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# Researcher's Reflexivity in a Study of Gender and Vulnerable Children in Eswatini Schools

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## Abstract

Qualitative researchers come into the research field embodied with all their background experiences and interpretations of the phenomenon they are studying. These all have a bearing on the study undertaken. Reflexivity therefore becomes imperative, not only in the knowledge and data generating process, analysis, and interpretation but also in legitimizing qualitative studies. This paper explores the significance of reflexivity as a critical and crucial strategy in qualitative studies. I do this by unpacking the partial, positioned, and effective perspectives that I brought into research that sought to explore vulnerable children's gender constructions in three (3) rural schools in Eswatini. In this paper, I discuss my interactions with the participants – as a connected knower, as well as the emotionally charged interview spaces which might have indeed influenced data generation as well as analysis. I also detail how data generation was not only an emotionally arduous process but, reflecting on the research findings gave me space to think about my preconceived views, which led to the critique and analysis of my own beliefs, views and perceptions on vulnerability and gender. At the same time detailing how my position helped me to critically analyse the research findings from a point of reference in ways that enriched the study aimed at enhancing equitable gender experiences for the vulnerable children in these contexts.

## Keywords

gender, qualitative research, reflexivity, vulnerable children, Eswatini



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Qualitative researchers come into the research field embodied with all their background experiences and interpretations of the phenomenon they are studying. These all have a bearing on the study undertaken. Reflexivity therefore becomes imperative, not only in the knowledge and data generating process, analysis, and interpretation but also in legitimizing qualitative studies. This paper explores the significance of reflexivity as a critical and crucial strategy in qualitative studies. I do this by unpacking the partial, positioned, and effective perspectives that I brought into research that sought to explore vulnerable children's gender constructions in three (3) rural schools in Eswatini. In this paper, I discuss my interactions with the participants – as a connected knower, as well as the emotionally charged interview spaces which might have indeed influenced data generation as well as analysis. I also detail how data generation was not only an emotionally arduous process but, reflecting on the research findings gave me space to think about my preconceived views, which led to the critique and analysis of my own beliefs, views and perceptions on vulnerability and gender. At the same time detailing how my position helped me to critically analyse the research findings from a point of reference in ways that enriched the study aimed at enhancing equitable gender experiences for the vulnerable children in these contexts.

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## Introduction

According to Bourdieu, qualitative researchers come to the research field as embodied and materialised entities (Kenway & McLeod, 2004), with their own experiences, view to reality, biases, stereotypes, and assumptions. This makes qualitative researchers to be positioned within the knowledge acquisition process (Ravi, 2019). This may influence not only the research process but also the result of the study. This brings about one of the most contested debates in research, and that is insider and/outsider positionality. Bourke (2014) defines positionality as, the researchers' identity in relation to the phenomena being studied. Such positionality influences and potentially biases the researcher's understanding of and outlook of the world and phenomena they are studying (Kenway & McLeod, 2004). According to Fenge, Oakely, Taylor, and Beer (2019), a researcher is an insider in qualitative research if they share attributes with the participants. An outsider on the other hand, does not belong to or share any attributes and experiences, past or present with the participants of the study or the phenomena they are studying.

Hamilton (2017) argues that researchers with identities differing from those in the research field of interest come into the research field with fresh eyes, hence notice things that insider researchers may take for granted. Being an outside also limits researcher bias during

data generation and analysis, in a way that produces more objective, reliable and truthful results. In a similar vein, Gray (2017) suggests that insider researcher's greater familiarity with the phenomenon they are studying may lead to loss of objectivity. The same way, Hamilton (2017) warns about the risk of insider researcher's likelihood to over-indulge their subjective personal experiences in the research, at the expense of overriding or even excluding those of the research participants.

The same way Ravi (2019) further reveals that, researchers with insider identities may suffer some degree of uneasiness, especially when such research touches on personal, painful experiences. For example, sharing experiences of violence, vulnerability, and bereavement. This situation may render analysis and interpretation of the research particularly complex, as the researcher juggles between the assumed scientifically aspects of their research and their emotional-personal entanglements in these processes (Thaler, 2019). However, Knott (2019) argues that, when the socio-spatial researcher's experiences closely mirror those of the participants, these insider dynamics enable the researcher to provide profoundly insightful interpretations of the research processes and its findings.

Nonetheless, Bourke (2014) and Palaganas et al. (2017) argue that qualitative researchers are research instruments, therefore cannot detach themselves from their studies. England (1994) agrees that research represents a space shared and occupied by both the researcher and the participants. In qualitative research therefore, the researcher and the study participants may have shared life experiences which they bring into the research process (Bourke, 2014), but they also bring their own beliefs and perspectives on the phenomena being studied (Ravi, 2019). This makes the researcher's presence in qualitative studies inexorably consequential and prominent (Gemignani, 2017). In essence, qualitative research, undertaken through an interpretivist lens involves an interchange between researcher and the study participants. As England (1994) rightly puts:

> [even though] the researcher is an invisible and integral part of the research setting …[but] we do not parachute into the field with empty heads and a few pencils or tape recorder in our pockets ready to record the facts… we are not dematerialised, disembodied entities and this subject affects our research. (p. 248)

For validity, and to mitigate the effects of insider research therefore, it is crucial that qualitative researchers engage in a practical and visible process of reflexivity. Reflexivity in qualitative research, is a well-studied and well-theorised area, first brought to light by sociologists William and Dorothy in their book *The Child in America* (1928). In social science it was made popular through the works of Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist and philosopher. Berger (2013) defines reflexivity as "the turning of the researcher lens back to oneself, to recognise and take responsibility of one's own situatedness within the research," (p. 2) and how that position may influence the research process. It has to do with qualitative researchers considering their own positions, social identities, and that of the study participants during the research process (Ravi, 2019). This could be both productive for and intrusive of the process. In essence reflexivity entails insider researchers acknowledging, assessing and reflecting on how their identity influences the questions they ask, data they collect, and the interpretations they make (Gemignani, 2017).

Reflexivity has therefore been hailed and recognized as a crucial strategy in the knowledge generation process of qualitative researchers. It has a significant role in facilitating a dominant presentation of the participants' voices throughout, rather than the researcher's own experiences (Hamilton, 2017). Only when one becomes reflexive about oneself can they understand and learn to be objective and carry qualitative research properly (Hamilton, 2017).

On a similar vein, Knott (2019) argues that to "omit reflexivity [in qualitative research] is to fail to counter bias" (p. 149). It is through reflexivity therefore that a researcher acquires new knowledge, unlearns, and deconstructs her/his own constructions on the research phenomenon under study (Palaganas et al., 2017). At the same time finding a balance between their own perspectives of a phenomena and that of the participant in ways that bring up a more in-depth and critical analysis of a phenomena (Ravi, 2019).

In this paper, I share my reflexive researcher experiences as I conducted a qualitative study of gender and schooling with vulnerable children, in three (3) rural schools in Eswatini for my doctoral degree. The parents/caregivers and teachers participated in the study as primary gender socialisers of the informants. The study sought to comprehend their own constructions of gender, because it formed basis for the vulnerable boys' and girls' gender socialisation and meaning making of gender (Gergen, 2009). I explain how continuous reflexivity of my childhood experiences, values and beliefs "beyond introspection" (Mahadevan, 2015, p. 80), did not only help me gain additional insights into the study but the emotional bond to the phenomena and my personal familiarity with the subject helped me delve deeper into the subject at the same time placed me at a vantage point and conduit for better understanding and bringing solutions (Palaganas et al., 2017) for the vulnerable children of Eswatini. I also show how my gendered life experiences as a vulnerable child, who schooled and grew up in almost similar circumstances with my research participants, inflected the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological decisions taken in this study. I reflect on how I navigated the winding, emotionally taking and draining paths through data collection to analysis. In so doing, the paper brings to the fore the valuable insights that researchers can gain by making reflexive engagement part and parcel of qualitative knowledge production processes, aimed at enhancing equitable gender relations within rural schooling contexts.

## My Positionality - My Situated Self in the Study

I was born and raised in the Kingdom of Eswatini, an ethnically homogenous country in Southern Africa ruled by an absolute monarch, King Mswati III. The people of eSwatini (my people) share a common language and preserve their conventional and traditional way of life, founded on Christianity and patriarchy (Fielding-Miller et al., 2016). In the Kingdom of eSwatini, men/boys and women/girls culturally occupy completely different hierarchal power positions in the society. Whilst men/boys are accorded high value in society, superior to women in strength and in law (Mavundla, Strode, & Dlamini, 2020), women and girls, not only occupy the lower tiers of the hierarchised strata of unequal gendered power relations (Fielding-Miller et al., 2016), but are also considered and treated as minors and second-class citizens (Nxumalo et al., 2014). As a woman, I was socialised to occupy the inferior position in all avenues of social life. My mother, uLaMembiwa* (a psedounym) was born and raised in a polygamous family. Her father (my grandfather) was a conformist Swati man and had four (4) wives. My grandfather, like most traditional men of eSwatini, *abegane iNkhosi* (had dedicated his life to serve the king). Hence, he spent most of his adult life away from the family and stayed *emalawini* (the royal household). Being one of the King's men, made my grandfather a "true Swati man" and in extension that made his daughter- my mother, a "typical Swati woman and wife." My mother was a respected member of the society, for the "true Swati ideologies" she instilled to her children (5 daughters and a son) and every child that she helped to raise. Growing up, she inculcated in us, very strict traditional and cultural ideologies, the power of love and of respect. The emphasis on us as girls, was always how to be good and real wives and how to treat the in-laws. Certainly, my mother was herself an extremely submissive, loving and caring wife.

My father too, like my grandfather, was a traditionalist and spent most of his life *emalawini* (the royal household). Coupled with his polygamous lifestyle too, he was practically never home. That left my mother with the responsibility to fend for the big family of 13 (thirteen) on her own, with the little, she had, from selling handmade jewellery in the town market (Motsa, 2017). Hence, we were rendered vulnerable and destitute. My childhood therefore was not only located in poverty and vulnerability but also socialised within the Swati society's very strong patriarchal beliefs and spaces. Being an educator in the rural areas of the country for the past 17 years also located me in the insider position in respect of the research. As an educator I am exposed to the country`s educational discourses, politics, structures, and culture (Unluer, 2012). Making me not only familiar with the teachers' constructions of gender but also the dynamics related to gender and vulnerability in the school contexts. Hence, my professional and personal experiences, both childhood and adulthood influenced my decision to research on gender and vulnerability. It was logical that my beliefs, social identity, cultural background, and experiences would act as important variables affecting the research process.

## Researcher Experiences during Data Generation

### Conceptualising a Study on Gender and Vulnerability

To conceptualise a study on vulnerability and gender, I followed England's (1994) suggestion that, the intersubjective nature of social life means that the researcher and the participants of the study share a social space and have shared meanings. Hence, to develop this advantage, the study used a qualitative narrative research design. To begin with, being reflexive, that is "using self-reference" (Ravi, 2019, p. 383), considering and using my own childhood and life experiences as a point of reference had a great influence on the choice of methodology I chose for this study. When I began this research, I was fully aware that my participants would be children that had experienced some form of discrimination in life. The qualitative research approach would therefore enable me to build a mutual and caring relationship with the participants, exploring deeper into their social and personal world (Creswell, 2014) and eliciting quality data that would explicate their emotional subjectivities (Cohen et al., 2007). Through qualitative research I could also give power to the participants "voices as they express their constructions of gender rather than my own viewpoint on the phenomena.

#### *Talking to the Vulnerable Boys and Girls – Silencing My Own Assumptions*

Just as the participants' experiences of gender were framed in rural, patriarchal and poverty- stricken socio-cultural contexts, so were my own (Bourke, 2014). However, there were incidents when these vulnerable children's experiences of gender left me concerned, stunned, and awestruck. For instance, discussing issues around sexual relationships with the young children was initially not comfortable and felt so awkward. The girls' and boys' narratives sometimes felt too graphic. Not only for me as a woman whose childhood was in spaces and places where sex-talk was always a taboo but also as a parent and an educator. Strangely, for every question I posed, they had a way of relating it back to their sexual activities and relationships. With time, though I became or rather, was forced to be freer and more open. Realising that these were their realities and there was no turning a blind eye if I wanted to comprehend their "own" lived experiences as boys and girls affected by vulnerability.

Hence, for a moment, it was mandatory to forget about my own socialisation and instead relate to these participants the best way I could. A skill imperative for qualitative researchers- that is, to separate the participants realities from their own (Gemignani, 2017), at

the same time giving it an all-inclusive, and comprehensive understanding (Ravi, 2019). I did this by going beyond the participants' words but using my own experiences to have a better understanding of their realities. Reflexivity also ensured that my assumptions, identity, experiences, interpretations and pre-formulated ideas on gender and vulnerability did not cloud the participants' voices, hence providing a more effective and impartial analysis of the research findings (Hamilton, 2017).

### *Talking to the Girls – Awoken from My Slumber*

The research process itself took a great deal of an emotionally intense introspection. Interacting with the girls came with deep emotions (Ling Yong et al., 2019). For instance, data generation at school B felt more nostalgic and emotional for me, than the other two schools in the study. School B is the same school where I did my primary education, and it is here that I spent the first 14 years of my life. It is in these contexts that my childhood was located and where indeed like all Swati children I was socialised along patriarchal ideologies (Nxumalo et al., 2014). Co-incidentally, this is the very same school where I first heard a 12- year-old child saying the word "sex" without a flinch and I was left stunned, "The boys here only want sex and at most instances we have no option but to do it (have sex with them) because we need the money" (Zipho*, girl aged 12, from school B; focus group interviews).

As a born and breed Swati woman, raised and inculcated with very strong cultural and traditional beliefs. Also, as a parent, a teacher and an elder, the participant's response and the straight face in which she said it, left me shocked and mortified. I was not sure whether to concentrate on what she had just said or ignore her. Immediately I was taken back to the proposal writing stage of my Ph.D. study. Having to write the word "sex" for the first time, for someone to read it, felt so raw and blunt, indeed sending creeps down my spine. I could immediately imagine my mother's reaction when reading my work. Initially, I had thought of different and more "dignified" words to use, but there was none. Immediately, I knew I was up for an arduous Ph.D. ride. This very moment and my reaction to the participant's response reminded me that, I was not ready for the details that my participants shared with me. During these little children, who were too excited and at ease in discussing issues related to their sexual activity, I felt so vulnerable and uneasy.

## Reflexivity and Dynamics of Insider Positionality

Bourke (2014) believes the appreciative nature of research lies in its "product." That is, the ability to have an influence beyond the research findings, for both the researcher and the study participants. Hence as a researcher and an insider, the research, research findings, analysis and critically reflecting on the whole research process influenced me in multi-dimensional ways. The same way my insider positionality as having been a vulnerable child myself, now being a teacher and a Swati woman helped in the critical analysis of the research findings towards the enhancement of gender equitability for the vulnerable boys and girls. Indeed, agreeing with England (1994), that in qualitative research, the researcher with all their embodied positionalities becomes a research tool towards knowledge production.

### *Listening to the Girls' Stories … Towards Breaking Their Chains of Sexual Exploitation*

I was awestruck though to realise the complacency in which the girls expressed their experiences of gender-based violence. As I listened to the girls' narrations, I could feel the girls' deep sense of second citizenry and resignation to their abhorring fate (Ling Yong et al., 2019). I also realised how the intersection of poverty and culture had not only aggravated

feminine experiences of domestic violence in these contexts (Groes-Green, 2011), but also formatted these girls into relentless and absolute submission (N'guessan, 2011). The girls had long resigned to their fate- vulnerable, desperate, poor and "deserving" victims of sexual and physical abuse:

> True, sometimes these people hit us when we do not want to have sex with them …using belts or even kicks and fists. However, that is not important… all we want auntie is their money (laughs and looks around for the other girls for confirmation). As long as he gives me the money there is no reason therefore to refuse to be in a relationship with him. In fact, men should provide for us. (Temvelo*, girl aged 12, from school A; focus group interviews)

As I listened to these stories I was engulfed by very deep emotions and for some time I held back tears (Ling Yong et al., 2019). The attachment the vulnerable girls had with men who took advantage of them, only because of being provided for and being able to provide for their families which seemed to matter more than their own dignity was awe dropping and distressing:

> Zuzu*'s boyfriend told her to come to his house. He had promised to give her money. Zuzu did not want to go there because, the last time she went there; the guy forced her to have sex... but she had no alternative… she needed the money. Besides, had she refused; the guy would have simply had another girl visit him. (Swakhy*, girl aged 16, from school B; individual interview)

> Yes…at times, we wish we could stop it, but we need the money and without the money, life would be more difficult for us. Besides most of my friends have boyfriends and they give them money. (Sphesihle*, girl aged 12, from school C; individual interview)

My emotional entangle-ness on this subject indeed made the generation of data and analysis complex (Thaler, 2019). Having been a vulnerable child myself, helped me to objectively understand these girls' experiences without judging them. I understood these came from a space of deep need and poverty, and without available means to come out of this destitution except the only way they had known and perfected. That was, not only giving themselves to the men who could provide for them, no matter the consequences but also objectification and submission even to hurtful and destructive realities. With deeper reflection, these experiences make vulnerable girlhood in these contexts one of the most appalling human experiences in life. Horrific as it may seem, I understood the vulnerable girls' actions and deep sense of need to be cared and provided for. I knew that the vulnerable girls' belief that, "in fact, men should provide for us" was not an indication of sexual promiscuity, but generally a normalised cultural domination of males, at the expense of young females' sense of dignity, peace, and freedom. I was engulfed with deep pity for these girls and appreciated their sense of paralysis induced by complex dynamics of feminine subjugation, which poverty as a powerful tool used to reinforce the status quo of gender inequalities in these contexts.

One day at school A, after a focus group interview with the girls, one female teacher Mrs Zwane* (who was also a participant in the study), asked if the learners (participants) were free to talk about issues of gender. Immediately, my mind took me back to one of the discussions we had as teachers in my school. In an instant, I was dumbstruck. I recalled how (as teachers) we regarded talk about gender and sexuality, not only as a "strange" subject but also against our moral backbone as Swati people. I was caught in a deep sense of uncertainty and very hesitant to answer the teacher's question. Besides, confidentiality was a critical

principle guiding the research. Hence, I did not know if yes or no was the right response. In a swift moment, unconsciously and in my mind.

I could hear myself saying, *konkhe kuhamba kahle* (all is well). The look she gave me spoke volumes and I knew she had more questions than answers. She just looked at me with blank eyes, and even though I was ready for any eventuality, she just bowed down and focused on her work. The silence though was very loud. Without noticing, I heard her blurting out: "I can imagine how interesting it should be for the girls to talk about boys. In fact, all they know is boys and sex. These girls are not even scared of pregnancy … it's just disgusting!"

For a split second, I recoiled. As much as I could relate to her observation, but I wished, I could express my (newfound) interpretations on the subject at hand. Silencing my voice felt like I was powerless in a situation where I could have shared what I had already learnt about poverty, vulnerability, and femininities. I felt so useless and wanted to escape as soon as I could. Taking my papers and heading for the car back to my workstation, I felt uncomfortable and dishonest with myself (Wilkinson & Kitzznger, 2013). On the road to Manzini, (my workstation) I reflected on the teacher's words and realised it was only recent that I also had such views and such beliefs about vulnerable girls. Indeed, the study did not only lead to the emergence of the research findings, a but also to my personal growth and positioned me differently from when I began with this inquiry (Bourke, 2014). Reflecting on my personal experiences opened new understandings and new ways to respond to the vulnerable girls' plight beyond judging and viewing them as "simply loose" or sexually promiscuous. Indeed, with such conviction, I could already envisage limited possibilities for them to navigate and successfully transcend their penurious present and future lives, especially without the governments' help towards their families' economic situations. The dominant cultural practices of Eswatini culture, has indeed successfully infused heavy judgement on the vulnerable girl child- that of being loose. Yet to help these girls as educators and as a nation, we need a shift and a deconstruction of these judgemental normative discourses of our culture and seek to understand these girls' plight as being resultant from the framing of their context of livelihood-poor, vulnerable and female. All these, within a patriarchal society.

In hindsight, I felt I had only identified with the girls' problems but could not offer them an immediate helpline. Indeed, that had an intense emotional effect and frustrated me (Ravi, 2019). My silent stance felt like I was not only condoning the physical violence against these girls but also the sexual exploitation prevailing in these contexts. My earnest wish was to share the participants' subjective experiences with this teacher (and other teachers off course) and all educational stakeholders, with the hope that they could also have some sense of these children's lives and probably dissimilate the misconstrued realities of vulnerable children (Ling Yong et al., 2019). My hope is that, through my Ph.D. study, the rendition and better understanding of the girls' realities might lead to individual and societal change of mind-set, and indeed the creation of socially just spaces in these contexts (Gilgun, 2008). Such feelings motivated me to report the vulnerable girls' realities the best way I could. I wanted to cut this chain of events by contributing to policies that would help the vulnerable girls deconstruct and navigate patriarchal ideologies. Again, working towards educational policies that would assist all educational stakeholders see the real face of femininity, poverty, and patriarchy.

Thus, I translated my research beyond the confines of introspection, into research publications where I could reach a wider audience. This is with the strongest belief that understanding and appreciating these girls' experiences, would enable both the country's educators and Emaswati as a whole, to change their mind set. That is, to neither judge nor condemn the girls but offer the required help towards education and better prosperity for all.

### *Talking to the Parents/Caregivers… Affording Them "Unmatched" Respect*

Interviewing the male parents/caregivers was quite the most challenging. As I interviewed the elderly men and asked them questions related to gender, I felt like a deviant and a naughty child, displaying an act of disloyalty. As a woman, I knew talking about gender in the country and indeed in these contexts was tantamount to questioning and undermining men's authority. An act, viewed as being a rebellious act against men "accorded" dominant positions (Fielding-Miller et al., 2016). Even though I was caught in this conundrum, but I acknowledge that, as a Swati woman, I held these men in very high esteem. Being knowledgeable of these men's cultural base helped me in creating rapport and maintaining unmatched respect. As a Swati woman I knew the only way to get to these men and gain their trust was through maintaining the submissive, subservient, and passive position. Though these cultural boundaries in a way restricted and constrained my interaction with the elderly men, but they were willing to participate the best way they could. This highlights the imperativeness of understanding the participants' culture as one way towards building rapport and getting in-depth data (Hamlall, 2014).

Reflecting from sampling to data collection, I realised the elderly men saw the study as a perfect space to let their voices be heard. Indeed, reproducing the cultural ideologies founded on patriarchy, which they held so profoundly. With each elderly man I interviewed, I came face to face with very raw emotions of disappointment and anger. For example, Mr Sukati* from school C expressed his disappointment on how *Emaswati* (the Swati people) have decided to forget about culture and adopt "useless" foreign concepts. Again, how the country has changed from "the Eswatini of their forefathers" because "women now wanted to be men." I also observed very high emotions when each of the old men complained how our society has been turned into a "sex den" – perhaps attempting to equate gender liberalisation to sexual prostitution of some sort. Possibly logically so, as some complained about sex education in schools. Though as a component of gender equality move, these men felt strongly against it, "sex is now taught in schools and girls are encouraged to be boys" as expressed by Mr Gwebu* from school A. To keep these men's emotions on check, I tried to stick to the questions in the best was I could. Even though I felt probing would have helped me come with more rich data relating to the men's constructions of gender, but I was not prepared to go that extra mile and risk the old men's wrath.

### *Talking to the Teachers … Untangled from My Own Familiarities*

As previously mentioned, being an educator for 17 years in the rural areas of Eswatini made me an insider in the rural teachers' constructions of gender. Nonetheless, I was aware that human experience is diverse, therefore it was imperative that I silence my own gender constructions (as an educator) and give a voice to the participants' realities (Gilgun, 2008). Somehow, some of the teachers' meaning making of gender and vulnerability mirrored my own. For example, when Mr Hlata* from school C told me about a challenge they had with learners during feeding time. I related my own experiences and how indeed the school feeding scheme, like for most of the teachers in the study has over the years created spaces for me to exert my own stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity:

> What happens is, these "children" literally fight for the food. Hence, we tasked the grade 7 boys to control the situation and ensure that the learners make straight lines than pushing each other over the food. The girl cannot do that job effectively (pause). These children fight…and they fight violently! We have had complaints about the responsible boys though using violence to

> control the other learners, and again there are cases where the [desperate] boys fight them [the grade 7 boys responsible] but we have not yet found a solution to that. (Mr Hlata*, from school C; individual interviews)

In retrospect, I realised that the educators' gender constructions (mine inclusive), were in direct contrast to the rights of the children, as enshrined in the 2018 Swaziland Education Sector Policy (The Government of the Kingdom of Eswatini, 2018). Rather than encouraging gender equality and creating inclusive and equitable spaces for all learners irrespective of gender, such gender constructions not only nurtured inequalities between the boys and girls in the schools but also made girls victims of the boys' masculine power. Hence, if the Ministry of Education and Training hopes to create gender equitable and inclusive school spaces, educators in these contexts should be aided to understand how their present gender constructions adherently encourage gender inequality and masculine violence (Hamlall, 2014). Such information would also help the teachers to critique and deconstruct their own held constructions of gender for the benefit of the vulnerable learners they teach.

### *Talking to the Boys …. Becoming a Better Educator and Parent*

One day at school B, the boys' focus group discussions diverted deeper into sexual relationships with girls. Sipho* was silent whilst the other learners were talking about their girlfriends, and I had to ask him if his silence meant he did not have a girlfriend. This is what he said: "Eish…auntie, I do have a girlfriend! I don't want to lie though. It is stressful because girls here love money, and I don't have any. But I am a man so I am forced to always make a plan" (Sipho*, boy aged 15, from school B; focus group interviews).

Constructing gender around sexual relationships for Grade 6 learners, aged between 11 and 16 years was quite shocking and incomprehensible. I thought of my 11-year-old son and fear crippled in when I thought these were the same gender constructions that prevailed in his supposedly "young and innocent" mind. As a parent and a researcher, I found myself exploring these relationships out of concern and curiosity for not only the study participants but also for my 11-year-old son and learners. I was drawn into finding out how much these assumed "innocent minds" were no longer, "innocent and untouched by the cares of the adult gendered world" (Bhana et al., 2011).

Even though I was interested to hear their realities, I felt my interactions with these participants was not only limited but also circumscribed, especially by my own fears of hearing the unexpected. As a female I could relate to some degree to the girls' experiences, but for the boys, most of the things they said were so outrageous. Especially coming from boys as young as these were. For example, in one of the focus group interviews, the boys discussed (even though jokingly) how getting "old women - as girlfriends to finance them" could be their way out of poverty. Nonetheless, it was both amazing and sad to listen to their stories especially how they navigated their poverty and vulnerability to affirm their dominant masculine identities (Hamlall, 2014). During the interviews, I was on the edge and my parental and educator instincts often kicked in. Listening to their narrations overwhelmed me and I was tempted to take the "adult" role and advise them against sexual relationships especially at such a young age. However, I did not want to sound reproachful. Reflecting on these boys' experiences though helped me focus on how I could talk to my son and my learners about the complexities of gender and sexuality. With a clear understanding that, sexual discourses and practices are produced as early as primary school (Bhana et al., 2011). In a sense, talking to these vulnerable girls and boys prepared me to become a better educator and parent in many unprecedented ways. As a researcher, educator, and Swati woman, this study helped me to move to from viewing these girls and boys as doing "disgusting things" to understanding their

cry for help. At the same time appreciating their agency and inventive ways of navigating their penurious situations, as young as they were.

## Conclusions

The article reflected on my reflexive positionality, entering the research field as a female, an educator and as a parent whose childhood was also located in vulnerability and poverty entering the research field. This multidimensional position formed basis for my reflexivity. Indeed, reflexivity helped me comprehend how my identity not only influenced the inquiry but also how the whole in-depth research process (Palaganas et al., 2017), personally sustained and changed me and my beliefs about gender equality within schools in the Kingdom of eSwatini. My insider positioning in this research was indeed moulded and predicated on paradoxical kind of principles. On one hand, a multiplicity of the socially controlled inducement to conform to the patriarchal ideologies inculcated in me from childhood. On the other hand, an intrinsic longing and urge in me for a greater gender equitable eSwatini schooling system especially for learners affected by vulnerability. This intrinsic longing for gender equality was in part bolstered by my outsider identity as now a modestly privileged professional educator, with a critical desire for a fair and just society, a positionality partly nurtured by my exposure to higher education outside of the Kingdom of eSwatini's education system.

My insider positionality, my cognitions, professional and personal experiences, did not only give me an expedient point and a point of reference for the participants' narrations but also a deeper understanding of the individual participants' constructions of gender. In part, my professional and personal experiences made me a connected knower, hence I used "self – my emotions, cognitions, memories, and personal experience – as a strategy for understanding' (Gilgun, 2008, p. 184). Reflecting on the vulnerable children's gender constructions in relation to my personal and professional experience helped me produce a contextually authentic study. Indeed, this has illuminated both the possibilities and limits for enhancement of gender equality in Eswatini schools.

Through this study, I have come to comprehend the possibilities and limitations induced by the socio-spatial locatedness of the vulnerable children for enhancement of gender equality within the three Eswatini schools. I have come to appreciate that even an insider researcher positionality in a research study, does not mandate the live gender experiences of vulnerable children. Gender experiences are complex and time specific – every generation variably experience gender somewhat similarly but with ascending degree of plight intensity as the social ills of disease and poverty continue to take toll on the most vulnerable members of our society. Education policy-practice reformist and activists therefore need to take cognisance of these dynamics as a basis for devising strategies aimed at enhancing gender equality in the Kingdom of eSwatini rural schools. Some of these could be for schools specially, to implement approaches that would inculcate the girls with self-efficacy to be able to navigate their indigent situations in life affirmative rather than "their adopted" destructive ways. The state too, should implement strategies to alleviate poverty in the country as it has a bearing on the girls' performances of gender, the creation of gender equitable spaces and effective learning experiences for girls in these contexts.

Lastly, the article has highlighted how qualitative research makes both the researcher and participants at risk of emotional and psychological challenges, making emotional vulnerability not simply a concern for the participants but researchers' too. Through the article, I have presented the emotional and psychologically challenging journey of doing research not only as a qualitative researcher but also a researcher with an insider position. How research on issues of inequality, powerlessness and social justice are emotionally challenging for

researchers (Pio & Singh, 2016). I detailed how doing research with vulnerable children – my people as an insider were an emotional process. How it moved me into the opening of "childhood wounds" as I relived my own experiences of vulnerability, inequality, and powerlessness. This is in ways that sensitise insider positioned qualitative researchers on the need to be emotionally prepared when engaging on such research, at the same time highlighting the need for researcher care and support.

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