Mapping the unsafe school journey: Rural primary school children's perspectives on dangerous social geographies in South Africa

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A B S T R A C T

This paper describes a study conducted with 20 primary school children from a resource-poor rural community in South Africa. Using participatory mapping, the school children were asked to draw the paths they walked to school (referred to as child maps), and identify unsafe areas on this journey. The data were analyzed using participatory visual analysis techniques by focusing on the children's representations of their school journeys and their perspectives on their vulnerability on these paths. The analysis revealed a plethora of areas that posed a threat to children as they walked to school. Moreover, the findings suggest that children experienced hetero-patriarchal violence on their school journeys, which evoked fear and anxiety since they associated this walk with risk. Using participatory mapping offered a unique opportunity to see how school children constructed and navigated the routes they walked to school, and how on these paths, different forms of violence occurred. The children's maps offered an important tool for understanding the significance of space and place on routes to school in rural communities.

1. Introduction

There is growing evidence that highlights children's school journeys as unsafe (Chambers, 2018; Morojele and Muthukrishna, 2012; Morojele, 2013). Indeed, children report fears of and are bullied, harassed, and sexually assaulted as they make their way to school (Ngidi et al., 2021, 2018; Pells and Morrow, 2017; Porter et al., 2011). While schools are often framed as safe places that facilitate children's intellectual growth and development, available literature points to schools as areas where violence against children occurs. Globally, an estimated 246 million children experience violence each year in and around the school (UNESCO, 2016). Scholars have drawn attention to the gendered nature of school violence, and that it continues relentlessly, heightening school children's vulnerability and dampening their daily school experience (Morrell, 2002; Nicholson and Mukaro, 2018). This violence is pronounced in resource-poor communities, where it has been found to cluster around both primary and secondary schools (Breetzke et al., 2021).

Within the context of such violence, results from the 2020 National Household Travel Survey suggest that of the 17 million school children in South Africa, about 10.1 million (or 59,4 %) walked to school (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Of the 7.8 million primary school children aged between 7 and 13 years, more than 1 million walked up to 3 hours daily (Hall, 2019). Further, some of these children walked up to 10 kilometers to school (Hall, 2019). This is despite scholar transport being a basic right that the national Department of Basic Education (DBE) is constitutionally mandated to provide for all children across the country (Rogan, 2006). Children who have to walk more than six kilometers (roundtrip) to school qualify for state-provided transport (John, 2015). However, millions of children, particularly those in rural communities, still walk double that distance every school day (Hall, 2019).

Across South African provinces, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), the province where this study was based, has the highest percentage (20,3 %) of children who walk to school (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Additionally, 3.7 million school children in the province travel more than 60 min to school, while 33 % travel even longer (Equal Education, 2017). These numbers are particularly high in rural areas of the province, where for most children getting to school is a daunting task as they walk for hours, often on empty stomachs (Hall, 2019). These statistics show that physical access to school remains a problem for many children in South Africa, and KZN in particular. This applies especially to those from resource-poor rural areas with limited public transport to school, and

where households cannot afford private transportation for their children. Within this context, many children are transported to school by 'oMalume' (uncles) – a reference to the male drivers of informal scholar transport. However, this form of transport is risky given that vehicles are often overcrowded (Hunter, 2015). There have also been cases of sexual assaults perpetrated by oMalume in media reports (Bhengu, 2019). Yet, there is limited academic scholarship on the perpetration of sexual violence by oMalume (see, Hunter, 2015). For example, in 2019, the rape and subsequent impregnation of a 12-year-old school girl by a malume in KZN received both public and media attention (Rall, 2019). This, and other incidents of sexual violations against school children have resulted in public calls for the screening of oMalume (Bhengu, 2019).

Walking the school journey presents several risks for school children who must navigate treacherous terrains and inclement weather (De Kadt et al., 2014). What is more, in some high-risk areas in KZN, children who walk to school have reported feeling vulnerable to abductions, physical, verbal and sexual violence, crime, bullying, and even murder (Ngidi et al., 2021). Walking to school, especially without adult supervision, is problematic given that violence in South African resource-poor rural communities is ubiquitous (South African Police Services, 2021). South African children generally experience one of the highest rates of violence and are counted among the most bullied in the world (Ward et al., 2018). Sexual abuse and bullying are the most common forms of violence, with at least one in three children reporting an experience of sexual victimization in and around the school (Artz et al., 2018). Rural communities and their schools by extension are also sites of violence, with primary school children being one of the most vulnerable population groups (Pells and Morrow, 2017).

Global South scholarship has begun to direct attention to children's school journeys (Kingsly et al., 2020; Bourke, 2017; Ross, 2007; Su et al., 2013). For example, studies focusing on the walk to school report that children feel unsafe when passing by unmaintained paths and walking through busy and wider streets (Bourke, 2017). In other parts of the world, scholars have largely focused on the physical benefits of walking to school (Zavareh et al., 2020; Adminaité-Fodor and Jost, 2020), although some attention has been given to the broader well-being and safety of school children (Wandera et al., 2017; Jamme et al., 2018). In poor South African communities, children fear walking to school because of reports that their peers get abducted, robbed, and raped (Mahlaba, 2014; Ngidi, 2022a; Ngidi et al., 2021). Other studies report that parents are also concerned about their children's safety when walking to school (Francis et al., 2017). For example, parents from low socioeconomic rural communities report a fear of strangers who might harass, harm, or abduct their children (Motsa and Morojele, 2016). This paper emanates from research that sought to examine how rural primary school children experienced the walk to school. The paper focuses on data from participatory maps generated by primary school children to examine how these children identified and communicated about unsafe spaces and places on their school journey.

2. Framing children's journeys to school

To frame our analysis, we draw from the sub-discipline of children's geographies. Children's geographies recognize young people as a group with their views, ideas, and experiences that merit scientific exploration (Holloway, 2014). As a school of thought, it seeks to amplify children's understanding of the spaces and places they occupy, and the meaning of their social world as generated through their embodiment and engagement with the world and people surrounding them (Rollo, 2016). Children's geographies focus on young people as agents who are capable of making meaning of their social spaces (Bromley and Stacey, 2012). In this study, we sought to involve primary school children in research on their depiction of spaces and places (using participatory mapping) that posed a threat or which they perceived as unsafe on their walking journey to school. Involving school children as both knowers and actors of their own lives was key to understanding the salient spaces and places

of their school journeys (Morojele and Muthukrishna, 2012) and their experiences of gendered violence. Almost two decades ago, Fraser (2004) highlighted how this approach yields context-based benefits, including improving children's health outcomes. Researching with school children as co-researchers in the research process, rather than on them as objects to be studied, was significant in the context of this study and for the topic of child safety for several reasons (Treffly-Goatley et al., 2018). First, enlisting their insights was important for generating knowledge that is often silenced (Mahadev, 2015). Secondly, participating in the research allowed them to present for themselves their realities, narratives, and explanations about how they experienced the walk to school. Thirdly, research with school children was aimed at shifting and minimizing the impact of the unequal power dynamics that are often observed in research (De Lange and Geldenhuys, 2012).

3. Methodology

The data was drawn from a larger mixed-methods study called the 'Walking School Bus', which evaluated the impact of a walking school bus intervention on school children's experiences of violence and bullying. While the larger study used a variety of methods, in this paper we analyze data generated from the children's participatory maps. The participants were 20 primary school boys (n = 11) and girls (n = 9) aged 10–14 years and recruited through the community outreach office at the Human Sciences Research Councils (HSRC) Sweetwaters Research Site. Participants were purposively recruited because they lived, studied, and generally walked to school in rural communities situated in the KZN Midlands. These communities are characterized by high levels of poverty, unemployment, crime, and violence, as well as significant marginalization in services and infrastructure. The study contexts represent high-risk communities in the Vulindlela and Edendale areas. These contexts are characterized by substantial social and economic distress, evidenced by high levels of violence and crime (South Africa Police Services, 2021).

Participatory mapping draws strongly on the principles of participatory research in which participants work alongside researchers to generate multiple forms of locally held knowledge about their interaction with their environment (Preto et al., 2016). At the core of participatory mapping is the idea that children can map their social and physical environment to make prominent their experiences and perspectives of space and place. This approach simply asks that children map, through a simple drawing, their social world, and attach meaning to the spaces and places represented in their drawing (Wilson et al., 2018). In participatory mapping, children do not just hold a mental map, but they are asked to take it a step further by putting it on paper, in the form of a child-drawn map. For our research, we aimed to provide the school children with open-ended prompts and activity goals they used to not only create maps about their community but highlight the paths they walk to get to school. Moreover, within these paths, the school children were asked to identify places and spaces that they felt were not safe for them as they walk to and from school.

3.1. Generating data

In this study, we used participatory mapping to engage children on issues of safety as they journeyed by foot to school. Most of our participants exclusively walked to school, but some did on occasion take public or private transport. Of interest were the typical walking routes that children used to get to and from school. Data generation took place in a workshops, where we first introduced participatory mapping to the participants and provided them with examples of what others had produced in various studies. Following this, we invited participants to draw their routes to and from school, that is, the school children were asked to map their community by paying particular attention to the paths they used on their school journeys. They were given sheets of white A3 paper, pencils, colored pens, and crayons to draw their maps. They were given

one hour to think about their maps and to draw them. Once they had completed their maps, we further asked them to identify what they believed to be safe, sometimes safe, and unsafe areas on the path to school. To assist them with identifying these spaces, we provided the participants with colored round stickers[1] that they pasted next to the areas they identified as safe (green), sometimes safe (orange), or unsafe (red). Each participant was then asked to present and explain their map to the researchers and the other participants. They were also asked, in the form of a group discussion, to discuss their rationale for identifying areas along their route as safe or unsafe. The three mixed-sex group discussions, lasting for one hour each, created an opportunity for further input and conversations about their journeys to school. The discussions were mostly in isiZulu, the local language of the area. These were audiotaped and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

3.2. Data analysis

Our analysis was influenced by the work of Fiske, (1992), who advanced the idea of three sites of analysis or textuality. For Fiske, the image (i.e., the participatory map) is the primary text, and what the producers (of the participatory maps) say about their images and how they experienced making them is the production text. Finally, what the audience (those who come to see/view the images) says about the images is the audience's text. In working with children's maps in this study, we analysed the primary texts or the maps produced by the school children, and the producer texts, based on the participants' descriptions and explanations of their creations during group discussions. We then conducted a thematic analysis of all the material collected, including from the transcribed audiotapes of the discussions of the productions and the issues that emerged from them.

3.3. Ethical considerations

The study received ethics approval from the HSRC's Research Ethics Committee (HSRC REC) (Protocol No. 4/2208/18). Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians along with written informed assent from the child participants. We also obtained consent to use the participatory maps in our reports.

4. Findings: Mapping the unsafe walk to school

Using their maps, the participants identified their rural communities as social geographies where school children navigate safe and unsafe spaces. As illustrated by the red sticky dots in the children's maps (some presented in sections below), the walk to school was marked by several areas that children experienced as unsafe. In fact, in all their maps, the participants identified more unsafe spaces (red stickers) than safe spaces (green stickers). Only a few spaces were identified as safe, including their immediate homes and inside their schools. Through identifying their experiences in unsafe spaces, participants often articulated their perceived and experienced vulnerability to different forms of heteropatriarchal violence. Heteropatriarchy describes a social and political system that affirms the notion that cisgender males hold authority over women, children, and space (Harris, 2011). It is rooted in perilous masculinity, which allows for, and is sustained through, brutal expressions of violence, harassment, and abuse. Heteropatriarchal violence is thus understood to mean forms of violence, abuse, and harassment that are instigated by cisgender males. The fact that children illustrated and described more unsafe spaces is an important finding because it illuminates the ways and means to which rural school children are constantly under the gaze of perilous masculinity which renders children vulnerable to harm as they journey to school. Notably, both adult

and young men, especially those who use substances, were centrally identified as the key perpetrators of violence that school children experienced on their journey to school. For example:

> *Some of them smoke weed. The majority of them are men, they try and abduct children, [Someone's Name] child was abducted by the carwash (Participant 15, Boy, 11 years, FGD 3).*

> *Even near home, there are boys that smoke… that are in large groups and you find that you are afraid of passing them because they will keep shouting at you, but it's better to stay at home, even near home is not safe that much (Participant 4, Girl, 12 years, FGD 3).*

In the following sections, we zoom in on these violent heteropatriarchal geographies (social geographies that are cisgender male-dominated, and in which men perpetrate violence against school children) that the participants identified as unsafe. Moreover, we highlight the existence of perilous masculinity which is characterized by violent acts, threats, and the policing of spaces that are navigated by school children.

4.1. Taverns as spaces of heteropatriarchal violence

Most participants identified taverns in their communities as places of the omnipresent threat of harassment and violence on their walk to school. As Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate, taverns were marked as red zones, implying a sense of looming danger and vulnerability for school children. Taverns were described as places often occupied by intoxicated people (usually adult and young cisgender males) who harassed school children. In group discussions, the participants expressed their distress about passing by taverns on the school journey, primarily out of fear of experiencing physical and sexual victimization, suggesting for example that:

> *[I]t gets packed with a lot of men who drink… It gets scary to walk past here […] because they might rape you (Participant 3, girl, 12 years, FGD 1).*

Agreeing, Participant 4 spoke of incidents where adult men at a tavern in her community harassed girls through cat-calling, unwanted sexual attention, and unsolicited touching.

> *When I leave home for school I pass the tavern, at the tavern, some men are usually drunk and they cat-call us. They call the girls that pass there, they shout and tell them to come to them. They shout and say "yeyi nina zingane wozani nizohla la" (hey there you girls come and sit here with us). They keep saying we must sit with them (Participant 4, Girl, 12 years, FGD 1).*

The girls in the study also reported experiences where male tavern patrons would chase or stalk them to school. In some instances, these men sexually harassed school girls as detailed in a participant's discussion of her map below:

> *Here is kwaMkhize (a pseudonym) and over there you find men drinking and some of them are fighting, one time a man chased us and we don't know why he chased us and we ran away, and then over here is kaMavuka (a pseudonym), men drink there as well. They do all sorts of things there. One day we were walking past here with [my friends] and over here three men started following us and we tried to run away and while we were running to cross to the other side of the road another group of men appeared in front of us and we had to turn back. Over here it's at eStezi (a pseudonym), at eStezi it's not safe because there are also men who drink, smoke, and do all types of things inside eStezi, and they used to harass us and touch our buttocks (Participant 5, Girl, 14 years, FGD 1).*

In describing the experiences of the unsafety of taverns, other participants reported being mugged and physically assaulted, for example:

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[1] The green, yellow and red stickers represented safe, sometimes safe and unsafe spaces as identified by the school children.
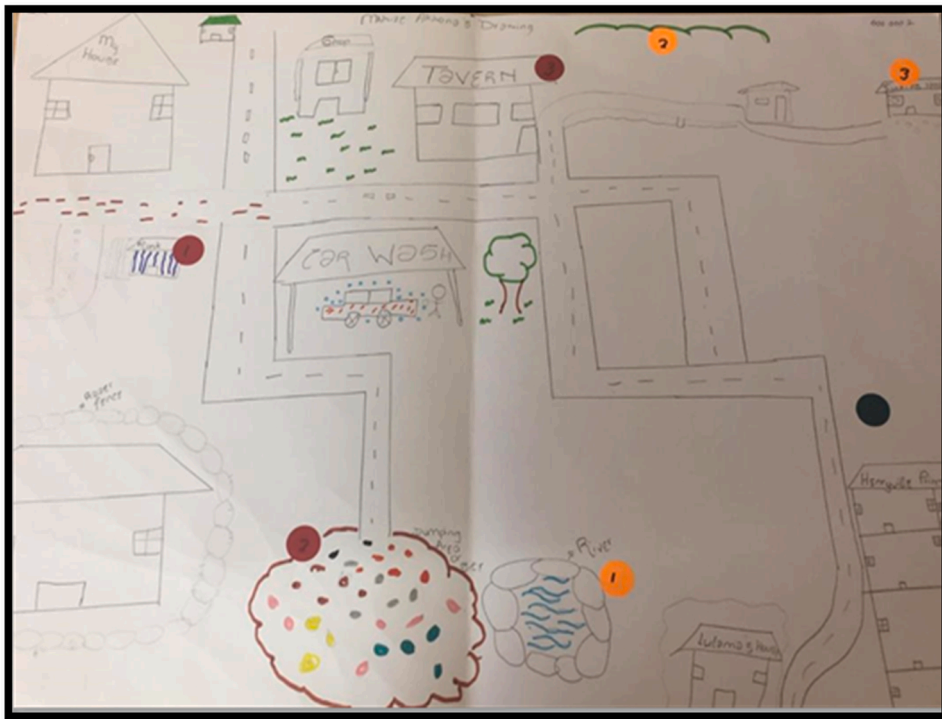
Child Map 1.

I have been robbed before around here at kaMkhaya (a pseudonym)*, they've robbed me and beat me and took my money, sometimes they throw bottles at us even when we have done nothing wrong and are just passing by (Participant 6, Girl, 12 years, FGD 1).*

At eStezi when you walk past there is a tavern, when you are going past you first start at the tavern. Someone can grab you, there is a small house there where people smoke and where the street kids sleep and then they

grab hold you and put you in this house and rape you. Someone can get drunk and then grab you (Participant 7, Boy, 10 years, FGD 2).

These maps and narratives illustrate the problematic, and often violent, behaviors of men against school children, exacerbated in heteropatriarchal spaces where men use alcohol. Taverns have been identified as spaces that infringe on child' safety and as obstacles in ensuring school children's safety (Fouche et al., 2019), and research has

Child Map 2.

highlighted the amplified risk of sexual assault for youth who drink at or walk by taverns (Letsela et al., 2019).

4.2. Dense bushes as places of sexual violence

Dense bushes were also identified as unsafe by participants. Children used the routes through the bushes as shortcuts to school. However, these spaces were experienced (or perceived) as dangerous, with participants reporting being mugged/robbed, harassed, and even raped by boys and men. One participant, referring to a dense bush he had penciled on his map, suggested that "*the bushes [were] not safe because there are criminals when we are on our way to school they rob us of our money* (Participant 15). The girls reported getting harassed by boys and men who used the bushes as their preferred space for smoking and drug trading. These instigators, according to the participants, were intent on raping girls who were heading to school. For example, Participant 4 shared a case she heard from her mother of a Grade 11 girl who was abducted and raped by boys in one of the bushes around the neighborhood.

> *Over here (pointing to a bush in his drawing) children are harassed, those guys that smoke wants to rape them, those guys that smoke do so in these bushes where children pass and then they catch us and… they fight you. There's a girl that was passing here, she is in Grade 11, she was passing here, men were sitting around here then they caught her. They raped her, they caught and raped her … her mother told my mother about this. You shouldn't go to the other side of it in the bush because that's where the danger is and there's this path that continues towards the river where children are harassed (Participant 4, Girl, 12 years, FGD 1)*

Even those participants who had not experienced violence or harassment in the bushes held a strong perception of danger and unease about navigating these spaces. For example, Participant 7 feared being accosted by strangers who might end up raping her:

> *Over here (pointing to a bush on her map) it's not safe because it can happen that if you take this short cut someone might approach you and ask you to accompany them. It's by the eTsheneni* (a pseudonym) *where the bush is. Someone may call you and go with you and they rape you. It's*

also not safe because it's a bush … someone might come and rape you. (Participant 7, Girl, 10 years, FGD 2)

Participant 9 held similar sentiments and expressed her fear of walking through the bushes in inclement weather, especially for girls:

> *When we get to the bushes, if there is fog one of us can be abducted, and we usually walk as girls. These are the bushes and when there is fog the men usually hide in the bush and then harass us (Participant 9, Girl, 13 years, FGD 2).*

Another participant lamented the danger he and his peers experienced when they traversed the path through dense bushes in his community. Strikingly, the participant further highlighted girls' vulnerability to rape while journeying through these bushes:

> *In the afternoon when we come back from school, we have to walk to the rank (to get transport), here's the rank here, but when we walk we used to come across danger because the path we walked had a forest (dense bush), it was hidden and there were not many houses around, so there was a lot of robberies so that's where they would catch us and … there were other girls that were raped there, they were raped in the afternoon whilst we were on our way back from school so… I think it was around 15:30 going on to 16:00 so there weren't that many students around and these girls were walking alone [inaudible segment], then they get raped (sic) (Participant 8, Boy, 12 years, FGD 2).*

The idea that dense bushes and unkempt spaces pose a criminal risk has been identified in previous research (Muthukrishna and Morojele, 2012; Ngidi et al., 2021). School children in this study have also identified bushes as red zones, occupied by criminals, substance abusers, abductors, and rapists. Even for those who had no negative personal experiences, children were able to vicariously relay the experiences of friends and other community members, which heightened their stress and anxiety about navigating spaces and places that were marked by bushes or trees.

4.3. Fear of public spaces

Public spaces such as taxi ranks, car wash establishments, and bus shelters were also marked as unsafe by participants. Their
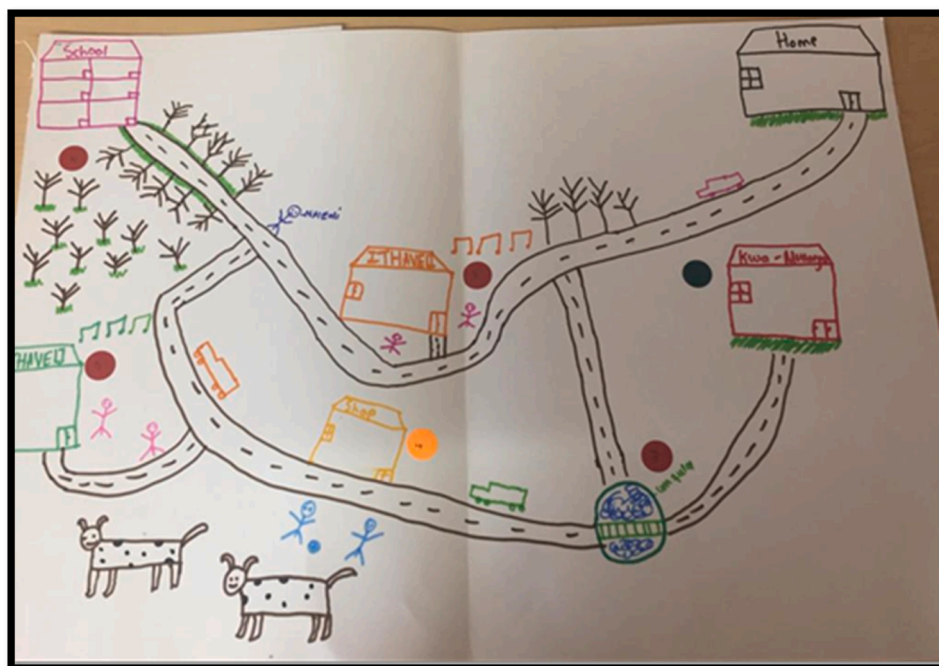
Child Map 3.

accompanying narratives underscored a sense of vulnerability to violence when they navigated such spaces. Available evidence suggests that in these spaces hegemonic masculinity is maintained through violence and intimidation (Ngidi et al., 2018; Sonke Gender Justice, 2018).

The vulnerability was further exacerbated by the knowledge that homeless youths roamed the taxi rank. While there is no scholarly evidence that homeless youths violated school children at taxi ranks, the findings illustrate a form of daily psychological terror that followed these primary school children.

For me what I can say was dangerous was the walk from school to the (taxi) rank in the afternoon when we came back from school because this route was quiet, street kids would appear from out of nowhere whilst you were unaware and attack you (Participant 16, Boy, 14 years, FGD 3).

One participant reported experiences of harassment by homeless youth in and around the taxi rank. According to him, the homeless youth used the taxi rank to mug school children and threatened them with weapons such as knives. As the participant reported, one of his friends had been stabbed by a homeless youth while walking past the taxi rank to school. Moreover, girls faced unwanted sexual attention and harassment in these spaces.

Here is home, when I leave here and walk down the road I run into street kids, when you walk down here they keep asking us for R1.00 (US$ 0.061), and when you don't want to give him R1.00 he says he will stab you. They threaten you with the knife and take it out, they have stabbed someone before. It's another boy called [friend's name]. They first asked him for R1.00 and he asked them why they don't go work for it. They said they will do it if he doesn't want to give them money, they said they will stab him, he said to do it and then they stabbed him. They also harass girls, [and] if the girls don't want to then they grab them forcefully and take the girls with them (Participant 15, Boy, 11 Years, FGD 3)

Indeed, other public places such as bus shelters and car wash establishments were also cited as unsafe. The participants reported a sense of fear that emanated from their vulnerability of not just being robbed, but also the prospect of abduction and sexual abuse. In the focus group discussions, the participants noted instances of heteropatriarchal violence that they experienced while transiting those spaces.

At home it is safe but when you get to the bus shelter, as you can see the red, the red indicates that the bus shelter is not safe because once it reaches a certain time of the day then they start robbing us [especially if] it was quiet and empty in the streets (Participant 18, Boy, 11 years, FGD 3).

We accompany [our friend] to catch the bus to school… some boys harass us here. They keep cat-calling us, touching us, and wanting us to come to them, and asking us out (sic) (Participant 10, Girl, 12 years, FGD 2).

Finally, as the map in Figure 4 - shows, car wash establishments were also cited as unsafe. In one exchange between the first author and participants, it was revealed that at car wash establishments, girls were harassed and abducted. In a chilling revelation, Participant 3 reported a case of a young girl who was "*abducted*" near a carwash place, and her lifeless body was later found "*floating on a river*".

Researcher: The child you are talking about, you said she was abducted at the carwash, and then what happened?

Participant: She was abducted and then taken to the grounds where the forests are nearby… they searched all over for her until she was found floating on the river (Participant 3, Girl, 12 years, FGD 1).

These findings delineate a kind of childhood fear of public spaces. They further suggest that even the seemingly safe places such as bus shelters and taxi ranks were experienced and perceived as unsafe by primary school children. The school children's experiences and fears of navigating public spaces suggest that children have limited spatial

Child Map 4.

Child Map 5.

agency. Rather, public spaces are experienced as not only unsafe but as anti-child geographies that posed a serious threat to the lives of school children. This inhibits children's navigation of the areas they walked to school; creating as it does a sense of helplessness and the expectation that violence might occur any time when children journey to school.

5. Discussion

Participants' maps illustrate that school children constantly experience, imagine, and fear harassment and violence on their school journeys. This vulnerability impacts their sense of safety, agency, and belonging in their community. This study illustrates how violence, and the threat thereof, acts as social control measures of children's physical and mental geographies. The participants' maps show the many spaces/ places on rural primary school children's walk to school that they perceived as unsafe; there was significant agreement among children participants on these red zones.

Taverns were spaces commonly identified as unsafe by participants. In their unpacking, participants described taverns as problematic spaces for children at the hands of intoxicated men. In other words, participants' descriptions of their experiences and fears of taverns on their school journeys reflect concerns about heteropatriarchal violence. In South Africa's resource-poor communities, taverns are ever mushrooming. Recent liquor legislation in the country has centered on these spaces as conduits for crime and violence (Herrick and Charman, 2013). For example, a qualitative study in North West Province found taverns as spaces where sexism is perpetuated and violence is perpetrated by men" (Rich et al., 2015). In this way, taverns were identified as spaces where men "can reaffirm their gender power and masculinity" (Rich et al., 2015, p. 288). This resonates with our study findings, where although not present as patrons of taverns, children described feeling vulnerable walking past taverns and reported harassment by intoxicated men. Children in this study experienced taverns as geographies that cemented and allowed for the performance of perilous masculinities. This aligns with findings that link male aggressive behavior in tavern spaces with their need to assert their masculine identity, accompanied by shows of power, dominance, and importance (Wells et al., 2014). It is plausible that these behaviors spill over to children navigating their way to school and passing drinking establishments.

Other 'red zones' identified by our child participants, were bushes, unkempt spaces, and public spaces typically dominated by men. A common thread that resonated between the spaces, was that they were gendered and heteropatriarchal. While this is more overt for spaces like taverns and car washes with frequent demonstrations of violent masculinities, the bushes, and forests were also reportedly occupied by men who abuse drugs or commit other crimes. In particular, available reports suggest that perpetrators often use dense bushes around communities to violate school children (Ngidi, 2022b; 2021). These acts are particularly pronounced in resource-poor communities such as those that were the focus of this study. It is therefore not surprising that the participants feared walking past or closer to bushy areas. It is also noteworthy that the participants referred to these dense bushes as "forests". During transect walks of various paths to school, these "forests" were observed by researchers to be just a few trees in an open space. This perhaps speaks to the psychological perception of these geographies. Because of the significant mental distress that school children felt, combined with a sense of lingering fear, the bushes in their mental maps became something more substantive. In hindsight, we should have questioned this use of terminology from the participants. Nonetheless, these findings suggest that the experience and fear of violence might alter children's spatial perceptions.

In contrast to fears of less densely populated spaces like forests and bushes on their school journeys, children described an intense fear of potential harm in certain public spaces, especially those dominated by men – such as taxi ranks, bus shelters, and car washes. These findings align with those of previous research on adolescents. In a study that used a photovoice methodology to explore adolescents' perspectives on sexual violence in one rural community in South Africa, the authors found that young people experienced sexual harassment at bus shelters (Ngidi et al., 2018). Our findings in this paper suggest that unwanted sexual attention at bus shelters was a significant issue for school children. Similarly in South Africa, taxis are a dominant form of transportation for many school children – these spaces are "characterized by a misogynistic culture and high risk of exposure to violence" (Eagle and Kwele, 2021, p. NP8035). Young women participants in a study on their experiences of using mini-bus taxis reported experiencing and witnessing multiple types of violence at taxi ranks, including street crime and sexual harassment and assault. These experiences create perpetual fear, stress,

and anxiety in navigating these spaces (Eagle and Kwele, 2021) in resonance with reports from our participants. Homeless youth who occupy these public spaces were also perceived as threatening to both young boys and girls, who feared being mugged, physically assaulted, sexually harassed, and abducted. This reflects other research in South Africa which indicated avoidance of parks and open spaces due to concerns about criminal activity and the presence of homeless people (Snyders and Landman, 2018).

In resonance with other scholarship, boys and men were cited as the perpetrators of violence against children on their journey to school (Hampshire et al., 2011). This points not only to men's performance of harmful masculinity but further draws attention to how space in rural areas is constructed as heteropatriarchal, where even children are surveilled, controlled, and punished. The geographies that children navigate to reach school are thus produced through heteropatriarchal relations and reproduced in everyday violent practices against school children. This has developmental, health, and educational implications for school children. The fear and terror the participants expressed suggest that spatial trauma was part of their daily lives. This means that children experience trauma and anxiety even before they enter their school premises. It follows, therefore, that school children live and learn in fear. There are also notable gendered trends in the experiences reported by the participants. For example, while both boys and girls in the study felt unsafe when they walked to school, their fears were strikingly different because of different experiences. For boys, their experiences and fears largely centered on crimes such as muggings and physical assaults. For girls, the crime and violence they experienced and feared were gendered and sexual. Moreover, it seems girls, more than boys, reported experiences where children were not just abducted but were later raped and even murdered. As highlighted in this paper, this experience is not unique to our research. The media in South Africa has revealed cases of abduction, rape, and murder of school children as they walk to and from school. Research also suggests the potential for sexual harassment and sexual violence during the school journey (Kaufman et al., 2004; Dunne et al., 2006). Previous research on mobility with children confirmed their concerns about being bullied, attacked, robbed, abducted, and/or sexually violated (Hampshire et al., 2011).

While both girls' and boys' experiences are traumatic and highlight the scope and extent of their vulnerability when walking to school, it is the experiences of girls that are largely concerning insofar as they relate to sexual violence and harassment. In addition to muggings, girls are vulnerable to sexual violence, including rape and murder. We argue for the need to start thinking spatially about school children's vulnerability on their journeys to school. Space and place matter for understanding childhood experiences. They are also significant in shaping children's social and educational experiences. Our paper draws attention to the area of research which brings together children's social, developmental, and educational geographies by highlighting how, in this case, issues of safety and lack of safety come to the fore (Hampshire et al., 2011). Using children's maps offered us a unique opportunity to see how primary school children constructed their social and educational environments, including the geographies of heteropatriarchal violence and harassment that constituted major threats to their well-being and left them feeling unsafe. Participatory mapping thus offers an important tool for unpacking and understanding the significance of geography in school-related violence.

6. Conclusion

This study opens new avenues into thinking about and understanding how rural primary school children experience, perceive, and understand their walk to school, as well as the spaces they navigate during this journey. As the findings illustrate, school children face several social obstacles even before they reach their respective schools. It is evident from the findings that more sustainable interventions are required to provide safety for children. Chief among these is the urgent need for

scholar transport that is subsidized by the government. Given that rural areas in South Africa are resource-poor settlements that accommodate the working and low-income class, free learner transport could prove to be a progressive step towards South Africa's commitment to children's rights and the realization of child protection during the journey to school. However, given inherent challenges with the implementation of scholar transport we make some recommendations for alternative measures to improve learner safety. Our previous community-based research (Ngidi et al., 2018) identified that better lighting in communities was an important safety measure and this should be considered a cost-effective and feasible solution in all communities. Walking school bus interventions where children are chaperoned to and from school by screened adults have also been implemented to ensure safe journeys to and from school (Essack and Ngidi, 2018; Muchaka and Behrens, 2012). Visible policing of heteropatriarchal spaces like taxis ranks, taverns, and car washes may also allay fears of school children and minimize the perpetration of violence in these spaces (Ngidi et al., 2021, 2020). Finally, dense and unkempt bushes have been frequently identified as unsafe by children in research (Ngidi et al., 2021; Muthukrishn and Morojele, 2012). Cutting and maintaining these spaces may be a simple and feasible solution to addressing children's perceptions of vulnerability and ensuring their safety. Globally, policies to promote walking to school for physical health benefits and related social benefits have been developed and implemented. However, in South Africa, many children walk long distances to school as a result of poor socio-economic conditions and face many hazards on this journey. Yet, South Africa has not established policies to ensure safe journeys to school. Therefore, relevant policies should be developed that are responsive to the inherent social, physical, children overall well-being?.

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