



**“BOYS AND GIRLS SHOULD BE TREATED DIFFERENTLY”: HOW SCHOOL STRUCTURES SUPPORT GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTIFICATIONS IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN KADUNA STATE NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*Contextualising schools as complex spaces where gender and sexualities are performed entails understanding the interplay of gender and sexuality in school. This means recognising the influences of material and non-material practices and their bearing on young people's understanding and construction of social identities. Using observations and interviews the study explores how the school environment supports the understanding and construction of gender and sexual identities of boys and girls in the school. By studying young people's interaction in the school environment, the paper reveals how heteronormative values are reflected in the ways school routines are organised to reflect gender differentiation among both staff and students. This restricts young people's freedom to express agency in constructing their social identities. Instead, they are regularly subjected to the strict control of adult teachers and expected to act in ways that reflect cultural heteronormative values as is obtainable in the society where the school is located. The study presents implications for rethinking forms of stereotypical gendered interactions within the school. This will enable young people operate within a less gendered environment and employ some form of agency in their self-identification.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Sexuality, Heteronormativity, Young People, Identity Constructions

**Introduction**

Studies on how young people construct gender identities in school have conceptualised schools as sites of prescribed behaviour and attitudes that children are expected to imbibe and live (Francis & Reygan, 2016; Francis, 2017a; Francis, 2019; Burton, Rawstorne, Watchirs-Smith, Nathan, & Carter, 2023; Schmitt, 2023). Myers & Raymond (2010) in their study of heteronormativity among elementary school girls in the USA argue that boys and girls are often taught to be opposites of each other through the way they walk, dress, speak and act. This process presents them to the social world as opposites with complementary roles that reinforce each other. For example, boys and girls are taught to adhere to heteronormative ideals; though they are different, girls will have to partner with boys sexually and vice versa. This was considered as the proper way of doing gender (Jackson, 2009; Mensah, 2020; Pedersen, Bakken, Stefansen, & von Soest, 2023; Skoog, Lunde, & Gattario, 2023)

According to Foucault (1990), this dynamics is supported by the process of social interaction among individuals and society. Developing from the ideas of Myers and Raymond (2010), The paper argues that schools are in constant interaction with the external environment; as such, the forms of interactions and relations in schools influence and are influenced by the social beliefs and practices of the wider society. Therefore, to consider schools as sites for performing gender and sexuality entails understanding the roles they place in the reinforcement of and challenging existing gender inequalities in society.

The interconnectedness of school and society has been emphasised by DePalma and Atkinson (2010). For them, school cultures are often influenced and shaped by the broader society within which they are located. Through this, cultures of heterosexuality and gender normativity are reinforced. In line with this, I argue that heteronormativity should not only be understood as influencing social interactions in schools but that it should also be understood as part

of the everyday practice which individuals engage before attaining school age. Thorne (1993) emphasises the need to recognise children from age one as able to creatively negotiate and imbibe adult forms of gender and sexual identities.

Different societies have developed parameters around the expressions of gender and sexuality in Nigeria. These parameters generally prescribe and proscribe ways of behaviour among people, thereby indicating what is appropriate and what is inappropriate, what is morally right or wrong, and what is abominable or not abominable (Mukoro, 2017; Somefun & Olamijuwon, 2022; Habeeb Omoaponle & Veronica, 2023). These studies reveal the impact of culture, religion, and socio-political practices on the discourse of sexuality in Nigeria. In most Nigerian cultures, the socialisation of children centres heavily on the "proper" way of behaving as boys and girls, adopting "appropriate" gender roles and ways of dressing. These socialisation processes, as noted in a study conducted in South-Eastern Nigeria by Izugbara (2005), are often skewed towards privileging men. In the said study, Izugbara discovers that young people are taught to adhere to this teaching as it assures their security and peaceful co-existence within the cultural space.

This paper draws on data collected through a six-month ethnographic fieldwork with young people in a secondary school. It explores how the organizational structures of the school support the performance of gender and sexual roles among students. Schools have been found to provide normalising space for young people to perform gender and sexuality. These spaces include classrooms, libraries, hallways, cafeteria, gyms, locker rooms and even parking lots and playgrounds (Bhana & Pattman, 2010; Fields & Payne, 2016; Mayeza, 2015; Ullah & Skelton, 2016). The paper understands school practices as creating a context for the performance of gender and sexual identities. Gender is understood as a social practice embedded in everyday interaction. Gender is something we do, and not something we have. In line with Kehily's study, the objective of the paper is to explore how the school categorises young people's gender and sexualise them through particular institutional and discursive practices. To achieve this, the paper discusses the physical, organisational

structure and the processes of interactions that are obtained within these physical structures and their bearing on the construction of identities among students of the secondary school. The paper integrates findings with the analysis of themes that emerged from data collected.

### **Structural Organisation of the School**

The structural arrangement the school is a rectangular form. The school is located within a residential settlement and has no fence that separates it from other residential buildings in the neighbourhood. Behind the structures are roads that connect the school to the community. These roads make it easy for students to abscond from classes without the teachers noticing. The open nature of the school environment enhances the informal interaction between students and members of the community. For example, there were times when community members walk through the school to their various destinations as though it was mere pathways. This provides an avenue for students to interact with and establish relationships with people from the external community within school periods. Unlike Mayeza's 2015 study among young school goers in South Africa, where he found the playground to be highly gender spaces that support the domination of boys playing football; the school playground in the school does not reflect such gendered arrangements. The absence of sporting facilities in the school makes the playground an open space where both boys and girls meet to interact in same, and mixed gendered groups.

The staffrooms of the school were organised along gender polarities. There are three staffrooms; one occupied by female teachers only, the other by male teachers. A third is occupied by both male and female teachers. However, in the mix-gender staffroom, there are few male teachers dominated by female teachers. This organisation of the staffroom is not official as indicated by Mr Kazah during an interaction. It is only a reflection of the preference to occupy the same office space among colleagues of the same gender with whom they felt comfortable. To this set up, Mr Kazah states:

*Well, this is not an official arrangement. We are free to choose which office to stay. However, we will always select spaces where we feel comfortable with our friends. So, you see men coming together*

*in one office and the women in another office. In fact, the men you see in that office [pointing at the mixed-gender office] are there because there is no space in our office [referring to the male-only staffroom]. As you can see our office is the smallest (Mr Kazah, Head Teacher).*

### **Researching how School Structures Influences Social Identifications: Theory and Methods**

The paper is framed in line with the arguments of the social constructionist theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The theory holds that reality in society is socially defined through interaction. In line with this, the paper sees knowledge and reality as being created through interactions with people in society within a specific social context. This consequently makes human behaviour a product of interactions with the external social world (White, Bondurant & Travis, 2000). This theory suggests that individuals' reality is informed by the knowledge they acquire through the interactive process of learning with other people and the social environment. The paper thus explains how students' self-identification is influenced by the forms of interaction they enter into within the school space. In line with the postulations of social constructionism, Connell (1987) argues that both gender and sexuality are socially constructed and should not be understood as natural sets of biological characteristics. In agreement with Connell, the paper argues that gender and sexuality do not exist before or outside the social practices in which people create and sustain relationships. Gender and sexuality should, therefore, be understood within the context of historical processes that involve the body in interaction with the social environment.

In order to have a good understanding of the influences of the school environment on young people's construction of gender and social identities, data was collected using an ethnographic approach. This approach involved participant observation and informal interviews with young people in the school, as well as semi-structured interviews with teachers. The approach provided an in-depth rather than broad understanding of the problem of study. The process of data collection adopted a young person-centred approach that views young people as authorities about their lives, interests and concerns. Therefore, engaged young people as active participants in the

research process through which knowledge is collectively produced from their everyday interaction within the school space (Corsaro, 1997; James & Prout, 1997; Pattman, 2013; Pattman, 2015)

Data was collected through continuous engagement with students in their Senior Secondary (SS 1 and 2) classes, majorly ranging within the ages of 13-20 years. These students were considered old enough to understand, interpret, and make sense of interactions between them and adults in society. Students in their final year (SS 3) were exempted because this set of students were busy preparing for their final examination and did not engage in the normal school routines as other students. Their schedule of activities differed from those of the other students. This therefore means students in SS 1 and SS 2 in the school automatically became participants in the study, especially the unstructured observation process and informal interviews that ensued during observations.

Data was collected through observations at least three days in a week; Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, between the hours of 7:10 am to 12:40 pm. Sometimes interviews were conducted on Tuesdays and Thursdays as was convenient for teachers and/or students. The first phase of observation took a period of 20 minutes before the bell rings and students moved to the assembly ground. The assembly took a period of 30 minutes after which students marched to their classes for lectures. Students' interactions and behaviours were also observed within and outside the classrooms. Careful attention was given to students' conversations and the messages passed to them by teachers. Student's reaction to these messages was also observed especially with regards to gender and sexuality, which was a reoccurring theme.

During observations, notes were taken in a research journal as activities unfolded. When the need for informal interviews arose, verbal consent was gotten from students to record their responses with a voice recorder. Informal interviews assisted to clarify meanings young people attached to ambiguous statements/concepts made during conversations. Semi structured interviews were also conducted with four teachers (two males and two females) within the school environment. This provided an understanding

of the perception of teachers as adults on the influences of the school environment on students' self-identification. Data was analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **School Routine: How Students' Interaction is Organised in the School**

Allen (2007); Heywood and Mac an Ghail (2003), Redman (2001); and Renold (2004) in their studies posit the importance of school routines in the production of gender and sexual identities among students. Through these routines, students can negotiate, adapt, and resist ideas as they make sense of their sexual selves. Through conversations with students and teachers in the school, it was understood that school routines provided two forms of interaction. First, interaction that exists within the classrooms during teaching periods. This is mostly defined as a teacher-student form of interaction characterised by strict regulations by teachers. Secondly, the interaction that exists outside of the classroom before assembly, during the official break time or after closing times. Interaction outside the classroom is mostly between students and is constructed during their free time.

### **Assembly Structure of the School**

The nature of assembly in the School was one that reflects and contributes to forms of gender differentiation and polarisation between boys and girls. This gender distinction is observed in terms of the official grouping of students during the assembly, students' dressing patterns and the duties that prefects carry out during assembly periods. The following observation illustrates the gendering of assembly practices and how these draw on and reinforce normative assumptions about gender.

It was 7: 30 am on a cold Monday morning. I stood by a window at SS 1 block of classes watching how students were cleaning and arranging their classrooms in preparation for the day. The school bell rang, and all the students had to leave what they were doing and ran to the assembly ground. It was a day for General Assembly. The students assembled in the open space in front of the school hall. Teachers were yet to come out from their morning briefing. Prefects ensured that students queued according to their classes in separate lines, one for boys and another for girls. Students

were neatly dressed in white and brown colours. Girls were dressed in brown skirts against white neatly tucked-in long-sleeved shirts, with their hair all plaited in the same style. The boys were dressed in brown trousers and white long-sleeved shirts, bearing low haircuts. Both boys and girls wore white stockings with either brown or black sandals. Unlike the girls whose shirts had no buttons, the white shirts worn by boys had a line of buttons in front, down to the bottom. Interestingly, almost all girls were well-dressed from home with well tucked in shirts, while most boys were flying their shirts and only made efforts to tuck-in when they get to school or at the sight of a teacher. While the assembly was going on, students who came late were being apprehended and asked to kneel until the end of the assembly. I observed that male prefects were often the ones stopping late comers, while female prefects were made to inspect and ensure that latecomers served the punishment. While this was going on, I went to stand by Gimbiya and Kuyet (two among the female prefects who were inspecting students on punishment). After a few seconds, Gimbiya turned to me and said, "Good morning, Sir". I responded, "Good morning, you can call me Hilary". And the following conversation ensued:

*Hilary to Gimbiya: So why are you girls not around the corners of the classrooms to stop latecomers?*

*Kuyet: Because we are girls and the boys don't respect us, even your junior, that is a boy will look down on you sometimes and may even push you. But they cannot do that with the boys.*

*Gimbiya: When the boys [male prefects] bring them here and make them to kneel, they cannot stand up or escape because they know that teachers are around, and we can easily report them.*

The above observation reflects how the Assembly Ground serves as a space for reinforcing normative gender divisions. Boys dressed separately from girls and were made to stand on different lines during assembly. The differences in the mode of dressing were informed by normative assumptions about gender and sexuality that boys and girls should dress and behave differently. The form of interactions that takes place before, and during assembly further

intensifies young peoples' construction of themselves as opposites in the school. This is exemplified when students constructed the boys' masculinities as commanding respect and obedience from other students, unlike Girls' femininities that were associated with vulnerabilities that suggest the possibility of violence on girls by boys when no teacher or male prefect was watching.

The grouping of students along gender divisions was further shown in the school by the Gender Assembly that took place every Friday. Boys assembled in front of the School Hall, while girls assembled in front of the mixed-gender staffroom. During Gender Assembly, male teachers met with boys while female teachers met with girls. Mr. Kaburuk, in an interview, stated that gender assembly provided the platform for teachers to instruct students about the right behaviour both in and out of school thus:

*... we normally have the gender assembly, where the male students are in one side and then females are in the other side. This provides the opportunity for male teachers to advise the male students based on how they can be responsible individuals regarding their education. Also, how they should be responsible in relationships with girls by treating them nicely while not engaging in any form of sexual relationship (Mr. Kaburuk, Head Teacher).*

In another interview, Ms. Asmau further explained the conduct of Gender Assembly in the school saying:

*On our own side, as women, we address the female students generally every Friday, cleanliness, you know, what you can observe in yourself, and how to behave. About two weeks ago we addressed them seriously ... we spoke with them on having to know who they are and then maintain their integrity, not to allow anybody to have access to them or their value but maintaining their track. When you derail out of the track, you can crash-land. When you let yourself so free and so lose to everyone then, the boys will use and dump you and you won't achieve your dream; so many things about your life will be truncated (Ms. Asmau, Head Teacher).*

Boys and girls were taught to be "responsible" individuals, to focus on achieving educational excellence and the need to establish healthy relationships devoid of sex. Sex was constructed by teachers as being destructive and needs to be abstained from. Through the Gender Assembly, girls

were constantly reminded of their identity that suggests being a girl is ideally grounded in nature. Teachers' construction of boys as sexual predators, positions girls as particularly vulnerable to forms of 'immorality'. Constructing girls in this way by teacher's acts to infantilise these girls as lacking knowledge of their own identity. It further shows the heteronormative expectations on girls to conform to notions of respectability by resisting the advances of boys by practicing sexual restraint (Kruger, Shefer, & Oakes, 2015).

Furthermore, there was a conscious effort at avoiding the discourse of sexuality. This is reflected in the use of euphemism by Ms Asmau while talking about student's sexuality. Fine (1988) in her work on sexuality education in the United States, found the absence of a discourse of desire in sex education lessons and the how this absence impacted negatively, especially with regards to girls. In this study, teachers' responses addressed a form of sexuality education that is devoid of desire. The lack of critical conversations with young people in this regard impacted differently on boys and girls, it disproportionately placed the burden on girls by appealing to their integrity in ways that made them think they would lose their morality if they discuss or involve in sex. In this way, the anti-sex rhetoric around school-based sex conversations does very little in promoting the healthy development of sexual subjectivities among young people in the school. It, however, embodies a potential for increasing the rates of victimisation, teenage pregnancy and consequently exacerbates the vulnerabilities of girls whom it seeks to protect.

### **'Boys and Girls Could Sit Together but Not all of them': Classroom Arrangement at School**

The sitting arrangement in classes resonates with the enforcement of gender polarity in the system. In the classrooms, a desk was occupied by a maximum of three students. Specific desk space was allocated to each student through the term. The process of allocating desk space was often determined by students with the supervision of the class teachers. Boys and girls were often paired with students of the same gender on each desk, while in some cases desks were occupied by students of mixed gender. This sitting arrangement was mostly informed by girls'

lack of trust on the boys. It was learned during a conversation with a group of students in SS 2, where Swatchet explains:

*“We don't trust them [boys], if you sit with some of them, they will help you, but others will start touching you and saying they want to date or have sex with you”.*

Similarly, teachers constructed some boys as possessing “reckless” sexuality and should not be allowed to sit on the same desk with girls.

Girls’ construction of boys in this way is influenced by the kind of information they get from their teachers. Constructing boys as sexual predators has two effects; firstly, it makes the selection of seats in the class a function of gender. Here, girls were given priority over boys because teachers felt the need to protect the girls from the excesses of the boys. Secondly, a girl would not want to share a seat with a boy because of the fear of being constructed by teachers in “negative” ways, owing to teachers’ preference for sexually inactive students and their construction of sexually active students as bad and reckless. The construction of boys in this way becomes problematic in that it represses the sexuality of girls and denies them the agency they need to initiate or display affection for boys. The construction of young people in this way is informed by essentialist views of gender and sexuality upon which the teachers at the school draw. In contrast, the construction of young people’s gender and sexuality should be understood in line with the ideas of Allen (2008), Francis (2018), Fine (1988) and Bhana & Pattman (2010). These scholars argue that the separation and polarisation of boys and girls in school is highly problematic. They are critical of heteronormative values that frame informal and formal sex educational practices in schools. They instead, attempt to develop forms of sexuality education that do not infantilise young people but engage with them as sexual beings. They also argue for opportunities for boys and girls to learn from each other in sexuality education and tried to promote friendships across lines of gender and sexuality in stark contrast to the kinds of messages being conveyed by teachers in this study who deemed such relationships as impossible.

### **Allocation of Responsibility to Teachers and Students in the School**

The allocation of responsibilities in the school is highly gender sensitive and promotes the consciousness of students to its diversity along heteronormative lines. Teachers and students were given responsibilities according to what was considered in the school as being gender appropriate. Connell’s conception of gender regime explains the forms of relationships that exist between male and female in society to reinforce patriarchal patterns of power and authority (Connell, 1987). Gender regimes in Connell’s context demonstrate the traditional forms of patriarchy that ensure the placement of male teachers in prestigious positions in schools as against their female counterparts. In this study, gender regimes engage with institutional cultures and norms and locate gender power and dynamics as they operate in the school in relation to wider social norms and discursive practices which students and teachers imbue, articulate and engage with. In this regard, the existing form of gender regime ensures the domination of female teachers in management positions. The Principal, two Vice Principals and the four Heads of Department were females. One could easily assume this dominance of females to be a result of the higher number of female teachers in the school. However, this is not the case as allocating responsibilities to teachers was understood to be informed by competence. Competence, in this case, is defined as a function of gender. During a conversation with teachers in the school, Ms Zigwai affirmed the following position:

*Even in cases where we have a male principal, his vice-principals are women. The truth is when a man is at the top, he will always want things to go well and most will not consider the feelings of people. But these children need to be loved and cared for, at the same time disciplined. A woman is capable of doing both and that is why this school is even better than other schools. The principal and most staff treat students with love as if they were their children. They also correct them when they are wrong, but men don’t have that patience. That is why when you look at positions that are physical in nature, like games, labour and others; you will see that male teachers are occupying those offices because they can perform better there.*

Conversations with the teachers indicate the dominant value ascribed to gender in the school. These values associate physical strength, being unsympathetic, and toughness to the masculinities of men, while women are seen to be emotional, sympathetic, gentle, and caring. By constructing students as children that need to be loved and cared for, Ms. Zigwai attempts to justify the dominance of female teachers in management positions in the school, as if male teachers are naturally wired to care less or show less affection to children. Through this conversation, efficient and effective leadership in schools are constructed by Ms. Zigwai has characterised by discipline, sympathy, patience and caring. Also, by attributing these characteristics to women, she considers female teachers as better suited for leadership positions in the school.

The dominant values of gender that reify categorisation of students along divisive gender characteristics informed the selection of students into positions as prefects in school. This process ensures a balance in the normative gender categories of male and female students at the school. For example, there are separate positions for the head prefects for boys and girls (Head Boy and Head Girl), with each having an assistant of the same gender category. Other positions were allocated to two students as well, one male and one female. Whoever heads the position is determined by the peculiar requirement of the position, while the other gender becomes the assistant. The perceived masculinity of boys that has to do with physical strength, toughness and being rough, made them more suitable for positions such as Labour Prefects, Games Prefect, and House Prefects; while the perceived gentle femininity of girls qualified them better for positions such as Health Prefect, Social Prefect, and Welfare Prefect. However, for each of the positions headed by a female student, there was always a male assistant and vice-versa.

The selection of class captains followed the same process as each class had a male/female class captain with the opposite gender as an assistant. Class captains were shouldered with the responsibility of representing the class at various levels. The selection of a class captain was often determined by the individual's intellectual ability. The process was

supervised by the class teacher. The selection process was either by nomination and voting by students or through appointment by the class teacher. Whoever was selected as class captain must be someone intelligent, obedient, and well-behaved. There was a preference for female class captains by teachers in the school. For example, this was emphasised by Ms Doney when she addressed her students

*"...we will select a class captain today, but you know we (referring to her and other teachers) prefer a girl to head my class, so you can nominate three girls that are intelligent and obedient. I don't want troublesome people like most of these boys".*

Although the selection process was meant to be democratic, by allowing the students to choose whoever will represent them, Ms. Doney's construction of boys as troublesome is reductive, as it ensured that a girl was selected as the class captain and a boy as her assistant. This was the case in most of the classes where teachers preferred girls to serve as class captains.

In terms of allocating general responsibilities such as daily routines in the school, gender differences became less explicit. Boys and girls were given the same responsibilities such as sweeping of classrooms and the school environment, cutting of grasses during labour periods and washing the school toilets - which was normally done as a form of punishment for both boys and girls. However, in certain situations, gender divisions became explicit when certain responsibilities were categorised by teachers as peculiar to boys and girls. Teachers' categorisation of students in this regard is informed by normative gender norms and expectations that construct boys as stronger than girls and should be given responsibilities that demand physical strength.

This position is in line with the findings of Mukoro (2017) on the conflict of sex education and cultural values in Nigeria. Mukoro reports the overarching effects of cultural norms in the definitions and understanding of gender and gender roles within schools in Nigeria. The positioning of boys as possessing strong, unserious and reckless masculinities against the weak, more focused and intelligent femininity of girls reinforces forms of gender power that ascribes control to male masculinities both within and outside the school.

Normative gender categorisations as this do not only impact on young peoples' understanding of gender as natural but limits their agency to perform gender in non-essentialist ways.

### **Teachers' Interaction with Students in the School and how this impacts on Students and their Self-Identifications**

During observations, it was realised that forms of interactions between teachers and students are dominated by the categorisation of boys and girls as distinctive groups. Since gender is an unambiguous category of an individual's identity that easily differentiates groups of people, it serves as a convenient basis for comparison between boys and girls in the school. This is both in terms of classroom competitions and the perceptions of teachers on the needs of students, which in turn determines the kind of relationships they establish with boys and girls.

### **Teachers Organising Classroom Competitions**

It was observed that boys and girls were divided into opposing groups in their classes to engage in certain class works. Ms. Amara, the Mathematics teacher, grouped her students in SS 2 into separate groups of boys and girls and instructed each group to select group representatives. She wrote an equation on the board and asked each group representative to solve the equation. The female group, after winning the contest was told to yell "shame on you" to the losing boys. The winning female groups exchanged pleasantries with one another and whispered to the boys sitting close to them how they were more intelligent. Class contests along gender lines continued when Mr. Abrak organised a debate between male and female students in SS 1 on the topic 'Who is more intelligent, boys or girls?' Although Mr. Abrak intended to observe how students articulate their points in supporting or opposing the motion, the exercise promoted forms of oppositional gender divide among boys and girls in the class.

By grouping boys and girls in the class contest that supports the placement of one group above the other, teachers create an environment that enables gender antagonism. Thorne (1993:67) argues that "When teachers organise gender-divided classroom contest, students pick up on and elaborate the oppositional

and antagonistic meanings". In this case, female students in Ms. Amara's class continued yelling "shame on you" on the boys even when the contest was over. Teacher's categorisation of students by gender during class contests promotes gender contestation among boys and girls beyond the classroom. In this case, it influences girl's self-identification as being more intelligent, obedient and loved than the boys.

### **"Girls should be Given Special Attention": Teachers in Gender-Based Interaction with Students**

Findings from observations and interviews reveal that interaction between teachers and students is determined by the perceptions of the former about the gender needs of the latter. Teachers in the school related with students in ways that made gender boundaries explicit. These forms of relationship were expressed from the subtle and polite conversations between teachers and girls to the more pronounced presentations through variations in the forms of punishment on students and the construction of girls as being more intelligent than boys. Mr Bakut, in an interview, emphasised the need for gender consideration in establishing relationships with students thus:

*The girls are more at risk when it comes to social vices. So, I try to be more friendly with them because that way, they will feel free to talk to me about some of their problems. This way, they don't fall victim of such social vices. I address everybody based on what he or she needs. I am on both sides. When I see anything so demanding in the aspect of boys, I shift my attention to them. When it is the other way round, I go there also. Yes, but if I am to rate, I will say I am more friendly to the girls because they are more at risk. (Mr Bakut, Head Teacher)*

The variation in the kind of relationship and interaction between teachers and students reflects the dominance of a gender order that constructs boys as independent and capable of taking care of themselves. It also reveals the positionality of girls as a vulnerable feminine category that needs to be given special attention. This therefore means more time and attention is given to girls in the school as a way of protecting them from the "reckless" masculinities of boys. The construction of girls as a vulnerable



category by teachers was also evident in the forms of punishments meted out to students. Mr. Banenat was presented with the names of noisemakers by an SS 2 Class Captain. He decided to punish the offenders before commencing his class for the day. He made the boys hold the class desks while he flogged them two strokes on their backs. When it was Nneka's turn, the first girl among the offenders, she held the desk ready to be flogged, but Mr. Banenat smiled and said, "Give me your hand, I don't flog girls on their backs or buttocks, I don't want to injure you, you know you people are not as strong as the boys." Mr. Banenat's construction of girls as not being strong like boys is a common perception in the school that defines the forms of relationship between teachers and the girls as opposed to the boys.

Discussions with students on the relationship between students and teachers were dominated by accounts of teachers being friendlier to the girls than the boys. Students believed that teachers were nice to the girls because they were more organised, intelligent and obedient than the boys. However, they also believed that some male teachers were friendly with the girls because they wanted to establish sexual relationships with the girls. Collaborating students' assertion about male teachers establishing sexual relationships with girls in the school, Mr. Kaburuk, in an interview gave accounts of two teachers that had been involved in such relationships thus:

*... A bad case, when for example, a Corper (Corp member) recently had his student here whom he was very nice to. Eventually, he was caught having sex with the girl whose parents had gone to work. The girl claimed she loved him... It was really a bad case. I think there was also one case we had; the teacher was nice to the girls than the boys but actually he was trying to harass these girls. The girls collaborated with the boys and recorded their discussions and reported to the school.*

The above account affirms the position held by students about some male teacher's interest in establishing sexual relationships with students as a basis for preferential treatment to girls over boys. While the first account indicates the girl's consent, the second account shows girls and boys exercising some form of agency by rejecting sexual advances from a male teacher who is assumed to be in the place of authority over them. Girls and boys coming together

to record conversations, and report to the school illustrates how they could diffuse gender boundaries to achieve a common interest.

The role of teachers is recognised, in various context, as influential in the process of categorising and reinforcing different forms of gender and sexuality among students in schools (Abbott, Ellis & Abbott, 2015; Francis, 2019; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Forms of teacher-student interactions in school are instrumental in the shaping of students' understanding of gender and sexual identities. Adults' continuous use of gender labels such as boys and girls to interact with young people, makes being a boy or a girl central to self-identification as well as the ongoing life in school. Similarly, and in the case of this school, divisions along gender binary are reinforced by the forms of relationships teachers develop with students in the course of interaction. These forms of relationship continue to dominate students' experiences in the school.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study focused on exploring how existing structures in school support young people's construction of social identities. In this way, the school space is conceived as having a variety of existing discourses regarding young people's gender and sexuality. However, these discourses are foregrounded in normative cultural forms of gender and sexualities that young people are expected to adhere to. The school environment provided little or no spaces for the free expressions of alternative forms of gender identities. Rather, it supports forms of heteronormative identity construction that is inclined with hegemonic forms of masculinities and emphasised femininities. These inclinations are found to have a strong bearing on the ways young people understand themselves in school. Despite these regulations, young people sometimes resist by navigating existing regulations and behaving in ways that suit their interpretations of social reality, thereby contravening adult expectations of them.

Given the interconnectedness of the school and the society, there is continuous domination of heteronormative values in the way the school is organised. Gender polarity becomes emphasised in school routines among both teachers and students.

This creates an unfavourable environment for young people who may want to act in ways that contradict the cultural heteronormative definitions of gender. The school must be re-organised to propagate gender-neutral values such as downplaying the emphasis made on gender differentiation in organising school routines.

The arrangement of students in the assembly ground, sitting arrangement in classrooms, students' activities during break time, and the allocation of responsibilities to students heavily invest in gender polarity and differentiation. To address this, the study suggests that students could be made to stand in lines according to their year of study rather than based on their gender during assembly. There should be fewer restrictions to young people selecting a seat in the classrooms. The school will need to normalise the spaces within the school as gender-neutral spaces that both boys and girls could collectively use for social interactions during break time. Also, the allocation of responsibilities should be done in ways that encourage both boys and girls to take on responsibilities irrespective of their gender or based on merit (capability). Re-Organising school routines in this way will assist in creating less consciousness in young people about their gender difference and will help them to understand and act in ways that resonate with gender neutrality, thereby dismantling existing gender boundaries in the school.

Young people in the study view teachers as role models from whom they seek to learn and copy ways

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of livelihoods. This implies that a change in the attitude of teachers regarding how they conceive and perform gender in the school is expected to have a large impact on young people's views and understanding of their social identities. Given this, the study suggest that teachers should be trained to adopt new ways of thinking about gender and sexuality by repudiating the widely held ideas of "oversocialised" (Wrong, 1961) understanding of children as presented by the sex-role socialisation theory. The sex-role socialisation theory constructs young people as passive beings who only adopt and reproduce static and natural sets of identities passed to them by adults. Rather, the study suggests that teachers in the school should see gender and sexuality as social constructs which are produced in everyday interactions. In this way, teachers will recognise young people's agency, and view young people as active agents in their construction of social identities. There should also be a change in the unconscious distributions of staffroom spaces to reflect less gender polarity. Male and female teachers should consciously move into staffrooms and co-exist with one another. By teachers behaving in non-stereotypical gendered ways, young people are encouraged to invest less in positioning themselves as opposites of each other. Thereby, creating an enabling environment for boys and girls to engage in activities normally constructed for the opposite gender.

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