed hegemonic masculinity which is manifest through football among boys at Sun Shine. Importantly, gay emerges as a vital means of policing how boys should behave in ways that produce and reinforce dominant boundaries of masculinity and femininity. Bu as a boy whose play interests are perceived as not ‘normal’ for boys, finds himself a victim of abuse and ridicule through being constructed as gay by his male peers at school. Bu’s strategy of reporting boys who call him gay to his teacher seems quite risky. It seems to reinforce some boys’ contempt for him as a weak boy seeking adult protection in the same way some girls do. However, Bu not only shared his experience of boy-transgressors like himself that are called gay; he also mentioned that girls who construct their femininity through football constructed as for boys often incur the label of tomboy:

Emmanuel: Is it only the skipping boys who get called gay, what about the girls who don’t skip? You said there are some girls who play soccer; you said they play *ladies* soccer...

Bu: When a girl does not play *ladies* soccer and wants to play with boys, then *bathi uyi tomboy ngoba edlala nabafana* // they say she is a tomboy because she plays with boys.

Emmanuel: So girls who play with boys are called tomboys?

Bu: Yes.

Emmanuel: Mm, are there girls who play soccer with boys here at school?

Bu: Mm [Nodding].

Emmanuel: And those are the ones who get called tomboys?

Bu: Yes.

Emmanuel: So is it the boys who say tomboy to girls who play soccer with boys or it is the girls who say tomboy to other girls?

Bu: Boys say gay to other boys and they [boys; also] say tomboy to girls.

Bu highlights the gender policing of both boys’ and girls’ play behaviours through ‘gay’ and ‘tomboy’ as mainly practised by boys. As my conversation with Bu continues below, I explore the gender of the friends he plays with and how this further invites him the label of gay:

Emmanuel: Who are your friends here at school?

Bu: Musa [boy], Nonhlanhla [girl], Snehlanhla [girl], Lolo [girl], Thandokuhle [girl] and Thulasonke [boy].

Emmanuel: Oh, so what do you often play with your friends, is it skipping or soccer?

Bu: Soccer.

Emmanuel: So you play soccer with them, even the friends who are girls [i.e. Nonhlanhla, Snehlanhla, Thandokuhle and Lolo]?

Bu: Yes.

Emmanuel: And you play soccer and skipping with them too?

Bu: Mm [Nodding].

Emmanuel: Mm... about the boys who skip, are they many or few?

Bu: Maybe they are six or seven.

Emmanuel: So they are few then?

Bu: Yes.

Emmanuel: About your friends, *abangani bakho abaningi bangamantombazane noma bangabafana* // are most of your friends boys or girls?

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

Bu: *Amantombazane* // they are girls...

Even though I was sympathetic and empathetic in my approach to the interview, it seemed difficult for Bu to say this.

Emmanuel: And what do you like about having many friends who are girls?

Bu: We play netball together.

Emmanuel: *Abangani bakho babafana bancane bona* // that means you have fewer friends who are boys?

Bu: Yes, *mhla'mpe bawu 4* // maybe they are four of them.

Emmanuel: *Amantombazane wona, mhlaw'mpe mangaki nje* // what about girls who are your friends, what's their number/size?

Bu: *Mhlaw'mpe awu 10* // maybe they are ten of them.

Emmanuel: 10! *Lokho kusho ukuthi maningi amantombazane angabangani bakho* // that means you have more friends who are girls than boys.

Bu: Mm [Nodding].

Emmanuel: So when you play with your friends who are girls, they don't say you are gay or do they?

Bu: *Laba engidlala nabo ilabo abangasho ukuthi ngi-gay* // the girls that I play with are the ones who don't say that I am gay.

Emmanuel: Mm...

Bu: *Lamantombzane engidlala nawo abangani bami wona awangibizi nge-gay* // the girls I play with are my friends and they don't call me gay.

When I asked Bu whether or not the other girls who are not his friends ever call him gay, he responded with conviction that they do, but that the girls who are his close friends always tell him if the other girls have called him gay in his absence. In this way, Bu presents the girl friends he plays with as people who are loyal to him not only because they do not call him gay but also because they inform him about people who gossip about him as gay. Bu not only plays games that are considered as for girls but has many friends who are girls that he spends most of his break time playing and socialising with at school. Bu has more friends who are girls than those who are boys and this female-centred gender imbalance in his circle of friends does not help him in terms of creating increased opportunities for social bonding with other boys. However, Bu mentioned to me that one of the reasons he plays mostly with girls is because many boys at his school do not allow him to play football with them. He told me that: 'when I want to play football with boys, many of them would say no. They say I'm gay and they don't play with gays'. Plummer (2001) argues that one of the reasons why boys do not want to mix with boys who are called gay is that they fear they will also be called gay. When Bu is rejected by the football boys, he finds friendship in the company of girls; this can be seen as further reinforcing the label of gay he receives from some of his peers at school.

### **Lindo: his character, position and status as a boy who disidentify with football at school**

Lindo was another boy in the school who was constructed by the boys who carried a high profile in the school and constructed themselves as tough and strong through football and disassociated themselves from boys (such as Bu and Lindo) whom they constructed as gay for their disinterest and lack of ability in playing football. Striking about Lindo is his assertive personality despite being constructed in marginalising ways as the 'other' of the perceived normative way of 'doing' boy through football. Significantly, Lindo's incredible confidence, positive outlook and joviality struck me. I quote from a note I wrote in my diary when I met Lindo for the first time:

In meeting Lindo for the first time it was outside class during break. Observing him at play, he was the only boy among three girls playing some kind of a racing game where they were running up and down the grassy steep; racing to reach the top of the hillock. When players failed to run to the top of



the hillock at once without falling on the ground and grasping grass for balance, gliding or rolled back they claim victory which erupted a lot of laughter, screams and cheering as did falling on the ground and gliding back to the base which meant going back to the starting point again. Lindo managed to reach the top at first attempts a lot more often than did his playmates all of whom were girls. To get to know Lindo better, I spent time observing and interacting with him in the school yard during break, alone and with his peers. Through these interactions I found him to be a soft spoken yet a good conversationalist, active, fun and perceptive third grader who even had some authority among his peers as a monitor in his class. Though he appeared a bit heavier than the majority of his peers at school, I found Lindo to be a confident and friendly conversationalist with a lively and likable personality. In my conversations with him about his constructions and experiences of being a boy at his school, Lindo constructed his masculinity in a relational manner by positioning himself as different from other boys at school and raised, for instance, aggression, violence, bullying and an intense interest in football as characteristics of most boys from which he disassociate himself. However, most prominently, it also emerged that his least interest in football accompanied by a strong association with the game of skipping which he performs with girls is the main cause of the abuse, through the label of gay, as well as the general alienation he experiences from the majority of boys at school especially those who were popular for their football skills which they displayed on the playground everyday during break (6/11/2013).

In my conversations with Lindo, which I will elaborate upon in the next chapter, he expressed feeling very unhappy with the label of gay that he receives mainly from his male peers at school and spoke about reacting to this by reporting his abusers to his class teacher who would discipline them, only for them to repeat calling him gay. Lindo's bold character, despite his body size and shape, combined with constant verbal abuse through being called gay in ways which alienated him from other boys at school, and his friendly personality contradicts popular narratives which tend to associate childhood and youth heaviness with poor self-esteem, as well as other psychosocial problems (Sweeting, 2008).

I elaborate on Lindo and how he positioned himself in relation to other boys and girls at school in chapter seven, in which he discusses his role as a mediator, arranging 'dates' between boys and girls, a position which he enjoy and for which he accrued considerable status despite being teased and mocked as gay.

## **Summary**

The empirical material explored in this chapter highlights how young pupils at Sun Shine give meaning to and police behaviours perceived as transgressing commonly perceived normative ways of expressing and positioning oneself as a boy or a girl through play. Engaging in 'gender-transgressive' play invites various consequences for boys and girls. The label of tomboy is commonly applied to girls who, through play, transgress perceived normative ways of being a girl such as engaging in football and other forms of play constructed as 'masculine'. Tomboy is constructed as the equivalent of gay commonly applied to boys who 'transgress' boundaries of perceived normative masculinity by showing interest in forms of play considered as for girls such as

skipping and *shumpu*. While boys perceived as gay mainly experience criticism and rejection at school, especially from their male peers, girls perceived as tomboys report similar criticism from most boys, but at the same time, they also report receiving messages of support from other girls at school. This variance in terms of peer reactions to boys and girls who transgress gender expectations at school illustrates some level of acceptance and tolerance of ‘girl-transgressors’ as opposed to the prevalent negativity surrounding boys constructed as gay. Indeed, as an effective means of policing gender-transgression among boys, the label of gay emerges as a heavier and more derogatory label than tomboy which also emerges as a source of praise and honour for girls who transgress the perceived masculinity of football at Sun Shine. While the mixed connotations of both criticism and praise embedded in the label of tomboy highlight some level of flexibility and increased play possibilities for girls, on the other hand, they highlight increased difficulty for boys to play outside the perceived boundaries of masculinity.

While terms such as gay, and to some degree tomboy, tend to be used with connotations of homosexuality in the adult world, for the young children these terms carry different meanings. For the young pupils at Sun Shine, gay is not necessarily used to mean sexual desires between people of the same sex, but is a powerful means of policing ‘gender-transgression’ especially in boys’ play behaviours and friendships. Although children’s constructions of gay and tomboy fall outside the context of sexuality, this does not mean that understanding of sexuality is non-existent among these young pupils. Contrary to the dominant construction of sexuality as a marker of adulthood which implies its absence in childhood, the following chapter documents some of the ways in which sexuality features among children in their play at Sun Shine.

## Chapter Seven

### **‘Charmer boys’ and ‘cream girls’: intersections of gender, sexuality and popularity through play**

#### **Introduction**

Research on sexuality among school children in the South African context usually focuses on adolescents in secondary schools (Butler & Astbury, 2007; Pattman & Bhana, 2009; Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Bhana & Anderson, 2013). South African primary school children’s constructions of sexuality remain a much under-researched area of childhood social identity construction. This chapter explores how the children at Sun Shine Primary (hetero)sexualise their gendered identities through play. By making visible the different ways in which sexuality features in the young children’s playground cultures at the school, the chapter challenges the popular discourse of childhood which reinforces childhood sexual innocence (Epstein, 1997; Kehily & Montgomery, 2003; Blaise, 2009; Renold, 2006). To explore the ways in which the young children construct themselves as sexual beings through play, I draw on data from observations of different children’s behaviours on the playground and conversations with them based on these observations. This chapter explores the following key questions:

How do different children at Sun Shine Primary get constructed as ‘charmer boys’ and ‘cream girls’ and why?

How is childhood sexuality ‘policed’ by the children themselves and by teachers in the setting?

How do the ‘charmer boys’ and ‘cream girls’ communicate in the schooling cultural context where gender polarisation is the norm?

How do different children perceive ‘dating’ among peers at the school?

I begin this chapter by introducing the playground and how it is produced by the children not simply as a play space but as a vital social context where heterosexuality is performed, negotiated and celebrated.

#### **The ‘football space’ as a ‘heterosexual attraction zone’: who are the ‘charmer boys’ and ‘cream girls’?**

Butler (1990) uses the concept of ‘heterosexual matrix’ to make visible how gendered identities often require heterosexualisation in order to be viewed as ‘intelligible’. Drawing on Butler’s (1990)

understanding of ‘normative’ gender as (hetero)sexual, I focus on the complex ways in which the young boys and girls heterosexualise their identities in the ‘football space’. Observation of the way in which the boys tended to dominate the playground space with football games, while girls generally remained passive on the margins of the playground provide insight into the complex ways in which the children construct their gendered and (hetero)sexual identities through play. I refer to the ‘football space’ as a ‘heterosexual attraction zone’ to conceptualise the way in which this play space is constructed by the children as a social site where they interact, not only as gendered, but also as heterosexual beings. As illustrated on Diagram C in Chapter Five, the ‘football space’ is a play space at the school which the boys dominate and construct as a ‘football space’. Girls are allowed in this space mainly as spectators rather than active participants in football games. However, the ‘football space’ emerges as more than just a boys’ space in which girls are marginalised. It is also a ‘heterosexual attraction zone’. That is, it is a social context where, through performing in football games, boys aim to attract the attention of girls who are spectators. In conversations with girls about their constructions of their relations with boys playing football, they speak about the best performing boys as ‘charmors’. The girls construct the category of a ‘charmer boy’ in sexualised ways as referring to the boys they find more attractive or charming to have as ‘boyfriends’ compared with non-footballing boys or those who are seen as poor performers. On the other hand, in conversations with the so-called ‘charmer boys’ and their constructions of the girls that watch their football games, they speak about these girls in sexualised ways as ‘creams’. That is, the ‘charmer boys’ construct ‘cream girls’ as beautiful girls whom they ‘play hard’ to attract to become their ‘girlfriends’.

### **How ‘cream girls’ react to non-charmer boys’ presumed ‘love’ approaches on the playground**

The following observation and conversation document the way in which I came to learn about the ‘football space’ and the meaning it has for the children as a ‘heterosexual attraction zone’:

It’s a sunny Monday morning; before the start of classes. I am sitting on the edge of the verandah for grade one and two block of classes observing boys playing tennis ball as football on the paved school ground. The number of children on the ground increases with time. The verandah and playground become busier as many more children arrive to school. As more children are arriving it gets busier and noisier around me. However, what I am watching on the playground is a crowd of boys playing with a tennis ball, many girls are on the verandah where I am sitting and many more others across looking more eager for the classrooms to be open so that they can get inside. The few girls I can see around are mostly standing on the margins of the playfield, others walking up and down across the playfield, and others are just roaming around, chatting and laughing on the verandah next to me. One of the two girls Thembi and Sindi stand against the pole next to me, they are close enough such that I can hear what they talk about. I try to pay more attention to them and their conversation when I see Mandla and Ben join them. Below I narrate what I (over)heard and saw in the interaction between them:

Mandla to Thembi [In a soft but clear voice with his right hand caressing his chin]: Hi Zama ...and you Sindi...

Zama to Mandla [Laughing]: Hi ...

Mandla to Thembi: Uhh, Zinhle, over there [Pointing to a group of girls on the far left hand side of the verandah], she says I should call you. She says there is something she wants to say to you ...

Thembi to Mandla [Now looking confused and annoyed]: Zinhle! ... Aybo! She's not my friend ... what does she want to say to me? [Looking at Sindi who also looks puzzled and turns to Ben again] Please go and tell her that I said I am not her friend. She must come to me if she wants to talk to me [She shuns Mandla and begins another conversation with Sindi]

Thembi to Sindi: Ay ay! It's so hot today! ... I just don't know how boys can play in such a heat... [They both walk slowly to lean on the classroom wall for a shade]

Mandla to Ben [Looking disappointed and stranded, speaks quietly to Ben for few moments, I hardly hear a word except ...'eish ... eish' ... as his hand brushes his head as they both slowly walk away].

Immediately I saw Mandla and Ben walking miserably away, I went to talk with Thembi and Sindi about what I had seen and heard in their interaction. I began the conversation with the two girls by asking:

Emmanuel: Hey! Thembi, what did you say to them, I mean I see them walking away looking a bit unhappy, what happened?

Thembi: They are just liars, you don't know them, they like to say 'someone is calling you, your 'friend' is calling over there' But they just want to say that stupid thing to you.

Emmanuel: What stupid thing do they say?

Thembi [Sigh then giggling]: Do you really want to know?

Emmanuel: Yes! [Smiling]

Thembi: If I went with him [Mandla] to see Zinhle, on the way, he would have said 'Thembi you are beautiful, and I love you', I know them, that's exactly what he wanted to say. Zinhle is not my friend anyway, he was just lying, they are liars...

Emmanuel: Really, do they say that?

Sindi: Yes, Thembi is right, and that one [Mandla] is very naughty.

Emmanuel to Sindi: Naughty?

Sindi: Yeah, that's the naughty one...

Emmanuel: Why do you say that?

Sindi [Laughter]: The other day in class, Mandla, he wrote 'I love you' on a page, folded it like a small plane and threw it to Sma... and the paper plane landed in front of her, on her desk.

Emmanuel: And what happened then?

Sindi: Then Sma read what he wrote and sent the paper to Miss, he [Mandla] got some hiding for that [Giggling].

Although football and the footballing space are generally constructed as for, and subsequently dominated by, boys, the above observation/conversation illustrates that this does not mean that girls do not appear in the football space. However, most girls seldom actively engage in football games along with boys. Generally, girls' positionings on the football space are marginal as they congregate on the periphery and remain passive spectators as do Thembi and Sindi in the above observation. As a 'heterosexual attraction zone', the football space serves as a social site where boys and girls meet to negotiate heterosexuality in complex ways through football performance in boys and spectatorship in girls. On the football space, boys 'play to impress' and girls watch football not just out of interest in the game; they are presenting themselves to be noticed by the 'charmners'.

In the above observation and conversation, it is either Mandla or possibly his friend, Ben, who themselves want to talk with Thembi privately. The boys may be disguising this by saying that it is another girl, Zinhle, who wants to talk with Thembi which could explain why Thembi rejects Mandla's call and reckons that she is not friends with Zinhle. This could indicate Thembi's suspicion of Mandla's disguise or the 'lies' he uses in order to tell her 'I love you' on the side. Indeed, Thembi believes that Mandla wants to propose 'love' to her by following a strategy that other boys commonly use at the school. Moreover, as Sindi states, Mandla has written an 'I love you' message to another girl, Sma, and this makes the girls suspect that he is lying about Zinhle. This observation and conversation suggest the prominent role associated with boys in initiating hetero-romantic relationship at school.

This corresponds with Pellegrini's (2001) US-based longitudinal study into the development of heterosexual relationships from primary school years to early adolescence which documents how children often use playful strategies to initiate hetero-romantic relations, with the initiation role normally assumed by boys. Furthermore, there is a strong possibility that Mandla, who presumably falls outside the construction of a 'charmer', is not attractive to the girls because he is not a football enthusiast like the 'charming' boys that Thembi, Sindi and many other girls watch playing football.

### **Talking to the ‘cream girls’ about how they construct their passivity on the ‘football space’**

As was often the case, on one of my observations on the play yard at break, I was observing boys’ playing football. As I stood and walked around aimlessly on the yards’ margins, there were crowds of girls on the margins rather than on the playing space except for the few that skipped at the far end of the yard as previously shown in Diagram C. I aimed to start some ethnographic conversations with some of the passive girls in order to explore how they constructed their least-active positionings on the ‘football space’. Some of the girls I spoke to construct their passivity in the following ways:

Ayanda: No we [girls] don’t play football because we don’t want to sweat ...

Gugu: We can’t play in the sun, you know the skin we become too black, the sun is too hot...

Bongi: We will grow tough muscles and be like them [boys]...

Sli: We can’t play with them [boys], because they are rough, as you can see the way they push each other, they’ll hurt us!

Thembi: When you fall there on the ground we’ll get bruises on the face and legs, no ways...

Sindi reacting to Thembi: And NO boy will love her with bruises and scratches on the face [Giggling].

Thembi to Sindi: I don’t like that, and stop lying, Sir, Sir, what she is saying is not true, don’t listen to her.

Emmanuel: Of course I’m not listening to her, she’s lying.

In their London-based study on 10-to-11 year-old boys’ and girls’ constructions of their varying levels of engagement in football, Clark and Paechter (2007) found that girls’ predominantly marginal positionings on football grounds were mainly due to the dominant masculine construction of the game of football. The popular construction of football as masculine produces girls’ involvement in football as taboo and falling outside the ‘normative’ construction of femininity as fragile and passive. While the above conversation conveys a similar prevailing masculine construction of football at the primary school, in ways which limit girls’ active engagement in football, at the same time, what the girls are saying enlightens us about their conformity to that construction which prejudices them. Clearly these girls appear to be defending their passive femininity in opposition to the more involved boys who enact their tough and strong masculine selves through football rather than contesting this. In speaking about boys as ‘tough/rough’ and

people who will ‘hurt’ them when they play football together, the young girls draw on the popular binary construction of masculinity and femininity in which boys and girls are constructed as fundamentally different beings and cross-gender interactions are understood in terms of heterosexuality. On the footballing space, while boys assert and perform ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell, 1995) through football, positioned on the margins of the footballing space, girls subscribe to and perform ‘emphasised femininity’ (Connell, 2002) which manifest in their compliance with boys’ dominating the game of football and space rather than contesting this.

A critical reading of the position the cream girls hold on the football space highlights that the girls can be seen as holding power by their very passivity as spectators on the margins of the football space. Being passive on the margins does not mean that girls are powerless in relation to the powerful boys who dominate the space. In other words, although ‘cream girls’ may appear to be passive and marginalised while ‘charmer boys’ dominate, ‘cream girls’ have power as spectators in the sense that the ‘charmer boys’ play football and sweat in the heat of the sun in order to please and entertain ‘cream girls’ who relax on the shaded verandah while being entertained by the boys. Through playing football in the heat, boys perform for the entertainment of girls who emerge as evaluators of the boys’ performance. This reading of the cream girls’ passivity in the football space illustrates the complexity of gender power relations among children (Bhana, 2008). Although the charmer boys assert themselves as figures of power by dominating the space, power can also be seen as located in the sphere of the cream girls who are entertained by football performances from the shady margins of the play space.

### **‘Charmer boys’ talking about the significance of football performance and the impact of girl spectatorship**

Following observations of interactions in the ‘football space’ and conversations with some of the cream girls, I conducted more ethnographic conversations with some of the boys who are constructed by the cream girls as ‘charmings’ because of their football abilities which displayed everyday on the playground:

Emmanuel: I was talking with some of the girls here at school the other day, and I was just asking them questions about themselves and their play games at school. And, as part of that talk, some of the girls told me that some you here are ‘charmings’ and when I asked them what they meant about this and why they called you ‘charmings’? They said that you are among the most popular boys at school because you like football, you are good at it, and you play it every day during break. And I would like ask, what can you say about this?

Nku: Yes, they say we are charmings...But you know why, BOYS, like us, who are [good] football players ... it’s easy to get all the cream ones [the most beautiful girls]. They like us more ... they [even] come to watch us playing football ...they just like watching us play.



Phako: Some boys here at school, like, when playing football, and there are lot of girls on the sides ... they like to show off their underwear, they pull down their shorts a bit [Standing up and pulling his own down a bit showing the waist liner of his underwear]... they also like to unbutton their shirts, and sometimes they take them off altogether, they want to show off their six packs and strong chests.

Emmanuel: Do they really do that? And may I ask, why do you think they do it?

Phako: Yes! They do it for girls! They want girls to see them ... their muscles, and you know ... like strong and big calf muscles and six packs [Laughter]. They want girls to see that and then love them...

Emmanuel: Ohh [Nodding]. Girls like good soccer players with strong muscles then?

Phako: Yeah, yeah, that's the type of boys they'd YES to...

Emmanuel: Yeah, I see, but can you give me examples of some boys who like to do that?

Phako to Mavu: [Looking at Mavu with a smile]: Yah, it's boys like Mavu ... [Laughter]

Mavu: Yah, yah, it's like when I, you know like when playing football and my girlfriend is watching or, maybe there is girl I want who's in the crowd of girls on the verandahs watching us playing football, I try to play like really hard, I dribble with the ball forward... 'cause uhhm, I'll like to score at least one gaol. I'd like her to cheer for me...

Emmanuel: So you play at your best when your girlfriend is watching ...

Mavu: Yeah, but ... still, if I miss a goal and miss a kick, or fall on the playground ... she would laugh at me, you know, and would call me *inkomo*<sup>9</sup> // a cow.

Emmanuel: And how does it feel to be called *inkomo* // a cow?

Mavu: No one likes to be called that. I don't like to be called by that [*inkomo* // cow], NO, no one likes that. It means you're a boy and can't play football! That's a shame ...! [Shaking his head] That's bad... girls like boys like us, yah ... [good] football players.

Khule: When a girl sees you playing [football] well and getting all the praise, cheering and applause, many girls will want you [to be their boyfriend] ... It's like this: the one you want will want you more, ... and will say yes when you tell her [that] you love her after the game, ... like even on the way back home after school. Like she'll laugh with you and stuff... *ayazizela amantombazane kuthina bafaba be-bhola* // girls flock to us [good] football players!

Mavu: This thing [footballing to impress girls] is like dating a girl in you class. Like if you give a wrong answer she'll laugh at you and think you stupid and dumb, it's not right to date a girl from your class. I'll never do that, better to date a girl from another class...

Emmanuel: What do you all think about this: is it better to date a girl from another class than in your own class?

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<sup>9</sup>This is a common and derogatory term among children at the school that is levelled at boys who are especially poor at football or lack interest in the game; they are usually 'dateless'.

Phako; Mavu; Khule and Nku: YEEES! ... [said simultaneously].

The significance of football in the young boy's constructions and performance of their heterosexual identities is fascinating. Although the footballing space is constructed as a (heterosexual) male space, it appears that having girls, whether they are already 'girlfriends' to some of the footballing boys or potential 'girlfriends', is important in the construction of this space as a 'heterosexual attraction zone'. However, it would seem that while for the charmer boys, having girls watching their games serves to complete the heterosexuality of the play area, the girls' presence can yield both positive and negative outcomes for the football performers. While the 'cream' girls' presence on the football space generally prompts 'charmings' to play and perform their level best, the boys believe that receiving cheers and applause from the spectators would spark girls' interest in them and cement hetero-romantic relationships. On the other hand, as Mavu points out, playing and performing poorly, such as failing to score at least a single goal during the entire match can be very detrimental to the charismatic and charming characters that the boys desperately want to express to the girls 'they want' to be their 'girlfriends' or when already 'dating'; poor performance may result in girls doubting the boys' heterosexuality. In other words, while boys can gain the 'cream girls' admiration through football performance, the girls' spectatorship puts heavy pressure on the boys to perform and failure to perform can be very dangerous. As Mavu states, having potential-girlfriend spectatorship is the same thing as having a 'girlfriend' in the same class; the 'boyfriend' should strive to perform and give the correct answers all the time. Being called *inkomo* // a cow for a disappointing performance in the football game, or a lack of interest and enthusiasm in football, is the last thing the 'charmer boys' want and they avoid this label through constantly excelling in their performance on the playground. The above conversation with the charmer boys illustrates not only the use and significance of football skills among the boys as a vital means to gain popularity and admiration among girls, but their strong investment in the construction of the 'football space' as a 'heterosexual male zone' in which the boys assert their heterosexuality through football competence and interest, which also works as a strategy to initiate hetero-romantic relations. The use and construction of football as a symbol of being a heterosexual male is dominant at Sun Shine Primary and is heavily premised upon and validated by the very dominant construction of football as 'suitable' for boys, thereby reinforcing the construction of the footballing space as 'masculine'.

**'Cream girls' talking about 'charmer boys' not just as good footballers but also as potential 'boyfriends'**

In ethnographic conversations with some of the 'cream girls', as constructed by the 'charmer boys' they elaborate candidly about footballing boys as particular kinds of boys, that is, 'charmings' and potential 'boyfriends', as captured below:

Emmanuel: Last time we spoke a lot about boys and girls games and how some boys don't allow you to play football with them ...

Zinne: [Whispering] Shh shh wait; wait ... let me tell you something... there are some boys who say [to girls] 'Come and let's go and play, let's go to play soccer...' But, you know what, they just want to say something to you, something ... [Voice fades], you know what I mean! [Smile]

Emmanuel: Not really! [Shaking my head] Please tell me what the boys want say to girls.

Zinne: *Aih abafanan bala es'skoleni awubazi* // you don't the boys here at school ... they will say come Zinne come; come please let's go to play ... but they want to say 'I LOVE YOU' ...

Emmanuel: Ooh really! [Surprised and interested]. But do they actually play with you or they call you along just to say 'I love you'?

Zinne: No [Shaking head]. They [Boys] don't want to play with us ... they say they don't play with girls...

Emmanuel: So; are you saying that some boys would say to you 'let's go and play football' but don't actually want to play with you but they just want tell you that they love you?

Zinne: Yes.

Neli: *Kodwa ngesinye isikhathi abafana bayadlala nathi. Umfana ufike athi 'woza asihambe siyodlala ibhola', mhlaw'mbe intombazane beyibona umfana ukuthi uyi-charmer izovuma ... Bafike badlale; badlale mhlampe intombazane mese ithi 'ay sengikhathele manje, ngikhathele manje ukudlala ibhola ...' Bese ithi intombazane 'as'hambe siyodlala i-skipping rope' bese intombazane iyagxuma kuphakame i skirt kuvele i panty ... // Sometimes boys do play with us. A boy would say 'come let us go to play football', maybe if a girl sees that the boy is a charmer she would agree ... Then they would play and play and maybe the girl would say 'ay I am tired now, I am tired of playing football ...' And the girl would say 'let's go and play skipping rope' and when playing skipping rope the girl would jump casually and her skirt would lift up and show off her panty ... [Laughter]*

Emmanuel: Yeah [Nodding], but what kinds of boys do you think are charmers?

Neli: *Amantombzane amaningi a charm-wa kakhulu abafanan abadlala ibhola* // most girls are charmed mostly by boys who are popular because they are good at football and they play football every day during break at school.

Emmanuel: And are those the kinds of boys who would ask girls to 'play soccer with them'?

Thah: *Laba bebhola ibona impele aba charm ayo, ibona ... // the boys who are good at football are the ones that charm many girls, they are the charmers ...*

Emmanuel: Yeah! And I was talking with some of the footballing boys a couple of weeks back and they told me that the other boys who can't play football very well or don't want to play football are called cows. Is that true, are some boys called cows here at school?

Zinne, Neli and Thah: Yebo, baqinisile // yes, that is true [Chorus].

Emmanuel: *Ngicela ukubuza ukuthi ngabe labafana ababizwa ngezi-nkomo nabo bama charmer yini* // may I please ask whether or not the boys who are called cows are they also charmers?

Zinne: *Labafana ababizwa ngezinkomo bayizishimane* // the boys called cows are usually dateless; they are single boys.

Emmanuel: *Kusho ukuthini ukuthi umuntu uyisishimane* // what does it mean to say someone is dateless?

Thah: *Isishimane umfana ongenayo intombi* // that is a boy who does not have a girlfriend.

The above conversation resonates with Martin's (2011) London-based ethnography on elementary school children at play which revealed children's constructions of gender difference through play with football emerging as a masculine game and skipping strongly associated with girls and femininity. In this study, however, football not only serves as a medium through which the boys construct themselves as different from girls who almost 'naturally' like to skip; it is also strongly tied to a dominant discourse of heterosexuality in which poor football skills, interest or non-footballing among boys results in their heterosexuality being subjected to doubt. On the other hand, girls who show an interest in football are constructed by the footballers as the least attractive as 'girlfriends'. Girls consider football enthusiasts 'charmers' in opposition to 'cows' who remain 'dateless' primarily due to the 'shame' in their lack of interest in football or playing football poorly. Indeed, as discussed in the previous chapter, non-footballing boys, especially those who show an interest in skipping with girls are constructed as 'gay' by most of the charmer boys. It is interesting to note that the cream girls' construction of a 'charmer' is in sharp contrast to the ways footballers describe the girls they consider to be 'creams'. That is, the key characteristic of a 'charmer' is a great interest and ability in football. In contrast, 'cream girls' are girls who do not play football or share boys' unwavering enthusiasm for the game. Even when they make an appearance on the footballing space, they are expected to position themselves on the margins and watch rather than actively participate in the game with boys and their margin positioning stimulates boys' football performance.

### **'Charmer boys' talking about what defines a 'cream girl'**

Conversations with some of the 'charmer boys' about their constructions of 'cream girls' further indicate the charmer boys' oppositional construction of beauty in girls as those that are less athletic than them, while sporting girls' excessive physical exercise, fitness and toughness is intimidating to the boys:

Emmanuel: How can you tell whether or not a girl is a 'cream'?

Phako: 'Cream' girls have long hair and have a light skin.

Mavu: 'Creams' are neat and clean, and they have that model walk.

Khule: You'll see she's a 'cream' with her fresh skin ... like with no sores, spots or rough skin and stuff like that'. They are not *amazumba* // ugly.

To explore the boys' construction of other girls, that is, not 'creams', I asked the boys to describe the kinds of girls they considered as not 'cream', which they called *amazumba* // ugly and unattractive girls:

Nku: *Amazumba* are those who like to play football and rugby! They are tough girls, and they are not nice to look, they like to act like boys.

Phako: They don't paint [their] nails, and they don't let them [finger and toe nails] grow long.

Mavu: They have flat buttocks [Laughter]; a [cream] girl is not supposed to have a flat buttocks! Creams are like *Nicki Minaj*, but she's fake!

Khule: They are not nice to look at, with their rough face, strong body, strong and deep voices ... and they have very tough muscles too.

Nku: They walk like 'niggers', you know like how some boys walk, and they don't walk like girls, like [female] models on TV.

It would seem that, for the charmers, 'cream girls' are girls that are the complete opposite to them. That is, they are less sporty, poor at football, fragile, not physically strong and do not walk 'properly' like 'normal/cream' girls should do. Gender and sexual identities are relational and constructed in opposition to each other; boys construct and find attractive 'cream girls' who are unlike them. The category of 'tomboy' discussed in the previous chapter is particularly associated with girls who play football and are constructed as gender transgressors for their interest in football and disassociation with skipping, constructed as a girls' play activity. Although 'tomboys', constructed similarly to *amazumba* girls as opposites of 'creams', are acceptable to the boys for social friendships as well as football playmates, they seem least attractive as 'potential-girlfriends'. This may be because 'tomboyhood' is associated with notions of masculinity and places 'tomboys' outside the sexually attractive feminine 'Other' of masculinity. Beyond enlightening us about the young children's underground patterns and dynamics of heterosexuality, the above conversation also illuminates the underlying construction of the 'dating' relationship initiation role as the domain of boys as further expounded the following conversations.

### **Boys and girls on 'dating' and the popular construction of boys as legitimate 'date' initiators**

As demonstrated in chapters five and six, due to the dominant discourse of gender polarity that circulates among children at the school, cross-gender play interactions are uncommon and when they occur 'gender transgressors' incur various consequences. My focus here is to further illustrate that when cross-gender play or social interactions occur, they are not only 'policed' in order to

maintain gender borders, but also seem to be difficult to conceptualise outside the dominant discourse of heterosexuality in which the construction of boys' as the primary heterosexual 'date' initiators is considered normative:

Emmanuel: Since I have been in the school I have not seen many boys and girls playing together or spending break time together. And I wonder why boys and girls don't mix a lot here at school. Let's talk, what can say about this?

Sbo: There are others who are dating here at school, I know some from Ms Madlala's class. Abonge, he's dating Sah.

Emmanuel: When you say they're dating, what does that mean?

Sbo: Dating is when a boy loves a girl, like when he wants her to be his girlfriend.

Lindani: It's when a boy sees a beautiful girl and says to her: I love you. *Mese beyajola ke ...* // then they date each other. You know... [Smile] and then the other things they do ... [laughter]

Emmanuel: Other things, like what?

Lindani: [Laughter] ... I don't know ... [Looking away]

Emmanuel: Why are laughing?

Lindani: [Cracks more loud laughter ... which ends with]: 'I don't know ... it's just nothing'!

Sbo: *Baqala ngokushelana mese beyajola-ke ...* // the first thing in dating relationships is courting then dating...

Emmanuel: *Kushelwa kanjani* // what does courting entail then?

Sbo: *Ukushela* // courting is to tell or show a girl that you love her.

Lindani: No, you don't just tell her that you love her. *Uma ushela uqale umtshela ukuthi muhle, umbuze igama lakhe* // you begin by telling her that she is beautiful, then ask her to tell you her name. You ask where she lives. You ask her if does have a phone, if she says yes then you ask for her phone number. Then you say the big words: I LOVE YOU... [Laughter from both the boys]. And ... if she says YES, you then ask her to prove that [she loves you]... with a KISS [Applause, cheering and laughter from Sbo as Lindani mimes a kiss by placing his open left hand onto his mouth to blow a kiss].

Emmanuel: So you have to kiss each other then?

Lindani: Yeah, yeah ... she must allow me to kiss her, then I'll know [that] she really loves me, ... And that she's not just kidding when saying yes. A kiss proves it's true... [that] she loves me too.

Emmanuel: What if she says no, meaning she doesn't love you or doesn't want you as a boyfriend? Does that happen at all?

Sbo: *Bakhona abanye abazitshelayo, bengavumi, labo kumele ubabelesele ... ugcina evumile* // there are those who 'play hard to get', and would say no. For those ones, you need to give them

more constant pressure before they can say yes to your love proposal. Other girls, Eih, Eih [Shaking his head], I just don't how they are at times...

Emmanuel: What is it about them that seem difficult for you to understand?

Sbo: You know what, they can say no to you today, and the next day, when you tell them the same thing they can yes!

Lindani: *Lawa amambi iwona ajwayele ukuvumana kanti lawa amahle ayathanda ukunqaba // ugly girls more often would say yes, but the more beautiful girls [O-cream bes'kole // creams of the school, adds Sbo]. Abanye bathi kugcono ukushela embi ngoba enhle ishelwa yibo bonke abafana, futhi abafana babuye balwe bebanga yona // some [boys] say it is better to date an ugly girl because a beautiful one is always wanted by many other boys and sometimes boys fight over a beautiful girl. Kugcono ukushela embi ngoba uyazi ukuthi ngeke ulwe namuntu // it is better to [want] to date an ugly girl because then you won't fight or compete with many other boys.*

Emmanuel: Sbo, do you agree with Lindani that the girls you think are ugly say yes most of the times than those who you think are more beautiful?

Sbo: Yes, he's right, *uginisile // that's true ...beautiful girls are hard to [have as] date ...*

Emmanuel: Yeah, yeah, I understand [Nodding]. But does it ever happen that a girl be the first one to tell a boy that she loves him?

Sbo and Lindani: [Laughter], No, no. *Amantombazane awasheli // girls don't ask boys out.*

Emmanuel: Why do you think this is so?

Sbo: *Angazi-ke // I don't know.*

Lindani: *Nami angazi ukuthi yinindaba // I also don't know why [Raising his shoulders with a smile].*

The way in which this conversation flowed from my initial question on the dearth of cross-gender play at the school to discussions on dating cultural practices is fascinating. Interestingly, the children's accounts in relation to 'boyfriends/girlfriends' emerged, spontaneously, out of a question on the prevalence of gender play. I encouraged this sexuality talk to develop in the direction it took mainly because the topic of heterosexuality was raised by the boys themselves. I found this fascinating as it suggests that sexuality forms a significant component of the young children's social world. The strong association of cross-gender play interactions and 'dating' highlights the difficulty and impossibility of gender-mixed social interactions among children as these risk being heterosexualised in terms of 'boyfriends/girlfriends' (Renold, 2006), the kinds of relations which are considered taboo and punishable at the primary school. Cross-gender play and social interactions seem inconceivable to comprehend without making references to heterosexuality as a prime basis for cross-gender interactions among the children.

The two boys talk candidly about heterosexuality and offer vivid and elaborate descriptions of how ‘dates’ start, which kinds of girls they consider more attractive to have as ‘girlfriends’ and how ‘love’ is affirmed through kissing each other. These accounts of hetero-romantic relationships suggest the young boys’ experiential knowledge of initiating and being in heterosexual relationships. Regardless of whether they are speaking about imagined ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ relations or their talk is based on behaviours they have witnessed among other children at school or among much older children, or if they are reflecting on their own personal experiences, what they say is equally relevant because it sheds light on the ways in which these children, young as they are, construct heterosexuality. Note how Lindani changes from talking about what other boys do and how they do it to talking about his own experience of ‘dating’ relationship initiation: ‘... you say the big words: I LOVE YOU... And ... if she says YES, you then ask her to prove that [she loves you]... with a KISS’. From generalising and distancing himself from the account he is narrating, by using the pronoun ‘you’, he suddenly places himself in this account by using ‘me’ and ‘I’: ‘... she must allow me to kiss her, then I’ll know [that] she really loves me, ... And that she’s not just kidding when saying yes. A kiss proves it’s true... [that] she loves me too’. The fact that Lindani can speak both generally and personally in describing the same account provides an indication of the wide prevalence of heterosexual dating practices in the children’s underground social world, understandably kept underground within the schooling cultural context which prohibits and even punishes any form of sexuality in its effort to construct and maintain the dominant view of a non-sexual primary school child. The popular assumption of childhood sexual innocence has been challenged by previous research. For example, Renold (2006) explored how sexuality features in young children’s everyday social and cultural interactions at two London primary schools. The study documents the complex ways in which boys and girls construct and perform their sexual identities by positioning themselves in boyfriend/girlfriend subjects. She found that the ways in which these relations are constructed is deeply embedded within dominant discourses of hetero-romantic cultures and relationships which, for example, tend to feminise emotionality (Renold, 2006). Furthermore, charged emotional accounts and reminiscences of ‘being dumped or dumping’ emerged strongly among girls and to a much lesser extent in her conversations with boys (Renold, 2006:497-498). In my study, the emotional content of the varied conversations with the children also tended to be gendered in some ways. For instance I witnessed girls cry on numerous occasions, while I did not witness a single boy cry in all of my interactions with them. Instead, they made jokes and laughed about issues that invoked tears in some of the girls. In particular, I remember that, when one of the children made an example of someone who had a ‘boyfriend’ or ‘girlfriend’, had kissed or had written or received a love letter by naming a person present in a group conversation, girls often found being named and used as an example very upsetting and showed this



emotion through tears. In contrast, boys found humour in this; I often felt that being recognised by peers as having a ‘girlfriend’ was a status elevator for boys as this gave them increased opportunities to talk at length about this, while others in the group were silenced.

From the above conversation it appears that it is not necessarily always the case that the ‘charmer boys’ would receive positive responses from girls that they tell they ‘love’ at first attempt. However, the boys’ strategy of perseverance seems to eventually yield positive results. It would seem that ‘cream girls’ generally need more determined pressure to convince them, ‘... they can say no to you today, and the next day, when you tell them the same thing they can yes!’ It is for reasons such as this that Sbo points out that ‘cream girls’ are sometimes difficult to understand. In contrast, it would seem that ‘*amazumba*<sup>10</sup> // the ugly girls’ are easier to have as ‘girlfriends’ as they do not require as much convincing as the ‘creams’. Furthermore, even if the ‘charmer boys’ eventually get the ‘cream girls’ as ‘girlfriends’ they would still need to deal with competition because ‘cream girls’ are generally ‘wanted’ by many other boys at the school. Although the ‘charmer boys’ are certain that initiating ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ relations is primarily the role of boys and not girls, they are unable to justify why this role is only appropriate for boys. I also engaged some of the ‘cream girls’ in order to explore their views regarding the seemingly masculine ‘date’ initiation role:

Emmanuel: *Ngesikhathi ngikhuluma nabafana ezinye zezinto abazishilo ukuthi ibona abajwayele uku ... // when I was talking with the boys some of the things they said was that it is often the boys who ...*

Thembi [Completes my sentence]: *Ukushela // initiate boyfriend/girlfriend relationships?*

Emmanuel: Yes [Nodding].

... [Silence] ...

Emmanuel: And what I would like to understand is why girls do not usually start the boyfriend/girlfriend relationships?

Zinne: *Ingoba amantombzane amagwala, ayasaba ukukhuluma ... // it’s because girls are scaredy-cats, they are afraid to talk ...*

Thah: *Amantombazane anamahloni futhi ayasaba // girls are too shy and scared to approach boys.*

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<sup>10</sup> The boys construct *amazumba* in derogatory terms as if these are girls who are ‘unnaturally’ masculine and represent the stereotypical opposite of the girls constructed as ‘creams’ who, in Connell’s (1987; 2002) terms, seem to ‘emphasise’ femininity. For the boys, beyond referring to girls who are ‘overly’ athletic and masculine in character, the term *amazumba* also refers to fat, very dark skinned and at times unhygienic girls at school who are also sexually unattractive just like ‘tomboys’, as opposed to the ‘cream girls’ they construct as beautiful.

Neli: *Amantombazane ayasaba. Othi ngilinganise, asitheni intombazane ithanda umfana kodwa ngoba intombazane iyasaba ukutshela umfana ukuthi iyamthanda, intombazane izotshela umngani wayo ukuthi akamshelale, anamahloni anantombazane ...* // most girls are scaredy-cats. Let me make an example, let's say a girl loves a boy but because a girl is afraid to directly tell a boy that she loves him, the girl will then ask her friend to tell the boy that she loves him, girls are shy ...

Thah: *Amanye amantombazane abhala izincwadi mese edweba izithombe zama-ring omshado noma zenhliziyo ezibomvu ...* // some of the girls would prefer to write letters with drawings of wedding rings or red hearts ... [Laughter]

Thembi: *Akhona amantombazane angenawo amahloni avele nje uthole ukuthi umfana wabantu uzihlalele ivele intombazane iyohla la eduze kwakhe nayeke umfana mese eyachazeka ...* // there are other girls who are not shy, they just see a boy sitting alone and the girl would go to sit next to him and the boy then become interested ...

Sindi: *Kodwa mina ngithanda ukusho ukuthi akusibona bodwa abafana abashelayo, namantombazane ayazishelela ngesinye isikhathi, ayazizela kubafana abadlala ibhola ... ibona ababathanda kakhulu. Kuyafana nabafana laba ababaculi njengo Justin Bieber nje, uke ubone nje nawe ukuthi amantombazane ayazizela nje kuabaculi ... Ungabona mengase kufike u Chris Brown la es'koleni, ungawoba ke amantombane ala ukuthi anjani angaziyela kuyena* // but I would like to say that it's not always the boys who initiate, even girls do this sometimes, they like to 'throw themselves' to charmer boys ... they like very much the boys who are popular at school for playing good football. It is the same thing like how male musicians such as Justin Bieber, you may have seen how girls like to 'throw themselves' to such famous musicians ... You can see this for yourself if Chris Brown could come to the school, you can see how girls here are like; they would 'throw themselves' to him.

Zinne: *e-Pava* [The Pavilion Shopping Centre, Durban] *kwakufike i-Generations ... kwangena u-Phenyo* [Actor from *Generations*] *e-stage amantombazane a screamer kakhulu ebona u-Phenyo, amanye agijima aya e-stage ayomhaga, abanye bamshutha, abanye bashutha naye futhi ...* // at the Pavilion Shopping Centre there was a *Generations* cast visit ... then Phenyo [One of the popular actors in the show] came onto the stage and many girls screamed very loudly at him, some ran to him on stage to give him hugs, some took photos of him, and some took photos with him as well ...

As the girls reminiscences and fantasies indicate, skilled footballing boys and football enthusiasts at the school are construed as 'charmings' and as sexually attractive to most girls in much the same way as local male TV actors like the character of Phenyo in the popular SABC 1 soap opera, *Generations*. Famous international male musicians such as Chris Brown and Justin Bieber also emerge as charming, attractive and interesting to girls as compared to boys who mentioned the name, Nicki Minaj among other female music and TV stars, as their epitome of beauty and sexiness. Importantly, one of the main reasons why girls generally refrain from approaching boys in 'dating' cultures is because 'girls are too scared' to do so. Indeed, the dominant construction of heterosexual date initiation as socially and culturally a role for males, sheds light on what prevents girls from being proactive in 'date' initiation practices. For example, Thembi mentioned that: '...It's wrong for a girl to be the one who tells a boy [that] she loves him. That's just disgusting, it's wrong'. The way in which these young girls distance themselves from taking an active role as 'date'

initiators by constructing this as a sole role of boys, draws on the male sex drive discourse which positions males as active subjects and females as passive objects in hetero-romantic practices (Hollway, 1984). Although not all girls present themselves as passive and afraid of ‘dating’ relationship initiation, those who dare to defy the norm and approach boys do this indirectly through physical signs. For example, girls try to establish close contact with the boys they find ‘charming’ through sitting next to them rather than communicating their message of affection to the boys in a straightforward and direct way. One of the key questions I had in mind as I engaged with the girls and boys in conversations on their constructions of ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ relations at the school was: how do these relationships actually start and sustain in a schooling cultural environment where gender polarity is the norm? Below I explore this question by focusing on a conversation with one of the boys ‘othered’ by the ‘charmer boys’ for his lack of interest in football while playing and maintaining friendships with girls.

### **Lindo: the mediator of communication between ‘boyfriends’ and ‘girlfriends’**

In part, the common strategy of using mediators shed light on the question of how hetero-romantic relations are sustained given the rigidity of gender borders in the school. Here I explore the dynamics of this particular strategy. Most of the conversations I had with some of the boys were broadly aimed at exploring how they construct and engage with their gendered/sexual identities. What emerged strongly from these conversations is the significance of football in the way the boys construct and position themselves in relation to ideas of masculinity. That is, by constantly drawing on football, most of the boys, especially ‘charmings’, constructed themselves as ‘real’ boys who are both physically and emotionally tough and strong in opposition to most girls, as well as some boys, particularly those they construct as ‘gay’ due to their lack of interest in football and for befriending and playing with girls. One such ‘othered’ boys is Lindo to whom I have already referred in chapter six. Like Bu in chapter six, Lindo’s name was often raised by the ‘charmer boys’ as a key example of the boys they constructed as not being ‘properly’ masculine and as ‘gay’ because they played mostly with girls at skipping rather than with other boys at football. Below I talk with Lindo about himself, his interests in relation to play and the kinds of relationships he has with the so-called ‘charmer boys’ and ‘cream girls’ at school:

Emmanuel: Do boys and girls play together at school?

Lindo: No. boys and girls play different games. Boys play football, and girls skip. Some girls sometimes play *shumpu*.

Emmanuel: So that means boys and girls don’t play together?

Lindo: Yes.

Emmanuel: What about friends, are there boys who friends with girls at school?

Lindo: Yes, but *bancane* // they are very few.

Emmanuel: Why do you think there are few boys who are friends with girls in your school?

Lindo: Boys just don't like to be friends with girls; they don't want to play with them. It's always like that. Boys are friends with [other] boys and girls are friends with [other] girls. That's how it's like at break. Other boys say I'm gay because I'm friends with girls, and I like to play *shumpu* and skipping rope with girls and not football with them [boys].

Emmanuel: Is it only the boys at school who say you are gay because you play with girls? What about girls, don't they also call you gay?

Lindo: Sometimes girls say that also, like when there is a quarrel when we play and blaming me or my team for cheating in a *shumpu* game, girls swear and shout at me and sometimes call me gay. [... Silence...] *Kodwa abanye bayajola la e'skoleni* // but here at school there are others who are dating [Speaking softly with a smile].

Emmanuel: How do you know that others are dating, that they not just friends?

Lindo: *Ngababona abanye becabuzana emva kwe-class lethu ... babecabuzana ngababamba!* // the other day I saw some kissing behind our classroom ... they were kissing and I caught them!

Emmanuel: Did you do anything after seeing them kissing?

Lindo: *Bangibona nabo kodwa bathi ngingabacebi* // they asked me not to report them to teachers.

Emmanuel: *Nawe wangabaceba?* // and you did not report them?

Lindo: *Ang'bacebanga. Babesebecetshiwe.* // I didn't report them. They were already reported by someone else.

Emmanuel: *Babesebecetshwe kuthisha? Ubani owayesebacebe kuqala?* // were they reported to a teacher and who reported them?

Lindo: *Enye intombazane eyababona kuqala* // they were reported by the other girl who first saw them.

Emmanuel: *Kwenzakalani kubona* // do you know if anything happened to them after they were reported?

Lindo: *Angazike, angaz'nami* // I don't know what exactly happened after they were reported.

Emmanuel: *Ngabe bakhona abanye obaziyo abajolayo?* // are there others you know who are dating?

Lindo: Yes [Nodding slowly] *bakhona, baningi!* // there are many! [Here he also mentioned by name some of the 'couples' at school that he knew]

Emmanuel: Yeah [Nodding repeatedly]

Lindo: *Babuye babhalelane izincwadi. Bayabhalelana...* // sometimes they write love letters to each other. They write to each other ...

Emmanuel: *Zikhona yini izincwadi owake wazibona bebhalelene zona?* // have you seen some of those love letters?

Lindo: Yes, *bajwayele ukuthuma mina izincwadi zabo ukuthi ngibahambisele zona. Nabanye bayabathuma, kodwa bajwayele ukuthuma mina* // they usually ask me to deliver the love letters between (potential) dates.

Emmanuel: *Kulezi'ncwadi abajwayele ukutkuthuma zona ayikho owake wakwazi ukuyifunda?* // have you been able to read some of the love letters you delivered?

Lindo: *Ikhona engake ngayifunda, leyo yayibhalwe u-Sbo ebhalele u-Pree' wayebhale ukuthi uyamthanda, uzoshada naye nokunye nje ...* // the one I have read was from Sbo to Pree', in it he was saying he loves her, he will marry her and he also wrote many other things ... [Smile and laughter].

Emmanuel: *Nokunye, njengakuphi* // Sbo also said many other things in that letter, like what else?

Lindo: *Okunye wakusho ukuthi kukhona isipho azomupha sona* // the other thing Sbo wrote was that he wanted to give Pree' a gift.

Emmanuel: *Wena-ke manje, ukhona yini ojola naye?* // and what about you? Is there someone you're dating?

Lindo: No [Shaking his head].

Emmanuel: Why not? [Asked empathetically]

Lindo [Brief silence]: *Akekho engijola naye mina* // I'm not dating anyone [Serious face]. *Angithandi* // I don't want to, *angaz'nam* // I don't know why [Raising his shoulders].

I quote at length from this conversation because I find it interesting, both in terms of form and content. Although I did not introduce the topic about 'dating', the fact that this topic emerged spontaneously as introduced by Lindo himself is interesting in the sense that it suggests the significance of sexuality in the ways in which the young children articulate gender relations. My focus on Lindo himself as a 'gender-transgressor' spontaneously shifts to others' heterosexual relationships which he is in a position to talk about because he is a mediator who facilitates communication between 'dates'. It is puzzling to learn that some of the boys and girls that Lindo cites as examples of 'dates' he mediates are 'charmer boys' who mainly spoke about Lindo in critical ways as a 'gender-transgressor' without mentioning that he is useful to them as a messenger in their 'dating' culture. In their qualitative school based study in London on boys' identities and cultures, Frosh *et al* (2003) also observed how boys who were teased for playing with girls could also attain status as mediators who played an important role in facilitating 'dating' relations between 'popular' boys and girls.

The reason why I asked why Lindo remained dateless despite his peers 'dating' relationships at school is because dating, as he himself points out, seems fun and can yield material benefits such as the exchange of gifts as noted in the message in one of the love letters he handled. The fact that Lindo was so relaxed and at ease when talking about others' 'love' affairs, but 'closed down' somewhat when I probed about his own 'dating' relationship status is worth noting. While Lindo spoke excitedly and candidly about his peers' 'dating' relationships, he seemed reluctant to speak about himself. He did this by showing a serious face which I read as signalling his reluctance to share: 'I don't date anyone, I don't want to', he said with a firm and far less friendly tone and face as compared to the constant smiles and excitement which characterised the conversation about the kissing episode he witnessed at school, being asked to courier dates letters and messages, and sometimes secretly reading these. Closing down the conversation about his personal dating relationship status may indicate that he is dateless and therefore has no story to tell about himself in a dating relationship.

Among teachers, pupil 'dating' relationships, let alone kissing, is taboo and strongly prohibited. That sexuality is banned among children at the school is evident in the caught 'kissing couple' who asked Lindo not to report them to the teachers. Reporting acts of sexuality to teachers emerges as a means of 'policing' sexuality among the school children in ways which reproduce the popular discourse of childhood sexual innocence (Epstein, 1997; Bhana, 2002; Renold, 2006; Martin, 2011).

As a mediator, Lindo is in a good position to share much about children's underground cultures of sexuality at the primary school: '...but here at school there are others who are dating'. In saying this, Lindo is not only enlightening us about sexuality, but constructing and presenting his relationships with girls as non-sexual friendship in opposition to 'charmer boys' who 'would play with girls they date or who they want to date'. However, in mixing with girls, he attracts criticism and victimisation from both boys and girls who label him 'gay' with the derogatory connotation of a 'defective boy' who lacks presumed natural all-male social bonding which is maintained through football.

Although gay, in the context this term is used to refer to Lindo, may not necessarily mean male homosexuality, the term's strong association with dominant notions of femininity is visible in Lindo's case who is constructed as gay because he plays the 'girls' game' of skipping during break. Because he is interested in what is considered girls' play, he is associated with girls and femininity and gay is used to this effect. In a sense, the term of gay is levelled at Lindo as a form of abuse and as a way of showing utter criticism of his playing with and being friends with girls. Although gay cannot be simply seen as meaning homosexuality and homophobia in the way it is used towards

Lindo, the children in the study did speak about homosexuality in homophobic ways. Whenever gay was used by the children in the context of same-sex loving relationships, the children spoke about these in negative ways as ‘wrong’, ‘unnatural’ and anti-procreation. Their negative constructions and criticism of homosexuality emerged particularly when some of them spoke about a gay loving relationship on TV that is played by two male characters, ‘Senzo’ and ‘Jason’ in the popular SABC 1 soap opera, *Generations*. They could not speak about similar same-sex ‘dating’ relationships in their own underground romantic cultures at the school. It would seem, therefore, that being a boy and playing with and befriending girls without the explicit intention of dating any of them is what primarily defines gay in the young children’s social world.

Because of his sheer lack of interest in football and keen interest in games considered as for girls at his school, Lindo is subordinated to the position of girls in the boys’ social hierarchy and status despite his leadership position in the classroom as a monitor. From a poststructuralist feminist perspective, Lindo is a fascinating case to observe. His different ways of behaving during play and friendship with girls illuminate our understanding of gender identities as multiple and complex in the way they are performed among young children (MacNaughton, 2000). Lindo’s gender identification and positioning in relation to both boys and girls at the school illustrate the different ways he performs and presents his masculine identity depending on the social context. Although he is powerful in class as a monitor and exercises a level of authority over both over boys and girls, Lindo quickly loses this power and respect from boys during break who ridicule him as gay. However, at the same time, some of the ‘charmer boys’ who taunt and abuse Lindo by calling him gay, as do some of the girls he skips with at times, also use him as a messenger to communicate with their (potential) dates who are often separated by the rigid borders of gender.

### **Girls’ mixed opinions in relation to ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ relationships at the school**

Following the above conversations which illuminate our understanding of how the young children heterosexualise their gender identities through play, I explore the different children’s perceptions regarding the dating practices that occur in their ‘underground’ cultures. I refer to them as ‘underground’ precisely because such practices were reportable ‘offences’, and I began by asking the ‘cream girls’ if they thought it was right or wrong to be dating in the school.

Emmanuel: About the boyfriend/girlfriend topic we have been discussing ... I would like to understand what do think about it? I mean; do you think it is right or wrong to be dating in the school?

Thembi: I think it’s fine ... it’s OK ... ’cause sometimes *niyakwazi* // you can ..., sometimes you’d study with your boyfriend. It’s RIGHT because sometimes you study together, and help each other.

And when there're no girls to play with you can play with that boy, who is your boyfriend. Yah, sometimes *nifunda ndawonye* // you do your schoolwork together.

What is interesting, here, is how Thembi invokes 'play' with the implication that they are attracted to each other not just 'sexually' but as companions through play. Ironically, it is precisely for playing with girls that boys such as Lindo are 'emasculated' and called gay. It may be that companionship with girls through play is seen as acceptable for the 'charmer boys' who are dating girls, perhaps because the 'charmer boys' have secured high profile reputations as masculine boys built upon their prowess at playing football with other boys. But I did not see 'charmer boys' playing in any of the playground activities with girls. Indeed, Thembi, herself, implies that playing with 'your boyfriend' is not something that girls do publicly in school by indicating that one can do this 'when there're no girls to play with'.

Her emphasis on boyfriends as potential playmates has to be understood in the context of my question about whether they think dating is 'right' or 'wrong' in school. Her response reads like a way of 'defending' herself and her 'reputation' as a girl by de-sexualising boyfriend relationships, or suggesting that they are not based just on physical attraction. For, as I have discussed earlier, girls and women are often judged and critiqued, in ways which boys are not, for being 'overly' sexual (Hollway, 1984; Pattman & Chege, 2003). It seems that even the 'cream girls', like Thembi whose 'good' looks and boyfriends afforded them high status among girls in the school, were aware of and concerned about 'protecting' their 'reputation' as 'good' girls in the context of the interview. Indeed, as we see below, some of the 'cream girls' who claimed (in other contexts when I was talking to them to have boyfriends) distanced themselves from Thembi and expressed strong criticism about the very idea of having boyfriends.

Sindi to Thembi: *Kodwa ungadlala nje nabafana bakini* // but you can also play with boys in your family such as your brother(s).

Thembi: No response. [She stares at Sindi wordlessly].

Sindi: *Mina ngithi ku wrong ukujola usamncane* // I'm saying that it's wrong to date while you are still young.

Emmanuel to Sindi: *Ku wrong ngoba ...* // you say it is wrong because ...

Sindi: *Ngoba ingane ingenzenjani umangase imithe isencane* // because I don't know how would a young girl deal with pregnancy. Plus HIV! ... You'll never know, some children are born with it ... and he'll pass it on to you ...

Zinne: *Nami ngithi ku WRONG* // I am also saying that it's WRONG!

Emmanuel to Zinne: And you say it's wrong because ...



Zinne: *Ngeke bayimele ingane besabancane. Abazali bazothi 'zibonele wena ngoba uwena ozale usemncane', ungayimela kanjani-ke leyonto // they would not be able to deal with pregnancy and a baby when they are themselves still very young. Their parents would say 'you deal with that pregnancy and baby on your own because it's your responsibility', then how would you deal with that?*

Neli: It's not right to date here at school.

Emmanuel to Neli: And you think it's not right because ...

Neli: It's not right because they'd get caught then they'll get some hiding, they'll get hit by all the teachers here at school.

Emmanuel: Mm [Nodding], so when dating is caught people get hit for it?

Thah: Yes, *kanzima kabi kabi...* // and very severely ...

Zinhle: But I think it's good and fun to date ... sometimes they buy each other GIFTS!

Emmanuel: Wow, REALLY! Do they buy each other gifts?

All Girls: *Yebo* // Yes! [Chorus].

Emmanuel: Can you give me some of the examples of the gifts that dates usually exchange?

Thembi: Lollipops.

Sindi: *Simba* Chips.

Zinne: Baby dummy lollipop.

Neli: Other gifts are wedding rings, necklaces and earrings from ... you know the ones that come out from a lucky packet we buy from the aunties who sell at the school gate during break. The other day I saw Nhlaka buying a pair of earrings from the aunty and gave this to Palesa [his girlfriend] ... [Giggling].

Zinhle: *Hamba Nhlakanipho* // you GO Nhlakanipho! [A lot of laughter from the girls].

I found it puzzling when even some of the girls who claim to 'have' 'boyfriends' also perceive boyfriend/girlfriend relations negatively. It seems my question about whether they thought it was 'right' or 'wrong' to have boyfriends generated concerns among the girls to 'protect' themselves and their 'moral reputations'. In this context, they seemed to construct me more like an adult figure of authority in the school with some of the girls sounding very moralistic and echoing the familiar rhetoric that sex was wrong, although also enjoying talking about the gifts girls received in such relationships. Gift-giving seems to be a common and vital component of dating relationships which the girls cite as one of the reasons they think having a 'date' is good and 'fun'. This is not surprising given the shared repertoire embedded in the male sex drive discourse which renders girls the main recipients of gifts and boys as gift-givers. The 'play' lucky-packet gifts among the young children

are important as they symbolise the depth of ‘love’ between dates and they seem to also be used by boys to propose love. The types of ‘play’ jewellery gifts, in themselves, are fascinating as they include necklaces and wedding rings which are the kinds of jewellery commonly exchanged in popular hetero-romantic cultures. It is fascinating the way the young girls express the concern around pregnancy in their justification of their negative thoughts towards ‘dating’ relations in their social world. Interestingly, some of the girls raise concerns about boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, sex and HIV/AIDS. It may be that they are echoing familiar concerns adults at school and home have expressed more generally about such relationships to distance themselves from these and construct themselves as ‘good’. Clearly, though, they associate sex with certain kinds of boyfriend/girlfriend relations.

### **Boys’ opinions and (sexual) accounts of ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’ relations at the school**

Ironically, as I illustrate below, the ‘charmer boys’ overwhelmingly consider ‘dating’ to be ‘wrong’. They did not, however, cite concerns of pregnancy as a negative consequence. This is worrying given the young boys’ candid ways of talking about the significance of sexuality in their constructions of the hetero/gendered self. To explore the opinions and perceptions of the ‘charmer boys’ regarding ‘dating’ practices among pupils at the primary school, I began the conversation by referring back to the topic around ‘underground’ hetero-romantic relations which emerged in our previous conversations:

Emmanuel: Before we start with today’s talk I want to start by saying thanks to everyone for being here and I am really happy to be with you again! Last time we were here you spoke a lot about games you play, like and dislike, games you see as for boys and the others that you see as for girls. Also, you spoke about ‘dating’ that is happening among some of the learners here at school...

Bho: [Giggling] ... yah some boys write messages on papers and fold them like planes and throw them to girls they love ... [Laughter].

Emmanuel: Yes! I remember that [Excited and smiling].

Phiwe: Zamani and Thembi were caught kissing ... they were given letters to send to their parents. Their parents were called to school...

Emmanuel: And what happened then?

Phiwe: I don’t know.

Emmanuel: OK, but for today there is something else I would like us to talk about: in your opinions, and it doesn’t matter whether you are ‘dating’ someone or not, do you think that it is right or wrong to ‘date’ in the school?

Bho: *Ku-wrong* // it’s wrong.

Emmanuel to Bho: *Ku-wrong ngoba* // it's wrong because ...

Bho: *Ku-wrong ngoba la es'skoleni asizelenga ukuzojola sizofunda* // it's wrong because we did not come to school for 'dating' but we are here to learn.

Emmanuel to Bho: Mm, OK, *kodwa bakhona abajolayo* // but are there other learners who are dating?

Bho: *Yebo* // yes.

Emmanuel to Phiwe: Do think it is right or wrong to date at school?

Phiwe: *Ku-wrong* // it's wrong.

Emmanuel to Phiwe: *Ku-wrong ngoba* // you think it is wrong because ...

Phiwe: *Ku-wrong ngoba akuvumelekile ukujola la es'koleni* // it is wrong because dating is not allowed here at school.

Emmanuel: *Akuvumelekile* // is it not allowed?

All the boys, simultaneously: Yes!

Emmanuel: What can happen to those who are dating ... I mean if they get caught?

Phiwe: *Bazoshaywa* // they'll get some hiding ...

Langan: *Uthisha omkhulu uzobaxosha* // the principal will be suspended them from school.

Emmanuel: *Engabe bakhona yini abanye abafundi abake baxoshwa ngoba be jola* // are there some other pupils you know who got suspended from school for dating?

Langan: *Bakhona abaxoshwa kwathiwa ababuye nabazali, kwakubanjwe incwadi ababebhalelene yona* // I know some learners who were suspended and told to only return to school with their parents, their love letter was caught [Smile].

Emmanuel to Langan: Do you think it is right or wrong to date in your school?

Langan: *Ku-wrong ngoba bazofundisa izingane ezincane lezi ezifunda u-Grade R ukuthi kuyajolwa la es'koleni, mese nazo zenza lezozinto ezenziwa abantu abadala, izingane ezincane zizofunda izinto ezingasile* // it's wrong because they [dates] will teach young children from Grade R about dating, then the young children will also start dating and do the things that older dating people do, the young children will learn those bad [sexual] things.

Emmanuel to Nathi: What do you think ... is it right or wrong?

Nathi: *Ku-wrong ggoba izingane zisencane futhi aenziwa imikhuba esikoleni* // it is wrong because the school children are still very young and dating behaviours are not allowed in the school.

Sabelo to Nathi [Speaking out of turn]: *Pho wawuyenzeleni laphaya* // but why did you do it over there?

Emmanuel to Nathi: *Imikhuba enjengani* // what do you mean by dating behaviours?

Nathi: *Uku-jola ne-sex* // dating and sex.

Although I did not show my instant reaction of shock and disbelief, I was taken aback by the casual use of the term sex and wondered for a moment what they meant. I did not immediately and fully comprehend what Nathi meant by sex or what this meant for the other boys in the setting. I did not believe my ears as I did not believe that the word 'sex' existed in their vocabulary and was used in their everyday communication at school until I entered the boys' toilets in which among other graffiti the word sex was written a number of times on the inside walls and doors. There were also images of male/female nudity and at times these were shown opposite sex genitals in contact. This kind of sexual graffiti together with how the boys talked about dating/sex illuminated my understanding of how they understand sex: the practice of sex.

Emmanuel to Sabelo: It's your turn now. Do you think it is right or wrong...?

Sabelo: *Ku-wrong ngoba* ... // it is wrong because ... [He does not continue with this thought but starts another sentence below].

Sabelo to Nathi: [Laughter] You, Nathi why are saying it's wrong but you did it over there, up there ... [Pointing to the northern and bushy land of the school yard extending from outside the school fence].

Nathi: He's lying... he's lying!

Emmanuel to Nathi [Silencing him]: Shhheee ... [Leaning forward and placing my index finger on my mouth].

Emmanuel to Sabelo: What is it exactly that they did over there?

Sabelo: He had sex with girls over there in the bushes ... the girl, Yellene lay down on the grass, facing up, then...then Nathi went on top of her... her panty was off, they were naked [Laughter]. But you know ... we were caught.

Emmanuel: Caught by who?

Sabelo: It was some other girls who were just walking around there ... it was break time. Then we were called to Ms Mevi's class and we were hit badly for this. Then, on that day, we went home with letters for our parents to come with us to school the next day... But Nathi, he didn't come to school with his parent ...

Nathi: My mother said she won't do that, but she only came after the school [re-]opened, when we returned from June holidays... [at first] she said she won't come, she said she doesn't have time for that ... for that nonsense. She came but only after the school holidays...

Emmanuel: And what happened then?

Sabelo: I don't know [exactly], my mother spoke with Ms Mevi [their class teacher]; and I don't know what they spoke about... I wasn't with them; they went and talked in the office. They didn't call us, they spoke in the office. And that's the end! [Sigh of relief with a smile]

Emmanuel to Bhekani: And you Bhekani, what do you think about the boyfriend/girlfriend thing in the school?

Bhekani: *Ay, ay ... mina ngithi ku-wrong, ngoba leyo into eyenziwa abantu abadala* // I am saying that it is wrong because that [dating] is something for adults.

Emmanuel: *Into yabantu abadala kuphela ukujola* // is dating only for adults?

Bhekani: Yes [Nodding] [With other boys signalling agreement with him by nodding as well].

Emmanuel to Bhekani: *Uma bekhona abajolayo mese beyabanjwa kungenzakalani kubona* // what can happen if there are pupils who are caught dating at the school?

Bhekani: It will hurt [Lots of giggling from the group of boys].

Emmanuel to Bhekani: What do you mean 'it will hurt'?

Bhekani: Sex! ... To a girl, it will hurt.

Emmanuel to Bhekani: And to a boy, will it hurt too or will be any different?

Bhekani: Awesome! To us [boys], it's just awesome! [Said with a smile, and there was lot of giggling from the rest of the boys].

Bhekani: [Continues after the laughter finally paused]: But you know that... that thing [sex] is not allowed here at school; you know they [teachers] always say that we're still young and we mustn't do it, they say sex is only for older people ... and not for us school children [Nodding with a smile].

The boys were very engaged in this conversation. They seemed very excited to talk about sex and the way it features in their social world. They seemed to enjoy the conversation very much as they spoke candidly, laughing and smiling throughout the conversation. Certainly, the kinds of democratic and child-centred relations I established with the children encouraged the boys to talk openly with me about how they construct the (hetero)sexual self. Although the conversation was aimed at exploring their attitudes regarding 'boyfriend/girlfriend' relations, the boys could not speak about these without making reference to sex/uality. Sabelo reveals that it was not only Nathi and Yellene who were caught having 'sex' at school but repeatedly using the pronoun 'we' in the subsequent line: 'We' were caught ...' suggests that he was also part of the sexual encounter he is describing. Furthermore, he adds that: 'we' got hit badly for this' and 'on that that day 'we' went home with letters for 'our' parents to come to school ...'. Nathi, who accused Sabelo of lying about this sexual encounter, says that 'it's wrong to date at school' when in fact he dated and even had sex with Yellene. Sabelo starts by speaking about Nathi as the main 'culprit' who had sex at school with Yellene and presenting him almost as if he was the only 'culprit' who also failed to 'come with his parent to school...the next day' as instructed by Ms Mevi. However, Sabelo's parent responded

promptly to the letter and called at school. Sexuality among the pupils seems to form a significant part of their underground social world. Among the teachers, sexuality among the children appears to be one of the uncomfortable realities they face. They react alarmingly and with disapproval as expressed through the punishment the boys incurred for being sexual. Through punishment of sexuality, the teachers (re)produce the children as non-sexual beings. Children who are suspected to be dating and having 'sex' at school are not only hit badly but also risk being suspended from school to return with their parents. However, children themselves also emerge as complicit in the teachers' practice of policing sexuality among learners. In particular, this complicity is manifest in the children's practice of reporting the incidents of sexuality they witness among their peers. Both the teachers and children contribute to the social reproduction of the primary school as a sexually-free context.

Therefore, the children emerge as sexual beings whose sexuality is constantly policed by their peers who report sexuality to the teachers who then impose forms of punishment. The sexual account that the young boys narrate contradicts popular constructions of primary school age children as non-sexual beings (Piper, 2000). This is a very powerful discourse of the childhood/adulthood binary in our society. Developmental psychologists who are influenced by the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud, particularly his psychosexual development theory which places sexuality at the centre of 'normal' childhood development, argue that even very young children are sexual in some form. However, they also express some reservations. For example, Coleman and Charles (2001) maintain that children do not suddenly wake up on their thirteenth birthday as teenagers to begin an entirely new life as sexual beings. As with other areas of human development, sexuality begins in the very early years of life (Coleman & Charles, 2001). However, at the same time, the literature suggests that while young children need to be conceptualised as sexual beings (Pattman & Chege, 2003), this does not imply that their sexuality means the same thing as sexuality as understood and experienced by adolescents and adults (Kilmer & Shahinfar, 2006). In other words, although the young children use romantic terms such as 'love', 'sex', 'dating', and 'boyfriend/girlfriend' and narrate their accounts, experiences and perceptions regarding these, these terms and accounts need to be read and understood in terms of the children's own cultural contexts, as they may not necessarily carry the same meaning as they do for much older, post-puberty children and adults. Kilmer and Shahinfar (2006) elaborate this cautionary point when they write that:

Sexuality in childhood – the very notion seems an oxymoron. Although many parents and caregivers may prefer to believe that sexuality is something that is not awakened in their child until adolescence, sexuality is no different from other areas of human development in that its roots are planted and take hold in childhood. This does not mean, however, that a young child's capacity to experience and express sexuality is equivalent to that of an adult.

Perhaps the most useful approach to understanding child sexuality in this context is to regard it as a 'normal' aspect of development, encompassing the set of processes, explorations and experiences that provide the groundwork for healthy adult sexual functioning (Kilmer & Shahinfar, 2006:35).

Therefore, while children are conceptualised as sexual beings (Epstein, 1997; Pattman & Chege, 2003; Renold, 2006; Bhana, 2002; 2008), at the same time, there is a need to recognise that the ways in which young children understand and experience sexuality is fundamentally different from sexuality as understood and experienced by adolescents and adults. Kilmer and Shahinfar (2006) highlight some of the important distinctions to be noted between child and adult meanings of sexuality:

... there is a meaningful difference between [sexual] behaviours motivated by curiosity and those driven by sexual interest and, importantly, between behaviours that are *pleasurable* and those that are *sexual*. Put another way, although some of the behaviours in which young children engage involve their genitalia, they are not necessarily sexual in nature (Kilmer & Shahinfar, 2006:36).

In a not dissimilar way, Gregory (1987) argues that although young boys and girls in the pre-puberty years of elementary schooling are sexual in some form and may engage in sexual self-exploration and experience some form of orgasmic pleasure, there would not be an ejaculatory consequence on the part of a boy. Whether or not Nathi and Sabelo experienced and attached the same meaning to their sexual encounter with Yellene as adults would, this account illuminates that sexuality forms a significant part of the young children's underground culture.

## **Summary**

This chapter has illuminated our understanding of how the young boys and girls construct their sexual identities through play. The empirical data explored in this chapter suggests that the young children are sexual beings, but their sexuality is constrained by the popular discourse of childhood sexual innocence which is enforced by the teachers and supported by some pupils. The 'football space' emerges as a 'heterosexual attraction zone' in which 'charmer boys' express football prowess in order to attract 'cream girls'. In their constructions of hetero-romantic relations, the children draw on the male sex drive discourse which manifests in the ways in which 'charmer boys' are positioned as active role players in practices of 'date' initiation. While the 'charmer boys' speak about the boys who 'transgress' gender through play in negative ways, ironically, 'charmer boys' rely on the gender 'transgressing' boys to communicate with 'cream girls'. The role that gender 'transgressing' boys play in the hetero-romantic culture is very important given the background cultural context of the school marked by strong gender polarity.

This chapter has also demonstrated that the boys and girls have mixed and divergent perceptions of 'dating' among people of their age. While some view 'dating' in a positive light by highlighting the benefits of gifts, as well as a play and study companion, others feel that 'dating' relationships are 'wrong' and inappropriate for people of their age; this is because these relations conflict with their school's zero tolerance approach to sexuality among pupils. Moreover, feminised social problems such as early pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS emerge as prominent concerns raised by the children in their justification of their negative views of 'dating'. However, these kinds of concerns also illuminate how the children link 'dating' with 'sex'. Whichever way 'sex' is understood or experienced by the children it emerges as a matter of great significance in the social lives of these young children.

The following chapter concludes this research study by highlighting the key emerging themes and reflecting on their implications for future research and pedagogic practices in the early years.



## Chapter Eight

### **What did I find and where do we go from here? Summary of the research findings and implications for future practices**

#### **Introduction**

This concluding chapter summarises the research study by highlighting the key themes that emerge from the analysis of the empirical data. Based on the major finding of the polarisation of gender in the children's play and the limitations and problems this creates for both boys and girls, this chapter provides useful recommendations for consideration by the teachers with regard to the ways in which they could encourage play that cuts across the boundaries of gender. The findings on the ways in which the young children construct their gender identities in heterosexualised ways through play raise implications for sexual health and HIV/AIDS in the primary school Life Orientation curriculum. In this regard, I reflect on my role as a researcher modeling certain kinds of behaviour in my interactions with the children, for example, treating them with respect, wanting to learn from them and being playful with them, and show how this approach can be emulated by the Life Orientation teachers as a model of good pedagogic practice.

#### **Key emerging themes**

My findings are significant with regard to gender polarity. Below I highlight the themes which emerge from the research study and which engage with the categories that the different children invoke in their constructions of masculinities and femininities through play. However, I begin with a self-reflexive theme, *the social construction of 'Emmanuel'*, in which I reflect critically on the different ways in which different people in the research process constructed me as an adult male conducting this study and what this says about them and me.

#### **The social construction of 'Emmanuel' by different people in and outside the school**

Critical self-reflexivity forms an important part of this research study. *The social construction of 'Emmanuel'* as a research theme highlights my experiences of gender polarisation in the process of conducting this study. Here I reflect on myself not just as an adult but as a man researching with young children and trying to establish democratic relations with them. As an adult male, I was constructed in different ways by the children and teachers at the primary school, as well as by other adults outside the school in a research training programme. Below I reflect on how these different categories of people constructed me and how I construct them, and what these constructions tell us about them and about me.

*Boys' social construction of me as a 'coach'*

One of the ways in which I came to be incorporated into the playground social worlds of particular groups of children in the study was through joining in their games. For example, through playing football with the boys, I learnt about the pleasure the boys derived from 'playing' with me as an adult, especially when they kicked the ball through my legs. In chapter four I discussed the sorts of identifications which were going on here and how and why the boys constructed me as a friendly adult male, and at the same time, as a coach. The pleasure that I evoked for the boys when I played football with them, especially when they 'beat' me, was significant in terms of developing democratised relations with them. Through presenting myself as a playful, approachable and accessible adult to the children, in contrast to the teachers who the children associated with the classroom and authority, I befriended the children, not through showing them how good I was at football or instructing them how they should play good football, but rather through playing with them and allowing them to 'beat' me. Although playing football with the boys enabled them to relate to me more as a friend than an adult authority figure, they tended to call me 'coach' in ways which constructed me as an adult male who is an expert in football. One of the boys in the study, Fana, articulates the social construction of coach as a masculine title when he says: 'all teachers here at school we call Miss and not coach ... You're a boy, and we like to call you coach. Miss is not a boy, you're a boy'. Many boys in the study constructed football coaching as a masculine role, in which the title of coach was presented as more suitable for me as a man, than their school female football coach who they hardly ever addressed as coach. The way the boys constructed me as a coach, used with connotations of being an expert even if I allowed them to beat me, is interesting because as a young boy at school I was not among the star performers at football and I had very little interest in this sport. As a result, I was often subjected to teasing and ridicule by my peers at school. My transformation from a boy who used to experience forms of marginalisation through the popular construction of football as a symbol of what it is to be 'properly' masculine, to being endearingly and admiringly identified as a 'coach' by many of the boys in the school is interesting. This transformation says a lot about the interaction of play and age in the social construction of gender identities among children at the school. In other words, as an adult, I was allowed to be poor at football without being rejected and produced as a problem as commonly experienced by some boys in the school who lack interest or ability in football.

*Teachers' constructions of me as an adult at the school*

The teachers at the primary school generally constructed me as one of them: an adult figure of authority. They did this by giving me certain roles and responsibilities which tended to position me as a teacher and a formal authority over children. For example, when I was observing in classrooms

I was sometimes given marking by some of the teachers. Besides being occasionally asked to mark children's workbooks, I was occasionally asked by some teachers to take charge and maintain order in the class when they went out. I was often tasked with the duty of a monitor to watch and write down the names of pupils who were misbehaving, such as failing to sit down and keep quiet in class. However, I tried to resist this kind of construction because it was in direct opposition to the kinds of democratic and friendly relations I wanted to establish with the children in order to learn from them what it is like to be boys and girls of their age in the particular school. I tried to invert the teachers' construction of me as an adult authority figure by avoiding sitting at the teacher's table at the front of the classroom. Instead, I sat among the children at their desks. During break, I did not stay in the classroom or in the staffroom with the teachers, but spent break interacting with children on the playground. I found that playing along with the children in the yard, rather than simply observing and talking with them, worked very well in terms of cementing the child-centred relations I was negotiating at the school.

*Being problematised as a man conducting this study: reflecting on my experiences in a research training programme*

My gender as a man conducting this study raised problems and concerns among my colleagues in a research training programme. They expressed scepticism and consternation about me as a man doing this study in ways which presented my adulthood masculinity as being in opposition to childhood, with the implicit assumption that adults who engage with young children who are not their own should be women, since caring and nurturing are perceived as natural qualities of women. However, drawing on the work of poststructuralist feminist scholars (MacNaughton, 2000; Davies, 2003; Martin, 2011), this binary view of gender is very problematic. For example, criticising the common-sense view of masculinity and femininity as unitary, homogenous and essential identities, MacNaughton (2000) draws attention to the multiple ways of performing masculinities and femininities. Therefore, as a man who exemplifies caring and nurturing roles through the kinds of friendly relations and interactions with children in this study, I challenge the essentialist view of caring and nurturing as natural qualities of women. In doing so, I broaden the possibilities for men. However, in doing this research, as a man, I not only narrow the boundary between what is commonly seen as permissible for men and women but also provide a good role model of a child-centred and caring masculinity to the boys and girls in the study.

**Children constructing gender differences through play**

My analysis of the empirical data yielded fascinating insights about the symbolic significance forms of play carry for the children as mediums through which they reproduce gender differences. The

key finding in this study points to the difficulty of boys and girls playing beyond the stereotypical boundaries of masculinity and femininity. Whether observed in or outside the classroom, children's play at the school is generally characterised by strict boundaries of gender which regulate and restrict play possibilities for both boys and girls. Children's choices regarding what, where and with who they can play are shaped by how forms of play are positioned within the binary construction of masculinity and femininity. For example, classroom play observations illuminate how gender polarity manifests in the way in which the construction area of play is constructed as masculine and dominated by boys who exclude girls. Constructed in opposition to the construction area is the fantasy area of play which is dominated by girls who exclude boys. Furthermore, observations of play activities in the school yard indicate the ways in which football is invoked by boys as a means through which they assert themselves as tough in opposition to girls who are constructed by the boys as too emotionally and physically fragile to play the tough 'masculine' game of football. On the other hand, distancing themselves from football that is seen as for boys, girls invoke skipping as a signifier of what it means to be a 'normal' girl.

Playing within the boundaries of gender provides vital groundwork for children to learn and perform social meanings of masculinity and femininity in ways which produce and reinforce the common-sense discourse of gender polarity from the early years. For example, the domestic roles that girls enact in their play in 'the fantasy area' reinforce caring and nurturing roles as naturally feminine activities. Furthermore, boys playing with toy building blocks, bricks, construction toy vehicles and toy mechanic tools reinforce the idea of construction work as appropriate for males. To gain a broader understanding of how and why children organise themselves in gendered ways during play, it is not enough to focus only on children and what they do. As I elaborate below, teachers play a role in the reproduction of gender in children's play.

### **Teachers (re)producing gendered interests among children**

Martin (2011) writes about the failure of teachers in early education to recognise their role in contributing to the reproduction of gendered differences among children by addressing and treating girls and boys differently in class. In my study, teachers' implicit assumption that boys and girls are fundamentally different manifests in the ways they construct play areas by marking them with stereotypically gender differentiated toys. For example, one area only comprised 'construction' toys and the other just 'domestic' toys with no mixing of the two. Although the teachers did not intervene when the children were playing, they did organise and construct the fantasy and construction areas of play in ways that encouraged gender segregation during play in class. When the teachers construct the fantasy play area as a space where stereotypically girls' toys such as baby

dolls and kitchen play objects are placed; for the children, this setup constructs the fantasy area as an area for girls. Likewise, the stereotypically boys' types of toys such as cars and other construction vehicles placed in the construction area, constructs the construction area as an area of play for boys. Although teachers do not formally instruct children that only boys should play in the construction area or that only girls should play in the fantasy area, the gender stereotypical manner in which these areas of play are structured by the teachers encourages children to play in gender-differentiated ways. Because gender socialisation processes begin very early in life (Martin, 2011), children arrive at school with knowledge of what counts as masculine or feminine and they want to position themselves 'appropriately' within their classroom's gendered play areas. Therefore, it can be argued that the girls' tendency to congregate in the fantasy area and boys' tendency to play in the construction area are not simply informed by the children's own free choices. Rather, their gendered play behaviours should be seen as shaped and constrained by what they have learnt about gender from home which is further validated and encouraged by the gendered manner in which play areas are arranged in their classroom. Although the teachers present themselves as simply responding to children whose gendered interests have already been fashioned outside school, they are implicated in the process of reproducing these interests not least by dividing construction toys and play areas in class from domestic toys and play areas. However, although the gender boundaries in children's play may appear rigid and fixed, they are fluid and occasionally subject to transgression. As I elaborate below, transgressing gender norms among children in the school is not without consequences, whose function is to police the transgression of gender.

### **Policing cross-gender play**

As part of the research process I developed the concept of 'gender-transgressive' play to describe the forms of play which defy gender stereotypes among children at the school. Exploring 'gender-transgressive' play and the treatment of gender transgressors provides insight into the young children's everyday constructions of gender, as well as their investment in gender polarisation. Gender 'transgressions' in children's play helps to make visible the fluid nature of gender as opposed to being seen as a biological fact. If the boys play football because they have a 'football instinct' or if girls skip because skipping is in their blood then the numerous observations of gender 'transgression' documented in this study would not have surfaced. Rather than taking the gender boundaries in children's play as reflective of natural differences, interests and abilities between boys and girls, I argue that boys and girls play in the gendered ways that they do because they have learnt that, in their school, to present and position oneself as a 'normal' boy involves an expression of commitment and skill with regard to football, and that a 'normative' way of being a girl involves expressing commitment to skipping. Boys and girls are compelled to play within the boundaries of

masculinity and femininity because it is difficult to transgress these without incurring different forms of repercussions.

Boys who skip rather than play football often receive the derogatory label of 'gay' and experience social exclusion from their male peers at school. Excluded from boys' social groupings boys perceived to be 'gay' find close friendships among girls, thereby further distancing themselves from other boys which often results in them being constructed as different and not 'real' boys by the majority of their male peers. The label of 'gay' emerges as a powerful means of 'policing' gender transgression among boys whereby in order to avoid incurring the label involves constantly playing within the boundaries of masculinity while disassociating from forms of play constructed as feminine such as skipping. 'Gay' is levelled towards boys as a means of expressing criticism and disapproval of their play behaviours that are perceived as transgressing 'normative' ways of performing 'boy' through play. The equivalent of 'gay' is 'tomboy' which is applied to girls who express interest in games constructed as for boys such as football. Like 'gay', 'tomboy' is also used in derogatory ways with connotations of not being 'properly' feminine or being overly masculine. However, although the label of 'tomboy' is also experienced as derogatory by the girls who are its victims, it does not emerge with as much negativity as does 'gay'. Unlike 'gay' which is consistently used as a swear-word and a form of criticism of boys who transgress gender stereotypes through play, in certain instances 'tomboy' is used with meanings of support and praise towards girls for being brave to challenge the masculinity of football. This suggests that girls, unlike their male peers at Sun Shine, have a degree of leeway in terms of what is permissible with regard to play. In similar vein, Jordan (1995) documents how young Australian boys experienced more pressure to play within the boundaries of perceived normative masculinity than girls who were sometimes praised by other girls for their interest and ability in forms of play constructed as for boys. Not only is cross-gender play policed at the school but boy-girl friendships are not easy to sustain in a schooling cultural environment where gender polarisation is a norm. I elaborate on this below.

### **The difficulty of boys and girls becoming friends**

The popular discourse of gender polarity among children at the school regulates not only play but friendships that cut across boundaries of gender. For example, one of the boys in the study articulates how difficult it is for boys to be friends with girls without this being constructed by peers as mediated by sexuality:

...when they see you playing with your friend who's a girl, they like to say she is your girlfriend, ... They just say it's your girlfriend, even if they don't know that the girl you play with could be your

sister. Whenever they see you walking with a girl they'd say you trying to get her to be your girlfriend. Like when you are walking with a girl who is about your age they'd say you are lovers; but they don't know maybe she's just your friend...

In this study, boy-girl mixing is not only policed through the derogatory labels of gay and tomboy levelled at gender transgressing boys and girls, but cross-gender mixing is also policed through being constructed in terms of sexuality. At the primary school, sexual relations among children, whether serious or just playing, is constructed by the teachers as taboo and children who engage or are suspected to be in such kinds of relations are problematised. Within the schooling cultural environment where sexuality forms part of what constitutes a 'problem child', cross-gender mixing among children is policed through being viewed as boyfriend/girlfriend relations, which are not allowed. The popular assumption of childhood sexual innocence (Bhana, 2002; Kehily & Montgomery, 2003; Renold, 2006) helps us understand why teachers regard sexuality among children in a negative light. Contrary to the common-sense assumption that reifies sexuality as an exclusive hallmark of adulthood and presents primary school children as non-sexual beings, this study shows how the children construct themselves as both gendered and sexual beings through play.

### **Challenging the popular assumption of childhood sexual innocence**

The purpose of this ethnography was to explore children's constructions of gender identities through play. However, in conducting the ethnography I also learnt that gender intersects with sexuality in the way it is constructed through play by children at the school. Thus, contrary to the common-sense understanding of sexuality as a hallmark of adolescents and adults in which primary school children are presented as non-sexual, this study makes visible how sexuality features in young children's everyday playground social worlds. For example, through expressing interest and considerable skill in football, 'charmer boys' aim to increase their popularity at school in order to impress and draw the attention of 'cream girls'. However, one of the interesting findings in this regard points to a contradiction in terms of how 'charmer boys' construct 'cream girls'. Thus, while the 'charmer boys' idealise 'cream girls' as potential girlfriends, at the same time, they denigrate them by constructing them as poor at football. While the children's romantic cultures that emerge in this study are interesting in the way they challenge the common-sense assumption of childhood sexual innocence, these cultures of sexuality should be read with caution. It should be noted that while young boys and girls in this study speak about themselves in 'dating' relationships and narrate their accounts and experiences of 'kissing', having 'sex' and being 'boyfriends' or 'girlfriends', these narrative accounts may not necessarily carry the similar meaning that they do for adolescents and adults.

### **Boys' claims of power over girls and girls' resistance**

Drawing on Foucault's (1982) understanding of power as complex and multi-dimensional, this study illuminates how power relations between boys and girls manifest in complex ways through play. While the study documents how boys constantly assert and position themselves as powerful over girls, how girls react with forms of resistance rather than conformity to boys' exercise of power during play also forms part of the findings. For example, although boys generally claimed domination in the play yard through football games, girls utilised different forms to resist and challenge this domination. Girls resisted by reporting boys' exclusionary practices to teachers and by encroaching on the spaces generally dominated by boys with their skipping ropes. They also disturbed boys' football games by taking the football and playing a 'girls' game with it. The girls' different strategies of resistance to boys' claims of domination in the yard illustrate the complexity of power relations in children's interactions at the primary school. Therefore, gender power relations are complex in the sense that power does not simply reside in the sphere of boys who exercise it over docile and passive girls. Rather, girls have possibilities of exercising power in relation to boys and these are manifest in the strategies used by girls in this study to resist boys' exercise of power during play.

### **Multiple ways of 'doing' identities of boy and girl through play**

In many different ways, the analysis of the ethnographic data suggests that the identities of boy and girl are not singular and homogenous. Rather, these identities are multiple and complex in the way they are constructed by the young children through play. Within the mix of different identities of boys and girls, certain versions of gender identities come to be constructed as dominant and this often involves subordination of other forms of masculinities and femininities that are perceived as not conforming to the popular discourse of gender polarity. For example, through their everyday public display of football prowess, the majority of boys in the study, particularly the so-called 'charmer boys', are able to construct and position themselves as 'real' boys who are both physically and emotionally tougher and stronger than all girls and some boys. Football is taken to represent a 'normative' way of being a boy, in contrast to skipping which is seen as a game that symbolises femininity; boys who engage in skipping are constructed by the 'charmer boys' as not 'properly' male and inferior. The stereotypical construction of boys who skip as the subservient 'other' of the 'charmer boys' manifests in the cultural practice where 'charmer boys' use the boys who skip as messengers to deliver forms of communication between 'charmer boys' and 'cream girls' in the underground 'dating' culture. Ironically, while 'charmer boys' speak about the boys who skip in a negative light as gender transgressors, they rely on them for communication with their potential 'girlfriends' within a schooling social context where a clear separation between boys and girls is



maintained.

Although most boys at the school draw on football to assert their masculinity, the study also draws attention to the fact that not all the boys share a common interest in football. Some boys prefer skipping to football. The research evidence pointing to the different ways in which boys construct their masculinities through football and through skipping is an interesting finding of this study which illustrates the poststructuralist feminist theory and the understanding of masculinities and femininities as complex and dynamic identities rather than fixed, unitary and essential (MacNaughton, 2000; Davies, 2003; Martin, 2011). Therefore, rather than regarding ‘charmer boys’ as exemplifying a ‘normative’ way of being a boy and boys who skip as ‘deviants’ I argue for the view that both footballing and skipping boys are ‘normal’ boys who ‘do’ masculinity in different ways through play. Both these practices of masculinity through play should be validated and supported rather than being evaluated against each other as do the ‘charmer boys’ in the ways they speak about boys at skipping.

### **Implications of the research findings for future practices**

The key theme that permeates this study points to the significance of gender in shaping the behaviours of children during play. Furthermore, the analysis of the children’s constructions of gender identities through play indicates that for the gendered self to be rendered ‘normative’ it has to be (hetero)sexualised. Below I outline the implications of these findings for the ways in which early years teachers could work with children to explore ways of promoting play that cut across the norm of gender polarisation. I also highlight how the child-centred approach I adopted in this study could contribute to the teaching of Life Orientation at Sun Shine in ways that explore and address children’s own understanding and experiences of gender and sexuality.

### **Addressing gender polarity in children’s play**

Gender polarisation in children’s play is problematic for a number of reasons. For example, it limits possibilities for both boys and girls with regard to play. Since the early years teachers argue that children learn through play, gender-differentiated play means that the learning opportunities associated with different forms of play are not equally distributed between boys and girls. In other words, if the construction area is constructed as for boys and the fantasy area as for girls, this polarity of gender creates problems in the sense that boys ‘miss out’ on the learning opportunities associated with the fantasy area of play. Likewise, girls ‘miss out’ on the learning opportunities associated with play in the construction area. Therefore, while teachers at Sun Shine argue that the aim of education is to develop potential for every child without any form of discrimination, gender

polarisation in the play acts against the equality of opportunity espoused by the teachers. It is for these reasons that I provide recommendations for consideration by the teachers at Sun Shine in an effort to address gender polarity in children's play.

*'Free-choice play' teacher intervention*

Gender in children's play is generally taken for granted and presented as if it reflects innate differences between boys and girls among the teachers at Sun Shine. However, when I discussed my critical view of gender in children's play with the teachers, highlighting how this limits possibilities for both boys and girls, they mainly invoked sex role socialisation approaches when they spoke about the ways they could address gender polarity in the play. They mentioned, for instance, that in order to address gender in children's play they needed to simply make some changes with regard to how they structure the play areas from being based on gender stereotypes in toy provision to being gender neutral and inclusive. They argued that including the so-called boys' role-play materials such as *Spiderman*, *Superman* or *Ben Ten* figurines in the fantasy area in addition to the baby dolls and kitchen play items would attract boys to the fantasy area and thereby achieve more gender mixing during play in the classroom.

However, engaging with gender from a poststructuralist feminist perspective (MacNaughton, 2000), I argue that simply changing the type and nature of toys such as adding fluffy toys and baby dolls to the construction area or adding toy vehicles and superhero toys to the fantasy area cannot guarantee gender-mixed play. What I find problematic about this sex role socialisation approach to addressing gender in children's play is that it fails to engage with the children as active agents in the gendering of their identities. That is, the approach does not seek to investigate children's engagement with and the kinds of investment they make in playing in the gendered ways that they do. In her study on the relationship between weapon play and violent behaviour among children in the UK, Holland (2003) found that banning toy guns on the grounds that they encourage boys' aggression and violent behaviours towards girls and among boys actually encouraged boys to assert themselves more aggressively in relation to girls. When presented with dolls, instead of toy guns, boys threw the dolls away or tore them apart (Holland, 2003). This behaviour suggests that children invest emotionally in the gendered play choices they make and constantly aim to present and position themselves 'correctly' within the shared discourses of what signifies masculinity and femininity in their cultural contexts. To address gender in children's play more effectively, teachers at Sun Shine should aim to work with the children and explore their understandings and investment in the gendered forms of play they engage in. I elaborate on this below.

The way in which the early years teachers at Sun Shine engage with play as a child-centred pedagogy prevents them from recognising and alleviating the practices of gender-based exclusion which form part of children's play. The popular discourse of play, which states that children learn independently and naturally through 'free play', encourages the teachers at Sun Shine to be detached from the children's play. They are therefore unable to closely observe how assumptions about gender shape and constrain the play choices children make. I therefore suggest that teachers adopt a participatory approach to play in order to engage children on their gendered play behaviours and explore ways in which to address the gender polarity in the play in ways that take into account the meanings that children have for the gendered roles they enact during play. This participatory approach to play should incorporate the increased visibility of teachers in children's play in which they act both as direct observers of play interactions and initiators of gender-focused conversations with the children. Teachers who closely observe children's play could play a vital role in curbing the gender-based discriminatory practices observed during the study, thereby allowing children who want to cross gender borders to do so without any difficulty, given the immediate support of a teacher.

Teachers' interventions in children's play should ideally see them acting as mediators which could involve providing support to gender 'transgressions', while reprimanding all forms of negative reactions such as 'transgressions'. Negativity and criticism of gender 'transgressions' among pupils should be openly reprimanded by teachers. This would communicate a clear message of respect and tolerance with regard to the free choice of every child, not only to a particular child or a group who expressed negativity. Teachers should encourage all children to report to them if they witness or experience gender-based discrimination for using certain types of toys or playing in certain spaces, and reported cases should be taken seriously.

However, while discriminatory practices and forms of abuse levelled at boys and girls who 'transgress' gender should be reprimanded at all times, this should take into consideration the kinds of emotional investment children make in their gendered play choices and the particular meanings they attach to these. In condemning forms of gender exclusion and homophobic policing of gender boundaries among children during play, teachers need to be sensitive to the fact that the discriminatory practices some children display have their roots and sources and it is these that need primary deconstruction work. The gendered behaviours which children express during play are partly informed by polarised ways of thinking about gender which they learn long before they started school. To explore and understand how children think about themselves as gendered beings and how this informs their gendered play practices, I encourage teachers at Sun Shine to take time

to explore with the children how they think and feel about the gender polarised ways in which they organise during play. They could explore whether the children think gender polarity is absolutely necessary and explore the patterns of reasoning of those who argue for and against gender-differentiated play. What concerns and fears make children feel the need to constantly play in gender polarised ways? What are the children's likes and dislikes in relation to what and how they play as boys and girls in the setting?

### *Teachers as gender-neutral role models*

In order to encourage children to play beyond gender borders, I also suggest that teachers model gender-neutral play behaviours for the children. For example, this could include teachers enacting gender 'transgression' roles and positions such as the female teachers playing football among themselves or with the boys at school. Female teachers playing football, which is constructed as for boys in the school, could allow girls to recognise and appreciate that crossing gender boundaries through play is not impossible. At the same time, this could encourage boys to reconsider their view of football as a game that is exclusively 'masculine'. By role modelling non-stereotypical gender roles and positions in this way, teachers would encourage gender-free play among pupils, in effect dismantling gender boundaries.

As Salisbury and Jackson (1996) have argued, encouraging boys to be less invested in constructing and positioning themselves as stereotypical opposites of girls should involve support and affirmation for boys who show interest in forms of play normally constructed as for girls, as well as providing such boys with role models of men subverting stereotypically feminine roles. However, the absence of males among the teaching staff at Sun Shine presents a challenge. Although female teachers playing football could work towards deconstructing football as a symbolic domain of masculinity, the absence of male teachers at Sun Shine implies that the perceived feminine forms of play such as skipping and caring roles that girls enact in the fantasy play area would be difficult to challenge. In the absence of male teachers to role model gender-neutral play behaviours it would remain difficult for boys to safely express their interest in forms of play constructed as feminine without risking forms of victimisation such as being called 'gay'.

Given that the feminisation of the teaching staff at Sun Shine poses problems in relation to this strategy to address gender polarity in children's play, I suggest that the school's stakeholders consider attracting male applicants for future vacancies. This would not only promote gender diversity among the teaching staff that corresponds with the learner profile, but would make a difference in strategies to address gender polarity in play. I also encourage the teachers to view boys

and girls in terms of similarity and commonality beyond the common discourse of difference which reinforces gender polarity in play. It would also be useful for the early years teachers to constantly reflect on how their own conceptions or biases about gender may affect how they differently engage with and treat boys and girls in their everyday practices at school.

#### *Teacher education programmes to address gender issues*

Another way in which the polarity of gender in children's play could be addressed is by incorporating gender in the curriculum of teachers in training. This could be achieved by the Department of Higher Education and Training introducing a policy that requires all foundation phase teacher education institutions throughout South Africa to include a compulsory module on gender. Incorporating gender in early years teacher education programmes could help to sensitise teachers in training to the workings of gender in childhood, but should also focus on providing insight into the kinds of problems that gender polarised play behaviours produce among children. The module on gender should include both theoretical and practical training material which promotes an understanding of gender from a critical social constructionist perspective, while at the same time empowering teachers in training with practical knowledge on how to help children play beyond the restrictive boundaries of gender. Training on gender issues is equally important for working teachers. The Department of Basic Education could introduce compulsory gender-focused workshops and seminars to sensitise working teachers to the problems and issues embedded in children's gender polarised play behaviours while empowering them to react in ways that promote gender-free play among pupils.

However, the teacher training programmes on gender issues as a possible intervention strategy towards addressing the problem of gender polarisation among children at Sun Shine does not stand without challenges and limitations. Even if the teachers attend the training, their investment in the discourse of gender polarity may make it difficult for them to convey messages of tolerance of individual differences among children in their classroom practices. For the teachers, supporting individual differences among children with regard to gender and play could be as challenging as sex education in primary schools. Indeed, Adonis and Baxen (2009) observed that many Life Orientation teachers in different primary schools in South Africa do not always adhere to the syllabus in terms of discussing topics of sexual health, sexuality and HIV/AIDS. Adonis and Baxen (2009) demonstrate that teachers often omit many curriculum topics which involve sexual content which they perceived as too sensitive and inappropriate for children in the primary years. Teachers' personal values, beliefs and assumptions about sexuality as an exclusive domain of adults make them feel uncomfortable to discuss matters of sexuality with primary school children (Adonis &

Baxen, 2009). Furthermore, expectations of the broader community, religious beliefs and cultural values which associate childhood with sexual innocence influenced the primary school teachers' decision of ignoring sexual matters in their Life Orientation classrooms (Adonis & Baxen, 2009). Adonis and Baxen (2009) found that teachers who did discuss matters of sexuality as expected by the official Life Orientation curriculum, often did so without using explicit sexual terminology. The manner in which the personal and cultural background of a teacher influences how he/she conducts his/her classroom raises important implications for the intervention strategy of teacher training programmes aimed at encouraging gender sensitivity at Sun Shine Primary. Thus, while the teachers may attend the proposed training programmes on gender/sexual issues in childhood, this may not guarantee that they will operationalise the knowledge in their respective classrooms. The taboo of talking about sex with primary school age children and the popular assumption that talking to children about sex will encourage them to be sexually active at a young age highlights possible limitations of teacher training programmes as a strategy aimed at encouraging sensitivity with regard to gender/sexual identity construction among children at Sun Shine.

*Involving parents in discussions about gender dynamics in children's play*

Although my research is based in the schooling setting, the significant role played by parents in the gendering of children's identities through play emerged strongly in the conversations with children in the study. For example, one of the girls had to negotiate her play interests through playing with boys at school and not at home because her mother disapproved of her playing with boys. She mentioned that: 'my mum says boys are rough and I must not play with them because they will hurt me and I'll come home with bruises all over my body. At home I don't play skipping rope with boys because my mum will hit me with a stick! But when I'm here at school I do skip with boys because my mum is not around and she can't see me skipping with boys.' This extract is a powerful example of how parents contribute to the gendering and policing of children's identities through play. Therefore, in their efforts to address gender polarity in children's play, the teachers at Sun Shine need to involve parents and explore the concerns they may have regarding play behaviours and interests that may seem to be transgressing traditional ways of being masculine or feminine among their children. Parents should be invited to offer suggestions and comments about any policies and practices that the school intends implementing to address gendered play among the pupils. Promoting gender equitable play is important because it would broaden the children's play possibilities in ways that encourage children to explore and develop a wide variety of interests and skills which transcend the borders of gender. In order for this to happen, teachers cannot work alone; they need to form good partnerships with parents. Such partnerships should be founded on the common interest of broadening rather than narrowing down play possibilities for both boys and

girls attending Sun Shine Primary. To address the traditionally gendered play behaviours among children at Sun Shine teachers need to involve parents in their gender equity plans and practices. Consultation with parents is especially important because not all parents would respond positively to their children being encouraged to engage in non-traditional ways of being a boy or girl through play. For example, MacNaughton (2000) highlights that some parents in her research on gender in childhood in Australia reported feeling unhappy about ‘non-sexist’ teachers’ encouragement of children who did not behave in gender stereotypical ways during play. She shows that some parents of young boys who were seen as behaving differently from other boys in their choice of toys raised concerns about teachers supporting their sons’ non-traditional ways of being masculine through play. The implicit concern of these parents was that the teachers were channelling them to becoming gay. MacNaughton (2000:186) documents how distressing this was for some parents who challenged the non-sexist teachers’ practices by asking them to reconsider their supportive reactions to boys who transgressed ‘normative’ ways of being boys through play. In light of such reactions from parents, in involving parents in discussions about addressing gender in children’s play the teachers would likely face a difficult challenge of how to practice ‘non-sexism’ in their classrooms while some parents may oppose such practice.

### **Addressing the difficulty of boys and girls becoming friends**

The finding on the difficulty of developing and sustaining boy-girl friendships is problematic as this encourages boys and girls to construct themselves as fundamentally different from each other in ways which reproduce the discourse of gender polarity. For this reason, I suggest that topics which explore possibilities for boys and girls to mix and relate as friends beyond the stereotype of same-sex friendships should form an important part of the Life Orientation syllabus at the school. Life Orientation programmes should aim to challenge the segregation between boys and girls during play and encourage boys and girls to become less invested in defining themselves as different and opposites. In focusing on exploring the possibilities of friendships between boys and girls, Life Orientation education should aim to encourage children to explore and consider the possibilities of relating closely to schoolmates of the opposite sex as friends, not just as girlfriends or boyfriends as they currently tend to do. However, such education should also address the bullying practices that manifests through the labels of gay/tomboy that victimise and problematise boys and girls who develop and sustain friendships with people of the opposite sex. Exploring ways of encouraging boy-girl friendships is important because it would address the popular construction of boys and girls as different and oppositional identities who relate to each other only on the grounds of sexuality.

## **Addressing gender-based violence and ‘homophobic’ bullying among the children**

The gendering and policing of identities through play among children in the research took many different forms. Here I reflect on the two most common ones. Firstly, I reflect on the violent conflicts between boys and girls which manifest in the contestation of the playground space. Secondly, I reflect on how the boys’ symbolic construction of football as a ‘masculine’ game involved homophobic bullying directed towards boys produced as ‘gay’ because they dislike football and prefer playing with girls, often at skipping. I begin with the gendered violence as it manifests on the playground. The physical violence between boys and girls on the playground saw girls emerging as victims of the violence perpetrated by boys in their quest to dominate the playground space. For example, one of the boys spoke to me about how they (him and his friends) not only excluded girls from football by constructing them as poor in the game, but about how they were unhappy to share the playground with girls and their skipping activities. He mentioned that they try to move the girls from the playground by adopting violent behaviours towards them: ‘girls like to disturb us with their skipping ropes when we play football in the yard. And that’s why we hit them with the ball because we want them to cry and go away. We hit them with the ball ... and then they leave’. This compromises girls’ play interests and possibilities during break at school. One of the ways in which the teachers could address this form of gender-based violence among children is by being visible on the playground. They should not direct what games boys and girls should or should not play. Rather, they should supervise children’s directed forms of play and intervene as mediators when conflicts and violence erupt. The surveillance effect of teacher visibility on the playground could help to prevent the gendered violence in the children’s play from starting in the first place. Another way teachers could address violence among their pupils is to warn them that violence, in whatever form, is unacceptable and is not allowed at the school. It would also be useful for teachers to encourage children to always report any violence they experience or witness. However, it is important to highlight that reporting abuse to teachers can be very tricky, especially when the reporting is done by a boy who complains about other boys’ forms of abuse to him. In conversations with some of the boys who were ridiculed as gay for playing games constructed as for girls, it seems that reporting this form of abuse encouraged further denigration of these boys.

For example, when I asked one of the boys constructed as gay about how this makes him feel his response indicated distress: ‘I feel bad. I feel sad and I go and tell Miss’. Boys who express dislike for football while keeping company with girls as friends and playmates, especially in games seen as for girls risked being constructed as gay in derogatory ways by their male peers. Being called gay was a negative experience that resulted in these boys reporting the abuse to the teachers. However, this did not always deter the bullies. As one boy pointed out, ‘I report them to Miss when they call



me gay, but I feel unhappy when they do not stop calling me gay'. While reporting to teachers is advised to children who experience forms of abuse at the hands of their peers at school, boys who experience homophobic bullying through the label of gay often invite further bullying when they report. Bullies present this as a sign of them not being 'properly' masculine. In reporting the bullying, the victims are produced by the bullies as weaklings who rely on teachers for help rather than facing the social challenge themselves. The question of how to deal with reports of homophobic bullying in ways which protect the victims from further victimisation raises important challenges and possibilities for members of staff at Sun Shine Primary.

### **Addressing children as active agents in research and in Life Orientation programmes**

Addressing the children as active agents in this study involved establishing friendly and democratic relationships with them; this encouraged the children to 'open up' in conversations about themselves and their social constructions of gendered/sexual identities through play. I encourage future researchers working in the area of childhood social identities to follow the kind of child-centred approach I adopted in this study and to democratise the relationships they establish with the children with whom they are researching. This would help to produce data that provides children's own subjective accounts of aspects of childhood. Based on the kind of data discussed in this study which speaks to the ways in which sexuality features in children's cultural worlds, I argue that one possible explanation for the dearth of research into primary school children's constructions of gendered/sexual identities in South Africa, as may be the case in other parts of the world, is the inability or failure of researchers to deconstruct their taken for granted positions of power in their interactions with children in research.

Furthermore, I argue that the process of the research, and in particular, the kinds of friendly and democratic relationships I established with the children where I tried to engage with them as experts and aimed to learn from them may provide models of good pedagogic practices in Life Orientation classes. The democratic and friendly relationships I established with children in the study encouraged them to talk openly about sexual aspects of their lives, whether imagined or real, which they keep secret from their teachers. These young boys and girls felt able to talk about themselves in sexualised subject positions as 'boyfriends', 'girlfriends', 'charmer boys' and 'cream girls' in ways they had never done before with another adult whether in or outside the school. They requested that I not tell their teachers about the 'dating' cultures and practices they discussed with me during research encounters. In justifying this request, the children raised concerns about getting into 'trouble' with the teachers if they were to learn about their underground cultures of sexuality at

school. When I asked the children why they could talk to me, as an adult, about their constructions of sexuality and would not want their teachers (other adults) to know about these, they said that they trusted me because I was not one of their teachers who would punish them by suspending them from school as has happened to pupils caught or suspected to be ‘dating’. I argue that good pedagogic practices are the opposite of this antagonistic relationship between pupils and teachers at Sun Shine. In my view, good pedagogic practices encourage children to feel free to talk openly with their teachers about the different aspects of their lives, including subjects that touch on sexuality. However, for these kinds of conversations to happen between children and teachers at the school, teachers need to deconstruct their positions of power over children.

The way I established child-centred relationships with children in the study may provide a good model for teachers to learn from and apply in their efforts to break down the power differential that currently exists between them and their pupils. In particular, I suggest that Life Orientation teachers at the school should emulate the friendly and democratic relationships I established with the children in their interactions with their pupils, especially when discussing sexual health in the context of HIV/AIDS. The importance of Life Orientation teachers being friendly rather than authoritative in their engagement with children is that this would encourage a more learner-centred approach to teaching sexual health and HIV/AIDS: a less didactic approach which seeks to address specific concerns, questions, myths and experiences that different children might have about HIV/AIDS more specifically and about growing up as sexual beings more broadly. However, establishing friendly and democratic relations with the children is not without challenges especially in light of my experience of children becoming riotous and unruly in class when I was asked to supervise them in the absence of their teacher. The question of how teachers can be more friendly in their engagement with children while ensuring that learning takes place without children undermining and not taking the instructions given by teachers seriously presents important challenges and possibilities for the pedagogic implications of democratised power relations between teachers and pupils.

## **Summary**

In conducting this ethnographic study, my aim was to explore how young children construct their gender identities through play at a South African primary school. In order to learn from the children about gender I needed to integrate myself into the children’s playground cultures and democratise the relations I established with them. As part of this process, I learnt how easy and comfortable it felt for me to befriend and interact with boys in research about children. The kinds of boy-centric relations and identifications I forged during the course of this study highlight how easy it is even for

researchers of gender to fall into the trap of reproducing the fictitious boundary of masculinity and femininity by unconsciously interacting with people that we think are similar to us in terms of gender in the setting. The analysis of the empirical data from the participatory research with the children enlightens us about the ways in which boys and girls differentiate in terms of the toys they play with and the games they engage in. Notably, this differentiation illuminates the highly gender segregated construction and fantasy play areas in class provided by the teachers for 'free play' sessions, sessions which are not at all 'free' if we associate 'free', as do the teachers, with children's natural inclinations. I found that different forms of gender policing are applied to boys and girls who 'transgress' gender boundaries during the supposedly 'free play' sessions. I also found that there are differences between boys and girls in terms of the kinds of games they play and who they associate with during break. I focussed, in particular, on popular boys, called 'charmners', who play football and emphasise their difference from the boys who skip like the girls and who become effeminised. The 'charmners' present themselves as macho males partly through their performative repertoires which include football. The charmer boys' difference from girls is not only emphasised through football, with the 'cream girls' watching them play, but the relationship between the 'charmer boys' and 'cream girls' is sexual. This sexualisation involves the 'charmer boys' self-consciously performing for the attention of 'cream girls'. On the playground, the 'cream girls' participate not only as members of the audience but as those the boys are trying to charm and as judges and evaluators of the boys' performance. These kinds of gendered playground identifications and interactions yield two important insights in relation to sexuality and gender power relations among the children. Firstly, the children are sexual beings and their social constructions of sexuality are mediated and imbricated in the ways they construct their gender identities through their playground practices. Secondly, gender articulates in complex and multi-dimensional ways with power in the young children's playground cultures.

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Appendix A: KZNDoE Research approval letter



**kzn education**

Department:  
Education  
KWAZULU-NATAL

Enquiries: Sibusiso Alwar

Tel: 033 341 8610

Ref.:2/4/8/174

Mr. Emmanuel Mayeza

Dear Mr. Mayeza

**PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS**

Your application to conduct research entitled: **Playing and Performing Gender in Childhood: Investigating Childhood Play in Gender Identity Construction among South African Boys and Girls From Different Racial and Socio-Economic Backgrounds**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The Period of investigation is limited to the period from 01 April 2012 to 30 April 2014.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Mr. Alwar at the contact numbers below.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report / dissertation / thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Director-Resources Planning, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to the following Schools and Institutions:  
10.1  
10.2

**Nkhesinathi S.P. Sishi, PhD**  
Head of Department: Education

25/04/2012  
Date

...dedicated to service and performance  
beyond the call of duty.

**KWAZULU-NATAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

POSTAL: Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200, KwaZulu-Natal, Republic of South Africa

PHYSICAL: Office G 25, 188 Pietermaritz Street, Metropolitan Building, Pietermaritzburg 3201

TEL: Tel: +27 33 341 8610 | Fax: +27 33 3341 8612 | E-mail: [sibusiso.alwar@kzndoe.gov.za](mailto:sibusiso.alwar@kzndoe.gov.za) |  
Web: [www.kzndoe.gov.za](http://www.kzndoe.gov.za)

## Appendix B: Consent form for the school principal



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### **PRINCIPAL'S PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

---

#### **1. PROPOSED TITLE OF THE STUDY**

Playing gender in childhood: investigating children's constructions of gender identities through play in a primary school in Durban

#### **2. AIM OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this ethnographic study with children at play is to explore how the young children construct gender identities through their play at school.

#### **3. PROCEDURES**

The proposed study aims to involve both children and teachers in the school as participants. The children and teachers who will be willing to participate in the study will be expected to do the following:

Children will be expected to participate in semi-structured and participatory research activities in which they will be creating drawings about themselves and how they play and telling stories about these. I shall use these drawings and stories as means of encouraging the children to critically reflect upon themselves as particular kinds of boys and girls and the kinds of games they engage and disengage and why. Also, I shall conduct unstructured observations with children at play, both in the yard during break and in class during playtime. In conducting these research activities, my aim will be to explore what different children in the school see as play, how they behave during play and what these behaviours say about them and their perceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Following observations and interactions with the children, I shall interview the teachers in order to explore how they construct play and what this says about them and their perceptions of gender among the children they teach.

#### **4. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this study is voluntary. The school can choose whether to be in this study or not. If the school chooses to be in this study, learners and teachers may still choose whether or not they participate in the study. And, if they choose to participate by signing consent and assent forms, they can still withdraw from the research at any time without consequences of any kind.

## 5. CONFIDENTIALITY

Any form of information that is obtained through the research in the school will be used for research purposes only and will be treated in a confidential manner at all times. Identities of individual children and teachers in the study, as well as the identity of the school itself, will be protected through the use of pseudonyms in any form of dissemination of the research results.

## 6. IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCHERS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact

Researcher: Emmanuel Mayeza  
Email: [17401410@sun.ac.za](mailto:17401410@sun.ac.za)  
Phone: xxxxxxxxxxx

Research Supervisor: Rob Pattman  
Email: [rpattman@sun.ac.za](mailto:rpattman@sun.ac.za)  
Phone: xxxxxxxxxxx

## 7. PARENTAL CONSENT

Parents and legal guardians of learners who will be in the study will be required to sign consent forms giving permission for their children to be in the study. No learner will be considered as a participant in this study unless consent of his/her parent/legal guardian is received by the researcher. Data that may be obtained through open-ended observations during play in the yard or in class without prior parental consent will not be used in the study.

**SIGNATURE OF X PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL**

I hereby consent that Emmanuel Mayeza may conduct his study in our school.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of the School Principal**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of the School Principal**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**



Appendix C: Consent form for teachers in the study



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**TEACHERS' CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH**

---

**1. TITLE OF THE STUDY**

Playing gender in childhood: investigating children's constructions of gender identities through play in a primary school in Durban

**2. AIM OF THE STUDY**

The aim of the study is to explore how the young children experience and construct being 'boys' and being 'girls' through play.

**3. PROCEDURES**

As a teacher in the participating school, you are kindly asked to participate in research interviews which will be focusing on your views with regard to play and gender among children in the school.

**4. POTENTIAL RISKS, DISCOMFORTS OR INCONVENIENCES**

Potential inconveniences anticipated are those that relate to the research conflicting with teaching time. To avoid these inconveniences, the research interviews will only be conducted outside teaching hours, such as during free periods and after the school day in the afternoon at school.

**5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

Participation in the study is voluntary, and the participants should not expect to receive payments of any kind for their participation.

**6. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. In the dissemination of the study, your identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym instead of your real name.

## 7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you choose to be in this study by signing at the bottom of this form, you may still withdraw your consent at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

## 8. IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCHER(S)

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact

Researcher: Emmanuel Mayeza

Email: [17401410@sun.ac.za](mailto:17401410@sun.ac.za)

Phone: xxxxxxxxxxx

Supervisor: Prof Rob Pattman

Email: [rpattman@sun.ac.za](mailto:rpattman@sun.ac.za)

Phone: xxxxxxxxxxx

<b>SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT</b>
--

The information above was described to me by Emmanuel Mayeza in English and I am in command of this language. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

Appendix D: Consent form for parents of children in the study



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**PARENTS' CONSENT TO CHILD PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH**

---

**1. TITLE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY:**

Playing gender in childhood: investigating children's constructions of gender identities through play in a primary school in Durban

**2. AIM OF THE STUDY**

The aim of this ethnographic study with children at play is to explore what different children attending school at X Primary see as play and what they do (and do not do) during play and why. The study aims to document what happens in the playground during break and what happens in class during playtime. In other words, the focus of this study is on children's play, both in class and outside, and documents the different children's patterns of behaviour and the meanings they attach to these as sources of social identifications and relations among themselves at school.

**3. PROCEDURES**

The research procedure will involve observations with children as they play, both in class during playtime and outside in the school yard. The observations of play will involve some brief and spontaneous conversations with the children which will seek to explore meanings which the different children give to the kinds of roles, activities and games they engage when they play. In addition to observations, children may be asked to participate in a graphic-narrative research exercise in which they will be drawing pictures about themselves and how they play and telling stories about their drawings. The drawings and the stories that will emanate from this exercise will form part of the research data. However, this research exercise shall also be used as a means of encouraging self-reflexive discussions with the children which will focus on play and how the children use and invoke play in the ways they define and speak about themselves as different kinds of boys and girls. The observations and discussions with the children will be recorded using a digital voice and video recorder, and these recordings will be transcribed. The data will be treated in a confidential manner and will be used only for the research purposes.

#### 4. CONFIDENTIALITY

In the dissemination of the research results, children's identities will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. Furthermore, a pseudonym will be created in order to protect the identity of their school.

#### 5. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

As a parent or legal guardian, you can choose whether or not your child participates in this study. If you consent that your child participates in this study, he or she will still have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences of any kind. Your child may also refuse to answer any questions he or she does not want to answer and still remain in the study. If, by any possible chance, it happens that your child participates in any of the research activities I will be conducting in the school without your prior consent, data involving your child will be omitted in the analysis of the findings of this study.

#### 6. IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCHERS

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, please feel free to contact

Researcher: Emmanuel Mayeza  
Email: [17401410@sun.ac.za](mailto:17401410@sun.ac.za)  
Phone: xxxxxxxxxxx

Supervisor: Prof Rob Pattman  
Email: [rpattman@sun.ac.za](mailto:rpattman@sun.ac.za)  
Phone: xxxxxxxxxxx

**SIGNATURE OF PARENT/LEGAL GUARDIAN**

I hereby consent that \_\_\_\_\_ [Name of the Child] may participate in this research.

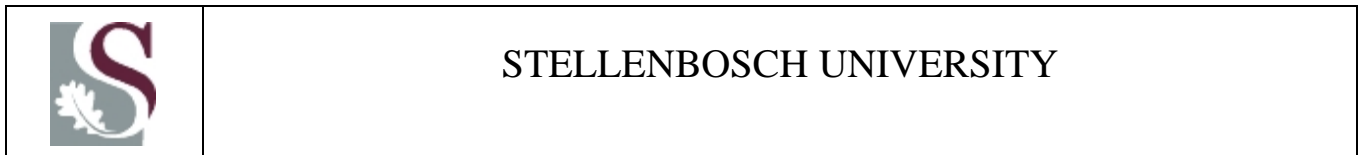
\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Parent/Guardian**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Parent/Guardian**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Contact phone number: Parent/Guardian**

Appendix E: Assent form for children in the study



**CHILD-PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORM**



**TITLE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY:**

Playing gender in childhood: investigating children's constructions of gender identities through play in a primary school in Durban

**WHAT IS RESEARCH?**

Research is something we do to find new knowledge about the way things (and people) work. For example, we conduct research to find out more about diseases. Research can also help us to find better ways of helping, or treating children who are sick.

**WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ALL ABOUT?**

The aim of this research is to find out what are the different kinds of games that boys and girls like and play or dislike and do not play in this primary school. This research aims to find out how and why do different children in this school choose to play in the ways they do, in class and outside.

**WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?**

Your school was selected for this study because it is special. So, you were chosen to participate in this study because you are a learner in this school. I am really interested to know about what games you play, what you like about them, who do you play with and why.

**WHO IS DOING THIS RESEARCH?**

My name is Emmanuel Mayeza, and I am the researcher in this study. I do this research as part of the PhD course I am registered for at the University of Stellenbosch.

### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IN THIS STUDY?**

I will watch you when you play in the yard during break and in class during playtime. I will chat to you, sometimes with other children and sometimes on your own, about what it is like being a boy or a girl at your school. I would ask you about your interests, your friends and what games you play and what toys you play with. Also, I might ask you to do some drawings about play and then talk about them.

### **WILL I EXPERIENCE PAIN OR GET SICK?**

I do not think so as all I will be doing is mixing with you and chatting with you and looking at the kinds of games you and other boys and girls play. But if you feel unwell at all when I am with you, please tell me about it or you could tell your teacher or parents.

### **CAN ANYTHING GOOD HAPPEN TO ME?**

I hope you will enjoy taking part in the research and talking about yourself and play. The information about your play activities and behaviours is important to me, however, actual benefits to you as a participant in this research are not known.

### **WILL ANYONE KNOW I AM IN THE STUDY?**

No one will know that you are in the study except for the other boys and girls who are taking part. I hope to write a book about the research and when I write about you I will give you a pretend name so no one will know it is you.

### **WHO CAN I TALK TO ABOUT THIS STUDY?**

If you want to know more about this study you should talk to me:

Name: Emmanuel Mayeza  
Email: 17401410@sun.ac.za  
Phone: xxxxxxxxxxx

Or my research supervisor  
Name: Rob Pattman  
Email: rpattman@sun.ac.za  
Phone: xxxxxxxxxxx

### **WHAT IF I DO NOT WANT TO DO THIS?**

If you do not want to do this; just say NO. You can refuse to take part in this study, even if your parents have said it is OK. Also, you can stop being in the study at any time without worrying about getting in trouble.

**ASSENT**

Please answer the following questions by ticking the box which represents your answer:

Do you understand this research study and are you willing to take part in it?

 YES NO

Has the researcher answered all your questions?

 YES NO

Do you understand that you can pull out of the study at any time?

 YES NO

Please sign and write the date below to indicate that you want to be in this study:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix F: Research Ethics Committee approval letter



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jou kennisvennoot • your knowledge partner

**Approval Notice**  
**Response to Modifications- (New Application)**

03-Oct-2012  
MAYEZA, Emmanuel Simo

**Protocol #:** HS844/2012

**Title:** Playing and performing gender in childhood: investigating childhood play in gender identity construction among South African boys and girls from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

Dear Mr Emmanuel MAYEZA,

The **Response to Modifications - (New Application)** received on 07-Sep-2012, was reviewed by members of **Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities)** via Expedited review procedures on 26-Sep-2012 and was approved.  
Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

Protocol Approval Period: 26-Sep-2012 - 25-Sep-2013

**Standard provisions**

1. The researcher will remain within the procedures and protocols indicated in the proposal, particularly in terms of any undertakings made in terms of the confidentiality of the information gathered.
2. The research will again be submitted for ethical clearance if there is any substantial departure from the existing proposal.
3. The researcher will remain within the parameters of any applicable national legislation, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of research.
4. The researcher will consider and implement the foregoing suggestions to lower the ethical risk associated with the research.

You may commence with your research with strict adherence to the abovementioned provisions and stipulations.

Please remember to use your **protocol number (HS844/2012)** on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your research protocol.

Please note that the REC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

**After Ethical Review:**

Please note that a progress report should be submitted to the Committee before the approval period has expired if a continuation is required. The Committee will then consider the continuation of the project for a further year (if necessary). Annually a number of projects may be selected randomly for an external audit.

National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) number REC-050411-032.

This committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research, established by the Declaration of Helsinki, the South African Medical Research Council Guidelines as well as the Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles Structures and Processes 2004 (Department of Health).

**Provincial and City of Cape Town Approval**

Please note that for research at a primary or secondary healthcare facility permission must be obtained from the relevant authorities (Western Cape Department of Health and/or City Health) to conduct the research as stated in the protocol. Contact persons are Ms Claudette Abrahams at Western Cape Department of Health ([healthres@pgwc.gov.za](mailto:healthres@pgwc.gov.za) Tel: +27 21 483 9907) and Dr Helene Visser at City Health ([Helene.Visser@capetown.gov.za](mailto:Helene.Visser@capetown.gov.za) Tel: +27 21 400 3981). Research that will be conducted at any tertiary academic institution requires approval from the relevant parties. For approvals from the Western Cape Education Department, contact Dr AT Wyngaard ([awyngaard@pgwc.gov.za](mailto:awyngaard@pgwc.gov.za), Tel: 0214769272, Fax: 0865902282, <http://wced.wcape.gov.za>).

Institutional permission from academic institutions for students, staff & alumni. This institutional permission should be obtained before submitting an application for ethics clearance to the REC.

Please note that informed consent from participants can only be obtained after ethics approval has been granted. It is your responsibility as researcher to keep signed informed consent forms for inspection for the duration of the research.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research.

If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the REC office at 0218089003.