Evaluation of a masculinity and gender equality intervention for primary school boys

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Abstract

Interventions with children to promote gender equality should focus on constructive perceptions of masculinity. This study aimed to evaluate a brief intervention to promote constructive gender perspectives among South African primary school boys. Participants were Grade five boys attending 10 primary schools (N = 549, blacks = 100%; age range: 10–12). They completed the 12-session Hero Empathy Programme in two phases over a two-year period at their schools. They completed measures on gender perceptions, self-esteem and family relationships pre- and post-intervention. In addition, a sub-sample of the boys (n=100) participated in focus group discussions. The results following t-test analyses indicated the boys to have significantly more egalitarian gender perceptions after the first phase of the intervention, but not after the second phase. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data indicated the boys to question gender stereotypes, respect girls more, and to not endorse abuse of girls. The findings suggest that a brief masculinity and gender equality intervention would be effective for young schoolboys exploring their gender identities.

Keywords: gender equality; constructive masculinity; Hero Empathy intervention; primary
 school boys; mixed methods evaluation

Introduction

The United Nations has identified 17 sustainable development goals for transforming our current world to improve the health and well-being of the world's most vulnerable populations (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Improving gender equality and empowering all women and girls is one of the sustainable development goals. The gender equality goals seek to end all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, as well as elimination of harmful practices and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family. Gender equality includes equal participation in different life domains such as economy, social life, politics, education and health decisions (Abendroth, 2014; United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Implementation of gender equity initiatives has resulted in various interventions worldwide with various degrees of success (Antonucci et al., 2019). South Africa is a country with deep-rooted gender inequalities despite constitutional guarantees for gender equality (Sibanda et al., 2017). This study aimed to test the efficacy of a masculinity and gender equity intervention with South African primary school boys.

The South African Gendered Socio-Ecology

South Africa has one of the highest rates of physical and sexual intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence in the world, with 45.6% of women experiencing one or more episodes of violence in their lifetime; compared to a global average of 35% (Maluleke, 2018; Mpani & Nsibande, 2015; Theletsane, 2020). In addition to intimate partner violence, South African women are at high risk of HIV infection due to gendered violence (Jewkes et al., 2010; Quarraisha Abdool & Cheryl, 2016). In response, the state president has described the situation as the "war against South African women" (Ramaphosa, 2020).

Few interventions show positive outcomes in bridging disadvantages South African women experience (Mannell et al., 2019; Mwale & Muula, 2017; Righi et al., 2019), possibly

because the interventions do not address deeply entrenched cultural beliefs underlying gender inequities across southern Africa (Mannell et al., 2019). The patriarchal system is prominent in many households and communities in South Africa. It is a cultural biased power structure that maintain male dominance and female subordination (Corradi et al., 2016), allowing males privileges and entitlements that are not accessible to women (Dickerson, 2013). These gender inequities have the effect to disempower women (Gibbs et al., 2018; Jewkes & Morrell, 2012), and justify some violence against women (Gibbs et al., 2018; Jewkes et al., 2015).

To address culturally ingrained social practices the younger generation needs to be educated on gender equity and risks associated with masculinity from childhood. Gender norms are mostly passed down to the next generation in an uncritically way (Fry et al., 2019). Research results have shown a significant link between children witnessing and experiencing violence and trauma in their families and communities and later endorsement and use of violence against women (Fulu et al., 2017; Jewkes et al., 2020; Mathews et al., 2016; Richter et al., 2018; Yount et al., 2018). Family relationships and self-esteem of boys was found to influence developing gender perceptions (Diaz-Aguado & Marinez, 2015). The focus of this research is to investigate the value of a brief intervention to increase awareness of positive masculine behaviour in young boys, to enhance their sense of equity in gender relationships.

Masculinities

The concept hegemonic masculinity refers to how boys and men accept, adhere to, and reproduce particular norms of masculinity and gendered behaviour (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, the view that men are expected to act tough, in control, aggressive, sexually dominant and to show no emotion or vulnerabilities is rooted in hegemonic masculinity (Jewkes et al., 2015; Morrell et al., 2013; Ratele et al., 2010; Shefer et al., 2007). The American Psychological Association (APA, 2018) described such beliefs

about masculinity as "toxic" which is harmful to men's mental health and hurtful to women. The APA (2018) recommended a shift in such perspectives of masculinity to promote gender equity and human well-being.

Interventions for gender equity

Interventions to improve gender norms and curtail intimate partner violence among men, showed mixed results. For example, Jewkes et al. (2014) and Pettifor et al. (2018) found improvement in gender scores following their psychosocial intervention with adult men, but no change in intimate partner violence behaviour. Christofides et al. (2020) showed that a multilevel community mobilisation programme with men from a peri-urban area was unable to transform their entrenched gender attitudes and had limited effect in reducing intimate partner violence perpetrated by males. However, Gibbs et al. (2020) observed a significant reduction in violence among highly violent men.

It may be possible to change gendered attitudes early in life, as gender perceptions and behaviour develop through the socialisation process (Bhana, 2005; Jewkes et al., 2020; Leaper, 2004). An intervention, at a young age, to raise awareness of positive masculinities and equality in gender relationships can encourage positive socialisation towards healthier gender perceptions.

Goal of the study

This study sought to evaluate whether a brief masculinity and gender equality intervention, the Hero Empathy Programme, would be effective to improve primary school boys' gender perceptions. The study attempted to answer the following questions:

1) Does participation in the intervention result in gender equity perceptions of boys?

2) Does positive self-esteem and family relationships contribute to gender equity perceptions of boys?

Method

Research design

The study employed a pre- and post-design, using a concurrent mixed methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). A survey was used to obtain quantitative data and the perceptions of boys were explored to explain the results in terms of their subjective experiences of the intervention (Willig, 2013).

Participants and setting

All Grade five boys (aged 10 to 12 years) from 10 low-resourced primary schools in Soweto and Atteridgeville, South Africa participated in the intervention, which was implemented in two phases of six weekly sessions each. The pre-and post-assessments of phase 1 was completed by 269 and 419 boys respectively, while 547 and 331 boys completed the phase 2 assessments respectively. Almost half of the boys (44.4%) were cared for by both their parents, while just more than a third (35.8%) stayed with their mothers as single parents and 12.6% were cared for by other adult family members or stayed in child-headed households.

Programme description

The HERO Empathy Programme for boys (Action Breaks Silence, 2021) aims to provide young boys an alternative perspective on masculinities and gender relationships based on respect towards women. In addition, it aims to:

- Develop boys' self-esteem and healthy expression of emotions.
- Break down gender stereotypes and accept gender equality.
- Build empathetic attitudes and respectful behaviour towards women and girls.
- Create a safe and positive environment where boys could express their feelings and have their voices heard within their peer group.
- Provide positive role models through both male and female trainers.
- Prevent abusive and violent behaviour against women and girls in the long run.

The programme consists of 12 sessions presented in two phases of six one-hour sessions, each presented over a six-week period (see Table 1). Trained assistants implemented the programme.

Data collection

Gender perceptions: A Gender Perception Scale (GPS) based on research by Jewkes et al. (2002) was used to assess gender perceptions in various contexts. The scale comprises 18 items answered on a 4-point Likert scale. A low score reflected acceptance of hegemonic gender norms, whereas a high score indicated support for equality in gender relationships. Examples of items are: "*A woman's role is to do household jobs and raise children*", "*A man should have the final say in family decisions*" (household context), "*Girls may refuse to have sex even when her boyfriend wants to have sex*" (intimate partner context) and "*There are times when a girl/woman deserves to be beaten or punished*" (intimate partner violence). In previous research with school-going children the reliability (Cronbach-α) of scores from this scale was 0.80 (N=3561) (Visser, 2017). In this study, the reliability of scores from the GPS ranged from 0.75 to 0.76 (Table 2).

Self-esteem: The 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (RSE) (Rosenberg, 1965), is a widely used measure of self-esteem. It is scored on a four-point scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree). A low score indicated a positive self-esteem. A reliability of 0.75 was recorded in a study on young women (Makin et al., 2008). In the current study, scores from the RSE yielded an alpha of 0.65 (Table 2).

Family relationships: The Safe, Caring and Child-friendly Schools Framework (Department of Basic Education, 2008) was used to develop 15 items answered on a four-point scale. Children rated their relationship with their mother/caregiver (3 items), father/male caregiver (3 items) and quality of family relationships (9 items). A low score implies positive relationships. Typical positive items are: "*My caregiver supports and encourages me*"; "*My*

caregiver is a role model of how I want to be" and a negative item is: "*There is often conflict in our house*". In previous research with school-going children the reliability of scores from the family relationships scale was 0.74 (N=3582) (Visser, 2017). The reliability of scores from the family relationships scale in this study varied between 0.65 to 0.72 (Table 2).

Focus group discussions

Before the intervention focus group discussions focused on what boys understood by "being a man", how they perceived relationships between boys and girls, men and women and how they viewed gender-based violence in their communities. The same boys participated in post-intervention focus group discussions on their gender perceptions.

Procedure

Ethical clearance for the evaluation was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. Permission to implement and evaluate the programme was granted by the Gauteng Education Department and the school management of each school. Parental consent was obtained for all the boys to participate in the intervention and the evaluation. Boys signed assent forms indicating willingness to participate. The identity of the participants is not used in reporting of the research results.

All boys that participated in the intervention completed the survey pre- and post-intervention for both phases. Ten boys from each of the ten schools participated in focus group discussions facilitated by two trained research assistants using the vernacular of the boys. The discussions were held during school hours in a classroom made available by the organising teacher. The discussions that generally took between 60 and 90 minutes were audio recorded, transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Data analysis

The analysis involved t-test comparison of pre- and post-intervention scores for each phase. In addition, correlations between scale scores were calculated as well as a stepwise linear

regression analysis predicting gender perception change scores. Focus group discussions were analysed following the thematic analysis procedures by Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes identified in data before and after the intervention, were compared. Two researchers analysed the data and reached consensus to enhance the trustworthiness of the interpretations.

Results

The results showed that boys' gender perception scores changed significantly (with small effect size) after the first phase of the intervention ($t = 3.38$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.27$). They showed more equal gender perceptions. No significant change in gender perceptions was reported in phase 2 or the overall analysis. These results were confirmed in a dependent samples t-test analysis (where boys' pre- and post-assessments were matched, in phase 1 ($n = 138$) and in phase 2 ($n=150$)).

Boys rated their relationships with their fathers significantly more negative after phase 2 ($t = 2.98$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.21$, small effect size) and overall ($t = 2.07$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.17$ small effect size). It may be that boys did not see their fathers as good role models after learning about gender equality. There were no significant differences in other scale scores.

Equality in gender perceptions of boys in the pre-assessment correlated significantly with a positive self-esteem ($r = -.468$, $p < .001$), being close to their mothers ($r = -.307$. $p < .001$) and positive family relationships ($r = -.416$, $p < .001$), as found in the literature.

Positive self-esteem of boys predicted change in perceptions of equality in gender relationships. This was found in a stepwise linear regression with gender perception change scores of matched boys during phase 1 as dependent variable and self-esteem and family relationship scores as predictors. Self-esteem was the only significant predictor of change in gender perceptions in a statistically significant model ($F(1, 131) = 8.595$, $p < 0.000$). This model only accounted for approximately 6.2% of the variance in change in gender perceptions. A similar regression analysis was done for overall change in gender perceptions

(from pre-assessment (phase 1) to post-assessment (phase 2)). The model did not significantly explain changes.

Themes from qualitative data

The themes illustrating change in attitudes and behaviour identified from the different phases are summarised below.

Masculinity: Following the intervention, the boys characterised men as being physically strong and brave, which allow them to be dominant in relationships and to take responsibility to be the provider and protector of their families:

"*A real man is someone who takes responsibility to take care of his family. He is always faithful to his wife and never allow other people to abuse and disrespect his children and wife.*"

Emotional expression: Boys have learned that they may express their emotions in adaptive ways: "*Real men can cry and express their feeling. I learned that as a man you need to express your emotions so that you do not get damaged from within or vent your anger on the wrong people.*"

Stereotypes: The boys questioned some stereotypes they believed in: "*The stereotype is that women should only clean and wash dishes, so now I have changed in a sense that I believe I can help and also clean.*"

Respect: Boys have learned to interact with girls as equals and with respect: "*We need to treat women and girls the same way we would like them to treat us. I have learned that women are human beings like us and therefore they also need the same level of respect we give to a man.*"

Violence: Boys realised that violence is not the preferred way to deal with their problems: "*Before the workshop we used to beat them – now we do not beat girls anymore. When I am provoked in class by girls, I just report the matter to the teacher.*"

Boys want fairness and mutual respect: Boys expressed that respectful relationships should come from both sides. Girls should not tease, provoke or emotionally abuse boys and take advantage of their kindness: *"Women need to respect men and men need to respect women."*

There were a few responses of boys in the post-assessment survey that shows that some boys held on to unhealthy norms which need to be addressed in future interventions.

Discussion

A brief intervention on positive perspectives of masculinities improved gender perception scores of young school boys, which maintained after the first phase of the intervention. Positive self-esteem scores predicted perceptions of equality in gender relationships, similar to findings of Diaz-Aguado and Marinez (2015). Surprisingly, the second phase of the intervention did not improve boys' gender equity scores. In these sessions the focus was on non-violent relationships and healthy communication and not specifically gender perceptions. The strongest effect of the intervention was breaking down gender stereotypes to allow them to see boys and girls as equals, to respect girls as "*human beings like us*" and to not endorse violence towards girls and women. These results compare to the subtle shift moving away from harmful aspects of masculinity, observed by Gibbs et al. (2015) in an intervention with young men.

The intervention thus contributed to shape gender perceptions of boys during a period of fluidity in acquiring masculine identities (Bhana, 2005), which could be more effective than interventions later in life. However, the sustainability of change in boys' perceptions and behaviour within a patriarchal context, is questionable. To address sustainability, the intervention should be developed further based on these results, to improve its efficacy for the specific population and then be implemented widely as part of school-based gender equity student support services to promote equitable gender norms – which needs to be implemented in South African schools.

Limitations and Conclusion

Limitations of the study include the lack of a control group to confirm that changes were the result of the intervention. Also, the intervention and assessments were in English which was not the boys' vernacular. Although trainers assisted them where needed, language barriers could have influenced the boys' responses to survey questions.

Nonetheless, this intervention showed promising results in the South African context and provide a basis for future studies. Interventions with boys (and men) to enhance gender equality would strengthen the sustainable development goal to reach equality in gender relationships, as interventions with women alone, as one side of the coin, will not be enough to reach this goal.

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Table 1 Content of the programme

Phase 1	1	Establish a safe environment. I am worthy to self-love: build self-esteem, action plan for self-care.
	2	I am competent: identify strengths and competencies, abilities, talents, qualities. Strengthen positive self-messages.
	3	Expression of emotions: Identify characteristics of a HERO, learn to express emotions. Men and women experience similar emotions (gender equality).
	4	Challenge gender stereotypes: Identify and challenge perceived gender characteristics and roles, promote equality.
	5	Develop empathy and respect for girls, prevent abuse of girls (being a HERO)
	6	Respect for women/girls: role play, pledge to be a HERO and respect women.
Phase 2	7	Setting goals: Revisit previous sessions, group expectations.
	8	Take a stand against abuse: Create awareness of abuse, help others by being active bystanders.
	9	Take a stand against abuse: Role play scenarios to prevent violence in relationships.
	10	Healthy relationships: how to set boundaries, respect others' boundaries, ask for consent in a role play.
	11	Assertive communication: demonstration of communication styles, role play assertiveness.
	12	Healthy relationships: circles of support. Commitment to non-violence and respect for women

Table 2 Reliability coefficients of the scales

Scale	Number of items	Phase 1 Pre-assessment (N=269) Cronbach-α	Phase 2 Pre-assessment (n=547) Cronbach-α
Gender perception	18	.749	.757
Self-esteem	10	.654	.646
Close to mother	3	.692	.648
Close to father	3	.771	.728
Family relationships	9	.654	.656

Table 3 Difference between pre- and post-assessments of phase 1 and phase 2 (independent samples analysis)

Variable	Group	n	Mean (SD)	T	df	p	Effect size (d)	T	df	p	Effect size (d)
								Overall difference			
Gender perception	Phase 1 pre	259	2.90 (0.43)								
	Phase 1 post	404	3.02 (0.45)	3.38	661	.001***	0.27				
	Phase 2 pre	543	2.97 (0.43)								
	Phase 2 post	328	2.95 (0.45)	-0.53	869	.60		1.45	585	.15	
Self-esteem	Phase 1 pre	255	1.96 (0.43)								
	Phase 1 post	402	1.91 (0.45)	-1.70	655	.09					
	Phase 2 pre	543	1.94 (0.46)								
	Phase 2 post	328	1.92 (0.47)	-0.77	869	.44		-1.27	581	.20	
Close to mother	Phase 1 pre	251	1.65 (0.69)								
	Phase 1 post	392	1.64 (0.66)	-0.15	641	.88					
	Phase 2 pre	547	1.60 (0.64)								
	Phase 2 post	331	1.56 (0.65)	-0.79	876	.43		-1.5	580	.13	
Close to father	Phase 1 pre	251	1.84 (0.78)								
	Phase 1 post	392	1.90 (0.81)	0.90	641	.37					
	Phase 2 pre	547	1.81 (0.77)								
	Phase 2 post	331	1.98 (0.87)	2.98	876	.003**	0.21	2.07	580	.039 *	0.17
Positive family support	Phase 1 pre	256	1.96 (0.48)								
	Phase 1 post	402	1.95 (0.51)	-0.23	656	.82					
	Phase 2 pre	541	1.91 (0.54)								
	Phase 2 post	330	1.94 (0.54)	0.65	869	.52		-4.43	584	.67	

*p < .05;   ** p < .01;   ***p < .001

Table 4 Correlations between variables

Variables	Gender perception	Self-esteem	Close to mother	Close to father
Gender perception	-			
Self-esteem	-.468***	-		
Close to mother	-.307***	.517***	-	
Close to father	0.28	.224***	.261***	-
Family relationships	-.416***	.539***	.179***	.180***

N = 259, ***p < .001