

Regime, Reputation and Resilience: The Queer Experience of Cape Town's Single-Sex Schools

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Social Science in Gender and Transformation.

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole or in part for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, cited, and referenced.

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Abstract

The following research paper explores the experiences of self-identified queer past pupils of single-sex schools in Cape Town, South Africa. The intention of the study was to gain insights into the implicit and explicit psycho-social and systematic control felt by student bodies in highly-traditional school spaces, through the specific lens of queer students and their navigations of such spaces. The theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory, the hidden curriculum, Freire's Critical Consciousness and hooks's Engaged Pedagogy provide the theoretical foundation, in addition to Butler's Gendered Performativity.

Research findings revealed the strict school environment, moulding an idealised archetype expected of the students, which aligned closely with heteronormative, middle-class, whiteness. This archetype was upheld through the hierarchy of academic excellence, internalised compliance, and strict boundaries of acceptable behaviour that were maintained through discipline and reward practices. Within this strict environment, queer students and educators were located through the accounts provided by participants. Their resilience, navigation and endurance of the school space are central to this dissertation. This study provides a clear example of Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory and the hidden curriculum at work in the school environment. The impact of pervasive heteronormative white hegemony, the remaining legacy of the white-dominated Apartheid system and the conservative societal expectations of gender performativity are revealed to have an ever-present role in the experience of single-sex schools in Cape Town.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Foundations

Background and Context:

Since 1996, South Africa has boasted a progressive constitution promoting and protecting citizens, specifically;

“No person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds in terms of subsection (3) [including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth]. National legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination” (South African Constitutional Assembly, 2012, p6).

However, heteronormative and patriarchal hegemonies continue to shape societal expectations, placing pressure on individuals to conform. Luyt’s (2012) study on the historical roots of the hegemonic patriarchy and conceptions of masculinity and heteronormativity in South Africa provides insight into these pervasive social structures. The study notes that heterosexuality and “real masculinity” are co-constructed (p13), homophobia is justified on cultural and religious grounds (p13-15), and idealised heteronormative masculinity is closely linked to sexual performance (p18-19). Luyt concludes by noting that “performative (hetero)sexuality constitutes a dominant discourse of regional hegemonic masculinity” and that “the dominant discourses of masculinity tend to serve the interests of young heterosexual men who espouse a female sexual object choice and are best able to perform heterosex” (p21). As a result, many members of the South African population are forced to navigate suffocating contexts marked by institutionalized, subtle, or explicit rejections of their identities.

I posit that single-sex schooling in South Africa concentrates heteronormative and patriarchal ideals in South African society and does so within race/class regimes which privilege the hegemonic notions of ‘femininity,’ ‘masculinity,’ and ‘heterosexuality’ Luyt explores. Given the historically colonial ties to and current maintenance of outdated traditions that many single-sex secondary schools support, patriarchal and heteronormative principles are perpetuated through

institutional practices and idealised student models. The recollections of queer past pupils on their experiences of difference within such school regimes centre this research, as the school environment is significant in developing one's sense of selfhood during the formative period of adolescence, and the environments risk of creating a fraught space for queerness. In examining the reflections from queer past pupils, I hope to gain insight into how young people, living as queer (one doesn't name a person as an 'identity', I think) represent their navigation of the same-sex secondary educational space; finding solace, companionship, and confidence, while also facing othering, erasure, and discrimination. By examining these experiences, I hope to reveal the pervasive dynamics of heteronormativity that flourish in schools, and that require first recognition, and then, dismantling to ensure all students feel welcome and nurtured during this critical developmental period.

The following dissertation will work to provide valuable insight into the single sex-school environment and the various dynamics of heteronormativity and queerness within the space. The current chapter establishes the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that apply to the overall research project, introduce the existing research in the field – highlighting the areas of research that this project aims to fill, and finally introduce the research question and the guiding subquestions. The second chapter focuses entirely on the research methodology chosen in pursuit of the question; providing insight into the feminist epistemological framework, the chosen methodology and reasoning therein, reflecting on participant research and the necessary considerations of ethics, positionality, and limitations that are expected to arise in the research process. Following this, the third chapter is the first analysis chapter, introducing participants accounts of The School Space. This chapter provides valuable insight and creates an understanding of the environment, following the subheadings of; School Brand Maintenance, the Idealised Student, and the Discipline and Regulation of students. The fourth chapter introduces the counternormative in juxtaposition to the established space in chapter 3, focusing on Identifying Queer, and provides a close analysis of the theme according to the subheadings of; Students, Educators, and Spaces. The third and fourth chapters are close analyses of the environment's normativity and the experiences of those who stand outside of the acceptable. The subheadings guide one through the expectations, the policing, and the models in the school, as well as the unique experiences of those who stand as Others within the space, considering both their experiences and

the safe spaces they created in the environment. The final chapter synthesizes the existing literature with the participant research completed in this project to reflect on the contributions this research has made to understanding the landscape of single-sex schooling in South Africa and the experiences of those who do not conform to the heteropatriarchal norms within institutions.

Conceptual Review

The following chapter presents key concepts that will be central to the exploration of single-sex school spaces, and will form the framework through which I offer deep analysis of how these spaces are represented by those who experience them while living as queer in later chapters. The research focus demands that I understand fully concepts of intersectionally inflected gender, queerness and heteronormativity, all of which will be presented below.

Gendered Performativity

Judith Butler's perspective on gendered performativity (Butler, 1990, pXV) lays the foundation for conceptualising the schools' approach to gender and sexuality. By conceptualising gender as a performance of ritualised behaviours that subscribe to societally idealised femininity and masculinity, one can understand how gender operates in social spaces such as the school. This includes the performance of sexuality, as idealised femininity and masculinity are expected to perform within the boundaries of heterosexuality in accordance with hegemonic cis-heteronormativity. In identifying gendered behaviour arising from social reinforcement and expectation, the boundaries of acceptable (cis-heteronormative) and unacceptable (gender and sexuality counternormative) behaviour become clear, as does the resulting marginalisation. Gender and sexuality counternormativity becomes othered due to the socialised definitions of acceptability. This conceptualization becomes more complex as the recognition of intersectional influences on gendered performances is centred (Crenshaw, 1989). Such an approach frames the processes of gendering, and attendant discursive and material realizations of performance, as locatable with diverse contexts in which the dynamics of race and racialization, class, and - in South Africa, languages and religion - coalesce to shape differing options for gendered power and powerlessness.

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is one of the core concepts which energize the research focus, given the way in which hegemonic conventions concerning the relationship between sex and gender, and the predictions around sexual orientation and relations flow from these as “heterosexual.” Heteronormativity functions as a system, which has the power to regulate both the ideas and the practices of normative sexual identities, desires, and relationships. Peake defines heteronormativity (a neologism of normative heterosexuality) as “the encompassing regime in which an individual, sexually attracted only to a person of the opposite sex, is assumed to be a natural and universal norm or way of being human” (2017, p1). Within heteronormativity, categories of male–masculine and female–feminine align directly and assume attraction to one another, which is especially perpetuated and institutionalised through practices of monogamy, marriage, and the nuclear family (*ibid*). This is similar to the enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) which situates heterosexuality as the expected neutral and norm, and therefore positions other relationships to sexual orientation and/or desire as beyond the norm, and therefore as deviant. This concept of a societal structuring and belief system which policies sexuality and gendering takes centre stage in my own research on the ways in which South African same-sex schools may reinforce compulsory heterosexuality in their interpersonal, institutional, and subtextual practices.

Queer

The research project centres participants’ identification with queerness, as they understand this. Queer is a complex concept, evolving as it has over multiple and interlocking ideas about visionary process which destabilize gender binaries and heteronormative ideas about counter-heteronormative identities with African space (Matebeni, 2014), and ideas about performances, especially within visuality and the arts. This study will primarily situate the understanding of queerness in accordance with Nyeck’s definition as having “ceased to be in line with expected dominant conventions regarding matters of taste and (re)presentation” (2021, p11). Queerness is situated as beyond, and resistant to, the order of the world in which it finds itself. This definition is profound as the idea of queerness does not imply any particular relationship to certain sexuality or gender, but rather opens up a counter-heteronormativity space to contain (temporarily) the

representations of how self-identified queer participants felt (and feel) as they moved against the accepted norm of the institution. Peters further contributes to queer in saying; “queer can mean/be: something you are; something you call yourself; something you do; a way to think (theory); and a way to act – sexually and politically” (Peters, 2005, p106). In establishing the research focus of this thesis I have intentionally chosen to use the language queer, as I wish to keep the participants’ perspective of queerness organic, considering the variety of ways that counter-normativities can co-exist in the single school space.

Theoretical Framework

Henry A. Giroux and Pierre Bourdieu’s *Social Reproduction Theories* (Nash, 1990), Paulo Freire’s *Critical Consciousness* (Shor, 1993) and bell hooks’ *Engaged Pedagogy* (1994) offer the key theories that will scaffold this research and analysis. I have chosen to include these theories due to their analysis of hegemonies, especially in educational spaces, and the oppressive influence that they have on individual experiences (Moen, 2008).

Nash explains in *Bourdieu on Education and Social and Cultural Reproduction* (1990) that the theory describes institutions as colluding with the external social hierarchies and systems at play, due to learned and reinforced actions (known as ‘habitus’). A cultural cycle is developed, wherein behaviour is introduced as an effect of circumstance, thereafter socialised and internalised through continued practice. Through this, the behaviour becomes synonymous with the culture in which it exists, even after the circumstances have changed (Nash, 1990, p433). In other words:

“we can say that members of a social group come to acquire, as a result of their socialisation, a set of dispositions which reflect central structural elements and therefore behave in ways which reproduce those structural elements” (p434).

Giroux and Penna follow this theory in their own *Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamics of the Hidden Curriculum* (1979). Here, they bring Bourdieu’s theorisation of cultural and social reproduction into the classroom. They point specifically to the link between the institution of the school and wider economic and political institutions, and state that

“by viewing schools within the context of the larger society, social studies developers can begin to focus on the tacit teaching that goes on in schools and help to uncover the ideological messages embedded in both the content of the formal curriculum and the social relations of the classroom encounter” (Giroux & Penna, 1979, p19).

Giroux and Penna note that the school must be seen as an agent of socialisation, specifically be means of the *hidden curriculum* which is described as: “the unstated norms, values and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure of meaning in both the formal content as well as the social relations of school and classroom life” (p22).

Apple’s work states that the hidden curriculum exists to reinforce societally internalised assumptions and ensure that these socialisations continue (Apple, 2019, p89). Students are socialised to behave in ways that avoid disrupting the norm - referred to as conflict. By not allowing students to witness and experience the positive results of conflict, students are encouraged to stay complacent, in the unsubstantiated belief that all conflict is negative and should be avoided (p89). The combination of Bourdieu’s, Giroux and Penna’s, and Apple’s theories on socialised, internalised, and perpetuated societal norms within and outside of institutions are the primary foundation upon which I aim to build my analysis of the school spaces. I enter this study with the perspective that schools reflect and reproduce societal divides and oppressive belief systems, and therefore form part of the root issue of oppressive societal structures.

Secondly, Freire’s *Critical Consciousness* theory serves as the lens through which one can develop critical engagement with institutions through participants’ reflections. Critical Consciousness can be described, in short, by the following excerpt;

“For Freire, teaching and learning are human experiences with profound social consequences. Education is not reducible to a mechanical method of instruction. Learning is not a quantity of information to be memorized or a package of skills to be transferred to students. Classrooms die as intellectual centers [sic] when they become delivery systems for lifeless bodies of knowledge. Instead of transferring facts and skills from teacher to students, a Freirean

*class invites students to think critically about subject matter, doctrines, the learning process
itself, and their society.”*

(Shor, 1993, p25)

Most importantly, Freire encourages the questioning of hegemonies, especially as these are embedded within institutions. He subverts the hierarchy of education that places authority in the hands of educators; rather, he gives students the agency to guide and contribute to their own knowledge (p25-34). Students are encouraged to question the content and the answers. This encourages reflection on the narratives, and underlying systems of oppression and hegemony, in the content they are fed (Giroux, 2010, p716).

Similarly, bell hooks' *Engaged Pedagogy* espouses the belief that classroom spaces can generate societal change and critical thinking (Specia and Osman, p198, 2015). Her work takes a similar critical consciousness perspective to that of Freire, but leans into the value of vulnerability from teachers as well as students. hooks encourages educators to take the same introspective risks that their students take, further breaking down the hierarchy and authority that educators are seen to have over the students in their classrooms (Berry, 2010, p21). Through working towards actual engagement with their content, context, and students, educators come closer to reaching self-actualisation in their role and therefore to creating better environments for their students to explore their knowledge and education (hooks, 1994 p15 & p21-22; Specia and Osman, 2015, p195-196; Asher, 2003, p239). Educators are not merely vessels through which the curriculum is presented to students; they create microcosms of society in their classroom, and the conversations had can impact outer social spaces (Greenwood-Hau, 2021, p7-8).

The perspectives provided by these theories aid in establishing an understanding of how these institutional environments have been created, and contribute to the analysis and discussion of the research findings, in the pursuit of gaining insight into the single-sex school space.

Literature Review

The following literature review will reflect on existing research relevant to my interests and this has been thematised as follows: motivating the single-sex schooling system; schools as gendered

environments; sexuality within the school environment; and queerness in school contexts. The review of such literature will serve to both contextualise and highlight the gap that the question hopes to address. The majority of the literature chosen focuses on the South African research context due to the unique history and various intersectional concerns of race, gender and sex, economics and politics at play.

Single-sex Schooling

The system of single-sex schooling has been extensively studied, yielding a wide range of findings both supporting and opposing binary education, with much of the research originating in the United States and referencing countries such as Australia, England, and New Zealand. It is important to bear in mind that the South African social, political, and economic context is unique; material relevant to the above examples may not be comparable to experiences in South Africa. However, it is still important to situate the discussion about single-sex schools globally, so as to create a broad understanding of the theorisation around binaried education.

Single sex schooling was established in South Africa due to its role in the British colony, following the British model of schools with higher educational standards being divided along the basis of sex (Morrell, 2000). However, English speaking schools were divided along the basis of sex, whereas Afrikaans and 'African' schools were co-educational (*ibid*). And while schools specifically for black pupils were co-educational, they were still divided in the curriculum provided to male and female students, preparing young women for domestic roles as housekeepers and labour-oriented positions for young men (p230). Morrell notes that even as recently as 1995, when a large number of schools were pursuing the task of desegregating their acceptance policies and inviting a more racially diverse student body, single-sex schooling was seen as an elite choice in education, open only to the middle class sectors of society. At the time of writing, Morrell noted that "there is still effectively no public provision of single-sex schools for black working class girls" (p230). Significantly, however, there was a move towards all-girls single-sex schools being established as a measure of the Gender Equity Task Team in 1998 as a way in which to mitigate the risk of harassment from their male classmates while also educating girls on their basic rights as women within a conducive work environment (Wolpe, Martinez and Quinlan, 1997).

Furthermore, the majority of single sex schools in South Africa were historically categorised as “Model C” during the period of transition out of Apartheid (Christie and McKinney, 2017). The Clase Models (named after the Minister of Education at that time) dictated the degrees of government involvement in schools, with Model C schools blending state and private control. This categorisation is further described by Christie and McKinney (2017) in saying;

Schools would need to remain majority white (50% + 1) and to give preference to white children from their feeder areas. They would have to continue to uphold principles of Christian National Education, provide mother-tongue instruction for English and Afrikaans speakers, and maintain their "traditional values and ethos." In apartheid terms, these schools would remain constitutionally bound to white education departments and would "render service" to students of other race groups provided that the schools remained fundamentally unchanged in the process.

(p9-10)

This contextualises the schools within a history of assimilation, white supremacy, and monocultural social practices, thereby providing a background of understanding for the environments that participants will be reflecting on.

Research finds that coeducational school environments appear to create gender-stereotyped subject areas (Smyth, 2010, p53; Bigler and Signorella, 2011). The same study also acknowledges that even on a global scale, single-sex schools and coeducational schools have notably different selection processes when it comes to students, and the student bodies vary with regard to socioeconomic backgrounds, inevitably influencing the findings of studies that consider the academic, gender, and social impacts that the different systems have on students (*ibid*; Anfara and Mertens, 2008, p57; Bigler and Signorella, 2011).

Williams’ study (2004) provides insight into the historical intersections of sex- and race-segregated schooling in the United States of America. Here, schools were separated according to sex in accordance with separate spheres of life, preparing (white) girls for their role in their household as their family’s caregiver (Williams, 2004, p54). This echoed black girls’ experience; however, their caretaking was in the service of others’ homes and families (*ibid*). The education

of women was separate and limited to the needs of a home, and not comparable to the education in boys schools. This was often motivated as preserving womanhood in keeping girls in the domestic sphere. Williams also notably mentions that “sex segregation historically has been a key element of the hidden curriculum which reinforces gendered and raced expectations for students” (Williams, 2004, p37-38).

Similarly, Salomone highlights the arguments against single-sex education, viewing it as stigmatising and directly opposed to equality, stating; “separation does not breed the mutual understanding and respect that place women on an equal footing with men” (Salomone, 2004, p73). In separation learners are inherently seen as different, risking the repetition of historical patterns of superiority and inferiority. This underscores the concerns that, if not carefully managed, single-sex education runs the risk of perpetuating sexism and reinforcing heteronormative and patriarchally coded constructions of femininity and masculinity (p94).

In reflecting on co-education, Salomone argued that the implicit hidden curriculum exposes students to male-dominated classroom environments, unfair expectations on behalf of educators, and “attitudes that prepare students for gender-specific roles in society” (Salomone, 2004, p72). It is further argued that co-education does not allow for a learning environment that caters for the different needs of young men and women. Single-sex schooling, it is stated, allows young women and men to feel comfortable and to flourish within their learning environment without distraction (*ibid*).

Similarly, Salomone considered the fact that gender-binariied school systems might “provide an opportunity for students to reflect on and openly discuss the ways in which gender expectations can affect their personal and professional lives” (Salomone, 2013, p1005). Further stating that “when thoughtfully managed, [single sex schools] can even prove validating to students whose sexual identity falls outside of society’s gendered norms” (*ibid*, p1006), a sentiment that other research on this topic has echoed (Anfara and Mertens, 2008, p55). Comfort and familiarity offer a valuable lens for examining binariied schooling, shifting focus from institutional systems and curricula to the relational culture that shapes students’ formative years.

Schools as Gendered Environments

The period of adolescence is an important period of self-discovery, particularly for one's sexuality and gender identification during the biological developments of puberty (Pfeifer and Berkman, 2018). Schools further contribute to the development of social relationships, personal identity, and the sense of one's place in society. I, therefore, posit that the gendered nature of a single-sex school deeply embeds heteronormative expectations and limits the authentic expression of those who fall outside of the norm. Throughout the following section, I will reflect on the various realms in which schools are shown by South African research to be gendered spaces; specifically creating and enforcing heteronorms, gendered expectations, and binaries, in both single-sex and co-educational environments.

The school itself may enforce idealised and binaried cisgendered roles through policy, discourse, and practice. For one, prescribed uniforms require students to wear *gendered* school uniforms, thereby forcing students to present themselves within the boundary of what is stereotyped of their sex, which may not align with their gender identity. Many students, when speaking about gendered experiences at school or the sexual orientations of themselves and their classmates, reference the impact that uniforms had on the way they were perceived (Francis & Monakali, 2021, p718). This risks invalidation of students' genders, which could cause dysphoria and discomfort daily (Francis & Monakali, 2021; Francis, 2021a; Msibi, 2012). Additionally, Hiss and Peck argue that the idealised student at an all-girls school models middle-class white femininity, which was strictly enforced and maintained through the rules and regulations for the schools code of conduct (2020). This study highlights the strict definitions of acceptability - revealing the intersection of race, class, and gender performance - and will be more deeply discussed later in this section.

Gender-based division can also be seen in the separation of academic subjects offered, and the division of extra-mural activities. An example of this is Consumer Studies being seen as a girls' subject, due to its teachings reflecting the skills and household roles traditionally fulfilled by women (Francis, 2023a, p66; Schwendeman, 2014, p33; Humphreys, 2008, p535). In viewing certain subjects as girly or boy-ish, interests are divided along cisgendered lines and young students are limited to subjects deemed gender appropriate. Also, within the classroom space, teachers are the actors on behalf of the institution and may enforce gendered expectations on

students through their language, treatment of students, or the content taught in the classroom (Morrell, 2001; Hunter & Morrell, 2021; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020).

A variety of research of both single-sex and co-educational schools has shown that sports similarly suffer from cisgender divisions and serve as another example of schools policing gendered behaviour. Research noted that students were not welcome to play sports across gendered divisions - with some activities, such as football, being seen as exclusively for boys (Bowley, 2013; Pattman & Bhana, 2010; Mayeza, 2017). Notably too - certain sports were recognised as more masculine than others (Pattman & Bhana, 2010). Schoolboys note that rugby was given a higher ranking in the school hierarchy, by both the staff and students, than soccer (used interchangeably in the research with 'football') or hockey, due to rugby's physicality (Bowley, 2013; Pattman & Bhana, 2010). The preference for rugby was linked to the physical combat, aggression, and endurance of injury the sport demands, positioning resilience to injury as a key marker of hegemonic heteronormative masculinity. Bowley (2013, p. 88) further argues that by participating in traditionally masculine sports, boys subject their bodies to public scrutiny, where their identities are shaped by others' perceptions of their performance. This was exemplified by participants referring to rugby as "a real man's sport" or "it takes real men to play this game" (*ibid*, p90). This was contrasted with boys who play hockey being described as soft (*ibid*, p91).

A clear distinction between young boys and girls was created as early as primary school regarding the gendering of sports. Girls were not permitted to engage in activities deemed masculine, and were instructed to rather observe or stay away from the playground where masculinity was constructed (Mayerza, 2016, p478). This study also notes that organised sport at this school was divided into football exclusively for boys, and netball for girls – thereby reinforcing the playground belief that football was not a sport that girls were allowed to take part in (*ibid*, p479). Girls who did want to take part in soccer games were labelled as "tomboys" (p485), which painted them as walking the border of femininity and masculinity in their companionship with boys, lack of care for appearing girly, or "constantly getting into trouble for engaging in fights at school" (*ibid*, p485). This is an interesting distinction: with troublemaking and fights positioned closer to boyhood than girlhood, once again reinforcing the perceived good behaviour and innocence of the idealised feminine subject versus the aggression and troublemaking of the masculine.

Pattman and Bhana note the ways in which young, black and Indian school boys navigate their place in a formally exclusively white school (2010). Race was recognised as contributing to the expectations of masculine performance – with Indian boys seen as studious, and black students seen as being prone to troublemaking in class (2010, p550 & 552). There was a history of corporal punishment in South African schools prior to the 1996 South African Schools Act (South African Schools Act No. 84, 1996), especially related to the link between the early white school system and militarisation, which reinforced aggressive, disciplined hypermasculinity (Hunter & Morrell, 2021, p348). As mentioned above, black students at an all-boys school were reported to be blamed for troublemaking by teachers, reflecting the stereotyped racial dynamics of deviance (Pattman & Bhana, 2010, p552). Morrell’s study (2001) highlights cisgendered divisions in punishment, comparing both students and educators. Boys reported receiving harsher beatings than girls, with punishments from male educators described as more severe. In contrast, female educators were perceived as more compassionate and lenient, often offering second chances (Morrell, 2001). This gendered division perpetuates idealised masculinity as uncaring, aggressive, able to withstand harsh physical attacks (Msani, 2007, p25-26, p56), and in need of more severe discipline. This stands in opposition to a feminised counterpart of soft or weak girls who cannot withstand punishment, or teachers with a more forgiving nature (Mayeza & Bhana, 2020, p439). The idea of student deviance and punishment is not only divided on the grounds of gender and race, but students with queer sexualities are often seen as deviant and in need of the control and authority of teachers (Francis, 2018a; Francis, 2018b; Bhana, 2012). In this way, queer students are othered and set apart from their peers who conform to heteronormativity. Queer students are simultaneously pathologised, erased, and vilified within their school environment.

Similarly Hiss and Peck situated idealised femininity in their study of an all-girls “former Model C school in South Africa” (2020) reflecting on the racialised and gendered experiences of students. The study provides insight into the ways in which race and gender performance are controlled in the school environment – detailing the enforced assimilation of black students into white middle-class womanhood. While the study is relevant to the current efforts to decolonize South Africa's education system, I will focus on the policing of gender rather than race. An intersectional perspective remains essential, particularly in recognizing the racialized aspects of hegemonic

heteropatriarchal control. However, due to the scope of this project, I have limited the analysis of racial assimilation. In the study the idealised student is criticized due to the necessitated conformity to white middle-class womanhood. Examples of this include policing black femininity by restricting natural hairstyles based on the school's idea of neatness - noting that braids were specifically marked as the opposite of neatness. Hairstyles typically worn by black students – including afros, weaves, extensions, twisting, and wigs were banned by the school (Hiss and Peck, 2020, p33).

Implicit in these restrictions is the requirement that young black girls should conform to whiteness, and that anything which challenges or differs from such whiteness would be considered untidy and/or in conflict with the code of conduct. Furthermore, the discouragement of using of any language except English, and the exhortation to be soft-spoken (*ibid*, p36 & p39), are examples of policing expression and the display of femininity. The control of learners' communication - even as far as the volume at which they are allowed to speak - is especially problematic in that it perpetuates beliefs that women are to be seen and not heard. The study contributes to a foundational understanding of the intersections of idealised femininity, race and heteronormative gender performativity (*ibid*, p32-44). The intersection of race and gender in this study highlights that, while patriarchal hegemony persists, the Apartheid-era legacy of white hegemonic rule has entrenched the idealisation of the middle-class white woman as the epitome of femininity. Consequently, the assimilation of black students into the school's image becomes an implicit effort to align them with this model of middle-class white femininity. (p44).

Gendered expectations in the social contexts of schools were identifiable from the social pressure of the dating environment impacting many participants' social experiences (Pattman, 2005; Govender & Bhana, 2021; Bhana, 2017; Martino & Pallota-Chiarolli, 2007). Pattman further describes heteronormative coding as enforced by the belief that "boys and girls who were seen together must be boyfriends and girlfriends" and therefore not only projecting heterosexuality but limiting friendships to one's gender (Pattman, 2005, p500). Boys noted the heteronormative self-policing and gendered performances required, specifically the assumption and expectation of boys sexual promiscuity and derogatory treatment of women. These assumptions perpetuate the belief that emotions are feminine and unsuitable for boys, requiring self-policing and performative

rejection of emotions except for those of loyalty to the school, or the nation. Those who behave otherwise are socially exiled, chastised, and seen as traversing into the sphere of gender limited to girls (Pattman, 2005). The students reflected on these strict boundaries and their dissonance from the heteronormative expected behaviour in private journals that were kept during the study. They revealed to have sincere, romantic feelings for their girlfriends, and to experience emotions about breakups that they would have self-censored around their peers to protect their masculinity (p509). The self-censoring and policing risks the individuals' sense of self and may have a long-term detrimental effect on both their personal expression and their future peer and romantic relationships.

In a study of adolescent girls' and boys' experiences of gender in a school environment, Martino and Pallota-Chiarolli explore Australian teens' accounts of interpersonal pressures to conform to the "hierarchy of masculinities and femininities", which, was closely associated with one's desirability to the opposite sex (Martino and Pallota-Chiarolli, 2007, p9). Students also reflected on the expectations of gendered performativity, with some examples including appearing strong and formidable against other boys; "you do something like cry or act gay, that can give you a reputation you can't live down" and pressure to engage sexually with girls, and pressure to be "macho" (p9-11). Girls, on the other hand, admitted to social pressures related to their physical appearance, and defiance or adherence to the "good girl" persona – revealing the duality of femininity that they had to tread, and the weight that male attention had in relation to their social success (p12-14).

Sexuality in School

Many of the studies that have contributed to this literature review have revealed that educators view sexuality as inappropriate and deviant as a subject in the school environment. For one, much South African research has found that discourse and education regarding sexuality, for adolescents in school, is closely associated with disease and danger, which thereby perpetuates a negative relationship with sex (Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019, p423; Francis, 2018a, p779; Bhana et al., 2019, p367; Shefer & Macleod, 2015, p4; Mayeza & Vincent, 2018, p473). Bhana (2012) specifically found that a silencing and censorship of students' sexualities further compounded the erasure of

queer sexualities. Teachers created hierarchies of sensitivity; prioritizing religion or race as key identifiers requiring sensitivity, in lieu of sexuality and gender concerns. This approach ‘relegated sexuality to an inconsequential matter and to the domain of the private in an attempt to silence it’ (p. 313). In some cases, religious or cultural rejections of queerness were given influence, further pushing discussions of sex and gender into private spheres and silencing them (*ibid*).

Research has found that primary school students have a natural inclination to explore their sexuality in various ways (Govender & Bhana, 2021) and that their behaviour impacts their social status and reputation in mirroring idealised masculine and feminine gender behaviour. These behaviours include sexualised body movements (*ibid*, p113), dressing in revealing clothing to embody their sexuality (*ibid*, p121-123), and vocalising or displaying their sexual engagements in social spaces (*ibid*, p126-128). This study interestingly reveals the duality faced by young girls: one side of which was empowering their sexuality through embodiment, or physically engaging romantically with the boys at school - affording them the attention of boys as well as the benefits of adherence to heteronormative relations (*ibid*, p120-p122, p126-128). On the other extreme exists their deviance, from innocence and the acceptable form of femininity that subscribes to purity - enforced and monitored by their fellow girls, often resulting in labels of “bitches,” “sluts,” or “isifebe” (*ibid*, p124). Bhana also noted that “to be a normal girl and conform to acceptable femininity involves the projection and presentation of sexual investments in boys” as well as “relations of power that are defined through... the expression of desire for the opposite sex” (Bhana, 2018, p82)

This is in direct contrast to the experiences of male students in Pattman’s study, where male students “[derived] a sense of power through being hedonistic and free and having multiple relations” and “boasted of having more than one girlfriend – and were encouraged to do so by the other boys’ laughter” (Pattman, 2005, p507). This is reiterated by Anderson’s study of high school boys constructing masculinity heterosexually:

“talking about their intended sexual conquests to their male peers attains popularity amongst them and is central to the construction of a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity”

(Anderson, 2010, p639).

Research on the experiences of student teachers reveals the persistent enforcement of heteronormativity in the schooling institution, regardless of students or staff. In Brown and Diale's study of the experiences of student teachers with same-sex sexualities, participants recounted their experiences of other teachers policing their dress codes and behaviour to conform to heteronormative standards (Brown & Diale, 2017). This study specifically revealed the implicit belief that teachers' sexuality is a defining factor in their ability to teach students and be professionally successful (p6 & p9). Student teachers found themselves conforming and "adhering to heteronormative social scripts" for fear of losing their jobs, thus showcasing the self-regulation that is felt by queer people of all ages (p9). This highlights that the hetero-patriarchal system constrains all members of the microcosmic society in the school context and the policing of gender and sexuality is not limited to students.

Queerness in Schools

Studies analysing the representation of sexualities in Life Orientation textbooks serve as an indication of the discourse being spread through the formal classroom curriculum. Both the Wilmot & Naidoo (2014; 2017) and Potgieter & Reygan (2012) analyses study linguistic components, visual elements, perspectives, and beliefs implicit in language use and imagery, as well as the frequency and contexts under which these identities were mentioned. In both of their joint studies, Wilmot & Naidoo (2014; 2017) note that same-sex relationships were largely framed in relation to violence and abuse (2014, p328; 2017, p7) and that authors of the textbooks present "emotional disturbance and social detachment [as] associated with adolescent homosexuality" (2017, p8). Wilmot & Naidoo observed that textbooks often reinforce heteronormative cisgender binaries, presenting heterosexual attraction as a natural part of maturation and implying that counter-normative sexualities are phases and abnormalities one will outgrow (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2017, p10). All three studies found that lesbian, bisexual, and transgender representation was underwhelming. The studies found that this underrepresentation could lead to erasure and denial of their identities by their peers and society (Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014; 2017; Potgieter & Reygan, 2012). Many textbooks hardly referenced specific language relating to counternormative sexualities and genders (Potgieter & Reygan, 2012, p42-43; Wilmot & Naidoo, 2014, p328, p331). Overall, the textbooks promoted a pervasive narrative of heteronormativity while limiting the

representation of diverse sexualities. This was achieved through framing counternormative sexuality and gender identities within themes of violence and danger, emphasizing tolerance over acceptance, lacking diversity and accurate representation, and repeatedly positioning heterosexuality as the norm. Potgieter and Reygan (2012) similarly found that sexuality and gender counternormative individuals were often depicted as victims or outsiders rather than as agents or capable citizens, further reinforcing negative associations that students may develop with such identities (p. 47).

Dennis Francis has produced a significant body of work investigating the classroom experiences and curriculum needs of queer students in South Africa. His research has addressed the heteronormative lens of sex education in schools and the overall heteronormative dominance in the narratives of the classroom (Francis, 2013, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, & 2020). A significant takeaway from his findings is the need to reframe South African students, particularly queer students, as agents in their own sexuality and knowledge base. Francis shows that students should not be framed as void of knowledge, in contrast to the authorities of knowledge that are their teachers. Students should be empowered to contribute to classroom knowledge development, especially as it pertains to their sexuality and the necessary education regarding it. While Francis agrees that sexuality and gender counternormative students require the support of their teachers and the greater institution, they are currently seen as either sexually and socially ‘innocent’ and in need of protection, or hypersexual, hedonistic, and deviant – both perspectives that cause them to be seen as othered from their heteronormative peers and therefore unlikely to be given adequate support (Francis, 2018b). Francis further found that;

“Implicit in the teacher talk is the view that if the queer youth are to be tolerated or accepted, then this must be within the dominant framework of assimilation”. (Francis, 2018b, p9)

In other words, true acceptance is only achievable on the condition that students become what is deemed acceptable. Other students are also noted as referencing queer peers as ‘troublemaker’ or ‘from a different world’ for performing their sexuality in the ways in which they wear their uniform or behave in school (Francis, 2023a, p64). Queer students are further invalidated through an

“erasure of same-sex sexualities”, or the lack of acknowledgement that there are sexuality counter-normative students in the school (Francis, 2020, p5).

The silencing of counternormative genders and sexualities even goes so far as to enter linguistic divides. Mayeza & Vincent recorded that some Life Orientation teachers would change their language of teaching when it came to sex education, as “a distancing device” (2018, p481). Similarly, another study references teachers who silence diverse sexualities by referring to homosexuality as “it” and therefore dehumanising the sexual orientation (Francis & Reygan, 2016, p186). Other teachers were noted to view their students' queer sexuality and gender as a sign of immaturity and an attempt to follow what is popular, as opposed to their actual lived subjectivities (Francis & Monakali, 2021, p723). In another project, Francis found that, within the wider heteronormative institutions where these students are othered, they have found solace in friendships, sports teams, and student-teacher relationships that have allowed them to feel included and accepted (Francis, 2021, p1581-1583). It is important that queer students be made to feel safe, accepted, and included in the school environment, to prevent them from dropping out of school or turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms due to the harsh bullying they face (Daniels, Struthers, Maleke, Catabay, Lane, McIntyre, Coates, 2019; Butler et al., 2003).

Religion and cultural beliefs also influence teachers' and parents' reactions to students' sexuality, which Lindokuhle Ubisi addresses in analysing the goals and priorities of schools with religious foundations (2021). Ubisi found that religious education was prioritised over comprehensive sexuality education, and that sexuality education was censored along the moral guidelines of the respective religions in each school (Ubisi, 2021, p7). Furthermore, these schools prioritised and protected their religious minorities over their sexual minority students (Ubisi, 2021, p12). In Francis' work, some teachers reference their own cultural and religious beliefs as cause for their refusal to include counternormative sexualities and genders in the classroom (Francis, 2013, p70-71). Teachers and parents referred to Christian morality as their reasoning for deeming sexuality and gender counternormativity to be sinful and therefore inappropriate for the classroom (Francis & Kuhl, 2020, p8).

Francis and Msibi (2011) found that teachers avoided addressing homophobia and heterosexism out of fear of retribution from the school board and the parent body, revealing the societal heteronormativity that infiltrates the classroom. Even more interestingly, and indicative of the general ignorance on the topic of sexuality and gender, were some teachers' understanding of sexuality diversity wherein they conflated gender and sexual identity (p1697). Further misunderstandings included the inability to recognise sexuality as a form of human diversity, the perception of sexuality and gender counternormativity as unnatural and pathological, and the belief that counternormative sexuality and gender identities were adopted merely because they were seen as trendy (p1697-p1699).

The above review reflects existing literature on students' sexuality and gender experiences in school contexts. It highlights how schools perpetuate hetero-patriarchal power dynamics, with gendered binaries and expectations influencing social dynamics, teacher-pupil interactions, and even sports. Notably, research on primary schools has focused more on gender dynamics, while studies on high schools have largely centred on sexuality.

My research aims to address this gap by examining the critical developmental period of high school and its role in shaping participants' queer identities. Insights from studies on LGBTQI+ students in South African schools have revealed significant shortcomings in classroom materials and interactions, underscoring the importance of representation and student agency. However, there is a clear gap: no studies have specifically explored queer students' experiences in single-sex schools, which is the focus of my research. Additionally, while prior studies engage with students currently navigating their schooling years, my study will work with past pupils who, with sufficient distance, can reflect retrospectively on their experiences. This literature review has both informed the direction of my research and identified the gaps my study seeks to fill.

Research Question and Objectives/Sub-Questions.

This research hopes to explore the psycho-social and institutional environment of single-sex schools to uncover how gender-normative expectations shape these strictly binaried spaces. I seek to understand the single-sex school experience through the nuanced perspectives of queer past pupils, reflecting on how these institutions explicitly and implicitly engaged with queerness and

counter-normativity. Ultimately, I hope to investigate the pervasive influence of patriarchal heteronormativity in modern single-sex schools, specifically through the lens of individuals who navigated these environments as the constantly rehearsed and distinctive Other.

The primary objective of the project is to gain insight into the single-sex schooling environments with a specific focus on students' navigations of heteronormativity and their own queerness. Additionally, the research hopes to highlight the areas in which single-sex schools perpetuate heteronormative and patriarchal ideals, creating a treacherous environment for students, specifically those who identify as queer. In reflecting on areas that created discomfort or that were lacking in their acknowledgement of sexuality and gender counternormativity, specific zones of focus and reparation can and will be identified.

With all of the above in consideration, the research question is: *How do self-identified queer past pupils represent the cultures of heteronormativities they experienced within single-sex high schools in Cape Town?* Within this, the sub questions of the research aim to gain more specific insight into the school environment and presence of queerness within the institution. These sub questions align closely with the open-ended, thematized questions asked in the interview process itself. Firstly, asking participants to describe their experience in the institution of a single-sex school guides one to the first subquestion of: *What is the school environment like, specifically reflecting on the dominant narratives, traditions, dynamics, and implicit expectations and normativities that infiltrate into the institution?* The second subquestion locates queerness within the introduced institution; *How did queerness exist in and navigate the institution?* This question was largely informed by asking participants about their experience of the institution as a self-identified queer person, as their reflections on the institution and queerness oftentimes naturally broadened to other queer experiences they recalled outside of their own. These subquestions contextualise the environment and introduce the various dynamics that exist as the norm, and then spotlight the counter normative and the specific experiences of such within the established context. These subquestions reflection on the dynamics of heteronormativity and queerness within the specific institutional environment guide one towards finding an answer to the aforementioned research question.

Chapter 2: Research Methodology

Research Methodology:

Epistemology

This research employs a feminist epistemological framework, with specific attention on “the influence of socially constructed conceptions and norms of gender and gender-specific interests and experiences” (Anderson, 1995, p54; Landman, 2007). The adoption of this epistemological lens invites investigation of the ways gender norms structure labour, the symbolic representations of gender binaries and their perpetuated stereotypes, androcentric perspectives that generalise masculinity as the norm and others as deviance, and finally, sexist content that perpetuates the belief of non-male subordination (p57-58). This allows one to address hegemonies, social hierarchies, institutional patriarchy, and coloniality: concepts that are particularly important in the South African schooling context, in which the embedded legacies and traditions still influence the current social environment and overall agenda (McLaren, 2020, p1244). The context further invites an intersectional lens which “[sees] the social problems caused by colonialism, racism, sexism, and nationalism as interconnected” (Collins, 2019, p1).

Methodology

A research project’s methodology provides a plan through which the research will be conducted and helps to establish the methods of data collection and analysis that will be implemented during the research process. It is defined as the “rules, principles and procedures for the production of knowledge” (Lykke, 2012, p144). The following section will outline participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

Recruitment & Sampling

Considering the question outlined for the research project, the specifics of participant qualification were individuals who had previously attended a single-sex school in Cape Town and surrounds and identified in some way with queerness. While the research focused on past pupils of schools

in Cape Town, participants from various locations were welcome, as the study accommodated online conversations. I made use of the snowball sampling method as a method of recruitment of participants for the study, hoping to reach participants through referrals and mutual connections. The call to participants was presented in digital posters, shared on social media and through various digital networks, thereby connecting to a notably large audience. I chose snowball sampling as the method of recruitment as it has been noted to be a valuable means by which to access communities that have been marginalised by society, and therefore are often invisible and difficult to find (Woodley and Lockard, 2016, p1; Noy, 2008, p330). I hoped, and found, that the referral through mutual connections would foster a sense of trust embedded into the relationship, through familiarity.

I employed a critical qualitative analysis, situating participants' subjective realities, as they represented them to me, as the core focus. My motivation for adopting a qualitative perspective lies in its focus on individual experiences and their impacts, particularly when addressing highly sensitive and personal themes in participants' lives. The qualitative focus therefore allows for the participants' own sense of their experiences and perspectives to be valued as the core of the research, rather than reducing them to mere components of a data set. This is concisely described in DeVault and Gross' reflections on the interview process. DeVault and Gross state

“our interviewees should be acknowledged as agents actively located in history – as makers of the worlds around them rather than as mere victims of an overarching patriarchy”
(DeVault & Gross, 2012, p33).

I adopted a Freirean critical perspective to maintain an acute awareness of implicit power structures, accepted knowledge, and hidden marginality (Freire, 2000). This critical awareness was both introspective and applied throughout the research process, allowing me to situate participants' memories and lived experiences within broader societal structures and power dynamics. Given my shared high school context with participants, I remained critically aware of my positionality and the power dynamics inherent in my role as the researcher. By separating my own perspectives and memories from those of my participants, I approached their contributions with openness, while

critically reflecting on my own accepted knowledge during engagement and analysis (Landman, 2007).

Method, Positionality & Ethics

The following section will engage with the chosen method of research, along with positionality and ethics. I have chosen to present these three sections together as the method is heavily motivated by the sensitivity of the content and is therefore closely tied to my positionality and the ethics that must be considered in the research. The following content will reflect on the three elements of the research in their deep relation to one another. First, I will reflect on the people-centric nature of feminist research, shortly thereafter reflecting on my positionality as the researcher, and the choice and motivation behind interviews as the method of research. Following this, I speak to the importance of active listening and significance of silence in interviews, leading the reflection to the expectations of traumatic accounts and the choice of feminist ethics of care to aid in supporting participants. Finally, I raise the matter of retraumatisation in academic research and extractivism and conclude with the ways in which I combatted this through collaborating with my participants.

Marina Cadaval Narezo provides a valuable reflection on the nuance of people-centred feminist research and the deeply personal and human experiences to which it exposes researchers and participants (Narezo, 2022). Her reflection noted the intimacy of a *conversation* with participants that one views as collaborators in the research – a sentiment that I share, and which motivated my choice to use an interview to engage with participants. Interviewing has been seen as a distinctly human way of doing research, due to the simulation of “a fundamental human activity” of “talking with people” (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p2). They are seen to raise awareness, amplify the voices of the marginalized, and bring untold stories to light (*ibid*). They serve as intimate conversations that situate lived experiences within a curated, protected space, allowing these narratives to be consensually shared through research to illuminate what was previously invisible. According to Wigginton and Lafrance, there is no specific feminist method; both semi-structured interviews and surveys can be traumatic and violent experiences for participants, depending on how they are handled (2019, p11; Harcourt *et al.*, 2022). Beetham and Demetriades (2007, p199) elaborate on

this, stating that feminist research does not rely on a particular method but rather on an approach that considers the multifaceted nature of gender.

In entering the reflection on methods and my interactions with participants, it is important to consider positionality: the ways in which researchers may, or may not, impact the research space and the outcomes of said research (Holmes, 2020). Being a cisheteronormative, white, middle-class, English-speaking woman, I am afforded a certain amount of social privilege due to the stigmas and discrimination faced by those who are not. My life with those privileges has created a worldview and life experiences that may be different to those of my participants. Furthermore, with gender, sex, and sexuality as central in the research, I was sensitive to the fact that my own identity risked being viewed as a representation of those who had (and perhaps, still do) inflicted harm on my participants. To combat this, I prioritised participant-led conversations and prioritised their voices in our exchanges so that I did not dominate the space.

My engagement with participants involved one-on-one conversations, chosen due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, and to allow each participant adequate opportunity to engage with the research topic as they see fit. These conversations offered an opportunity for participants to actively contribute their opinions on the topic, ask questions about the greater project, goals, and expectations, promoting a collaborative research environment (Aanand, 2013, p3; Montell, 1999, p5-6). I have also opened the invitation to meet as a larger group, once the research project has been concluded, in hopes of providing a sense of validation and community in coming together.

Furthermore, the interview format prioritised the comfort of participants, focused on their roles as leaders of the conversation, and was semi-structured - guided only by a couple of thematic questions for participants to interpret and respond to. I ensured that the 'interview' remained conversational, so as not to risk recreating formal and high-stress settings in which participants are made to feel uncomfortable (job interviews, public speaking, etc). I was mindful of prioritising their voice in the format of a conversation in which I aim to listen deeply and *hear* them.

DeVault and Gross address the nature of listening and active listening in their reflection on interviews as a method of data collection in feminist research (2012). It is in this discussion that

they acknowledge the continuous and conscious practice of self-examination throughout the interview process, not only in the transcription and analysis that follows (p18-19). Their work highlights the need for the researcher to critically evaluate their own assumptions that may influence the research process - ensuring that participants' voices are respected as unique and significant but unimpeded by the expectations of the researcher (*ibid*). Additionally, the value of silences is stressed, especially in research that focuses on groups that have been marginalised, as their silence is often a result of societal forces and therefore is relevant to the narrative of their experiences (p19). Dupuis, Harcourt, Gaybor, and van den Berg also acknowledge the importance of emotion in feminist research, in trying to understand and accurately represent participants' knowledge (2022, p13). I therefore attempted to give the space necessary for non-verbal contributions and the presence of emotion in discussion and analysis, allowing the "complexity of human talk" to enter into the research project (DeVault and Gross, 2012).

As my research topic addressed traumatic memories and experiences of othering or invalidation, I chose to follow feminist ethics of care (Held, 2005) to support the research process and the protection of my participants. The feminist ethics of care emphasises compassion and the moral responsibility we have toward others, grounded in mutual humanity and empathy. This perspective also highlights the importance of making context-specific moral decisions, acknowledging the diverse challenges that may arise in the research space. Furthermore, it values emotional responses and denies "the appeal to universal moral principles" (MacKay, 2019; Held, 2005). This is particularly important as I could not expect to apply the same response to each participant's reaction to revisiting memories. In these moments of vulnerability and difficulty, I prioritised my participants and their protection, over the goals and outcome of the research, grounding my focus in compassion and not on the needs of my academic project (Narezo, 2022).

Reflecting on feminist research principles and the value of silence and emotion, I was intentional in my presence during conversations, aiming to create a space where participants felt valued. Given the sensitive nature of their disclosures, it was essential that participants led the process, with the time and attention they needed to share their experiences fully. Acknowledging the subject matter and research environment, I anticipated that the atmosphere may feel vulnerable and exposing for

both participants and myself, and I was conscious of the need for sensitivity in those times, hoping to avoid re-traumatisation of those who have willingly chosen to be part of the project.

Furthermore, as the researcher and the organiser of the interviews, I risked being viewed as a leader of the project. I intended for the process to be collaborative and to merely provide the platform and space for the work to be done. Therefore, I was mindful of allowing my participants to take up the space they needed in sharing their experiences, particularly focusing on not interrupting, speaking over, or leading their choice of words. Traditionally, written academic material prioritises results, and does not adequately allow for the non-verbal elements of research, overlooking the importance of body language, emotion, and the impact of participants' surroundings (either company or location). Such academic research has also often mirrored patterns rooted in colonial anthropological practices. As a researcher, I recognized the potential for these patterns to perpetuate marginalisation and harm. I aimed to actively resist and dismantle such practices while remaining sensitive to the unique needs of each participant's interaction.

Most important in my ethical consideration is the fact that I wanted to avoid my research being extractivist and re-traumatising for my participants. As mentioned above, the research was guided by participants, allowing them to direct our conversations in ways they feel apply to the research, instead of enforcing a strict line of questioning with expected correct answers. Furthermore, I provided each participant with the transcription of our conversation after the fact, to allow them the chance to retract or revise anything they wish not to have analysed or published (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p35). Participants have also had access to the research project throughout the drafting phase, to ensure they are fairly represented and feel comfortable with the analysis applied to their contributions.

Consent & Anonymity

As the project centred on memories from *past* pupils – having graduated from the school environment, and now legally consenting adults – I did not need to take the Department of Education's ethical clearance into consideration. I obtained informed consent from all participants before commencing interviews. Consent forms were accompanied by an information sheet, detailing the purpose of the study, the methods of data collection and analysis, and most

importantly, every participant's right to withdraw their participation at any point, without consequence or need for justification. Participants have been anonymised throughout this project, making use of pseudonyms that avoid cultural or gender biases when quoted. As the project will include reflection on participants past schools, which may reveal their identities, the schools have not been named. Additionally, all participants have had access to review their transcripts and redact any parts that they were uncomfortable disclosing in the final project. Once again, I stress the regular communication and engagement with participants as a means to encourage collaboration on the project, allowing participants to remain within the project throughout the process in as much as they are comfortable and willing to be involved.

Limitations

The research project was predicted to encounter several limitations, primarily centred around participant recruitment and dynamics during data collection. Since I relied on snowball sampling and personal networks to gather participants, there was a risk of not finding enough individuals willing to participate. Moreover, the sensitive nature of the research topic might have led individuals to be hesitant to disclose their experiences.

Another potential limitation related to the emotional impact of the research environment and subject matter. I was concerned that participants would be triggered and retraumatised during the process, and despite my efforts to provide a supportive atmosphere, it is essential to acknowledge that emotional distress could not be completely eliminated.

Participant Engagement

As has been established above, the interactions with participants hoped to avoid retraumatisation and rather create a space of comfortable conversation. Therefore, the questions were generalised and guided largely by the natural progression of the conversation. Conversations were initiated with the establishment of participants' comfort in identifying as queer and engaging further with their preferred presentations of self. I then led the conversations to introduce the participants' school, aiming to understand what the environment was like in its doctrine, traditions, and interactions with students. From this point, I allowed participants to guide the conversation to

where they felt comfortable, asking questions to further understand or gain additional insight into what they were sharing. I did not subscribe to a strict guideline of questions with expectations of answers, instead focusing on a sincere conversation as I had explained in the content above. My hopes in the conversation were to speak about how the school interacted with queerness, but also the relationships and solace found within the environment, therefore I encouraged participants to tell me more about their safe spaces and people when and if they organically brought them into the conversation. With each conversation, I offered the question of participants' feelings towards the school experience in retrospect as a means to carefully bring the conversation to a close and allow participants to share any recollections or thoughts that had not yet been raised. Throughout the process I offered participants moments to ask me questions or my own experiences, in the hopes that my own sincerity and vulnerability would make them feel more comfortable and in control of the space.

I spoke to ten participants in total, with the majority falling within the similar age bracket of 20-29 years old. There was only one participant who had attended school a significant time before the others, having attended in the early 2000's as opposed to the others broad 2010's period. Participant demographics are recorded in the table below, with participants having provided their gender identification and race. I have also anonymised all participants throughout this project, applying pseudonyms to any referenced quotation from their accounts.

| Pseudonym | Age Range | Gender | Race |
|-----------|-----------|------------|----------|
| Ben | 20-25 | Man | Coloured |
| Lara | 25-30 | Non-Binary | Coloured |
| Emma | 25-30 | Woman | White |
| Anna | 20-25 | Woman | White |
| Jenny | 25-30 | Woman | White |
| Alex | 25-30 | Man | Coloured |
| Claire | 20-25 | Woman | White |
| Sarah | 25-30 | Woman | Coloured |
| Hannah | 25-30 | Woman | Coloured |

| | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Grace | 35-40 | Woman | White |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|

Analysis

I made use of a thematic framework in analysing the content gathered from participants. Guided by the core themes established in the literature review, and the primary focal question, I created two overarching themes under which I could further categorise core findings. These core themes were the school environment and counternormative sexuality and gender – or rather, queerness. Within this, further organic subcategories developed. In categorising reflections on the school space, I found the repeating themes of, The School Brand, The Ideal Student, and Discipline and Regulation. Similarly, reflections on instances and representations of queerness organically grouped into, Students, Educators and Spaces. This pattern of thematising and subcategorising continued throughout the initial analyses of participant accounts, with natural groupings becoming evident and ultimately driving the collection and presentation of participants accounts as can be seen in this project.

The above chapter has provided a reflection on the existing research in the field, highlighting core themes that will later guide analysis and discussion, as well as identifying gaps that my research hoped to fill. These core themes are specifically: Single-Sex Schooling, Schools as Gendered, Sexuality in Schools, and Queerness in Schools. Additionally, I have outlined the research methodology that will be implemented through the research process, specifically highlighting the orientation of a feminist lens, a qualitative focus on lived experiences, and the implementation of feminist ethics of care in the data gathering stage. Through the research methodology I hope to convey the participant-centric focus of this research, prioritising the sensitivity of their contributions and the need to ensure their comfort in the research project.

Chapter 3: Establishing The School Culture of Heteronormativities

Introduction

The school environment plays a pivotal role in understanding how queer pupils navigated the single-sex school experience, serving as both the setting for their navigation and the backdrop for their formative experiences. The majority of time during crucial developmental years are spent in school-related activities and within school-related relationships. Pupils are exposed to the various requirements of the institution, the social dynamics amongst their peers, pressure to progress academically, and actively, often publicly, experiencing their adolescence and development into young adults. The meaning of a school environment spans the micro-details of school classroom geographies to the macro-cultural norms around values, school-branding identity, and explicit rules about dress, behaviour, language, and hierarchy. The following analysis will outline the prominent themes relating to the school environment that arose during participant interviews, and which seem most useful for revealing participants' sense of how school environments might embody heteronormativities. These include: the school image, the school's articulation of their ideal student persona, the subsequent expectations that are placed on students, and the ways in which this persona is constructed and controlled by the school.

School Brand/Image

"Imagine paying for your education and then being churned out as a product of a brand. And being made to represent that brand."

A recurring theme in participants' accounts was the emphasis on protecting and maintaining the school's image. All the schools represented in this study cater to Cape Town's middle-class population and fall under the private or semi-private education category. These schools are characterized by high annual fees, quality resources, and a history of serving middle- and upper-middle-class students. Located in affluent suburbs due to Cape Town's economic zoning, the schools reflect middle-class dynamics such as access to transport, the display of certain commodities, and aspirations for high-paying careers and international opportunities. English monolingualism dominates as both the social and academic norm.

The image of the school was a central feature in reflecting on the space, and influenced the accepted behaviours and aesthetic for students. Areas in which the school image was controlled included uniforms and student grooming, as these elements reflected on the reputation of the school as seen by the external world. The pressure and responsibility placed on students to uphold certain ideals was highlighted in a participant saying; “Imagine paying for your education and then being churned out as a product of a brand. And being made to represent that brand. It's just so crazy.”

Behaviour

Certain behaviours were deemed acceptable for maintaining the school’s reputation, often aligning with traditional, idealized gender performances. Responsibility for upholding the school image was placed on the students, tied to their decision to attend the school. As one participant described, this involved “buying in” to the concept of a “[school name] man”¹ and “joining this idea of ‘be a [school name] boy’”². This ideal was used both to motivate good behaviour and, in cases of discipline, to exclude students who were seen as undeserving of the school’s gendered ideal, marking them as outsiders. A similar dynamic was observed in girls schools, where students were tasked with “uphold[ing] the [school name] image in a specific manner, which is very, like, conservative coded.”³ The following section will discuss the accepted student behaviour within the school and will be followed by the behaviour deemed acceptable when in contact with the external world.

Internal

The idealised behaviour within the school reflected duality of certain controls over gendered performance coexisting with instances of looseness and freedom. One example of controlling students was the policing of physical contact – largely as a means to police queerness, which will

¹ Alex

² Ben

³ Lara

be discussed in detail in the next chapter; “they... police your bodies, there’s a certain way that you need to look and then act, for like as yourself and then in comparison to each other... there was a lot of control around how you had to act with other, like with your peers”⁴ and “heterosexual individuals are treated differently. So they didn't have that immediate, like, you can't hold hands or you can't kiss or, but then it was more a thing of do it before or after school. Whereas with peer on peer, it was more like, you can't do it at all, whether it's before or after school, because we are aware of it.”⁵

Conversely, a participant reflected on their school “as an environment for a girl growing up [that] was very open”⁶ and that they felt “completely free to do whatever you wanted”⁷ when it came to extra-murals, hobbies, sports or subject choices. The contrast reveals the complexity that these students navigated, oscillating between traditional school image⁸ that bred the controlling of student behaviour⁹, and environments in which “you could be outspoken and embodied in yourself and kind of confident and... a very empowering environment in that sense as a young woman growing up.”¹⁰ The complexity of the space was further acknowledged in:

“I mean, in a sense, there were kind of gender roles that you played that were very much performed. But at the same time, it was a very interesting space because it was a very safe space for girls just to be girls. Like, yes, it was a school environment. Don't run in the halls. Don't do silly things. But I mean, things that weren't perceived as ladylike that people did was like summer, you would get quite hot in the dresses, they are starchy materials. So most of the girls would just unzip the dresses at the back and walk around with like an unzipped dress.”¹¹

⁴ Hannah

⁵ Hannah

⁶ Sarah

⁷ Sarah

⁸ Alex, Lara, Emma

⁹ Alex, Lara, Emma, Grace,

¹⁰ Sarah

¹¹ Sarah

Similarly, in boys' schools the control sometimes loosened within the school;

*"I don't think they ever actively stopped forms of self-expression more than most schools do. It's like, here's your uniform, here's how you must adhere to the rules... We had dress up days, I came in full pink. Full pink. Little fake boombox, my queer self there. In the personal spaces that the school provided, where you could express yourself, I've never felt policed in those spaces."*¹²

In contrast, girls schools still faced the policing of casual clothes on school grounds; "so on civvies days, as well, there were things that were and weren't allowed, as you know, like, that's kind of, that's kind of everywhere where they've policed, like, what's considered appropriate in a sense".¹³ While the participant did not provide specifics, the implied standard of appropriateness likely included modest clothing – covering shoulders, and mid-thigh skirts or shorts.

The duality contextualises students need to remain conscious of the line of acceptable and unacceptable, internalising the boundaries and practicing self-surveillance to navigate the environment.

External

Students' behaviour was significant when in contact with the external world and had to uphold certain standards. An annual school tradition was described as:

*"we all get dressed. And we all have our French braid and we walk down to St. George's Chapel in height order. The entire school, even the baby tots. And we go and we sing beautiful choir hymns and everyone knows the words. And we do the practices like days before and stuff."*¹⁴

¹² Ben

¹³ Lara

¹⁴ Sarah

Additional; “don’t raise your voice, speak softly, walk in a line, don’t run away... everything was quite orderly and practised”.¹⁵ The school's brand image is on display and students are central to the maintenance and presentation of the carefully curated image. Within this, they are expected to present as homogenous, devoid of any evidence of individuality.

Interestingly, when representing the school at inter-schools sports events, the students themselves policed the behaviour and involvement of their peers; “the teachers... would come sit and talk with us and be casual... It's the boys that seem to have this culture of if you don't, you're not one of us. You're not one of us”¹⁶ (emphasis added). This dynamic highlighted the internalisation and maintenance of heteronormative masculinity from the students themselves; “[the culture is] driven more so by the boys than the institution... I don't blame the institution as much as the boys being in a space together in a culture that has been created where boys uphold these things, rather so than the school.”¹⁷

Aesthetics

The school’s aesthetics and idealized image focused on homogeneity – using the schools uniform and restrictions on grooming to contain individuality.

Hair arose as a site of control for the school. Examples include:

“if you want to express yourself with [dying] your hair, well, sorry, that's not part of our guidelines so get out. It's like that self-expression was definitely muffled”¹⁸,

“[another student] like shaved her head... She would dye her hair. ... if you can't dye your hair, it's like, imagine anything else that's like somewhat different. There's not going to be, it's not, not

¹⁵ Sarah

¹⁶ Ben

¹⁷ Ben

¹⁸ Emma

going to be tolerated ... I think the one girl did eventually get like a final warning or whatever because she kept dyeing her hair”¹⁹

“I had short hair as well, but they object to very short hair, and if you shaved your head, you were expelled... one of the girls decided to shave her head, and they expelled her... I mean they made you style your hair. So, if you dyed your hair in the holidays you had to un-dye it before you go back to school... So very few girls had short hair. Mostly everybody, you just wore a ponytail”²⁰

“you must have your hair cut in a very specific way ...if you had straight hair, you could get away with shaving more of the sides, because that's more traditionally masculine in a white sense. Whereas when I would shave some of my sides and have curly on top, that was seen more as like a... Oh, that's not gentleman-esque. That's not seen as like this idea of a well-kept man... I viewed it mainly from a racial point of view, because I would see a lot of coloured and black guys in my grade feel similarly. If they did that with their hair, they would get viewed a bit differently from the school side.”²¹

The final quote highlights the role of race in a historically white environment and its impact on students' adherence to the school's aesthetic ideals. This introduces important intersectional concerns, which will be explored in greater depth in the subtheme of the Ideal Student later in the chapter.

Gender norms influenced the uniform; “since I've left, they've introduced pants in the uniform... we had tried as well to get pants part of the uniform, and they were, like, no, it's not ladylike”²², further adding to this in saying; “the way that you were supposed to wear uniform and present

¹⁹ Emma

²⁰ Grace

²¹ Ben

²² Lara

yourself, especially outside of school... you had to be prim and proper, shirt always ironed, looking neat, upholding the [school name] name.”²³

In one case, a participant recalled the “hyper-feminine kind of styling of the school uniform”, “you had to kneel on the floor... they measured your dress or your skirt”, “no jewellery at all”, and strict regulations on nail length.

These examples highlight how the school’s brand was upheld by students’ visual presentation, with gendered performance deeply entrenched in acceptability. Because the focus of this research is not on ways in which boys’ single-sex schools insistence on their brand differed from that of girls’, I have not presented my findings on this according to what the men “versus” the women participants spoke to me about; what was very interesting was in fact how similar their observations about the power of the brand was, within their schools’ culture, and how deeply the brand drew on conventional norms of masculinity and femininity

External Reputation

Scandal

The external reputation of the school was the students’ responsibility, in terms of generating both positive and negative attention. Participants recalled how the school perceived students’ actions outside of school hours as threatening to the school’s reputation. In one example, a participant recalls a case in which several students were non-consensually filmed while participating in sexual acts. The underaged pornographic content was shared extensively amongst the network of schools in the area, which in itself is criminal. The incident “became a [school name] issue... they had to get up and apologise to the school.”²⁴ That minors were held accountable in front of the school body for the experience in which they were the victims of multiple criminal acts is highly indicative of the priority of maintaining the school image and reputation over and above the wellbeing of the students. Another example involved a private and intimate image of two students being brought to

²³ Lara

²⁴ Jenny

the school authorities; “they essentially had to stand in front of a governing body... they needed to pay a fine to the school because you're damaging the school's reputation... they had to stand in front of the governing body and please explain why they should still be in the school”²⁵. These examples reveal that even students’ personal lives link to the image of the school, and that impacting the schools image risks their place in the student body being revoked.

Notoriety vs Aspiration

Notably, the school’s brand or reputation was mentioned as a factor in school choice only in the context of ‘boys’ schools. In these examples, the language used to describe the schools and participants’ decisions to enrol were “aspirational”²⁶, “I want to be there”²⁷, “brotherhood”²⁸, “upholding what came before”²⁹, “fraternity”³⁰ and feeling particularly “special and privileged. Like you were chosen.”³¹ Students’ motivations in school choice were closely related to the reputation of honour and exclusivity that the school held, inspiring the desire for deep belonging. Such honour explicitly involved notions of idealised gender performance and created school-rooted communities of brotherhood or sisterhood that were viewed as essential gateways to good global citizenship.

Alternatively, parents’ desire to protect a notion of virtue focused on academic achievement drove attendance to ‘girls’ schools. For one; “my mom really wanted it because she’s got a thing about, like, private education and class”³². Past pupils of girls schools described their attendance as driven by their parents: “I think my parents wanted me to go”³³, “you just regurgitate what your parents

²⁵ Hannah

²⁶ Ben

²⁷ Ben

²⁸ Ben

²⁹ Ben

³⁰ Alex

³¹ Alex

³² Sarah

³³ Jenny

say and I think I'd also [heard] the thing of you focus better at a single sex school"³⁴ and "I got the foundation of a co-ed school, but now it's time to focus"³⁵. This focus on academics was a central motivator, with single sex schools offering a "lack of distraction" and "I was one of those kids who wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend until they were out of school"³⁶. The notion of "focus" entailed the deferral of any sexuality, and that any hint of sexual embodiment would diminish intelligence and success.

The schools in question were also chosen due to their promise of a good education: "it was made very clear that it was an investment into my future"³⁷, "these are the top English schools within the province"³⁸ and having a holistic selection of extra-curricular activities; "suddenly you had so many options and so much access to resources that weren't previously there"³⁹ and "they just offered everything that I had wanted in terms of academics, sport and culture."⁴⁰

The comparison of motivations to attend these schools do reveal a clear divide: young boys exercised greater agency, encouraged to join an exclusive brotherhood, while young girls were expected to remain virtuous, in need of institutional protection, and to focus on academic success as a path to idealized femininity.

Ideal Student

³⁴ Jenny

³⁵ Jenny

³⁶ Sarah

³⁷ Sarah

³⁸ Hannah

³⁹ Hannah

⁴⁰ Lara

“There was this culture of masking and subduing everything that was different and important in the pursuit of greater academic accomplishment.”

The schools’ brand and the emphasis on students’ responsibility to uphold that image created an aspirational model of the idealized student. This ideal was reinforced through pressures, expectations, rules, and the positive or negative reinforcement of specific characteristics. Constantly marked by gendered expectations, the ideal student reflected the schools’ reputation as elite educational spaces for wealthy and well-resourced South Africans.

Academic Excellence

The most central characteristic of the idealised student was academic excellence. The pressure to excel academically was recalled by many participants. In some cases, these expectations have lingered into their adult life and still have an impact. The hierarchy was simply ranked as; “It’s academics, then just below that sports. Then, a little bit of a gap. Then, arts. And then, whatever else.”⁴¹

Interestingly, the pressure noted was not easily identifiable as originating from the school, peer pressure, or internal expectations. One reflection offered; “the teachers also feel it, they’re not encouraging it. I think it’s just this systemic thing”⁴². Other participants reflected on the pressure as “just an expectation we all create in our minds and then go in with that expectation and then perpetuate that”⁴³, going on to say, “we all felt this pressure and this expectation, but like no one ever actually said to us, you have to do this.”⁴⁴. One participant described the pressure as “Everyone excelled at [school name]. And that was the challenge. That was a good challenge because it pushed you”⁴⁵ and “you have to fight for your awards... you had to earn it every year.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ben

⁴² Jenny

⁴³ Emma

⁴⁴ Emma

⁴⁵ Hannah

⁴⁶ Sarah

Academics took precedence over identity: “if you were an academic who was queer, your academics took preference over your identity or your association with queer friend groups or with queer bodies like music.”⁴⁷ This created a disjuncture between her identity and her academic success, specifically; “I place my academic accomplishments ahead of who I am as a person”, “having a queer relationship would be something that would take away from my academics” and “I felt that now I had to prove myself even more academically to compensate for the fact that now I’m actively and visibly queer”⁴⁸.

Public displays of grades led to a culture of comparison for students; “they posted the distinctions at the end of the year with the matric... they would [] post your photo and then how many distinctions you got. And if you got zero, you would get like a little zero”⁴⁹, and “Each grade had a notice board. And on the notice board, there was the academic portion, which would show the top 20 students in the grade. Like they would name you and rank you. If your position changed, everyone can see that.”⁵⁰

Academic achievement ruled over all factors of the school life; “sports practice, music practice was cancelled during exam season... it needed to be exam time. Stop your little hobbies.”⁵¹ The discourse of academic excellence to value placed on certain subjects, with creative subjects “seen as something additional, something fun”⁵² and STEM subjects being favoured⁵³.

Creative subjects were also physically separate from the main school campus in many accounts; “art you could take as a seventh subject and it was not offered at [school name]. There was a

⁴⁷ Claire

⁴⁸ Claire

⁴⁹ Sarah

⁵⁰ Lara

⁵¹ Claire

⁵² Grace

⁵³ Jenny, Claire, Hannah, Grace

separate art school where you would walk to in town”⁵⁴ and “also didn't feel part of the academic space as well. The building was completely separate”⁵⁵ - creating a tangible space between what is academic and what is not, and therefore what is acceptable and what is not. Some participants further noted that the educators in these spaces were viewed as outside of the institution and its regulatory structure, with one participant stating, “the music teachers weren't giving you detention”⁵⁶.

This hierarchical value of academics over culture, coupled with the physical distancing of cultural hubs, served to benefit the participants during their time at school in creating invisible safe spaces which will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

The low rank of arts and music presented itself in various ways. Firstly, in recognition of achievements; “we were given an applause on stage for participating in an academic competition, and girls that had done very well in the Kaapse Afrikaanser music Eisteddfod that happened on the same weekend were given a; “we will host a music awards ceremony later outside of school hours””⁵⁷ (own emphasis). Secondly, in providing funding for facility development; “I was part of the jazz band, we were pushing to win the band stand so we could get this money to pump into the music block. Why couldn't we just get the money from the school?”⁵⁸, “The music block... definitely needed maintenance and definitely needed reconstruction. And the number of people in the music department, teachers, and students, that justified that, but the money was not spent. It was spent on sport.”⁵⁹

For participants, the exclusion of creative intelligences from academic work reinforced the marginalization of counter normativity, thereby queerness, and the erasure of those who did not

⁵⁴ Grace

⁵⁵ Alex

⁵⁶ Alex

⁵⁷ Claire

⁵⁸ Sarah

⁵⁹ Sarah

assimilate. All that mattered, through powerful systems of competitive assessment and rewards, was visible and public success in academic terms.

Race & Class

Within the South African context, the realities of race and class are ever-present. There were multiple instances in which the politics of school space intersected with the dynamics of race, providing a microcosmic lens of a wider and deeply problematic society. The most prominent examples of this were reflections on assimilation into a white space; “Even though they had all these societies, the core values of the school are rooted in whiteness.”⁶⁰ The participant was more concerned with his “shift from colouredness to whiteness”⁶¹ than navigating sexuality and masculinity. Race was a central concern when pursuing the ideal of a respectable and presentable student;

“I would say the racial aspect I felt the most. Mainly because I don't think... I think the white boys can get away with a bit more at those schools. Because I think that their ideal of masculinity has been built years ago around whiteness. So I think when brown and black bodies exist in that space, at least when I was there, they didn't know how to deal with it as, on an even scale.”⁶²

Participants highlighted the policing of brown and blackness in the construction of the ideal student. Reflections revealed the duality of acceptable behaviour, with the definition differing for students based on race and white students being granted more freedom in their behaviour. Specifically instances of bad behaviour left permanent marks on the reputations of students of colour, in comparison to their white peers:

⁶⁰ Ben

⁶¹ Ben

⁶² Ben

*“But then the brown and black boys know that we can't do that. Not because the school will be harsher on us, but we know that in this environment, it's like the rest of the world where these white peers are going to immediately put those labels on you.”*⁶³

Additionally, “I could tell that a lot of the brown and black boys were... We had a camaraderie between each other where it was like, we know what's happening here. We're playing a little bit of their game.”⁶⁴. The discipline of behaviour will be discussed in the next subtheme.

Student leadership roles were fairly racially diverse, with participants recalling some brown and black head girls/boys: “when I was in grade 11... the deputy head and the head were both girls of colour”⁶⁵ and “there was a diverse group within the leading body, but the leader of a group of people needs to appeal in a general sense so that most people would be able to follow behind him”⁶⁶.

While class was not a frequent topic, it is interesting to reflect on the ways in which it was mentioned. Notably, the previously mentioned motivation for attending a school being “my mom really wanted it because she’s got a thing about, like, private education and class”⁶⁷, but also that the avatar of the ideal student was described as “a white, cisgendered, straight, very, very intelligent, skinny, popular, pretty, and then financially very well-off girl”⁶⁸.

There were some participants that acknowledged the expense borne by their parents to allow them the opportunity to attend the school in question:

⁶³ Ben

⁶⁴ Ben

⁶⁵ Sarah

⁶⁶ Ben

⁶⁷ Sarah

⁶⁸ Claire

“for my parents, just sending me to [school name] was quite a, not a financial sacrifice, investment. And it was made very clear that it was an investment into my future. And it was a sacrifice that they made. Like my dad always said, we don't drive fancy cars because we're sending you to [school name], you and your sister to [school name].”⁶⁹

Economic status and the social divisions that were created in the school due to money were noted; “there was the rich kids that, there was, like, a group of, like, 40 strong that had, they were the money kids. They were always together. If you hung out with them, you needed to be able to, like, match their lifestyle kind of expectation.”⁷⁰ The distinction of this group of students, based on their economic status, implies that there was a social awareness of one’s difference, and therefore othering, from the group.

Reflections on race and class, always inflected by gender and versa, reveal the varieties of othering in the school context. The gendered “ideal student” is shaped not only by the schools themselves but also by the broader cultures of consumer capitalism, racializations, and social media that permeate students’ homes and social lives. The geographical location of the schools is significant, as they are almost all situated in middle-class, historically predominantly white areas of Cape Town, a city where economic divides are starkly reflected in its geography. Consequently, these schools largely cater to South Africa’s middle class, either through their student population or through the surrounding physical spaces. Participants’ specific acknowledgments of navigating race and class in their experiences highlight how these factors contributed to their othering in a predominantly white, middle-class context.

Curating Behaviour

Rewarding favourable behaviour embedded the idealised student as aspirational. Three participants recall awards that celebrated students conforming to the ideal student⁷¹. These awards

⁶⁹ Sarah

⁷⁰ Lara

⁷¹ Jenny, Alex, Claire

were named after the school motto, or simply named “Fellowship Award”⁷². One participant described the qualifying characteristics of this award as “the example we want in the world”⁷³ and

*“[there] would definitely be a couple; smart and hardworking and determined and academically-driven adjectives plotted in there. But they painted a very characteristic image of someone, but it was definitely someone that didn't make waves to the broader school structures.”*⁷⁴

For boys “there are lots of awards that acknowledge you for being involved in as much as you can, for being well-rounded”⁷⁵. To receive the award, one would have to fully subscribe to the notion of the brotherhood that was being created; “being a representative... You have to be seen to be really part of the fraternity.”⁷⁶ On being a representative, the participant explained; “how visible are you? Do people look up to you? Do you take a leadership role?”⁷⁷.

For girls, “one of the most coveted awards in prize-giving was literally like the nicest person in the grade award”⁷⁸. The celebration of likability reveals the importance of compliance that conforms to an idealised gender performance for girls. In one case, a participant specifically noted the school as teaching their students to be a “people-pleaser”;

“It was always put yourself second, pay attention to what the person in front of you is saying, do everything you can to make them feel comfortable. It was very much like internalize your own thoughts and feelings and make sure everyone around you is happy and comfortable. I think that was externally encouraged, which is quite interesting... it was almost like don't verbalize

⁷² Jenny

⁷³ Claire

⁷⁴ Claire

⁷⁵ Alex

⁷⁶ Alex

⁷⁷ Alex

⁷⁸ Jenny

thoughts and feelings unless specifically asked. And even then, even when asked, it was like deliver it in a way that is not offensive or even somewhat offensive to other parties. So, I think it was very much like, it was just in the way that you acted. It was like... It wasn't ladylike, it wasn't polite to be too opinionated or too outward with who you are as a person."⁷⁹

The qualifications for school awards reveal a striking contrast between the narratives of girls' and boys' schools. While in both instances, participants were clear that such qualifications were well-known, openly discussed, and articulated frequently within teachers' discourses on merit, young women were to be celebrated for their diligence, and compliance with institutional norms, and young men for their reputation, influence, and leadership. This reward system reinforces traditional gender roles: a respectable performance of girlhood—marked by peacefulness and conformity—stands in stark contrast to the accepted performance of boyhood, which prioritizes assertiveness and leadership.

Coded language such as “ladylike-ness” and “gentleman-ness” were commonly enforced to regulate students' behaviour; “It wasn't ladylike, it wasn't polite to be too opinionated or too outward with who you are as a person”⁸⁰, “to be a proper lady you shouldn't do this”⁸¹, “it's like not ladylike, not appropriate to be close to each other”⁸², “And if you were rude then you were not being ladylike”⁸³, “that's not gentleman-esque. That's not seen as like this idea of a well-kept man”⁸⁴, “what it means to be a good man, or what it means to be a good person”⁸⁵, and;

“[the headmaster] gave a lot of speeches in assemblies [on] integrity and courage and that sort of stuff. And it would always be tied to the attributes of a [school name] man. And so, when I talk

⁷⁹ Emma

⁸⁰ Emma

⁸¹ Sarah

⁸² Sarah

⁸³ Grace

⁸⁴ Ben

⁸⁵ Ben

about the fraternity, that's what I talk about. Are you a [school name] man? Because a [school name] man was different to a [school name] boy.”⁸⁶

The content above establishes the idealised student according to the pressures, demographics, and behaviours of students. In the next section, the ways in which the ideal student was further policed and moulded through discipline will be explored.

Discipline and Regulation:

“The rules are the rules, don't question the rules.”

While rewards embedded acceptable behaviour, discipline controlled the unacceptable. For boys, discipline was highly visible compared to the erasure of girls. Participants highlighted how disciplinary practices fostered a culture of assimilation or exclusion, as well as the internalisation of acceptability which resulted in self-policing. Finally, interestingly, students’ academic success created more leeway for certain students. These various areas of discipline and regulation will be discussed below.

Visible and Invisible Discipline

As a highly visible repercussion of bad behaviour, boys would have their school blazer and tie confiscated – separating those who conform and belong, and those who do not.

“if you had long hair or you misbehaved, they would confiscate your blazer and your tie. And essentially what that meant was that you weren't part of the club. And it meant that you walk around school and you just got your plain shirt. So everyone can identify you.”⁸⁷

This was coupled with the concept of ‘earning’ one’s blazer and tie in one’s first year at the school:

⁸⁶ Alex

⁸⁷ Alex

“And grade eights aren't given their blazer. They walk around without a blazer for the first couple of months. Yeah, they have to earn their blazer and their tie. Yeah. All within the masculine man context and framework.”⁸⁸

Comparatively, disciplining girls deviant behaviour was described as:

“It gets swept under the rug... in relation to how schools deal with certain things. Abortions. How many, um, dropout that also do not get spoken of. Yeah. There's a lot of, and also failures. Sometimes it's not a dropout, but if someone fails, um, the school is very reluctant to deal with that. In the sense that, they're just no longer a student at the school.”⁸⁹

While deviant students were silently removed, there is also the example of the previously mentioned case of students who had to publicly apologise to the school body for their behaviour outside the school – grounding their discipline publicly taking accountability. It is an interesting comparison in viewing the discipline at the ‘boys’ school of removing their sense of belonging, versus the silent removal or public shame of the student at the girls school.

Self-Policing

Self-policing and peer policing were regularly referenced as the internalised understanding of what would be accepted in the school; “the quiet rules, the ones that were never said out loud or explicitly, but that we all knew were there and that we had to abide by.”⁹⁰ One participant reflected on the discipline systems being so heavily embedded in the students that the expression of bans on certain behaviour was not necessary:

⁸⁸ Alex

⁸⁹ Hannah

⁹⁰ Lara

“the cultural norm within the school was such that, around shame, around being disciplined for any deviance from the [school name] lady ideal, that yeah people just didn’t feel comfortable to go against the norms even though there wasn’t an expressed ban.”⁹¹

The internalisation of school rules was made clear in a participant’s opinion: “to be totally honest with you, like I do think if you do know the rules, it’s kind of like, it is also your choice to stick around... I guess you got to pick your difficult”⁹². This reflects the need to assimilate to avoid conflict and was similarly reflected in describing the attitude as “fit in or F off”⁹³ – highlighting the rejection of those who do not comply. This was once again shown in; “it’s kind of like the rules are the rules, don’t question the rules. They’re there for a reason, just follow them. And if you don’t agree with that reason, that’s your own problem, don’t come to the school. And they very much also made it clear when you join, fit in and accept the rules or don’t come here.”⁹⁴ It is very interesting to see how definitive the boundary of compliance was, as the school made it clear that assimilation to their structures was non-negotiable.

Loop Holes

In some cases, fulfilling the idealised image of the student in academics granted behavioural privileges – if you met and maintained the high standards, the rules on your behaviour loosened; “I did ignore a lot of these rules, and that did get me into trouble, but I was an A student up to a point. And because academic excellence was very, very, very important to them, they gave me some leeway for my misbehaviour as long as I keep getting A’s”⁹⁵, “I’m a good kid always, but I have like, would build quite strong relationships with the teachers. And then once that’s established, be a little shit in class right. But I get my work done, I’m achieving. So they, it’s like I

⁹¹ Sarah

⁹² Emma

⁹³ Claire, Emma

⁹⁴ Emma

⁹⁵ Grace

had like a loophole there”⁹⁶, “Well, they would do their best to retain you if you were an A student. Yes, you could mostly get away with it.”⁹⁷

Conclusion

This chapter has provided detailed and valuable insight into the pervasive practices of creating environments of heteronormativity, in which the whole same-sex school was embedded, according to all my participants. As the overwhelming driver of policies and expectations, the schools brand and image is of utmost importance - influencing the academic, aesthetic, and interpersonal realms of the school in entirety. The brand maintenance specifically enforced homogeneity in the pursuit of acceptable student behaviours and presentation, resulting in a strict idealised student image. The idealised student image conformed to heteronormative gender performativity and was closely associated with academic excellence and traditional ideas of ladylike and gentlemanly behaviour. Ideal students were also modeled around whiteness, with students needing to navigate their race amongst the other stressors enforced by the institution. Acceptability was heavily policed through discipline and reward, exemplifying the schools careful curation of the student. Disciplining behaviour aligned with heteronormative gender assumptions - with exile from the group for boys contrasting directly with shame and/or silent erasure for girls. The practice of rewarding and disciplining certain behaviours created deeply embedded understandings of the system, resulting in internalisation from students. In summary, the above chapter has painted this context, from the participants’ own descriptions and stories, as a space of strictly enforced, heteronormative, and conservative ideals that conform to traditionally white gendered performativity, and prioritise the external reputation and perception of the institution over and above the well-being and individuality of the students within it. The next chapter will introduce queerness as it exists in this controlled environment, and in its many interpretations.

⁹⁶ Lara

⁹⁷ Grace

Chapter 4: Identifying Queer

Introduction

The previous chapter offered clear insight into the system of the school environment. Through analysis of institutionalised brand maintenance, the intense academic pressure on participants, and the various gendered dynamics of surveillance over behaviour and presentability, there is a clear understanding of the institutions conditions of membership to their elite student body. This orientation was, at best, uninterested in students who did not conform to the conventional heteronormative expectations placed on becoming a successful school member. At worst, this orientation was actively dismissive of and destructive for research participants. In the following chapter, I will locate the topic of queer being, for my participants, more deeply within the established context.

There are various ways in which queerness existed in the school space, which I have thematised through the following headings: queer students, queer teachers, and queer spaces. These three overarching focal areas guide deeper explorations into the experiences and reception of queer students, the presence and perceptions of queer teachers, and the various spaces within the school that were noted as safe for queerness – both physically and psychologically. The concept of queer in this chapter was heavily guided by my participants' interpretations of the label, and strayed beyond understandings of queer in relation to sexuality. Some participants attributed queerness to the otherness felt in the traditional school environment, students' position within the social structure, or, more generally, counter-normative behaviour. The choice of these themes and subthemes was guided by my interest in understanding how my participants, fully aware of their schools' institutional heteronormativity, negotiated their own queer identities, experiences and relationships.

Students

“I don't want to be that person that's always talking about it.”

The primary focal point of queerness centres the participants' reflections on being students, and queer, themselves. While the research question asked self-identified queer participants to reflect on their own time in a single sex school, many participants spoke of both their experiences and those of their queer schoolmates – creating a wider perspective of queer experiences in their unique settings. Queer students' experiences can be thematised into two main focal points: performance and protection of self, and hostility and negative associations. While social relationships were an important theme in the topic of students' queerness, the topic will be explored more deeply in the later theme of Queer Spaces, as participants reflected on their social relationships as providing solace. However, there were instances in which the social space contributed to participants' protection of self and their experiences of hostility, in which case the social will be brought into this section of thematic analysis.

Performance, Navigation, and the Protection of Self

In considering the ways in which participants navigated the school space as queer, one participant noted that they managed their experience with resilience, taking control of interactions to prevent bullying:

“[T]hey said something ... along those lines of an off-brand slur... I turned around and I said [] “you're not going to do that with me” ... And then I think from that moment on, it was like, a lot of the boys just like, I'm sure [they made comments] in their own circles, but never with me.”⁹⁸

Likewise,

“I was never bullied for my sexuality. Because I didn't allow anyone to bully me for it... But I didn't see it as bullying. I saw it as like, I need to, I need to [stand] my ground here.”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Ben

⁹⁹ Ben

This was a significant recollection in the interview process, as it was the only example mentioned wherein a student spoke of having to choose to confront their aggressors and set concrete boundaries against the mistreatment.

The explicit denial of mistreatment was not always a method that would work in one's favour, as one participant recollected that protecting peers from queer-focused aggression could cause damage to oneself. They noted that their peers' experiences of bullying "[acted] as a big sign that says, stay in your lane. And even standing up for someone in a situation like that, people can identify you as similar through association."¹⁰⁰ Herein, students were forced to carefully navigate the social space, even restraining themselves from protecting others due to the risk of exposing themselves to similar rejection.

Some participants saw their social groups as helping them gauge the reception of their identity. One participant described carefully navigating conversations:

*"I feel like I avoided the conversations as well... I don't want to talk about this and then go bright red and then... everyone's going to know because I'm sitting here quietly or whatever you think as kids... I don't want to be that person that's always talking about it."*¹⁰¹

Comparatively, another participant recalled her anxiety in coming out to friends, despite their explicit and vocal support of queer culture:

*"they were all very liberal, very accepting. So with them, I would speak about it very openly... Like it was a bit nerve wracking to come out because I think when you're that age, you do worry a lot about what people are going to say. And also I just didn't want to lose my friends... once I came out, I was like, "why was I ever worried"?"*¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Alex

¹⁰¹ Jenny

¹⁰² Emma

These two accounts highlight the difficult terrain that participants navigated when it came to their queerness and protecting themselves, even within their close friendship circles.

Another participant recalled engaging, thought-provoking discussions about sexuality and queer culture with friends, although his own struggles kept him from sharing his identity.

“I remember having lots of conversations about homosexuality and that with my friends. Like just trying to understand it... Lots of like really good and stimulating debates, often very triggering debates... not a space of insult.”¹⁰³

Around the topic of self-policing to protect oneself, this participant noted:

“there were things that I intentionally was aware of, like how I ran or how I stood or how I spoke... I could physically feel when I was breaking the mould. Like something went off in my head that was like, “don't do that”... It was more like you're going to be found out.”¹⁰⁴

The above accounts reveal the ways in which, specifically in social settings, students were forced to cautiously negotiate their identity within the space – remaining constantly aware of the acceptable and the unacceptable. Their existence in the school space required performance of what their peers perceived as acceptable, and the careful navigation of being themselves within these boundaries.

Hostility and Negative Associations

In a few cases, queer students were met with neutrality; “So while the students so much didn't care, again, like your preference is your preference, what you do is what you do”¹⁰⁵ and “nothing, nothing regarding sexuality... people often refer to like bullying and... that wasn't really present...

¹⁰³ Alex

¹⁰⁴ Alex

¹⁰⁵ Hannah

not that I could pick up where being queer was an issue.”¹⁰⁶ However, queer sexuality was more commonly perceived as something that was scandalous or considered negative gossip; “And it was always, there was like, an element of scandal to it”¹⁰⁷ , “a lot of rumours and like undercover stuff, but like everyone kind of knew.”¹⁰⁸

Students’ queer identities were not only known by their peers but became a topic of quiet gossip and conversation, and sometimes leading to targeted treatment; “I feel like everyone definitely knew I was gay ... So in the sense of like, yup, there would be maybe a conversation here or there, but...I never got bullied for it”¹⁰⁹ and “So they were kind of targeted because people knew that they were gay.”¹¹⁰

One participant recalled that peers would publicly confront him about his sexuality, asking probing questions in an attempt to incite shame or embarrassment in front of a crowd, but that these exchanges would often be redirected by the participant, using it as an opportunity to have informative discussions about sexuality:

“And I think he was trying to like, prod like, in a mean way... I think at that time, I was viewing it as like, a “let me teach you” way. Like, he was like, “what is this [referring to counternormative sexuality]”? And... I was explaining to him. But I think he was trying to like, jab... I’ve never seen these things as bullying. I’ve always seen it as like, “what are you guys doing? Let me teach you.””¹¹¹

The above quote illustrates how a participant subverted the power dynamics between the normative and the other by defusing his aggressor with compassion, turning the engagement into an opportunity for insight and communication. While this approach led to a constructive conversation, it was a rare occurrence and not necessarily an option available to other queer students.

¹⁰⁶ Hannah

¹⁰⁷ Jenny

¹⁰⁸ Emma

¹⁰⁹ Emma

¹¹⁰ Hannah

¹¹¹ Ben

Queer students in the schools were regularly met with negativity and rejection around the notion that they could form romantic and/or sexual relationships, with one participant noting the double standard that the school enforced on physical touch between same-sex schoolmates and students in heterosexual relationships.

“On the one hand, like heterosexual individuals are treated differently. So they didn't have that immediate, like, “you can't hold hands” or “you can't kiss”... but then it was more a thing of “do it before or after school”. Whereas with peer on peer, it was more like, “you can't do it at all, whether it's before or after school, because we are aware of it.””¹¹²

In this, the participant highlighted that physical touch between students with heterosexual partners was permitted within specific parameters, but same-sex schoolmates had strict restrictions on physical contact to control the potential of queer relationships of any kind. This was echoed in another participant's account of any kind of physical contact being strictly policed by the school: “I don't know if it was a national law, or if it was the school that kind of brought this about, that it was like, girls weren't allowed to like hug”¹¹³

Furthermore, the control of the school extended to whether queer students were allowed to bring same-sex partners to their matric dances; “no one's allowed to bring a girl to the matric dance. And it was a huge scramble if they did”¹¹⁴, “There was no [] blanket ban. But I think it was really really frowned upon”¹¹⁵ and “I mean, they went to the matric dance together, a whole group of people went together. But, they actually, in secret, were going together”¹¹⁶.

Some students were forced into secrecy; in one case, students in a queer relationship were disciplined by the school to protect the school image.

¹¹² Hannah

¹¹³ Sarah

¹¹⁴ Jenny

¹¹⁵ Sarah

¹¹⁶ Sarah

*“[T]he head girl ... got called in by the principal to say “this is not okay this is not allowed this is not what a *school name* lady is like” ... she was really pushed to say they were just friends by the school.”¹¹⁷*

Others recalled the school viewing same-sex relationships as threatening to students:

“there were definitely different groups of [the] school who took - not a queerphobic direct stance but - again a very subdued... “how's that going to impact her academics”, that was a big concern... “she's gonna fail so she should just break up with this girl”. ”¹¹⁸

It is interesting here to note the prioritisation of academic performance when it came to the students' personal relationship – once again compounding the institution's expectations, introduced in the previous chapter.

For another participant, the public exposure of her sexuality at a large school event resulted in her rejection by both the students and teachers.

“[T]hey all shouted “dyke” at the top of their lungs, right from the back of the hall. And this ripple went through everyone... The principal didn't want to shake my hand, and everyone just stared at me... There was a wariness... it became pretty obvious that some of the teachers didn't like me at all... I wasn't a problem [before the event] but there was some hostility after... the news went around.”¹¹⁹

One participant recalled that her friends distanced themselves while she was in a same-sex relationship, saying

¹¹⁷ Sarah

¹¹⁸ Claire

¹¹⁹ Grace

“they just avoided me while I had a girlfriend... after we broke up... if we don't talk about it, and “as long as you don't look at me in that way, we're just going to ignore that that happened”. So, that was the closest acceptance you could get.”¹²⁰

This limited acceptance was compounded by classmates' verbal and physical bullying, due to her sexual orientation;

“So, I was bullied a lot for it... kicking your bag down the hallway, or turning your bag upside down, or taking your chair away, or hiding your books. Um, sometimes it was more physical. So I got spat on. Um, I was shoved around a lot or like bumped over. I was tripped or locked in the bathroom...if I went to go hide in the bathroom... some of the girls would like crowd in and try to get me out or climb over the stall walls... I was never beaten up, but I was roughed up when the teachers weren't looking... none of the bullying was ever followed up on. Even when it happened in class, nobody ever got into trouble for it.”¹²¹

One participant shared that the perception of the dynamics of a friendship between two students changed after one student was known to be queer:

“it started coming out that Student A was gay, but Student B wasn't. So it was this whole thing of, “Student A's actually really into Student B”, and then it was, the weird thing of, “Student B was just super drunk”.”¹²²

In this, the participant recalls that conversations alluded to the idea that the queer student was a threat to her friend, specifically referencing interactions between them in which one was retrospectively framed as prey – implying the social perception of queerness as deviance.

In one case at an all-boys school, a student faced aggressive bullying from a teacher:

¹²⁰ Grace

¹²¹ Grace

¹²² Jenny

“I remember sitting in class and my teacher openly making fun of this boy to the class... he stopped the lesson to kind of tell this boy that he doesn't really know what he wants. That he just needs a girl... it was a total ridicule, total making fun of... And being fuelled by the laughter of the class... it had definitely been so normalised over the past months to address this person in that way that it had become a bit of a joke... basically just accusing him of not knowing what [he] want[s], or him lying.”¹²³

Not only was the bullying normalised in the school by the students, but the societal permission to do so was extended to the teacher – a figure that should discipline the mistreatment of students, not contribute to it.

The narratives shared by participants reveal the nuanced and complex ways queer students navigated their school experiences, balancing self-preservation with the pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations. Through subtle acts of self-policing, calculated social navigation, or moments of outright resistance, these students demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of systemic and interpersonal challenges. Participants recounted how they negotiated their identities amidst the constant threat of hostility, the weight of social norms, and the institutional policing of queerness—further highlighting the inherently stifling nature of the school environment for those who did not conform. Although moments of connection and mutual understanding occasionally provided solace, these were often overshadowed by rejection, hostility, and stigmatization. The following section will examine the role of educators within these institutions and their contributions to shaping students’ experiences.

Educators

“she always used to nudge us to think a bit more critically about our environment”

Queer teachers, according to various interpretations of “queer”, were mentioned in many of the participants’ reflections on their time in school. In some cases, participants reflected on educators who queered the strict school environment – either through behaving in ways that might be considered counter to the school’s strict, authoritarian norm, their more alternative behaviours, or

¹²³ Alex

due to their counternormative sexuality and/or gender. The following theme will therefore be subdivided into three subthemes: Queer Behaviour (which will explore queer characteristics as well as educators who queered the control of the school space), Sexuality and Gender Counternormative Educators, and Educators Considered Safe. The final subtheme of Educators as Safe will segue into the Queer Spaces theme of the chapter, which – while connected to the individual educators – will explore the contexts and environments of safety for queer students, instead of the individual educators. The terms educators and teachers will be used interchangeably in these sections, as participants would alternate between the two labels.

Queer Behaviour

The existence of queer teachers was noted by participants not only in the sense of counternormative sexuality and gender identities, but also in their unconventional characters and distinct sense of otherness within the rigid school environment. These teachers were seemingly accepted in the entire embodiment of their queerness, as a contra-normative presence within the institution.

“she wasn't actively queer... she was the most queer person looking back. Just in terms of like the way she dressed and moved in spaces... But like in hindsight, she's a very queer person. Even if she particularly wasn't queer in sexuality.”¹²⁴

There were examples of teachers that queered the traditional thinking of the school. “She encouraged critical thinking, debating, questioning.”¹²⁵

“There was one particular teacher, she previously taught at... one of those schools where it's... more well-rounded rather than just being solely focused on academics. And she always used to kind of try and like nudge us to all think a bit more like critically about our environment and the way we were taught and what we were learning and stuff.”¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Anna

¹²⁵ Emma

¹²⁶ Emma

Here, participants recognised that queerness in the school was not only associated with the sexuality of their educators, but rather the ways in which they behaved and contradicted the traditional school environment.

Sexuality and Gender Counternormative Educators

There were a wide variety of references to educators that were queer in their sexuality. In one case, a participant recalled the stereotyped queer characteristics of the teacher, recognising that there was little nuance in their queer representatives:

*“the queer teachers that were out... they very much fit the stereotypes, like the old school stereotypes of like gay music teacher who like is very flamboyant and femme and then like a masc sports”*¹²⁷

Interestingly, queer teachers sometimes appeared to form isolated groups within the school:

*“They would sit together at lunch... actually isolated from the staff room. And then that was so much of a structure for students that anyone who then went to go and sit with them, we assumed was queer.”*¹²⁸

The participant recalled recognising the explicit outsider-ness in the teachers collecting outside of the formal staff room and perceiving these teachers as queer representatives finding community and space within the rigid environment. It is also interesting to note the assumption of “anyone who then went to go and sit with them, we assumed was queer”. Not only does this imply close surveillance, but also the fact that these educators in their collective queerness attracted enough attention to fuel what seemed to be an ongoing conversation about the members of their group.

The school’s hierarchy of authority also influenced teachers’ openness in their queer identity;

¹²⁷ Sarah

¹²⁸ Claire

*“I think he was the only one that was out... I don't know if it was because he was a head teacher. He was **head of discipline**. So he was going to all of the events. He was at the matric dances. So I mean, he brought his partner to everything... but as a teacher who is not in like a head position, you are free to not be as open.”¹²⁹(own emphasis)*

In one participant's account, a particularly negative reception of a queer teacher was noted. This teacher she embodied a form of queerness from which the participant wanted to distance herself:

“there was one teacher who was very obviously gay or queer or lesbian or whatever... there was a lot of comments made towards her about the fact that she was a masculine lesbian... And I think that maybe that's where that association comes from now that we're speaking about it, it kind of comes to mind.”¹³⁰

Through observing the reception of this teacher's embodiment of queerness, the participant internalised what was viewed as acceptable in her own embodiment of queerness.

Curiously, in one story, a queer Life Orientation (a subject encompassing preparation for life outside of school as a member of society) teacher was recalled as policing students' queerness:

“we always called her like the queer-phobic queer teacher... Then all of the queer people would go to the queer LO teacher, and it turned out to be a terrible idea because she... was like... “just wait till you're finished with school, then you can, then you can be who you're going to be”.”¹³¹

It is interesting to observe that the participant's reflection on this narrative is one of the teacher being controlling and repressing queerness, as it could be viewed as the educator understanding the context with maturity and encouraging queer students to protect themselves by separating their queerness from their school identity, to avoid the negative reception they could encounter.

¹²⁹ Sarah

¹³⁰ Emma

¹³¹ Claire

Teachers as Safe

Teachers had a mixed impact on queer students' experiences, with some creating safe spaces and others contributing negatively. Teachers connected to cultural spaces were often more accepting, operating somewhat outside the school's strict authority. Examples of this include: "our librarian created such a safe space in the library for us"¹³² and "I remember the music centre, that was very much my safe space ...the music teachers just couldn't be bothered [with the authority of the school]"¹³³

Support was also found in the stereotypically academic subjects: "My maths teacher, she's a big ally... She was like, "do you guys want to start a Pride society?""¹³⁴ and "I had a physics teacher- also queer – a woman who married [a] woman, which she was quite proud of that fact, but only within her classroom space."¹³⁵

However, for some participants, the protection of ones' sexual identity from exposure was still a priority:

*"I remember one time a teacher misheard me. I think I said something about like, boys. And I remember she misheard me in a way that like, would have suggested I didn't like boys. And I was like, horrified about it because I was like, "oh my God, I must correct her." And this was my drama teacher... the [one] I was the closest to."*¹³⁶

Herein, despite the close, personal relationship with the educator, the participant felt that her sexual identity was still a matter of secrecy and something that would have a negative impact on the relationship.

¹³² Sarah

¹³³ Alex

¹³⁴ Ben

¹³⁵ Claire

¹³⁶ Jenny

As contributors to the school space, educators played various roles in participants' recollection of their experiences. Whether as representatives of counternormativity in such a rigid context, as queer models, or as providing solace in the institution, teachers had impact on participants' experiences. The discussion of safe spaces and solace will be unpacked in greater detail in the next section.

Spaces

“there's no way to threaten the academic standing of the school, so therefore we don't care about it.”

Societies (Pride Society)

Some schools allowed LGBTQI+ students to form Pride Societies, but reactions to their formation varied widely.

Schools denied the recognition and celebration of any queerness:

“we were prevented from having a rainbow society, like an actual formed queer society. We were also stopped from having badges made and provided by the school that indicated that we were proudly queer or that we supported queer people. So we wanted little pride flags just as a symbol. If we couldn't have society, we then pushed for a little pride flag. And then our principal was notably quoted as saying, “we don't want to be seen as supporting that trend”. ”¹³⁷

Additionally, the lack of recognition for those who founded pride societies impacted their candidacy for leadership roles:

“I always just thought it was funny that none of the people that were involved in the creation of the Pride Society were given a prefect status or any head of house or anything like that. ”¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Claire

¹³⁸ Claire

In contrast, another participant described the presence of a supportive ally in a teacher who initiated a Pride Society that became a safe space for many students:

*“And it felt like a very safe space. For people to now come and discuss. And, she'd do little, like, presentations with our help on... different sexualities, different gender-spec things and all that. So, we did an initiative where we put all the different flags and what they mean around the school... We did a little talk in front of the school about the Pride society also.”*¹³⁹

Culture vs Academics & Sport

Participants described the school's arts, theatre and music spheres as inherently queer, both due to the neglect it experienced from the institution and from the academic focus, and as a mental and physical safe space' for queerness: “there was much more of an availability for students to be queer in the cultural aspects of school rather than the sport or the academic”¹⁴⁰.

Participants noted that the school often ignored, rejected, or neglected these cultural spaces:

*“You can exist within safe spaces within things that are not academic... so it's not as important, that's fine, we don't really care because there's no way to threaten the academic standing of the school, so therefore we don't care about it.”*¹⁴¹

This was also seen in “I remember the music centre, that was very much my safe space... maybe it's because they also didn't feel part of the academic space as well”.¹⁴²

In fact, one participant recalled the direct link that the pursuit of music and queer sexuality had in the school;

¹³⁹ Ben

¹⁴⁰ Claire

¹⁴¹ Claire

¹⁴² Alex

“a lot of music students were openly queer and... I think there was that availability to music students and to art students, um to question... but there was definitely much more of an availability for students to be queer in the cultural aspects of school rather than the sport or the academic... so everyone kind of went around assuming that everyone in chamber choir was queer because there was this presence of queer people and presence of queer student authorities. So girls in older grades who were queer [] so that made us quite open to the idea. And because our music teachers, I think, couldn't be bothered with our sexualities to be honest, there's a very good space for that.”¹⁴³

The lack of interest in culture from the school authorities can be seen in the ways in which arts and culture were deprioritised by the institution:

“The music block, for instance, definitely needed maintenance and definitely needed reconstruction. And the number of people in the music department, teachers and students, that justified that, but the money was not spent... we were pushing to win the band stand so we could get this money to pump into the music block. Why couldn't we just get the money from the school?”¹⁴⁴

This was also seen in:

“Art you could only take as a seventh subject and it was not offered at [school name]. There was a separate art school where you would walk to in town... It didn't actually have anything to do with [school name] at all.”¹⁴⁵

It is interesting to reflect on the relationship between culture, othering, queerness, and invisibility in the school space. The neglect of culture created safety through its being pushed out of the spotlight for the school, creating invisibility for students, and in these cases, queer students. This compounded their lack of belonging and the fact that unless they conformed to the school's ideals

¹⁴³ Claire

¹⁴⁴ Sarah

¹⁴⁵ Grace

in various ways, they did not matter. This is both a clear neglect of adolescents in a turbulent environment and stage of life, and the origin of a source of refuge within the same environment, due to the institution's willful blindness towards these areas.

The relaxed atmosphere in these spaces, often shaped by supportive staff, fostered a sense of acceptance. One participant shared;

*"I think that's also because... we had music teachers that were very feminine. And sure, we giggled and laughed, but we still really respected them... that helped to maybe not normalise the label but normalise the possibility that those people... were around."*¹⁴⁶

For some, these cultural spaces allowed queerness to exist without the fear of ridicule, as another participant observed:

*"there were definitely people that were undeniably gay in the culture space... I know that if those people existed in the sports spaces... they would have been ridiculed, whereas they weren't ridiculed in the culture space."*¹⁴⁷

Sport was prioritised within the school, second to academic success, but also had complex engagements with queering and belonging to the institution. One participant recalled the participation in supporting the schools' competitive sports games as a point of tension for students: "[other students] didn't care about my queerness. They just cared that I was participating."¹⁴⁸ In this reflection, "it's the boys enforcing that"¹⁴⁹ expectation of demonstrating allegiance to the school through public cheering, while teachers did not enforce the expectation.

¹⁴⁶ Alex

¹⁴⁷ Alex

¹⁴⁸ Ben

¹⁴⁹ Ben

Queerness, in one instance, faced aggression and rejection from the sporting community of the school; “he did face a lot of stereotypical ridicule... it did mostly come from the sports crowd.”¹⁵⁰

Certain sports created environments in which the lines of queer and heteronormativity became blurred;

“And a big part of sporting culture when I was at school was pseudo-homoerotic activity... caressing and touching people, you know, hitting each other in private parts. Like, play-acting this homo sort of vibes... hitting each other on the bum, putting people's pants down. Massaging each other at break time. Hanging on each other. Big long hugs. But it was all in jest... that line is very important. Like, you're not queer. This is not a queer interaction... That jokiness of those interactions eventually disappeared completely. The presumption was still there from onlookers... The context was preserved that this isn't a queer engagement. But because the barriers of physical vulnerability were more osmotic, it was easier.”¹⁵¹

Physical Safe Spaces

There were physical safe spaces on school campuses where students could find solace. These areas, sometimes distant from main school buildings, provided separation from the stricter academic setting; “I remember the music centre, that was very much my safe space... The building was completely separate... I guess that physical separation does help create that.”¹⁵² As mentioned before, the schools strict academic focus and neglect of cultural spaces created a physical and psychological refuge for queer students; “even the music block was also another one that was... a very safe space as well... there were queer women on the staff.”¹⁵³

Herein, the combination of the exile of cultural interests coupled with the physical distance allowed for a safe space for students. For others, safe spaces were specific educators’ classrooms:

¹⁵⁰ Alex

¹⁵¹ Alex

¹⁵² Alex

¹⁵³ Sarah

*“our librarian created such a safe space in the library for us... she was, like, really the saving grace for us... the library was, like, the safe space for this queer couple.”*¹⁵⁴

Similarly; “She's very free kind of spirit, lax space... a lot of people would just... come sit [there] for a break.”¹⁵⁵

Psycho-Social Safe Spaces

Many participants recognise their friends during this time as being crucial to both who they are today and how they experienced their time at school:

*“I've never felt more accepted and more loved and I'm still friends with these people today... I think, not because they're queer, but because they are welcoming and loving and accepting... I bounced around from a lot of friend groups before grade 10... So being able to find a place that was so amazing and so kind and welcoming and that let me experiment with that stuff or experience that, and have conversations with that- I mean, I devoted my thesis to my friend group because they taught me more about what it means to love freely than any textbook could have ever done.”*¹⁵⁶

Close friendships were crucial for many queer students in navigating single-sex school life, sometimes blurring platonic and romantic boundaries and therefore allowing the students to explore and discover their queerness within relationships that they felt were safe:

*“So many of us were connecting in ways that don't fit the heteronormative norms of same-sex friendships... The friendships were more flexible, or relationships I'd say. [M]ore room for play between platonic [and] romantic, I think.”*¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Sarah

¹⁵⁵ Anna

¹⁵⁶ Claire

¹⁵⁷ Sarah

The most notable example of this was once again in reference to the sporting culture in the all-boys school environment that oscillated between physically platonic and intimate:

*“That jokiness of those interactions eventually disappeared completely. The presumption was still there from onlookers. And that was good enough... The context was preserved that this isn't a queer engagement. But because the barriers of physical vulnerability were more osmotic, it was easier.”*¹⁵⁸

Even within the sporting environment – the second most important sector for the institution – space was found for queerness, in the safety of friendships with fluid boundaries and lack of acknowledgement of their potentially queer nature.

This blurring of the platonic and the intimate had to remain unaddressed, for risk of being seen as counternormative: “Even with the people that I was sexually engaged with, it was ... a very friendshippy thing that didn't mean anything about our identity”¹⁵⁹ and

*“[Without] acknowledgement of the fact that it was a queer engagement. So like guys masturbating together or showing or comparing. That was all done within a masculine and straight space. Where it wasn't... acknowledged or explicitly discussed because... “Why?” Like “why are you analysing it?” Because of what's attached to the analysis... and that is the safe space. That it doesn't actually mean anything ... ”*¹⁶⁰

In recognising the queer, participants felt they would bring the queer to life – similarly to the ways in which the invisibilities and silencing of the cultural space forced them to exist with no meaning in the eyes of the institution and therefore allowed them to exist at all. If the school were to acknowledge the culture and the queer elements therein, the school would grant meaning to it, much like if the two individuals were to acknowledge their actions (even if not as queer), they would apply meaning to their actions.

¹⁵⁸ Alex

¹⁵⁹ Alex

¹⁶⁰ Alex

As can be seen above, there were various ways in which students found their safe spaces – be they physical, social, or through their specific interest groups. These safe spaces, with the previous discussion of students’ performances of self and navigation of the institution, provide insight into participants’ lived experiences and the negotiations of the institutional culture that students had to endure to survive strict regulation, as introduced in the previous chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the multifaceted experiences of queerness within the school environment, focusing on queer students’ navigation of the space, the influence of educators, and the identification of safe spaces — both physical and psychological. The chapter centers on participants accounts of their lived experiences as the queer other in their respective schools - specifically their performance within and navigation of the space, and the hostility faced. Following this, the chapter identified non-student queerness, in reflecting on educators in the school that represented counter-normativity. Participants’ accounts of these educators highlighted key contributing factors to their own negotiations with queerness, as well as the overall institutional perception. Within the rigidly heteronormative framework of the school, queer identities were often marginalised, forcing students to carve out their own spaces of safety and belonging. These spaces were often located in cultural hubs due to the schools prioritisation of academia, but were also found in alliances with peers and teachers who embodied queerness in various ways, challenging the institution's normative expectations. Many participants recounted experiences of ridicule and social exclusion, with some educators and peers reinforcing the boundaries of acceptable identities. Yet, within this challenging environment, queer individuals continuously negotiated visibility and safety, balancing self-expression with the need for self-preservation. Ultimately, this chapter underscores the resilience of these individuals, highlighting how their support networks — rooted in friendships, the presence of queer teachers, and safe spaces — played a crucial role in their ability to endure and navigate the institutional pressures of a conservative and idealised school culture.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The following chapter will reflect on the findings of the study, in conversation with the proposed research question and the existing research introduced in the literature review. The content will be divided into; situating the research discussion within the existing research, acknowledging the implications and limitations of what my research has created, and reflecting on the research as it contributes to answering my core question: *How do self-identified queer past pupils represent the cultures of heteronormativities they experienced within single-sex high schools in Cape Town?*

This research hoped to gain insight into the experiences of self-identified queer participants during their attendance of single-sex secondary schools in Cape Town – with specific emphasis placed on how queer students navigated an environment with heteronormative traditions and narrow definitions of acceptable and ideal behaviour for students. Furthermore, participants' specific reflections on the cultures within the schools were of interest to this project, as their perspective of the space as the distinct other within it would offer a unique angle to reading heteronormativities with secondary school cultures and focus attention on what it means to be placed as other within one's high school environment.

The previous chapters on the school (chapter 3) and locating queer within it (chapter 4) provided insights into the highly pressurised, restrictive environment of the school and the curated idealised student that was made responsible for the maintenance of the school brand. In situating my research in the existing archive of research relevant to this project, I will follow the themes headlined in the literature review in conjunction with the chapterised themes I established of Establishing The School Culture of Heteronormativities (chapter 3) and Identifying Queer (chapter 4). Accordingly, the content will be organised as follows: The School; Single-sex Schooling, Schools as Gendered,

and Reputation, and The Queer; Sexuality in School and Queerness in School. These thematised headings will be used to synthesise existing research with my findings, to gain an understanding of the heteronormative culture of the single-sex school environment and the experiences of self-identified queer people who were students within it.

The School

The third chapter of this project provided valuable insight into the environment of the school itself, revealing the expectations, the importance of the school's reputation, and the binary of accepted and unaccepted behaviour that was enforced with rewards and discipline. In reflecting on the findings of this research in conversation with the existing research archive on single-sex schools, there are specific points worth noting in which similarities and deviations arose. First, I reflect on the existing research on Single-Sex Schooling and Schools as Gendered, locating the areas in which my findings correspond with the work introduced in earlier chapters, as well as the differences identified. The final subtheme of Reputation will address the matter of the maintenance of the school's reputation as the responsibility of the students, which I had not previously located in existing research and to which my own findings have contributed new knowledge.

Single-Sex Schooling

Two primary benefits of single-sex schools were noted in the reflections of existing research. Firstly, the benefit of interpersonal relationality reasoned that single-sex schooling allowed for stronger connections to be made with peers, according to the assumption that same-sex peers are more relatable and therefore inspire feelings of safety. It was further argued that single-sex schools might provide validation for those whose sexual identity is non-normative (Salomone, 2013; Anfara and Mertens, 2008). While my research participants spoke of the fact that friendships provided safe spaces, and some participants recalled the comfort and safety of being surrounded by same-sex peers as opposed to the physical threat of co-educational student bodies, the argument against the security of same-sex relationality was also made clear. The pressure, surveillance, policing, and competition that pervaded schools appeared to combat, and largely overwhelm, the feelings of familiarity and comfort that same-sex familiarity might have created. Furthermore, the enforced gendered performativity of behaviour ascribed strict definitions of acceptability that

revealed single-sex school spaces to not be supportive of counternormative identities at all. My research therefore provides a strong argument against single-sex schooling as providing comfort and safety, due to the traditional heteronormativity embedded in the institutions.

The second, and most significant, argument for same-sex schooling was the creation of empowered environments - specifically referencing the confidence displayed by girls in same-sex schooling to voice their opinions and engage actively in classroom discussions when compared to those in co-educational settings (Salomone, 2004). There were examples of this in the participants' reflections, with descriptions of the school space empowering adolescent girls, encouraging opinions and individuality, and instilling the belief that they are capable of anything. This varied from the encouragement to take part in all extracurricular activities, to hosting specific events in which students were encouraged to raise topics they deemed in need of the school body's attention. However, the significant contrast of this seen in other reflections on the implicit teachings of girls' schools revealed that the pressure to be polite, soft-spoken, avoid conflict, and put others' comfort before one's own, was paramount. These stark contradictions in exploring the idea of empowered environments reveal the complexity of the single-sex school space and most importantly the dissonance between the explicit and implicit teachings of the schools.

The research findings from the project largely highlighted the negative elements of single-sex schooling in that the entrenchment of heteronormative gendered performance for students created restrictive environments of internalised boundaries of acceptability and therefore self-policing. In this, my research has contributed a more in-depth perspective of the single-sex school space, revealing the lived realities as contradictory to the theorised benefits raised in the existing research.

Schools as Gendered

One of the core themes raised in reviewing the existing research relevant to this study was schools as gendered spaces. The key realms in gendering was highly operative for my participants were: the usage of uniforms, the value of school subjects, and rules around dating. Additionally, the intersection of race and gendered performativity was raised in both the existing literature and my participants' accounts - and will therefore be reflected upon in the following discussion.

The use of uniforms as a point of control from the institution was noted in both the existing research and my own, forcing pupils to subscribe to heteronormative ideals of dressing. My participants recalled the use of uniforms to enforce traditionally heteronormative and binaried ideas of appropriate appearance, also reflecting traditional ideas of neatness, respectability, and the goal of homogeneity. This resonates with the arguments presented in research by Francis, Monakali and Msibi wherein uniforms are noted as enforcing gendered norms along a heteronormative binary on the students (Francis & Monakali, 2021; Francis, 2021a; Msibi, 2012). Therefore, my research complements the existing body of research that presented the regulation of uniforms as a tool of heteronormativity, invalidating difference and a means of control by the school.

Francis (2023a), Humphreys (2008) and Schwenderman (2014) reflect on the gendering of specific school subjects through the assumptions of which skills girls and boys should be taught. Interestingly, however, my research did not reflect the schools' gendering of certain subjects, but rather the value difference of certain subjects over others. Specifically, the importance of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and academic subjects in comparison to the neglect faced by creative subjects was a significant matter of concern for participants. Here, subjects were not inherently associated with traditional gender roles; instead, areas of knowledge such as music, art-making, and drama and interests were viewed as trivial and secondary to traditional academic foci. Given that music-making, the arts and drama were frequently areas of interest, talent, and creativity for my participants, this explicitly degraded aspects of their intellectual engagement; and as a corollary, where my participants excelled in STEM subjects, this sometimes meant that their queerness was “overlooked” given their academic prowess. My research thus deepens earlier literature on questions of gender, sexuality and knowledge-making in schools (much of which focuses on the shortcomings and biases within Life Orientation curricula) in that I argue for the connection between heteronormativity and the stigmatization of arts, music, and theatre, all areas of knowledge-making critical to humanity. Through this connection, queer students found some escape from hostile school contexts but were simultaneously relegated to being unsuccessful intellectually.

The matter of students' personal dating lives was highlighted in both my research and the reviewed literature. Specifically, the pressure felt by boys to be both heterosexually promiscuous and derogatory towards women (Pattman, 2005) was reflected in my research findings, wherein a teacher invalidated a student's sexual identity by framing it as a failure to find the right girl. Here, my research compounds the existing research, revealing the hypermasculinised social pressure felt by boys at school. Conversely, the greater expectations on girls to remain pure and to be ashamed of their sexuality was evident in accounts of pregnant students being removed (expelled) from the school, and in instances wherein students were forced to publicly apologise for sexual activity in their private lives. The censorship of girls' sexuality and dating lives is similar to the reflections in research by Govender & Bhana (2021), in which girls were expected to adhere to the heteronormative social practices of desiring, and being desired by, the opposite sex, but the simultaneous preservation of their purity - closely policed by those around them. My research deepens this in that it is revealed that the surveillance and policing of girls' sexuality was the responsibility of the school, therefore holding them accountable to their peers in the student body. In considering the topic of policing and discipline, Morrell (2001) and Mayeza & Bhana (2020) provide reflections on the divisions of punishment for students according to their sex - specifically focusing on physical/corporal punishment. While my own participants made no reference to physical punishments, the examples of the punishment practices of public shaming (e.g. public apologies, expulsions, and blazer confiscations) were interesting, and disturbing, to hear of as being embraced by a c21st educational environment.

An interesting and invaluable revelation in my research was the role of race in participants' experiences of the school space. Similar to research by Pattman & Bhana (2010), race played a central role in the schools' treatment of students, with participants confirming the notion that black and brown students' behaviour made indelible marks on their reputation at school. In fact, race was noted as more central of a concern for one participant, when compared to his concerns about the navigation of queerness in the school space. Furthermore, Hiss & Peck's (2020) study of the pervasive white hegemony in a former Model C all-girls school in Cape Town was supported by the findings in my research. Both their study and my own reflected on the strict boundaries of acceptable presentation for girls that closely followed traditionally heteronormative white femininity, outlining specific hairstyles, uniform presentation, and even the way they communicate

- both in language and volume. My participants regularly reflected on schools' idealisation of quiet submission, lady-like behaviour, compliance, respectable presentation, and most commonly - strict guidelines for acceptable hair styling. However, where their study provided a close analysis of the codes of conduct of the school over certain time periods, my research provides a deeper, personal insight into the very mechanics of that control and the internalisation experienced by students. Therefore, my study contributes to an understanding of the practical application of codes of conduct and institutions' definitions of ideal students, as experienced by the students themselves.

Considering the school environment, my research has contributed to a deep insight into the practices and narratives present in schools that were historically “Model C”, and how the mechanics of the white supremacist, middle class, and Anglicised hegemony have been maintained even 30 years after the political fall of Apartheid. The experiences spoken of by my queer participants see this “from the edges” to which they have been relegated, and such a viewpoint is telling.

The Queer

The accounts from participants in my research have provided a varied insight into the presence of queerness in the school spaces, sharing their own lived experiences of participants and the observations about experiences of others considered queer in the space.

Sexuality in School

Reflected in both the existing bodies of research and my participant accounts was the censorship of the topic of sexuality in the school space. While researchers such as Ngabaza & Shefer (2019), Francis (2018a), Bhana et al. (2019), Shefer & Macleod (2015), and Mayeza & Vincent (2018) found the narrative of sexuality centred largely around fear, disease, and avoidance, my participants recalled the conversations of sex education being hetero-biological and practical - focusing on reproduction as the goal - albeit minimal, or cause for punishment; seen in the public shaming of students for the exposure of their personal intimate relationships. I argue here that my research contributes to an understanding of sexuality as extremely limited and strictly controlled in the school space, as it showcases examples in which information about aspects of sexuality was only present as a curriculum-based requirement and as an actual practice otherwise shamed and

punished - arguably creating a negative and fear-based relationship with the topic. Furthermore, both the existing research and my own confirm the censorship around queer sexuality, with both noting that the absence of queer sexuality contributed to the othering and invisibilisation of queer identities in the school.

Participants' reflections on queer teachers mirrored the findings in Brown & Diale's (2017) study of queer student teachers' navigations of the school space. However, where the participants of their study found themselves pressured to conform to and perform heteronormative presentations of self, my participants' recollections of their queer teachers reflect a more complex negotiation of self. My participants revealed the multitudes of navigation; with some teachers reserving their sexual orientation and identity as queer outside the school space, and others feeling free to embody their queerness due to their rank in the school leadership hierarchy. Also of significance was the example of queer teachers collecting outside of the allocated teacher spaces. My research, therefore, contributes to the existing works, highlighting the varieties and complexities at play, and the uniqueness of each context. Some teachers were expected to assimilate, censor, and compartmentalise, whereas others were afforded freedom in their queerness within specific contexts of their own classrooms or arts and culture hubs - further adding to the existing research and understanding of queer teachers' negotiations of school spaces in the many varieties noted.

Queerness in School

The most notable contributing research on the topic of queerness in the school context was conducted by Dennis Francis - with many similarities found in the findings of my own study. Francis reflected on the erasure of counternormative sexuality and gender in classrooms, specifically through lack of acknowledgement and devaluation. This was echoed in my participants' accounts in that many recalled a distinct lack of recognition or discussions about queerness or counternormative sexuality or gender entirely. The erasure and distancing methods of the schools referenced in existing work (Mayeza & Vincent, 2018, p481; and Francis & Reygan, 2016, p186) were seen in schools' refusal to agree to the formation of a pride society - viewing pride and counternormative sexuality and gender as a trend-, policing of same-sex students' physical contact, and the censoring of existing same-sex couples in the student body. Once again, my research contributes to the archive with a deeper understanding of the detailed practices of

control and heteronormative assimilation expected of students by providing examples of these moments as experienced by my participants, as well as expanding from erasure through language and classroom material, into more physical and personal forms of control of queer individuals.

The use of the language ‘trend’ to justify the denial of a pride society for students is reflective of the research by Francis & Msibi (2011) and Francis & Monakali (2021, p723) in their revelation of teachers views that queer sexuality was subscribed to as a means to follow what is considered popular and trending. These are examples wherein my research is directly linked to and reflective of the existing understanding of queerness in school spaces and the heteronormativity that pervades.

Interestingly, however, while Francis (2013, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, & 2020) notes the lack of, and therefore need for educators and the overall institution to recognise queer students as knowledgeable and in need of empowerment in the classroom as bearers of valuable information, my research exemplified one participant who recalled experiences that empowered them as active contributors and participants in the creation of knowledge. Specifically, the creation of a pride society by a teacher in collaboration with queer students who were seen as knowledgeable and a source of education for their peers and educators. This example, when in conversation with Francis’ plea, bolsters the argument in its proof of the value of students as knowledge-makers.

My research added to the understanding of the value of support groups and safe spaces, as raised by Francis (2021, p1581-1583), in providing both examples of these spaces and the lived recollections of the support that they offered. Notably, my research revealed the trend of the traditionally non-academic, often artistic and cultural spaces as being safe spaces for queer students, as a result of the school's value on academics and devaluation of more creative pursuits. This is an interesting addition to the existing research on queerness in school spaces, as it reveals both the neglect of non-academic realms of the school and the sanctuary therefore created in the school's ignorance, further providing insight into the dynamics of the schools.

Reputation and Brand Maintenance

The most significant takeaway from this research, that had not been identified in the previous literature review, is the responsibility and pressure placed on students to uphold the reputation and image of the school they choose to attend and the related idealised student avatars they are expected to embody. Additionally, the reputation of the school precludes the attendance of students, as participants noted the school's reputation as a motivator for their desire to join the student body. This is noted as having created a complicated relationship with the expectations of the school, as participants reflected on their choice to attend the school with some understanding of what they were subscribing to - however the depth of this subscription and the related pressure was revealed to be more overwhelming and everpresent than expected. The maintenance of the school's reputation is layered. For many schools included in this study, the reputation is traditional and steeped history deeply connected to colonialism, Apartheid power structures, and the Model-C legacy that had been addressed in early chapters. This reputation is directly linked to the idealised student image addressed throughout the research, as the expectations on students are modelled on an idealised student image that had developed as part of the overall school image and reputation and is therefore also deeply rooted in white heteronormative hegemony. Therefore, my study raises the spectre of the maintenance of an outdated, white hegemonic legacy and reputation that students of diverse backgrounds and identities are responsible for. Not only is the well-being of students apparently secondary to the external perception of the school, but students who do not assimilate and conform to the idealised student model are invisibilised, neglected, or exiled. The pressure to conform was interestingly raised by participants of all demographics and identities however, it would be remiss to ignore the compounded difficulty to assimilate to the idealised student image for black and brown students, considering the largely white contexts in which they find themselves. While all students are expected to excel academically, behave according to conservative and heteronormative gender performance parameters, and embody the school in the external world, black and brown students are expected to further assimilate to whiteness and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour that are defined by conservative, traditional, and white understandings of acceptability. In this, my research has contributed significantly in revealing the nature of belonging to such institutions, and the negative components associated with the prestigious reputation that attracts them to the school in the first place. The revelations of the schools' image and the pressure placed on students is intimately linked to the introduced concepts of Social Reproduction Theory,

the Hidden Curriculum, and Gendered Performativity in that students internalise heteronormative gender performativity expectations, academic pressures and accepted behaviours, creating a self-fulfilling system of self-policing and peer surveillance, often compounded with the hidden curriculum of the narratives and reward/discipline matrix present in the space.

I argue that my research provided insight into the experiences of the single-sex secondary school experience that was largely congruent with the existing research reviewed in the literature review. However, the matter of brand maintenance, the school's reputation, and the related expectations on pupils is an invaluable contribution from my research that creates a deeper understanding of the pervasive and malicious systems (both explicit and implicit) still present in these schools. In this regard, my research has contributed significantly to exposing elements of a system that is not only treacherous for queer students or black and brown students, but that creates an oppressive environment for arguably all students.

Implications of the study

The results of this study contribute to an understanding of the pervasive nature of heteronormative hegemony in post-democracy single-sex schools in Cape Town, South Africa. While the research is limited to the unique context of Cape Town, and does not presume to be reflective of single-sex schools in the wider country, there are clear commonalities that carry through the ten unique accounts, clearly revealing deeply ingrained structures in these institutions. Clear evidence of Social Reproduction Theory was found, as the hidden curriculum of patriarchal heteronormative gender performativity is deeply embedded in the schools' psycho-social structures.

Furthermore, this study specifically provides insight into the single-sex secondary school environment and the lived experiences of past pupils, where previous research has focused largely on primary school students, the experiences of queer people in co-educational spaces, and curriculum content. The insight provided by this research is significant in that it fills a gap in existing research. It is especially timely, as several South African educational institutions have recently been criticised for their extreme heteropatriarchal practices that perpetuate the harm and

erasure experienced by queer pupils (Dayimani, 2020; News24 et al., n.d.; Charles, 2022; McCain, 2021; Matwadia, 2022; Luvhengo, 2023; Francis and McEwen, n.d.; Jansen, 2024).

In providing an in-depth analysis of the schools' control, students' internalised practices, and students' experiences of control, and in locating students' spaces of safety, resistance, and strength, this research has allowed for a holistic overview of residual and maintained hegemonic heteropatriarchal practices and the various means of survival adopted by students.

Limitations

This research was limited to a small geographical population, due to its focus on schools in Cape Town. This contributed to further limitations in that many participants had attended schools in similar socio-economic areas. This limitation has been discussed in consideration of how social dynamics of race, class, education, and accessibility, amongst others, influence the makeup and values of the schools studied.

Due to the snowball sampling method, participants' backgrounds were not particularly diverse. While a directly negative impact on the research itself was not observed, it is important to note that the economic, linguistic, and cultural demographics of participants were not representative of the wider Cape Town population. Additionally, the participant group was made up of a significant majority of past pupils of girls' schools, resulting in greater insight into the dynamics of those spaces in contrast to those of boys' schools. Once again, this may be reflective of the snowball sampling method and the network accessed through this method.

For future research, the inclusion of more participants from boys' schools, differently socio-economically zoned schools, and a wider geographical area would be valuable in contributing to a broader understanding of the dynamics at play in the wider context of single-sex schools. Additionally, a deep analysis of the schools' codes of conduct, in conjunction with participant accounts, would provide grounded examples of the policing of students' performance of the school brand. This could be complemented by analyses of school policies, specifically regarding the inclusion of queer pupils. These suggestions, coupled with this research, would contribute to a wide and comprehensive review of the state of single-sex schooling and how queer experiences

reveal the ongoing narrow, and white-dominated, hegemonies of what education means for young South African.

Conclusion

In this discussion, I have argued that my research complements some previous research on the ways in which self-identified queer students encounter and theorize heteronormativities in their school environments, showing as Francis does how these students find these environments actively hostile. My research also builds on this work, seeking to show in more detail the operations of heteronormative school cultures, through students' representations of their experiences in a very wide, but interlocking, set of practices of discourses. "The school" becomes, in my participants' material, an amalgam of endured erasure, stigmatization, and negotiation with brands which idealize certain forms of gender performance and render others non-successful intellectually and as school members. My participants see this as a system, one they must endure, theorize, and survive for five years of education critical to their futures. My research deepens previous work by using the space of a dissertation to allow for the representation of the range and influence of this system, and simultaneously, through the authority of the participants' own descriptions, jokes, and paralinguistic moves (they laughed, gestured, used their hands to demonstrate their memories as emotion and as salient), my research underscores the courage of queer-identifying students, in same-sex schools.

Approximately 26,250 words.

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Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

Faculty of Humanities

Department of African Feminist Studies

Consent Sheet

Name of researcher:

Kirstin Cassells

Title of research project:

How do self-identified queer past pupils represent the cultures of heteronormativities they experienced within single-sex high schools in Cape Town?

By filling out this questionnaire / answering the questions put to me:

- I agree to participate in this research project.
- I have read this consent form and the information it contains and had the opportunity to ask questions about them.
- I agree to my responses being used for education and research on condition my privacy is respected, subject to the following: - *(tick as appropriate)*

| | Yes | No |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| My name may be used in the published research | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My personal details (e.g. age, occupation, position) may be included in the published research | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| My responses can only be used in a way that I cannot be personally identifiable | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

- I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in this project.
- I understand I have the right to withdraw from this project at any stage.

- I understand that this research might be published in a research journal or book. In the case of dissertation research, the document will be available to readers in a university library in printed form, and possibly in electronic form as well.

Name of Participant : _____

Signature of Participant : _____

Date : _____

| | | | |
|--|-----|----|--|
| The researcher must supply you with an Information sheet which provides his / her contact details, outlines the nature of the research and how the information will be used and explains what your participation in the research involves (e.g. how long it will take, participants' roles and rights (including the right to skip questions or withdraw without penalty at any time), any anticipated risks/benefits which may arise as a result of participating, any costs or payment involved (even if none, these should be stated)) | | | |
| Has this been provided? | Yes | No | |
| Have your received verbal confirmation/explanations where needed? | Yes | No | |