Sexual violence through corporal punishment: Rethinking siloes in school violence prevention using feminist theory and data from Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Children can experience significant violence from teachers and peers in schools. Growing evidence from low-and-middle-income country settings shows the potential for interventions in schools to reduce violence and improve school environments, however these tend to act in siloes and address particular subsets of violence. Further, little is known about how to prevent teacher sexual violence, a particularly sensitive form of violence. We conducted a qualitative semi-ethnographic study in two primary schools in Luwero District, Uganda in 2017. Methods included participant observation, 21 semi-structured interviews with school staff and a range of participatory methods with children aged 8–16 years. The study employed a child protection referral protocol, and 16 children received follow-up healthcare and/or counselling services.

Teacher-perpetrated sexual violence occurred in both schools, and at times through sexualised corporal punishment. The boundaries around teacher sexual violence, corporal punishment and emotional violence, and peer violence, were often blurred as they influenced and shaped each other in practice. Drawing on feminist theory, our analysis reveals how interconnected forms of violence occur within overlapping forms of gender, institutional and generational inequality. There is potential for school interventions to address teacher sexual violence and other forms of violence as interconnected, by moving beyond siloes and addressing gendered, institutional school contexts that give rise to violence.

1. Introduction

More than one billion children experience physical, sexual or emotional violence every year (Hillis et al., 2016). Violence in childhood has serious consequences for children's mental (Devries, Mak, et al., 2014; Norman et al., 2012) and physical health (Clark et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2017; Rasmussen et al., 2019), and has been declared a world health emergency (WHO. World Report on Violence, 2002). Children spend more time in school than anywhere else outside the home (Pinheiro, 2006), yet schools are sites where they experience significant violence. School peers are the second most common perpetrators of violence against children globally (Devries et al., 2018), with 11% of schoolchildren reporting sexualised bullying across 96 countries (UNESCO, 2019). Children also experience violence from adults.

Corporal punishment by teachers is highly prevalent in many settings even where legally banned, with prevalence estimated at over 70% for many countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Heekes et al., 2020). Evidence points to comparatively low rates of sexual violence from teachers, with 2% of primary school children reporting this in Luwero District, Uganda (Devries, Child, et al., 2014). Among adolescents, one study in South-western Uganda found rates of 3% (Goessmann et al., 2020), and in another just under 5% of adolescents reported teacher sexual violence in Luwero District (Parkes et al., 2022). However, qualitative evidence from Uganda (Mirembe & Davies, 2001; Muhanguzi, 2011; Parkes et al., 2022) and other sub-Saharan African settings (Abuya et al., 2012; Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018; Bhana, 2012; Chikwiri & Lemmer, 2014; Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010), suggests it may be being underreported.

There is a growing body of evidence and practice on preventing

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violence in schools outside high income country settings (Mathews et al., 2021; Parkes et al., 2016). Rigorously tested interventions have tended to primarily address particular subsets of violence; for example corporal punishment, dating violence, sexual violence, or bullying. Reviews highlight a distinction between forms of violence widely considered as gendered, such as sexual violence against girls, typically being addressed through work with communities or peers, employing gender transformative or social norms approaches; and violence not typically viewed as gendered, such as corporal punishment and bullying, more often addressed through non-gendered approaches in schools, focusing on interpersonal relationships, communication, and institutional structures (Leach et al., 2014; Parkes et al., 2016). Some exceptions show the potential of including gender focus in these latter approaches (Devries et al., 2017; Karmaliani et al., 2020). While interventions directly addressing gender more often employ feminist theory to support action for gender violence prevention, those not addressing forms of violence typically viewed as gendered, have not on the whole rooted intervention approaches within theories of gender (Parkes et al., 2016). Sexual violence from teachers has been largely missing (Parkes et al., 2022), with sexual violence prevention programmes involving teachers as intervention implementers, not as potential perpetrators or enablers (Kerr-Wilson et al., 2020; Mathews et al., 2021).

But does this focus on separating forms of violence (physical, sexual and emotional violence) and from different perpetrators (teachers and peers) make sense for interventions? Empirical data show that many children experience multiple forms of violence and/or violence from multiple perpetrators, termed polyvictimisation in the public health literature (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Le et al., 2016). Newer evidence is showing the potential for interventions to prevent teacher and peer violence simultaneously (Devries et al., 2015a, 2017; Karmaliani et al., 2020). There is increasing interest in whole-school interventions that work at multiple levels (Chaux et al., 2017; Devries et al., 2015a; Mathews et al., 2021; Nyoni et al., 2022; Shinde et al., 2018), and a UNGEI framework for gendered whole-school approaches (UNGEI, 2018). However, even whole-school interventions are underpinned by conceptualisations of 'violence' as separate acts falling under categroies of physical, sexual and emotional and neglect. There is surprisingly little empirical research on the boundaries around forms of violence seen as distinct in international definitions (World Health Organization, 2002), and crucially, children's perspectives on what they experience. Evidence suggests that while adults see violence more in terms of acts, with certain acts being viewed as clearly identifiable as violence, children more often emphasise the importance of the context and relationships surrounding an act of violence that give it meaning (Naker, 2005; Turner et al., forthcoming).

This study considers the blurred boundaries around forms of violence that emerged during the course of a qualitative study in Ugandan primary schools, and that query an understanding of teacher-perpetrated sexual violence, corporal punishment and peer violence as distinct forms of violence. We focus in particular on teacher sexual violence: on the way it emerged through other forms of violence in this study, and how it also influenced them.

We employ feminist theory to our qualitative study that forefronts teachers' and children's experiences in schools. Our theoretical framework draws on a range of conceptualisations, viewing violence as having multiple layers: first, examining acts of violence in schools, and the individuals that perpetrate them (Parkes et al., 2013; WHO. World Report on Violence, 2002); second, that these acts are embedded in structural gender and institutional inequalities in schools (Leach and Mitchell, 2006; Parkes et al., 2013; Walby, 1990); third, a view that individuals' engagements with violence are complex, subject to subjective meanings shaped by identities, and this requires an attention to difference and changeability (Nnaemeka, 2004); and finally, a view that focuses theorisations of violence on action for social change and violence prevention (Michau et al., 2015; Naker, 2009; Nnaemeka, 2004). Finally, we consider the implications of this analysis for social epidemiological

approaches for understanding and measuring violence, and for strategic approaches to preventing it. With these findings, we consider the potential of using feminist theory to strengthen our understanding of violence, and urge thinking beyond siloed approaches in school violence prevention approaches.

2. Conceptualisations of linkages between different forms of violence in schools

Growing evidence over the past four decades has examined violence against children in schools from a range of methodological and disciplinary perspectives. Here we consider different approaches to conceptualising linkages between different forms of violence in schools within social epidemiology; sociology, using a range of feminist theoretical frameworks; and in violence prevention action and practice.

Building on the declaration of violence as a public health emergency in 2002, a growing body of social epidemiological research has shed light on the scale and intractability of violence against children (Devries et al., 2014b, 2018; Hillis et al., 2016). This research has primarily employed internationally recognised definitions of violence, differentiating between physical, sexual or emotional forms (WHO. World Report on Violence, 2002). This focus on 'acts and individuals' (Parkes et al., 2013), emphasises which children experience what acts, and in what situations. Linkages between forms of violence are viewed as 'polyvictimisation', or the likelihood of experiencing multiple forms of violence (Finkelhor et al., 2007).

Sociology in public health and education has focused more on social and institutional contexts of gender and violence. Structural feminist theories have examined inequality underpinning violence, with violence seen as 'the outcome of unjust and unequal social relations' (Parkes et al., 2013). Rather than primarily focusing on acts, structural feminist theories instead emphasise that societal structures and institutions can be gendered and unequal places, giving rise to violence in many forms (Leach and Mitchell, 2006; Walby, 1990). Research in Uganda (Mirembe & Davies, 2001; Muhanguzi, 2011; Parkes et al., 2022), and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018; Chikwiri & Lemmer, 2014; Leach, 2003) has shown how male teacher and male peer violence against girls can be rooted in gender inequality; and how generational inequality permits adults' violence against children (Naker, 2005). Here, violence in different forms, and from different perpetrators, are seen as linked through these underlying inequalities and relations of power, however the attention in these theorisations is more on unequal relations than acts themselves.

Poststructural feminist theory has examined how individuals engage with gender and violence in complex ways. Poststructural feminism emphasises that gender is a social construct, created by repeated behaviours, including violence (Butler, 1990, 2004). Research using this lens in sub-Saharan African settings has examined the role of violence in what it means to be male or female (Dunne, 2007); how school curricula produce discourses around gender and sexual identities (Namatende-Sakwa, 2018); and how children construct their gender through peer relations, play and violence (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016). These studies emphasise that violence is complicated for individuals, leading to contradictory emotions and feelings, and that their experiences are fluid and changing (Bhana, 2005, pp. 205–220; Parkes, 2007). Here, violence in different forms, and from different perpetrators, are seen as linked in how it plays a role in the production of gendered identities, however emphasis is on how this may look (and feel) very different at different moments.

Some approaches draw across or synthesise these theoretical frameworks (Fraser, 2009; Nnaemeka, 2004; Parkes et al., 2013). Nego-feminist theory, examines structural gender inequality, but sees gender relations as dynamic and not fixed, in similar ways to poststructural feminism (Dunne, 2007; Nnaemeka, 2004). Here the focus is on balance, negotiation and compromise, seen as inherent to African feminisms, and on including all within communities as partners and

collaborators for change. This has links to strategic activist approaches that emphasise multisectoral collaboration and addressing injustices through an inclusive, benefits-based vision for non-violence and gender equality (Michau et al., 2015; Naker, 2009). Lessons from violence prevention practice emphasise the importance of building on analyses of power and inequality to consider the stages, components and inclusivity needed to bring about real-world change in relationships and in institutions (Chaux, 2007; Dhar et al., 2018; Michau et al., 2015; Naker, 2019). Here, the emphasis is less on specific forms of violence, and more on strategic approaches to creating sustained change.

In this paper we draw on these conceptualisations of the linkages between forms of violence in schools, to examine the acts of violence that occurred in two Ugandan primary schools; the forms of inequality and power relations that existed in these schools and in which these acts were embedded; the subjective and changeable nature of individuals' engagements with such acts of violence; and the need to root this analysis in its implications for strategic action for change.

3. Methods

3.1. Study setting

The study was conducted in two primary schools in Luwero District, Uganda. Uganda has extensive legal and policy frameworks to prevent and respond to violence against children. The path to prevention of corporal punishment in schools began in 1997 with a temporary ban, leading to full prohibition in 2016, and there is a clear national framework in place for preventing violence in schools (National Strategic Plan on Violence Against Children in Schools [2015–2020]). However prevalence of violence in childhood is high, with one in three girls and one in six boys nationally experiencing sexual violence, and roughly two thirds of children experiencing physical violence (Ugandan Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development, 2018). In Luwero district, 93–94% of primary schools children surveyed had ever experienced physical violence from school staff (Devries, Child, et al., 2014), while 5% of young women surveyed had experienced sexual violence from a teacher (Parkes et al., 2022). Uganda has a strong national movement for violence prevention and promotion of gender equality through civil society organisations, as well as a vibrant feminist movement advocating for policy frameworks such as the Domestic Violence Act (2010), alongside other government policies and initiatives focused on gender equality.

Luwero District is a predominantly rural and peri-urban area, situated 1–2 h from Kampala by road. Subsistence farming is a main source of labour and income. Luwero was particularly affected by the civil war of the 1980s, but today is among the more well-resourced districts in Uganda. 41% of children are multidimensionally classed as 'vulnerable', compared to national average of 54% (UBOS. National Population and Housing Census, 2014). Despite robust national frameworks, child protection policies and structures in this area were found to face challenges in implementation (Child et al., 2014), as noted across Uganda nationally (Awich Ochen et al., 2017). Primary education is officially free in Uganda, although children pay for uniforms, resources and often contributions to school upkeep. There are seven grades in primary schools (Primary 1–Primary 7 [P1-P7]). Many children repeat grades so age of pupils varies. Language of instruction in schools is English from P4 upwards, and in local languages (Luganda in Luwero District) for P1–P3.

3.2. Background to the study

This paper draws on a semi-ethnographic qualitative study that examined violence and the long-term influence of an intervention to prevent violence in two primary schools. The Good School Toolkit, designed and implemented by Ugandan NGO Raising Voices in collaboration with Ugandan primary schools, is a whole-school approach to violence prevention. The Good School Toolkit for primary schools aims to prevent violence and improve the whole school environment. The intervention addresses the school's 'operational culture', incorporating work aimed at influencing relationships across the school culture, involving teachers, students, parents and community members (Naker, 2019). The intervention employs a six-step process of change over 18 months that includes supporting teachers for more effective teaching strategies, using alternatives to corporal punishment, improving the learning environment, and strengthening the function of the school administration. Change is led in-school by two teacher protagonists and at least two pupil protagonists that are trained and supported by Raising Voices staff. The intervention was rigorously evaluated through the Good Schools Study [GSS], and found to be effective at reducing teacher physical and emotional violence (Devries et al., 2015b) and peer violence (Devries et al., 2017). It was effective for both boys and girls, but slightly more so for boys (Devries et al., 2015a; Devries et al., 2017). This study builds on the Good Schools Study. Data collection was conducted in 2017, two-and-a-half years after intervention implementation, in two former GSS intervention schools. The aims of this study were to examine violence in these two schools, and the long-term influence of the Good School Toolkit intervention. During the course of the research, blurred boundaries between different forms of violence emerged as a key finding. We examine these blurred boundaries in this paper.

3.3. Study sites

The two study schools received the Good School Toolkit intervention in 2012–2014. Both schools were located within small villages amid farmland, close to a town on the main road from Kampala. One school was larger and slightly better resourced (including, for example, staff quarters, predominantly brick structures, fences, and eight formally built latrines), with approximately 360 pupils and 11 staff [6 female/6 male], and larger class sizes (30–60 per class); one school had approximately 160 pupils, 10 staff [6 female/4 male], poorer school infrastructure (no staff quarters, no fences, and structures made of mud and brick, and one informally built latrine), and smaller class sizes (10–30 pupils per class). Both schools were mixed sex, and children involved in the study were aged 8–16 years. One headteacher was female, and the most institutionally senior positions in this school were held by the headteacher, and the 'senior man' and 'senior woman' teachers. In the other school, the headteacher and deputy head teacher were both male, and these constituted the most institutionally senior positions. Male teachers tended to teach upper primary classes in both schools (although with some exceptions) while female teachers taught the lower primary classes. The schools were purposively selected from GSS intervention schools, for high levels of intervention implementation (as shown in Raising Voices' monitoring data), and for levels of school staff violence that had reduced during the intervention, but continued to be high (as shown in GSS data). We therefore selected schools that would enable us to examine the long-term influence of the intervention, and violence within the schools.

3.4. Methods and participants

The study design was semi-ethnographic, and data collection included a range of methods with staff and pupils. Data was collected by ET, in collaboration with SNN for methods with children. Raising Voices supported and facilitated the research collaboration, and provided an introduction for the researchers to the schools. The schools' participation in the research began gradually, with ET spending two days a week in each school over a four-month period and drawing on a teaching background to become involved in school life. This involved activities such as teaching support, marking, and teaching English to school staff. SNN joined for active data collection two months into this period, for one day a week.

Ethnographic observations were undertaken around the school site,

and during lessons with teachers who chose to participate. Participant observations were both used as data, and to triangulate and interpret data collected through other methods (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Participant observations were recorded in the form of ethnographic fieldnotes, written at the end of each day by ET. 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted by ET with 16 school staff members (8 female/8 male). All teachers were given the opportunity to interview: five declined and five were interviewed twice. Interviews included questions on staff experiences of teaching (e.g. 'what do you enoy most/find most challenging in your job?'), challenges for teachers and for children in schools and at home (e.g. 'what challenges do pupils face outside of school that affect their lives in school?'), and gendered differences in children's experiences and behaviours (e.g. 'are these challenges the same for girls and boys?'). Interviews were semi-structured however, and also responded to issues that teachers raised, to allow teachers to raise issues of most interest to them, related to the topic (Willis et al., 2006).

Data collection with children was conducted by SNN and ET collaboratively, with pupils in grades P3–P7 (N=79). We used a range of methods to seek children's meaningful participation (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Powell, 2016). Participatory group discussions (N=16) were conducted twice each with eight groups of pupils. Groups were disaggregated by age and sex, with younger children aged 8–11 years and older children aged 12–16 years. To recruit pupils for group discussions, first, teachers explained the research to their classes and shared written consent forms with parents and caregivers of pupils who volunteered; and second, SNN and ET picked at 'random' from a collection of returned parental consent forms in front of the class. Pupils were known to the researchers by name, however, enabling us to select a range of pupils with different characteristics, and therefore seeking particularly varied experiences in school. Discussions were held in settings that could not be overheard, and were conducted in Luganda by SNN, with ET inputting with questions and prompts in English. Photos from a Raising Voices repository were used to spark discussion and prompt children's reflections (Mitchell, 2008). Questions covered topics such as: good and bad things that happen in schools (e.g. 'what makes pupils feel happy/sad in schools?'), characteristics of a good or bad teacher (e.g 'what makes a good/bad teacher?'), and differences in boys' and girls' experiences or behaviours in school (e.g. 'do girls and boys do the same jobs/play the same games in school?').

Immediately following group discussions, one pupil remained for an individual interview. Recruitment included picking a pupil's name card at 'random' in front of the group, to avoid stigmatisation or feelings of unfairness, however SNN and ET selected this pupil based on topics raised that were of interest to the research. This interview involved the same topics and questions as the group discussion, but focused in greater depth. Moving from group to individual interviews enabled some prior comfort when discussing sensitive issues (Leach and Parkes, 2015). Writing club sessions in English were conducted with older pupils, aged 13–15 years. This generated mixed-media writing club data (N=58), including children's written pieces and verbal explanations. Writing tasks allowed children time to decide what they wanted to share (Angell et al., 2014). Pupils responded to written questions in English, on the same topics as group discussions.

3.5. Data analysis

All data was transcribed and analysed in English. Interviews and group discussions were audio recorded with participants' consent or assent, as appropriate. SNN transcribed all data collected with children while ET transcribed all data collected with teachers. With children, group discussions and interviews were most often conducted in Luganda, and translated during transcription into English by SNN. Interviews with school staff and writing club data were conducted in English. Analysis was led by ET with interpretive input from all study team members at key stages to iteratively develop key themes, in particular:

SNN during data collection in daily debriefs; DP, SN and JN during and immediately following data collection during team debriefs; and JP and KD during the formal analysis stage. The analytic approach drew on both thematic and critical discourse analysis approaches, identifying themes both through situations that were described by participants or observed by the researchers, as well as through examining how participants spoke and created meaning through their discussions (Heslop et al., 2019; Willig and Flick, 2013). We sought themes relevant for our original research questions, and also that emerged during fieldwork. Analysis involved coding across the data and using NVivo software (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018) as well as through examining key moments in depth (Ringrose, 2014).

3.6. Reflexivity

We are a multi-disciplinary team working both within Uganda and internationally in the field of preventing violence against children in schools. Our team includes researchers working in social epidemiology and sociology of education; researchers with qualitative expertise in violence research in Uganda; and activist practitioners and researchers working to design and implement evidence-based violence prevention programmes. Data was collected by the lead author, ET, a researcher with a background as a secondary school teacher in the UK, and SNN, a qualitative researcher with expertise in public health research and experience in conducting research with children in Uganda. Both Raising Voices and the Good School Toolkit were well known in the schools, and as Raising Voices staff provided the initial introduction for this research, the research was viewed by school participants as being linked to their violence prevention efforts. This range of factors undoubtedly have shaped the way participants responded to the researchers, and our own analysis of findings.

3.7. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from University College London [UCL] Institute of Education, Mildmay Uganda Research and Ethics Committee [MUREC] and Uganda National Council of Science and Technology [UNCST] (Reference: SS4282). Headteachers offered initial informed consent for schools to participate, then all adults offered written consent for interviews and verbal consent for lesson observations. While interviews were formally bounded research activities, consent for ethnographic lesson observations was more nuanced (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). ET asked teachers for permission to observe lessons, but this process was also iterative and ongoing, and involved gauging teachers' and pupils' level of comfort (Plankey-Videla, 2012). Parents or caregivers offered informed written consent for all research with children, with letters written in Luganda and English shared with parents via pupils. For pupils, teachers first explained the research to their classes to ask for volunteers. Subsequently, SNN explained the research in more detail to pupils in Luganda (supported by ET in English) within the confidential research space, including information for pupils on how their safety would be prioritised through links with a child protection organisation and a safeguarding referral mechanism, how confidentiality would be ensured, and the limits of this confidentiality (for example in the case of serious concern for child protection). All children were given the opportunity to ask questions, and offered written assent. All participant names are pseudonyms.

This study employed a referral protocol for handling disclosures of violence, drawing on Good Schools Study approaches (Child et al., 2014; Devries et al., 2015c) and adapted in collaboration with Raising Voices and social work organisation Child Health – International (CAI) for this semi-ethnographic study. This referral protocol enlisted level of severity for child protection concerns that emerged during data collection, with corresponding actions and timeframes for response. All pupils were given the option to request counselling services even if no disclosures of child protection concerns were made. Pupils were asked who their

preferred point of contact would be for the referral (e.g. a trusted teacher or parent), and these details were kept confidential and not shared otherwise with teachers. 16 children met criteria for referral and received follow-up healthcare and/or counselling services. Despite implementing the protocol closely, teacher sexual violence was a highly sensitive and ethically challenging issue to handle (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Morrell et al., 2012). In particular, no direct disclosures were made by children reportedly involved in sexual relationships with teachers, leading to difficulties in referring the children most directly affected. Following the protocol, all secondary disclosures and observations were documented and shared with Raising Voices and CAI, who designed and implemented sensitive and appropriate follow-up activities in the schools after the research. Study findings were shared with schools and participants in a way that prioritised pupil and teacher safety, primarily through a written leaflet. We positioned the less sensitive findings of the study (such as long-term influence of the Good School Toolkit intervention, teachers' and pupils' positive and negative with the intervention) at the forefront of the leaflet, and shared brief and sensitively worded text on different forms of violence, with no specific details given.

4. Findings

Teacher-perpetrated sexual violence emerged in both schools in relation to a minority of male teachers, emerging as a taboo form of violence that was not openly discussed in everyday school life. Corporal punishment and peer violence also occurred in both schools, and was more openly discussed and accepted by participants. The boundaries between these forms of violence were often blurred.

Instances of teacher sexual violence emerged among male teachers (N=4) who taught upper primary classes (P4–P7), in relation to older, adolescent female pupils (ages 11–16). Pupils in one school, and pupils and teachers in the other, described acts of teacher sexual violence: firstly teachers eliciting sex with certain adolescent girls in exchange for money or goods; and/or teachers' sexualised touching and verbal interactions with female pupils more broadly. Clear (but secondary) disclosures were made about one male teacher in each school eliciting relationships and sexualised interactions (Paul and Matthias), and less clear references were made about one futher male teacher in each school engaging in sexualised interactions with female pupils (Charles and Isaac). The other two male teachers in each school (N=4) were not described to engage in sexual violence.

Teachers in both schools used corporal punishment and emotional violence in varying ways. Some teachers, both male and female, were observed to cane, slap or pull pupils' ears as everyday discipline. Many teachers did not appear to use corporal punishment often, and described using it less since the Good School Toolkit intervention. Some teachers (particularly female) appeared to avoid using it altogether, using a range of positive discipline approaches. Male teachers were observed to use emotional violence of shaming and humiliation as discipline more often than female teachers. Peer violence was described by teachers and pupils to be common in both schools.

4.1. Sexualised corporal punishment and emotional violence

For male teachers using both corporal punishment and sexual violence, punishment could be sexualised in nature. James, a 15-year-old pupil described the following in a P7 classroom, with a senior teacher named Paul:

Sometimes a girl might say something in class, and as a response the teacher will come and pretend as if he is trying to discipline the girl, but in the form of touching the girl. So the teacher will start touching the girl here and there, here and there, as if pretending to be punishing the girl in the form of pulling the hand … basically doing those

touches in class (James, 15-year-old boy, individual interview [SNN verbal translation])

James later described these as 'bad touches', widely used to describe sexualised touching, such as on the breasts or buttocks. We also observed such behaviours around the school. Paul at times engaged in 'pretend' or 'play' behaviours with female pupils linked to corporal punishment and sexualised touching. For example, in one incident pretending to slap the face of a 12-year-old girl laughingly, then stroking her face instead, and in another, pretending to slap the bottom of 16-year-old girl, also in a jokey manner. Through this merging of discipline and sexualised touching, Paul can be seen to enact multiple forms of authority: his institutional authority over pupils' bodies as teacher, heightened by generational power imbalances of adult over child, and gendered sexual dominance of male over female bodies. In the other school, we observed a male teacher, Matthias, using corporal punishment almost exclusively with girls, and predominantly on the buttocks. Interpreted in light of girls describing his verbal sexual harassment elsewhere, this corporal punishment also had sexualised undertones. Interestingly, while we observed these behaviours ourselves, and James (a male pupil) describes them above, girls themselves did not directly discuss sexualised corporal punishment. We explore further the way girls positioned themselves in relation to this violence elsewhere (Turner, Nagasha and Parkes, forthcoming).

Male teachers also at times used sexualised forms of emotionally violent discipline, such as humiliation, shaming or intimidation as discipline in the classroom. Prossy, a 13-year-old girl described Matthias using sexually harassing language with particularly girls:

Shakira: How do students feel in his class? Or how do you feel in his lessons?

Prossy: Sometimes he uses vulgar words in class for both girls and boys

[…]

Shakira: How about the boys, what kind of words does he use when he is chatting or punishing them?

Prossy: He rarely interacts with the boys. He mostly likes to chat with the girls

Prossy's description of 'vulgar words', which she later explained as sexual, points to routinised gendered and sexualised interactions in Matthias' classroom. A group of P4 girls described how their teacher, Charles, verbally 'assigned' them male partners as a form of discipline:

SNN: Which kinds of words do these teachers use when they are shaming pupils?

Priscilla: Teacher Charles can tell you to stand up and tells you that you have a man/boyfriend

SNN: So which kind of girls does he tell this word?

Priscilla: He tells every girl whether you are young or old

[…]

Priscilla: They write names of men on the blackboard and start telling girls that they will get married to those men

SNN: Tell me more about this, how do they give you these men?

Priscilla: They write names of men on the blackboard and when a girl does something wrong in class or when they fail to give an answer, they tell you that you are a girlfriend to one of those men

SNN: So do you know these men? Are they members within the community or at school?

Harriet: They are members in the nearby village and we know them
(Girls, 8–11 years, group discussion)

In this classroom, involving early adolescent and pre-pubescent girls, Charles uses disciplinary tactics that merge emotional violence of humiliation and shame, with discussion of girls' bodies and imagined intimate relationships with men. Later the girls also described how Charles shamed boys too, by labelling misbehaving boys as those that are sexually violent against girls:

SNN: Does he only do it to the girls or even the boys?

All: Even boys

SNN: So how does he do it for the boys?

Priscilla: He writes down the names of women or girls and he tells the boys that they will marry these girls

Harriet: But he doesn't do it so much with the boys like he does with the girls

SNN: How exactly does he do it with the boys?

Harriet: When the boy is talking in class, he tells that they are the ones that rape and defile girls on their way

Here, Charles is described as both shaming boys, and also routinising acts of sexual violence against girls. The emotional violence used as discipline in these examples, points to an over-emphasis on girls, and to gendered and sexualisd classroom dynamics.

Classroom observations also revealed male teachers disciplining female pupils with intimidation and humiliation, with sexualised undertones. For example, in a P5 classroom, we observed Matthias standing very close to a female pupil in the front row, and commenting in a quiet and intimidating voice on her misbehaviour and the fact that her mother was very beautiful, while the girl appeared embarrassed and ashamed. His standing over her and holding the whole class's attention while he reprimanded her, enacted public shame and intimidation, which he extended through gendered language describing her mother's attractiveness.

These instances show how such violence could be corporal punishment and/or emotional violence as discipline, and simultaneously sexual violence, thus blurring their boundaries. Generational, gendered and institutional power imbalances in these instances thus facilitated male teachers' access to girls' bodies, and afforded some impunity for men engaging in sexual violence, acting within, and misusing, their institutionally mandated roles as disciplinarians. Interestingly, for Matthias as a junior member of staff, sexualised discipline (linked to his reported simultaneous elicitation of sexual relationships) occurred mostly within his classroom or away from other teachers, whereas Paul, as a senior teacher, engaged in open displays of sexualised discipline around the school site. The fact that Paul engaged openly in sexualised touching in front of our study researchers, despite viewing the research collaboration as linked to the Good School Toolkit and corporal punishment, suggests first, his disassociation between teacher sexual violence and physical violence, and second, a level of institutional impunity due to his senior status.

4.2. Gendered classroom discipline in the context of teacher sexual violence

In addition to sexual violence enacted through discipline practices, the presence of teacher sexual violence within a school or classroom also had an influence on discipline more broadly. In the school with Paul, boys felt they received harsher punishment and less support due to senior teachers' sexual preference for girls. James, a 15-year-old boy described this:

Girls have more power in our school because the male teacher we think that they love them. If the case must be for the girl (/is about the girl), teacher says you're going to get a punishment

James, 15-year-old boy, writing club piece

Later in an interview he explained further:

When teachers are speaking to the boys, often times they use a language that is a little intimidating amongst them, amongst the boys, and that makes them feel bad, because they feel like they are doing it intentionally because of the presence of the girls

(James, 15-year-old boy, individual interview [SNN verbal translation])

Boys in this class often described how they felt mistreated by Paul, often leading to feelings of distress and feeling neglected. Edward, a 14-year-old boy this same class described in an interview:

Edward: They [male teachers] just come there and start abusing like that. Anyhow they can. Even if you have done any such mistake, they don't talk … what can I say … they cannot talk in a soft way, they just abuse …

(Edward 14-year-old boy, individual interview)

Incidences elsewhere in the data resonated with these descriptions. First, these dynamics tallied with our observation of Paul's harsh classroom manner with male pupils. Second, a male teacher, John, described in an interview how he had sought Paul and another senior teacher's support for James's problems at home, which he felt had been dismissed. As a senior teacher, Paul blocked John's attempt to seek support for this boy. Boys' gendered experiences of harsh punishment from Paul thus occurred alongside his engagements in sexual violence against girls, and extended outside the classroom due to his institutional authority. Interestingly, boys described these feelings of powerlessness, silencing and distress around Paul, however girls' data suggested that the same boys engaged in dominant behaviours and sexual harassment of girls around the school site. This emphasised how gendered dynamics around violence were fluid and shifting.

Paul's sexual violence were also linked to other teachers' use of gendered classroom discipline. A junior male teacher, Victor, described feeling uncomfortable caning or using harsh punishment for female pupils he believed to be in sexual relationships with senior staff. He felt this led to unfair punishment:

Victor: Even if you want to, maybe to punish her, she can refuse […] she can laugh 'Aha! You want to beat me? You are joking master' […] because they know that wherever you come to punish that child, she … can say everything … to other people who are important [senior teachers]. And you can fear. So some teachers they just keep quiet. They don't mind about those learners

ET: So they don't discipline those girls in the same way?

Victor: They don't treat them in the same way like others. And even other pupils can also understand: 'Why are we punished? Yet the other one is not punished? She has done wrongly … For us, this one is beating us, or he's giving us some punishment. Yet the other child is not given'

Victor, male teacher

Victor's fears of punishing a girl he believed to be in a relationship with a senior teacher influenced his use of classroom discipline, which led to a description of unfairness amongst peers.

Finally, we observed that male teachers engaging in sexual violence with girls also tended to use corporal punishment differently with boys and girls. For example, Matthias was observed using corporal punishment almost exclusively with girls. We interpreted this in line with his sexual interest in girls and as an over-attentiveness to girls' bodies and sexuality, and a generalised neglect of boys' classroom behaviour. We observed that Charles, who used sexualised emotional violence in the classroom, used corporal punishment more often with boys, amid gendered beliefs about boys' behaviour. Paul was described, and observed, to use harsher violent discipline with boys, alongside his sexual interest in girls. By contrast, we observed that teachers reportedly not engaging in sexual violence, both male and female, tended to use

corporal punishment in more gender-neutral ways. For example, we observed other female and male teachers using it frequently, or not at all, for both boys and girls. While used in apparently opposite gendered ways, therefore, the gendered application of corporal punishment coincided with these teachers' engagements in sexual violence. Further, as with Paul and Victor, senior teachers' sexual violence could influence other teachers' gendered discipline too. Interestingly, female pupils and teachers' responses to male teachers' sexual violence were complex, and they did not generally discuss this as openly as male pupils. We explore this further elsewhere (Turner, Nagasha and Parkes, forthcoming).

4.3. Peer violence in the context of teacher sexual violence

Interactions between peers were also influenced by teachers' engagements in sexual violence. In one school, girls' descriptions of peer sexual violence were linked to male teachers responses to it. They described how some male teachers trivialised or minimised sexual violence from peers:

> SNN: P5 and P6 class teachers are men, so what happens when you tell these teachers about the bad habits that boys have?
>
> Phiona: Sometimes the male teacher tells them "you stop that" and the boys do it again
>
> Clare: When we tell male teachers, they just laugh and don't do anything about it and this makes us feel bad
>
> […]
>
> Clare: Some male teachers also laugh as the boys are doing these bad touches
>
> Hope: Some of the boys who do these touches are friends with the male teachers so they cannot do anything
>
> Girls, 12–16 years, group discussion

Male teachers that 'laugh' at girls being abused, or male pupils being 'friends' with teachers, show how teachers' failure to take peer sexual violence seriously could condone it, and lead to a routinisation of sexual harassment in certain classrooms. Interestingly, two of the four male teachers of this age group in this school were also described to sexually violate girls themselves. We interpreted, therefore, that teachers who engaged in sexual violence were also dismissive of boys' behaviour, and girls' experienced mistrust towards both boys and male teachers amid gendered classroom dynamics. This was in contrast to the other school where senior teachers' sexual violence created friction and tension between male teachers and pupils.

Emotional peer violence (such as gossiping, laughing and shaming) also occurred around teacher sexual violence. Older girls described peer shaming and gossiping around Paul's interactions with female pupils. This was rooted in a general classroom atmosphere that we observed was quite unpredictable and involved much joking, which pupils appeared to find at times light-hearted and enjoyable, and at others antagonistic and shaming. Girls describe this general atmosphere below:

> SNN: When the teacher says these things to a child in class, how do the other children react? Do they laugh or they feel sad that the teacher is shaming their friend?
>
> [Laughter]
>
> Rose: Mmm … [laughter] other children laugh at you and they even make fun out of it
>
> Stella: Your friends will not laugh, they will feel bad but other children in class who are not your friends will definitely laugh at you
>
> Girls, 12–16 years, group discussion

Similar incidents occurred in this classroom context around sexual violence. Rose, a 13-year-old girl, described Paul humiliating Stella, a 16-year-old girl he was widely perceived to be in a relationship with, by joking that he 'loved' her, leading the class to laugh and her to become distressed. Elsewhere, Stella described pupils gossiping about her relationship with Paul:

> SNN: In the discussion you mentioned that pupils talk about things that are not true and you said "if it is a girl like Cathy, they will not say anything but if it is me, they will say something". Tell me more about that?
>
> Stella: It is like this, with my appearance, someone can easily accept that the teacher has a relationship with me than with Cathy because I look older, I am bigger and I even have breasts, but Cathy generally looks young. But for me, I am focusing on my books not relationships with teachers because I want to prosper
>
> Stella, 16 years

Stella's last point here references divisions that emerged often between female pupils in this school, where girls positioned those perceived to be sexualised and interested in relationships with teachers on one hand, and those who rejected sex and focused on studies on the other. Interestingly, despite these tensions and rumours of sexual relationships, Stella continued to hold high status among her peers, showing that her positioning was complex. Teacher sexual violence could therefore shape peers' engagements in emotional violence of gossip, humiliation and shame, although these dynamics were not fixed.

5. Discussion

We found that first, teacher sexual violence could emerge through discipline practices in schools, and second, fundamental interconnections between different forms of violence in schools more broadly. The boundaries around teacher sexual violence, corporal punishment and emotional violence as discipline, and peer violence, were often blurred as they influenced and shaped each other in practice. These findings query a tendency in intervention approaches, and in social epidemiological research, to consider subsets of violence as distinct, drawing on international definitions of physical, sexual and emotional violence (World Health Organization, 2002). Our use of feminist theory sheds light on gendered social and institutional school contexts, revealing how these interconnected forms of violence were rooted in generational, institutional and gender inequality.

Our findings showed that some male teachers enacted sexual violence against girls through corporal punishment and emotional violence, and this was linked to teachers' authority and institutional imbalances of power. Male teachers at times used physical or emotional violence that was sexualised in nature, and a teacher's sexual interest in female pupils could shape classroom discipline practices. Other studies in sub-Saharan Africa have shown pupils facing sexual advances from teachers and being fearful of teachers' authority (Bhana, 2012; Muhanguzi, 2011; Parkes et al., 2022), or teachers exchanging rewards for sex, such as grades, preferential treatment or resources (Altinyelken & Le Mat, 2018; Leach, 2003). Previous studies in Uganda have also shown how structural gender inequality can give rise to multiple forms of teacher and peer violence (Mirembe & Davies, 2001; Muhanguzi, 2011). We show here how teacher sexual violence, and teacher corporal punishment and emotional violence, are linked not only in the same forms of generational, gendered and institutional inequality, but that their boundaries are also blurred in practice.

Interconnections between teacher and peer sexual violence also resonate with previous research. Other studies in sub-Saharan Africa show that teachers can serve as 'role models' for boys in their harassment of girls (Chikwiri & Lemmer, 2014; Leach, 2003), and, further, that teachers can implicitly condone peer sexual violence through failing to take it seriously (Dunne, 2007; Mirembe & Davies, 2001; Muhanguzi, 2011). Our findings support this, and show how girls felt mistrust towards both boys and male teachers due to fears of sexual violence. The

finding that sexualised emotional violence from teachers was linked to peer violence of humiliation and shame, contributes further insights to literature into how teacher violence increases peer antagonism and violence (Pells et al., 2018), however suggest this can also be sexualised in nature.

Our use of feminist theory has revealed how acts of violence in schools occur within gendered social and institutional contexts. First, it builds on previous literature exploring gender inequality in Ugandan schools (Mirembe & Davies, 2001; Muhanguzi, 2011), and highlights how sexualised corporal punishment and emotional violence were rooted in generational, institutional and gender inequality that facilitated male teachers' sexual access to girls' bodies. This could be seen, for example, in male teachers misusing their role as disciplinarians to enact sexual violence on girls. Second, as has been shown in studies examining the complexity of gendered identities surrounding violence elsewhere in sub-Saharan African settings (Bhana & Mayeza, 2016; Dunne, 2007), feminist theory emphasising dynamism and changeability also showed how a range of different, at times contradictory, behaviours were related to these forms of inequality (Nnaemeka, 2004). This is seen in, for example, the male teachers who sexually violated girls, and used corporal punishment in apparently opposite ways with girls and boys; the male pupils who felt vulnerable and overlooked around a senior male teacher, but who sexually harassed girls themselves on the school compound; in how teacher seniority affected the implications of his sexual violence; and the differences in how gender dynamics played out in the two schools and in different classrooms. Capturing this dynamism is important if we are to understand the ways in which multiple forms of inequality shape schools' social and institutional contexts, and give rise to multiple forms of violence.

5.1. Strengths and limitations

This study has strengths and limitations. It is the first study, to our knowledge, that explicitly examines the blurred boundaries around different forms of violence in schools. Our study team involves a collaboration of co-authors working internationally and in Uganda, including sociologists and epidemiologists researching violence in schools; activists and practitioners working to prevent violence against children and women through programming, advocacy and learning; and social science qualitative researchers with experience working in this setting and conducting violence research. Study insights were strengthened by our multi-disciplinary study team. Discussing sexual violence is shrouded in taboos and risks, particularly within the school setting (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Leach and Parkes, 2015; Parkes et al., 2022). A strength of our study is the semi-ethnographic approach, where nuanced insights were generated through outsiders becoming embedded in a school community and building trusting relationships. However it is apparent that not all participants were comfortable discussing violence, particularly girls themselves experiencing coerced sex from teachers. ET did not speak fluent Luganda, although SNN and ET working collaboratively supported this. A longer period of data collection, and improved Luganda language skills of the data collection lead may have led to deeper insights. As a qualitative study, the sample size is small and findings cannot be generalised to other settings. However our diverse sample, including both teachers and pupils, and range of data collection methods conducted over a period of several months, have led to a depth of focus. Our findings do not show, therefore, that these dynamics are consistent across all schools, however they point to fundamental interconnections between forms of violence in practice that have so far been underexplored, and will likely be of relevance to other settings.

5.2. Implications for research and practice

This study has implications for interventions seeking to prevent violence against children in schools. First, interventions are needed that address how male teachers may at times be perpetrators of sexual

violence. The role of teachers in school violence prevention interventions is most often as facilitators of the programme, or as participants in in-service training for alternative discipline practices and creating a positive school environment (Kerr-Wilson et al., 2020; Mathews et al., 2021). More research is needed into approaches that may be effective for teachers as perpetrators of sexual violence, which would likely include content for teachers, for pupils, and/or a focus on strengthening referral mechanisms.

Second, our findings into the blurred boundaries and interconnections between forms of violence suggests there is potential for interventions to address multiple forms of violence simultaneously. In the field of intimate partner violence research and practice, there has been recent attention to moving beyond siloes to consider integrated approaches to addressing violence against women and violence against children (Maternowska et al., 2021; Namy et al., 2017), underpinned by feminist theory (Namy et al., 2017). The importance of moving beyond siloes and addressing sexualised contexts in schools emerges clearly from our study. School interventions addressing corporal punishment and bullying have not typically employed a gender lens, however our findings suggest there is potential in employing feminist theory to address generational, institutional and gender inequalities in schools. We suggest that this includes drawing on the different approaches to conceptualising linkages between forms of violence we have explored in this study, therefore focusing on: *acts* of violence and the *individuals* who perpetrate and experience them (WHO. World Report on Violence, 2002); gender inequality and relations of power underpinning acts of violence (Walby, 1990); critical reflection on gendered identities and violence, and the complexity and contradictions this may entail (Nnaemeka, 2004); and strategic activism and collaboration for action and a benefits-based vision for change (Michau et al., 2015; Naker, 2009; Nnaemeka, 2004). Further research is needed into how interventions can synthesise different conceptualisations of linkages between forms of violence for prevention efforts, and in ways that is appropriate for particular contexts.

For social epidemiological research, our findings suggest that current quantitative survey approaches to measuring violence against children may be missing important aspects of social and institutional contexts. As measures of behavioural acts do not capture the context in which they occur, the gendered and sexualised nature of corporal punishment, emotional violence and peer violence may be being missed. Teacher sexual violence may therefore not be being adequately captured in current survey approaches, and is likely being underreported. Further, as these survey approaches underpin rigorous evaluation of interventions in schools, current survey tools may also be missing important changes to school environments that interventions are potentially already making. Further research is needed with survey tools for violence to better capture gendered social and institutional contexts in schools, and the blurred boundaries around the acts themselves.

6. Conclusion

Teacher sexual violence, teacher corporal punishment and emotional violence, and peer violence were interconnected in two primary schools in Uganda. Boundaries around these forms of violence were blurred as they often shaped and influenced each other in practice. Feminist theory that explores gender, generational and institutional inequality in schools, as well as the dynamism of gender relations, can support interventions and research into effective approaches to prevent violence in schools. There is potential for school interventions to address teacher sexual violence and other forms of violence as interconnected, by moving beyond siloes and addressing gendered school contexts that give rise to violence.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ellen Turner: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis,

Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft. **Jenny Parkes:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis. **Shakilah N. Nagasha:** Data curation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis. **Dipak Naker:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Janet Nakuti:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Sophie Namy:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Karen Devries:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

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