“We Had More Eyes on Us Than the Boys”: Recollections of Girlhood at Residential Schools for the Blind

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts. Social Justice and Equity Studies

Brock University

St. Catharines, Ontario

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Dedication

I am dedicating this thesis to the past, present and future girls of residential schools for the blind. No one will quite understand the types of girlhoods that we experienced and the stories that shaped us. Our laughter, tears and memories will remain with those institutions forever. This one’s for us.
Abstract

This thesis explores experiences of girlhood within residential schools for the blind in North America. The analysis draws upon and contributes to theorizing in feminist disability studies and gendered embodiment in schooling and residential schools as social systems. It also offers insight into methodological approaches to conducting research with the blind and partially sighted community. Qualitative interviews with former female students illuminate how girls in these residential school settings experienced and navigated curriculum, space, informal/formal school rules and peer culture. The analysis focuses on gendered and sexualized inequalities as well as the agency of girls within in this particular educational context. Documenting the experiences of former female students of residential schools for the blind makes an important contribution to understanding the intersecting realities of girlhood and disability in an under-researched educational context, and points to the need for greater initiatives focused at addressing the inequalities that they encounter.
Acknowledgements

My journey conducting research and completing my Master’s thesis was not a straightforward one with my blind/partially sighted identity, mental health struggles and the constant presence of “you can’t” attitudes. Achieving the goal of completing my thesis is surreal and cause for reflection to acknowledge my gratitude to those who played a role in this experience.

A special thank you to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Jane Helleiner for not giving up on me during this process (no matter how many track changes you had to make in a draft). Thank you for being attentive, dedicated, and patient with me. Your in-depth feedback, guidance and commitment to this project has been immense and invaluable. This project would not have been possible without you. To my first reader, Dr. Shannon Moore, thank you for your encouragement, feedback and support during this process. I appreciated your enthusiasm for my goals and scholarship, as well as for giving me a space to chat when I needed to. I also enjoyed the opportunity to work with you as a Research Assistant. Thank you to my second reader Dr. Lauren Corman for the great feedback and challenging (yet excellent) questions during my thesis defense. Thank you to Dr. Michelle Owen, my external examiner from The University of Winnipeg for engaging in such a deep way with my thesis, providing excellent constructive feedback, encouragement for my scholarship and great dialogue during my defense.

It is hard to put into words my gratitude to Dr. Rebecca Raby. Rebecca, it seems like yesterday I was sitting at the front of your first-year class, laughing at your jokes. Thank you for encouraging me with your pep talks, for guiding me and for being in my corner during my successes and struggles. I appreciated the opportunity to work with you on my undergraduate thesis, a project that set the basis for this research. Thank you for introducing me to critical thinking which has influenced my research and how I reflect on my experiences. You are someone who I greatly look up to and I would not be where I am today without your mentorship.

Thank you to my best friend from high school, T.H. for all the late-night phone calls, exchanging of ideas and years of friendship. I have enjoyed being able to experience going through post-secondary together (albeit from afar). I am also thankful for the conversations I’ve had along the way with my other friends in the blind/partially sighted community that have contributed to my thinking in this project.

Thank you to my peer colleagues for the fun social experiences and study sessions which helped make this process exciting and a bit less lonely. I am particularly thankful to my peer colleagues who helped and were a part of a side activism project I spearheaded, Ability Empowerment Day. Unfortunately, many in my community face numerous barriers to employment, including a lack of guidance, acceptance and willingness to give us a chance. My first paid job was not until I started my Masters as a Teaching Assistant and because of this, I would like to extend my gratitude to my peer colleague S.K. for the guidance along the way. I would like to thank my mom and dad for instilling in me a love of reading, the importance of education and hard work. I can’t help but reflect on how my dad would react to the person I’m growing into.
Finally, this thesis would not have been possible without my participants (pseudonyms Jasmine, Ava and Daniela). Thank you, Jasmine, Ava and Daniela for taking the time to share your stories with me. Your insights on issues e.g. creating more inclusive sexuality education were invaluable. I have enjoyed the opportunity to learn from and work with each of you.
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INTRODUCTION

In developing this project, I drew from personal experiences as well as scholarship in the areas of gender, sexuality, disability and schooling. Consistent with literature on the importance of researcher positioning (Whitson, 2017), I will begin by providing some discussion of my positioning within this project. I self-identify as a white, Jewish woman and I started attending a residential school for the blind at the beginning of my last two months of grade 5. I lived at this school from Sunday until Friday, spending Friday and Saturday at home during the school year for the next seven years until I graduated. My experience was shared by my classmates who came from different parts of the province. My relationship with the school was and continues to be a complicated one as I reflect on my positive, as well as more negative experiences.

When I started attending university and was introduced to more critical ways of thinking and opportunities to reflect on my past, I developed a broader interest in the phenomenon of residential schools for the blind from both a scholarly and an activist perspective. My honours undergraduate 4th year thesis in Child and Youth Studies allowed me to contribute to the very limited scholarship on this topic when I used interviews to explore the lived experiences of three former students (Grossman 2017). By the end of the undergraduate thesis, I had become interested in gendered and sexualized regulation (e.g. Foucault 1978; Allen 2009) and peer cultures (Carey, Donaghue and Broderick, 2011), and decided to pursue these issues in my graduate work.

For this thesis, I returned to the setting of residential schools for the blind but with a more targeted focus on the gendered and sexualized experiences of former female students. In thinking about how to explore these topics, I considered my own memories of binary gender-segregated residential layouts and rules governing cross-gender interactions within the school residences
(e.g., female students could not enter the bedroom of a male student for any purpose and vice-versa). I thought about how the gendered geography and rules produced gendered binaries of “boys” and “girls,” and how comments made by residence staff that linked same-gender friendships to stigmatized same sex sexualities, upheld dominant heteronormative and heterosexist ideologies.

I also recalled how my learning about various gendered and sexualized identities, and the importance of visibility and acceptance of such identities had expanded when as a student, I sought online support for some struggles I was going through and came across two websites: SixBillionSecrets and GivesMeHope (both of which are no longer active). The aim of SixBillionSecrets was to allow users to anonymously publish their secrets and it also offered an online chatroom. Many of the users came out identifying as a part of the LGBTQ+ community and/or discussed issues such as lack of acceptance from peers and family. GivesMeHope was a website that allowed users to anonymously submit their stories of witnessing, or experiencing instances of acceptance, inspiration, and hope. Users also often shared stories related to accepting LGBTQ+ identities and positionings. On both sites, the importance of school-based gay/straight alliances (GSAs) were often mentioned, leading me to wonder why my school did not offer this kind of space.

Along with my experiences as a former female student of a residential school for the blind, as mentioned above, my post-residential school experiences as an undergraduate and now graduate student have also shaped my approach to this thesis. As a university student for example, I have taken on several activist roles. Among other activities I have produced and shared poetry to spread awareness and address social issues and I have been an organizer in the area of disability rights. My scholarship is linked directly to my role as an activist as I believe
that amplifying the voices of those who experienced girlhood in residential schools for the blind, is important to a broader feminist-informed disability rights movement.

The organization of this thesis is as follows: in Chapter One I offer a discussion of the language used in the thesis and a literature review which is divided into four sections. The first section briefly outlines key works that inform my conceptual approach to gender and sexuality. The second section outlines some of the context for, and key tenets of what can be termed feminist disability studies (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Hall, 2011). The third section addresses some of the literature relating to girlhood studies, with a particular focus on gendered and sexualized aspects of schooling. The fourth section explores residential schools as social institutions.

In Chapter Two I outline my research design to provide insight into the structuring of this thesis as well as to guide other researchers who may be interested in working with the blind community. To illustrate this, I begin my second chapter by offering a discussion of researcher positioning. I then provide an account of qualitative interviewing and my own research design. I discuss my recruitment and interviewing strategies and some of the challenges that I encountered as a researcher. I finish with brief profiles of my participants and a brief overview of my approach to data analysis.

In Chapter Three I turn to how participant experiences reveal the governing of girlhood in residential schools for the blind. I begin by discussing their memories of the informal and formal curriculum. This is followed by attention to their accounts of gendered spaces and staffing. I finish the chapter with an analysis of their descriptions of gendered school rules, schedules and practices that governed such things as dress and dating.
In Chapter Four, I explore girlhood and peer cultures in the residential school setting. I first examine aspects of peer dynamics and how in micro ways, girls and their peers tried to navigate structures of authority. I then discuss their descriptions of how femininities were constructed by their peer culture. This is followed by attention to heterosexual dating, cross gender peer groups and sexual cultures more broadly. The discussion is attentive to heteronormativity and queer identities within these peer and sexual cultures.

In the conclusion, I present the ideas of participants about how to create more equitable spaces and experiences for blind and partially sighted girls both within in residential schools for the blind and more broadly in society. I then offer some of my own thoughts about how this research has shaped my own thinking about ways to promote greater empowerment and equity for blind and partially sighted girls.
CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the limited research directly relating to experiences of girlhood in residential schools for the blind, I drew from many different bodies of scholarship to inform my research. In this chapter I outline these in turn but first, I discuss my own language choices in regard to how I refer to my participants and the residential schools that are the focus of this study.

Thinking about Language

When thinking about language around disability, it is important to acknowledge the complexities and politics involved. Key feminist disability studies theorist Rosemarie Garland Thomson for example, stresses the importance of not using words such as “abnormality” when referring to disability and the importance of having to distinguish between the body itself and the identity of a person (Garland-Thomson, 2005 p. 1558). For example, she advocates for using phrases such as “people who identify as disabled” (Garland-Thomson, 2005 p. 1558). Garland-Thomson tends to use person first language throughout her scholarship e.g. (2005 pp. 1558-1561), however, language usage varies extensively. In the case of the Deaf community, Ladd (2005) and O’Brien and Placier (2015 pp. 322-330) discuss how they use “identity first” language e.g. “Deaf people,” rather than “people who are Deaf,” in order to promote Deaf culture. Ladd (2005) and O’Brien and Placier (2015 p. 322) also explain that the upper case “D” is used when referring to the Deaf community, or Deaf culture whereas using the lower case “d” as in “deaf,” emphasizes the medical rather than cultural aspects of being “deaf.”

According to Vaughan and Schroeder (2018 p. 17) the blind and partially sighted community also prefer “identity-first” language, e.g. “a blind person,” rather than “a person who is blind.” Vaughan and Schroeder note how when we link a desired trait with a person, we tend to place that trait before the person e.g. “he is a good person,” rather than “he is a person who is
good.” Vaughan and Schroeder suggest it is this logic that leads to a preference for “identity-first” language in the case of the blind and partially sighted because it serves as a means to mitigate negative perceptions of the blind identity (Vaughan & Schroeder, 2018 p. 17). Consistent with this, many scholars working among the blind and partially sighted community use “identity first” language (i.e. Friedman 2012; Fannon 2016).

As the above section suggests, the relationship between disability, identity, and language is complex. In this thesis I have chosen to use “identity first” language when referring to the Deaf and the blind community, but I use “person first” language when referring to people with disabilities as a whole. In retrospect, asking my participants for their own language preferences would have been ideal as without guidance I found making these decisions about language use quite difficult. I want to emphasize to readers of this thesis that I recognize how different disabilities are linked to different degrees of marginalization making “person first” language potentially more significant and empowering for some than others.

I have also struggled with how to refer to the educational setting that is the focus of this thesis. While these schools are often collectively referred to as “schools for the blind,” I have settled on using the terminology of “residential schools for the blind.” This is because while these schools do accept day students, the fact is that few blind students have access to such a school in their home community and, as a result, for most blind students these are residential schools.

It is also important to note that these schools serve not only blind students (students with no vision), but also the partially sighted and deafblind students as well. While there are differences between such schools, some of which I learned about in the course of my research, I argue that they share enough similarities to be discussed as a collective.
Thinking about Gender and Sexuality

Given that the literature on the concepts of gender and sexuality is extensive, I offer just a brief discussion of scholarship that has influenced how I conceptualize gender and sexuality in this thesis. Risman (2004 pp. 430-431), for example, discusses the many categories of socially constructed gender and how these are linked to inequalities. Risman (2004 p. 432) suggests that understanding gender as a social construct allows for taking into account both internal influences on gendered expression and more externally imposed gender binaries and inequalities.

Understanding gender as a social structure recognizes that it changes through time and space and that gender expression is socially produced and reproduced (Risman, 2004 p. 435). Butler (1988 pp. 519-520) more particularly argues that gender is a performance and as an acted identity can change and both reproduce and complicate binary gender categories (Butler 1988 p. 523).

Connell’s (1985 p. 262) gender relations theory brings together the notion of gender as a social construct with attention to how societies are structured in ways that give men power over women (i.e. patriarchy) as well over each other (i.e. “hegemonic masculinity”) (Connell 1987 p. 184). Connell (1987 p. 184) then describes how women become subject to having to accommodate or conform to male dominant societies.

Understanding how gender intersects with other identities is important. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) was the first scholar to use the term “intersectionality” as it relates to gender, class, race and other identities and positionings, but Collins (2015 pp. 3-4) discusses how similar ideas were central to Black feminist scholarship of the 1960s and 70s (p. 8). Collins lists disability as one aspect of intersectionality, referencing disability studies as a source of new
knowledge and understanding within intersectional scholarship but she does not develop the point (2015 pp. 2-12).

I am particularly interested in the intersections of girlhood and disability Owen (2010; 2014a: 2014b) is a predominant Canadian researcher in this field. I note that according to Owen (who identifies as a female feminist scholar with a disability), girls with disabilities are disproportionately targeted by violence including in the educational sphere (Owen 2010 p. 187). Women with disabilities she claims, tend to be more likely than able-bodied women to have experienced sexual abuse as girls in Canada (Owen 2010 p. 189). Girls and women with disabilities who are institutionalized are also vulnerable to other forms of abuse e.g. over-medicating. Verbal abuse by those in authority towards girls and women with disabilities can result in them having negative perceptions of themselves and their capabilities and can also affect how they perceive the people around them (Owen, 2010). Owen (2010 p. 189) describes one of the most troubling aspects of the intersections of girls and women with disabilities and violence: the prominence of homicide committed against them and how it is easily accepted by others.

Along with gender, it is necessary to discuss conceptualizations of sexuality as attention to sexuality is also an important part of this thesis. According to Gamson and Moon (2004 p. 47), sociologists of sexuality were historically primarily interested in studying sexuality as it related to ‘deviance’ in contexts such as bars, prisons and in relation to prostitution. Sociologists, however, have now shifted to explore sexuality more broadly as a basis of identity and social relations. Feminist, Queer and other theorizing has replaced more static ideas of sexuality with understandings of sexuality as fluid and evolving (Gamson & Moon, 2004 p. 48). This shift often includes recognizing heteronormativity as part of unequal power dynamics (Gamson & Moon,
2004 p. 49). As mentioned above, Black feminist theorizing recognized the need to include sexuality as part of intersectionality, and Gamson and Moon (2004 p. 53) note how constructions of racialized sexuality have underpinned policies and systems of oppression (Gamson & Moon, 2004 p. 54).

Foucault (1978) discusses sexuality, institutionalization and regulation (1978 pp. 17-24) suggesting that around the 18th century, human sexuality started to be more heavily regulated by those in authority and social systems, including institutions (Foucault, 1978 pp. 24-26). Foucault (1978 p. 27) discusses how residential secondary schools of 18th century France were characterized by institutional buildings and rules often focused on controlling child sexuality. Foucault (1978 p. 28) outlines how everything- including classroom spaces, dorm spaces and bedtime regimes contributed to the regulation of young peoples’ sexuality and argued that these remained central to many institutions of his later era.

In relation to the sexualization of girlhoods in particular, Kehily (2012 p. 255) discusses this issue as it relates to the press and girls’ peer cultures in a more contemporary United Kingdom. In the case of the latter, Kehily (2012 p. 259) draws on an ethnographic study (see Kehily, 2002) that she conducted with 9 and 10-year-old girls. In her study of friendship groups in different school-based contexts, Kehily found that girls had extensive discussions of sexuality and attraction centered on celebrities, the boys in their class, and their teachers, regulated by their peer groups (2012 p. 260).

Kehily also discusses how constructions of childhood as sexually innocent and in need of protection, has dominated adult regulation of childhood sexuality (Kehily, 2012 pp. 261-262). At the same time, such constructions are combined with other constructions. For example, she
notes how in Western films young girls may be portrayed as innocent but also as all-knowing in ways that are equated with sexual suggestiveness (2012 p. 262).

Recognizing diverse ways of identifying sexually e.g. as part of the LGBTQ+ community, is important to conceptualizing children’s sexuality. Thompson’s (2006 p. 49) literature review outlines how the media and popular culture have begun to shift to be more inclusive of same sex female sexual relationships for example, through displays of desire and intimacy on popular channels such as MTV. Thompson (2006) highlights the role of female friendship groups and sexual orientation, as well as the role of female friendship group experimentation in sexuality experiences. Thompson (2006) points out how sexual identities evolve over time and that the media, popular culture and peers have a role in this (Thompson, 2006).

A disability perspective on sexuality suggests that attitudes and beliefs about disability greatly impact the sexual freedom and rights of persons with disabilities. In the early 2000s, the World Health Organization (WHO) included rights to sexuality, sexual health, sexual equality and sexual freedom among other important components of sexual rights for people with disabilities (Jungels & Bender, 2015 p. 173). As Jungels and Bender (2015 p. 173) state, this was to help put the sexual rights of persons with disabilities on the human rights agenda. Assumptions about asexuality or heteronormativity on the part of those who work with people with disabilities, however, continue to create barriers to sexual expression and participation for the latter (Jungels & Bender, 2015 p. 174).

Jungels and Bender’s (2015 p. 175) literature review more specifically notes how those with intellectual disabilities face particularly strong stigmatization with regards to their sexual autonomy and health. Sexual autonomy and health, however, can also be impacted for those with
physical disabilities facing structural barriers that create inequities when it comes to participation in dating and sexual culture (Jungels & Bender, 2015 pp. 173-175).

A particularly relevant point made because of this project’s focus on institutional governance is that the policies, procedures and regulations of group homes factor into reproducing and producing unequitable sexual cultures, experiences and access to participation for people with disabilities (Jungels & Bender, 2015 p. 175). Sexuality education that could be empowering for individuals with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities, is often withheld (Jungels & Bender, 2915 p. 176). This is due to negative ideas of people with disabilities (in particular intellectual disabilities), participating in sexual practices and having children (Jungels & Bender p. 176). However, as Jungels and Bender (2015 p. 176) suggest, people with disabilities want to and need to be informed about reproductive rights, healthcare and masturbation among other key components of sexual participation. As a result of this lack of sexuality education, people with disabilities rely on a potentially unreliable media to be informed and educated (Jungels and Bender (2015 p. 176).

The literature outlined above has guided my thinking about gender and sexuality for this project. It has deepened my thinking about how gender and sexuality are both constructed by society and are sites of inequality.

**Feminist Disability Studies**

This section first discusses how disability studies and feminist theorizing combine to produce a feminist disability studies framework before then turning to some research studies that illustrate such an approach. Early models of disability took a biomedical approach and viewed a “disability” as a limitation and part of a person that needed to be fixed. The social model of disability emerged to challenge this understanding by introducing the notions that environments
cause “disability” (Barnes, 2012). According to Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009 p. 50), a more critical disability studies started to take shape in the late 1990s as scholars began to challenge the assumption that “disability” was equivalent to an economic burden and highlighted the complexities surrounding the concept of “disability.” They describe how critical disability studies emerged in tandem with other kinds of critical social theorizing to focus on how social systems coupled with everyday discriminatory practices and attitudes, create barriers to autonomy thereby producing and reproducing “disability” and the inequalities experienced by those who are thereby “disabled” (Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009 pp. 49-52).

Shildrick (2012) suggests that critical disability studies drew upon postmodernist theorizing that understands the body as socially constructed and recognizes that bodily differences are not inherently linked to an incapacity to perform tasks or negotiate various environments. According to Shildrick, it is important to challenge the unequal power relations that produce binary labels of ability/disability and to adapt environments and change attitudes to reflect and empower diverse bodies.

According to Santos and Santos (2018 pp. 305-6) until the 1990s, mainstream disability studies was often implicitly, or explicitly based on presumptive masculinity as well as heteronormativity (or assumptions that those produced as “disabled” were or should be asexual). This would be challenged by the emergence of feminist theorizing within critical disability studies. Wendell (1989) who Santos and Santos (2018) describe as one of the earliest feminist disability theorists, highlighted how social structures can be “disabling” and produce relative powerlessness for those who experience such disablement (Wendell, 1989 p. 110). Wendell (1989 p. 111) describes how social constructions of so-called public and private worlds for example, serve as divisions that unfairly oppress individuals with disabilities by linking them
with private worlds such as the home. Wendell drew upon feminist theorizing to challenge these constructions by demonstrating the importance of access to public spaces and economic autonomy for those categorized as disabled alongside those categorized as women. Wendell (1989 p. 111) also drew from feminist theorizing the insight that the “othering” of those deemed disabled was linked to patriarchal forms of bodily control marked by the stigmatization, stereotyping, and even fear of various “others” in this way. While Wendell brought insights from feminism to disability studies, she also called on feminist theorists to pay more attention to issues of disability.

Another contribution to feminist disability studies comes from Hirschmann (2012 p. 397) who critiques first and second waves of Western feminism for reproducing ableism through a lack of adequately acknowledging, valuing, or understanding the diversity of female bodies (Hirschmann, 2012 p. 397). Further in focusing on the need for women to be “independent,” Hirschmann argues, these movements unfairly stigmatized disability through assuming and problematizing dependency. Female disabled bodies for example, were implicitly or explicitly, constructed as less likely to achieve the political, economic and social independence deemed necessary for “women’s liberation” (Hirschmann, 2012 p. 398). These sentiments are also echoed by Stienstra (2017 pp. 158-159) who notes that within the Canadian context, women with disabilities are less likely to be employed and when employed, tend to earn less than both men with disabilities, and women without disabilities. Drawing on the insights of critical disability studies, Hirschmann points to how because it is social environments that restrain, or liberate those with disabilities it is these environments that need to be changed to achieve greater equality for both those with disabilities and for women (with particular attention to how social environments restrain or liberate the intersectional category of “disabled women”) (Hirschmann,
The category of “disabled women” is however, complex and in need of further unpacking as there are different experiences of marginalization and oppression within the fluid categories of both “disability” and “women.”

Garland-Thomson, a key scholar working to advance feminist and critical disability theorizing, warns against equating dependency and disability in ways that may obscure and deny autonomy and agency to those experiencing these conditions. She also notes how feminist theorizing can be usefully combined with the critical disability studies insights that disability (a category she reminds us, most experience during their lives), is constructed via environmental, and/or attitudinal barriers (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Garland-Thomson, 2005). A feminist disability studies she suggests, should focus on social representation and body politics that avoid normative ideas about “bodies” and negative constructions of “disability” (2005 p. 155).

Garland-Thomson (2011) also developed the concepts of “misfitting” and “fitting” as a way to think about social justice issues related to disability. In Stienstra’s (2017 p. 155) scholarship on disability, she identifies misfitting and fitting as core concepts of a feminist theorizing of disability. Garland-Thomson describes “misfitting” as an embodied experience that occurs when people are denied access to or marginalized within, socially constructed “normal” environments and/or activities (Garland-Thomson, 2011 pp. 592-93). “Fitting” on the other hand, refers to when those with disabilities are able to experience environments and/or activities as full participants due to accessibility and adaptation (Garland-Thomson, 2011 p. 593). Essentially, Garland-Thomson uses the concepts of “misfitting” and “fitting” to argue for social environments that allow full participation by all (2011 p. 595). These concepts are useful for thinking about the ways in which (as I discuss in Chapter Three) some students’ experiences of “misfitting” in mainstream schools may “push” them into the residential schools for the blind.
In relation to sexuality more specifically, I also note how “misfitting” can occur when those with disabilities who express interest in sex, or are already sexually active, are met with ableist presumptions on the part of teachers, or healthcare professionals that they are disinterested or sexually inactive and as a result are denied sexual information and/or supports offered to able-bodied peers (see Santos and Santos 2018 below). Such assumptions may also obscure realities of sexual abuse highlighted by Owen (2010).

The insights of both critical disability studies and feminism are combined in the recognition that full participation for all requires ensuring that environments and/or activities are predicated on an acknowledgement of diverse bodies. As the above discussion suggests, there have been important links between critical disability studies and feminist theorizing, but there remains more to be done to develop stronger links between critical disability studies and intersectional feminism more specifically. Intersectional feminism can for example, offer to critical disability studies the insight that disabling structures, processes, and the lived experience of varied forms of disablement intersect with other axes of oppression and privilege including those that are not just gendered but also sexualized, classed and raced (e.g. Collins 2015).

**Connecting Gender, Feminism and Disability Studies Through Empirical Research**

Having outlined some of the key ideas of a feminist critical disability studies, I briefly discuss five studies that apply some of these ideas in research conducted with blind and partially sighted people. I begin with a study conducted in Ireland by Fannon (2016) that involved seven white, Irish-born middle-class women between the ages of twenty to forty-five years old who were blind, or partially sighted. Using qualitative data collection methods including diary entries and semi-structured interviews, Fannon explored the ideas and practices of these seven women focusing on their embodied femininity. Among other findings, she concluded that the
participants’ perceptions of what constituted an ideal feminine body were similar to those of their sighted peers. As a result, like many sighted women, these women devoted considerable energy to trying to achieve this ideal femininity through using make-up and partaking in practices such as waxing and manicures. Fitness activities and clothing choices were also part of how participants worked toward achieving an “ideal” appearance (Fannon, 2016).

Fannon (2016) indicates that the women tended to participate in different beauty related activities as a means to try to enhance positive readings of their female gender identity and remove the focus of others from their blind/partial sightedness. Fannon further notes some of the challenges mentioned by these women in conforming to dominant expectations around femininity. One of the women, for example, described how not being completely visually aware of her appearance could be difficult at times in her paid work setting because others’ assessments of her professionalism were linked to assessments of her appearance.

Additionally, Fannon (2016) makes some bigger points with regard to the exclusion of women with disabilities from beauty campaigns and mainstream media. Fannon argues that this exclusion is related to assumptions that “disabled” bodies are sites of imperfection. Fannon further criticizes Dove’s “real beauty” campaign, which while including diverse female bodies, continued to promote a message that female empowerment is linked to body acceptance, thereby still objectifying women by linking their value to their (albeit diverse) bodies. Fannon’s study exemplifies a feminist critical disability studies approach in its highlighting of the ways in which wider environments shape gendered processes of disablement, in this case how attitudes about feminine appearance shape the lives of blind and partially sighted women. The study also raises questions about intersectionality by pointing to how whiteness, Irishness, and class positioning may intersect with (a specific form of) disability and womanhood in complex ways.
The second study conducted by Friedman (2012) focused on how blind or partially sighted people use senses other than “sight” to identify gendered bodies. The study involved twenty-seven blind and partially sighted participants most of whom were from the United States (the exceptions were one participant from Guam and another from Kosovo). They were divided almost evenly by gender, were aged from nineteen to sixty-one, and all but three identified as white. The research was conducted via telephone or online using semi structured interview questions. Findings included a couple of participants discussing how they use auditory cues such as the type of shoe being worn, presence of a skirt and/or the type of voice and laugh when they are determining gender (Friedman, 2012 p. 290). Others talked about determining the gender of others through the use of smell e.g. noting types of perfume, lotion, or other fragrances. Participants in the study discussed how they were sometimes unclear as to a person’s gender, but in such circumstances rarely asked other people about their gender identity (Friedman, 2012 p. 294). Friedman speculates that not asking other people about their gender identity reflects a social prohibition, but that this social prohibition creates challenges and a different experience of gender for those who are blind and partially sighted. By delving into the lived experiences of those who are blind and partially sighted, Friedman provides some insights into how blind and partially sighted individuals engage with and navigate a gendered social world while also challenging dominant assumptions about self-evidently gendered bodies (2012 p.296).

The third study by Santos and Santos (2018) was conducted in Portugal. Unlike the first two studies focused exclusively on the experiences of blind and partially sighted participants, this study involved thirty Portuguese women with a range of disabilities including some who identified as partially sighted. The women were between the ages of twenty-nine and forty-nine and were described by the authors as mostly white and heterosexual (Santos & Santos, 2018 p.
The study gathered qualitative biographical narratives from these women about their experience of sexuality. The analysis of the narratives suggests how dominant constructions of sexuality including the concept of “sex life” itself, contributed to reproducing ableism (p. 308). The term “sex life,” for example, can promote normative assumptions about sexuality that do not account for diverse bodies, experiences and identities, e.g. by emphasizing genital contact between two people rather than a broader array of sexual practices (Santos & Santos, 2018 p. 308). The ableism inherent in such narrow constructions of a “sex life” can lead to stigmatizing assumptions that those with disabilities are problematically sexual and/or asexual.

One blind/partially sighted participant for example, described how national healthcare providers were uncomfortable having dialogue on reproductive health with her because they assumed that she was asexual and not sexually active (Santos & Santos, 2018 p. 308). Other women also described how assumptions that they had no sex life resulted in the lack of a provision of adequate privacy in hospital settings (Santos & Santos, 2018 p. 309). Women in the study further explained how within these disabling constraints they still managed to use their bodies as sites of resistance as they sought to increase their sexual autonomy (what Santos and Santos refer to as “sexual” or “intimate” citizenship”), via tactics of bodily exploration, experimentation and creativity (Santos & Santos, 2018 p. 312).

The fourth study by Hammer (2012) outlines how blind and partially sighted women in Israel navigate normative gendered ideas and standards of appearance. The study was conducted using in depth interviews as part of a larger ethnographic project (see Hammer, 2013). There were 40 blind and partially sighted women participating in the study. The women were between the ages of 19 and 66 years old with 38 identifying as Jewish and two as Arab/Muslim (Hammer, 2012 p. 413). Hammer (2012 p. 408) found that these women used sensory appearance
management strategies and practices, as I describe below, that in turn produced bodily pleasure which Hammer (2012 p. 408) terms “sensory capital.” Hammer (2012 pp. 408-410) suggests that these women engaged in such strategies with the aim of challenging societal assumptions that linked their disability to a lack of, or diminished femininity. More particularly they were attempting to challenge sighted people’s assumptions that they must struggle with gendered tasks, including menstrual management or mothering (Hammer, 2012 p. 417).

While investing in such appearance management was easier for those who were better off than those with more limited resources, all emphasized its importance (Hammer, 2012 p. 418). Hammer outlines how participants focused attentively on their body movements (including facial expressions and posture), as well as clothing and other adornment practices in an attempt to achieve a presentation of normative femininity (pp. 419-22). In such efforts Hammer also notes how participants described rich sensory experiences of their bodies, femininity and beauty (pp. 423-4). One participant for example, described using nail polish because of how smooth it made her nails, while another wore high heeled shoes because she liked the sound they made while another placed great importance on the tactile feel of clothes (p. 423). These accounts reveal aspects of gendered appearance beyond the visual and the pleasure of such experiences even within the constraints of oppressively gendered and disabling attitudes (pp. 424-426).

I end with a study from Canada by Michelle Owen. As mentioned above, Owen (2010) emphasizes the role of violence in the lives of girls and women with disabilities. Owen (2010 pp. 189-190) interviewed nine women with disabilities in Winnipeg while her Research Assistant interviewed and conducted a focus group with another 9 girls aged 14-17 with disabilities in Quebec. Focus group topics included violence, bullying and self-harm. The demographics of the participants were primarily white, middle class and heterosexual. While the girls had different
disabilities, two identified as being blind, or partially sighted (Owen, 2010 p. 191). Some of the women described being physically and sexually abused by their partners (Owen, 2010 pp. 193-194). Many described being put down by their parents, significant others, teachers and healthcare providers (Owen, 2010 pp. 194-195). Being targeted by ableist language, such as “crippled”, expressions of doubt and phrases such as “you can’t,” were common forms of belittlement experienced by the participants (Owen, 2010 pp. 194-195). Both of the blind and partially sighted participants experienced severe bullying in school, including name calling, among other violent behaviours (Owen, 2010 p. 196).

The above studies critically engage with various issues e.g. beauty campaigns, gender identity, appearance management, sexuality and violence where disability intersects with femininity. These studies engage with these issues by offering critical perspectives on how gender, sexuality and disability are shaped by societal structures and social interactions and challenge dominant assumptions about ideal ways of being. As a result, all five of these studies offer guidance for my thinking about girls and their gendered and sexualized experiences within residential schools for the blind.

**Girlhood, Schooling, Gender and Sexuality**

This thesis examines how gender, sexuality and disability intersect in girlhood experiences of the residential school for the blind setting. My focus on girls allows me to draw upon an evolving “girlhood studies.” This literature often emphasizes the importance of amplifying the discourses, agency and/or resistances of girls in ways significant to this thesis (e.g. Gonick, Renold, Ringrose & Weems, 2011; Raby and Pomerantz 2015). The scope of girlhood studies is fairly broad and encompasses many intersectionalities relating to the experiences of girlhood and the diverse contexts that they must navigate. While some of this
literature has addressed intersections of girlhood and disability (e.g. Hill 2017; Stienstra, 2015) including some work on girlhood and disability in the context of schooling (e.g., Nguyen & Mitchell 2014), Stienstra (2015) has critiqued the limited focus on the perspectives of girls with disabilities within girlhood studies scholarship. Given the limited scholarship available in girls with disabilities in particular, below I outline some studies relating to the broader topics of able-bodied girlhood, schooling gender and sexuality which have been useful for my work and thinking.

In a study conducted in Australia in an all-girls day school, Carey, et al., (2011) interviewed girls in order to examine gendered “appearance cultures” in the school setting. They defined an “appearance culture” in terms of an intensified experience of having to navigate appearance and body image shaped by school-based peer groups, student-staff interactions and media consumption (p. 302). Looking at the media aspect of the construction of appearance culture for example, the girls interviewed emphasized that images on magazine covers in the school library influenced their thinking about the “ideal body” for females (p. 305).

The girls shared that there was extensive discussion of body image and weight among their female friendship groups as well as group dieting (pp. 306-7). The study further indicated how these girls engaged in mutual bodily surveillance through discussions about the appearance of other girls, and understandings of appearance as a “public” phenomenon within the school (pp. 307-8). The girls praised their school for holding workshops about body image but suggested that school authority figures were not helping them in ways that best reflected their needs (p. 310). For example, staff at the school tended to focus programming on eating disorders (such as anorexia and bulimia) as opposed to how to maintain a healthy lifestyle. The girls also
felt that there was insufficient acknowledgement of the pressures that they faced to have an “ideal body” (ibid).

Scholars such as Raby (2010) have also highlighted the role of school authorities in girlhood experiences of femininity. More specifically, Raby (2010) examined how school authorities regulated the bodies of girls through dress codes and other school rules in public high schools in Ontario. The girls in the study described how bodily surveillance by school authorities to enforce dress codes reproduced inequalities between the girls and their experiences of navigating girlhood (pp. 340-41). For example, girls critiqued school authorities for being inconsistent in their implementation of such codes claiming that girls who had “bigger” bodies were more likely to be targeted by dress code surveillance with the result that they were more likely to be told to cover up or in some cases to be sent home for infractions (Raby 2010 pp. 343-45). Carey et al., (2011), also found girls engaging in mutual bodily surveillance and critique e.g. some girls described other girls as dressing in a “slutty” manner.

Another study from Australia focused on the experiences and perceptions of the residential school environment as revealed by questionnaires given to 121 boarding school staff and 415 able-bodied male and female students from several boarding schools (Hodges, Sheffield & Ralph, 2016). Focusing specifically on the responses from female students, the study noted that girls criticized residence staff for not being sufficiently attentive to their emotions or supportive in times of need (Hodges et al., 2016 p. 1052). They also felt like they were unduly regulated in terms of self-expression, described residence staff as “bitchy,” and critiqued the lack of privacy that they experienced (Hodges, et al., 2016 pp. 1052-54).

The literature on gender and education provides some understanding of the ways in which able bodied girls navigate the education terrain. In these terrains, peer as well as authority-
based surveillance work together to shape the experiences of girls. These insights are helpful for my analysis of girlhood in residential schools for the blind.

As mentioned above, attention to sexuality in the context of schooling is a significant part of this thesis. Among other studies, my thinking has been aided by Allen’s (2009) discussion of how sexuality is regulated in school settings. Allen outlines how “sexual cultures” in schools are reproduced through structures and practices of gendered segregation including policies that enforce distance regulations between students and between students and their teachers (p. 444). Allen uses the Foucauldian concept of “biopower” to refer to the indirect and direct control that schools have over the body (Foucault 1980 as cited by Allen 2009 p. 444). Allen discusses for example, how the specific policy of a “5 cm rule” implemented to regulate physical contact (e.g. students are not to be closer than 5 centimeters to one another), reinforced certain institutional sexual cultures such as heteronormativity, regulatory practices and sexual inequities (ibid.). Allen also discusses how within school contexts bodies can be portrayed as less valuable than the intellect with the result that more body-oriented classes e.g. physical education and sexuality education, are given a lesser status than other classes (ibid.)

Allen explored these issues in a study that recruited 22 student participants between the ages of 16-19 from two high schools in New Zealand (2009 pp. 445-6). Students were asked to provide a “photo diary” and do photo elicitations that were then the basis for semi structured interviews about sexuality in the school on a day to day basis. (p. 446). Allen found that some students were not clear about the rationale for the 5-cm distance rule, but one student described its origin as having come from cases of complaints of unwanted touching between female students and male peers and teachers (p. 447). The rule was reinforced through
assemblies, newsletters and enforcement by teachers and principals (pp. 447-448). Allen outlines how students thought that the rule was meant to foster greater academic achievement and steer students away from dating and sexual intimacies (p. 449). Many however, were unclear about its implementation e.g. which relationships were governed by this rule. For example, they reported how a boy and girl might be reprimanded for physical contact, but not two girls or two boys (pp. 451-2).

Participants also described how some teachers would enforce the rule more than others. Older teachers for example, were seen as 5cm rule enforcers, whereas younger teachers were seen as more lenient and students described regulating their behaviour accordingly (pp. 453-4). None of the students mentioned girls doing any of the inappropriate touching which fits with the historic discourses of men being sexual predators and women being sexual victims (Allen, 2009 p. 450).

Garcia (2009 p. 524) who identifies as a member of the Latina community conducted another study that pointed to intersectionalities of girlhood, sexuality and racialization. Garcia conducted a study in Chicago, Illinois with Latina (Mexican and Puerto Rican) girls between 2002-2004. In-depth interviews, ethnography and content analysis were used to explore the experiences of these girls with formal sexuality education. Of the 40 participants 32 identified as straight and eight identified as lesbian (Garcia, 2009 p. 526). The study indicated that Latina girls were often hypersexualized by teachers and that these same teachers often did not treat their sexuality education-based questions seriously.

The ways in which schooling, gender and sexuality and disability more particularly can intersect is discussed in a UK project focused on student experiences of school toilets. For their project called “Around the Toilet” Slater, Jones and Proctor (2018) examined how adults who
were queer, trans and/or disabled recalled their student experiences of gender segregated bathrooms as well as the phenomenon of separate bathrooms for those with disabilities. Around the Toilet involved storytelling, performance and creating workshops and was carried out by academic and non-academic partners from organizations serving the trans, queer and disability community (Slater et al., 2018 p. 955). The findings included participant recollections of bathrooms as difficult spaces as segregated facilities reinforced existing stereotypical male/female, disabled /able-bodied binaries and were sites of body and toilet regulation.

In school spaces, the creation of Gay/Straight alliances are one example of an intervention aimed at reducing heteronormativity and providing spaces for safer expression of sexuality. In a narrative account of experiences with Gay/Straight Alliances, Wozolek, Wooton and Demlow, (2017) present the positive role that Gay/Straight Alliances can play in providing support for LGBTQ+ youth struggling with mental health. The first author who was a high school teacher/researcher and a Gay Straight Alliance support advisor, draws on the lived experiences of the other two coauthors’ narratives of their experiences of being an LGBTQ+ youth in US schools (Wozolek et al., 2017 pp. 392-393). One was an openly bi- sexual grade 10 student and the other was an openly transgender grade 12 student. Their study illustrates the potential for Gay/Straight Alliance in providing positive experiences for LGBTQ+ youth within schools.

A study by Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin and Drechsler (2012 pp. 188-194) also examined Gay/Straight Alliances as “safe spaces” using semi structured qualitative interviewing (via online messaging platforms), with 57 young adults between the ages of 18 to 25 years old who had been involved with Gay/Straight Alliances or similar groups in high schools in the United
States and Canada. The findings highlighted the complexities of Gay/Straight Alliance spaces as participants described their fear of what would happen outside of those spaces if they were open about their sexuality. Interviewees further talked about some of the inequalities within Gay/Straight Alliance spaces themselves and how certain identities and demographics could be left out. This study presents a more critical perspective on Gay/Straight Alliances by pointing to some of their complexities.

Studies such as these draw attention to various aspects of gender and sexuality within various residential and non-residential school settings. I turn now to the particular setting of residential schools for the blind where, as I discuss in later chapters, female students navigate their multilayered identities (gendered, sexed and disabled) while under round the clock surveillance by staff and peers.

**Residential Schools**

This thesis focuses on recollections of girlhood at residential schools for the blind. In Canada, only one such school, established in 1872 is still operating (Harper, 1997 p. 197). However, in the United States where the first such school was established in 1829, many are still functioning (Ajuwon & Oyinlade, 2008 p. 325). To date there is limited research (including within the specialized British Journal of Visual Impairment), into such schools and even less focused on student experiences (e.g., Haegele, Sato, Zhu, & Avery, 2017). Before offering a discussion on residential schooling within the disability context, residential schools as they relate to other social contexts will be addressed.

Residential (boarding) schools as a form of segregated education have in different ways in different times and places, been part of larger systems of social inequality including colonialism, racism, classed and gendered hierarchies and ableism- and their
intersectionalities. The forced removal of Indigenous children from families and communities to segregated residential schools controlled by non-Indigenous institutions and personnel for instance, was part of the history of settler colonialism in North America (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

The residential schools many Indigenous children were forced to attend took away from them their language, culture and dignity (Morgensen, 2010; Smith, 2004; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The development of these residential schools was part of the larger project of European settler colonialism in North America. Within such schools, Indigenous children were often starved and forced to live in conditions where disease was prominent because they were denied healthcare. Death rates were high and many of those who survived faced abuse (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015 pp. 90-94).

Of particular relevance to my focus on gendered and sexualized experiences within residential schools, Smith (2004) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015 e.g. pp. 40-41, 85) note how residential schools, as part of a broader project of cultural genocide, worked to impose colonizers gendered and sexualized roles on Indigenous students (Morgensen, 2010 p. 106). Prior to colonialism, there was gender fluidity in Indigenous communities, but European male/female binary and related distinctions were imposed in residential school settings (Smith, 2004 p. 90). Morgensen (2010 p. 115) outlines a particular instance at a residential school where a student wearing “female” clothing was placed with the girls. When it was discovered that this student had male genitalia, the student was removed from the girls who had known the secret and they never saw the student again (Morgensen, 2010 p. 115). Colonizers not only tried to eliminate gender fluidity (including free gender self-expression and two
spiritedness), but also imposed and promoted patriarchal power relations in the schools (Morgensen, 2010 pp. 113-14).

In contrast to the forced separation of children from their families, oppressive conditions and the project of cultural genocide that marked residential schools for Indigenous children in North America, are the features of residential schools for the children of elites. In the United Kingdom, for example, there is a long history of wealthy families voluntarily sending their sons to expensive and exclusive residential schools for the purpose of preparing them for lives of privilege (Reeves et al., 2017). Founded with the intent to separate upper class children from their lower-class peers, residential schools for male children of the elite focus on maintaining inter-generational privilege and power by ensuring that these students have access to the kind of education deemed most valuable by those with power. The schools also provide the kinds of social networks that can facilitate the reproduction of familial wealth and influence (Reeves et al., 2017 pp. 1140-1). As Reeves et al., (2017 p. 1159) point out, this form of educational segregation continues to ensure the predominance of (predominantly white and able-bodied) males from elite-backgrounds at the top of many powerful societal organizations. As these two very different examples make clear, residential schools can serve very different social purposes for different categories of students. When thinking about residential schools then, it is important to consider the context of the creation and functioning of such schools within unequal social systems. With this in mind, I turn to the limited scholarly literature on residential schools for children with disabilities.

An initial review of the limited scholarship relating to residential schools and students with disabilities reveals some of the variation in such school settings. One of the better researched examples involves U.S. residential schools for Deaf students. These segregated
residential schools provide instruction focused on developing basic skills that may lead to independent living and at least entry-level employment upon graduation rather than post-secondary studies and more advanced careers (O’Brien and Placier, 2015 p., 321).

Skill development initially included instruction in sign language as well as “oralism” (i.e. teaching students how to lip read and communicate verbally) (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2011 pp. 2-3; O’Brien & Placier pp. 321-22). However, as the popularity of “oralism” grew, instruction in sign language was reduced (O’Brien & Placier, 2015 p. 322). O’Brien and Placier argue that this change represented the imposition of a hearing “normative” culture on Deaf students, a form of cultural assimilation by the hearing authority figures. While they describe the residential schools as sites of oppressive ableism in this regard, they also note how such schools were simultaneously important sites of student resistance in the form of building Deaf culture as students offered one another secret instruction in American Sign Language (O’Brien & Placier, 2015 p. 322).

Ladd (2005 pp. 12-13) discusses the movement to not only emphasize “oralism,” but also to close down residential schools for Deaf children and move Deaf children to mainstream schools. The result he argues, has been a forced integration into normative, ableist hearing cultures (p. 13). Ladd outlines how schools for the Deaf were established by Deaf people and were spaces where Deaf teachers passed down Deaf cultures to students (ibid.). Given this history he argues, the shift toward oralism, can be described as a form of colonialism vis-à-vis the Deaf community as a linguistic and cultural minority.

Ladd (2005 p. 14) suggests that these shifts have involved hearing people coming into Deaf organizations and institutions in positions of power, thereby producing relatively powerless “Deaf colonies.” These “Deaf colonies” are reproduced by hearing people bringing their
normative cultures into organizations and residential schools that previously fostered Deaf culture. Ladd introduces the concept of “Deafhood” to refer to a shared way of being that he argues is being denied and oppressed through a colonial approach that focuses on removing deafness instead of recognizing and supporting its cultural reality and value (ibid.).

While there is a fair bit of discussion of the relationship between residential schools and the politics and culture of Deafhood, there is less written about similar issues as they relate to the blind community. Focusing on employment and other organizations for blind and partially sighted adults, Vaughan and Shroeder (2018) start to bridge the gap in identifying the complexities surrounding the blind community and schooling.

Debate over schooling for the blind has been related to broader developments involving the blind community. In 1940, for example, a group of blind community members, led by Dr. Jacobus tenBroek started the National Federation of the Blind in the United States to challenge the idea that sight was necessary to being able to navigate, interact with and participate in the wider world (Vaughan & Schroeder, 2018 p. 19). The National Federation of the Blind argued that blindness was simply another way of being with both positives and negatives (ibid.). The white cane -once a form of identification, enabling members of the public to be aware of blindness, was reworked by the National Federation for the Blind into an important blind culture symbol of independence (Vaughan & Shroeder, 2018 p. 20).

According to Vaughan and Shroeder (2018 p. 50) when schools for the blind began reaching full capacity in the mid 1900s, there was push for blind children to enter mainstream education. Described as “full inclusion,” the pros and cons of such integration remains a topic of debate as some are concerned that teachers in mainstream education are not able to
meet the needs of blind and partially sighted children, including with regards to holding them to high expectations (pp. 50-51).

Another part of the education debate concerns the status of Braille - a language with cultural significance and meaning for the blind and partially sighted community. Vaughan and Shroeder (2018 p. 53) argue that the current common model of Individualized Education Plans (IEP) gives too much power to mainstream school authorities who often do not recognize the value of, or are not prepared to invest in, teaching Braille to blind and partially sighted children. Some argue this makes obtaining literacy skills for blind and partially sighted children more difficult in the mainstream school system.

In one of the few studies specifically focused on residential schools for the blind in the US, Ajuwon and Oyinlade (2008) sought to examine the rationale behind parents’ choices to put their children in such schools. Ajuwon and Oyinlade (2008) found that parents felt that such a placement would offer their child better opportunities and academic support such as Educational Assistants and accessible course materials. Another American study discussed how residential schools offered short term weekend programs for blind and partially sighted students attending regular public schools in the community (Pogrund, Darst and Boland, 2013). The latter study revealed how parents and school authorities felt that these short-term programs enhanced the independence of the students by teaching them important life skills that they did not learn at their public schools.

Both of these studies offered positive assessments of residential schools for the blind but neither directly addressed student experiences, let alone student experiences of gender and sexuality within such schools. To my knowledge, there are only a couple of studies that start to approach such issues. One by Haegele, Yessick and Zhu (2018) involved asking eight females
who were blind, or partially sighted between the ages of 21 and 32 and living in the United States, about their girlhood experiences of physical education (Haegele et al., 2018 p. 300). Some of these described experiences of physical education in the context of mainstream schools but some had attended residential schools for the blind in the United States and also in one case, in Ukraine (Haegele et al., 2018 p. 300).

This study found that girls who had experienced physical education in the context of regular schools, recalled being segregated from other students and/or asked to do different or fewer activities than the other students as safety concerns were invoked by teachers as a reason to reduce expectations for them (Haegele et al., 2018 p. 303-4). Some felt that it was not only their disability but also their gender that led to lower expectations of them in this context (Haegele et al., 2018 p. 303). Interestingly, the latter point was also made by those who had attended residential schools for the blind. The former female students of these schools felt that physical education teachers in this setting also had higher expectations for the male students (Haegele et al., 2018 p. 304). Regardless of school setting, the female interviewees also reported experiencing bullying in the form of verbal and physical abuse primarily from male peers in gym class (Haegele et al., 2018 p. 305). A linked study of male student recollections of physical education within U.S. residential schools for the blind revealed that some male students also experienced bullying by other male students (Haegele et al., 2017 pp. 137-138).

As discussed, residential schools need to be understood in terms of their functioning within larger systems of social inequality. While residential schools were a place of cultural assimilation for Indigenous communities, for example, they have been described as important sites for the transmission of Deaf culture by writers such as Ladd. My research contributes to the
limited work on residential schools for the blind and raises questions about their relationship to ableist, gendered and heteronormative ideologies and inequalities.
CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

As Berger and Lorenz (2015) note, methods are the specific techniques utilized in a research project (e.g. qualitative interviews) while methodology refers to the wider principles governing its design and implementation. This thesis is informed by qualitative research methodologies that stress the importance of researchers reflecting on their positioning in relationship to those they are researching. Berger and Lorenz (2015 p.13) for example, mention that there is some debate as to whether able-bodied researchers should be involved in disability studies and also point to the fact that many scholars (whether non-disabled or disabled) within disability studies embrace an “emancipatory research” approach that prioritizes working in solidarity with people with disabilities and aiming to contribute to their empowerment.

Attentiveness to researcher positioning has been part of both disability and feminist studies (Berger & Lorenz, 2015) and thus, it is not surprising that they are highlighted in feminist disability studies. I explore how some of the researchers who have informed this thesis, outline their researcher positioning before considering how my own positioning may have shaped recruitment and interview dynamics. Following this I review how other scholars have used qualitative methods and interviewing in particular, before outlining the details of my own recruitment, interviewing and data analysis processes.

Researcher Positioning

Within Feminist Disability Studies, Simplican (2017 p. 47) discusses how scholars have used “life writing” to outline their positionings within, and in relation to disability in order to challenge ableism. Simplican (2017 pp. 47-49) explains that life writing, or the sharing of personal experiences has been advocated by prominent Feminist Disability Studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997; 2005) whose work, has greatly influenced my project. By
explicitly positioning themselves in terms of their own embodied relationship to disability. Feminist Disability Studies researchers aim to confront ableism among both readers and researchers (Simplican, 2017 p. 54).

Below I draw on select researchers from my literature review to briefly illustrate the diverse ways in which researcher positioning can be addressed and reflected on in scholarship. Wendell (1989 p. 104) for example, lives with a chronic illness. Friedman (2012 pp. 288-9) in contrast, identifies as a sighted scholar working within the blind and partially sighted community, as does Hammer who writes in greater detail about how she felt that her “sighted” positioning affected her researcher role and insights (2013 n.p.). While Friedman does not elaborate too much, she does discuss how as an outsider she experienced critique from the blind and partially sighted community who were concerned that her research was focused on differences between sighted and blind/partially sighted individuals instead of similarities. Friedman describes responding to this critique by trying to clarify that the aim of her research was to highlight varieties of “perception.” She felt that this effort seemed to make those involved more comfortable.

Hammer (2013) provides a more in-depth analysis of her experiences as a sighted researcher working with the blind and partially sighted community. Hammer (2013 n.p) outlines a number of critiques voiced by the participants in her study. One for example, suggested that the interview questions could have been more specific while another expressed resentment at the blind community being approached as though they were a “tribe” (Hammer, 2013 n.p.). Hammer (2013) described how she navigated these concerns by being open about her own positioning as a sighted outsider. She also described her own learning about and adoption of new sensory dynamics. For example, she learned to announce her presence, to use more verbal cues within the
interview process and to be more conscious about verbally communicating other relevant information to participants (Hammer, 2013 n.p.). She further described learning about the use of touch e.g. holding the elbow of a sighted guide. Hammer (2013 n.p.) discussed how learning about and sometimes engaging in such sensory processes fostered new awareness for her as a sighted researcher.

As these examples suggest, many feminist disability studies researchers, whether experiencing disability or not, work toward critically reflecting on their relation to disability and its complexities and the significance of this positioning for their research.

**Reflections on Researcher Insider/Outsiderness**

Following the argument of many qualitative researchers, I believe that the backgrounds, identities and experiences of researchers can have great significance for the research process and for those participating in the research. Adding onto the ideas presented by Berger and Lorenz (2015), I further advocate for disability-related research to be open to and include abled-bodied researchers as it can benefit from the perspectives of those who occupy various degrees of insider/outsiderness.

While the significance of “insiderness” cannot be assumed in advance, Dwyer and Buckle (2009 pp. 57-8) note that being considered an “insider” as a researcher may be beneficial as it may lead to more access to and acceptance by potential participants who also may be more willing to discuss certain aspects of their experiences. “Insider” researchers may also bring greater understanding to the data that they gather (Asselin 2003). On the other hand, there may be disadvantages associated with “insider” research including being too close to the topic and/or participants. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) suggest that complexities and challenges in the research
process arise when, as an insider researcher, the researcher’s experiences, or ideas overshadow those of their participants.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) also argue that an insider/outsider binary may not capture the complexity of researcher positionings and should be replaced by more fluid conceptions of how researchers may navigate between these two categories (2009 p. 61). The call to complicate simplistic “insider/outsider” binaries can be linked to discussions about intersectionality that encourage deeper reflection on the complexities of the social locations, positionalities and politics of researchers.

With this in mind, I provide insights into my own positioning and its significance for the unfolding of this thesis. As mentioned above, my experiences of girlhood in a residential school for the blind set the foundations for this project and provided the motivation to amplify the voices of other girls who experienced these schools. My goal is to conduct research that can contribute to wider advocacy efforts in the areas of gender, sexuality and disability and therefore my work falls within the “emancipatory research” approach mentioned earlier.

As I discuss in greater detail below, my research design involved interviewing young women aged 18-29 about their recollections as former students of these schools. My decision to focus on this group for recruitment was motivated by the fact that recollections would be relatively fresh and would offer a fairly recent account of experiences within these schools. I anticipated that my positioning as a member of the blind and partially sighted community and former female student in a residential school would affect the recruitment and interview processes by making it easier for participants to open up to me as a result of this shared experience. I was concerned, however, that my identity might also serve as a deterrent for those
worried about disclosure to someone who, as part of small networks of former students, might not be trusted with sensitive information.

While I occupied an insider positioning in many ways, I recognize that in other ways, I was positioned as an outsider. For example, my status as a graduate student researcher, the residential school I attended and the time period of my attendance, could have contributed to being perceived as an outsider by some potential and actual participants. As mentioned above, it is also important to complicate any simplistic notions of insiderness by recognizing how other intersecting identities, for example, perceived ethnoracialized and classed identities may have also positioned me as more or less of an insider or outsider vis-à-vis my participants. In the end, it was challenging to gauge how potential and actual participants perceived my positioning. A degree of recognized “insiderness” however, was suggested by the fact that I did not encounter the same kind of concerns expressed to Friedman (2012) and Hammer (2013) about their “outsider” research among the blind and partially sighted community.

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I have tried to remain attentive to the complexities of my positioning. As my analysis demonstrates, there are diverse ways of experiencing disability, girlhood and residential schooling and a shared experience cannot be assumed.

**Qualitative Research and Interviewing**

According to Flick (2014), qualitative research allows multiple experiences and perspectives to be explored, providing insights into diverse populations and social phenomena. In what follows, I discuss some of the range of methods utilized by some of the research studies discussed in the literature review before turning to discuss the methods and procedures of this thesis.
To begin, Fannon (2016) asked her participants to send diary entries online and she used these to develop her interview questions. She argues that an advantage of diaries as a data collection tool is that they can help capture the thoughts and feelings of participants as they occur. The interviews then allowed participants to expand on or clarify the information in the diary entries. Fannon discusses how she worked to ensure that participants were able to discuss and elaborate on the aspects that were most important to them in the interview setting.

Hammer (2013) used both an ethnographic approach and semi-structured interviews in her study. For her ethnography Hammer (2013) observed her participants in a variety of settings including a beauty class and a museum exhibit where members of the blind and partially sighted community would guide visitors through the exhibit. She also did long term participant observation in a medical message therapy course and a tandem cycling group where the blind and partially sighted participants were paired with sighted guides.

In the case of Friedman’s study, the data collection process involved recorded telephone or email interviews (2012 p. 288). Semi-structured interview questions were designed to allow participants to influence the interview in ways that ensured that what was most important to them was included (ibid.). Similarly, Carey et al., (2011 p. 303) used semi-structured interviews with girls for their study. They structured their interview guide to begin with broader interview questions and then moved to more focused ones in an effort to allow participants to feel more comfortable with the interview process and to have the opportunity to influence the discussion. Unlike Fannon and Friedman, since Carey et al. conducted research with girls who were minors, they had to ensure that informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews from both the girls and their parents (ibid.).
Research Design

While I initially hoped to conduct ethnographic research among and/or interviews with current female students of residential schools for the blind, I quickly changed my focus to interviewing young women about their recollections of girlhood in such schools. This decision allowed the project to pass through the university ethics review process more quickly as I did not have to go through multiple channels (e.g. school boards and parents/guardians) to obtain permission to conduct the study. While interviewing girls still in school would have been fascinating, the complexities of gaining access seemed too great given my limited time and resources. I opted instead to recruit females aged 18-29 who had previously lived at a North American residential school for the blind for at least one year (see Appendix A for the Letter of Invitation). As mentioned above, recruiting this age group allowed me to capture recollections of student life that were relatively recent, and the exclusion of day students ensured that my focus was on the residential aspect of these kinds of schools. As I discuss below, interest in participating in the study was expressed by those who fell outside of the age and gender restrictions. The many expressions of interest and support for the project, suggest there are numerous people willing to share their recollections of residential schools for the blind, but are not being given the opportunity to do so.

My decision to utilize qualitative interviewing, was influenced by the popularity of this method in the research which informed this study. As Byrne (2004) discusses, there are many ways to carry out an interview but, in my case, I used a semi-structured interview design. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to gain insights into participants’ experiences, understandings and social worlds (Byrne, 2004). My semi-structured interview schedule provided initial direction to the conversation while still leaving room for my participants to take
the discussion where they wanted to. I posed mostly open-ended questions because participants are more likely to be reflective when they answer such questions and have the freedom to elaborate on what is most important to them (see Appendix B for the Interview Guide). While I would have loved to have conducted in person face to face interviews, this was impossible due to geographical barriers as well as limited time and resources. Instead I conducted online interviews and found these to be an accessible and successful alternative.

My previous experience as an undergraduate researcher included conducting interviews through email online typed exchanges. This interviewing format comes with some advantages. James (2016 pp. 150-153) for example, argues that using email as an interview platform allows participants easy navigation between their online and physical/social worlds. Email interviewing can provide time and space for reflection as participants have the ability to process the interview questions (James, 2016 p. 154). James references Kivits (2005) who argues that the length of time that can elapse between email interview questions and responses does not produce weak data or indicate a problematic researcher and participant dynamics. Such silences and are simply part of the email research process (James (2016 pp. 154-5).

Both Friedman (2012) and Fannon (2016) report using electronic methods of data collection when working with their blind and partially sighted participants as assistive technologies make these methods more accessible. When working with outsider researchers the blind and partially sighted community often have to educate those with sight about how to ensure accessibility. Applying my own insider accessibility lens as well as my previous experience with online typed interviews, I decided to try Skype as an online interview platform instead of email. Skype as a research tool offers the significant advantage of allowing participants the option of typed, or oral online interviews and I thought that this would reduce the degree to
which my potential participants would have to advocate, educate, or express accessibility concerns. Skype offered the ability to type messages (in a back and forth exchange) and the possibility of an audio call on a relatively popular and accessible platform.

**Recruitment**

The recruitment procedures used for this study built on and augmented those that I used for my undergraduate thesis. Following approval from the Brock University Research Ethics Board, I began by recruiting participants using letters of invitation that I posted to Facebook groups popular among the blind and partially sighted community (see Appendix A).

As an insider, I am aware of these Facebook groups and like many, I have used these groups to get advice, or to simply learn more about the oppressions faced by my community. The Facebook groups initially included Guide Dog Handlers Network which is an international group with one thousand seven hundred and twelve members. The aim of this group is to allow guide dog users to share advice, knowledge and support with each other. Another Facebook group that I initially posted in was Blind Parent Alliance which is also international and has one thousand five hundred and twenty-six members. The group offers advice, knowledge and support for parenting.

I also posted in various Facebook groups for alumni of the approximately 30 residential schools for the blind in North America. The aim of these Facebook groups typically is for individuals to share memories and recollections of their time at the school and keep up to date with each other’s lives. These alumni groups are typically open to both former students, staff and teachers. The number of members in alumni groups tended to vary, ranging from about one hundred to around three hundred. While I identified myself as a member of the blind and partially sighted community in my letter of invitation (see Appendix A), I unintentionally
neglected to disclose that I had also attended a residential school for the blind. As a result, most of the users of these Facebook groups would not have known that I shared their “alumni” status.

I began by contacting the administrators of these Facebook groups asking them for permission to post the letter of invitation. The responses to my request were primarily positive as administrators granted permission, some expressing appreciation to me for asking first, or expressing interest in the study. There was one administrator however, who did not grant permission for the post on the grounds that it did not align with the objectives of the group and others did not respond to my request.

After posting the letters of invitation I received positive comments from some group members including individuals who did not meet the participant criteria notably males, or those who had attended a residential school for the blind from a time period other than the one being sought for the study. Below I have reproduced some of these comments verbatim (without correcting typos, grammar, word use etc.) with the Facebook groups identified for this purpose by a number.

Group 1:

Group Member: Sounds worthwhile, but is there a similar study for boys? I'm curious.

Group 2:

Group Member: As a professional in the disability community, and a woman who is totally blind and a person who attended residential school for the blind Way back win, I’m not eligible for the study, but I want to congratulate you with the fact that you’re taking on this responsibility. I’ve offered myself wondered how to put something together where some of us older girls or guys can talk about our experience in residential schools for the blind. I would love to connect even though I don’t or I’m not eligible for
the study for I am 63, and that between the ages of 18 and 29… and I’d hate for my
generation and the one after me to not be here to talk about their experiences and the
things that happened to them while in residential schools or while attending residential
schools.

Group 3:

Group Member: Obviously, I can't participate. Still, I think this is an interesting
discussion. I think it's always a good thing when efforts are made to examine aspects of
life and society that are too often overlooked.

Will the findings of this study be published? Also, I'm curious as to what led you to
consider this topic as a study opportunity?

KG: Thank you for your support! I attended a residential school for the blind for 7 years
and boarded there. So that's really where my interest stemmed from. I am also really into
Girlhood Studies, so that's why my focus is on girlhoods—because of the surveillance that
young girls are often subjected to. These interests, coupled with my interest of power and
resistance, along with my own experiences contributed to the design and reasoning for
choosing this study. Yes, it will be published as it is a master’s thesis [Masters theses
from Brock University are made available online]. Thank you again for your interest!

Group Member: It sounds very interesting. As a very progressive person committed to
human rights, equity, and accessibility, studies like yours are important. I know it will be
a while, but please let us know when the findings are published. I would love to read your
report.

Group 4:

Group Member: I am very interested in the outcome of the study!
Group Member: (name of previous commenter) yeah me too. I wanna know what those young girls will have to say.

Group 5:

Group member: This sounds like some really interesting and powerful

Group member 2: This sounds incredibly neat.

The positive response was very encouraging and points to the interest of former students in contributing to documentation and analysis of student experiences of these schools. Despite such expressions of interest, however, I soon realized that potential participants were not following through with the process of signing the informed consent form. With the time constraints, I was worried about not getting interviewees and decided that I needed to broaden my recruitment scope.

In my original ethics application, I had described posting the letter of invitation in a small number of the many Facebook groups dedicated to the blind and partially sighted community. To reach a greater number of possible participants, I had to re-strategize. I decided to make a modification to my ethics application to enable me to post in more Facebook groups than originally planned and to post the letter of invitation on my own personal Facebook page through which I have connections to individuals who attended residential schools for the blind. Once the modification was approved, I proceeded to expand the postings and, in the end, posted in approximately fifteen Facebook groups (many of these are not named in the examples used above due to concern around ensuring anonymity for my participants).

The biggest advantage to using Facebook as a recruitment tool is the ability to easily reach a large (in this case international) audience at once. In my case, the Facebook groups allowed me access to the very specific group who would meet my participation criteria.
The biggest disadvantage to using Facebook was that some individuals who read the post responded by interacting with the post, including “liking,” or “commenting” in ways that could comprise their anonymity and confidentiality in the event that they then went on to participate in the study. While I tried to forestall this possibility by advising against this in the letter of invitation this did not stop the practice. The issue is important to flag for future researchers because the blind and partially sighted community is small. Any expression of interest directly on these posts could lead to others (e.g. former or current staff, teachers or students) to become aware that they may have participated in the study, despite anonymizing the data.

My attempt to direct interested individuals to contact me through email was not only not always successful but may also have resulted in some loss of potential participants. Having the option to contact the researcher via Facebook Messenger, as well as email might have made things both more confidential and convenient for potential participants. As the researcher however, I found using email to collect expressions of interest was much more convenient as it allowed for easier access and organization.

Once I received an expression of interest, I sent an email with another copy of the letter of invitation, the interview guide and an informed consent form. If I did not hear back, I sent two reminders, unless there were in between exchanges. I informed potential participants of their rights, including that participating in this study was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any point. I further informed them of these two fundamental participant rights in subsequent emails. I included mental health resources (listed before the interview questions) on the document for their reference if needed (i.e. if there were questions that my participants found difficult or triggering). Fortunately, no such issues were brought to my attention during the data collection process. I believe that my initial assumption that my relative insider positioning would
be an asset for both research design and recruitment was accurate even though I had a few challenges arise which I discuss below.

In the end, I conducted interviews with four participants, but unfortunately one of these subsequently chose to withdraw, leaving me with three transcripts for analysis. However, it is important to note that small numbers of participants in qualitative research is common. For example, a narrative approach typically may analyze data from only 1 to 2 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017 p. 68) while phenomenology, a methodology I am familiar with from my honours undergraduate thesis, may include 3-4 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017 p. 76).

**Interviewing**

As mentioned, using Skype as a research tool allowed my participants to choose if they would rather provide oral, or written responses to the interview guide. Since they received the interview guide beforehand, they were able to reflect on their responses. Regardless of how they chose to complete the interview, participants were able to use their assistive technology (i.e. screen readers and magnifier functions on their computers) to provide the oral, or written responses to the questions that I provided in advance.

My interviews ran smoothly with no concerns expressed by participants throughout. Comparing my undergraduate experience of interviewing over email versus the new experience of conducting two interviews with participants that I have named Jasmine and Daniela through Skype’s audio call function, I found I had richer results due to the ability to ask to follow up questions and ask for any clarification where needed. The email typed transcript produced by the participant that I have named Ava, in contrast was not as rich and there were multiple instances where I would have liked to have been able to ask a follow up question.
In terms of the interviewer-interviewee dynamics, my sense is that my insiderness was an asset. I found for example, that I was familiar with and able to understand words/phrases that are specific to the blind community e.g. “itinerant teacher” (a teacher of Braille in the mainstream school system). While there were some cases where, because of differences in time and place, I was not initially aware of the meanings of some phrases e.g. “one on one” (punishing students by assigning a staff member to follow them around), the interviewee was able to clarify the meaning for me. My lack of experience with conducting audio (verbal) interviews meant that I wonder if I could have probed more or asked more to follow up questions but overall, I am happy with the richness of the results.

Challenges

While I am happy with the results, I want to include some discussion of some of the challenges that I encountered for future researchers interested in designing more accessible research. Despite my familiarity (through day to day use) with assistive technology, including both the screen reader and magnifier functions on my computer, I did not adequately anticipate some barriers to participation reported by actual and would-be participants. For example, one encountered difficulty signing the informed consent form. This participant expressed initial interest but let me know that she had third party assistance to sign the informed consent form. In the end, she did not proceed to the interview stage of the study.

In retrospect, I could have been clearer that individuals could provide oral informed consent (i.e. I could have read the informed consent form and had them state their verbal agreement). Another option would have been to copy and paste the informed consent form into the body of an email and allow them to type their name and date as consent in written email form.
During the study process, it emerged that lacking access to Skype may have posed another barrier to full participation. Ava’s lack of access to Skype was the reason she completed her interview as a written response over email. In addition, the person who required third-party assistance in signing the informed consent form and did not proceed past the informed consent stage would also have had to set up a Skype account to participate. While there were a couple of follow up exchanges in which I suggested completing the interview typed over email, this latter participant seemed to be set on proceeding with Skype and perhaps looking for an extra push to create an account. Recognizing the hesitancy this participant might have been displaying, I refrained from pushing participation. My reluctance to push was also related to the fact that it occurred to me that if there was a need for third party assistance (i.e. to set up the account), the presence of the third party could also have interfered with confidentiality. The participant who withdrew her interview transcript from the study also did not have Skype and conducted the interview via writing over email. This participant had also discussed participation in the study with a third party (but not for accessibility reasons) and cited the views of this third party as influencing the decision to withdraw.

Other possible barriers were suggested in the course of the research. Daniela who followed through with study participation for example, had to cancel our initial scheduled Skype audio call due to her child-care falling through. While we rescheduled, it revealed the challenge she faced in terms of time and perhaps money in her effort to participate. Another barrier was suggested when someone who reached out to express interest in participating, referenced academic commitments that made it difficult to commit to the study. These issues and perhaps other barriers I am unaware of, partially explain what appeared to be a drop off between initial
interest on the part of many who responded to the postings and the number who actually
followed through to the interview process.

**Participant Profiles**

My initial goal of recruiting four to six participants for the study was prompted by my
interest in pursuing an intersectional analysis that would highlight how intersecting identities and
positionings shaped the experiences or recollections of girlhood in residential schools for the
blind (see Harris & Bartlow, 2015 pp. 261-4). I was hoping four to six participants, would
increase the possibility of some ethnoracial and/or sexual, and/or intellectual diversity. As
mentioned, after posting the letter of invitation in numerous Facebook groups, I conducted
interviews with four participants with one subsequently withdrawing her transcript. As I outline
in the participant profiles below, the three that remained did offer a degree of diversity in their
identities as revealed primarily by their responses to the initial question about their age, length of
time at a school for the blind, ethnoracial, religious and class backgrounds as well as from the
questions at the end of the interview guide about gender and sexual orientation (see Appendix
B). In compiling these profiles, I have used pseudonyms (chosen by me) and have been attentive
to the need to alter some details to ensure anonymity given the small community of former
students of these schools.

*Jasmine:* Jasmine is biracial identifying as half African American and half European. She is in
her twenties and self-identifies as female and asexual. She lives in North America and comes
from a middle-class family that is predominantly atheist, but her mom identifies as Christian.
Since leaving the school for the blind, she has obtained her bachelor’s degree in two areas of
study, volunteers at a women’s shelter and is an advocate. She is also obtaining a master’s degree.

*Ava*: Ava’s Mennonite family resettled in North America between the 1920s and 1940’s for both better opportunity and refuge from persecution. She lives in North America. She was raised, and self identifies as Christian. She is in her twenties and self identifies as a female who is straight. She did not offer any class-related information. Since leaving the school for the blind, she has done travelling to various parts of the world. She has also done humanitarian work in Asia. She went to college and works in a massage therapy practice.

*Daniela*: Daniela is from a Central American country and is a Latina. She was adopted into a white family and grew up North America first in one region and then in another. She identifies her religious affiliation while growing up as Southern Baptist. She is in her twenties and self identifies as a bisexual female. She is the only participant to have attended two residential schools for the blind, one in each region she lived in. She also did not offer any class-related information. Since leaving the school for the blind, she volunteered at a pre-school and did a few stints in college before getting pregnant. She’s going back to school and wants to do a master’s degree and then maybe a PhD. She aspires to be a sex therapist.

The demographic profiles outlined above include some diversity both in terms of ethnoracial identities and sexual orientation. However, they were similar in terms of all being cis gendered females as well as relatively high achieving in terms of post-secondary education. This latter point means that I did not interview individuals who combine being blind and partially
sighted with intellectual disability (a group who are also part of the residential school population). As I discuss in my analysis, the respondents’ discussion of their residential school experiences pointed to significant intra-student hierarchies based on relative degree and/or forms of disability (e.g. those described by the respondents as “lower functioning” occupied a lower status). Simplican (2017 p. 50) would term these representations “internalized ableism” as they reflect negative perceptions or stereotyping by some people with disabilities about others with disabilities (Simplican, 2017 p. 50). While occupying higher status positions within the residential school, my analysis makes clear that the three interviewees nonetheless felt that they faced barriers to achieving their full academic potential in their respective residential schools.

Data Analysis

Below I outline first some of the technical issues involved in the four interviews that I conducted. This is followed by a discussion of the transcription and process of analysis. In the case of the two oral interviews with Jasmine and Daniela, I audio recorded the exchange using Skype’s built in voice recorder and then saved it to my computer. The first interview was forty-seven minutes and fifty-five seconds and the second was fifty-four minutes and thirty-one seconds. Both interviews were transcribed into a word document and an anonymized password protected copy was sent to each participant for approval before it was entered as data. Ava’s typed interview over email was 7 pages. This was also copied into a new document, edited to anonymize, before being sent to her for her approval.

My experience with transcribing the oral interviews was largely straightforward, but there were occasions where it could be difficult to understand what my participants were saying. Giving participants the opportunity to look over and approve, or change their transcript helped address this challenge. For example, in one interview, I misinterpreted “herb club” as “earth
club” which was easily corrected by the participant when I sent her the transcript for approval. Since the precise linguistic patterns of my participants was not part of my analysis, I removed most of the “ums” and “likes” from the transcripts, but in some cases, these were retained to convey more of the personality of my participants.

As mentioned, one transcription was withdrawn at the approval stage. Once the remaining three were approved and entered into the data base, I used qualitative data analysis techniques to analyze their responses. I read and re-read the transcripts to identify key themes arising from the narratives. I then organized my transcripts into two overarching topics that became the basis for chapters three and four respectively. In chapter three, I analyze how girlhood was governed at residential schools for the blind. I first focus on the informal and formal curriculum within these schools, followed by an examination of gendered spaces and staffing. I conclude the chapter by providing detail on the school rules, practices and schedules, and how they shaped experiences of for example, dress codes and dating.

In chapter four I analyze girlhood within residential schools for the blind, with a particular focus on peer cultures. I begin by exploring the ways peer groups pushed back on school authority. I then examine constructions of femininities within these schools followed by in-depth accounts of dating and heteronormativity within these schools.

As discussed above, I initially worried that my high degree of insiderness might hold participants back from being open about their recollections of girlhood in the context of the residential school. I found however, that this was not the case as the participants were quite forthcoming. As a researcher, I worked to analyze experiences and perceptions that were sometimes different from my own in an effort to convey the realities of participants well as possible.
CHAPTER THREE: GOVERNING GIRLHOOD IN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS FOR THE BLIND

The following two chapters will address my findings with respect to experiences of girlhood in residential schools for the blind. In this first chapter I focus on my interviewees’ recollections of the reason for their entry to the school and their subsequent experiences of being governed by teachers and residence staff in the context of the classroom and residence. More specifically I first explore aspects of the formal and informal curriculum and how these communicated lessons about gendered and sexualized girlhood, paying particular attention to the sexuality curriculum as recalled by the interviewees. I then turn to consider gendered spaces and their implications for girlhood and in the residential school setting. This is then followed by a discussion of gendered rules and discipline with a more in-depth focus on rules that governed girls’ bodies, dating and sexuality. In the subsequent chapter, I turn my attention to the role of peers and peer cultures in shaping girlhood in the residential school setting.

“There Were No Academic Clubs” Girls Recollections of The Formal and Informal Curriculum

In my literature review, I referred to debates about the pros and cons of segregated versus mainstream schooling for students with disabilities. I also mentioned the more specific study by Ajuwon and Oyinlade (2008), that found that parents decide to place their blind, or partially sighted children in residential school for the blind because they feel that these schools offer their children more opportunities and better academic support.
The stated purpose of these schools is to assist blind and partially sighted children and youth in developing the skills to lead productive and fulfilling lives through the provision of accessible recreational activities, Independent Living Skills instruction, and learning in small class sizes with a smaller teacher to student ratio. Drawing on my own personal experiences, I was pushed out of mainstream schooling because of inadequate academic resources and bullying. However, I recall how the residential school setting offered me opportunities to fully participate in activities that I might have been excluded from in a mainstream school including skating, cross country running, drama, choir and one-on-one music lessons. The uniqueness of growing up at a residential school for the blind make the external factors that led to my interviewees attending these schools an important point of inquiry.

According to Jasmine, a significant decrease in her vision at age 11 led to the realization by her parents, as well as herself that her mainstream school setting would not provide her with sufficient instruction in Braille and the use of a white cane. She describes how a Braille teacher was only able to spend 45 minutes a week with her and her parents feared that she would get left behind academically. This concern led to her entry to a residential school despite that fact that she was doing well socially in the mainstream environment.

Ava described moving to a residential school as prompted by more negative social pressures in the mainstream school environment:

I spent grades 1-8 in the regular school system. Bullying and exclusion was an issue throughout. My parents were really concerned about my self-esteem as a result and felt it would be good for me to be a part of a community with a level playing field. I spent grades 9-12 at the school for the blind and tried to take a “victory lap” semester at a
regular school afterwards to upgrade courses but had to drop out a month in, due to improper accommodations causing me to fail all my tests/assignments. While she highlights social factors as the key reason for attending a residential school, her account suggests a weakness in the academic program provided there and also reveals how inadequate accommodation in the mainstream school system thwarted her later attempt to remedy this.

Daniela, like Jasmine described how her entry to a residential school at age 9 was prompted by the fact that the mainstream school that she attended did not have Braille textbooks or other needed resources. Her description of how she moved to a residential school to “get better accommodations, and learn life skills as well, and be around other blind people honestly,” points to motivating issues beyond accommodation for academics, notably an interest in accessing instruction in broader “life skills” and a desire to be part of a blind community.

The interviewee accounts raise important issues around what Garland-Thomson (2011) would call “fitting” and “misfitting” where mainstream environments were causing a sense of “misfitting” to varying degrees. It is due to the “misfitting” of these mainstream environments that many have to seek other alternatives, such as residential schools for the blind.

Along with documenting the push factors behind their attendance at a residential school for the blind, I sought insight into how my interviewees described their experience of the curriculum within these specialized residential settings. Their accounts reveal how in the residential setting the curriculum extends beyond the formal classroom to dorm-based activities. Their accounts link to my own experience of the curriculum going beyond the classroom to include a study hour to complete homework as well as music practice that was enforced by the residence (not teaching) staff.
In the case of residential schools there is also an “expanded core curriculum” that includes learning components aimed at helping individuals who are blind and partially sighted succeed outside the classroom in their day to day lives, future post-secondary education and workplaces (Wolffe & Kelly, 2011 p. 341). This includes Independent Living Skills (ILS) and Orientation and Mobility and Assistive Technology instruction (Wolffe & Kelly, 2011 p. 340).

As an “insider” researcher, I am familiar with how the expanded core curriculum can be implemented within schools for the blind in varying ways such as by age and gender. For instance, while elementary school students might have Independent Living Skills as part of their scheduled curriculum, as a student gets older, this might be offered on an “as needed” basis. I also recall how in my case, aspects of more informally offered Independent Living Skills could be stereotypically gendered through dorm-based activities organized by residence staff. For example, female residence staff may organize informal instruction for their female residence students with activities such as “girls groups” in the evening. Topics covered by these “girls groups” could range from social media safety to the intricacies of shaving legs. My recollections are supported by Jasmine’s account of dorm-based curricula where “for the girls dorm … it was basically…how to keep a house, how to clean… basically learning how to clean. That’s all we did every single day.” Daniela also mentioned how in her grade 11 year, the residence staff organized a weekly “girls night” activity, focused on beauty rituals for nails and hair. As the above suggests, the Independent Living Skills activities put on by residence staff for girls could reinforce stereotypical notions of girlhood and femininity in their emphasis on domestic skills and appearance.

The expanded core curriculum, central to residential schools for the blind is less available in mainstream schools (Wolffe & Kelly, 2011 p. 341) and the opportunity for instruction in
formal "life skills" can be a motivating factor for shifting to such schools as Daniela’s account above suggested. At the same time however, my interviewees pointed to the limitations of their residential school when it came to academic curriculum.

Jasmine for example, described her school as weak in its academic offerings when she commented on how:

Academically, there were no AP [advanced] classes, there were no academic clubs that you could join. You took basic classes: English [all throughout high school] 1 in grade 9, English 2…3…4. World History, Law, [just the] basic classes that every school has.

There was no Creative Writing.

Along with critiquing the limited academic offerings, Jasmine also pointed to what she saw as limited extracurricular opportunities compared to mainstream schools when she added that:

there were no other clubs but Herb Club, Clay Club and Out of Sight. But if you couldn't sing you couldn't join, and if you couldn't play an instrument you couldn't join, and Herb club was once a week for 30 minutes and Clay Club was once a week for 30 minutes.

Daniela’s experience was a little different insofar as she described a strong academic curriculum at her first school where:

there were lots of uh gifted programs and things like that. I was a part of them. I was at the top of my game and I was supposed to go to college... they have this thing in high school where you can like dual enroll and I was gonna wind up doing that.

However, she moved to a second school where: “the academics sucked. That’s the short version of it, the academics sucked.” When asked to say more about the latter school she elaborated saying that it:
had academic kids, but it also had kids who you’d teach life skills and kids who were really, really low functioning. They had like Cerebral Palsy, Autism, Blindness and a host of other issues to where they wouldn't perform in academia. So, and then the academic kids they did have, didn't really care…So they didn't have the like gifted programs and stuff, so I got bored.

As Daniela’s narrative of her first residential school for the blind suggests, these schools have the potential to provide rich academic and extracurricular opportunities to blind and partially sighted girls, but the realities are uneven in ways that contribute to the perpetuation of below-average socio-economic participation of those with disabilities. The accounts suggest the move from mainstream schooling to a residential school for the blind does not necessarily ensure access to improved quality of academic instruction for girls- an important finding given this was often a motivation for leaving mainstream education.

As mentioned above, there are few existing studies of student experiences of residential schools for the blind, but a study by Haegele, et al., (2017) offer a rare insight into former male student’s recollections of physical education. The study documented memories which were often positive due to adaptability being a key component of the residential school physical education curriculum compared to mainstream schools where interviewees had often felt excluded (p. 141). At the same time however, they also recalled a lack of choice in terms of physical education activities relative to their previous schools and they also missed participating in activities with sighted peers (p. 142).

As previously discussed, a subsequent study focusing on female student experiences, Haegele et al., (2018) also referenced gendered inequalities in the area of physical education. For example, participants at the residential school for the blind (and mainstream schools) described
boys being held to a higher standard and how certain activities were gendered e.g. dance being for girls (Haegele et al., 2018 p. 304). This account while focused exclusively on physical education, points to some of the complexities when it comes to the positives and negatives of the curriculum within the residential school for the blind setting.

Students such as Ava, Daniela and Jasmine in their descriptions of the curriculum of their respective schools illuminate some of the pros and cons of their experiences and begin to hint at the ways in which these were gendered-particularly in the case of the dorm-based informal instruction in Independent Living Skills.

“Sexuality Curriculum Didn’t Really Exist”: Informal and Formal Sexuality Education Curriculum

In this section I focus more narrowly on one particular aspect of the residential school curriculum, the sexuality curriculum. Due to the importance of sexual education for girls and the scholarship on how those with disabilities are often denied full sexual citizenship (e.g. Santos and Santos (2018), understanding the informal and formal sexuality education received by girls within these schools is important.

The history of sexuality education curriculum in the United States has been marked by debate between two sides that can be termed “socio-conservative” versus “socio-liberal” (Fields et al., 2015 p. 373). The socio-conservative perspective argues for teens to be taught heteronormative and abstinence-based curricula, while socio-liberal advocates argue that teens should learn about contraceptives, abortion and how to have healthy sexual relationships (Fields et al., 2015 p. 373). Both conservative and liberal approaches share perceptions of teens being “at risk” and sexuality education curriculum as mitigating that risk (Fields, et al., 2015 pp. 374-375).
Studies suggest that sexuality education is often gendered as well as classed and racialized. Those with more gendered, classed and racialized privilege are more likely to receive comprehensive sexuality education that promotes sexual agency, while those with less privilege (e.g. racialized female teens), may find themselves devalued in the sexuality education classroom (e.g. Fields et al., 2015, p. 377; Garcia, 2009 p. 522). Garcia’s study, for example found that racialized girls were disproportionately targeted for birth control by those teaching sexuality education due to racist assumptions about their sexuality (2009 p. 531).

As mentioned, people with disabilities are often constructed as asexual and many external ableist factors can restrain their sexual freedom e.g. Santos and Santos (2018). Given this, it is important to focus on how girls in residential schools for the blind experience sexuality education.

Jasmine described the formal sexuality education curriculum in her residential school as follows: “for half of a semester in PE, we focused on healthy bodies but did not go into detail on the differences in male and female bodies, did not mention puberty or STDs, etc.” While it was not clear from her account whether this was delivered in gender-segregated or mixed classes, the limited nature of the content was clear. Interestingly Jasmine also mentioned how the topic of sexual violence was informally addressed when a male classroom teacher told students to come to him if they were experiencing any sexual abuse, or harassment. She noted that while this teacher was well respected by students, he had made what she considered to be a problematic comment on a female student’s breasts and her commentary suggests her ambivalence about this teacher’s relationship to female students. In another instance, Jasmine noted that a teacher “slapped” her “ass”, but she did not elaborate further.
Jasmine’s account further revealed how learning about sexuality and bodies occurred outside of the classroom through the comments and practices of dorm staff. In terms of periods, she commented on how:

If you were bleeding, they would bring that up [asking] ‘do you have pads? Do you have tampons?’ That’s it, but I think … they had to comment on it because you looked out of place, you had blood on your jeans you know [but] hygiene was more focused on then puberty or…masturbation or anything like that. That was not talked about at all.

Ava also talked about how learning about sexuality was incorporated into the residence, or dorm-based activities, but in a much more formal way when a public health nurse came to the residence from outside of the school to talk to both boys and girls together in a space where both boys and girls were permitted to congregate. She recalled how the public health nurse left condoms in a fruit bowl for the girls.

While the sexuality education experiences of Jasmine and Ava seemed to be more limited, Daniela experienced a more comprehensive classroom-based sexuality education at her first school where, she recalled:

They [the teachers] talked about… puberty like periods and hormonal changes and they also talked about STIs, safer sex methods and we had to practice like putting condoms on fruit and they had like tactile models of like the different genitalia but not just…the penis or the vulva but like the fallopian tubes and the bladder and the testicles and the urethra…We sort of talked about healthy relationships but it didn't really delve into LGBT stuff. It just [was] sort of like a blip, a footnote like, ‘oh yeah, and there are sometimes gay people.’
In this school a more comprehensive sexuality education curriculum appears to have been taught with the use of tactile models as an accessible teaching tool, but the limited acknowledgement of LGBTQ+ realities reveals its heteronormative boundaries. Unfortunately following this experience, instruction at Daniela’s second school was much more limited. As she stated:

At my new blind school we didn't really talk about it [sexuality education] because my first year… we had…a designated health teacher and she was good, but then she left and then it was up to the gym teacher to teach the boys, and the science teacher to teach the girls, and she didn't talk about sex. She avoided it like at all costs.

Adding more detail, Daniela said:” [a] sexuality curriculum didn’t really exist… we had health class … where we had to like talk with the nutritionist and do things like…make healthy black bean brownies and… fruit smoothie things.” Sexuality education then seemed to be dependent on the teacher and in the case of the girls at least, the teacher change left them with little to no instruction. One of the resulting gaps that really concerned Daniela was the lack of discussion of what she called “dating violence.” As she commented:

I think one thing that kind of should have been talked about, but was never addressed was…dating violence, and…healthy relationships…that wasn't talked about.

She noted “we didn't really … talk about sexual violence except like...the whole… ‘don't get raped’ … equals creepy guy in a back alley somewhere that might tackle you and rape you and if they do [then] run, or just say ‘no.’

Jungels and Bender (2015 p. 176) note that a comprehensive sexuality education for people with disabilities is fundamental given that their disproportionately higher risk of experiencing sexual assault.
Jasmine like Daniela commented on the role of the residence staff in being part of an informal sexuality curriculum when she stated “When it came to residence staff in high school, I could talk to them about dating, or if I had a question about…safer sex…I could talk to them more than I could talk to the ‘health teacher.’”

While Daniela’s description of the role of residence staff was more positive than Jasmine’s account, both point to the significance of the dorm staff when it came to sexuality education for girls. While learning about sexuality occurred in the context of the classroom and in the dorm in both formal and informal ways, what is striking and problematic given the importance of sexuality education for girls’ empowerment, is the uneven, and limited character of sexuality education for girls in this setting.

“The Girls Were Never Really Allowed”: Gendered Spaces

Along with the formal classroom-based curriculum and the formal and informal learning that occurred in the residential spaces, I consider how girlhood was governed through the residential school as gendered space. In thinking about this, I draw on scholars such as Slater et al., (2018) who discuss for example, the heteronormative gendered and sexed beliefs that are reproduced by gendered bathrooms/变更 rooms that teach children and youth that their bodies need to be kept separate on the basis of being male or female (Slater et al., 2018 p. 954). In the study by Slater et al., which focused on toilets spaces more particularly, participants described some of the problems faced by transgender/transitional youth in navigating these spaces (2018 pp. 957-958). From a disability perspective, they also describe how toilets were spaces of segregation and toilet policing e.g. who gets to legitimately use the accessible stall (Slater et al., 2018 p. 961). Participants in the study advocated for unsegregated, gender neutral toilets with more inclusive signage explaining the contents of the toilet e.g. urinal, physical
support bar etc. so that people could make informed decisions and not be subjected to surveillance (ibid.).

The study outlined above highlighted the impact of gender segregated spaces in ways that guided my thinking about the gendered geographies of residential schools for the blind. In the context of this study, it is relevant that Jasmine, Ava and Daniela all directly, or indirectly alluded to the fact their dorms were gender segregated and Ava went into more specific detail about gender segregated change rooms saying:

The dorms were set up with a boy’s floor and girl’s floor and of course there were male/female change rooms for the gym/pool. Students of the opposite gender were not allowed in the designated space. There was common space in the dorms for all students to congregate.

In the past there had been even more gender segregation as she noted:

There was a part of the school grounds… that used to be used for the boys to walk from dorm to school on a separate route from the girls. That wasn’t the case anymore and everyone used the path, but the name [a gendered term] still stuck.

Through Ava’s second narrative, we can see how gender has shifted over time within these schools. While at one point there was more gender segregation, despite experiencing more gender-neutral spaces, for these interviewees the important dorm space remained gender-segregated.

Interestingly Daniela described how at her first school the cafeteria was also gender-segregated as girls sat at one group of tables and boys at another. While it was not clear from her account whether this was imposed by the staff, based on my experiences, this is likely.
At Jasmine’s school there was also a gendering of recreational activities and spaces. She describes how:

Every area and every activity was for both males and females but...our dorm staff was so much more strict than the boys…like everybody else goes to the gym after school but the girls were never really allowed. It was very rarely that we went to the gym, or to the pool…If we were able to go outside it would literally be right outside the dorm. Right across the way was a basketball court and…on the left of the dorm there was a little gazebo. So that’s basically where we spent our days.

While Jasmine’s narratives clearly indicate that spaces were formally available to all, in practice access was gendered and regulated as boys were given greater access to recreational activities and spaces than girls.

As Jasmine described it, the girls experienced more constraints:

There was nothing. We didn’t do anything for the girl’s dorm…We couldn't go to the gym, to the pool maybe once a month for not even two hours and we couldn't go to the gym, run on the track we couldn't do anything.

As Haegele et al. (2018) outlined, these gendered aspects of education reproduce harmful ideas of male/female binaries and beliefs that males are more entitled than girls to physical recreational activities and spaces (2018 pp. 304-306). On the other hand, Foucault (1980 p. 56) explains how certain physical activities lead to bodily awareness and therefore body power. Power is then placed against those who resist the status quo (Foucault, 1980 p. 56). As Foucault (1977; 1980) would suggest, this would then disrupt the social control of the institution.

The gendered geography of these schools was accompanied by varied patterns of gendered staffing. In terms of the gender segregated residences for example, Jasmine explained
that at her school, the girls residence was comprised of all women staff and for the boys, there were both female and male residence staff (often referred to as “dorm parents” in the US). Daniela described different patterns at the two schools that she attended. At the first school that she attended, where there were more female than male staff, the females were able to work with the girls and the boys, but males were only allowed to work with the boys. At the second school that she attended both males and females could work with girls or boys within the still gender-segregated residences.

As already revealed above, residence staff are central to the lives of female students in residential schools for the blind. To get a stronger sense of the role of residence staff I draw on personal experiences to highlight their formal and informal jobs within their roles. Formal jobs for residence staff included: keeping track of student meals, extracurricular activities, planning off-campus outings, running residence activities, ensuring students are on time for school, teaching life skills and managing student conflict to name a few. During my time in a residential school for the blind, each student was assigned to a residence staff member at the beginning of each academic year to develop what are termed as “RIP (Residence Individualized Plan/Program] Goals”. Each residence staff had between 3-5 students and would work on these goals during that academic school year. RIP goals could include learning such skills as cooking, straightening hair, tying shoes, doing laundry and cutting toenails. The idea was to perform these independently, or with little assistance by the end of the academic year. Based on my personal experience, there were residence staff who went above and beyond their training and responsibilities. For example, if students asked for help with appearance, some would help by plucking eyebrows, braiding hair etc. There were a few who also showed compassion towards
girls struggling with mental health issues through listening and/or bending the rules to ensure that they received greater support.

As described above, the formal and informal jobs that residence staff take on put them in a strong position to influence students in meaningful ways. The ways in which female staff in particular and their roles could be constructed by girls as “fictive kin” was mentioned by Ava who described how “some of the female students would call a few of the female staff/teachers “mommy/mama [staff last name]” adding that she “never saw this with male students or female students calling male staff “daddy, etc.;” The literature would suggest that this behaviour among girls is common in institutional settings (e.g. incarcerated girls may construct family units within the institution see Propper, 1982; Leahy, 1998). The complex role of residential staff in the lives of girls at residential schools for the blind is an important theme of the interviews.

“**We Had More Eyes on Us Than the Boys**” Gendered School Rules and Discipline

My understanding of school rules and discipline at residential schools for the blind, is influenced by Foucault’s (1980 p. 40) discussion of how every institution e.g. a prison, or a school is built to serve a function that is carried out through power and institutional regimes. Below I discuss how power and institutional regimes govern girlhood in residential schools through age and gender-based formal and informal rules relating to space and time, appearance and activities (i.e. dress and dating).

Jasmine described the rules of her school in great detail and emphasized that dorm staff discretion with regard to the implementation of these rules was often gendered in ways that allowed boys greater freedom than the girls. With regard to access to various spaces on and off campus and mealtime schedules which were based on age, she noted:
The guys were always outside… at the basketball court, at the gym, at the pool. You could go off campus those were the rules…you had to be back before dinner but…for the boys they [staff] were so much more lenient. For us [the girls] we weren’t really able to go out much off campus [and] we always had to be back around 4:00/4:30. Dinner was around 5:00 for the middle schoolers and 5:30 for high schoolers so … we had more eyes on us than the boys did.

According to her, the dorm staff also used discretion in favour of boys when it came to the implementation of age-based evening curfews.

For middle schoolers I believe it was 8:00 and for high schoolers I believe it was 9:00. For the girls it depended on the dorm staff. If there were a few high schoolers out and they wanted to stay out until 9:00 and the dorm parents [dorm staff] didn’t allow it, they’d probably come in at 8:00 with the middle schoolers, or 8:30 with the high schoolers. So, it all depended on the dorm staff if they wanted to stay until 9:00, or not.

Girls were subject to the dorm staff’s authority which Jasmine described as marked by gender-based discretion. Curfews in particular were about ensuring gender-segregation in the evening as Ava said: “curfew was the same for everyone whether you were 13 or 21; you had to be on your same gender floor by 9:30.” Jasmine summed up the overarching structure of surveillance of girls at her school saying “that school was like a prison, I don’t want to use that word because it’s so harsh but that’s the only way I can describe it. We always had eyes on us.”

Girls struggling with mental health issues tended to be placed under even more regulatory surveillance. Jasmine’s school had a counselor for mental health, but she described what it was like for girls to struggle with mental health at her school:
For mental health…it was really, really hard. I know some of the girls had bipolar and the dorm staff was very strict. It was a very tight schedule, very routine and if you had any ups and downs [if] anything happened in your life from suffering from depression, or if your parents just got divorced, or if you were sexually abused, like they [the dorm staff] gave no issue. You had to act a certain way and if you didn’t you were put on room restriction or work detail.

Jasmine further went on to describe “room restriction” and “work detail” as particular forms of discipline:

So, room restriction is where if you didn’t have a roommate you had to stay in your room after school. You couldn't go to the living room; you couldn't go outside. It depended on the dorm staff. Sometimes they would go and let you out to eat dinner with everyone else in the cafeteria or sometimes they’d bring it back to you and you’d eat in the kitchen in the dorm and then go straight back to your room. If you had a roommate and there was another room, they would put you in there.

In terms of “work detail” Jasmine described how:

Work detail is every girl had a chore assigned to them every Sunday and every day you had to do that chore for the rest of the week and if you received work detail, you would have to do everyone’s chore for that day, or for however long you were put on work detail.

Jasmine’s account of such forms of discipline being applied to struggling female students by residence staff reveals the impact of their discretionary power. She also pointed to their lack of compassion by saying:
Girls tended to go to each other if we had a problem in the later years, I guess the dorm staff got a little more comfortable a little more lenient…. not … to where we didn’t have a lot of restrictions, but …we were on a lot more friendlier terms…If I was on my period and I had really bad cramps, I would feel comfortable going to them and being like ‘hey can I have an Ibuprofen.’ But …[when] my parents …went through a really bad divorce when I was in 10th grade…I would’ve never gone to them. I know a lot of girls; one girl was sexually abused and she…would never have went to any of the dorm parents. They…didn’t really inspire…any confidence… they were more babysitters, [they’re like] ‘we’re here to do a job, we’re watching you,’ that’s it.

Interestingly, Jasmine contrasted this situation with that of the boys who she felt received greater support in the area of mental health and indeed she added that there were girls who would seek out the female residence staff that worked with the boys for support.

The more negative impacts of residence staff on the lives of vulnerable female students was also described by Ava who noted how:

Mental health was a struggle for many of my female peers. It was clear that a lot of them struggled with anxiety and depression. I knew that a number of the girls self-harmed. These girls were often ridiculed for this by other students. I never saw these issues talked about or addressed by staff in a healthy way. It appeared to me that the girls who acted the most depressed were the most mistreated by staff who would say they just had a bad attitude and would force them out of bed when they clearly weren’t mentally able. Many of the girls with mental health struggles at my school could share with you stories of emotional or even physical abuse by staff. Those are not my stories to tell.
Daniela’s experiences with residence staff and rules on the other hand was more positive as she felt like she could go to the residence staff with problems. Once again what is clear is that there was unevenness and lack of consistency when it came to the imposition of rules, schedules and discipline on female students in residential schools for the blind.

“Some of the Staff Enforced Them More Than Others”: Governing Girls Bodies, Dating and Sexuality

The rules of these schools included those that governed girls’ bodies, dating and sexuality which I outline in greater detail below. Following on scholarship outlined in my literature e.g. Raby (2010), I explore what my interviewees had to say about dress codes within these schools. While not a prominent theme, it is evident that dress codes at residential schools for the blind are part of the rules and affect girls more than boys. As Jasmine discussed:

Girls [were] held to a higher standard for dress code. Like I can’t say this enough. The dorm staff was very very strict and so were the teachers with regards to girls. Your fingertips had to be able to reach the end of your skirt, otherwise it was too short. You had to place your three fingers had to be wider than your top strap, otherwise it wasn't wide enough. There really wasn't mention about boys. Boys could wear hats, there wasn't really any concern.

Ava further emphasized the gendered inequalities in dress code rules:

I think girls weren’t allowed to wear spaghetti straps to school or short skirts and probably weren’t allowed into the common spaces of the dorms without a bra. I don’t think there were any rules for the boy dress code. I also remember a female student expressing her distaste in gym class when she wasn’t allowed to play sports in a sports bra, but the boys were allowed to play with their shirts off.
Daniela’s school also had dress code rules with regards to tank tops and skirts, but she did not mention any relation to boys.

The descriptions of dress code inequalities between the boys and the girls is consistent with the studies of Raby and Fields et al. which stress how these disproportionately regulate girls’ bodies often on the grounds that they serve as a distraction to boys (Raby 2010; Fields et al., 2015 p. 378). The latter rationale communicates powerful messages about girls’ bodies and male sexuality (Fields et al., 2015 p. 378).

According to the interviewees, governance of girls’ bodies at the residential school went beyond dress codes to encompass a broader governing of appearance. In the case of Jasmine, she discussed how the residence staff were very focused on hygiene, which included for example, twice a day hair brushing for girls. Ava also discussed how residence staff highlighted appearance, and how girls felt belittled by this:

most girls in the school did not follow the cultural norms of fashion and beauty. They would mainly wear what was comfortable and no makeup. Staff would try to encourage the girls to dress nicer or at least brush their hair. I could see that often times this felt to those girls as an attack. They felt belittled.

Daniela also discussed the appearance-related expectations placed on girls in particular by staff at her first school:

My first school had more expectations as a girl just because its…old fashioned, I guess. But I remember because I wasn't really into make-up, I was more into running around with the boys and kind of sports and stuff. One of the staff commented and said I would never find a boyfriend if I didn’t learn…how to ‘dress like a proper young lady’ and wear skirts and dresses and stuff like that.
Daniela, Jasmine and Ava, then all suggest the important role of dorm staff in governing girls in terms of having a “right kind of” feminine appearance. Raby (2005 p. 78) suggests that school rules and dress codes are aimed at producing citizens that can go from the school environment to the workplace with a set of behavioural and appearance norms pre-established through the regulatory practices of the school. However, as noted by Raby (2005) and scholars such as Aghasaleh (2018), certain bodies, including racialized, gendered and classed bodies can be disadvantaged by ideas of “appropriate” dress laid out in dress codes and enforced by both classroom and residence staff as well as society outside of school (Aghasaleh, 2018). For blind and partially sighted students in residential schools, the criteria for the “right kind of” appearance is imposed by residence staff who enforce particular kinds of bodily presentation and hygiene for girls in ways that can be disempowering.

The governing of girls’ bodies extended beyond dress codes to informal and formal regulation around dating. Jasmine describes how the dating at her school was regulated:

If you were dating a girl that’d basically be seeing her after school at the gazebo. If you got to go off campus because the dorm staff actually let you, you had to go with another girl, and you had to be back at a certain time. You couldn't be alone with them [male dates]. At one point you couldn't even hold hands otherwise the female dorm staff would call the girls out. You had to be at certain length apart otherwise you’d get called out. And if his arm was around your shoulder, or around your waist ‘no,’ that’s a sure ‘no.’ There was no affection, no public display of affection, no. Dating was just hard. You had to really sneak around for it.

Daniela explained how these rules worked at both of the schools that she attended:
The first school had a lot of strict rules around dating. Like they even had different age groups… elementary school dating was like out of the question…It was just ‘no.’ They were going to break that up right then and there. Middle school you could date, but you were really restricted…you could hold hands…you could…be in like the lobby areas of the dorms hanging out together in the afternoon where staff could see you at all times, and that would be about it. In high school you could…go to dances as dates…you could like hug and kiss and stuff but…they would really watch you. Like you could only hug for a certain amount of time without them breaking you up…You couldn't like, they called it like ‘deep kissing,’ you couldn’t do that really. They really tried to crack down on same sex dating…because it was making people uncomfortable and… since they cracked down on that it went into the straight dating too…It was really hard to date. People did it, they dated, but they kind of snuck around. Whereas when I was in high school at my second [residential] school…they didn’t have like official rules and kids were rabbits.

Dating rules then varied across schools but served to regulate girls’ sexuality while upholding heteronormativity and homophobia. At Daniela’s first school, rules around dating were governed by age, and focused on regulating physical contact rather than on fostering positive intimate relationships.

With regards to rule enforcement, discretion by residence staff was once again highlighted. As Daniela explained:

some of the staff enforced them [rules about dating] more than others. At my first school…there was a … nice dorm parent but she was really really Catholic like strict Catholic and she enforced the like hugging 10 second rule. Like no one else really cared
that much they were not going to stand there and count [how long students were hugging]. At my second school…I remember some of the staff kind of turned …their backs [when students engaged in physical intimacies] …they were like ‘nah I didn’t see anything, nope!’

As indicated throughout this chapter, residence staff exercised discretion when they enforced the rules, often subjecting girls to greater regulation than boys. This is consistent with the findings of many scholars, including Allen (2009).

Residential schools for the blind are settings of informal and formal learning both inside and outside the classroom. Girls in this institutional environment are governed by rules and discipline that are deeply gendered and sexualized in ways that reproduce gendered inequality and heteronormativity. The role of the residence staff emerges as central to the governing of girlhood in this setting.
CHAPTER FOUR: GIRLS BETWEEN THE CRACKS: GIRLS’ PEER CULTURES IN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS FOR THE BLIND

In the previous chapter, I examined the various structural ways that girlhood was governed and shaped. In this second chapter of my analysis, I focus on gendered and sexualized aspects of student peer cultures at residential schools for the blind. I begin by highlighting aspects of peer dynamics at residential schools for the blind and how peer cultures sometimes facilitated girls’ attempts to negotiate around or resist school authorities. I then turn to an examination of how peer cultures constructed femininities and girls’ experiences of heterosexual dating, friendship groups and other aspects of peer sexual cultures. I conclude the chapter with an analysis of heteronormativity and queer identities within these schools.

“As Much as They Could”: Student Peer Cultures

Understanding peer dynamics is important as these dynamics influence students’ experiences of school (e.g. Read, Francis & Skelton, 2011). Jasmine for example, in her account of moving from a mainstream school setting to a residential school for the blind described how the move facilitated her learning of Braille literacy skills because her new blind and partially sighted peers were already familiar with Braille and could provide assistance. In this account, the peer culture of the residential school was described as supportive.

The study by Haegele et al. (2017) of former male student recollections of physical education in residential schools for the blind, revealed how moving to a school for the blind on the one hand involved a positive shift from being one of the only blind students in a mainstream school setting, to a peer group based on shared blindness (2017 p. 140). The latter however also included more negative realities such as the existence of hierarchies among male students between “the bullies and the bullied” (pp. 142-143).
Ava also described hierarchies within her school’s peer culture. In her account these were based on hierarchies of disability as students were stratified by peers based on whether they were (as she described it), “lower functioning” or “high functioning.” While she recalled some girls showing compassion towards peers deemed “lower functioning,” she also noted how the latter were often excluded or isolated especially by some of the boys who would make fun of them.

Below I focus on the gendered and sexualized aspects of girls’ peer cultures and pay particular attention to the role of peer cultures in attempting to resist school authority figures. In the context of a residential school for the blind, a striking example of this was offered by Daniela who described how at her second school, students were more likely to try to “get away” with transgressive behavior when they had blind teachers. As she put it:

Kids just…tried to get away with as much as they could they would like kind of…like this is terrible, this is going to sound awful, but…some of the teachers were blind and some of the kids knew it and they would take advantage of the fact that they had blind teachers and they would do stuff they knew they couldn't get away with if the teacher had vision.

Jasmine also described how her same gender friendship group pushed back against constraints imposed by the residence staff in her preteen/early teen years by refusing to verbally engage:

my friends and I got so upset when…our dorm staff wouldn’t let us do anything that we would say ‘no comment.’ We were just teenagers, stupid girls 12 years old 13 years old. So, when the dorm staff asked us a question we’d be like, ‘no comment’ …[and] they would…punish us.
While Jasmine demeans such peer-based behaviours as “stupid” retroactively, her recollections reveal something of girls working collectively to exercise a modicum of resistance within an all-encompassing institution—even when this resulted in predictable punishment. As I discuss below, as older teens, girls also pushed back against residence staff governance of dating and sexuality. First however, I highlight the role of girls’ peer culture in constructing femininity and sexuality in residential school life.

“I Liked Fashion and Beauty”: Peer Surveillance and Constructions of Femininity

As previously discussed, Carey et al., (2011) identify peer surveillance as a strong component of girls’ peer cultures. Peer surveillance is amplified at residential schools where relationships with peers go beyond the classroom to pervade all aspects of everyday life. My respondents had a lot to say about peers and their role in policing gendered and sexualized experiences of girlhood.

One of the ways in which peers could influence daily life was through communicating “norms” around appearance. Ava for example, described experiencing peer pressure to abandon her own preferences when it came to clothes and make up. She outlined how:

I liked fashion and beauty but found that I was mostly made fun of by boys and girls for wearing nice clothes or makeup, so I toned things down a lot, wearing mainly jeans and hoodies. Girls who continued to dress trendy and wear makeup were considered weird, made fun of all the more and often were outsiders.

Ava’s narrative, specifically her description of being made fun of for her style, fits with research on able-bodied girlhood and mainstream schools. For example, as mentioned above, peers in Raby’s (2010) study participated in discussions of each other’s style. The studies of Hammer
(2012) and Fannon (2016) also emphasized the social pressures experienced by blind women when it came to appearance.

Daniela experienced similar peer pressure but in an opposite way because as a self-described “tomboy”, she felt pressure to adopt more “sexy” clothing at her second school:

At my second school I also felt kind of weird because everyone wanted to be sexy and… I was from (specifies region) before so it was kind of like a culture shock. So, I remember like when I’d pick up prom dresses and stuff, everyone had like strapless dresses and really like kind of risqué dresses um and that was like normal, but my mom was like, ‘you know... you don't have to do that. You can just wear a pretty dress ... why does it have to be strapless and form fitting and things like that?’

Interestingly, both Ava and Daniela used the word “weird” to describe girls who did not fit the peer group norms of appearance (as determined through limited vision, smell, touch and discussions with peers). The pressure to conform came through clearly in their accounts.

“Sneaking Off with A Boy”: Peers, Heterosexual Dating and Sexual Cultures

Peer expectations of girlhood went beyond appearance to behaviors, including those associated with cross gender friendships, hetero relationships and sexuality. These behaviors were in turn, deeply shaped by the formal and informal rules and surveillance of teachers and especially dorm staff once again. The role of dorm staff in enforcing rules that governed everyday life made them a constant focus of student peer cultures of resistance.

My interviewees for example, described colluding with their peers as they navigated staff surveillance of cross gender relationships and sexuality. Jasmine highlighted this when she related how students would go to the health center with a friend and “go past the health centre to
meet your girlfriend, or boyfriend to get some alone time to make out, to talk, or whatever.” She noted however, that when some girls were “caught” doing this:

They implemented a sign in sheet... just for the girls. So, if you had to go to the health care centre … you both had to take a small little sheet and the dorm staff would write their name and when you left, and where you were going. And then when you got to the healthcare centre, you had to give it to one of the nurses and they’d write their name and the time you got there, and the time you left, and where you were going. And you would have to give that to the dorm staff when you walked in so …...they knew you weren’t sneaking off with a boy.

Ava also described how:

There were areas in the school building that were off limits as long as I remember while being there because students used to go have sex in those spaces because they were more private.

She went on to add that:

It wasn’t uncommon to walk by a couple feeling each other up in a common dorm space or to be sitting across from someone receiving a hand job or blowjob in the booth style seating we had in the student center. Generally, students tried to engage in sexual activity in parts of the school/dorm where staff were less likely to catch them, but obviously, this being a school for the blind, students would get caught sometimes.

Jasmine described anything to do with sexuality as a taboo subject and explained what would happen if students were to get caught engaging in various physical intimacies at her school as follows:
You could have gotten two days of work detail [imposed by the girls’ dorm staff] if you were caught…French kissing, sitting in his lap…anything… like that…When it comes to sex it’s such a taboo that…I mean, it…was really bad.

While Daniela described her second school as more lenient when it came to policing student sexuality, she too described how inequitable it was when her efforts to privately hug and kiss her boyfriend led to her being “caught and reprimanded” by the dorm staff:

like I…remember…I had a boyfriend and I would meet them in a spot so I could…hug and kiss them goodbye right before…we went our separate ways because they didn't live on campus… I did that my...entire senior year and....that was the one thing I got caught and reprimanded for. I was like, ‘are you serious?’

As these accounts reveal, peer-based sexual activity is common despite attempts at regulation by school authorities. Girls at residential schools for the blind are navigating peer sexual cultures in a round-the clock setting at younger ages than, for example, college students living in college dorms (Currier, 2013). They are further doing so, as the interviewees have revealed, in a context of limited and uneven access to comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health care.

Ava described how “dating was a huge part of student life”, noting that in the context of her school, it was common to “have dated several of your friends’ exes.” She went on to describe how:

No one asked permission of one another or held too much jealousy about it. I remember a friendship of mine actually growing with a female classmate who would come to me and complain about my ex when she dated him.

In this context Ava outlines how girls would seek support from each other with their heterosexual relationships. However, she also felt that over time, the limited number of potential
partners combined with pressure to date meant students “ended up getting increasingly desperate as they fell in and out of relationships, ending up with people towards the end of their time at school that they were not compatible with at all and they knew it.” In her own case, for example, she described a series of heterosexual relationships, none of which were fulfilling for her:

I had 3 relationships with boys from my school in my time there... four if you count the one that lasted a week at the beginning in which he called me a bitch, so I broke up with him. In the first … I was…[in] rebound …[from] a long-term relationship and that lasted 3 weeks. The second lasted 5 months and I was cheated on twice, once with my best friend. The third lasted 1.5 years in which my boyfriend was emotionally abusive. I eventually had enough and was ready for a new life, so I ended it.

Ava explained that her residential school “peer relationships (romantic and otherwise)” had been unhealthy and the result was that she was “confused and damaged from the intensity, manipulation and extortive nature of the [peer relationships] … in there.” She described having to “relearn how to form proper peer relationships” after leaving the school and had not yet had a post-school romantic relationship

As her account suggests, girls could experience abuse within the context of intimate relationships. For example, Ava stated:

I do remember a friend of mine being in a relationship with a male student who was physically and verbally abusive towards her. He was suspended several times... basically a slap on the wrist. I remember one day she had had enough. [She] called her relatives from out of town to come get her and sat at the end of the school driveway with her suitcase for hours. I went out for a bit to sit with her. The female staff shrugged their
shoulders and said, ‘that’s her choice,’ and seemed to not see her as a victim in the situation. Looking back, I would also say that a lot of the ways that boys behaved towards girls could be considered sexual harassment. [There was] a lot of inappropriate sexual joking that made girls feel uncomfortable and sometimes the boys would slap a girl’s ass without her permission, though they would do this to each other as well. None of this was addressed by staff.

Daniela also described the inequitable relationships between boys and girls at her residential school for the blind:

At my first school girls would like, go kiss boys and they thought that was a big deal. But when I was at my second school, I was 14, 15 ...[and] girls there...were more experienced ... they were like all from the inner city and I wasn't. So, it was like ... a complete culture shock for me...more ... like the hip-hop culture and...there were a lot more Latinos .... Dominicans and Puerto Ricans ... and there was a lot of...unhealthy relationships... some of the girls... thought the only way to get guys to like them was if they let the guys sort of like cop a feel. Like that was normal to some of the girls.

Daniela’s description hints at how racialized and classed identities intersected with sexual peer cultures. As Owen (2010) has noted, forms of sexual violence experienced by girls and women with disabilities may be shaped by classed, racialized and sexualized identities and Daniela’s narratives of girls’ interactions with the boys hints at this when she goes on to explain:

I remember saying like ‘you don't have to let them do that to you,’ like some of the...boys would call some of the girls...their ‘little white horse’ and they just thought that was like ‘ha! you know they ha!...he likes me’ type thing and I remember being like ‘no that’s not
cool you can’t let them.’ And they tried it out with me once and I was like ‘oh no don’t put your hands on me.’

There were other references to girls being victims of non-consensual sexual abuse. Daniela for example, described how she suspected that another female student had experienced some form of sexual abuse when that student asked her to participate in sexual “play”:

There was a younger girl in my dorm, and she wanted to play like little kid games dress up, or whatever. But then she like wanted to play this game that involved me getting in the bed with her and like doing something I can’t remember... and she would say ‘stop’ and I would say ‘no’ and … I remember being like, ‘yeah that’s not right’…I remember going to the residence staff about that and I wasn't the only one. I didn't find out till years later, but other people had reported that...something might have happened um...they did act on that. I don't know what happened, cause I moved. But then when I was in high school there was a boy who had a ‘one on one’ [a staff member always being present] because... the story’s murky [but] apparently the girl [a different one at her new school] said that he had pressured her into … unconsensual sex she didn't really want ....And she wrote about it in her diary and her mom found it and contacted the police. And… because like everyone was like…’he’s a great guy!’…they couldn't really do anything about it. So, they just gave him a ‘one on one’ and he had a ‘one on one’ forever.

As illustrated, girls like Daniela actively navigated and at times pushed back against dominant male dominated peer sexual cultures demonstrating agency (see Gonick et al., 2011) but Daniela also described how when a peer-based romantic relationship turned violent and her former male partner bit her in the cafeteria, she lied about it to teachers to protect the person because she had
loved them and thought it was her fault. Klein (2012 p. 74) outlines that this response is a common occurrence among girls who may not realize that they are experiencing dating violence.

With approximately 4 out of 5 girls experiencing sexual harassment in schools in the United States (Klein, 2012 pp. 66-67) such experiences are clearly not unique to girls in residential schools for the blind. Klein’s (2012 p. 74) observation that school authorities often normalize male sexual harassment of girls also resonates with the accounts of my interviewees.

Significantly hierarchies among boys shaped hierarchies among girls as Ava for example, described how girls could gain status by being the girlfriend of a “popular” boy:

Socially the girls seemed to be subject to the boys in some ways. For example, if you were a girlfriend of a popular boy, you were popular by association and everyone seemed to not mind having you around. Some of the girls, who were a bit more quiet who found themselves in this position [however] were really mistreated by the boyfriends and their friends. I remember girls being put in garbage cans or having their shoes taken away and microwaved. I did date a few of the popular boys during my time at the school, but never received this kind of treatment. I believe this might be because I’m fairly outspoken and wouldn’t let people push me around. I can’t say that for sure though.

Ava further described how girl’s peer friendship group activities could be shaped by the interests of the boys. She explained that generally, the girls had to accommodate what the boys wanted to do, mentioning that video games were a popular pastime for the boys and that they were less keen about girls’ invitations to hang out in their common rooms, or to attend events put on by the girls. Ava’s description reveals male dominated cross-gendered peer cultures as well as the existence of intra-male hierarchies that parallel the findings of Haegel et al. (2017).
Peer surveillance in the form of gossiping (see Raby 2010; Carey et al. 2011; Klein 2012) was also described as pervasive by Ava:

I will say here collectively, for boys and girls, that talking about people behind their back, spreading rumours and gossiping (even about your close friend) was normal. It was just assumed that everyone was talking about you, whether it was who you were dating or what they just didn’t like about you. I remember having to learn a lot of healthy friendship building skills after leaving the school in order to have a social life outside of it.

Daniela in a description of how familial expectations and a friendship with a boy were hard to maintain in the context of peer sexual cultures at the school revealed how hurtful gossiping about girls’ sexuality and bodies could be:

When I was younger in the first school everything was great…Then I hit middle school. It was a little bit harder for me as a girl because…I grew up in a family [where] I wasn't allowed to ‘date’ until I was 16. So, I got picked on because of that cause the other girls who were in middle school could date and they flaunted it and they knew that I couldn't do it. And then…it took me awhile…like to grow breasts…I used to get teased...People thought that I was dating my best friend…back in seventh grade … and I wasn't and… [peers would ask] ‘are you dating’…? You know ‘come on, why not?’ And my friend didn't know…like I was walking right by and he was like ‘I wouldn't date her. Come on she ain’t got boobs.’ And then he turned and saw that I was right there.

Scholars such as Ringrose and Harvey (2015 p. 206) outline the significance of the development of breasts and how they are noticed and objectified by boys.
Ava also described how her religious convictions were in tension with male peer pressure for girls to be sexually available to them and how she became the subject of sexual gossip:

In high school, I was abstinent, and everyone knew it. I was known as the good Christian girl, called “Mary” or “Nunnery” by some of the boys. Despite this, they still wanted to date me, maybe to see how far we’d go…One male friend of mine would often try to pressure me to let my boyfriend do stuff with me, but I always felt that it didn’t align with my conviction so I never gave in. In my third relationship, my boyfriend (who had graduated from the school by this time), lied and told some of his friends that we had had sex and went into great detail about it. I didn’t find this out until our relationship had ended and his best friend asked me about it.

Jasmine pointed out how in this context of considerable sexual activity, but limited formal sexuality education, students often relied upon peer-based learning in the area of sexuality. While she learned a great deal about gender and sexuality from her mother, she noted, most of her fellow students relied on peers more than family when it came to sexuality and because “most of…their knowledge came from their friends” this could cause confusion.

Daniela who described relying on peers for information for example, in the area of dating violence also noted that her peers often did not know what they were talking about. Despite these drawbacks, peer information could provide potentially useful information. Ava described for example, how students learned from one another that a male residence staff member was fired for sexually abusing female students and discussed among themselves another teacher who was perceived by many students as being verbally inappropriate with female students. The teacher, she outlined, would call female students’ “sweetheart” and spend more time with female students that she described as particularly “vulnerable.” She noted how fellow male students called him a
pedophile- a label that may have signaled a sense of cross-gender sexual vulnerability and warning to peers.

As mentioned above, peers also used each other as a resource with regard to contraceptives. Daniela outlined how, while some girls could buy their own contraceptives on Amazon, others would “go to doctors and get birth control, IUD’s things like that.” She also noted how “we would get stuff from each [other]. Like if I knew my friend bought … 500 condoms from Amazon because you can get them in bulk…she would give them to us if we asked.” She noted that this was particularly important “for those of us who didn't have credit cards.” It is clear from these accounts that access to comprehensive sexuality information and reproductive healthcare is important within residential schools for the blind.

“We Wouldn’t Dare Tell the Guys”: Heteronormativity and Queer Identities

The above discussion focused on girls’ peer cultures as this related to friendship groups, heterosexual dating, male peer harassment and abuse, gossip and sharing information about sexuality. This section will address girls’ experiences of heteronormativity and the marginalization of queer identities within their peer cultures in residential schools for the blind.

Jasmine described a general acceptance of queer identities by girls, but also how the limits of this acceptance could be policed by boys:

For students it was …’whatever…oh you have a girlfriend now? That’s fine. You're a lesbian? Who cares? You’re bisexual?...whatever’. The only time it mattered is if you pissed somebody off that day or you turned a boy down because you’re dating a girl… Then the negative comments came around, but that’s about it. Other than that, it was just basically ‘whatever.’
While Jasmine is quite positive, her narrative points to the continued male dominance of girls’ peer cultures of sexuality. Ava described a much bleaker scene at her school with regards to LGBTQ+ identities:

I was in school when words like “gay” and “faggot” were part of common colloquial insults. Some of the boys would mock gay people by imitating effeminate speech and creating personas based on common gay stereotypes. I do remember hearing through rumours that this or that student was gay, bisexual or lesbian, but there were never any explicit same sex relationships during my time at the school. There was never any talk about trans identities though I do remember a few of the boys dressing up as girls for Halloween one year.

Homophobic words and rumours point to the heterosexism of the landscape of the male dominated peer cultures at Ava’s school. Likewise, Ava remarked on how:

LGTBQ+ stereotypes were a source of comedy at my school. I remember learning a few years ago that one student, who was always quick to make jokes about or mock gay people, came out as gay himself. It must’ve been how he coped with a culture that he knew wouldn’t accept him.

Such lack of acceptance can be extremely harmful to girls and children and youth as numerous scholars point out (Grace & Wells, 2009; Fetner, et al., 2012). As mentioned above, Wozolek et al., (2017) presented two narratives from former high school students who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community to illustrate the role and potential of Gay/Straight Alliances in schools. The narrative from the former openly bisexual grade 10 student described her experiences of being targeted by name-calling and being encouraged to commit suicide by her peers (Wozolek, et al., 2017 395). In fact, she did attempt suicide and continues to struggle in many
ways in adult life (Wozolek, et al., 2017 p. 395). This individual described how while a guidance counsellor, principal and other teachers did nothing with regards to the bullying, she felt supported by a Gay/Straight Alliance and the teachers who supported the Alliance (Wozolek, et al., 2017 p. 395). The former transgender grade 12 student, described the struggle of going through puberty, knowing that he did not belong in their biologically female body (Wozolek, et al., 2017 pp. 395-396). He described cutting his hair short, but being seen as a butch and, complicating his experiences, not knowing identities and terminology of transgender to describe himself (ibid.). He described attempting suicide twice in his first year of high school and the impact these experiences had on his subsequent adult life (ibid).

These narratives point to the need to challenge heteronormative peer (and school) culture and the potential of Gay/Straight Alliances in providing support by creating “safe spaces” and ultimately greater acceptance for LGBTQ+ young people in schools (Fields et al., 2015 p. 378). Such alliances however, can be limited insofar as participants may still experience abuse and harassment by their peers, teachers and administrators outside of these spaces, and even within the space may not disclose their sexuality due to potentially being targeted by peers (Fetner et al., 2012). The alliances also can be marked by exclusion or under-representation of those who are Transgender, or persons of colour (Fetner et al., 2012 pp. 200-201). Fetner et al., (2012) concluded that while Alliances could spread awareness, they could not easily create change in school cultures and policies.

Knowing from Jasmine and Ava’s narratives in the previous chapter that struggles with mental health were a serious component of residential school life, queer identities would have likely complicated the already strained and near non-existent support for struggling girls. Additionally, girls identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community would be subject to the name
calling and other homophobic components of peer and sexual cultures round the clock. Neither Jasmine, Ava, nor Daniela mentioned a Gay/Straight Alliance at their residential school.

Peer cultures of heteronormativity were also shaped by school authorities—both teachers and residence staff. Neither Jasmine, Ava, nor Daniela mentioned a Gay/Straight Alliance at their residential school and when asked if she could elaborate more on LGBTQ+ identities at her first school, Daniela described how “I had a friend who was openly bi sexual and they [staff] knew it and they didn’t want like her to hang out with me, or other girls and they kind of treated her as if she was a guy and we were girls and it was like a hetero situation.” She also commented on how at her first school:

if you were straight that was cool as far as staff went …if you were straight that was fine, if you were gay they didn't really want you to... influence the other girls … [they’d be] like, ‘don’t stay the night with the other girl...don’t influence them with your gayness’ kind of vibe going on.

Garcia notes that teachers often enforce and regulate heteronormative behaviour e.g. they might tell students to be respectful of queer identities but simultaneously laugh in response to homophobic remarks by students (2009 p. 534). The policing of same sex experimenting in residential schools is also reminiscent of how incarcerated girls engaged in consensual same sex sexual encounters can find themselves disciplined by corrections staff (Pasko, 2010 p. 11).

My interviewees commentary made it clear that experiences of same-sex sexuality were gendered. At Daniela’s second school for example, she reported:

As far as guys go, they all basically were straight. I can’t really think of really any blind openly gay males. If they were gay, they were closeted, and they didn't want anyone to
know about it. but the girls were more … but for some girls it was like they have this thing like ‘hey I’ve had sex with this girl last night but no, nah I ain’t gay!!’

From her account we are reminded of how same-sex sexuality is not only gendered (i.e. in this case apparently more acceptable for girls than boys), but also of the need to distinguish between same sex sexuality and sexual identities as the former might be down played (for and by girls) even as they might distance themselves from (an apparently unwanted) “gay” identity.

Jasmine raised the issue of the distinction between same sex sexuality and queer identities when she commented:

I would say a lot of girls experimented with each other because...a lot of us were so isolated and for a lot of those girls... [who] didn’t have the social life outside the school on the weekends when they went home so... I feel like a lot of the girls that’s all they had when it came to, trying to find themselves, or trying to find out what they liked or didn’t like. It was usually their roommate that they’d been with the last 4 or 5 years...That...they got to know what they were interested in.

While girls may have had more leeway when it came to same-sex sexuality experimentation, this was often downplayed or hidden from the boys who dominated students peer cultures. Daniela further went into detail about LGBTQ identities at her second school noting how:

As far as students ……for girls I can speak for us, we wouldn't dare tell the guys that we were bisexual, or lesbian because if we did, they’d be like, ‘oooh I wanna watch!’ ...and we didn't want to deal with that so …most of us kept it really hidden because reasons...everyone had their own reasons. Some people just didn't want to admit it. Some people they’d admit it, but they didn't want the guys to know or they didn't want girls to
be [saying to them] like ‘ew get away from me.’ Some people would act that way. Most people wouldn't, but some would.

Daniela’s narratives suggest how despite an apparently liberal female student peer culture when it came to same-sex sexuality, a dominant heteronormativity meant that girls kept their LGBTQ+ identities hidden from the boys out of desire to avoid a sexualized male gaze and/or fear of social marginalization by other girls.

This chapter addressed some of the complex dynamics of girls’ peer cultures in residential schools for the blind. It explored the role of peers in the construction of femininities, cross gendered peer friendships, heterosexual dating, same sex sexualities and queer identities. While peer culture could be sources of support, resistance and potentially empowering sexual experimentation in this institutional setting, the more problematic evidence of male dominance and heteronormativity was also highlighted.
Conclusion: Learning from Former Female Students of Residential Schools for the Blind

In this conclusion I have decided to prioritize Jasmine, Ava and Daniela’s ideas about how the experiences of girls who are blind or partially sighted can be improved in key settings like schools and healthcare before turning to my own thoughts on these issues. My decision is consistent with my goal of contributing to a feminist -informed disability rights movement by amplifying the voices of my interviewees.

Jasmine

In an exchange about how schools and community-based organizations might promote the sexual agency of young people with disabilities, Jasmine emphasized the need to first acknowledge their sexual lives before suggesting that such organizations should:

- ask those high school students or those middle school students what they know or are confused about and then compile it into a presentation. But first they need to acknowledge that we have those feelings and those thoughts just like anybody without a disability.

When pushed a little more on the subject, she added that in the case of any educational panel about disability and sexuality it would be essential to “make sure a disabled person’s there.” She recalled how when talking to some friends who were disabled about the sexuality education that they had received in mainstream schools, she learned that they were often overtly excluded by teachers who would ask them:

- ‘why don’t you go to lunch early?’ or ‘why don’t you go to study hour? Why don’t you go to the computer room?’ [because] they...thought they [the disabled students] wouldn't need it [sexuality education].
She added that sexuality education for people with disabilities and able-bodied people should not be segregated but part of the “same curriculum.” In terms of the limitations of sexuality education within residential schools for the blind in particular, she noted that beyond her own experience, her female friends who had been at such schools since kindergarten had told her that:

- not once did they have that... discussion about birth control, about pads and the different types of pads about how to put a tampon in, about ovaries, about...how you become pregnant. Not once did that...ever come up.

She also expressed concern about medical practices noting that when her friends:

- started hitting puberty … Doctors automatically recommended ‘hey since they’re disabled...they need to be on this right away’ you know to stop the period or to stop the cycle or to... regulate them.

Jasmine’s narrative then highlights the need for better consultation and inclusion of those with disabilities in the provision of sexuality education, attention to the reproductive health and autonomy of girls with disabilities and a more comprehensive sexuality education in residential schools for the blind in particular.

**Ava**

Ava made some similar points when she stated:

- Mainly the conversation actually needs to start happening. One of the reasons I haven’t been in a relationship since my time at school is because our society desexualizes disabled people, so it’s difficult to meet someone and have them be interested in you that way. Society needs to start having these conversations, but before they do, the disabled community has to feel confident enough in their gender/sexuality to be brave enough to
introduce them. I think different organizations that work with disabled people need to bring in experts in gender and sexual empowerment to talk to disabled young people, encouraging them to see themselves as worthy of being comfortable in their skin and being seen that way by everyone, disabled or not. We need to talk about body and self-image and sexual identity in a way that make sense for the blind person who only has access to their own body until someone else gives them permission to touch theirs. We need to empower blind/disabled girls, who already feel so vulnerable in this sight dominated world, allowing them to see the strengths they have and the worthiness they possess that allows them to see what is and isn’t okay for someone to do or say to them.

As illustrated in the above quote, Ava attests to the need to empower girls with disabilities. She discusses how advocacy and external efforts need to focus on people with disabilities first to build confidence, followed by greater work towards societal de-stigmatization with people experiencing disabilities leading those conversations. Ava elaborated further on these issues saying:

disabled people are desexualized in our culture. It’s assumed if you’re attracted to someone disabled that you’re a sick/gross person. This stigma needs to be broken. I think it’s important firstly that we start seeing disabled people portrayed as sexy in the media, but also to be included in the voices that speak to kids about sex. Not that a disabled person necessarily should come in a be like “hey look, I’m sexy too!” so overtly, but that a person who happens to be disabled could talk about their experiences and the formation of their sexual and gender identity. That way it wouldn’t be such a segregated idea, it would just be another piece of diversity

_Daniela_
When discussing these issues, Daniela said:

the big take away that I think [is that] people should realize is that people with disabilities have sex and they are sexual beings and just like everyone else. Even if you have the most you know, intellectual disability… you’re still going to have urges. You might not know what they are, but you know that something’s going on and I think the big thing is to talk about it…with the people. So like my parents they talked to me just like they did their five sighted children...I dealt with it and I was fine, but I know people who think that if they don’t talk about sexuality with their kids then their kids will just never have sex, but it doesn't happen that way....Because I was also...a camp counsellor I worked with [organization name]...I’ve seen … really low functioning people who got taken advantage of because no one spoke to them and they didn't know about like body autonomy, or things like that. So just...talk to them because you’re doing people more harm than good by not talking to them. And treating them like you would regular teens …going through puberty and don’t just … tell them about uh ‘straight laced vanilla’ … straight hetero normative education but give them like an actual education about different identities and things like that.

Daniela’s response stresses the harm not talking to teens with disabilities about sex can cause. Daniela emphasizes how sex education needs to focus on educating about multiple identities, moving away from heteronormativity to be more inclusive. When asked to elaborate on her thoughts she discussed the specific need to:

Talk about dating violence of all genders because it can happen everywhere anywhere. And teach about consent... when they’re younger and then as they get older kind of building onto it like any other form of education.
She also emphasized the importance of bringing the sexuality of people with disabilities “into the open…with non-disabled people.” She critiqued able-bodied peoples’ stereotypes of those with disabilities as “inspiration porn” or “helpless saints” who “stay at home and read the bible all day” and wanted to challenge this “weird puritan sort of image of people with disabilities” because “we’re just regular people... we’re normal like everyone else [and] we wanna be treated as such.”

The three take away messages from Daniela’s narratives is the need for teaching teens with disabilities about a variety of gender and sexual identities as well as dating violence and educating those without disabilities about how people with disabilities are “normal.”

Having outlined the insights of Jasmine, Ava and Daniela, I now turn to a discussion of my own thoughts about what this study of girlhood in residential schools for the blind can offer to help improve their experiences in the schools themselves and beyond. Overarching themes include ensuring access to reproductive healthcare, challenging male dominant peer cultures and improving accountability by, and more professional development training for, residence staff to assist with girl empowerment.

I note that residential schools for the blind reproduce marginality in ways that are disproportionately experienced by girls. Pushed out of mainstream schools by inadequate accommodation to an often-weaker academic environment, girls in these schools can experience gender-based inequities produced by the governance of these schools as well as by peer cultures. As I have discussed, my interviewees described a formal and informal curriculum that conveyed sometime problematic lessons about girlhood and sexuality. They also described unequal access to gendered spaces and disproportionate surveillance of the bodies and sexuality within these schools.
While the peer cultures of girls were sites of important forms of agency in this context, they were limited in terms of challenging or resisting aspects of this setting. Their peer cultures were marked by male peer dominance, heteronormativity and homophobia.

In terms of suggestions for improving the lives of girls I would like to advocate for better accommodation in mainstream educational settings, but in the meantime, it is important to ensure that girls do not suffer academically by attending a residential school for the blind. Within such schools, the academic and residential staff need to work toward gender equity in all learning and recreational spaces and implement a comprehensive sexuality education that includes access to contraceptives, reproductive healthcare and abortion.

With regard to the focus of residence staff on bodily presentation and hygiene, it is important that girls are empowered to feel control over their own bodies and what they choose to wear so as to allow them to express the gender identity that they feel best aligns with them. To empower girls further, residence staff should move away from telling girls what is wrong with their appearance or hygiene by shifting to asking them questions and providing them guidance by teaching in ways that make the students feel safe.

Owen, (2010 p. 202) outlines a number of ideas to address issues of violence against girls and women which should also be a part of shifting to a more comprehensive sexuality education curriculum at residential schools for the blind. For example, Owen (2010) emphasizes teaching girls and women with disabilities about violence, focusing on their sexual empowerment and having girls and women with disabilities be a part of shifting public discourse on disability through education.

Given the around the clock character of residential schools, there needs to be greater attention to the non-academic aspects of girls’ school lives including their mental health.
Residence staff in particular, should have to participate in mental health training workshops. There must be greater oversight of teachers and staff, as abuse by residence staff toward students was indirectly and directly hinted at by two of the three participants. Residence staff and teachers should undergo professional development training on these issues and school awareness campaigns need to highlight these issues for students. An effective online reporting system and support for students should be available directly within the school.

As Klein (2012 pp. 67-71) argues, regulations, rules and surveillance will not mitigate abuse and harassment of girls without a simultaneous challenging of male dominance by school authorities and student peer groups. Challenges to gender-based inequality and violence also need to be accompanied by Gay/Straight alliances or similar initiatives that offer safe spaces for queer students and activities that engage the entire school in LGBTQ+ issues.

Students and girls in particular, need to have more outlets to express concerns in ways consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) specifically Article 12 which stresses children’s right to participate in matters which affect them. This would go a long way in constructing these schools with more of a student focus and more specifically, focus on girl empowerment- by treating them as having agency and holders of rights.

This thesis contributes to feminist disability studies by providing insight into how girls navigated aspects of femininity and disability at residential schools for the blind. By listening to how they experienced curriculum, space, regulations and rules as well as peer cultures, this examination showed the dynamics and multilayers of girlhood within these schools.

As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, my relationship with the residential school for the blind is complicated and there is similar complexity in the narratives of the participants of
this study. As Jasmine stated: “I don’t...want to paint the school for the blind like it was hell because it wasn't … I had good times there obviously.” Daniela also “normalized” her experience there when she said:

Overall it it’s like…any other school...you got your teenage drama, and your break ups, and your...makeups. And...kids trying to play hooky, trying to test limits, and...be a teenager, and be rebellious, or be a goody two shoes and stay away from everyone... It’s just like a normal high school really, we just live together.

I refrain from making a conclusion about whether these institutions should even exist within our society noting instead that these institutions were formed because of external societal inequalities but have in turn reproduced inequalities within their institutions. As a researcher, my goal has been to bring attention to the lives of girls within these institutions and present areas where change needs to happen. Moving forward I propose that officials at residential schools for the blind need to acknowledge past abuses that may have happened within their institutions and work towards accountability for residence staff as I noted above. Along with this, residence staff should be working in healthy environments where they are empowered to stop inappropriate behaviour by colleagues, whether directly, or through reporting to the head of residence.

It is clear that these schools offer unique opportunities that many otherwise would not have had and for many, these schools provide a better option than their mainstream schools or living at home. Attitudes by residential schools for the blind officials need to change to ensure that their schools can be a positive place. Moving forward I hope to share my research with officials associated with the W. Ross Macdonald School for the Blind in Canada to begin the process of using this research to create these changes.
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Appendix A: Letter of Invitation

August 22, 2018

Girls Between the Cracks: A Critical Disability Girlhood Studies Approach to the Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Disability at Residential Schools for the Blind

Principal Student Investigator: Keely Grossman, Graduate Student

MA Social Justice and Equity Studies, Brock University

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jane Helleiner, Professor

Department of Sociology Brock University

As a member of the blind and partially sighted community, I would like to invite you to participate in a research project entitled” Girls Between the Cracks: A Critical Disability Girlhood Studies Approach to the Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Disability at Residential Schools for the Blind.” The focus of this study is on the experiences of former students at residential schools for the blind and specifically former students’ recollections of girlhood within these residential school settings. This study is designed to be exploratory. Participating in this study will contribute to academic work within critical disability girlhood studies and may inform educational policy and varied forms of activism.

For the study, participants are asked to answer open ended interview questions over Skype. You will have the choice to complete the interview either through a typed back and forth messaging exchange on Skype, or verbally through Skype’s audio call function. The questions are estimated to take around an hour to complete. Following the completion of the interview, your responses will be transcribed, with the finished transcripts being sent to you via E-mail for your approval.
It is important to note that your right as a participant to confidentiality will be respected and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any point up until you provide final approval of the interview transcript. You will be reminded of these rights throughout the research process. Additionally, please be advised that interacting with this post, for example “liking”, or “commenting” on it could compromise your confidentiality and privacy.

Since the study asks participants to reflect on their past experiences- which some may find difficult, a list of Canadian and U.S.-based resources aimed at ensuring wellbeing will be provided in the interview question sheet that will be sent in advance of the interview.

Study participants must have lived at a residential school for the blind for at least one year in the past and be between the ages of 18-29 at the time of the interview. Participants must either have identified as a girl while attending the residential school for the blind and/or currently identify as female.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Officer (905 688-5550 ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca)

If you have any questions, or if you are interested in participating, please contact Keely Grossman (Principal Student Investigator) at kg12df@brocku.ca. If you have further questions, or concerns you are welcome to also get into contact with Dr. Jane Helleiner (Principal Investigator) at jhelleiner@brocku.ca or via phone 905-688-5550 ext. 371

Thank you,

Keely Grossman

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University’s Research Ethics Board.
Appendix B: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Please answer the following questions to the best of your abilities. Please keep in mind as previously mentioned in the Letter of Invitation and Informed Consent Form, that these responses will be used with complete confidentiality and that you have the right to withdraw at any point from this study. In the case of withdrawal, or if you have any questions, or concerns please contact me at kg12df@brocku.ca. A list of National mental health resources for both the United States and Canada can be found directly below, while the interview guide is located at the bottom of this document. Thank you.

Mental Health Resources

Canada

Mental Health Helpline

18665312600

Website: http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/Home/Call

List of crisis centres across Canada:

Website: http://www.partnersformh.ca/resources/find-help/crisis-centres-across-canada/

Mental Health Crisis Line

18669960991

Website: http://www.crisisline.ca/

United States
Help Finding A Therapist
18008437274

National Alliance on Mental Illness
18009506264

Please see website below for extensive list of hotlines
http://www.healthyplace.com/other-info/resources/mental-health-hotline-numbers-and-referral-resources/

SAFE (Self Abuse Finally Ends
18003668288

See link below for extensive hotline list
Website: http://www.psychotherapist.net/crisis-hotlines.htm

**Interview Guide**

1. Please provide your age and the length of time that you attended a school for the blind. Please tell me a little about your background e.g. ethnoracial and/or religious identities? Family class background?

2. Please discuss how you ended up attending a school for the blind.

3. Please comment on the gendered breakdown of the student body, teachers and staff at your school.

4. Please describe any examples of spaces and/or activities at your school that were gender specific e.g. were there areas formally designated or informally associated with females or males? Were any curricular or extracurricular or recreational activities formally or informally associated with females or males?
5. Please describe how (if at all), different gender and sexual identities were acknowledged at your school for the blind e.g. LGBTQ+ identities.

6. Please describe any formal or informal regulation relating to gender and/or sexuality that was in place at your school e.g. dress codes or expectations, curfews, dating/sexual activity etc.?

7. Please discuss how formal and/or informal regulation relating to gender and/or sexuality was implemented and/or enforced and/or resisted by students, teachers, staff at your school.

8: Please describe what it was like to be a girl at your school e.g. peer relationships, academics, mental health, physical health, consumption of popular culture?

9. Please describe your perception of what being a boy was like at your school e.g. peer relationships, academics, mental health, physical health, consumption of popular culture?

10. Please describe any notable interactions that girls had with teachers and/or staff at your school? Please describe how you perceived these interactions. Please describe any notable interactions that boys had with teachers and/or staff at your school.

Please describe how you perceived these interactions.

11. Please comment on experiences of dating at your school.

12. Please describe how Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer, Pan-sexual, or Asexual students, teachers and/or staff may have experienced your school.

13. Please describe the sexuality education curriculum at your school e.g. health class, life skills lessons, discussions with residence staff?

14. Please discuss whether there was any formal or informal discussion of issues such as sexual abuse, harassment or violence at your school.

15. Please describe the access to contraceptives for students at your school.
16. Please describe how you feel the school prepared you in terms of gender and sexuality for post-school life.

17. If different from how you identified as a student, can you please share the gender that you identify with now e.g. male, female, nonbinary, Other?

18. If different from how you identified as a student, can you please share the sexuality that you identify with now e.g. Straight, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Pansexual, Asexual, Other?

19. What have you been doing since you left the school e.g. career, volunteerism, post secondary education, parenthood?

20. Do you have any suggestions for how school or community-based initiatives or programs could improve with respect to gender and/or sexual agency for young people with disabilities?

21. Do you have any suggestions for how the sexuality education curriculum could improve with respect to issues of disability?

22. Please elaborate on anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences with gender and sexuality at your school.
Appendix C: Brock Research Ethics Board Clearance

Brock University

Research Ethics Office Tel: 905-688-5550 ext. 3035 Email: reb@brocku.ca

Social Science Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research

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DATE: PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: FILE: TYPE:

TITLE:

October 10, 2018 HELLEINER, Jane – Sociology 18-074 – HELLEINER Masters

Thesis/Project STUDENT: Keely Grossman

SUPERVISOR: Jane Helleiner

Girls Between The Cracks: A Critical Disability Girlhood Studies Approach to the Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Disability At Residential Schools for the Blind

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ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED

Type of Clearance: MODIFICATION Expiry Date: 10/1/2019
The Brock University Social Sciences Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University’s ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement.

Modification: Expanding recruitment strategy.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a Renewal form before **10/1/2019**. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Research Ethics web page at [http://www.brocku.ca/research/policies-and-forms/research-forms](http://www.brocku.ca/research/policies-and-forms/research-forms).

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:

. a) Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;

. b) All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavourable implications for participants;

. c) New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;

. d) Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research. Approved:
Note:

Lynn Dempsey, Chair Robert Steinbauer, Chair Social Science Research Ethics Board Social
Science Research Ethics Board

Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its
auspices and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or
community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the
ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the
REB prior to the initiation of research at that site.