'This is a competition': The relationship between examination pressure and gender violence in primary schools in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between gender violence in schools and teaching and learning processes in two case study primary schools in Kirinyaga County, Kenya. For seven months in 2015, the following qualitative methods were used: participant observation, individual teacher interviews, individual art-based student interviews and member-check interviews with teachers and students. Findings indicate that examination pressure can directly and indirectly perpetuate gender violence in schools by using corporal punishment and public humiliation as motivational tools and by diverting resources from efforts to enhance safety and equality to ever more time for exam preparation.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, substantial evidence has illustrated the widespread prevalence of gender violence in schools (GVS) [also known as school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV)] in a variety of country and cultural contexts (Parkes et al., 2016). This research has been most widespread across Sub-Saharan Africa and North America (Leach, 2015). Increasingly, research is being conducted on this subject in other areas such as the Asia-Pacific region (UNESCO, 2014). The emerging literature from Sub-Saharan Africa shows that girls and boys in primary and secondary school are often subject to sexual violence and harassment, corporal punishment, and physical and psychological victimization from their teachers and their peers. These forms of GVS are usually accompanied by a reinforcement of traditional gender expectations with the projection of sex-specific roles for girls and boys within the overt and hidden curriculum (Dunne et al., 2006). The term 'gender violence' is defined as "physical, verbal, psychological and emotional as well as sexual violence; it also includes the *fear* of violence, both *between* females and males and *among* females or *among* males" (Leach & Humphreys, 2007, p. 53, emphasis in original). There is growing recognition of GVS, particularly in Sub-Saharan African, and corresponding efforts to eradicate it. Simultaneously, there is a growing devotion to improving learning outcomes. In spite of the developing understanding of GVS, its relationship to teaching and learning processes has mostly been understood in terms of the negative impact of

violence on learning. This study advances this body of research by exploring the two-way relationship between GVS and teaching and learning processes, the latter defined as the teacher and student practices, behaviour and support systems that facilitate curriculum delivery, knowledge acquisition and the development of academic and social skills.

A multiple qualitative case study was conducted of two primary schools in Kirinyaga County, Kenya. For seven months in 2015, the following qualitative methods were used: participant observation, individual teacher interviews, individual art-based student interviews and member-check interviews with teachers and students. Using a Foucauldian analysis of power and institutions, examination pressure is found to directly and indirectly perpetuate GVS by using corporal punishment and public humiliation of low performers as motivational tools and diverting resources from efforts to enhance school safety and gender equality to ever more time for exam preparation. While GVS is rooted in interconnected structural factors such as poverty, patriarchy, power discrepancies and other forms of discrimination, marginalization and vulnerability, examination pressure emerged as an element enhancing its prevalence in the two case study schools.

2. Literature Review

Gender violence is increasingly recognized as prevalent in schools around the world, leading to a proliferation of projects and tools

seeking to reduce its pervasiveness. While more implicitly gendered than sexual violence, physical and psychological violence reinforce gender regimes in schools by influencing what are acceptable norms of behaviour for boys and girls and determining how teachers and students perform gender roles and exercise power and authority (Humphreys, 2008). Female teachers and male and female students can all be both victims and perpetrators (Leach and Humphreys, 2007; Saito, 2013). While certain forms of gender violence, such as sexual violence, target primarily girls and are most frequently perpetrated by male teachers and students (Bisika et al., 2009), other forms of violence, such as corporal punishment, are more frequently and severely inflicted upon boys by male and female teachers (Dunne, 2007).

Gender norms and expectations are socially constructed and learned. Leach (2003) writes that schools are key sites where boys and girls "are learning about and adopting what they see as conventional male and female behaviour. Boys may learn that the violence they witness in the wider world is acceptable within institutions, even in those where they are supposed to acquire social responsibility, tolerance and respect for others, and girls may learn to accept it" (p. 389). Students may internalize violence as normal or even expected, particularly when they see teachers participating in, condoning or ignoring instances of violence in school. Social expectations also interact with broader structural norms of masculinity and femininity and forms of systemic violence such as poverty, which may constrain students' ability to respond to violence they experience. As learned and practiced behaviours, constructs and expectations of femininity and masculinity are fluid, susceptible to change and fluctuation based on external influences, social trends and individual agency.

The first national survey of violence against female and male children in Kenya concluded violence against children is a serious problem (UNICEF, 2012). Among respondents 13 to 17 years old, 11% of females and 4% of males experienced sexual violence and 49% of females and 48% of males experienced physical violence in the 12 months prior to the survey. Among females and males who reported being physically assaulted by an authority figure prior to age 18, teachers were the most common perpetrators of physical violence by a public authority figure. Friends and classmates comprised 20% of perpetrators of sexual violence reported by females and 35% of sexual violence reported by males (UNICEF, 2012). These findings are supported by other studies of violence in Kenyan schools (Chege, 2006; Parkes et al., 2013; Saito, 2013). GVS is often classified into three types: corporal punishment, sexual violence and harassment, and peer victimization and bullying (Leach et al., 2014; RTI International, 2016). Recent studies in Kenya have documented widespread sexual violence and harassment in schools (Abuya et al., 2012a, 2012b; Ruto, 2009; Wane, 2009). While other forms of GVS in Kenya have not received as much attention, a study of 45 Kenyan schools by Parkes et al. (2013) found that 86% of girls had experienced some form of violence in the past year and that physical and psychological violence were more prominently reported than sexual violence, particularly as forms of punishment.

Globally, there is evidence from multiple contexts that school violence is negatively correlated with students' learning outcomes at both primary and secondary levels, among other detrimental social and developmental implications for affected students. Studies of mathematics performance on Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) data in over 47 different countries found that school violence is consistently associated with poor student achievement (Engel et al., 2009; Rutkowski et al., 2013). Similarly, in Sub-Saharan Africa, literacy and numeracy scores from 2007 South African East Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) data found that schools with higher rates of reported violence were correlated with lower test scores across eight SACMEQ education systems, including Kenya (Saito, 2013). Country-specific studies from Kenya, Ghana, Malawi and Tanzania demonstrate that GVS leads to increased student disengagement, absenteeism and risk of dropout (Ampiah and Adu-Yeboah, 2009; Abuya et al., 2012a, 2012b; Bisika et al., 2009; Dunne et al., 2013;

Kuleana Children's Rights Centre, 1999). It is therefore problematic not only because of its negative effect on students' well-being and development, but also because it hampers academic learning and performance and increases rates of absenteeism and dropout.

2.1. High-stakes testing

'High-stakes testing' is defined as an examination system that has a direct link to rewards or sanctions for students, teachers or institutions (Madaus, 1988). They are used in many parts of the world including Sub-Saharan Africa, where they usually date back to colonial governments (Lewin and Dunne, 2000). In Kenya, examinations were first introduced in 1940 by the colonial government with the Kenya Africa Secondary Examinations for Form 4 students (Sifuna and Otiende, 1994), replaced in 1950 by the Common Entrance Examination at the end of Grade 4 and the Kenya African Preliminary Examination at the end of Grade 8. These exams were used to control the expansion of education, limiting access to higher levels of education, particularly for students from under-resourced African schools in a racially divided education system (Mwiria, 1991; Somerset, 2009). Kenya used the regional East Africa Certificate for Primary Education when it adopted a common educational system with Uganda and Tanzania in 1967 until it introduced the Kenya Certificate for Primary Education (KCPE) with the establishment of the 8-4-4 system in 1985 (Daily Nation, 2012; Wasanga and Somerset, 2013).

A well-designed examination system can monitor learning achievement and education quality, providing performance feedback to stakeholders at various levels of the education system, and inform officials about the strengths and weaknesses of their system (Heyneman and Ransom, 1990). When effectively aligned with curricula, examinations can be equity-enhancing by identifying areas and students requiring further support, instruction and alternative pedagogical approaches (Schoenfeld, 2002; Sutton, 2004). That said, the process can lead to educationally unproductive activities and behaviours (Braun et al., 2006). As test anxiety has been shown to negatively effect achievement, anxiety resulting from pressure for increased examination results can reduce educational outcomes (Ocak and Yamac, 2013). A core component of the Kenyan education system and a determinant of school climate and learning processes is the emphasis on examinations as the main mechanism for measuring learning and determining student advancement from one level of education to the next (Buchmann, 1999; Mwaka et al., 2010). These examinations operate on the basis of comparison and competition that can diminish intrinsic motivation, particularly in students who struggle academically (Perry et al., 2006).

There is an extensive literature on the negative effects of high stakes testing, much of it emerging from the United States in response to the *No Child Left Behind* policy (Von der Embse et al., 2015; Tanner, 2013). The practice is increasingly critically examined in Sub-Saharan Africa as well, where it is found to often have a negative effect on teaching and learning processes. Roberts (2015) analyzed the relationship between the new curricular emphasis on learner-centered pedagogy in Tanzania in two schools with consistently high examination scores in rural Tanzania, demonstrating that teachers consistently used teacher-centered pedagogical approaches in contradiction to the government policy promoting learner-centered pedagogy. Lesson plans revolved around preparing students for national and mock examinations with publicly posted results. Teachers finished covering the curriculum content early so that the entire final month of the school year could be used exclusively to prepare for final exams. Teacher absenteeism and neglect of the learner-centered pedagogical approach were overlooked as the value of examination scores outweighed opposition to the teaching practices.

Depending on the examination, extensive preparation does not necessarily mean teachers are effectively teaching the required material, and can result in scores that falsely represent students' knowledge and ability (Chapman and Snyder, 2000). Goldstein states, "… any rise in