

BOOK CHAPTER

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Introduction

All-girls schools are commonly framed as institutions meant to empower girls to be their best selves in environments that foster compassion and excellence. In independent private schools, notions of language, privilege and place are closely tethered to history and traditions, woven into the cultural fabric of the institution, creating certain expectations and archetypes of the “ideal girl.” Girls’ identities and experiences of girlhood are multifaceted, hybridized, and constructed through their ties to various and simultaneous shifting, partial, and social locations (Bettis & Adams, 2009; Zaslow, 2009). Conversely, much of the popular and contemporary literature on girls from the last 30 years not only takes a protectionist stance, focusing on the negative and worrisome aspects of peer culture and adolescence, but also often makes broad claims about “girls” as a monolithic group (e.g., Cohen-Sandler, 2005; Pipher, 1994), failing to account for factors like intersectional identities, and how literacy practices, contexts, and environments inform who they are and who they want to be. In a similar vein, framing girlhood as a universal phenomenon flattens the experience, which, from a critical standpoint, largely reinforces White, upper-middle class, heteronormative experiences of girls and girlhood as “normal” and/or “typical.” It is also important to acknowledge the treatment of “girl” and “girlhood” as concepts that are overwhelmingly cisgendered, and often heteronormative, in nature. Therefore, this study employed a working understanding (as opposed to a firm definition) of “girlhood,” conceptualized as the various temporal, ecological, cultural, and discursive storylines that intersect to construct and define the experiences of being a girl, and the places and spaces within which these experiences occur.

This chapter draws from a qualitative case study at the Clyde School, an elite, independent private all-girls high school in Manhattan. The study interrogated how ideations of girls and girlhood are constructed and promoted as part of the school's institutional identity and how high school students in turn understand, negotiate, subscribe to, and/or resist dominant narratives of what it means to "be a girl" across the contexts of school and life. The study consisted primarily of interviews with 17 students and 5 school leaders. Using a critical analysis of discourse, the language, beliefs, values, and practices that collectively work to construct a school's institutional identity were examined and, in turn, how students perceive and challenge notions of what it means to be a student at the Clyde School were examined.

In this sense, the study took the form of critical-activist inquiry—research that seeks “not to prove or disprove, but rather to create movement, to displace, to pull apart and allow for resettlement...it seeks [to identify] what is possible and made manifest when our taken-for-taxonomic certainties are intentionally shaken” (Rolling, 2013, p. 99). Brown and Strega (2005, in Rolling, 2013) explain that critical-activist inquiry “produces resistance narratives—counter-stories to authoritative grand narratives that are critical, indigenous or local, and anti-oppressive. To be critical is to activate new discourse overwriting prior theory and practice” (p. 109). The hope is not necessarily to gather narratives that will stand in direct opposition to the “majoritarian story” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), but rather will work to *disrupt* the idea that only a single narrative exists—one that compresses experiences and silences the intersectional relationships between young people, institutions, and society. It is in these moments of disruption that we might begin to untangle and re-examine the cultural, discursive, and systemic practices that work to construct place in an all-girls school like Clyde and then

begin to collaboratively engage in reimagining what these spaces could look like when multiple narratives are embraced to create more authentically inclusive places and spaces.

Conceptual Framework

Literacy/ies as Socially Situated Practices

Many scholars (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Jewitt, 2005; Vasudevan, 2009) argue that literacy is multimodal—visual, spoken, written, gestural—and critical skills are needed to analyze and understand a range of media such as newspapers, television, film, Internet, radio, and magazines (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Janks, 2010). As a result, they feel that the practice and process of “reading” is deeply situated in social and cultural contexts and, as critical theorist Paulo Freire (2000) posits, consists of learning how to read both the word and the world critically (in Janks, 2010). There is power in engaging young people in new literacies practices that account for, value, and revolve around their lived experiences and perceptions of the world.

Evolving from the new literacies movement, contemporary scholars of critical literacy continue the push to expand verbo- and logo-centric definitions of literacy to consider the body (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012) and artifacts (Pahl & Rowsell, 2011) as texts that require critical literate practices to be read, interpreted, judged, analyzed, and negotiated. Embodied literacies practices are personal, political, and rife with assumptions and subjectivities. Kamler (1997, in Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012) understands the body as a text that is “produced by socially circulating norms for gender, race, sexuality, class, age and ability” (p. 35). In this sense, we read bodies by drawing from personal knowledge, lived experiences, discursive practices, media representations, and so on to make sense of who we are; to determine where we fit into micro and macro social orders; and to communicate particular ways of being through speaking, dressing, or gesturing that can reinforce or challenge social norms and power imbalances.

Identity/ies in Practice

From a sociocultural perspective, identities are “mediated, constrained, and juxtaposed” (Johnson, 2012) with intersecting subjectivities (e.g., race, socioeconomic class, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, ability, etc.) that are socially constructed and reinforced through sources such as mass media, popular culture, and school (Collins, 2000; Johnson, 2012). It is during adolescence that young people begin to situate themselves in both local and more global contexts (Noguera, 2012), drawing from the discourses available—behaviors, beliefs, social cues, dress, gestures—to perform and experiment with identity. Identities offer “different ways of participating” in various sorts of social groups, cultures, and institutions (Gee, 2005) such as a being a “good student,” a “star athlete,” a “people person,” or in the case of this study, a “Clyde Girl,” an institutional archetype that embodies the ideals of a student--and therefore a girl--at Clyde. How we understand ourselves and others is fundamentally shaped by our daily interactions and lived experiences in the places, contexts, and institutions we occupy (Nukkula, 2012). Within a sociocultural framing, identity is both an internal understanding of self as well as a set of practices outwardly expressed through, among other things, literacies. Literacy/ies practices, therefore, become the tools and modes of communication engaged when writing our own identities into being and reading—constructing and deconstructing—the identities of others.

Place and Institutional Identity

Harvey (1996, in Conley, 2016) aptly notes that place “has to be one of the most multilayered and multi-purpose keywords in our language,” functioning as metaphor, material, and territory (p. 50). Mollie Blackburn (2001) understands *space* as a dialogic *between* place and people; space refers to “people within a place and the ways in which that place brings people to life” (p. 64). She goes on to say that if a space does not allow for particular articulations or

expressions of self, then that space stops being a space for that particular performance of identity. Additionally, Gruenewald (2003, in Tupper, Carson, Johnson, & Mangat, 2008) contends, “If researchers consider that ‘places are what people make of them—that people are place-makers and that places are a primary artifact of human culture,’ then it seems reasonable that schools ‘might play a more active role in the study, care and creation of spaces’” (p. 1066). Given the significant amount of time that young people spend at school, examining the affordances of space(s) and place(s) are crucially important when considering how young people talk about and situate themselves within this setting.

Additionally, Charlotte Linde (2009), is concerned with the social and linguistic mechanisms used by members of an institution to *work the past*, or construct its collective identity, seeking to tell “an integrated story about stories within institutions: how they are formed, retained, passed on, changed, and used to affect both the narrators and the institution being narrated” (p. 14). One aspect of her study entailed looking at how people tell their own stories within an institution to reveal:

...small links and minute traces between individual stories and stories of the institution that indicate how people are inducted into institutional membership and ... learn to shape their stories to harmonize with the events and values of the main institutional narratives. (Linde, 2009, p. 4)

The practice of “working the past” highlights the importance of understanding an institution’s identity—the context of a school’s history, traditions, and discursive practices, and how they inform a collective of individuals in the present—in order to further explore how ideas of girlhood, and subsequently membership and belonging, are disseminated, reinforced, and perceived at the Clyde School.

The “All-Girls School” as Place

The literature that focuses on the institutional identities of all-girls schools in the United

States is complicated. Girls' schools are often celebrated not only for providing equitable access to education but empowering girls physically, emotionally, and intellectually. For instance, in providing a historical context for the Oakland-based all-girls school she co-founded, DeBare (2004) explains that all-girls schools "typically view their mission as extending beyond academics to address the social and emotional challenges facing girls, such as issues of self-esteem, body image, and sexuality" (p. 309). Similarly, McCall (2014) finds that the Parker School, an elite, private school for girls, "represents an ordinary world of learning where girls feel smart, special, cared for, and privileged" (p. 178). Like the Clyde School, the Parker School is committed to reaching and supporting every girl and providing "every opportunity" to their students (McCall, 2014).

All-girls schools, like other social institutions, construct *institutional identities* over time and in relation to their members (Linde, 2009), producing discourses, or "configuration[s] of knowledge and its habitual forms of expression" (Cazden et al., 1996, p. 75) that reflect particular interests, values, and beliefs. As a result, examining how literacy, identity, and place intersect and operate within a particular context is an important dimension to consider in research about the constructions of girlhood and discourse around expressions of self in single-sex schools.

Framing the "all-girls school" as having a particular institutional identity and history of constructing girls and single-sex education in particular ways requires a closer look at the historical relationship between girls and all-girls schools. Highlighting the dialogic power of belonging that exists between an institution and its members, Gee (2000) writes:

When an identity is underwritten and sustained by an institution, that institution works, across time and space, to see to it that certain sorts of discourse, dialogue, and interactions happen often enough [and] in similar enough ways to sustain the identities it underwrites. (p. 105)

While single-sex schools may share many commitments and goals to girls' education, they do not necessarily operate in a uniform manner, nor do they exist in dichotomous opposition of one another (DeBare, 2004; McCall, 2014). And while the narratives of encouragement, opportunity, and access in girls' schools may function in supportive and productive ways at times, they also run the risk of conveying essentialized images of institutions and populations in ways that silence inequities and differences, subsequently reinforcing dominant beliefs and hegemonic practices. Citing Deal's (1991) work delineating public schools from private schools, Proweller (1999) explains that, unlike the public school where community is "typically melded through an explicit set of regulatory practices, the private school binds individuals together through a common set of cultural codes that regulate student socialization inside and outside of school" (p. 780). Implying universal experiences across public, private, and parochial "all-girls schools," assigning them to a singular narrative, fails to account for the historical and contextual nuances of the institutions—how factors like race, class, gender, geography, school funding, and so on intersect and impact a school's culture, community, and identity.

The [hidden] ethos of privilege in Manhattan's elite private schools. One of the most significant challenges of conducting research in elite, private, independent schools lies in the ability to "access and then mine surface forms that embody social relations of privilege, inequalities, and hierarchies that are typically invisible because they have been so thoroughly institutionalized" (Proweller, 1998, p. 221). For instance, Amira Proweller (1998) finds that the "fabric of cultural life" at Best Academy is knit together by "social relations of privilege," deeply embedded and embodied in the structures and practices of the institution (p. 221). Her work examines how adolescent girls play active roles in shaping who they are on a daily basis, challenging the traditional view of young people as passive recipients of the institutional

structures and discourses available to them when it comes to identity formation. Proweller must, however, work through the tensions of utilizing a poststructural framework within an institution steeped in traditional conceptions of success and belonging:

Full support for academic excellence creates a climate that fosters confidence, independence, and self-reliance among girls because of and not in spite of the fact that they are female. Through a curriculum that promotes values of individualism, academic excellence, moral behavior, and community service, female students are being prepared for their place in the [upper middle-]class continuum. (p. 202)

Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1983) describes a similar feeling on the campus of St. Paul's, an elite boarding school in New England. She notes the school's "supreme orchestration" of events and people, arguing that only a school with abundance, privilege, and a sense of institutional security can anticipate and coordinate life in this way. The experiences and memories of the institution are rooted in tradition, which seems to influence the present (Linde, 2009). Traditions, Lightfoot (1983) argues, function as active artifacts that reinforce a discourse of "it has always been that way" (p. 225), making it difficult to question or re-examine the relevance and inclusiveness of a school's customs. This phenomenon is particularly salient when it comes to critically analyzing (and pushing back on) the language, beliefs, customs, and assumptions that have circulated throughout a school community and culture for years.

Methodology

This critical case study used qualitative research methodology to explore how notions of girls and girlhood are constructed, understood, and promoted at an elite, private all-girls school and to investigate how high school students perceive, navigate, and investigate constructions of girls and girlhood within their school and life worlds. To restate, "girlhood" refers to the various temporal, ecological, cultural, and discursive storylines that intersect to construct and define the experiences of "being a girl," and the places and spaces within which these experiences occur.

The study focused on how teenage girls read and write their realities in a particular environment using multimodal literacies practices. Specifically:

RQ1: How are girls and experiences of girlhood institutionally constructed within an elite, private, independent all-girls high school in New York City?

RQ2: How do high school students and school leaders read (interpret, perceive) constructions of girls and girlhood at an elite, private, independent all-girls school in New York City?

Data collection included semi-structured interviews, two multimodal media-making activities with sophomores, participant observations, and document review.¹ In total, 17 students were interviewed (10 seniors, 2 juniors, and 5 sophomores), as well as 5 school leaders. Because this study sought to amplify the diverse voices, positionalities, and identities of the student population, youth participants are further introduced below (Table 1).² While not all participants are included in the findings discussed in this chapter, the table below provides a full composite of the dynamic and diverse group of young people involved in this study. A combination of theoretical and quota sampling methods were used to recruit student participants based on a variety of access points and personal relationships that I had to students. Theoretical, or theory-based, sampling entails examining individuals “who can contribute to the evolving theory” of your study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 104).³ All participants (and the school itself) have been given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

¹ Given the scope of this chapter, only select data from the set of semi-structured interviews will be presented and discussed.

² Information includes their names (pseudonyms), grade levels, and the identifiers they provided during their interviews. Participants shared the identifiers they were comfortable with, so some students provided a more comprehensive list than others.

³ Participation in this study was voluntary. I received permission to conduct interviews with students and school leaders from each individual (and from parents as well if participants were under 18-years-old).

Table 1. Student Participants' Identifiers

| Student | Grade | Identifiers |
|----------|-----------|---|
| Raine | Sophomore | Female; speaks French, English, and Italian |
| Karl | Sophomore | She/her at Clyde (any pronouns for online persona); Chinese-Canadian; upper-middle class; gay; lives two blocks away from Clyde |
| Olivia | Sophomore | Straight; she/her; White; female; Jew-ish [sic]; upper-middle class |
| Lila | Sophomore | Pansexual; part-Asian, quarter Filipino, part White; cis-gendered |
| Jenny | Sophomore | White; female; straight; privileged; lives on the Upper East Side |
| Naomi | Junior | Female; she/her; Black; lower-middle class |
| Maya | Junior | Black; girl; pansexual; lives in Brooklyn |
| Caroline | Senior | She/her/hers; girl; White; straight; lives on the Upper East Side; Jewish |
| Annie | Senior | Queer; adopted; female (woman, girl, whatever); Christian; mental health issues; lower-middle class |
| Maria | Senior | Cis-gender; female |
| Kate | Senior | White; female; not straight |
| Lucy | Senior | White; upper class; female; straight; Catholic and Jewish |
| Megan | Senior | White; American; Jewish; she/her/hers; straight |
| Lauren | Senior | She/her; straight; Irani-American; middle-class; white |
| Lydia | Senior | White; Armenian and Irish; female; she/her; upper-middle class; lives in diverse neighborhood in Brooklyn |
| Rachel | Senior | White; female |
| Simone | Senior | Black |

The primary method of data analysis for this study was a critical analysis of discourse (CAD) (McCall, 2014).⁴ Engaging in CAD, McCall (2014) emphasizes “the centrality of discursive practices in relation to larger social structures” (p. 118). Discursive practices are the “spoken and unspoken rules and conventions that govern how individuals learn to think, act and speak” in the social positions they occupy in their lives (Alvermann et al., 1997, p. 74), such as student, girl, athlete, New Yorker, etc. For McCall, CAD serves as a productive approach in helping her to identify storylines (Søndergaard, 2002), “a condensed version of a naturalized and conventional cultural narrative, one that is often used as the explanatory framework of one’s own and other’s practices and sequences of action” (p. 191). Storylines function as lenses through which to consider how an idea is constructed and subsequently how it conveys *how to be* and *what to do* in a given setting or circumstance. Storylines helped to trace the ways in which students talk about and make sense of themselves, their experiences as students and girls, and their school surroundings. Using CAD also aided in analyzing the storylines that construct the school’s institutional identity and discourses involving belonging and empowerment from the adult perspective.

This case study was designed to provide participants with an opportunity to offer stories and, more importantly, *counter*-stories of girlhood: the representations, pressures, and idealized expectations about who they are and who they are expected to be in the context of the Clyde School. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 26). Counter-stories provide a space for people to engage in creative reflections of self-expression and self-definition.

Findings and Discussion

⁴ CAD is rooted in Foucault’s work on language and power, the methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines patterns of language use with a degree of detail and explicitness, but in ways that “reconnect instances of local discourse with salient political, economic, and cultural formation” (McCall, 2014, p. 11).

Below is a selection of counter-narratives from the case study that speak directly to the complexity and *tangled-ness* of girlhood. Counter-narratives provide a space for people—participants and readers alike—to engage in creative reflections of self-expression and self-definition. The first illustrates how students work to reclaim and reimagine the school-sanctioned archetype of the “Ideal Girl”; the second challenges the expectation of wanting or needing to bring one’s full self to school; and the third examines the binary that students present between the school culture and the school community at Clyde, and considers the implications of disconnection within the places and spaces that young people occupy. Again, these counter-narratives reveal that the identities and lived experiences of this group of girls are nuanced and complicated, challenging many of the dominant storylines (Søndergaard, 2002) that circulate throughout the school.

Re-imagining Notions of the “Ideal Girl”

As a highly competitive all-girls school in New York City, Clyde’s institutional identity is largely defined by its commitment to academics and knowledge; to a certain rigor, intellectuality, and curiosity; and to promises of helping girls “find the best versions” of themselves (as stated in the Clyde viewbook). In some discursive communities, there are constructed archetypes used so often that they begin to function as “revealing windows into a [particular] culture’s conventional and dominant conceptions of identity” (Williams, 2011, p. 204). Archetypes can function as conduits for institutionally-sanctioned expectations around behavior, performance, and membership meant to motivate and encourage students to do and be their best.

This research focused on two deeply embedded identities at the Clyde School: the “Clyde Girl” and the “Every Girl”,⁵ idealized archetypes that embodied the most desired and valued

⁵ The “Every Girl” archetype developed out of a capital campaign run by the Clyde School a few years ago. The tagline “Every Girl” was meant to communicate the school’s commitment to supporting, representing, and including every student in the school building in new and reimagined ways. As a result, the phrase became a motto used

characteristics, behaviors, and involvements of a quintessential student at the school. For some students, the archetypes were empowering and comforting labels, forces that pushed them toward a higher standard academically, extracurricularly, and socially. For others, the labels held rigid conceptions of what was valued and who belonged at Clyde—subsequently serving as barriers to representation and inclusion. Borrowing from Gee’s (1990) notion of membership as it relates to ‘big-D’ Discourse, the Clyde Girl and Every Girl function as symbolic representations of belonging at Clyde—the ways of being that were sanctioned as desirable, respectable, and supported, and in turn granted full access to membership in this discursive community. The idealized archetypes held particular values, perceptions, understandings, appreciations, and actions and served as a gatekeeper of “normalcy,” reinforcing hegemonic expectations of excellence, empowerment, and belonging. These expectations denoted the rules of membership—the ways of knowing, acting, believing, speaking, and valuing—required to identify as, and fit the criteria of, the idealized archetypes. Kate, a senior, explains that the quintessential Clyde Girl is a term “that’s kind of ... in the zeitgeist of Clyde.” She and another senior, Lydia, share:

This girl gets straight As in every class, she does like 10 gagillion extracurriculars, she is really happy and like, very just, outgoing. There’s definitely an image of what the Clyde Girl should be and like, frankly, there are just very few of us [who] fit into that mold ... and ... the Clyde Girl is usually White, wealthy, cis-gender, heterosexual, very...it’s like a very narrow idea of what the Clyde Girl should be and there are obviously so many deviations from that? ... And, I mean, luckily, I haven’t really had to... ‘cause I am White and wealthy and like, cis-gender, [but] I don’t identify as straight so that has been something that is kind of interesting.... (Interview, 3/15/17)

I’ve always assumed it’s like, a blonde, blue eyed, smart, athletic, but also artsy, funny, quiet, but not too quiet girl. She’s ... made up...she’s not a real person. I think it’s like Blake Lively in *Gossip Girl*...the ideal version of what that girl is... it’s hard to be so

frequently by school leaders and administrators, and then quickly developed into a new version of the “Clyde Girl” amongst the students. The Every Girl represented the same stereotypes of identity and privilege as the Clyde Girl for students, another phrase that made students feel as though they had to adhere to certain standards or images of being a girl and/or a student in order to truly belong and be included in the school community and culture.

inclusive and have everyone be the quintessential Clyde Girl... In middle school and freshman and sophomore years, I was really struggling a lot to be the Clyde Girl and, I just, when I showed up the first day, I wasn't that already and I knew that, so it was like, "I don't know how to mold myself to be this when it's just never gonna fit." ... 'cause the Clyde Girl is born that way. Like, she's a Clyde Girl from day one. She never mused herself to become it. She is just naturally that. (Lydia, Interview, 3/8/17)

These standards of being reinforce normative beliefs and values about who is appreciated and/or what is expected among students at Clyde. Synthesizing how girls understand the archetypes demonstrates a need to continue critically deconstructing and reflecting on the connections between literacy, identity, and place in relation to empowerment and belonging.

Students further complicated the Clyde Girl archetype by increasingly reclaiming and reimagining it at the time of data collection.

I think we all came to an agreement that it shouldn't be like one type of person ... when you're defining a large group of people, it's really hard to do because it's not going to fit over everyone.... It's more of like an applaud to all students that go here. It's like, well, Clyde students are ones that want to learn, are eager to learn, and to kind of do it their own way, yeah? And they are outspoken compared to other people.... (Lydia, Interview, 3/8/17)

I feel like there's a consensus amongst everyone that like, you are here because you want to make something of your life and you want...I mean, there are some people who may take this education for granted? But I feel like pretty unanimously everyone just like, really wants to...just gain more knowledge and like, ask questions about the world and I think that's kind of what the teachers kind of push us...to keep digging into discussions that like, force us to think outside of maybe our experiences as well? I think that's kind of what it means. If I could put a label on every single person, I feel like that would be what it means. (Kate, Interview, 3/15/17)

Instead of dismissing the Clyde Girl phrase all together, these participants chose to reclaim it, demarcating what an actual or *real* Clyde Girl looks like today from their perspectives versus the institutionally-sanctioned image. Their conceptions moved away from gender, race, and cultural capital and instead focused on the identity of "student," not "girl." Lydia, Rachel, and Kate, for instance, all centered their *re*-definitions of the typical and/or ideal student around intellect: the student that embodies everything about Clyde is one who thinks critically, asks questions, and

makes their voice heard. This is a testament to how even reclaimed notions of the Clyde Girl remain socially situated within the school context and demonstrate that students indeed share many of the values upheld by the school. The important takeaway here is not that students fully rejected the images and messages at Clyde; but rather, wanted to *share* in the ownership of the values, practices, behaviors, and ideals that circulated within and outside of the school building to tell the story/ies of the Clyde School. They wanted to feel heard.

Bringing Your Full Self to School

The second counter-narrative involves “bringing your full self to school,” a phrase deeply embedded in the Clyde School lexicon to convey inclusivity and acceptance. It was a well-intentioned mantra frequently used by school leaders and in admissions and development materials, meant to encourage students to feel as though they could express every aspect of themselves freely and openly upon entering the building. As the head of school explained, “I think parents send their daughters to girls’ schools so that they don’t have to hide any parts of who they are” (Mr. Bennett, Interview, 1/24/17). But, as students evidence below, the notion of bringing one’s full self to school every day is not as simple (nor as coveted) as one might think.

“I try to bring my full self to school every day, but there’s always some setback, or like, I’m always more scared to do something than I think I am,” Maya shared with me during her interview (4/10/17). Maya struggled with being perceived as shy and non-talkative: “I physically can’t [speak up] sometimes ... I think it changes with school. Like, I can actually feel my throat close up.... I think it’s just, uh, actually, that might have to do with people’s perceptions [of me]” (Interview, 4/10/17). At the same time, Maya also credited Clyde for helping her to push herself to try new things and share more of herself. She found that some aspects of her full self were more accepted at home, and others were more accepted by her peers at Clyde.

With the exception of two participants, students reported that they did not feel like they could bring their full selves to school every day, nor did they necessarily want to.

They say they want us to bring our full selves, but then when we do they're like, "That's too much of you. That's ... wow, we did not need all of that information." And like, you hear that all the time. "You're laughing too loud," or "Why are you in this room? What are you doing? Why are you writing stuff on the board? Why are you listening to that music?" ... Don't tell people to bring their full selves to school 'cause they're not doing it anyway and there's a lot of people who don't want to bring their full selves to school ... why would someone bring the rest of them if they [the school] is not supportive of what they did bring?... That's where I think people get confused and I think that's detrimental for young girls kind of like, figuring out who they are in general but then also have a school that's like, "We want to empower you, but you can't do this, or this, or your bra strap is showing, that's bad."... so that's where it gets conflicting ... just say what you mean. (Lydia, Interview, 3/8/17)

Sharing the sentiment of many, Simone and Rachel spoke to the expectation of asking people to bring their full selves to school when it was a generally unnatural and unfeasible thing to do:

I [don't] think that there was a time when I could bring my whole self to school, but I think that's a universal thing... I don't blame them [the school] for wanting that ... obviously people hide parts of themselves.... I don't think it's a bad thing that people want that to happen in the administration...that Clyde is so warm and it would be so ideal that people could be at a point where they bring their full selves. Like, I don't disagree with it. I [just] think it's unrealistic... (Interview, 4/12/17)

I never really understood what it meant to bring your whole self to school, to be honest.... It's a very scary thought to bring your whole self to school...I don't think I've ever brought my full self to school. I don't think I've been my full self anywhere...Um, but at the same time, being uncomfortable at a place where you're supposed to be challenged is okay, so I don't know ... I think I feel my full self when I'm...able to talk about my opinions and being able to, you know, have my voice heard. (Rachel, Interview, 5/2/17)

Lastly, a few participants talked about how the uniform reinforced certain stereotypes and prohibited people from truly or fully expressing themselves. Dress as a discursive practice conveys ways of knowing and belonging through visual and material modes. A school uniform

possesses its own codes of belonging, in the same way that one's own style communicates an understanding of identity and place.⁶

I have this like, more snazzy sense of fashion that can't ... like, be confined to like this and that [referring to her uniform]. I like wearing ... little waistcoats and things like that ... it's not like the uniform really constricts me but like, I still don't feel like I'm ever able to bring my full self to school just because like, there are things that I would like to do with my hair, to do with my clothes [that I can't]. (Karl, Interview, 3/13/17)

... I feel like Clyde can be [a] truly feminist [school] once they like, get rid of the uniform and just start letting us like, bring our full selves to school. Because they always say like, "...you can bring your full self to Clyde," but I don't know how true that is necessarily. (Kate, Interview, 3/15/17)

If the notion of bringing one's full self to school is not a realistic nor coveted option for students, what function does it then play in the school's rhetoric and culture? Participants recognize that the idea of bringing one's full self to school is a positive and respectable goal for the school to have, but it poses the question as to how and in what ways it reinforces the idea that the bodies, selves, and identities of young women are and should be regulated and monitored by an institution.

“Us” and “Them”: School Culture *versus* School Community

The final counter-narrative concerns the demarcations that students see between Clyde's school culture and school community. This finding is significant when thinking about the places and spaces that girls occupy, what institutional supports and barriers they face in the midst of figuring out who they are and who they want to be in their lives. Borrowing from Phillips (1996), school culture refers to the “beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors which characterize a school” (p. 1). A school's culture is abstract, yet also tightly bound to notions of physical space. For instance, Clyde is a “visionary place—a testament to Clyde's promise that every girl will have every

⁶ Clyde's uniform consisted of a choice of three pleated skirts (navy, grey, and light blue), a solid-colored collared shirt or school-related top (athletic/sports teams t-shirts and/or sweatshirts), and either sneakers or low-heeled, closed-toed shoes. While it is more flexible than other dress codes—and the uniform is meant to promote equality amongst students—many still felt there were significant restrictions for expression.

chance—at every moment, in every space—to find the best version of herself” (school viewbook, p. 31). As McDowell (1999) argues:

...places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define the boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial—they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience. (Quoted in Bettis & Adams, 2005, p. 5)

At Clyde, place not only represents physical spaces, but what students are able to do in them.

Like the school culture, the school community at Clyde had both tangible and intangible aspects to it. The tangible aspects refer to the people within the institution who participate in, engage with, and help create and maintain the culture; the intangible refer to a sense or feeling of being part of a collective within a bounded system—the institution. While there was some relationship between the school culture and school community, many students talked about them as largely unique and separate entities. For students, the “school culture” often seemed less accessible and relevant to them than the “school community,” but both clearly played critically central roles in their everyday experiences and perspectives of belonging at Clyde. Students overwhelmingly understood the school community as consisting primarily of their friends and peers as well as their teachers and advisors; the community was a source of support and acceptance. The administration was very rarely, if ever, included in students’ explanations of community; yet, when discussing school culture, students often personified the school culture as “they,” referring to the administration who, in their eyes, was largely synonymous with the construction and (re)production of the culture.

Clyde is such an open, like, very inclusive community, but I feel like there’s a lot of work to do ... in terms of like, creating the diverse, inclusive community that we talk about a lot.... Like, every girl kind of supports each other, but sometimes we don’t acknowledge, like, each other’s differences.... I guess from the admissions standpoint, [the Clyde culture is] like, every girl’s supported, um, every girl has a voice, and we want to hear it. Um, but then the culture within Clyde is ... very much geared to the experience of ... a girl. And sometimes that can get a little bit weird ... because not every girl chose the same

experience. And so, sometimes the culture can be a little bit uniform.... (Rachel, Interview, 5/2/17)

Lila articulately differentiated the dichotomous relationship between culture and community at

Clyde: the school culture was rooted in history, traditions, and operated as an intangible aspect of the school's identity and operation; the community was active, current, and personified as a united collective that was evolving in rich and important ways. She said:

The [school] culture is ... [laughs] not as amazing [as the school community]. I guess the culture is more built from an older time rather than the community? It's students who shape the community, which means we keep it modern, we keep it on top of everything. The culture at Clyde, a lot less so. I guess, I've been having a lot of arguments saying how some of the ideals that we have at Clyde just ... no longer match who is at Clyde anymore.... (Interview, 3/8/17)

I think it's a well-knit community and everyone is very supportive, and a lot of people love Clyde ... But I think my own experience is kind of different because I don't necessarily fit into the normal like, Clyde Girl, Every Girl-type thing. And so, like, a lot of my friends would agree with me, I think, that Clyde's a very safe and comforting community if you fit this little, like, mold ... And it's been challenging kind of to navigate, because no one's gonna be like, "No, you're gonna be ... an outcast or whatever." But there's this underlying kind of feeling that's definitely present. (Annie, Interview, 4/18/17)

The comments above illustrate the often contradictory aspects of the school climate that students grapple with every day. While there was an overall feeling of safety reported by students, it was largely attributed to relationships with peers and faculty members—the school community—not as much to the institution—the school culture. The messages surrounding the ideal archetypes, bringing one's full self to school, and the divisions between culture and community, all contribute to how students are made to understand notions of girlhood and their roles at Clyde. The nuanced and seemingly minor instances, interactions, and constructed environments are the aspects of the school climate that require greater attention and further research.

Limitations

There are always potential limitations in choosing to conduct a study in a school, as it requires flexibility on the part of the researcher and the ensuing research project. A school—as an institution, a culture, a community—is a living organism that is both constantly constructing and adapting to its environment. Schedules can change, new opportunities or access points for data collection can arise, just as tangential class discussions can derail lesson plans but result in important conversations about life. As scholars questioning traditional notions of scholarship (e.g., Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Luttrell, 2000; Vasudevan, 2011) argue, the imperfections and messiness of qualitative research (and the inevitability of limitations) are necessary for a study to evolve and emerge. More than anything, the research must be allowed to breathe. This was a particularly salient point given that a significant focus of this study was on the ecological dynamics of the Clyde School.

Because this project was a single case study and not a comprehensive exploration across multiple sites, the intention was not to represent or make broad claims about the experiences, perspectives, and identities of girls at the six elite private all-girls schools in New York City. The goal of case study research is not generalizability, but rather transferability: “how (if at all) and in what ways understanding and knowledge can be applied in similar contexts and settings” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 31). Conducting a single-site case study afforded more time in a particular culture and community, deeper relationships to develop with members of that community, and ultimately allowed findings and recommendations that were tailored to a specific population and institution.

Furthermore, it makes the case for further research in elite, independent private all-girls schools in New York City, a set of institutions which remain largely uninterrogated and absent from the literature on gender and schooling. A multi-site case study involving a selection from

the other six elite all-girls schools in Manhattan would be a strategic and important next step for this research. Studying other all-girls schools would help to strengthen the data collection instruments and theories used over time, layering findings from other institutions atop this initial study, and thickening understandings of constructions of girls and girlhood in Manhattan's elite all-girls schools.

Conclusion

These findings serve as a testament to the fundamental flaws that can exist in institutional language and practice, no matter how well-intentioned. The takeaway from this set of counter-narratives should not necessarily be that the institution and school leaders are to blame for crafting narratives and expectations meant to motivate, empower, and enliven its students and the larger school community. Clyde, like any other school, is deeply committed to being the best institution it can be, serving its members and fulfilling its promises. Yet, the data presented seek to demonstrate how grand statements and deeply-rooted traditions meant to unify a population can actually overlook and silence the immense diversity and wonderful complicatedness of students' identities and experiences that make young people such dynamic individuals. In this sense, and if nothing else, this study serves as a call to honor the new, complex, and multimodal literacies practices that young people are engaging in every day. These practices provide insights into who they are and what is important to them. As Bettis & Adams (2005) argue:

Adult feminist scholars must know what the day-to-day habits of life are for adolescent girls. And if these daily habits include talk of who is nice, who is not, and how to change a tampon, then that talk and focus must be taken seriously, explored, played with, explained, and theorized. (p. 3)

Again, the purpose of critical activist inquiry is to disrupt the idea of an institution operating within a single dominant narrative and serve as a reminder that it is in the moments of disruption that we might begin to untangle, examine and re-imagine the practices, language, structures, and

systems that work to construct notions of girls and girlhood in particular ways. Participants' responses raise questions of power and language at an institutional level and the impact that discursive practices can have on students' understandings of their roles and expectations through a gendered lens. The evidence presented illustrates the tensions that a school faces between embracing an evolving landscape of identities and literacies while still holding tightly onto history and tradition.

In the fields of gender studies and youth literacies, far less attention has been paid to the internal cultures and discourses of elite private all-girls schools, particularly those located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. The roles of institutions are often used to frame research studies, but the focus ultimately rests on the students—how they are shaped by the spaces they occupy or how they learn to navigate their ways out. These are important contributions that highlight students' perspectives and help us to re-imagine possibilities for change. At the same time, by *only* placing young people at the center of the conversation, we shift focus away from the institutions where the negotiations are happening; where language plays a significant role in constructing normative and Other practices and behaviors; and where power structures are in play. Further research that holds focus on institutions themselves—how they construct knowledge, meaning, and membership through discursive practices and sociopolitical structures—primarily from the perspectives of young people, is needed. This would provide fuller, more contextualized narratives and allow us to consider the possibilities and potentials for creating and sustaining more authentically inclusive school spaces. Such spaces are crucial in helping girls continue to redefine and reimagine their roles in society and school, to disrupt the status quo, and to have their voices heard. They have *so* much to say.

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