The challenges and complexities of negotiating normative femininities and creating safe spaces in all-girl settings

This is the Published version of the following publication

Chiodo, Linda and Morda, Romana (2023) The challenges and complexities of negotiating normative femininities and creating safe spaces in all-girl settings. SN Social Sciences, 3. ISSN 2662-9283

The publisher's official version can be found at
https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s43545-023-00759-8
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository https://vuir.vu.edu.au/47200/

SN Soc Sci (2023) 3:169
https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-023-00759-8

ORIGINAL PAPER

The challenges and complexities of negotiating normative femininities and creating safe spaces in all-girl settings

Linda Chiodo[1] · **Romana Morda**[1]

Received: 31 July 2022 / Accepted: 6 September 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

Contemporary culture is increasingly characterised by postfeminist and neoliberal sentiment, presenting a very complex, and contradictory context for young women to navigate. Schools represent one of the key places in which young people can learn, enact and potentially resist sociocultural norms and inequalities in relation to gender. For young women these spaces provide opportunities to negotiate and challenge essentialist ways of 'doing' gender. Informed by social constructionism and feminist poststructuralist understandings, the current paper draws on findings of an ethnographic study conducted within an all-girls secondary school. This study explored the everyday practices and discourses related to normative femininities and successful girlhood embedded within this setting. Data was collected from eleven students (8 semi-structured interviews; one focus group) and three teachers (semi-structured interviews). Field notes and archival data were also collected. The safe space concept was used to interrogate and discuss the opportunities and limitations school settings present for young women in their negotiation of normative femininities. It was found that the girls-only context, the promotion and presence of feminist ideals and the valuing of student voice characterised this school setting as a potential safe space for at least some students. Findings also highlighted that the prevalent reinforcement of normative femininities and the focus on academic achievement had implications for the ways in which students participated within this space. The opportunities, challenges and limitations of educational settings as safe spaces for young women will be interrogated.

Keywords Girlhood · Normative femininities · Schools · Safe spaces

✉ Linda Chiodo
Linda.Chiodo@vu.edu.au

[1] Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University, Melbourne, VIC 8001, Australia

Published online: 21 September 2023

Introduction

In response to calls for further attention to be paid to the ways in which settings are gendered via their structures, practices and norms (Bond and Wasco 2017), this paper explores the opportunities, challenges and limitations educational settings present for young women in their negotiation of normative femininities. Settings, including formal school settings, have entrenched structures and norms together with gendered beliefs, values and narratives. Also gendered are the various barriers and opportunities individuals negotiate within any given setting (Bond and Wasco 2017). These settings are inherently gendered by the forming and enforcing of customary ways of being and operating within a setting based on individuals' perceived gender (Bond and Wasco 2017). Schools, together with other settings and institutions, have a profound role in the subjectification of students (McLeod 2000; O'Flynn and Petersen 2007; Youdell 2004, 2005). For young women, schools can limit their engagement and performativity of diverse femininities, in favour of traditional schoolgirl subjectivity (Archer et al. 2007; Walkerdine 1990; Youdell 2005, 2006). It is important to consider if and how schools can provide settings for young women that allow them to critique hegemonic discourses concerning gender, normative femininities and sexist discourses which continue to be prevalent in today's postfeminist and neoliberal society.

Beyond the school setting, young women continue to be challenged by postfeminist and neoliberal sentiments inherent in the current sociocultural context. This postfeminist and neoliberal sociocultural terrain includes an increased focus on discourses of individualism; the heightened surveillance of young women and in particular self-surveillance; the strengthening of the idea of femininity as a "bodily property" (Gill 2007, p. 149); and the premise that gender inequality has been resolved (McRobbie 2007, 2009; Ringrose 2013). This is problematic for school-aged young women who are maturing and constructing their identities in a complex social terrain which holds them up as the 'winners' of gender equality and unlimited choice; whilst simultaneously subjecting them to heightened surveillance and critique (Baker 2010; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2007).

Developing their 'sense of self' within this contemporary sociocultural terrain, has implications for how young women 'do' gender and understand contemporary normative femininities. Normative femininities refer to the socially and culturally inscribed expectations and understandings of what it means to be a young woman (Budgeon 2015). It is recognised that the discourses of girlhood are varied and multiple, and not all young women may prescribe to a singular version of girlhood. Apart from gender, young women's notion of self and understandings of femininity intersect with and are informed by discourses pertaining to ethnicity, sexuality, class and religion amongst other social categories (Griffin 2004; Scharff 2012). Despite diversity in the social locations young women occupy, notions of ideal femininity "often obscures the intersectional social relations which constitute gender by misrepresenting white, middle-class, heterosexual and westernized femininity as the norm" (Budgeon 2015, p. 309; Harris 2004; Scharff 2012). Many young women often find themselves in the position of the 'other'

when surveying themselves (or when they are being surveyed) against hegemonic understandings of femininity (Budgeon 2015). Together with these macro level considerations, the school setting has been nominated as a site in which young people can learn, enact and potentially resist sociocultural norms and inequalities. This is pertinent for young women as postfeminist discourses which shape understandings of normative femininities centre on young women being inherently academically successful (Allan 2010; Raby and Pomerantz 2015; Ringrose 2013). Along with being academically successful, postfeminist and neoliberal notions of normative femininity continue to centre on idealised expressions of femininity and beauty related consumerism with significant implications for the health and wellbeing of young women (Gill and Orgad 2015; Jackson et al. 2013; Riley et al. 2016; Stuart and Donaghue 2012; Sur 2017). Therefore, it is essential to further understand the ways in which schools may be inadvertently reinscribing restrictive notions of femininities and how this impacts on young women's psychosocial wellbeing. The findings of this study are important in understanding how schools can become more inclusive and open to the expression of diverse femininities and thus provide young women with 'safer' spaces to negotiate their own ways of 'doing' gender.

Young women and the school setting: sites of identity construction and enactment

When constructing or 'performing' one's identity, individuals do so relative to other people and in varied contexts (Reay 2010). Schools have been frequently identified as the primary setting in which young people negotiate their gender identities (Allan and Charles 2014; Hill 2015; Reynolds and Bamford 2016; Weis and Fine 2001; Woolley 2017). Through interviews with young people in Australian secondary schools, McLeod (2000) highlighted that students' understanding of self and their positioning to and within their social worlds occur "in a kind of dialogue with the discourses of their particular schools" (p. 506). Within the school setting young people utilise the discursive repertoires and resources afforded to them to "make sense of themselves, what they do, and why they do it" (O'Flynn and Petersen 2007, p. 461). In addition, schools are settings, which replicate, confirm and in some cases potentially challenge sociocultural norms and discourses as well as persistent social inequalities related to gender, class, race and sexuality (Archer et al. 2007; Fisette and Walton 2015).

Fisette and Walton (2015, p. 63) and others (Paechter 2006, 2012) emphasise that educational institutions effectively "monitor and shape the bodies of young people" via peer dynamics, school culture, and through the disseminated curriculum. For young women, schools play an important role in the encouragement of customary gender roles and norms (Archer et al. 2007; Walkerdine 1990; Youdell 2005). Archer et al. (2007) explored the boundaries placed around the schoolgirl subjectivities of working class and ethnically diverse students and found that performances of assertive and boisterous femininity were characterised as transgressions of normative expectations of the good passive female student. In their qualitative inquiry,

these young women were positioned as subversive and educationally disengaged; and becoming ‘good’ students required them to alter their behaviour and assume a different identity position and performances of femininity within the school space (Archer et al. 2007). Signifying how the school context can be complicit in gendering young women, Archer et al. stipulate that “schools can be experienced as alien spaces for ‘other’ femininities” (p. 558), and for some young women schools are restrictive settings.

Young women also develop their subjectivities and perform femininities within communities of practice (Paechter 2003, 2006). Paechter (2003, 2006) draws on Butler’s (1990) notions of gender performativity, to contend that young people perform gender in localised communities (such as among peers in schools), and within such communities they learn what it means to be male or female. However, communities of feminine practice are not fixed, with members belonging to multiple communities of practice which are in turn informed by broader gendered expectations (Archer et al. 2007; Paechter 2003). Within schools, multiple and at times contested communities of feminine practice can be found and enacted. This means within a single setting, various notions of desired or ‘proper’ femininity may be present. These various ways of doing ‘girl’ exist alongside power dynamics inherent in such settings or among peers, allowing some young women with an increased ability to control and inform such practices (Paechter 2006). Whilst some versions of femininity are idealised, and others are contested, both work to inform and enforce stringent perceptions of what are suitable gender performances for young women amongst their peers (Archer et al. 2007; Paechter 2006). Schools and their inherent gendered cultures and climates are in one way informed by young people, whilst simultaneously working to shape young people (Reynolds and Bamford 2016).

Understanding schools as safe spaces

The notion of safe spaces originated from the early stages of the women’s movement, however it continues to be applied in a range of contexts with diverse objectives and definitions (Barrett 2010; Halagao and Kaomena 2018; The Roestone Collective 2014). Safe spaces refer to spaces where individuals including those from marginalised groups can collectively speak back to and resist various forms of oppression (McConnell et al. 2016). Safe spaces are also characterised as settings (e.g., classrooms and schools) that “allow students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and explore knowledge, attitudes and behaviours” (Holley and Steiner 2005, p. 50). For schools to effectively generate safe spaces for female students there are several fundamental elements that need to be addressed; including students participating in critical conversations that speak to sociocultural norms, together with prioritising the voices of young women in the setting (Mansfield 2014). Safe spaces are understood to be dynamic, complex, and can be inclusive and simultaneously exclusionary (McConnell et al. 2016; The Roestone Collective 2014). The following consideration of an all-girls educational site as a potential safe space for students is not neat and absolute, but rather is reflective

of, and conducive to, the “normative messiness” of safe spaces (The Roestone Collective 2014, p. 1348).

Research rationale, aim and approach

Although the notion and principles of ‘safe spaces’ have been previously discussed and critiqued with reference to school settings and other groups, the consideration of safe spaces for young women is limited (Mansfield 2014). Particularly limited is the consideration of the way discourses and practices within a setting communicate expectations and understandings regarding normative femininities. Furthermore, the current study’s consideration of how these expectations and understandings produce safe and unsafe spaces for young women to negotiate their relationship with femininity as well as potentially diverse femininities is relatively novel.

This paper draws on data collected as part of a broader study which was conducted within a Catholic all-girls secondary college in Melbourne, Victoria and examined school-aged young women’s understandings and negotiations of contemporary normative femininities (Chiodo 2018). This was inclusive of the ways in which the young women reconciled their position with regards to macro-level issues of gender inequality, sexism and feminism. Together with this exploration of young women’s understandings of normative femininities, this broader study also examined the role played by peers in such understandings; as well as the way in which the immediate school setting provided, or limited, potential opportunities for young women to explore various ways of ‘doing’ gender (Chiodo 2018).

Like all school settings, the specific all-girl educational context in which the current study took place is a gendered setting (Bond and Wasco 2017) and a fundamental site in which students are learning and performing normative femininities. Using the safe space construct (Mansfield 2014; The Roestone Collective 2014), this paper will reflect on the opportunities, challenges and limitations this educational setting presented for young women. That is, the current findings centre on how the school in which the current research was conducted demonstrates the potential to be a safe space for young women; as well as, the limitations inherent in the school setting, restricting the possibility of creating such spaces.

Theoretically, this paper and the wider inquiry from which it originated (Chiodo 2018), is informed by social constructionism (Burr 2015; Davis and Gergen 1997; Gergen 2003), while broadly drawing from feminist poststructuralist theories (Butler 1990; Gavey 2011; Weedon 1997). From this perspective, all knowledge is constructed from the interaction that occurs between an individual and their social context or environment (Burr 2015). Acknowledging the possibility of multiple worldviews and truths, social constructionists contend that an individual’s diverse experiences, knowledge and meanings, are constructed and influenced by their relevant cultural, historical and linguistic context (Davis and Gergen 1997; Gergen 2003; Willig 2013). The role of language is central and the meanings derived from language are fluid, diverse and continually contested (Burr 2015). People construct their identities via language and through the social exchange of language. The engagement with language and construction of

identity does not only occur at the relational level. The language available to individuals is limited and fundamentally informs social practices which has implications for what individuals can say and do as well as what can be done to them (Burr 2015; Willig 2013). Culturally informed discourses can be challenged and resisted, although there are also risks and consequences inherent in challenging the status quo.

Following approval from the necessary ethics committees, a small-scale ethnographic study was conducted. Although ethnographic research lacks a single definition (Griffin and Bengry-Howell 2008; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), ethnography has been discussed as a methodology, as well as a method, or "set of methods" (Brewer 2000; Duits 2008; Hammersley 2016, p. 2), and as a research practice (O'Reilly 2012). Despite the diversity in definitions and the way in which ethnographic research can be conducted, there are a number of shared characteristics that are found across ethnographic research (Brewer 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Pole and Morrison 2003). According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) the qualities of ethnographic research include, research which is conducted:

> In everyday contexts, rather than under conditions created by the researcher… data are gathered from a range of sources…the focus is usually on a few cases, generally fairly small-scale, perhaps a single setting…the analysis of data involves interpretations of meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices, and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider contexts. (p. 3)

It is these characteristics of ethnographic research design that the current study emulated.

Maintaining the school as the primary research site, allowed for the consideration of the discursive practices inherent within this setting and how this may inform young women's understandings of themselves and representations of successful girlhood. The research also extends this focus by situating a school's role in constructing the normative femininities of their female students within the broader sociocultural climate of postfeminism and neoliberalism. Therefore, the current study goes some way towards answering the calls for gendered research within the educational context which looks beyond the boundaries of schools and examine how "complex social, political and cultural forces" also continue to "provide legitimacy to patriarchy and reify oppressive gender relations" (Marshall and Young 2006, p. 64). McRobbie (1994) also proposed that an ethnographic method is the sole manner in which to gain an appreciation of "the social conditions and experiences, which play a role in constituting (young people's) subjectivities and identities" (p. 193).

Consistent with ethnographic research, multiple qualitative data collection methods were employed in the current research. The advantages of engaging with multiple methods of qualitative data collection have been noted (Chamberlain et al. 2011; Darbyshire et al. 2005). The current research primarily utilised individual semi-structured interviews (with young women and teachers), focus groups, fieldwork (and the drafting of field notes over a 13 week period) and archival data (e.g. school newsletters and documentation).

Research setting and participants

The Catholic non-government girls' secondary college, which acted as the research setting for the current study was located on the fringe of the inner-city suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria. At the time of the research, in excess of 1100 students were enrolled at the school from grades seven to twelve on a single school campus. The school was primarily comprised of students who came from relatively advantaged socio-educational backgrounds. A majority of students were Australian born with only close to seven percent of students being born overseas; no students at the time of the research identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Being a Catholic school, majority of students and their families nominated various forms of Catholicism as their religion (81.9%). A small segment of the school community practice other faith systems (18.1%).

The current study involved two key participant groups. The primary participant group consisted of eleven students aged between 15 and 16 years of age. Eight students participated in depth semi-structured interviews and three students participated in a focus group. Reflective of the wider student cohort, the young women who participated in the study predominantly resided within two parent homes, with only two participants living in single parent or multigenerational homes. Majority of participants reported that both their parents were employed. Parents' reported occupations ranged across a number of professional occupations and sectors, with only one participant reporting their parents were engaged in manual type work. All but one participant was born in Australia (although some identified with other nationalities).

The secondary participant group comprised three female members of the teaching staff who all partook in individual interviews. Of the three teachers, one held a Director role while the other two participants maintained leadership roles within the junior and senior schools. The diversity in their positions within the school was considered an advantage. At the time of the research these participants had been teaching at the educational setting from 3 to 10 years in a range of subjects and teaching positions. More broadly all three teachers had extensive teaching experience (from 10 to 20+ years) in varied teaching contexts (public, co-educational, private). Information elicited from teacher interviews centred on the school ethos and policy responses to student wellbeing and peer relationship issues. The contributions of both participant groups is particularly pertinent for this paper, as it examines the prospects and limitations this educational space presents for students.

Data analysis

In addition to providing an in depth data set necessary for ethnographic research, the multiple data sources utilised in the current study (e.g. semi-structured interviews, focus group, fieldwork and archival data) also assisted in satisfying the requirements of triangulation (Savin-Baden and Major 2013; Willig 2013). Whilst triangulation on its own does not translate into valid qualitative research, in the current

study the analysis and triangulating of multiple data points assisted in developing the researchers' understanding of the research setting and the phenomena of interest. Importantly, the contradictions and potential incongruities together with the rich contextual details was not overlooked in this triangulation of data, rather considered key in the data analysis process (Savin-Baden and Major 2013; Willig 2013). Individual interviews (with both students and staff) and the focus group were transcribed verbatim. The data collected was analysed thematically as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic data analysis refers to the identification, analysis and interpretation of patterns within data, allowing for both inductive and deductive approaches to the data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Willig 2013). Despite this data analysis process being far from linear, it was conducted in line with Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis. Ensuring the rigour of this thematic data analysis process, transcripts and identified themes were discussed and reviewed at length between both authors until a set of clear and well evidenced themes were identified.

This thematic analysis was informed by a social constructionism (Burr 2015) and feminist poststructuralist understandings (Gavey 1989, 1997, 2011; Weedon 1997) of the role of language and discourse in young women's development of gendered subjectivity. Therefore, the focus of this social constructionist informed thematic analysis is the "broader assumptions, structures and/or meanings…underpinning what is actually articulated in the data…the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 85). This data analysis framework provides the opportunity for the culturally situated discourses available to young women to be nominated, whilst considering "the social context of language and its function in or relation to structures of power" (Braun and Clarke 2006; Clarke 2005; Gavey 1997, p. 56; Shefer et al. 2008; Taylor and Ussher 2001). Importantly, for the findings of the current paper, the thematic analysis was also framed in relation to the safe space construct. That is, the safe space construct was used as one way to facilitate the organisation and interpretation of the findings related to the research setting, the climate of the school and the ways in which prominent discourses influenced young women's negotiation and performance of normative femininities. Thus, although limitations in the safe space concept are acknowledged and it was not an objective to determine or label the current educational setting as a purely 'safe space', the concept provided a guiding framework to understand complex school settings and importantly identify potential limitations and strengths inherent in this educational setting.

Findings and discussion: challenges and complexities of schools as potential safe spaces

With reference to the safe space concept (Mansfield 2014; The Roestone Collective 2014), the following discussion will examine the opportunities, challenges and limitations this particular educational setting presented for young women and their negotiations of normative femininities. Key findings consider co-occurring positive and negative aspects of this context, which effectively work to advance as well as

limit the emancipating potential of what is occurring in this space and the progress towards creating safe spaces for young women. Specifically, the girls-only nature of the setting, the presence of feminist dialogue and critical reflection as well as the opportunities for student voice were identified as central themes which highlight the potential for this school to act as a safe space for at least some students. However, analysis of findings also found that the reinforcement of normative femininities and the focus of academic achievement has significant implications for the ways in which students participated within the space. Please note all participant names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Girls-only spaces as potential safe spaces

Safe spaces are categorised as separatist or inclusive (McConnell et al. 2016; The Roestone Collective 2014). The former refers to spaces, which are organised around a single shared aspect of identity (such as gender) or focus, whilst membership in the latter is not dependent on a collective identity (McConnell et al. 2016). As is common with safe spaces, an all-girls' school could be described as sitting between these two extremes. One way a separatist space, due to being an all-girls' secondary school, however students vary on a number of intersecting identity markers (e.g., ethnicity, religion, sexuality, ability), also making the space 'inclusive' with a number of collective identities represented in the space.

Single sex settings are not automatically safe spaces for all women and girls. However, in the current study this setting was found to have added to the potential for a safe space to be developed, where young women could challenge themselves and the status quo determined by normative femininities and hegemonic discourses of 'doing' successful girlhood. Bertram et al. (2000) points to all-girl spaces allowing "girls a comfort zone, a caring network, a site out of which they can reimagine social possibilities and perhaps engage with strategies of social transgression" (p. 733). In the current study, this separatist space minimised the role of the male gaze and decreased cross-sex comparisons within the setting. Participants were cognisant of the impact of this reduced male gaze and often described feeling more comfortable being in an all-girl environment. Teachers were also consistent in acknowledging that as they are an all-girls' school, they have a role in assisting their students to build confidence and continue to challenge themselves within this space:

> I think it's good that they're here in an all-girls school so that their confidence can be built a little bit more…It's definitely a world that's geared more towards boys…we've got a role in—in helping girls in that respect. That's probably an issue that boys don't have. They're told from the outset, you know, they're the best and they can do anything…With girls, they're told that there's certain things they can't do. (Lindsey, teacher)

Contributing to this objective of improving students' confidence, the school provided a well-supported maths and science program and encouraged sport participation. The focus on a wide variety of sports was considered a positive element of the school environment. Adolescent young women's engagement and

disengagement with sport and physical education is complex (Azzarito et al. 2006; Jeanes 2011). Young women's gender performativity and negotiations of gendered discourses have been cited as reason for this complex (dis)engagement within the context of sports (Azzarito et al. 2006; Hill 2015). It has also been proposed that participation in sport can avail girls "with the opportunity to resist traditional gender norms and perform alternative scripts of femininity" (Jeanes 2011, p. 402). In a somewhat similar manner, Gina (teacher) contends that sport can assist young women to "stretch" themselves:

> The idea was very much that the girls get involved…to give them opportunities for success, so even if they're not good in the classroom, there are some other options…getting out of their comfort zone…stretching themselves a little bit…if they don't ever stretch themselves everything becomes scary…push yourself in a safe environment.

Young women were consistent in their comments and reflections regarding the opportunities they were provided to pursue their interests and in many cases excel in what are characterised as traditionally masculine curricula such as mathematics and science (Francis et al. 2017; Kessels and Hannover 2008).

> I really like this school. I think the education is really good and I get opportunities to have lots of experiences…I really like science so there's a lot of opportunities for girls who like science and maths and that kind of thing. (Sian, student)

Female students in girls-only physics classes, in comparison to mixed gender classes, demonstrated enhanced physics' aptitude confidence (Kessels and Hannover 2008). Participants in the current study also cited science and maths as being areas of interest, and demonstrated a secure self-concept with regards to their abilities in these areas. However, there was also an awareness that some activities and subjects were not "stereotypically things that women would be into". One participant, Carissa reported she was not restricted by these stereotypes:

> I know with some of my friends [pauses]…They are into things that sometimes aren't stereotypically things that women would be into…they went to the mock UN meeting…some of them do debating and science…I don't really feel like I have to be pressured to do something because, I never really noticed that females aren't really involved in like more science based careers. (Carissa, Student)

Carissa to an extent was aware of the gendered stereotypes regarding young women's participation in science and other school activities. Her continued interest in such areas could partly be due to the school creating such opportunities for students and emphasising young women can participate in these arenas.

Together with providing these varied opportunities and reduced chances for cross-gender comparison (Hill 2015; Kessels and Hannover 2008), being in an all-girls' setting, also has implications for how the setting is experienced by students. Women experience women's only settings "very differently than other

settings in their lives" (McConnell et al. 2016, p. 479). Students shared that their school's all-girl environment was positive because it allowed them to relate to each other as young women, explaining they "just feel more comfortable" (Chiara, student). They were consistent in their perceptions that this girl-only context allowed for shared understandings and discussion around menstruation, which is often positioned as a taboo subject.

> I feel like in an all-girls' school…you can talk about your periods so freely. "Hey, can I just have a pad? I'm on my period", but I imagine in a different [in a co-ed] school, you'd have to be more quiet about it…in an all-girls' school, you have more freedom to talk about girl issues as well. So that's really good. (Yen, student)

Talia expressed a similar sentiment regarding feeling comfortable and supported in this setting:

> I love it here, which is kind of really cool coz like in primary school it was co-ed and I don't want to be in a co-ed school...I like the fact that you can be with just girls and like everyone's safe…It's like everyone knows about your problems…Everyone's really supportive and they understand because you are a girl, like they can relate to you a lot better…they know how to make you feel better about yourself in a way and there's no discrimination...It's just like you know that you're really important here…sometimes in primary school, boys can put you down or you're separated by that kind of thing… they really focus on your success here...they make us feel really important.

This setting provided opportunities for students to develop shared understandings as young women, and according to Talia made students feel "really important" and "better about [themselves]". The absence of boys and the male gaze in this context was said to foster participants' confidence:

> I really like being at [this school]…I feel like I can be more confident here. I'm not feeling any pressures by boys or anything…I just like the atmosphere. (Carissa, student)

> I like being in an all-girls environment. I think it's more relaxed. I think if this was a co-ed school…I don't think I would be as comfortable or as carefree as I was right now. (Antonia, student)

These spaces shaped by women and girls, work to create environments which permit young women to build each other up, provide comfort and in some ways support the transgression of normative girlhood discourses. It is also important to acknowledge that together with these positive aspects of being in an all-girls' environment, both students and teachers commented on the negative aspects of these settings, including the hierarchical nature of young women's friendships and the judgmental looking and talking which can occur between students (Chiodo 2018). This is not unexpected due to the complexity of young women's friendships and social worlds (Brown 2003). Although the male gaze may be

directly absent in this setting, young women still have ways of governing each other's performances of femininity (Hill 2015).

The role of feminist conversations and critical reflection in creating safe spaces

With a focus on academic benchmarks, it has been argued that contemporary schools require students to participate in educational practices, which fundamentally overlook the sociocultural context in which they live (Fisette and Walton 2015). Within the current setting, the objective of fostering students' high achievement was apparent, however there was also a commitment to assisting students to become critical and socially minded community members. Underpinned by their Catholic ethos, the school maintained a social justice orientation, encouragement of volunteerism and community awareness. Social justice and service learning "can influence girls to talk back to oppressive forces…engaging in resistant voice, which involves questioning harmful societal or school practices, can facilitate gains in agency, belonging, and competence" (Martin and Beese 2016, p. 212). Encouraging social justice awareness has the potential to motivate young women to push the boundaries of normative femininities or at least assist them in developing the skills to do so.

In addition to promoting a social justice orientation amongst students, engagement in critical conversations and taking advantage of potential teaching moments was apparent within the school context. The objective of such critical conversations was to promote students' reflexivity of their gendered experiences. Teachers were still negotiating the best way to promote avenues for critical thinking. Some teachers were more confident, equipped, or willing than others to engage young women in critical conversations concerning gender. This diversity among teachers was further compounded by potential tensions created by the Catholic values of the school and how in some ways these are contradictory to the young women's lived experiences. Whilst the Catholic underpinnings of the school promoted engagement in social justice discourse and activity and encouraged engagement in critical discussions, some topics were 'off limits' or "silenced" (Gina, teacher). These topics included premarital sex, contraception and same-sex attractedness. These were important issues for some students. Within safe spaces such potential uneasiness and conflict in ideas is considered important to foster students' ability to critically examine their experiences as young women (Barrett 2010; Stengel and Weems 2010,). Yen (student) acknowledged the role of discomfort when discussing social issues:

> We talk about current issues—and voice...I voice my opinion [in class]…Yeah, [voicing my opinion] it's important…it's just one of the ways to get issues out that you have to talk about it [pauses]...even if it makes people uncomfortable.

Some teachers wanted to create a space to have these critical conversations. One avenue to promoting critical thinking and critical conversations was the growing inclusion of feminist values and principles within the school ethos. The participants were consistent in their identification of feminism within the school:

> Being at an all-girls' school they talk a lot about like young women and feminism…like women in history and all that sort of thing, so we hear a lot of it at school. (Jacinta, student)

> Especially a lot of the things we talk about…feminism and stuff…my pastoral teacher, he's always talking about it. It's an all-girls' school. You got to preach to the values. (Alexis, student)

Feminist pedagogy "invites students to critique the unequal social relations embedded in contemporary society and to ask why these circumstances exist and what one can do about them" (Mayberry 1999, p. 7). The value of feminist principles and approaches in secondary classrooms has been acknowledged (DiGiovanni 2004; Martin and Beese 2016). Lindsey and Gina identify the importance of having feminist conversations with students:

> In terms of feminism, I think it sort of underpins a lot of what we do here. We have a lot of like the image of a—a strong female and—and what that looks like…that's definitely a strong message that they get here…That they should be equal to men and that they shouldn't stand for anything less, that inequality—currently, it exists…that happens and that they should point out where that exists, and I don't think they're afraid to do that…we encourage them to have a voice. (Lindsey)

> Breaking it down and showing them different role models, introducing them to different ideas, and helping them critique stuff…having the feminist conversation and what does it mean and what does it look like, what is the world doing, is or isn't and all those sorts of things…giving them an avenue to have [the conversation], because some of them might not have it at home…so they have a place to do that and to think about it, it is important for them…(Gina)

Consistent with the fundamental goals of feminist pedagogy (Mayberry 1999), it is important that students are able to highlight instances of gender inequality. In addition to promoting critical thinking skills to disrupt hegemonic discourses concerning gender, this use of feminism is also utilised to keep young women cognisant of the sexism and gender inequality that women continue to experience. It was highlighted that everyday sexism may be something young women are not necessarily attuned to as a consequence of attending an all-girls' school:

> A lot of the senior girls would say they think it's a really feminist school, which has its advantages except that they then go out into the workplace and particularly their part-time jobs and experience things that they weren't prepared for. Because they've never had to here, because they've always been told girls can do anything…so they cop it from a guy they work with and don't know what to do with that. So, double edged…They are still going to face it [sexism and inequality]…And what do you do when a guy makes a sexist comment to you at work or does something that borders on sexual harassment, how do you handle it? I think that's a really hard thing to find an avenue to have those discussions…You're trying to do it in a way that

> the girls will engage with that's not preachy or totally out of context. (Gina, teacher)

Critical teaching moments were also utilised to disrupt potentially sexist rhetoric and victim blaming discourses, which place young women as responsible for the sexual behaviour of men:

> It (feminist conversations) just sort of slips into teaching…like even what I was talking to you about before about this Taekwondo instructor talking to the girls about how they should behave out in public to keep themselves safe….I'm going to go and speak to them about men's role in—in that. (Lindsey, teacher)

Young women in this setting are privy to the message that despite the opportunities they are afforded at the school, sexism and gender inequality is something they still need to address. Such teachings act as juxtaposition to the prevalent postfeminist discourses concerning the redundancy of feminism and the eradication of sexism (McRobbie 2009). Feminism is adopted in this space with the intent to improve the connection young women have to their sociocultural world and assist them in understanding and hopefully responding to the sexism and sexist rhetoric they will likely experience as they progress in their personal and professional lives. Finding ways to effectively do this within the classroom is challenging, however, the inclusion of feminist values and ideologies were considered to be welcomed by students in the current setting.

Regardless of the belief that "feminism underpins a lot of what [they] do" (Lindsey, teacher), it remains outside the formal syllabus, forming a fundamental element of the school's 'hidden' curriculum (DiGiovanni 2004). What constitutes hidden curriculum is diverse and includes, expectations around student behaviour, the physical school space, the role models students are exposed to, and the discourses and interactions that develop in a classroom (DiGiovanni 2004). In the current educational setting, whilst not cited in the formal curriculum or school values, feminism (or feminist values) was promoted and articulated in many everyday ways-overtly and covertly, making some progress towards demystifying feminism. Evidently the long-standing female principal led efforts to increase the feminist tone within the school. Teachers disclosed that this principal, encourages the place of feminism in the lives of young women and demonstrated a concern with the way her students are positioned. On a number of occasions during formal and informal conversations with teaching staff during fieldwork, references were made to the principal disagreeing with particular language being used to address or describe female students:

> We don't ever call them ladies at our school…The principal would be very quick to pick up on anybody who ever did that…because it's got connotations of, you know, something soft and frilly and like—downtrodden and, you know, submissive to men…and the girls, they know that. We don't call them ladies and all the staff know that from the minute they walk in the door. (Lindsey, teacher)

Overall, this school worked to create an environment in which critical reflection and conversations were encouraged. Assisting students with developing their critical thinking skills and providing opportunities to reflect on their gendered experiences is regarded as necessary for an educational context to be considered a 'safe space' for young women (Mansfield 2014; Weis and Fine 2001). A commitment to social justice and support for feminist values are two ways in which the school worked towards this objective. From observations made during fieldwork as well as by the reflections of the teachers interviewed, it is evident that there are still improvements to be made in this area.

Providing opportunities for voice in safe spaces

The recognition and valuing of student voice and providing avenues for self-expression are fundamental elements of developing safe spaces for female students (Mansfield 2014). In the current educational space, student voice appears to be increasingly encouraged. The promotion of assertiveness in contrast to the traditional expectations of the passive female student was evident (Allan 2009).

> They are incredibly respectable sometimes to the point where it means they don't actually speak up when we'd like that they would…Compliant. Not always in a good way…I mean it's an institution; you need some degree of rules and regulations for it to work. But sometimes when they do challenge the status quo…that stuffs great when they do it. You kind of want them to feel more and more that they don't have to just smile and nod and do what they're asked, that they can come up with ideas themselves. (Gina, teacher)

> We've talked a bit in class about apologising. Like all the time like, "Oh. Sorry". And I'll say, "What are you sorry for; what are you apologising for?" I think it's a female thing sometimes. I think they could probably be a bit more assertive, a bit more forthright in what—in what they do and say and not be just so afraid. So, I think that's probably something we need to instil in them a little bit more. (Lindsey, teacher)

There is a clear intent to encourage young women to challenge restrictive and stereotypical normative femininities and hegemonic discourses, which couple femininity with niceness (Letendre 2007) and passivity (Allan 2009), including the tendency to unnecessarily apologise. Teachers, Gina and Lindsey evoke these images of femininity in an effort to highlight their desire to disrupt young women's acceptance of such ways of 'doing' gender.

Opportunities for student voice and the genuine commitment to listening to this student voice is paramount in creating a safe space for young women (Mansfield 2014). In accordance with the objective to improve the confidence of young women, the increased valuing of student voice in the activities of the school was apparent. Students had opportunities to participate in various student leadership and representative roles and were encouraged to present school leadership with proposals and ideas for change at the school.

> I think the more voice, the better…policies that are for them and about them, they should have a voice on, I think that makes sense…we had a 3-hour meeting on this…about student voice and student rights…I think it's something that's developing, and we will see changes in the very near future...I think [students] should have policy input. (Lindsey)

At the time of this study, this element of student voice was a work-in-progress. However, it moves the school towards being a safe space for their female students. Apart from providing avenues to challenge notions of passivity, encouraging student voice promotes the notion that young women's voices are important; as they can make valuable contributions to the communities and environments, in which they are a part of—both within and external to the school.

Students were provided with a learning environment that demonstrates the potential to produce positive spaces for their continued development as young women in the broader postfeminist sociocultural climate. This girls-only space provided a unique context for young women to learn and challenge themselves with reduced opportunities for cross gender comparisons and to build shared understandings of their experiences as young women. Aligned with Mansfield's (2014) requirements, the school has made moves to make this setting one in which critical conversations are more commonplace and student voices are taken into consideration. Although with regards to student voice, there is some way to go to ensure that this is a core part of the school climate.

School as a limiting environment for young women

Irrespective of the potential ways this school setting acted as a safe space for young women, it was also evident that it was simultaneously limiting or restrictive for some students. Sociocultural norms and inequalities can be reproduced and reaffirmed in school settings (Fisette and Walton 2015), thus to what extent schools can act as truly safe spaces is questionable. Schools are dynamic settings, with inherent power structures (including between students) and have diverse student groups who vary on a number of intersecting identity categories. Evidently in the current study, what was presented as a safe space for some students may be viewed as exclusionary for others (McConnell et al. 2016; The Roestone Collective 2014). The practices which inevitably (and potentially unintentionally) reinscribe gendered discourses and normative femininities that limit young women were identified.

Reinforcement of normative femininities

Within the current educational setting, young women's gender performance was restricted in numerous ways. Despite the emphasis on girls' participation in the traditionally male domains of maths, science and sports, there were limited opportunities for students to develop diverse or practical skills (e.g. woodwork) and students were still seemingly encouraged to consider gender stereotypical career paths. Together with highlighting her desire to gain more practical skills, so she would not "have to depend on a man" to fix things like older females in her

family, Talia (student) still felt the pressures of normative expectations despite the school's celebratory messages that girls can be anything they want:

> They give us all these opportunities being [pauses] whoever we wanna be… We never really get encouraged to do stuff like being a builder or anything like that…a lot of us are pushed towards nursing.

Further to this, young women at the school who were considered to have "big personalities" or those that did not fit the stereotypical image of the good female student were described as needing to be managed or contained:

> Within a classroom setting…strong personalities can sometimes have a negative influence…I get emails from other staff members saying…such and such is just talking flat out…I hear from students who will come and…make complaints about other students in a class that they feel that are bullying their teacher or…creating a mood where people are not working…some big personalities can be very influential…in negative ways within a classroom setting. (Lindsey, teacher)

> There are girls that take on the role of boys in some way, in the classroom. And that's putting all boys in one category, but they would probably display behaviours that I would've seen in the boys in co-ed schools…playing the class clown, that kind of thing, getting the laugh off the others. The one that is sort of pushing the envelope, not to say that girls never do that when it was co-ed, but it was, it was more likely to be the boy rather than the girl. (Valerie, teacher)

There are expectations regarding how girls should behave in the classroom and that this behaviour was being monitored by teachers and students alike. This is reflective of the ways in which young women are gendered within the school context, and how 'proper' young women are positioned as studious and well behaved in the classroom (Archer et al. 2007; Youdell 2006). Bond and Wasco (2017), point to "the ways in which setting practices enforce particular gendered patterns of communication that convey or challenge gendered expectations of participants" (p. 377). Within the current setting, the suitability of young women having dominant or assertive personalities is only discussed in relation to the classroom setting. This brings to the forefront that the traditional conventions of the classroom setting may place restrictions on young women having and exercising their "big personalities", instead labelling this as disruptive behaviour. For some teachers, the intention to manage 'dominant' young women in the classroom, is with the purpose of encouraging the participation of students who are not as assertive:

> I've got a…great class, but there is probably 6 girls in there who are louder…they just will have their hand up for every single question…they just want their voice to be heard over everybody…And then there are girls who are just very, very quiet and I noticed like in the first couple of weeks… –I just thought to myself—I have not spoken to that girl for the entire lesson, and thought–that's really bad, like I've not heard her voice...you have

> to sort of–…make sure everybody has the opportunity to say something… sometimes that really annoys those girls who are quite dominant…it can be hard for some students to understand that everybody needs to have a voice. (Lindsey, teacher)

Although these teaching practices are aimed towards creating a balanced environment where all young women are encouraged to participate, there is still this element of silencing or restricting some students for the sake of others. This dynamic of the classroom setting is therefore the issue, not necessarily the teacher's intentions. It is also argued that this contributes to the contradictory notion of girlhood and the ways in which young women engage with their academic identities (Pomerantz and Raby 2017; Ringrose 2013). Young women are seemingly praised for their academic pursuits on one hand, whilst simultaneously being silenced or censured for being too smart and 'loudly' engaged.

Another way in which normative femininities was often reinscribed within this all-girls' educational setting, was via the focus on uniform compliance and appearance. This focus on uniform labels the appearance of some young women as acceptable and others as deviant or breaking the rules. In the current study, Sian (student) reflected on the stern focus the school has on students observing uniform expectations:

> Just some of the rules, I think this school is very focused on uniform. And like for example if you're wearing a sport uniform, it's yeah like harsh penalty like getting infringements and I just think those kind of things, it's maybe a bit harsh.

It was evident during fieldwork that uniform compliance was policed and enforced by the teaching staff. Not all members of the teaching staff were supportive of these measures and disciplining students for their appearance. This again raises the question around how emancipating schools can be for young women.

> I always feel the more we enforce uniform, the more we're actually playing into a particular appearance factor, but that's what you have to do…every time we say to the girls their skirt is too short, take it down, I want to hurt myself because I feel like it goes against everything I would stand for but it's what you have to do. (Gina, teacher)

Further to this point concerning uniform and the reinscribing of normative femininities, towards the end of the study, there was increased momentum around the notion of introducing trousers into the standard school uniform. The student led proposal was presented to the leadership team but from conversations with teachers it was thought unlikely to be approved. This is despite the change also being championed by staff, "there's a big push from a lot of the staff to introduce pants into school uniform because the skirts force the girls to behave like [ladies]" (Lindsey, teacher). The perceived restrictiveness of the current school uniform (summer dress and winter skirt), and linking this to connotations regarding 'being a lady', is in contrast to the feminist values promoted at the school. Without being informed of the rationale behind not approving such a change to the uniform, this dismissal of the students'

proposal was counterproductive to the school's intentions to foster student voice and, on the surface it appears to be contradictory to the notion of respecting young women's voices and reinforces traditional notions of femininity regarding what is appropriate for young women to wear. This, highlights the ways in which schools can corral young women into performing ideal schoolgirl femininities (Archer et al. 2007; Youdell 2006) and limit the ways they participate in their environments. In the current study, this limitation was identified at both an intellectual level (e.g. participation in the classroom and lending voice to school policy) as well as physical (e.g. the restrictions of school dresses).

Problematising academic achievement

The continued emphasis on academic achievement has been labelled as a symptom of neoliberal sentiment and the prioritisation of individual success (Walkerdine and Ringrose 2006; Woolley 2017). Within the current research setting, there was an increased focus on the school being regarded as academically competitive. Teachers were consistent in their reference to the school's culture changing to a more "academically rigorous" and a "high achieving" (Valerie, teacher) environment. Academic achievement and healthy competition can in many ways be positive for young women. However, when its focus leads to avenues of exclusion and criticism, the positives for the wellbeing of young women are negated.

> We have really high expectations of the girls. It's assumed that they will go onto university, which I think it can be a bad thing as well because, there are a lot of other legitimate pathways in terms of study and work—and the training that girls could be taking…sometimes we've got unfair pressure on some types of girls…there's a sort of an expectation and a culture around striving for your best and I don't think it's cool to be the dumb girl at this school. I don't think that's looked very favourably upon…There's definitely a culture of—of wanting to do well. (Lindsey, teacher)

This expectation communicated to young women that they will all go to university, reinforces essentialist notions regarding young women's academic achievement as something that is natural and free from struggle (Allan 2010). Within contemporary neoliberal times, education has been identified as a "key marker of female progress" (Baker 2010, p. 3). The discursive repertoires adopted by the school regarding what it means to be a successful (as well as an unsuccessful) young woman are also highlighted. Such discourses bring into question the potential of school settings to be safe spaces where young women can explore and develop their academic identity free from judgement and gendered expectations. The following comments from students further points to their awareness of these prevalent discourses concerning academic achievement:

> I've been worried...sometimes when I don't get such a good grade, it's like [pauses] I need to better myself…like the people I'm around, they get really good [grades]...sometimes I just worry way too much about what they're going to get instead of just focusing on myself, and like giving myself my

> own goals…that's kind of just instinct though. You want to be the best. (Talia, student)

> I don't want to look like a dork, but honestly, I'm going to be who I want to be, like—I'm book-smart and okay, I'm well-liked. Obviously, everybody cares what others think of them...you've gotta be smart but you don't want to [pauses] be too smart, then you're a dork; you don't want to be too dumb. (Alexis, student)

> I feel like you can't do anything right. I guess if you don't do well in school: "Ah well, you're dumb—you're off to VCAL…You're off to TAFE" even though it's not a bad thing. Or if you achieve really well…everyone's like... [Pauses] I remember at a ceremony like assembly at the school, they were announcing the top achievers of the school. And the people behind me were actually bashing the girls like, "Oh look at them. They're so ugly! Stop smiling like that! You're getting so many awards, stop being so smug!". (Yen, student)

Yen and Alexis' reflections also highlight the complexity of these negotiations among female students. Young women do not "engage their academic identities easily, naturally, and without struggle" (Raby and Pomerantz 2015, p. 508). This discourse and expectations concerning academic achievement act as avenues for the exclusion of young women who are not observed to be achieving at the desired standard. This narrative around essentialist notions of academic success, communicate to seemingly underperforming young women that they are not successfully fulfilling the opportunities and obligations afforded them (Baker 2010; Pomerantz and Raby 2011). Consistent with previous research (Allan 2010; Francis et al. 2017; Rich and Evans 2009; Spencer et al. 2018), it was found that within this school the need to be considered a high achiever was prevalent among female students. The anxiety induced for young women around other people's perceptions was noted:

> Their academic success is important to them...if they're not doing well, they don't want to be seen as the dumb girl. They do care what other girls think of them. They care what their teachers think about them and they care what their parents think of them. They want to be doing well and I think it's a—it's a great deal of frustration to some girls, especially if they're trying hard and they're not doing well. They can't understand why not. (Lindsey, teacher)

For young women, their identity as a 'smart girl' is often contested against other notions of femininity (Archer et al. 2012; Skelton et al. 2010). This was apparent in the current research, particularly when young women during their interviews, often qualified their academic achievement while also pointing out they were well liked by their peers; or as Louise (student) further explains:

> everyone gets really self-conscious over their marks, and [pauses] achievements…I feel like you just don't really want other people knowing…it might make you look…kind of cocky…I personally prefer to keep all my stuff to myself. And only tell my really close friends if I'm proud of myself for something.

In this school setting, being considered a smart girl alone was not looked upon favourably:

> If they're well regarded on a social level and they're incredibly intelligent, I think that's okay. But if they're not well regarded on a social level, maybe seen as a bit annoying and their hand is constantly up. They're demanding of their teacher's time. I think maybe there might be a case of eye-rolling, "She's got her hand up again. She's answering the question again". (Lindsey, teacher)

Apart from the potential social and psychological impact this anxiety around academic achievement can have for young women (Spencer et al. 2018), it also breeds an environment of competition within schools (Allan 2010; Ringrose 2013). This competition around results was evident among both junior and senior students:

> In a Year 7 classroom…when they first come in, it's even as physical as covering their work…Or before assignments are due, "Can I have a look at your–No, I haven't got it here today"... They think, "I want to do the best. If I show her my work, she might get higher marks"—so it's still very much that…they're very private with their marks. They might share them with others but generally it's hands over, not going discuss it…it's all about who's the best. (Valerie, teacher)

> There was supposed to be a SAC on the same day for two different classes, but one of the classes had to be moved…so they would've had a little bit more time to prepare. One of the girls in the SAC earlier in the week stood up and said to every single girl in the class, "none of you under any circumstances are to tell any of that other group what was on the SAC today. They are not to know because then they'll have time to prepare for what's on it and that's not fair to any of us. And they will do better than us and that's, you know, not okay"…I don't think they would have told them. I put money on that they wouldn't. (Lindsey, teacher)

Importantly, it is not contended here that young women should not be competitive within the realm of academics. However, it can result in a negative dynamic between students within a classroom and go somewhat towards disrupting the fostering of safe spaces in schools.

It is somewhat expected that schools particularly in the current neoliberal landscape would prioritise the academic performance of their students (O'Flynn and Petersen 2007; Woolley 2017). In the current study, the school's continued emphasis on students' academic achievement effectively reinforces postfeminist and neoliberal discourses which position academic attainment as an essential aspect of 'doing' girl (Jackson et al. 2010; Ringrose 2013). This is further evidenced by both student and teachers' reflections that young women are cognisant of the ways in which others perceive their level of achievement, including the stigma attached to not being a 'smart' girl within this educational space.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine the norms, narratives and discourses young women in an all-girls' Catholic school are privy to; and the ways in which these elements may inform, permit and restrict the fluid ways young women negotiate and perform normative femininities. Although schools are widely regarded as the primary setting in which young women are afforded the opportunity to negotiate their gender identities, it has been asserted that gender discourses prevalent within schools (as well as other settings) work to restrict the development of young women (Archer et al. 2007; Bond and Wasco 2017; McLeod 2000; Reay 2010; Youdell 2006).

The safe space concept was utilised as a way to make sense of what was occurring within this setting as depicted by teacher and student insights. Inherent in such safe settings is a sense of "normative messiness" (The Roestone Collective 2014, p. 1348), which is reflective in this discussion of the school setting in which this research took place. The school setting in question ultimately can be considered both safe as well as a restrictive context for young women. On a positive note, this setting provided students with a girls-only setting, which young women reported feeling comfortable, supported and understood as young women. The absence of the direct male gaze provides students with the opportunity to relate to one another as young women and cross-gender comparisons were limited. The school and many of the teachers were found to be encouraging of critical reflection, feminist conversations, and motivated young women to be cognisant of their social worlds. Steps were seemingly being taken to position student voice and participation as more central elements of the school's culture. These are necessary elements of a safe space (Mansfield 2014; The Roestone Collective 2014), a setting in which it is hoped that students can challenge themselves, their understandings of normative femininities and recognise the value of their voice.

This assessment of this girls-only space as a potential safe space for young women is measured against the limitations that persist in this setting. The silencing of important topics by some teachers due to the Catholic underpinnings of the school and the tempering of student voice were significant. To their credit, the teachers interviewed for the most part did not shy away from and were aware of the limitations which persisted in the climate of the school.

This educational space is an institution with rules and practices which can be characterised as counterintuitive to the goals of safe spaces. Postfeminist and neoliberal discourses regarding academic achievement and proper schoolgirl femininities are centralised (Allan 2010). The positive intentions of the school and in particular the teachers interviewed are not questioned, however, it was observed that at times students' adherence to normative femininities were reinforced. Young women's eager or loud behaviour within the classroom was suppressed; curriculum choices were not inclusive of skill-based subjects; and uniform compliance (which is mostly restricted to traditional dresses and skirts) was prioritised in this setting. The normalisation and expectations surrounding academic achievement of students worked to limit their post-secondary options and,

stigmatise young women who do not meet these expectations and minimise the struggle some young women experience with regards to their academic identities.

Overall due to such complexities, it is contended that the assessment of this school as a safe space cannot be achieved via the adding and subtracting of dichotomous advantages and disadvantages inherent in the space. Instead, it is asserted that without being complacent to such limitations, safe spaces will never be flawless and the work to make such spaces "better" safe spaces is "ever-incomplete" (The Roestone Collective 2014, p. 1360). Similar sentiments are also share by Bond and Wasco (2017), who argue that gendered contexts are always in a state of unrest and the pursuit to make such settings more gender equal, or in the cases of this educational space more open to diverse femininities and ways of 'doing' gender for female students is endless.

Author contributions All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by the first author LC. The first draft of the manuscript was written by LC and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. This research received no specific grant or funding.

Data availability The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available including on request. The dataset is qualitative in nature and making data available would be a privacy risk and violate the research's ethical obligations.

Declarations

Conflict of interest None of the authors have any potential conflicts of interest related to this manuscript.

Ethical approval This study was approved by Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. This research was performed in accordance with relevant guidelines/regulations applicable when human participants are involved as outlined in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007).

Informed consent In accordance with relevant ethical guidelines/regulations applicable when human participants are involved, informed consent was obtained from all participants and/or their legal guardians for participation in the current study.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

References

Allan A (2009) The importance of being a 'lady': hyper-femininity and heterosexuality in the private, single-sex primary school. Gend Educ 21(2):145–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802213172

Allan A (2010) Picturing success: young femininities and the (im)possibilities of academic achievement in selective, single-sex education. Int Stud Stud Sociol Educ 20(1):39–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620211003655630

Allan A, Charles C (2014) Cosmo girls: configurations of class and femininity in elite educational settings. Br J Sociol Educ 35(3):333–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/014256692.2013.764148

Archer L, Halsall A, Hollingworth S (2007) Inner-city femininities and education: 'race', class, gender and schooling in young women's lives. Gend Educ 19(5):549–568. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250701533568

Archer L, Dewitt J, Osborne J, Dillon J, Willis B, Wong B (2012) "Balancing acts": elementary school girls' negotiations of femininity, achievement, and science. Sci Educ 96(6):967–989. https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.21031

Azzarito L, Solmon MA, Harrison L Jr (2006) "…If I had a choice, I would…": a feminist poststructuralist perspective on girls in physical education. Res Q Exerc Sport 77(2):222–239. https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2006.10599356

Baker J (2010) Great expectations and post-feminist accountability: young women living up to the 'successful girls' discourse. Gend Educ 22(1):1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802612696

Barrett BJ (2010) Is "safety" dangerous? A critical examination of the classroom as a safe space. Can J Scholarsh Teach Learn 1(1):1–12. https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2010.1.9

Bertram C, Fine M, Marusza J (2000) Where the girls (and women) are. J Community Psychol 28(5):731–755

Bond MA, Wasco SM (2017) Gender as context: a framework for understanding and addressing gendered qualities of settings. In: Bond MA, Serrano-Garcia I, Keys CB (eds) APA handbook of community psychology: theoretical foundations, core concepts, and emerging challenges. American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, pp 369–385

Braun V, Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qual Res Psychol 3:77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Brewer JD (2000) Ethnography. Open University Press, Buckingham

Brown LM (2003) Girlfighting: betrayal and rejection among girls. New York University Press, New York

Budgeon S (2015) Individualized femininity and feminist politics of choice. Eur J Women's Stud 22(3):303–318. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506815576602

Burr V (2015) Social constructionism, 3rd edn. Routledge, London

Butler J (1990) Gender trouble. Routledge, New York

Chamberlain K, Cain T, Sheridan J, Dupuis A (2011) Pluralisms in qualitative research: from multiple methods to integrated methods. Qual Res Psychol 8(2):151–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2011.572730

Chiodo LN (2018) Exploring the impact of sociocultural expectations on young women's negotiations of normative femininities [PhD dissertation, Victoria University]. VU Research Repository. https://vuir.vu.edu.au/id/eprint/37822

Clarke V (2005) Were all very liberal in our views: students talk about lesbian and gay parenting. Lesbian Gay Psychol Rev 6(1):2–15

Darbyshire P, MacDougall C, Schiller W (2005) Multiple methods in qualitative research with children: more insight or just more? Qual Res 5(4):417–436. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794105056921

Davis SN, Gergen MM (1997) Toward a new psychology of gender: opening conversations. In: Gergen MM, Davis SN (eds) Toward a new psychology of gender. Routledge, New York, pp 1–27

DiGiovanni LW (2004) Feminist pedagogy and the elementary classroom. Encount Educ Mean Soc Justice 17(3):10–15

Duits L (2008) Multi-girl culture: an ethnography of doing identity. University Press, Amsterdam

Fisette JL, Walton TA (2015) "Beautiful You": creating contexts for students to become agents of social change. J Educ Res 108(1):62–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2013.838537

Francis B, Archer L, Moote J, de Witt J, Yeomans L (2017) Femininity, science, and the denigration of the girly girl. Br J Sociol Educ 38(8):1097–1110. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2016.1253455

Gavey N (1989) Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis. Psychol Women Q 13(4):459–475. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1989.tb01014.x

Gavey N (1997) Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis. In: Gergen MM, Davis SN (eds) Toward a new psychology of gender. Routledge, New York, pp 49–64

Gavey N (2011) Feminist poststructuralism and discourse analysis revisited. Psychol Women Q 35(1):183–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684310395916

Gergen KJ (2003) Knowledge as socially constructed. In: Gergen M, Gergen KJ (eds) Social construction: a reader. Sage Publications, London, pp 15–17

Gill R (2007) Postfeminist media culture: elements of a sensibility. Eur J Cult Stud 10(2):147–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898

Gill R, Orgad S (2015) The confidence cult(ure). Aust Fem Stud 30(86):324–344. https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2016.1148001

Griffin C (2004) Good girls, bad girls: anglocentrism and diversity in the constitution of contemporary girlhood. In: Harris A (ed) All about the girl: culture, power, and identity. Routledge, New York, pp 29–43

Griffin C, Bengry-Howell A (2008) Ethnography. In: Willig C, Stainton-Rogers W (eds) The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, pp 15–31

Halagao PE, Kaomea J (2018) On my honor: creating space for thinking and living girl scouts differently in (post)colonial Hawai'i. Gend Educ 30(7):866–881. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2017.1288858

Hammersley M (2016) Reading ethnographic research, 2nd edn. Routledge, New York

Hammersley M, Atkinson P (2007) Ethnography: principles in practice, 3rd edn. Routledge, New York

Harris A (2004) Future girl: young women in the twenty-first century. Routledge, London

Hill J (2015) Girls' active identities: navigating othering discourses of femininity, bodies and physical education. Gend Educ 27(6):666–684. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2015.1078875

Holley LC, Steiner S (2005) Safe space: student perspectives on classroom environment. J Soc Work Educ 41(1):49–64. https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2005.200300343

Jackson C, Paechter C, Renold E (2010) Introduction. In: Jackson C, Paechter C, Renold E (eds) Girls and education 3–16. Continuing concerns, new agendas. Open University Press, Maidenhead, pp 1–18

Jackson S, Vares T, Gill R (2013) 'The whole playboy mansion image': girls' fashioning and fashioned selves within a postfeminist culture. Fem Psychol 23(2):143–162. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353511433790

Jeanes R (2011) 'I'm into high heels and make up but I still love football': exploring gender identity and football participation with preadolescent girls. Soccer Soc 12(3):402–420. https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2011.568107

Kessels U, Hannover B (2008) When being a girl matters less: accessibility of gender-related self-knowledge in single-sex and coeducational classes and its impact on students' physics-related self-concept of ability. Br J Educ Psychol 78(2):273–289. https://doi.org/10.1348/000709907X215938

Letendre J (2007) "Sugar and spice but not always nice": gender socialization and its impact on development and maintenance of aggression in adolescent girls. Child Adolesc Soc Work J 24(4):353–368. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-007-0088-7

Mansfield KC (2014) "More than a school": providing a safe space for girls to rewrite, direct, and act their life stories. In: Newcomb WS, Mansfield KC (eds) Women interrupting, disrupting, and revolutionizing educational policy and practice. Information Age Publishing, Charlotte, pp 59–78

Marshall C, Young MD (2006) Gender and methodology. In: Skelton C, Francis B, Smulyan L (eds) The Sage handbook of gender and education. Sage Publications, London, pp 63–78

Martin JL, Beese JA (2016) Girls talk back: changing school culture through feminist and service-learning pedagogies. High Sch J 99(3):211–233. https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2016.0007

Mayberry M (1999) Reproductive and resistant pedagogies. The comparative roles of collaborative learning and feminist pedagogy in science education. In: Mayberry M, Rose EC (eds) Meeting the challenge. Innovative feminist pedagogies in action. Routledge, New York, pp 1–22

McConnell EA, Todd NR, Odahl-Ruan C, Shattell M (2016) Complicating counterspaces: intersectionality and the Michigan women's music festival. Am J Community Psychol 57(3–4):473–488. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12051

McLeod J (2000) Subjectivity and schooling in a longitudinal study of secondary students. Br J Sociol Educ 21(4):501–521. https://doi.org/10.1080/713655367

McRobbie A (1994) Different, youthful subjectivities: toward a cultural sociology of youth. In: McRobbie A (ed) Postmodernism and popular culture. Routledge, New York, pp 177–197

McRobbie A (2007) Top girls? Young women and the post-feminist sexual contract. Cult Stud 21(4–5):718–737. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380701279044

McRobbie A (2009) The aftermath of feminism: gender, culture and social change. Sage Publications, London

O'Flynn G, Petersen EB (2007) The 'good life' and the 'rich portfolio': young women, schooling and neoliberal subjectification. Br J Sociol Educ 28(4):459–472. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690701369483

O'Reilly K (2012) Ethnographic methods, 2nd edn. Routledge, Oxford

Paechter C (2003) Masculinities and femininities as communities of practice. Women's Stud Int Forum 26(1):69–77. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(02)00356-4

Paechter C (2006) Constructing femininity/constructing femininities. In: Skelton C, Francis B, Smulyan L (eds) The Sage handbook of gender and education. Sage Publications, London, pp 365–377

Paechter C (2012) Bodies, identities and performances: reconfiguring the language of gender and schooling. Gend Educ 24(2):229–241. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2011.606210

Pole C, Morrison M (2003) Ethnography for education. Open University Press, Berkshire

Pomerantz S, Raby R (2011) 'Oh, she's *so* smart': girls complex engagement with post/feminist narratives of academic success. Gend Educ 23(5):549–564. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2010.538014

Pomerantz S, Raby R (2017) Smart girls: success, school, and the myth of post-feminism. University of California Press, Oakland

Raby R, Pomerantz S (2015) Playing it down/playing it up: girls' strategic negotiations of academic success. Br J Sociol Educ 36(4):507–525. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.836056

Reay D (2010) Identity making in schools and classrooms. In: Wetherell M, Mohanty CT (eds) The Sage handbook of identities. Sage Publications, London, pp 277–294

Reynolds JR, Bamford MJ (2016) School gender culture and student subjective well-being. Sex Roles 74(1–2):62–77. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0557-y

Rich E, Evans J (2009) Now I am nobody, see me for who I am: the paradox of performativity. Gend Educ 21(1):1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250802213131

Riley S, Evans A, Mackiewicz A (2016) It's just between girls: negotiating the postfeminist gaze in women's 'looking talk.' Fem Psychol 26(1):94–113. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353515626182

Ringrose J (2013) Postfeminist education? Girls and the sexual politics of schooling. Routledge, London

Savin-Baden M, Major CH (2013) Qualitative research: the essential guide to theory and practice. Routledge, New York

Scharff C (2012) Repudiating feminism. Young women in a neoliberal world. Ashgate, Surrey

Shefer T, Crawford M, Strebel A, Simbayi LC, Dwadwa-Henda N, Cloete A, Kalichman SC (2008) Gender, power and resistance to change among two communities in the Western Cape, South Africa. Fem Psychol 18(2):157–182. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353507088265

Skelton C, Francis B, Read B (2010) "Brains before 'beauty'?" High achieving girls, schools and gender identities. Educ Stud 36(2):185–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/03055690903162366

Spencer R, Walsh J, Liang B, Mousseau AMD, Lund TJ (2018) Having it all? A qualitative examination of affluent adolescent girls' perceptions of stress and their quests for success. J Adolesc Res 33(1):33–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558416670990

Stengel BS, Weems L (2010) Questioning safe space: an introduction. Stud Philos Educ 29(6):505–507. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-010-9205-8

Stuart A, Donaghue N (2012) Choosing to conform: the discursive complexities of choice in relation to feminine beauty practices. Fem Psychol 22(1):98–121. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353511424362

Sur P (2017) Beauty and the internet: old wine in a new bottle. J Int Women's Stud 18(4):278–291

Taylor GW, Ussher JM (2001) Making sense of S&M: a discourse analytic account. Sexualities 4(3):293–314. https://doi.org/10.1177/136346001004003002

The Roestone Collective (2014) Safe space: towards a reconceptualization. Antipode 46(5):1346–1365. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12089

Walkerdine V (1990) Schoolgirl fictions. Verso, London

Walkerdine V, Ringrose J (2006) Femininities: reclassifying upward mobility and the neo-liberal subject. In: Skelton C, Francis B, Smulyan L (eds) The Sage handbook of gender and education. Sage Publication Ltd., London, pp 31–46

Weedon C (1997) Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory, 2nd edn. Blackwell Publishing, Malden

Weis L, Fine M (2001) Extraordinary conversations in public schools. Int J Qual Stud Educ 14(4):497–523. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390110046355

Willig C (2013) Introducing qualitative research in psychology, 3rd edn. Open University Press, Berkshire

Woolley SW (2017) Contesting silence, claiming space: gender and sexuality in the neo-liberal public high school. Gend Educ 29(1):84–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1197384

Youdell D (2004) Engineering school markets, constituting schools and subjectivating students: the bureaucratic, institutional and classroom dimensions of educational triage. J Educ Policy 19(4):407–431. https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093042000227474

Youdell D (2005) Sex-gender-sexuality: how sex, gender and sexuality constellations are constituted in secondary schools. Gend Educ 17(3):249–270. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250500145148

Youdell D (2006) Impossible bodies, impossible selves: exclusions and students subjectivities. Springer, Dordrecht