Narrating School, Narrative Self: Identity, Agency and the Hidden Curriculum of (Hetero)Normativity

Mikela Bjork

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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NARRATING SCHOOL, NARRATING SELF: IDENTITY, AGENCY, AND THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM OF (HETERO)NORMATIVITY

by

MIKELA BJORK

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Mikela Bjork

The manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

28 April 2017

Date

Terrie Epstein

Advisor Name

Chair of Examining Committee

28 April 2017

Date

Anthony Picciano

EO Name

Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Terrie Epstein

Dr. Michelle Fine

Dr. David Connor

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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ABSTRACT

Narrating School, Narrating Self: Identity, Agency, and the Hidden Curriculum of (Hetero)normativity

by

Mikela Bjork

Advisor: Terrie Epstein

This dissertation analyzes sober women’s narratives of their schooling experiences to reflect on how educators and policy makers can improve the schooling experiences for othered students. Inspired by the self-reflective and agentic pedagogy found within the figured world of Alcoholics Anonymous, I focused on the narratives of women in Alcoholics Anonymous, ages 18-85, as they narrated their schooling stories from pre-Kindergarten up to the last grade they completed. What the data of this qualitative research project reveals is that, despite the detrimental culture of denial at home and school, the participants, through the radical act of self-reflexivity and personal narrative, authored their experiences of resiliency, which are invaluable messages for our students both in and outside of the physical boundaries of school. The implications of this research include the importance of teaching self-reflexivity in teacher-training, questioning our social location and our personal definitions of “normalcy,” when considering what is “wrong” with our students who learn differently, and how the institution of public health and education can be in better conversation with each other in order to best support the complex needs of our students.
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Chapter 1

Listening for schooling stories is second nature to me. I didn’t realize it until I started talking about this research project, but I have been collecting narratives about schooling since I was a very little girl. I have fond memories of my father, who was a principal, and grandmother, who was a third grade teacher, sitting at the latter’s kitchen table, the late August sun setting over her front yard, glowing brilliant hues of red and orange as they discussed the approaching school year’s goals, the latest superintendent, and their concerns about returning students. At night, I would ask my grandmother to tell me stories about her life as a little girl. Many of those stories included her time in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Virginia.

I began attending Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings with my mother, who got sober when I was 5. For the most part, I looked forward to going with her to the meetings because I got to listen to people tell stories, and not just any stories—really intense, explicit stories, packed with drama and curse words and tears and, inevitably, bursts of laughter from the room full of other alcoholics, who related implicitly to the story being told. I remember my ears perking whenever I heard someone talk about being a kid or being in school. Maybe it was my age and the development of my ego that grabbed me; I was listening to hear if they were talking about me. Regardless of why those school stories interested me, they continued to keep my attention until I moved away from home at 18 to attend college.

It wouldn’t be until I was 25 years old that I found myself sitting in the same AA rooms that I had once attended as the daughter of an alcoholic. Less than a week before I moved to New York, I realized that I could not drink like a normal person, and so I stopped drinking and started attending AA meetings in my hometown, where I had grown up listening to stories of trauma, hope, solidarity, and schooling.
It seems that subconsciously, I have been working on this research for most of my life. Through storytelling and story listening, I have made sense of my own pedagogy as a classroom teacher. I have also made sense of my pedagogical beliefs by being a member of Alcoholics Anonymous just as much as I have made sense of being a student and learner over the last seven years of graduate school. From listening as a child to stories told at my kitchen table, to listening as an adult to stories told in musty church basements, I have held on to what some might think is an idealistic dream, but my truth in all of this story listening and story sharing is that I harbor a deep-seated hope that sharing stories can shift the neoliberal assumptions and education policies that inform how educators communicate with and care for students of all ages.

More often than not, when people ask me what my dissertation is about, they respond to my elevator speech with an unsolicited schooling story that sometimes has everything to do with the figured world (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) of school: their teacher, their peers, the assignments, the homework, the content they struggled with, the content they loved. Yet, inevitably, there is another story within their unsolicited schooling story—a frame story1—that calls in their figured world of home: their parents, siblings, neighborhood friends. The majority of these schooling stories also include frame stories about sexual abuse, incest, and rape.

Once I described my dissertation to a couple of women at a café, one of whom delighted in telling me about going to school at an all-girls high school—as she put it, “a lower-class Miss Porter’s.” She was full of life and livelihood as she narrated fond memories of connections she had made with peers and the overall joy she had experienced while attending this school. Less than 10 minutes into the conversation, she had woven recollections of intense sexual trauma into her schooling story and had shared how her schooling experience had been forever changed.

1 A secondary story or stories, embedded within the original story.
because of this trauma. This near-stranger’s schooling experience reflected a story that was just as much about trauma and survival as it was about teachers, peers, and everyday work.

This research project leaves no question that schooling experiences are highly influential to the ways in which women of all ages author themselves and come to understand themselves as (but not limited to) women, queers, mothers, and thinkers. It should be noted that my use of the term “schooling” is an adverb; by using “schooling” rather than the noun “school” I am acknowledging the act of learning is not limited to the physical boundaries of a school building. Rather, schooling, as I am defining it, pushes the boundaries of how places of teaching and learning are (mis)understood, thus including communities that exist outside of school-as-a-noun. By engaging in schooling narratives, it is my hope that researchers will have a more diverse and flexible understanding that schooling is omnipresent and that, furthermore, the best curriculum is that which cannot be scaffolded and tested.

**Statement of the Problem**

What began as a research project inspired by the labels, stigmas, and stereotypes associated with being a “troubled” girl in school has unfurled and evolved into a more complicated narrative that talks back to the “troubled” narrative and seeks to trouble that which isn’t considered a part of school or a school(ing) discourse. This research project seeks to uncover the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity within schooling structures. It also seeks to examine the consequences of this hidden curriculum, from microaggressions to blatant physical, emotional, and intellectual acts of violence toward girls and young women. By troubling the “troubled girl” narrative, this research project seeks to explore through firsthand narratives the expectations of girls and young women both inside and outside of school, the ways in which
women reflect on their experiences, and the ways in which their past experiences inform their present means of making sense of their identities.

**The Hidden Curriculum of Heteronormativity**

The hidden curriculum (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1982) has expanded from discourses around race, class, and the overall unjust power dynamics that exist in schooling to a broader yet more acute analysis that invites the discussion of gender (performance, identity) and sexuality. Scholars focusing on the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity (Blinick, 1994; Castro & Sujak, 2014; Pinar, 1994) have made connections between curricula and the reinscribed heteronormativity from which they are sourced. At its root, the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity is violent toward anyone who is not a wealthy white man. It is a structural, institutional regime of truth (Foucault, 1991) that reinscribes what it means to be (ab)normal, using language and texts as tools to subvert the lived experiences of those deemed Other. Many of those who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, like myself, learned about the AIDS epidemic while simultaneously learning about homosexuality; this is a violent attempt to maintain the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity. Gendered expectations and assumptions are placed daily on the passive bodies of young women and girls. From what sports girls can or cannot play to what instruments they are encouraged to play in the concert band, elements of the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity, I argue, feed into the beliefs that young women and girls learn about themselves at an early age and inform the ways in which they carry themselves both in and outside of school in the years that follow. The (un)intended consequences rooted in the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity include higher suicide rates among queer youth than their straight peers, higher percentages of truancy and dropping out or being pushed out (Weis & Fine, 2005) among queer youth than their straight peers, and higher reported rates of bullying among
queer youth than their straight peers (Fox & Fine, 2012). Specific to the participants in this research project—all of whom identify as women and the majority of whom identify as queer or lesbian—the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity is likened to the ways in which the institution of heterosexuality and the institution of schooling reify “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich, 1980, p. 637). That is, the act of schooling mirrors the institution of heterosexuality in order to “reproduce compulsory heterosexuality and homosexual repression” (Pinar, 1994, p. 164).

This project seeks to unveil the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity as it relates specifically to a diverse pool of women who are looking back on their schooling experiences. Unlike narratives collected in the now from school-aged girls, the narratives in this research reflect on childhood memories, using time as a tool to provide space and breadth between recollections of trauma and joy. An additional tool along with time is the decision to interview women with a specific narrative template. By interviewing women in Alcoholics Anonymous, I was curious to see how, if at all, the alcoholic story paralleled, intersected, or justified the schooling stories and visa versa.

My decision to interview women in Alcoholics Anonymous had multiple influences. There is a specific reflective language that is spoken within the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous. Having grown up listening to—and then, in my adult life, speaking—the language myself, I know firsthand the healing qualities of such a reflective and agentic discourse. The decision to interview women in AA was also sparked by the stories I had heard nine years prior to this research project. Inside the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous that same year, I was learning to listen. What I heard, and what planted the seed for this project, was that almost everyone has a school story situated within his or her sober alcoholic story. Whether a faint
memory or a vivid narrative, school and the act of schooling play a significant role in the shared narratives within Alcoholics Anonymous. What piqued my interest was the relationship between stories shared within the AA community and the intertwining of stories about schooling. What would it be like, I wondered, to interview people who are used to telling a story in a very specific way but to give them a different topic? That is, what would it be like to ask women in AA to tell their schooling stories rather than their stories about their alcoholism? And what might educators, health professionals, and others learn about and from these stories that may assist young women of diverse backgrounds in schools?

According to AA pedagogy, it is by honestly sharing one’s life experiences with someone else that one is both liberated from self-obsession and able to be of service to another person, who in turn is liberated in knowing that she is not alone in her own self-centered obsession. The acts of narrating and bearing witness to personal experiences are courageous and, when done within the parameters of a mutually created safe space, offer qualities of healing, unpacking, (re)directing, (re)defining, and hope, for both the narrator and the audience. Given the potential of the schooling stories of women in AA to “teach” educators and researchers about some of the ways that schooling has violated women’s senses of self, thus contributing to deep-seated issues of gender identity, sexuality, and the shame accompanying what it means to be a girl in school, the questions this research seeks to answer are:

1. How do women in AA narrate their schooling experiences?
2. What discourses do women in AA draw on to author their identities?
3. What are the educational policy implications that can be drawn from the educational narratives?
Why Is This Important?

I entered into this research project having been inspired by my own teaching experiences in a special education high school math and science classroom. What struck me, as a teacher and a master’s student, was the discrepancy in discourse surrounding the Brown-skinned boy in special education versus the Brown-skinned girl in special education. Indeed, there were more Brown-skinned boys in my special education classes, but the few girls who were present were being overlooked by the literature I was required to read for my graduate classes, and their presence was being overshadowed by their male peers—a mirroring of the patriarchal, heteronormative structures that have historically informed schooling experiences for girls as long as they have been allowed an education (Davis, 1981; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; Lorde, 1984; Taylor, Gilligan & Sullivan, 1995).

As a feminist and an educator, I saw a dearth of literature and a detrimental gap in the representation of girls’ and young women’s voices within the context of schooling. As a self-identified alcoholic, I have heard thousands of stories told by women (and men) that speak to their schooling experiences while sitting in the rooms of AA over the last 11 years. To be clear, never have I wanted to make the claim that had these women had better experiences in school, perhaps they wouldn’t have become alcoholics. For an alcoholic—as my belief and understanding of this disease has it—there is always a reason to drink alcoholically. That is, if it is not a traumatic experience at school, it is a traumatic experience elsewhere. I am not searching for the cause of these women’s alcoholic tendencies. And, as their narratives will bear out, they aren’t blaming their schooling experiences for their alcoholism. But I found it interesting that in these storied templates of life, loss, joy, and grief, there was almost always a frame story about
school. This omnipresence of schooling experiences framed within life stories and stories about addiction is what influenced this research project.

I was also attuned to the frequency of schooling experiences referenced through AA’s narrative template. The common denominator is schooling. Everyone has a schooling story, but the narratives that I have collected for this project are especially important because the women whose voices are shared here represent the collective stories of Other. This project seeks to problematize the gendered, raced, and classed figured world of school and figured world of home and the invaluable influence those experiences have on identity formation while children are in school, as well as in the years that follow outside of school.

What I have come to learn is that everyone has a schooling story. And that schooling story varies significantly in its content. Schooling stories are unique to the individual telling them and, more often than not, include details that one wouldn’t consider apropos of a schooling story. The purpose of this research project is to highlight how women in AA come to understand themselves through their schooling stories so that educators might glean from firsthand experiences how to educate and proactively support young women and girls of varying class, race, ethnic, and sexually oriented backgrounds. What’s more, the purpose of this research is to create a counterconversation to the heteronormative, patriarchal structures that define past and present educational standards (Anandhi & Velayudhan, 2010; Freire, 1973; Horton & Freire, 1990; Moraga & Anzaldua, 1981; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002).

This project seeks to make visible people and events that are typically quieted, displaced, and denied. In 2017, I am continuously baffled that women’s bodies are still being policed and that a woman’s right to choose what to do with her body is at the forefront of The Political Agenda. It is equally confounding that in 2017, media coverage about rape on college campuses
is tiptoed around, making it clear that not only are women not safe in what are deemed “safe spaces” but are villainized for calling out the sexual violence that has been inflicted upon them. Rape, of course, is not a new problem; it is one of the oldest problems women have been the victims of. The discourse surrounding rape is ever-so-slowly evolving; with every woman who comes forward about her own experience being raped, the broader culture is forced to look at that which has been historically swept under the table because it is too complicated or, worse, not important (Gay, 2014; Okun, 1986; Valenti, 2008, 2011).

I have been both inspired and repulsed by the schooling narratives authored by the women in this project, which have also included stories of rape, incest, and acts of violence. From these stories, I came to realize that the figured world of home and the figured world of school, for many of my participants, were equally unsafe. What message does it send to a young woman who is being sexually molested by her father to then be told by her third-grade teacher that she is stupid? I am interested in calling attention to the intersections of public health and education that need more attention, specifically how the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity reflects the hidden curriculum of the patriarchy and rape culture. Additionally, what role does the culture of denial play in institutions that are molding the minds of the next generation(s) of thinkers, creators, and workers? One is as sick as one’s secrets, and the way out of the imprisoning toxicity that these secrets inflict is by sharing honestly the things that one assumes—and sometimes assumes correctly—no one wants to hear. What I am suggesting is not a panacea to sexual violence toward women. It is a call for the acknowledgment that the figured world of school is not an entity unto itself; schooling—thorough schooling—includes the figured world of home. It is a call for the acknowledgment that the culture of denial and avoidance in school and home is detrimental to the health and security of daughters. It is a call for the acknowledgment
that current pedagogy does not have or make the time to address issues beyond what the Common Core standards ask of students and teachers, and this way of teaching and learning is an intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual detriment not just to the individuals being reared in the school system(s) but to the political economy they are a part of or will eventually contribute to.

There are young girls walking into first- and second-grade classrooms who have been molested by their fathers, brothers, stepfathers, and the like, and they are terrified, ashamed, and full of fear about their safety and security. And their teacher is exhausted and overwhelmed with content that she must teach and they must master by the end of the week to stay on track. There is a disparity here. It is not going anywhere. It has always been this way, as far as I am concerned. School is a figured world that advertises learning and growth, but it is also a site of denial—denial of empathy and of selfhood.

Why Women in AA?

The language of AA has been referred to as “the language of the heart” (Wilson, 1988). Beyond the narrative template, which highlights an individual’s experience, strength, and hope as she relates to the disease of alcoholism (experience with drinking and the strength it took to stop drinking and hope for the future of a nondrinking lifestyle), the language spoken in AA is one of acceptance and self-reflection. People in AA listen to one another and learn from each other how to make sense of and talk about the past in an agentic and self-reflective manner; this practice can be viewed as a pedagogy unto itself. This manner of speaking and bearing-witness creates a community that specializes in honesty, safety, and growth, attributes that schools employ in their mission statements but fall short of in practice. Because of this self-reflective skill set, I thought it would benefit the research project to look at the past through the lens of a
student/learner. The self-reflective and agentic awareness in the hindsight of AA participants provides a thorough and well-detailed understanding of what it was like through their narrative template, which highlights the “experience, strength, and hope” of their *schooling* stories. The act of story telling and bearing-witness-to is an act of healing for both narrator and listener. This is best signified by the growth of Alcoholics Anonymous, which started in 1935 with two men and has since expanded to an estimated 2 million people today (Living Sober, 2013). AA’s pedagogy has the potential to inform the implemention of a more empathetic and holistic approach to pedagogical structures within the institution of school.

Alcoholism is referred to as a family disease, easily traceable from generation to generation. From the many stories told by my participants, it is clear that the disease of alcoholism, like addiction in general, is a genetic disability. What happens in the homes of many of the participants is directly related to the alcoholism and addict-like abuse (emotional, physical, and sexual) of their family members. By acknowledging the disease of alcoholism as a familial disease and a genetic trait, educators and policy makers should consider public health and education as intertwined. Schooling and education cannot be addressed as a cut-and-dry problem of “good” teachers, the mastery of content, and test taking. It is a disservice to everyone involved. If alcoholism is framed as a familial disease and disorder, it becomes possible to use that frame to seek solutions to problems in education as they relate to public and mental health, rather than being limited to the frames of Common Core standards and big business models. This research seeks to highlight the unmet needs and wants of individual women as they reflect on their schooling experiences, in the hope of informing the ways in which other women’s needs and wants can be met now and in the future.
I chose to limit my research to female participants because there is a lack of women’s voices, individually and collectively, in nearly every public discourse. Women are continually talked about but are not invited to have their voices heard. From the divisive topic of abortion rights to rape culture pandemic (but not limited) to school campuses, women’s bodies, intellects, and experiences are discussed, criticized, and violently silenced. This research project is a collective counternarrative to the patriarchal, heteronormative discourses that pervade schools, politics, and everyday infrastructure.

From children’s bedtime stories to adults’ podcasts, storytelling and story listening have and continue to be favorite pastimes. The act of storytelling and bearing witness to personal stories is a radical act of community building, generosity, vulnerability, Truth seeking, empowerment, and empathy building. There is a true healing quality to storytelling and story listening that I hope to uncover and highlight from this research. When being interviewed by Terry Gross about the healing quality of publishing and talking openly about her experience being raped in college, Lena Dunham stated:

I not only knew it was important because I had seen other people going through it; I felt it was important because of what it was going to give me spiritually to not be hiding that anymore. . . . At the time that it happened, I wasn’t able to share about [the rape], and I said to this friend, “I spent so much time scared, I spent so much time ashamed. I don’t feel that way anymore and it’s not because of my job, it’s not because of my boyfriend, it’s not because of feminism—though all those things helped—it’s because I told the story.” And I still feel like myself and I feel less alone. (2014, September 29)

Telling stories, whether in a 12-step format or sitting in a room with close friends, is a radical act of intimacy. I integrate storytelling into every class that I teach—most of which are
Common Core and assessment heavy—as a way of connecting to my students and modeling to them how they might also use storytelling to engage their students, thinking and acting beyond the tightly-wound curricula with which they are working.

**Identity and Agency**

Holland et al. (1998) describe identity as “a concept that figuratively combines the intimate personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations . . . they are lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice” (p. 45). The convergence of these young women’s personal worlds with collective spaces in school and other institutions such as church, (foster) homes, and hospitals is rich. Activity, as it is positioned in identity formation and as I am using it, consists of the narratives they use to author their experiences in and about school. Bakhtin (1992) insists that “we also represent ourselves to ourselves from the vantage point (the words) of others and that those representations are significant to our experience of ourselves” (p. 174). He posits:

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention . . . it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293–294 in Holland et al., 1998)

How then do these women of diverse ages, races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic classes author themselves through the language and labels of their peers, their families, the media, and their teachers? How do they author themselves using words that have been used to narrate them in a world where they are not the primary author? As Rita Charon (2006) states, “narrative
knowledge and practice are what human beings use to communicate to one another about events or states of affairs and are, as such, a major source of both identity and community” (p. 11).

**Research Questions**

1. How do women in Alcoholics Anonymous narrate their school experiences?
2. What discourses do women in AA draw on to author their identities?
3. What are the implications that can be drawn from these educational narratives?

**Methodology**

Self-authoring narratives are agentic and deeply layered. By collecting personal insights from the point of view of narrators whose stories emerge from their lived experiences over time and in particular social, cultural and historical settings, these analyses offer insights into human agency as seen from the inside out . . . they can bridge the analytic gap between outside positionalities and interior worlds, between the social and individual. (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008, p. 16)

Identity through self-authoring is a self-sufficient cycle that begins with the narrator’s experiences, memories, and emotions in the particular point in time about which she is narrating. The process of naming and contextualizing the narrative then feeds back into the internalization, understanding, and meaning making of both the context and the narrator’s experience then in relation to her meaning making and reidentifying in the now. And so the cycle continues; as identity shaping is in constant motion, figured worlds are constantly (re)evolving.

Through in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006), focusing on the narratives of the self (Maynes et al., 2008), I collected the educational narratives of women in AA, with the intent to “examine the relationship between the individual and the social by delving into the identity of
the narrator through whose authorial voice and subject position a life story is told and whose life is at the same time the story’s focus” (Maynes et al., 2008, pg. 15).

Using snowball sampling, I contacted women in the AA community, informing them of this research project and asking them to tell other women who might be interested. I offered my contact information to those who expressed an interest in participating and met with them either at their homes or at the local library. The 15 participants ranged in age from 18 to 85 years old and were ethnically varied (five identified as white, two identified as Latina, one identified as Native American, and seven identified as mixed).

I met with each woman twice: the first interview, wherein I asked the participant to tell me her school story, was semistructured. The second meeting, also a semistructured interview, consisted of the initial question “What came up for you after our first interview session?” followed by clarifying questions and more specific inquiries related to school culture, being a girl in school, and the popular culture and historical contexts related to each participant’s narrative. “What was it like to be a girl in school?” “What movies, books, songs, or television shows were significant during your schooling experience?” “How would your teachers describe you?” “How would your friends describe you?” “How would you describe yourself during these years?” Each interview lasted approximately two hours. I personally transcribed all of the interviews.

I asked the participants to tell me their school stories between kindergarten and 12th grade because of the rich identity formation that occurs during this time. It should be noted that not all of my participants graduated from high school. In those cases, they narrated their school stories up until the grade or age at which they were expelled or dropped out.
**Data Analysis**

Thematic narrative analysis examines how participants make sense of their personal experiences in relation to historically and culturally specific discourses and how these narratives draw on, resist, and/or influence dominant discourses related to gender and schooling (Luttrell, 1997; Weiler, 2001). The narratives I have collected are indescribably rich and deeply layered. It has been a project unto itself to determine how best to analyze this data—although “data” does not begin to describe this collection. I chose to do a thematic analysis to collect the dominant discourses shared among the majority of the narratives. Additionally, I selected three participants as case studies. I use the narratives of these chosen participants to dive deeper into subject matter that is either missing in current discourse or that exemplifies current discourse surrounding girls and young women and schooling.

In Alcoholics Anonymous or any other 12-step program, community is built around the cocreated activity of story sharing and bearing witness. The narratives in this study are powerful, not just in what is told but in how it is told. My hope is that these narratives act as a model for building narrative communities within—but not limited to—schooling structures. It is my greatest wish that out of this research comes another way of knowing students—specifically, girls and young women—that extends beyond a first-day-of-school questionnaire or a rigorous placement exam. These narratives have become much more than a snowball sample of women between the ages of 18 and 85 years old. These narratives are the stories of girls in school right now: the girl who is “just one of the boys”; the girl who desperately wants positive attention from her teachers because she is not getting it at home; the girl who has difficulty sitting still because, well, she needs to move around, and that need goes unhonored until she drops out at 16
because she found people who did understand her—her first gang; the girl who was raped at 13 and juggled keeping her rape a secret while also attempting to stay on the honor roll.

These narratives are about the archetypal Girl. They are stories that need to be told and retold to classrooms of students, to inform healthy conversations about rape, incest, and the right to say no as well as about school culture and the hidden curriculum of what is taught in the classrooms. Whether they refer to a private school, religious school, public school, or boarding school, there are lessons to learn from these women’s narratives.
Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Constructions of Gender in Schools

Gender and Education

When I got to sixth grade I wanted to play football. Umm and they were like, “What do you want to do?” You know, you had extracurricular activities—two electives—and I wanted to play football. And you know I—they did the talk with me that you know, “You’re a girl, boys play football . . .” and I think the nice way they said it was that the boys’ hands might be too friendly. Something really weird like that, something I’m even uncomfortable saying now. Like it’s just bizarre to me that that’s how you would . . . and so uh, I couldn’t play football. (Anna, personal interview)

Historically, socially, institutionally, boys and girls are situated in gendered niches that define their sexes from birth. From color schemes to gendered expectations of what children are told they can be when they grow up, these societal constructs are archaic and stigmatizing. Judith Butler (1990) highlights Monique Wittig’s depiction of the heterosexual matrix as an example of the one-dimensionality of how sex and gender, respectively, are (re)produced in society.

Current published research tends to reify gendered binaries, as well, focusing on friendships, relationships, romantic interests, and teen pregnancy in regard to problems that girls in school face and aggression and incarceration in regard to problems that boys in school face (Cullinan, 2004; Rice & Yen, 2010; Underwood, 2003). Just shortly prior to this writing, The New York Times released an article entitled “Why teenage girls roll their eyes” (Damour, 2016). This is problematic within academic research because it irresponsibly actualizes feminine and masculine ideologies and further instantiates gendered discourses, undermining the prescient
work of the feminist scholars who have carved and continue to carve a space to challenge said discourses.

Femininity and sexuality have historically been conflated, describing and ascribing various typologies to women, particularly women of color (Collins, 2010; Davis, 1990). These ascriptions have been discussed by many feminist scholars and prove to be invaluable to an understanding of the experiences of young women of color. Caldwell (2007), echoing critical race and feminist scholars, asserts that Black women are sexualized more often than their White peers; unequal attention is given to their physical appearance, particularly their hair and skin, and their social skills are assessed more readily than their academic achievement. The White patriarchal lens is deeply rooted in sites of teaching and learning, even as it applies to (dis)abilities. To pretend otherwise contributes to the fetishization of the bodies of young women of color, the villainization of their behavior in schools, and the continued dominance of White, patriarchal ideologies of what it means to be a “good girl.”

The bind between the invisible “good” and the visible “bad” girl is a stratum of oxymorons; the invisible (“good”) girl, who refrains from expressing any emotion (the girl in the back of the classroom), runs the risk of being overlooked for the help that she might need (socially and academically), while the attention paid to the visible (“bad”) girl is negative, thus potentially overlooking the help that she too might need while simultaneously villainizing her. Through film, television, advertising, music lyrics, and political movements, women are barraged with structures that define “good” us from “bad” not us. The invisible girl is a good girl. She doesn’t require a lot of attention in class. She follows the rules without questioning them. She doesn’t express “too much” sadness or anger. The visible girl demands attention. She is emotive, assertive, aggressive, opinionated, and confident. She questions the rules. She might
even disobey them! The manifestation of good and bad, invisible and visible, in schools is perpetuated by the archaic standards used to label and categorize girls.

Echoing the gendered binary that frames young men and women both in and outside of the classroom, Yuval-Davis (1993, p.83) states, “With uncanny regularity, girls confide frustration when their attempts at truth telling are rebuffed and punished.” Cohen (1993) posits that women who are confident, who brag, who are assertive, and who fight are often labeled “bitchy,” “frigid,” “castrating,” or “aggressive.” These qualities are not viewed as assets; they are considered inappropriate. A young Latina woman describing an antagonistic conversation with her teacher states, “I’m trying to tell the truth but they think I’m being a bitch” (Cohen, 1993, p. 189). Yuval-Davis asserts that these girls struggle with being honest about their frustration for fear of being seen as a “bitch.” Assertiveness and truth telling in (but not limited to) school are identities that many young women internalize and pathologize to be negative rather than empowering.

The work of Bloom and Owen (2002) addresses gendered research and practice in the criminal justice system. The authors trouble dominant theories of crime, which they posit are androcentric in nature, and therefore the theoretical “reasoning” describing the differences in why men and women are incarcerated is gendered as well. Historically, gendered theories about criminality have ranged from biological to psychological and from economic to social. Social and cultural theories have typically been applied to men, while individual and pathological explanations have been applied to women (Belknap, 2001; Chesney-Lind, 1997). The research conducted by Owens et al. (2001) echoes the gendered and pathological explanations as to why women join gangs, asserting that female gang members need to confirm a sense of belonging and acceptance within a social group, whereas male gang members join due to peer pressure and the
need to claim their masculinity. These gendered explanations between boys’ and girls’ intentions in joining gangs is based on historical ideologies, which surmise that young girls are influenced by their emotions, while young boys are influenced by the need to prove their masculinity.

Pollock (1998) found that, until recently, most criminology theory ignored the dynamics of race and class and how these factors intermix with gender to influence criminal behavior patterns. She argues that it has been commonly believed that adding gender to these analytic variables “tended to complicate the theory” and that they “were better left out” (Pollock, 1999, p. 123). Due to this lack of attention, Belknap (2001) has called the female offender “the invisible woman.”

Research reveals that African American and Latina women have a stronger sense of self than White women and that they attribute their high levels of confidence to a sense of independence, which is modeled and taught in their social and familial communities (Caldwell, 2007; Evans, 1992; Morris, 2005; Robinson, 2007). Independence in women is a quality that challenges norms both inside and outside the confines of a school building, particularly within marginalized communities. As Anyon (1997, 2005) illuminates, students from low-income families are less likely to be rewarded in school for thinking independently than are students from middle- to upper-class families. Not only are they less likely to be rewarded, they are more likely to be discouraged from thinking or acting independently by their teachers. This discouragement is problematic on many levels, but it becomes especially problematic for young women and even more problematic for young women of color.

In public schools serving low-income students, the manifestations of independence in the “wrong” classroom could just as easily be (mis)labeled “apathy towards her education” or “oppositional defiance” (Anyon, 1989). In a school serving middle- to upper-class students, the
demonstration of independence is more likely to be viewed as a strength; someone who is independent or who thinks independently is less likely to be seen as a threat than as someone with a strong sense of self.

The conditions of how a female student’s independence might be (mis)understood are layered. Many White teachers working in low-income schools too easily translate independence as apathy or defiance. In turn, women of color face a double bind: they are punished for modeling inappropriate behavior that attracts attention, making them hypervisible, or they attract attention through their invisibility, which is (mis)interpreted as apathy, as in, “That girl doesn’t talk to anyone and doesn’t care about her grades or school.” Sometimes, as is evident from the dearth of available literature and research, they fail to attract any attention at all. The “angry Black woman” (Collins, 1990, 1998; McNamara, Tempenis, & Walton, 1999) isn’t angry until she models inappropriate behavior, based on White, patriarchal standards. Expressing anger as a woman earns her the label of a bitch; expressing anger as a Black woman in a White society warrants ostracism and further othering by way of villainization. This double bind is intensified through the dominant discourse that White, middle-class women are the ideal, acceptable model in school (Fordham, 1993), and as Fine and Weis (1998) assert, “equal education does not translate across race/ethnicity and gender into equal outcomes” (p. 134). The experiences of these women within the special education framework—and specifically women who have been labeled as having emotional or behavioral (dis)abilities—are absent from educators’ conversations addressing the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, and ability (Ferri & Connor, 2010; Garland-Thompson, 2005).
Troubled Girls are Overly Aggressive or Too Masculine

Historical discourses posit that boys are aggressive by nature, a characteristic that goes unquestioned while also remaining punishable. Girls, on the other hand, are denied their aggression as a natural emotion, leading to hastier, more severe punishments for the same aggressive actions asserted by their male peers (Boyle, 1999; Feld, 2009). In her research working extensively with young women between the ages of 10 and 18, Rachel Simmons brings to the fore conversations about bullying and what it means to be a woman (2002). According to a group of 28 young women, ages 13–18, the “non-ideal girl is mean, opinionated and pushy . . . unhappy and insecure . . . she is moody and hard to get along with; she doesn’t blend in” (126). Researchers similarly describe young women who “act like their male peers” by exhibiting physical and verbal aggression and are marginalized (Adler & Adler, 1995; Josephs & Lunde, 2012; Mitchell, 2012). In her 2003 publication Social Aggression Among Girls, Underwood notes that while both sexes experience anger, women tend to juggle expectations to act “ladylike” and “feminine,” thus deflecting their external expression of such “unladylike” features like anger and outspokenness. Pathologizing opinionated, insecure, and moody women, framing them as not blending in (or, rather, standing out) is consistent with the diagnostic explanations of the qualities of a “troubled” young woman both in and out of school. If the aforementioned qualities of the nonideal girl inform one of many discourses about what it means to be “troubled,” then it makes sense that young women end up in specialized classrooms—isolated from their “normal” peers and (un)consciously punished for exhibiting “unladylike” qualities.

Troubled Girls Are Overly Emotive or Too Emotional

After assigning my graduate students an article about a math literacy program that incorporated journaling as a tool to make math less exclusionary to students, the majority of
whom were girls (Reid & Roberts, 2006), I asked them to reflect on the ways in which they engage with their students based on their sex. Almost all of the graduate students expressed a low tolerance for the girls in their classroom, asserting that they “couldn’t handle” the “whiny” behavior or their frequent crying when they didn’t understand the content (Bjork, journal entry, 2012). The research of Rudolph (2002) and Zahn-Waxler et al. (1998) posits that middle school girls are unresearchable because “that” population is challenging to work with due to their “intense emotional states.” Teachers and scholars alike seem deterred by the emotive qualities ascribed to young women, which impedes new research regarding marginalized (female) populations.

The research of Cullinan, Obsorne, et al. (2004) indicates that the majority of elementary school girls who were characterized with an emotional disturbance (E.D.) label qualified under the “fear and physical symptoms” subsection as defined through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These qualifications are imprecise and ill-defined and are reflective of the individual subjective view of what it means to be “in fear” or “afraid.” Further, they reinforce the hyperattention that is paid to women’s physical bodies. To determine that fear and physical symptoms are symptomatic of young women with E.D. is to conform to the historical discourses that women’s bodies are to be discussed freely, as unagentic vessels and symbols of a “fragile” emotional state. Based on the Scale for Assessing Emotional Disturbance (SAED), the authors determined that the participants qualified under this category because they exhibited anxiety, worry, and tension. In line with my graduate students’ admissions of being annoyed with and less likely to engage with girls because of their emotional states, the research of Galen and Underwood (1997) suggests that research focusing on young women is challenging due to their unpredictable and emotive states at any given point.
Research attempting to explain these emotional “issues” addresses the challenge for young women of building and maintaining friendships, low self-esteem, and social exclusion within friend circles, leading to potential aggressive behavior toward their peers and teachers and an overall state of social aggression (Galen & Underwood, 1997). The authors posit that such issues might lead to direct forms of “social rejection, leading to negative facial expressions or body movements, slanderous rumors and friendship manipulation” (p. 593). Again, the authors pay attention to the physical bodies of these “troubled” young girls while also focusing on gendered interests that are ascribed to women: friendships, self-esteem, and socialization within friend circles. When these ascriptions are challenged, it signifies to outsiders that something is wrong with the girls. These ascriptions, which echo the aforementioned social, institutional, and historical constructs of (anti)femininity, are so embedded in gendered ideologies, it is easy to read available research about gender disparities without critically analyzing the lens of the researcher himself.

These implicit gendered assumptions about troubled girls within academia perpetuate the double bind “troubled” young women face in special education and in society at large. These assumptions acknowledge the existence of girls in special education classrooms but do not challenge the gendered ideologies that inform their experiences and others’ “diagnoses” of them, framing how school culture (mis)understands, (mis)treats, and (mis)diagnoses the “troubled” girl.

**Troubled Girls are Invisible/Hypervisible**

Rice and Yen (2010) posit that the oppression of African American women is visible and palpable, yet the women themselves and their needs remain invisible. The impasse of visibility/invisibility for young women in special education sparks my curiosity and speaks to the
marriage between the social constructions of gender and dis/ability. Further, it speaks to the structural domains of power within schools (and other institutions) that (re)organize and (re)produce the subordination-through-categorization of young women as determined through the hegemonic, patriarchal lens under which “abnormal,” “troubled,” and “disturbed” are defined.

In their research on sex roles and education, Raymond and Benbow (1986) suggest that gender identity is developed in the family and reinforced in the school system. The attitudes, values, and expectations that children develop for themselves are tied to their perceptions of themselves as male or as female and are part of their sex role identification. This identification, in turn, is seen ultimately to influence children’s school performance, most likely in an indirect fashion: gender identity influences social behavior (e.g., sitting still and paying attention), which is interpreted and evaluated by teachers and by others and thus influences the grades given. In this manner, many researchers link sex role identification to school performance. I disagree with this position. I think the point here is not about school performance so much as the heteronormative structures that impede school performance. This is about the ways in which school as an institution is another site for creating gendered norms. The figured world of home and the figured world of school are both sites of heteronorming (and therefore othering and shaming).

**Heteronormativity (in Schools)**

Heteronormativity is a way of being in the world that assumes the superiority of heterosexuality and, therefore, the inferiority of homosexuality, bisexuality, and questioning sexualities. It assumes that heterosexuality is normal and that therefore anyone who does not identify as heterosexual is abnormal. When heterosexuality is understood as the norm, the act of
being straight avoids criticism, which allows it to be invisible yet dominant. This is a dangerous combination. As Atkinson and Depalma (2008) state, “heteronormativity is a tautology that explains things must be this way because that’s the way they are” (p. 27). Organized religions have invisibly yet powerfully wielded heteronormativity to punish and proclaim deviant those who do not identify as straight. It is the same invisible, dangerous power that informs the GOP agenda to deny equal marriage rights to same-sex couples.


is a political institution which systematically works to the disadvantage of all women . . .

the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of/or racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness. (p. 313)

The institution of school is a site where heteronormative structures are unquestioned and reified. “From the time they enter school, students are systemically calibrated with ‘normal’ characterizations of one of the two gender assignments, male or female” (Blackburn & Smith, 2010, p. 627). From strict gender roles (bathroom signs, boys and girls separated into single-sex lines and groups) to requiring core bodies of literature that favor heterosexuality (Romeo and Juliet, The Great Gatsby) to discourses that claim “boys will be boys” and “girls will be girls,” the institution of heterosexuality is alive and thriving in schools that are populated with more and more students who do not relate or identify with the gendered boundaries with which they are
positioned. Gendered roles for teachers and administrators mirror the patriarchal hierarchy, typically placing (white) male math and science teachers in classrooms, as well as advancing (white) male teachers to positions of authority such as school dean or assistant principal. Pinar (1994) posits that all schooling is a “gender ceremony that compels heterosexuality” (p. 176).

In the figured world of schooling, “the absence of homosexuality reinforces the hegemony of heterosexuality as well as the constant re-inscription of heterosexuality,” such as photographs of opposite-sex partners decorating a teacher’s desk or (prior to the passage of the Marriage Equality Act, 2015) donning a wedding band on one’s ring finger (Evans, 1999). The heterosexual matrix “designates the grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” (Butler, 1998, p. 151). Thus, the figured world of schooling is a space where heteronormative assumptions are both silently enacted and publicly performed, othering the bodies (and spirits and minds) that do not fit into that matrix while projecting gendered expectations on girls and young women at large.

The Hidden Curriculum

In the latter decades of the 19th century, sociologists began to direct critical attention toward understanding the impact of social structures on individual behavior and the overt and covert subjective meanings individuals attribute to their own and others’ social actions. Later, social scientists began to explore how some behaviors became popularized or normalized, tracing the relative impact of formal versus informal social norms and the pivotal role played by social relationships in the formation of group norms and culture. These lines of inquiry led to work in the 1940s and ’50s on how professional institutions such as medicine were both formally and informally organized, including the need to differentiate between the curriculum on paper and something academics were beginning to label the “informal curriculum.” It would be well
into the 1960s, however, before the term “hidden curriculum” would make its first appearance (Martimianakis et al., 2015).

Allan Ornstein (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1993) defines the hidden curriculum as “behaviors and attitudes conveyed in classrooms and schools that often go unnoticed and unmentioned . . . it is best illustrated in the sexual roles and ethnic strategies that are conveyed in textbooks and . . . in the student-student and student-teacher interactions” (p. 369). Teachers who ask their female students if they have a boyfriend and students who use the term “gay” as a synonym for “weird” or “dumb” are committing microaggressions informed by the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity. The hidden privileging of heterosexuality reinforces and justifies the absence or otherness of homosexuality.

The hidden curriculum of heteronormativity is omnipresent. That is, it is not limited to the figured world of school, even though this is the predominant site to which the participants of this project refer. The hidden curriculum of heteronormativity is embedded in both tacit and explicit messages from teachers, administrators, peers, and family members. From passive-aggressive comments about what someone is wearing to abusive comments that negate the dreams of an aspiring athlete, the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity is conveyed to children and adolescents through everyday rituals within the figured world of school. The hidden curriculum of heteronormativity is composed of but not limited to systematic belief systems that favor (the experiences of) men over women and boys over girls; colonialist, racist systems of oppression that favor the histories of white men and boys over the historically subaltern histories of nonwhite women and girls; the normalization of rape and rape culture; and the stigmatization of nonstraight, nonwhite, non-male-identifying people.
Texts imbued in the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity continue to teach history as *his* story, thus negating the experiences of *her* stories, *their* stories, and *our* stories as the status-quo outliers. At the very least, these texts (digital, visual, spoken discourses) are exclusionary to those whose stories they do not encompass. At worst, these situated texts are spirit-murderous,² shaming, blaming, and oppressive words that are spoken and taught, positioning young women and girls as negotiators of their worth, intelligence, and belongingness. Girls and young women learn at an early age how to make physical space for themselves in classrooms that do not contain images that represent them in race, ethnicity, class, gender performance, or sexuality, but it is at a cost. If they attempt to make space for themselves, they must do it delicately; to create too much of a stir is costly to a young woman’s reputation as a “good” student, daughter, sister, or community member. To create too little of a stir means that she is not speaking up for herself, is a pushover, and does not have the “strength” that it takes to survive within the figured world of school and beyond.

Embedded within the hidden curriculum is also the “null curriculum,” or that which is not explicitly stated or enacted. The null curriculum is invisible but attends to embedded assumptions (about normality and heteronormativity). The null curriculum is an “absence strategy” (Evans, 1999) that applies to both text and body. The absence of LGBTQ literature used in classrooms, for example in health education classrooms when discussing sexual reproduction, contributes to the heteronormative lineage that informs the hidden curriculum. The absence of LGBTQ educators perpetuates the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity, assigning sexed and gendered roles.

² The term *spirit murder* was first used in Patricia L. Williams’s *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: The Diary of a Law Professor* (1991), wherein Williams defines spirit murder in terms of private and public racism. The opposite of spirit murder is spirit affirmation; these dichotomous definitions engage a similar perspective that includes but isn’t limited to the deleterious effects of homophobia, sexism, and classism as well as racism among the participants of this project.
One semester, two of my master’s students—one male, one female, both identifying as straight—presented what they thought was a witty and different way to teach sex ed to their inclusive education classes. In their description of how babies are created, they began by explaining that boys had sperm and girls had eggs, and it takes a boy and a girl to create a baby. Another student interrupted, exclaiming, “All boys don’t have sperm and all girls don’t have eggs,” a statement that was relieving to hear as I, a self-identified lesbian who was three months pregnant, struggled with their heteronormative language. I immediately thought, “What if my child were in their sex ed class? He would immediately feel othered, since he was created without the help of a physical man.” What ensued was a fruitful but difficult conversation where I expressed my concern about their languaging, introducing the hidden curriculum to them. As I and two other students reflected their language back to them, I watched the students who were presenting slip into a sea of discomfort, blushing and shifting gears from giddy to defeated, anxious to crawl back to their seats. What I witnessed that night and what stuck with me was layered: on the one hand, I trusted that the students in this class learned something that was not written in my lesson plan for that night but was the most important thing they could have learned; I also realized that I experienced guilt for “schooling them” on their heteronormative assumptions. The guilt, I realized, is a part of my own unteaching of the heteronormative agenda, which continues to be normalized and a part of the dominant discourse, until it is not.

The discourse around the securing of a rigid, monolithic heterosexual identity establishes homosexuality as its rigid, monolithic opposite. Such a relation can be secured in what Kristeva (1982) called “abjection.” Kristeva argues that the very definition of a coherent identity is based on the existence of an Other Whom I Am Not. Paradoxically, the Other that I despise and repudiate must be defined in order for me to establish myself against
it—this is the abject. Thus homosexuality is heterosexuality’s necessary abject. The hyper value of heterosexuality depends on the repudiation of homosexuality. (Evans, 1999, p. 9).

With abjection, “difference” is thus read as “horrid,” “dangerous,” and “sick,” which is one of the discourses around queerness in school. Such violence against queer people can be analyzed within the context of abjection. If the Other is posted as disgusting, dirty, and vile, then to act out against the Other—even to destroy the Other—is to purify the self” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 17). This is because the Other is made by projecting what I loathe about myself onto someone else; so to thrash that badness in myself or Other is cathartic, particularly because the abject is close to me rather than some distant Other.

If heterosexuality is read as vulnerable, then the way to secure its strength as something good and right is as the opposite of something sick and bad. Therefore, homosexuality is “permitted to exist but not be culturally validated in any way.” (Kristeva in Evans, 1999, p. 169)

When a queer person comes out, she is actively speaking and defining herself against and troubling the norm. Heterosexuality is a presumably shared experience. Going to school dances, referring to a homecoming king and queen, and mentioning boyfriends, girlfriends, or spouses are examples of language that is used to reinscribe heterosexism and that “denies power and historicized relations of a straight person in relation to a queer person” (Evans, 2014, p. 11). When this happens, a queer person can have the experience of being “doubly conscious” (DuBois, 1903) of the conflicts in her positionings. As I observed the sex ed lesson taught by those two master’s students, I felt doubly conscious of my positioning as Other to the norm of heterosexuality. It is a paradoxical feeling of being both hypervisible (upon correcting them) and
invisible (before correcting them) as they “taught” us. It becomes the queer person’s sole responsibility to unsettle heteronormative notions, which requires energy and emotional work (Hochschild, 1983).

I purport that this invisibility/hypervisibility is specific to women and girls, regardless of their sexual identity. As my research suggests, there are layers of invisibility/hypervisibility in being a woman; if one adds a layer of being a gay (poor, Brown-skinned) woman, then there are more layers to unpack, and it is through this layer of double consciousness, as it relates to the positioning of queer women, gender-nonconforming women, and girls in school. This double consciousness of invisibility/hypervisibility also relates to identity formation within the figured world of school if one is denied a language for and access to the self through the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity.

**Figured Worlds**

Figured worlds have four characteristics: they are historical worlds people are recruited into or willingly volunteer to be a part of; they are social structures, wherein participant positionality matters; they are socially organized and (re)produced; and they are peopled by familiar social types, developed by the particular figured world’s activity (Holland et al., 1998, p. 41). Alcoholics Anonymous and school, respectively, are figured worlds that possess the aforementioned characteristics: In order to be a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, one must willingly admit to being powerless over alcohol; attending school requires a legally binding willingness until the age of 18; both Alcoholics Anonymous and school are social structures with varying participant involvement. In AA, while there is no one in charge, there are rotating service positions that allow for more or less engagement and leadership positions. In school, there is a power dynamic, with the principal holding the most power, followed by the teachers,
followed by the students with the least amount of power. Both AA and school are socially organized and (re)produced; AA meetings and school buildings abound, due to the quickly growing populations of alcoholics and children, respectively. The figured world of AA is peopled by self-identifying alcoholics, who gather together to share their experience, strength, and hope\(^3\) with each other. The figured world of school is peopled with teachers, administrators, and students, whose activities range from reprimanding to nurturing and from teaching to learning.

A figured world is a socially and culturally constructed “realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). In the figured world of AA, for example, the particular characters who are recognized are the nondrinking alcoholic and the drinking nonalcoholic. These characters represent the present and past identities of the members of AA. In the figured world of school, the actors are teachers, administrators, and—in the case of my participants—women living under the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity, which fostered the belief system that straight, heteronormative identities are valued over nonstraight, queer identities.

These worlds are “socio-historic, contrived interpretations or imaginations that mediate behavior and so, from the perspective of heuristic development, inform participants’ outlooks” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 53). Thus, figured worlds contribute to the identity formation of those participating in such a world. In the figured world of AA, participants enter or are recruited into the program, unsure of the meeting format, the language used, including the humor, which can be off-putting to a newcomer. A recovering alcoholic in AA who tells her story might find

\(^3\) An expression used and coined in Alcoholics Anonymous, which describes the narrative approach used to carry the message of alcoholism and recovery to a fellow alcoholic.
humor in the insane behavior and choices made during drinking days; to a newcomer, this might not be humorous. Rather, the insanity of the disease of alcoholism might be too new and too relatable to be humorous to the newcomer. But over time, the newcomer learns by listening and observing that while the disease of alcoholism is deadly and destructive, within the figured world of AA, it is also important to laugh at oneself as a changed person. Similarly, within the figured world of school, the participants of this project formed their identities in response to and against the dominant discourse, which favored—via the hidden curriculum—heteronormativity.

Figured worlds take shape within and grant shape to the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances, and artifacts. A figured world is peopled by the figures, characters, and types who carry out its tasks and who also have styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it. (Holland et al., 1998, p. 51)

The figured world of AA is peopled with alcoholics of varying sober time, from 24 hours to multiple years. The AA discourse is one that is modeled and shared among the members of its community, with the intention to carry the message to other self-identifying alcoholics that they are not alone in their disease. The figured world of school is peopled with administrators, teachers, and students. These characters cocreate their world through daily activities, such as homework, class work, and recess. The discourses created and reproduced within the figured world of schooling include but are not limited to “the mean student,” “the good student,” “the bad student,” “the nice teacher,” “the mean teacher,” and so forth.

The link between identity formation and activity—in this case, the activity of self-authoring through narratives about schooling and narratives about recovery, respectively—is foundational in Holland et al.’s (1998) research on figured worlds. Lave and Wenger (1991)
acknowledge that “communities of practice” (re)produce working groups (figured worlds) as power/knowledge relationships. Synonymous to Foucault’s (1978) interpretation that knowledge cannot be divorced from position, and position is married to knowledge, Lave and Wenger’s “communities of practice” parallel the belief that identity formation is birthed through a similar power/knowledge dynamic through participation in activities that are organized through figured worlds.

As participants in figured worlds attempt to author their experiences, they engage in “social experimentation as well as social reproduction” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 238). In short, people come to know themselves in relation to their work with others. Within the figured world of school, there is inevitably a memorable story about a specific teacher who made an impact either in a positive or negative way. Within the figured world of AA, there is the narrative template of the alcoholic story, which members learn and use to (re)create their own alcoholic narrative over time. “Agency lies in the improvisations that people create in response to particular situations” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 279). It is through this agentic practice of narrative and self-authoring that identities are (re)formed and a figured world is (re)imagined. For participants in AA, this might look and sound like a new AA member observing and listening to how narratives are told, gradually picking up on the language from more seasoned AA members, digesting and using phrases that are an integrated part of the AA discourse, eventually adopting said phrases as their own, shaping and reshaping their evolving identity from a drinking nonalcoholic to a nondrinking alcoholic.

A figured world is “a landscape of objectified meanings, joint activities, and structures of privilege and influence—all partly contingent upon and partly independent of other figured worlds, and larger societal and trans-societal forces” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 60). The figured
world of school is (re)produced through a power/knowledge dynamic that is specific to the characters within school (administrators, teachers, students) but is also (re)produced through the figured world of home. The figured world of AA is (re)produced through the activity of self-authoring through a specific narrative template that is learned by listening to other, more seasoned members, as they share their experience, strength, and hope. The figured world of AA is informed by larger societal forces, such as varying drinking culture(s) across the world and medical influences and institutions. These figured worlds provide the loci in which members develop their identities. For drinking nonalcoholics, the figured world of AA becomes a site for participants to identify themselves as nondrinking alcoholics. The figured world of school becomes a site where students identify themselves as “teacher’s pet” (Luttrell, 1993) or, in the case of one of the participants in this study, “a cancer.”

Figured worlds use discourse as a tool to shape and define parameters specific to that figured world. Discourse theory (Foucault, 1969) parallels much of how Holland et al. describe the use of discourse within the creating of figured worlds. Specifically, it reflects the belief that discourses and their categories originate outside their performers and are imposed upon people, through recurrent institutional treatments and within interaction, to the point that they become self-administered. Categories carry an association to those who use them and are subject to them—an association with power. (Holland et al., 1998, p. 62)

The discourse specific to the figured world of AA favors self-identification as an alcoholic. Members introduce themselves before saying, “Hello. My name is ______, and I am an alcoholic.” Outside of the figured world of AA, this introduction of oneself would be frowned on, judged, or criticized. But within the figured world of AA the discourse around self-identifying with the disease of alcoholism is normalized. The discourse surrounding school is
similarly layered and dependent on an infinite number of factors. Specific to this research project, the figured world of school is framed by a heteronormative discourse that shames girls and young women who do not look or act the part of what it means to be a normal girl in school.

**The Figured World of Schooling**

The figured world of schooling is composed of characters, activities, and discourses, all of which are produced and reproduced within the narratives of the women who offered their respective schooling stories for this study. The figured world of schooling for these women include supportive and unsupportive teachers; peer bullies; discourses acknowledging **good** from **bad** and **right** from **wrong**; parallel discourses reflecting heteronormativity and the lack of safety provided to those women who identified as homosexual; rape culture; and classism, racism, and sexism. The figured world of schooling is not about an individual experience but a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or, as Wendy Luttrell names it, a “web of care” that characterizes young people as they engage in unceasing activity to build and strengthen connections with others (Lico & Luttrell, 2001). Vygotsky posits that it is through interpersonal interaction that learning is mediated. Learning, as it is highlighted in this research project, is specific to the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity and the teaching and learning of what it means to be a “good” girl or a “bad” girl, mediated through the relationships between the participants and their family members and teachers over the course of their elementary and high school experiences. Figured worlds, “like activities, are not so much things or objects to be apprehended, as processes or traditions of apprehension which gather us up and give us form as our lives intersect with them” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 41). Within figured worlds, people develop identifications through heuristic work, making sense of the cultural tools of the figured world such as narratives, stock characters, labels, and categories.
The figured world of school can be compared to Lave and Wenger’s *Communities of Practice* (1991), wherein development happens over time, with increasing participation within a particular community. *Communities of practice* reconstruct the practices and productions of working groups as a hierarchical power/knowledge binary (Foucault, 1978). In other words, communities of practice challenge the idea that knowledge cannot be divorced from position and that position is married to knowledge within social groups (Holland et al., 1998, p. 57). The figured world of school is a community peopled with students, coming from their own distinct figured worlds outside of school (e.g., home, church, or foster care). Within their coconstructed figured worlds, students begin to make meaning of themselves as they simultaneously categorize and make meaning of the figured world of school. Specific to the participants of this study, the meaning making that occurred over the course of an approximately 12-year period of formal schooling led many of the women to feel extreme shame (about their sexuality, about their gender performance, about their class status). It is within their figured worlds of schooling that these women’s identities were shaped, reshaped, and deconstructed. Participation in social worlds determined not just what they learned but who they were learning or resistant to become (Wenger, 1999).

The figured world of school exists because figured worlds are peopled by characters from “collective imaginings” (Urrieta, 2007) such as race, gender, and class but also because people’s identities are formed “dialectically and dialogically in them” (Urrieta, 2007). The ways in which the participants of this research project talk about and position themselves within their figured world(s) of school shed light on this dialectical and dialogic formation of self. From issues around sexuality and gender representation to questions about what it means to be a “good” girl, student, and daughter, the figured world of school is the site for the unfolding of myriad layered
identities. These (and other) women’s identities are formed “in the processes of participating in activities organized by [the] figured world” of school (Urrieta, 2007).

Figured worlds are (re)created by (often contentious) work with others (Urrieta, 2007). The figured world of school is positioned around status, influence, and hierarchical relationships. I posit that the work involved in the (re)creations of the figured world of schooling is both intra- and interpersonal, as the women of this study delve into personal explorations of self (as gay, poor, gender-nonconforming, nonwhite, and alcoholic, variously), and work on untangling the threads connecting relationships to family, with teachers and peers, and to the hidden curriculum.

**Identity Formation**

According to Holland et al., identity (re)formation occurs via three contexts within figured worlds: negotiations of positionality, space of authoring, and world making (Urrieta, 2007). Positionality refers to the positions that are given to people within the context of that figured world. For instance, in the figured world of school, some of the positions given are “good student,” “bad student,” “troubled student,” “smart student,” and “special ed student.” Positionality limits the agency of the individual being given any one of these titles. Once given a position, she can either accept, reject, or negotiate what has been assigned to her identity. “Space of authoring” is influenced by Bakhtinian theory (1975), which proposes that people make sense of themselves through many internal dialogues. Self-authoring through the figured world of school looks and sounds like the naming of a position given to a student. For example, it is not uncommon to hear my master’s students claim themselves as something they are not, such as “not a math person” or “not a science person.”

The third context for identity formation within figured worlds is the actual (re)creating of a figured world. Based on Vygotsky’s research on imaginative play, Holland et al. posit that
figured worlds are co-created and re-created based on the use of aforementioned artifacts (like the AA narratives in the figured world of AA), discourses, and acts (such as the gendered discourses that the study’s participants learned from teachers and peers, which in one case prevented Anna, a participant, from playing the drums in band and from playing football instead of house during recess).

**The Figured World of AA**

The figured world of Alcoholics Anonymous is a community where newcomers listen and watch as more seasoned members model what it looks and sounds like to engage within the structures of AA. The figured world of AA has a specific discourse, which is self-identifying and agentic and in which acknowledging that “My name is____, and I am an alcoholic” is the first step in becoming an active member. Transitioning from a drinking nonalcoholic to a nondrinking, self-identifying alcoholic is one of the first steps in being a part of the figured world of AA. The narrative template of AA is also a learned/observed skill, which, as Lave and Wenger (1991) state, is adopted over time with gradual participation. The figured world of AA is peopled with self-identifying nondrinking alcoholics who teach and learn from one another how to get sober and stay sober, one day at a time. Unlike the figured world of school, the figured world of AA is not hierarchical. There are no positions of power that demarcate those in power (teachers) from those without power (students). In AA, there are service positions, such as the AA group chair, secretary, and treasurer, but individuals in these positions hold no more power than a non-service-position-holding member does. Service positions are voluntary and are voted on every three to six months, in a rotating format, so that everyone may have a chance to be of service.
The figured world of AA is, like all figured worlds, a place where people “figure” who they are and where they develop new identities (Urrieta, 2007). The alcoholic identity is defined by drinking. Within the figured world of AA, an awareness of powerlessness over alcohol leads to the acceptance of a new identity, which requires a reformulation of self-perception. Instead of one’s neurosis leading to drinking, the drinking is seen as causing the neurosis. The personal story is a structured narrative for perpetuating this figured world, which redefines the world in terms of alcohol (Holland et al., 1998). It is through this personal narrative that alcoholics within the figured world of Alcoholics Anonymous share their *experience, strength, and hope* with each other and bear witness to one another. It is within this mediation of speaking, listening, and engaging that identities are shaped and reshaped, much like in the figured world of school.

The cultural artifacts of life stories and poker chips play a significant role in the figured world of AA. Poker chips, when used outside the figured world of AA, have a completely different meaning from when they are used within the figured world of AA. Outside of AA, poker chips are symbols that represent monetary value, typically used in gambling and entertainment. Inside AA, however, the different-colored poker chips (also known as medallions or coins) represent various amounts of time clean and sober: one day, 30 days, 60 days, 90 days, six months, one year, two years, and so forth. The narrative template or life story that is told within the figured world of AA is produced “to be used as a part of, and in relation to, intentional human actions” specific to AA (Holland et al., 1998, p. 61). The template includes a member’s “experience, strength and hope,” which in AA means each person’s life story includes her experience of what her life was like before she came into the rooms of AA, the strength she found within herself and among the community of other members, and the hope of a better life in sobriety. Outside of AA, the “life story” could (and does) mean myriad potential narratives, but
on the inside, members of the figured world of AA listen and learn, through their interactions and observations with one another, how to craft the life story. Reminiscent of Foucault’s discourse theory (1969), the cultural artifacts that comprise the figured world of AA originate “outside their performers and are imposed upon people, through recurrent institutional treatments and within interaction, to the point that they become self-administered” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 62). In the figured world of AA, new members learn to detach their previous understandings of “life story” and “poker chip” so that they can react and interact with these artifacts and to themselves as figured in this world.

The Figured World of Home

The figured world of home, as it relates to the participants in this study, includes characters that extend beyond parents or guardians and siblings to nonrelatives such as childhood friends and/or sexual abusers—people who are not directly associated with the participants’ figured worlds of schooling. The figured world of home, as the participants narrate their schooling stories, is constructed around stories and people outside of the physical boundaries of school. However, the experiences within the figured world of home greatly impact the participants’ figured world of school and vice versa. Only rarely did a participant author herself through her figured world of school without acknowledging what was happening in her figured world of home. Mothers (figured world of home) and teachers (figured world of school) are in conversation with each other; artifacts located within the figured world of school (a trumpet, football games) represent personal struggles at home (the in/ability to just be a kid, gender identity).
Rationale

There are multiple purposes for collecting the schooling narratives of women in AA. For one, Alcoholics Anonymous is a figured world that has been well documented by Holland et al. (1998) and that takes up and highlights identity formation and discourse in a way that is specific to its own artifacts and characters. There is a narrative template that is a part of the discourse of the figured world of AA and that I wanted to explore outside of its typical environment. That is, I wondered what the narrative template of AA would sound like when members of one figured world (AA) authored themselves within a narrative unrelated to alcoholism and of a different figured world (school). How, if it all, would the narratives, identities, and discourses intersect, and to what degree would one figured world inform another?

Interviewing women in AA about their schooling experiences seemed appropriate due to the frequent references to school that I heard when sitting in the rooms of AA, not as a researcher but as a member. Before applying to graduate school, while I worked as a high school teacher for the New York City Department of Education, my attention was piqued by the schooling stories told within the sacred spaces of church basements. I often drifted into thoughts about how I could use the pedagogy of AA to inform my own budding pedagogy as a special education teacher. In fact, I will address in the concluding chapter of this dissertation how the pedagogy of AA—inspired by the overall power of self-reflexive narrative and storytelling—is a praxis that I encourage educators to integrate into their own figured worlds of home and school as a means to engage in empathic teaching and learning.

My decision to look specifically at women, women’s health, sexuality, and the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity is more difficult to pinpoint, not because it is difficult but because my impulse is to retort: Why not? Or: There are only so many people who are going to
do this work because women, even in the year 2017, are still a marginalized demographic. Women are silenced, sexualized, and villainized for being smart or for being “bad” (mothers, daughters, politicians, teachers, and so on). Conducting this research was a way to create a platform for these narratives to gain breadth and space for both participants and readers to make connections to larger ideas, situated in but not confined to the figured worlds of AA, school, and home. In Alcoholics Anonymous, there is an expression that eventually you will hear your story being told by someone else. My hope is that the schooling stories told in this research will be shared in classrooms across the country, and girls will read and hear their story being told by one of these participants and know that they are not alone.
Chapter 3: Methods

This study examines the educational narratives of women in Alcoholics Anonymous, the discourses they draw on to author their identities, and the education and health policy implications that can be drawn for multiple excluded populations from these narratives. Seeking to unpack the schooling experiences of girls and young women as they author themselves while looking back on and recalling their figured worlds of home and school, this study focuses on the gendered expectations of girls and young women, the role of the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity in their self-authoring and identity formation, and the means of survival, resilience, and hope that they constructed within their difficult figured worlds of home and school. Further, it seeks to unpack how these figured worlds have helped to shape their identities in the past and present and what educators can learn from these women’s experiences that will help inform current education policy. This is a women-centered research project that seeks to highlight the invisible and silenced yet at times hypervisible experiences of girls and women across race, class, age, and sexual identity. The research questions for this project are as follows:

1. How do women in AA narrate their schooling experiences?
2. What discourses do women in AA draw on to author their identities?
3. What are the educational policy implications that can be drawn from the educational narratives?

Data Collection

To collect the participants for this study I told people whom I knew to be in Alcoholics Anonymous about the overview of the project and asked them to share the information with women at the AA meetings they attended. Using this snowball sampling (Browne, 2005; Morgan, 2008) approach, I gave the original group of women my email address for them to
distribute to women who were interested in participating. The qualifications to participate included identifying as a woman and being a current member of Alcoholics Anonymous. I selected the first 20 women who contacted me via email and expressed their interest in participating.

The 20 women lived in the U.S. northeast, although approximately half were natives to the area, one of whom immigrated from Italy when she was a teenager. Their ages ranged from 18 to 85 years old: three participants were between the ages of 18 and 24, five were between the ages of 25 and 35, six were between the ages of 36 and 45, four were between the ages of 46 and 55, and two were between the ages of 60 and 84. Ten of the 20 participants identified as women of color; 18 of the participants graduated from high school, and two were pushed out in the eighth grade. Their length of sobriety varied from one year to 35 years.

I interviewed each participant twice, between 2014 and 2015, for about two and a half hours per interview. Using a semistructured protocol (Seidman, 1991), I focused the first interview around the general lead-in, “Tell me about your schooling experiences from prekindergarten to the 12th grade or whatever the last grade was that you finished.” For most participants, this was enough of a lead-in to get the interview started. I did, however, have backup questions for those participants who needed more guidance. For example, when a participant stopped talking and seemingly came to the end of a thought, I then asked her to “Tell me more about X or Y,” based on the nature of this research project. Most of the interviews took place in the public library closest to the participant. In two cases, the women invited me to their homes because they were unable to drive or take public transportation.

The time between most participants’ first and second interviews did not exceed two weeks. For some, the time in between was no more than a few days. In one instance, a month

4 See Appendix for interview questions.
went by between the first and second interviews, due to the participant’s travel schedule. The second interview began with the question “Did anything come up for you after our initial conversation together that you would like to share with me?” For many participants, this was enough of a lead-in to get the second interview started. When participants simply answered, “No,” I moved on to the next line of questions, which asked them to clarify or explain specific areas that they had talked about in their first interview. I also asked a series of questions related to demographics and the like toward the end of the second interview.\(^5\)

**Data Analysis**

Narratives are personal, political, agentic, and unique to the self/author. Yuval-Davis claims, “Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are and who they are not” (Yuval-Davis in Riessman, 2008). Narratives of identity highlight the fluidity with which one comes to understand the self, in relation to the stories that are recalled—from pivotal to subtle. The narrative template used in Alcoholics Anonymous offers an initial foundation that complements the thematic analysis that I used to code each participant’s interviews.

There is a rich pool of definitions dedicated to the meaning of “narrative” (Riessman, 2008). I am most interested in the definition of a personal narrative, “which encompasses long sections of talk—extended account of lives in context that develop over the course of single or multiple research interviews or therapeutic conversations” (Reissman, 2008, p. 6).

I understand the narratives of these women as meaning-making discourses. My analysis is influenced by Bakhtinian philosophy, wherein identity forming and meaning making are in constant dialogue with language and power (Holquist, 1990). There is no Truth that can be documented past the truths of the young women authoring themselves in the temporality of each

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\(^5\) See Appendix for second set of interview questions.
interview. The participants narrate themselves through multiple lenses; they enter into this project with the prior experience of authoring themselves through narratives about trauma and redemption. I attempt to use their narratives as identity-making stories that “tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)” (Reissman, 2008, pg. 8).

I used a sociological approach to analyze the participants’ narratives inspired by Wendy Luttrell’s (1997) analysis of the ways in which working-class mothers, returning to school to get their GEDs, narrate themselves, as well as Luttrell’s (2003) research examining the identity formation of poor and working-class pregnant girls as they graduate from girlhood to motherhood. Chase (in Luttrell, 2010) describes this approach through the researcher’s interest in the hows and what of storytelling, relying on in-depth interviews about specific topics in the participants’ lives. Through “a range of linguistic practices” the researcher examines “how [the participant] makes sense of personal experience in relation to culturally and historically specific discourses, and how they draw on, resist and/or transform those discourses as they narrate their selves, experiences and realities” (Chase quoted in Luttrell, 2010, p. 217).

I relied on Luttrell’s “good enough” methods as a roadmap for these interviews, honoring invaluable researcher reflexivity, leaving behind “ideal” data and considering what is gained or lost in the interview and analysis process (Luttrell, 2010). My analysis focused on the content and themes in each of the young women’s narratives, which Luttrell (2010) refers to as representations. I am most interested in their “narrative urgency to tell it like it (is)” (Luttrell, 2010, p. 260). That is, what are their stories about school, and how do those big-picture stories create sub-stories about more specific issues than my research seeks to address? The thematic analysis is the method by which I analyzed the narratives of these young women. In the first part of the analysis, I focused on their schooling narratives. In this process, I listened to the richness
of the stories they offered about themselves in school, to understand and see each participant through the school-life-story that she authored. In the next part of the analysis, I focused on the storied stories—the structure, themes, and dominant discourses the young women used to locate and identify themselves within their school-life-stories. What categories and labels shaped who they are and who they are not? Because I am interested in how women’s lives are defined and constrained by issues related to gender and sexuality and the overall role that (hetero)norming informs schooling experiences, I listened and coded specifically for issues around gender, sexuality, the figured worlds of home and school, and sexual violence.

After the first interview with each participant, I wrote a memo on my initial thoughts: what the participant was wearing, the setting, parts of her narrative that stood out to me, and things that came up during the interview that seemed interesting but did not necessarily aid in answering my research questions. I sent these memos to my advisor at the time (Wendy Luttrell) as a means to hold myself accountable and as an entrada into conversation with her about anything she saw as pertinent. The feedback I received from her on my first three memos helped me to see the patterns in my initial analysis that were either insightful or not applicable (read: unrelated to my research questions). After writing the memo, I transcribed the first interview, having recorded the interview on two devices—an iPhone and a hand-held audio recorder. I chose to personally transcribe each interview due to the vulnerability of content coupled with my desire to make an intimate connection with each of the participants’ narratives, which I assumed would help me maximize my data analysis. After transcribing the first interview, I wrote another memo, noting passages related to recurring themes or any other points of pertinence. I then emailed the transcription to the participant for her review and approval (Maxwell, 2013) before we met for the second interview.
After the second interview, like the first interview, I immediately wrote a memo of initial thoughts, observations, and findings. Next, I transcribed the second interview, using deductive coding for themes such as sexuality, gender identity, rape, school, and home. I also coded for recurring inductive themes such as shame. After transcribing the second interview, I sent it to the participant for her review and any final thoughts or comments. None of the participants asked that anything be changed or removed. In fact, many of them admitted during the beginning of the first interview that they did not (want to) read the transcriptions, due to the intensity of what came up during our conversation.

After I coded and transcribed all 40 interviews, I organized the codes and collapsed them into broader codes around heteronormativity, gender performance, sexuality and sexual violence, survival, resilience, and hope and organized the themes within themes as they related to the figured world of home and the figured world of school. I selected three participants whose narratives were richest and most inclusive of the deductive themes.

Validity and Reliability

Because I am a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, there were moments that proved difficult. For instance, I had many sober friends who requested to participate in the study, but I declined because I did not think it was fair to interview those with whom I was most familiar. The snowball sampling method therefore worked in everyone’s favor; interviewing people who had heard about this research project through other members of AA but who were not directly a part of my sober friend group was the most objective way to work around this issue.

It was essential to be mindful of my voice versus those of the participants. Writing memos after each interview and acknowledging when the participant was speaking and self-analyzing versus when I was analyzing the information as presented by the participant became as
crucial as the actual interview itself. Emailing the transcriptions to the participants was a means to fact-check and hold one another accountable for the data collected (Chase, quoted in Luttrell, 2010; Maxwell, 2013).

**Positionality**

Being a member of AA was helpful in the sense that I outed myself to the participants, thus making myself vulnerable in a way, and presented myself from the very beginning of the interview process as somewhat of an insider, speaking the same “language of the heart” (Wilson, 1989). I also outed myself as an educator and a lesbian at some points during the interviewing process, on a case-by-case basis, so as to let participants know that they weren’t alone in their positioning. Because of my affiliation with AA and the feminist lens through which I approach everything, I tried to be incredibly careful and grounded in the participants’ transcripts. Again, writing the memos, sharing my initial thoughts with Dr. Luttrell, and receiving and considering her feedback were crucial parts of my grounded writing and analyzing process.

In addition to identifying as a sober lesbian and member of AA, I also identify as a teacher and an academic. During a few interviews, I became more aware of the latter identity, especially when interviewing participants who had been pushed out of school or, in one case, had invested a great deal of time and money in earning an undergraduate degree at the age of 35. In these moments, I was hyperaware of my positioning and felt that the best thing for me to do was to empathetically allow the participants who were sharing these vulnerable experiences to take the lead in the interview. As an academic and a doctoral student researching the lives of others, I found it challenging to separate my identities or compartmentalize them when listening to and writing about the experiences of some of these women. For instance, in a few memos that I sent to Dr. Luttrell, I admitted to having survivor’s guilt, especially in relation to the issue of
rape. Having never been raped but having been in plenty of situations where it could have been an outcome, listening to the stories of so many of the participants’ experiences being raped proved to be incredibly difficult. There were moments when the participants cried (which I made note of in the transcriptions), and I found myself wondering how much I should get involved. In AA, the most anyone does to support another member as she shares difficult information is offer a tissue or perhaps place a hand on her back to let her know that she is not alone. And so, following those boundaries, I offered tissues and told participants to take their time when speaking about such intense and traumatic experiences.

**Limitations**

This research is not an attempt to unpack the lives of women in AA in a way that connects the disease of alcoholism to traumatic events that occurred within their figured worlds of home and school. I am of the belief that the disease of alcoholism does not manifest from “bad things” happening to the alcoholic. Thus, the stories that I have collected and shared in this dissertation are not meant as generalizations about alcoholics or the disease of alcoholism. I do, however, think that the data—the in-depth narratives of the women who participated in this research—is beneficial for unpacking and creating a discourse around the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity as well as other issues that exist outside of school but that are highlighted in the practices enacted by school (rape culture, misogyny, patriarchal values). I also believe that the narratives collected offer great insight for those who are unfamiliar with the disease of alcoholism as a means to understand the intersections of public health and (public) education.
Chapter 4: Gender Performance, Sexuality, and the Hidden Curriculum of Heteronormativity

Gender Performance

Anna

Figured world of home.

Um. I . . . I don’t think I identified myself as a boy or a girl. I didn’t have that distinction yet. In my house there was no boy or girl, man or woman. In my house . . . I guess that distinction wasn’t really made for me. I mean, I thought I was going to marry my mother and live with my mother forever and just never really defined myself as man or woman, boy or girl. So it was just weird. Very strange.

Anna’s languaging around not identifying as a boy or a girl, based on the fact that “that distinction wasn’t really made for me,” speaks to the lack of agency Anna experienced around her gender identity. As if something so intimate, so personal to one’s identity formation, as identifying as a boy or a girl as not within her control at all, Anna highlighted that whether or not she was a girl or a boy was based on someone outside of her telling her who she was.

Figured world of school.

There was this kid who always made fun of me because I was so tall. And I think he just had a crush on me, and he had a rat-tail, and I hated him because he was like me, you know? He was poor. He was angry. And he was looking for someone to take it out on. I took it out on the football kids. We would literally just nail each other, and I felt great about that, you know? Cuz we’re doing it all to each other, so it’s fine. But he would just lay into me, and he just would never shut up, and then one day I grabbed him in a headlock, and I—I just pounded his head until my hand was swollen and bleeding. [She holds up her hand and balls it into a fist and releases it, looking at her knuckles.]
There is something very poignant about Anna using such strong self-hating language such as “I hated him because he was like me” because what she was saying is that she hated herself, and the reasons for her own self-hatred were that she was poor, angry, and looking to take it out on other people (which she did, by fighting—an activity, similar to football, that troubles the gendered expectations of boys and girls both in and outside of the figured world of school). She wanted to play football and found it therapeutic to “nail” the other football players. It was a way to get out her aggression; it was a way to be physical that did not feel like she was being violated, unlike the violence that she experienced in her figured world of home. It was a way that she could blend in and not be seen as a girl or a boy but as just another football player.

_We moved to Keysville. I mean, it’s the middle of nowhere, and sixth grade came around._

_And I guess up until that point I made really good grades. And um there was a huge shift in middle school, mostly because I got breasts. And I was devastated [laughs]. I was devastated, and I cried, and I had to wear a bra—and I can’t play football, and I felt so betrayed by the world._

Anna’s figured world of (middle) school was deeply informed by puberty and, specifically, getting breasts. Educators and schooling in general need to be more mindful about the patriarchal values that inform the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity that denies girls the safe space to explore their (dis)comfort surrounding physical, sexual, and emotional changes related to puberty. There is still an overwhelming pattern of blaming the victim—that is, blaming adolescent girls for experiencing puberty in a public sphere such as school (Brantlinger, 1993; Finders, 1997; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990; Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988).
Sara

**Figured world of home and school.** When asked how she identifies gender-wise, Sara responded,

*Woman. Only because of the politics, not necessarily sexual identification.*

In her next interview, I asked her to clarify what she meant, to which she replied,

*So, on my date last night, I can identify and feel more like a boy in a lot of ways. More male. More masculine. But my politics is that of women. And that’s the most important thing to me, cuz I feel like I watch this gross imbalance in front of my eyes every single day, and I watched it my entire life. I mean, there was a time period where I did consider transitioning and living as a trans guy in San Francisco, and in the end that’s not what I wanted. I wanted fashion. I wanted to look good in my shirts. But I didn’t want to be a man. And even my gender expression, I don’t want to be a man. Just talk about my dick [she starts to laugh]. Put that in your paper!*

*It’s incredibly important to me to keep working for what I want to protect. Which is to say, little me. I wish somebody could’ve protected me. But they could not! I’m so glad I can smash my titties down. [She says this while laughing.] I believe it’s incredibly important to continue to work to empower women and girls. Um. It’s the most important thing to me—the protection of and the advancement of—we are still so incredibly imbalanced in this world with gender and discrimination that I’m not willing to take my power and move it to the other side. Nor will I ever be.*

Indeed, Sara has committed her adult life and multiple careers to highlighting the detrimental role that misogyny plays in women’s lives via visual art, literature, music, politics, health care, and higher education. It is almost as if she has taken on the identity/role of The Protector as an
adult that so many of the participants in this study adopted during their childhood and adolescent years. Sara’s decision to remain identified as a girl/woman was about power; her decision was a political stance that addressed the historical imbalance of power between men and women.

*My gender was so strange as a kid. I was, like, wanting to be a boy. I wasn’t; I was a girl.*

*And then I was ADD and from a crazy, sexually violent and violent, alcoholic home. Like I found no advantages of being a girl in school. I didn’t have a lot of self-acceptance that I was a girl. So there was that. Everything was challenging.*

In addition to authoring her attention-deficit disorder into her identity—she was, rather than had, ADD—Sara also authored herself as wanting to be a boy, not able to have self-acceptance that she was a girl. Powerfully, in just a few sentences, Sara listed everything in her life that was challenging: her gender identity; the violence, including sexual violence, and alcoholism in her home; having ADD; and not having self-acceptance that she was a girl. While hearing Sara’s description of navigating her figured world of school, an institution that embodies the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity, I was struck with the thought, “Of course everything was challenging.”

*And just as an aside, I start getting crushes on girls. And all the pretty girls were super nice to me when they were alone, and then they would pretend like they didn’t know me when other people were around. But they wanted to hang out with me. When nobody was around they were talking my head off. But also, they would ask me to walk them home from school.*

Sara acknowledged that by the second grade, she had started to have crushes on girls. This memory illustrates Sara’s invisibility/hypervisibility in relation to the characters in her figured world of school. Her peers contributed to her feelings of invisibility through their mercurial
behavior, pretending they did not know Sara when other people were around but asking her to walk them home when they were alone. Sara learned from these interactions that to perform “maleness” as a female was appreciated privately, but when performed publicly, it was a source of discomfort for others that led to further ostracization from her peers.

**Figured world of school.**

*I think it was sixth grade when I got busted in the locker room from other girls wearing boy’s underwear, and the whole locker room erupted. And I just remember people laughing and pointing at me. And it was really intense. I just remember it being really intense and then feeling like gym wasn’t safe, either, which was just like whoa.*

*So sixth grade started, and I became really aware of my gender stuff. I wanted to be good. I really wanted to be good. I was afraid for my life. I was really afraid of what was going to happen. I played a shit ton of basketball. I played on the boys’ basketball team. Like, I was really, really good at sports. And that felt super safe. Like, just put all your energy into that.*

*I knew that I wanted to learn stuff. And I didn’t want to be bad. And I wanted to be like the other kids. And I wanted to be—figure out how to be a girl. And it just felt fake in a lot of ways. I just faked it.*

Many of the participants (Anna and Beth included) talked about their engagement in sports and how, for so many of them, sports were their saving grace. In this passage, Sara narrated a range of emotions and wishes, from being afraid for her life to wanting to “be good,” along with becoming aware of her “gender stuff” in the sixth grade. This “gender stuff” speaks to Sara’s identification as a girl politically but as a boy physically. It is significant to note that Sara, who identified more with boys on a physical level, authored her experience within her figured world.
of school during this specific time period as one where she felt “super safe.” Playing basketball with the boys provided for her a sense of safety as she began to become aware of her “gender stuff,” similar to the way that playing football brought Anna a sense of joy and belonging in her figured world of school. It is also important to note that as Sara authored this memory of “becoming aware of [her] gender stuff,” she immediately followed this with her desire to be “good.” For Sara, as for many girls who do not fit into the heteronormative structures of school, to be “good” is to act like the archetypal “girl” even when one does not relate to the social constructs of what it means to do so (Butler, 1990).

I asked Sara what it looks like to be a “good girl” because her desire to be a good girl and a good student in the sixth grade was a crucial part of her identity formation in school. This was her reply:

\textit{Compliant. Someone that people want to fuck. Someone that isn’t too threatening, and isn’t too loud, and doesn’t have an opinion, and takes care of people and—a perfect girl. It’s disgusting, what people say to women. But that was what I was trying to be during that time and was what people were talking about. That’s when I started sleeping with boys. That did not help me, you know? It helped me feel worse about myself. Trying to be a “good girl.” It was a setup, because it wasn’t me.}

\textit{But the message is so strong in society. It’s like, if you can be this type of girl, you’re going to be a good girl, you’re going to be taken care of. I was not that girl. And then people made sure to tell me that I wasn’t that girl, including the boys I was messing around with. So then I was slutty. It was used against me. It was used against me pretty quickly. And then I turned on myself. I also thought I was a piece of shit. I already had all these ideas about what my limitations were and where I came from, and then I failed}
being the good girl. The negative voices got louder. That’s what I mean. Then there was another level of self-hatred that I couldn’t be that—that I was a loser and I couldn’t be that.

The hidden curriculum of heteronormativity contributes to the belief systems fostered within students—girls like Anna, Sara, and Beth—from a very young age. These systems of belief carry the message to students that they should “fake it” in order to fit in, to “be good.” And for Sara, to fake it meant to be accepted, and to be accepted was a means of survival. This is not hyperbole: acceptance or the lack of acceptance of gender-nonconforming, trans, and queer kids within the figured world of school has been and continues to be a problem that is discussed openly in the media only after someone dies or is physically harmed due to bullying from peers or the federal government (Hutchinson, 2017; Payne & Smith, 2013; Wallace, 2011; Xavier et al., 2005). This is a discourse that must be taken up and valued unequivocally.

The Hidden Curriculum of Heteronormativity

Anna

Figured world of school.

I ended up living with a foster family, and she took me to the school, and they said, “Well, what do you want to do for extracurricular activities?” I had this conversation again. And I said I wanted to play football, but I don’t know what else I want to do. It’s what I’ve grown up doing, and I’m good at it. And they said, Well what about band, instead of football? And uh . . . [chuckling] I said, OK, I’ll play the drums. That sounds amazing. Just the pop, pop, pop [she motions as if she has a drum set in front of her] you know, beatin’ on . . . it’s cool, and it’s probably something I would enjoy because I don’t like girl stuff. I wanna do boy stuff.
In sixth grade I wanted to play football. I grew up as a kid loving football, playing football with all the neighborhood boys. I was fast; I was tough; I wasn’t afraid of getting hit [she says this while laughing]. I mean, I grew up getting my ass whumped, so it didn’t bother me to get hit or knocked over, or like hit other people and knock them over. So I loved playing football, and when I got to sixth grade I wanted to play football. And they were like, “What do you want?”—you know, you had extracurricular activities: two electives. And I wanted to play football. And I—they did the talk with me that, you know, “You’re a girl; boys play football.” And I think the nice way they said it was that the boys’ hands might be “too friendly.” Something really weird like that; something I’m even uncomfortable saying now. Like, it’s just bizarre to me that that’s how you would . . . and so, uh, I couldn’t play football.

Within her figured world of school, Beth’s teachers told her that she is a girl and therefore could not play instruments (drums) or sports (football) that boys play. A distinction was made for her rather than by her, regarding her gender identity. Anna didn’t identify or feel the need to define herself as a boy or a girl within her figured world of home. Within her figured world of school, however, a distinction was made for her and placed upon her, confining her to activities “for girls,” nestled tightly into the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity and patriarchal values.

You know, it was during recess, and all the girls would play . . . they would go off into this wooded area that was pine trees, and they would take straw and make beds and kitchens and make full houses out of it, and it was bizarre to me! And they would play house, and I would play football, and they would ask me to come and be their child for a moment or something. I don’t remember; it was very strange, and I just wanted to play football.
The hidden curriculum of heteronormativity, informed by patriarchal standards, influenced Anna’s figured world of school, creating a feeling of not belonging at an early age. The activities were divided between the sexes: boys played football; girls played house. Anna did not fit into the gendered niches that were carved out for her (by female peers and teachers). She was an outsider who did not relate to the girls who played house and who was told by her teachers that football was not for her to play.

In Anna’s figured world of school, not only was she denied, based on her sex, the right to choose her electives, but the reason offered to her as to why she was prohibited from playing football was based on a heteronormative rape culture canon that is deeply situated in the education system. She was told that “Boys’ hands might be too friendly,” a pretext that punished her for being a girl rather than punishing the boys for sexually harassing her on the football field. At the expense of denying Anna her right to play football, the people in her figured world of school contributed to the normalizing of rape culture through this rationalization. The phrase used, furthermore, is misleading at best, when in fact the boys’ hands are not friendly at all. A “too friendly” hand is quite the opposite of friendly; it is invasive, terrifying, abusive, and a part of a much bigger problem informed by the often-uninterrogated patriarchal, heteronormative rape culture that exists within and beyond the school systems (Rich, 1979).

Anna admitted to wanting to play the drums because she did not like “girl stuff,” something that came up a few times in our conversations together. I asked her to describe the “girl stuff” and what that meant to her. Her response was as follows:

*I don’t know. I think there was cheerleading or something? I just didn’t even know what those options were. I had no idea cuz I was told that boys played football and boys played in the percussion. I didn’t even know what my options were. I know I wanted to play*
football, and when I couldn’t do that and they presented band to me, I was like, “I’ll play the drums.” The band instructor said, “Well, what about the trumpet?” And I was like, “That’s crazy.”

Anna was denied access to playing football as well as access to playing the drums in the band because those activities were “for boys.” The message that Anna received in these moments—which she remembered 15 years later—was that her interests and extracurricular passions did not correspond with the gendered box-of-confinement that her figured world of school had set up for her. Anna’s figured world of school denied her opportunities based on her sex.

I had a math teacher, who was a man, who I hated. Uh, this black guy—I don’t remember his name, but there was something about him that rubbed me the wrong way. [She takes a long pause.] He was cocky, and he was he was arrogant in a sort of sexually dominant way. He looked down on you in a way that was like—I had a suspicion it was against women. That was my suspicion with him. In general, he felt dismissive, almost like it was—he was rough with the guys. Almost like he would put them down, but he almost expected submission from his female students. And he got it.

But I can almost feel his presence around me, and it’s really uncomfortable. I felt more, like, curious about him than anything. I wasn’t scared of the man. I literally have gotten in fist fights with my stepdad at 11, 12, 13, 14 years old. I was literally in fist fights with my stepdads. So I wasn’t really scared of him. I felt his dominance, and I was curious. He looked like a peacock when he walked around. You know, he was dressed to the nines in his suit. He always said, “You dress for success,” I remember that! And he would dress for success. He was a sharp dresser, like, you know, he wore a suit to school. And like he was very big on, like, how you dressed.
Anna described one of her most memorable teachers—a man—as being arrogant in a sexually dominant way, almost expecting submission from his female students and being rough with his male students. It seems like Anna was saying that she wasn’t scared of him because she had experienced scarier situations within her figured world of home, which included getting into fist fights with her (multiple) stepdads. While she narrated this experience with a memorable male teacher, she was also narrating a frame story about the similarities between the men in her figured worlds of home and school. The language Anna used to describe her teacher, “arrogant in a sexually dominant way,” or that he expected “submission from his female students,” speaks to an experience that was specific to her past but that made such a lasting impression on her that as she narrated, she could feel him around her, making her “really uncomfortable.” Anna made clear that she was not scared of him, weaving into her reasoning the distinction that she was “curious” about rather than fearful of him, based on her physical encounters with her stepfathers. Anna’s subconscious comparison between her arrogant, dismissive peacock-of-a-teacher and her violent stepfathers reveals how her gender-nonconforming identity was in conversation with the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity within her figured worlds of home and school.

Beth

**Figured world of school.**

* I went to a school called Riverside Country Day School, and there was a junior kindergarten up through the ninth grade. So when I was 4 I got to junior kindergarten.

* And I have a twin—and there was a kinda feeling—a truth, a something—which was that I was more developed than my brother, which I think is typical of girls and boys. But they had made a decision on some level that it would be bad for him, being a boy, seeing his sister move on ahead. So I had this feeling that I was supposed to always take care of him*
and protect him, and I didn’t want to. But there was another part of me that felt like it was my job to make sure he was OK. So that was true for a lot of my school life. It was like there’s me, but I also have to worry about him.

Beth authored herself as having been a sister, a caregiver, and a protector at the early age of 4 years old. This “truth” and “feeling” that Beth articulated, the knowledge that she was more developed than her brother, was a gift and a curse. As early as 4 years old, Beth was aware of her brother—his limitations, his differences, his abilities—and while she did not relate this knowing to her sex, I posit that her awareness of other is a skill that she learned because she was a girl (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1969; Bunch & Pollack, 1983; Gilligan, Rogers, & Tolman, 1991). Highlighting the ecology of women’s (and girls’) work—both visible and invisible—Beth authored herself, like Sara, as a protector of her brother, while also navigating her own schooling experiences. She learned at a young age to juggle herself (“there’s me”) with her brother (“but I also have to worry about him”). While this is not limited to girls’ experiences within their figured worlds of home and school, I suggest that it is a much more pronounced burden to bear on girls than boys and is intertwined in the expectations of girls in their figured worlds of school, which are manifestations of the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity.

The hidden curriculum of heteronormativity is echoed in Beth’s recollection that “they had made a decision on some level that it would be bad for him, being a boy, seeing his sister move on ahead.” The theys in this memory are not clear, but they were characters specific to her figured world of school who continued to make decisions about her progress as it related to her gender, as well as her identities as a sister, a caregiver, a troublemaker, and other roles that she took on over the course of her primary and secondary schooling.
Anna

When I got to sixth grade I met this girl, April, and she was very fashionable, and we became friends. She taught me things about being a girl that I just didn’t know and didn’t care about before. I mean, she wore vests with fringe on them, and I’m like, “Wow, so crazy!” I wore two different-colored shoes. That was as far as I went. And I wore jeans and T-shirts and—not much has changed—but she had this flair to her, and I was like, “How do you pull these things off?” She was like a girlie-girl, and I was being introduced to this world through her, just coming into my female identity because I hadn’t thought of it until that time of my life. I don’t remember her going to high school.

I—the first time I drank was with her. I lost my virginity to her cousin. I was 12 [she whispers it—I can barely hear her on the recording]. Because I was drunk. Um. I was in a blackout so, that scared me. So now, I had to—I had to get away from her. Cuz she tricked me. She told me we were going to stay with her cousins and, um, she really was going to see this 21-year-old—she was 14—we were really going to see this 21-year-old guy that she wanted to date, and she left me with her cousins getting wasted. And I woke up, and it was scary. But I said, “Never again” [laughing]. For me it wasn’t like “Oh! This is terrible! This is happening!” It was like, “Uh uh. Not again. This is the last time this is gonna happen” [laughing]. I learned how to pull myself up by my bootstraps early on. Early on. Five years old, I was pulling myself up by—keep on truckin’, you know? I got a new best friend after the whole rape thing.

Anna referred to April as introducing her into the “world” of being a girl. The figured world of being a girl to which Anna referred includes April, an archetypal cool girl, with different fashion
sense and the confidence to wear clothes that Anna seemingly would not choose to wear otherwise. Anna described April as a “girlie-girl,” the complete opposite of what Anna self-identified as up until this sixth-grade memory. She highlighted this point in her life as the moment of “coming into my female identity,” a seemingly pivotal point in time for Anna, since prior to this age/grade, she did not identify as either sex, and she alluded to being baffled and at times repulsed by what it meant to be a girl in the activities leading up to this identity shift. Unfortunately, Anna’s figured world of coming into her identity as a female also included the trauma of being raped.

Anna lost her virginity when she was drunk at the age of 12, while blacked out, by an older boy, and while she didn’t name it “rape” until the very end of the narrative, that is exactly what it was. Her languaging around the act almost makes it unclear that she was raped. She did not name it here, and she took responsibility by claiming that it won’t happen again—as if she had control over it happening the first time. Anna’s languaging around her rape experience speaks to the hidden curriculum of the patriarchy, which continues to blame the rape victim for what she was wearing or, as in this case, how much she had imbibed, when in actuality those factors should not matter. Anna was taken advantage of by a strange man who raped her. This is about a cultural power dynamic that was enacted and unquestioned both in and outside of the figured worlds of school and home.

This incident is reminiscent of Anna’s lack of agency around language in the context of describing herself or being described as either a boy or girl, man or woman. The hidden curriculum of heteronormativity and patriarchal values fed into Anna’s identity formation as a “female” in that it told her what was (un)acceptable to say, do, and/or wear in order to pass as the gender that others most identified her with. And yet, at the same time as Anna was coming into
her identity as a female—a seemingly positive experience—she was also being given the message that to be a female was synonymous to being abused, objectified, and violated. These conflicting messages are presented by the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity/patriarchy/misogyny and were located within Anna’s figured worlds of home and school.

Sara

Within her figured world of home, Sara narrated early experiences of being raped by her grandfather as well as her babysitter’s son. Sara recalled being raped from as young as 4 years old, which shaped her experiences within her figured world of school as well as her figured world of home. Sara authored herself as being in a “traumatic place” when narrating her figured world of home as a young girl. Regarding kindergarten, she noted:

*I think it’s also important to mention that at this point I had already been sexually abused. So I was in a kinda traumatic place between the sexual abuse—looking back on it now—I was in a pretty traumatic place between the sexual abuse, the alcoholism, and what was happening at home—I was in a pretty traumatic place.*

Sara’s figured world of home was colored not only by her mother’s alcoholism and suicidal depression but also by the fact that she was being raped as early as 4 years old.

*And so I’m being sexually abused by more than one person. It’s happened by the time I’m in the first grade. It’s happened by another person by the time I’m in second grade. The first sexual predator was my grandfather, which continued until I was 11 years old. It started when I was 4. And the second one which had happened at this point—that was a full rape—that was my babysitter’s son. So we had a babysitter, and it was her son, who I think was mildly retarded, and he was 20, and I think I was 5. And he—it was super,*
super intense. He tied me up to his bed and raped me, really violently. You know, I was really little. And my mom knew. And I don’t remember if she knew right away or if she figured it—not from me telling her—I just remember her freaking the fuck out and hysterically crying and being like “You never have to go there.” So I don’t know if I said something, or if my brother said something. Cuz I don’t know if it isn’t true for my brother, too, with my grandfather and my brother too. It had been my grandfather and babysitter’s son before second grade. And so I think that in the social worker’s office some of the beans were spilled on that.

Sexual abuse, incest, and rape were common occurrences in the schooling narratives of the participants in this study. I chose to categorize all sexual abuse under the term “rape” because there is a spiritual and emotional raping of these young women’s safety that, when acted on in any violent way, can never be regained or repaired. It is imperative to name all sexual abuse rape to counter the apparent spectrum of sexual abuse that has been created under the patriarchal lens and that classifies one form of sexual abuse as worse than another. Rape is defined as “unlawful sexual intercourse or any other sexual penetration of the vagina, anus, or mouth of another person, with or without force, by a sex organ, other body part, or foreign object, without the consent of the victim” (Dictionary.com).

Rape is the ultimate form of spirit murder, a common tactic to wield and forcefully exert power, or a false sense of power, over an authentically powerful demographic that typically troubles the hierarchical structures set forth by the patriarchy—historically, women. I am using the term rape as a critique of the variations in the terminology of sexual abuse. My intention is to make clear that all sexual abuse is life changing, affecting the physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual makeup of any person who has endured such a horrific experience. There is no form
of sexual abuse that is less brutal than another. It is all rape, the spiritual and emotional
penetration by force that shapes and re-creates the rest of a person’s life.

Beth

*I was 15, and I was running all over the place at 15. I just got on a train and went to Paris, and it was so dangerous, what I was doing. And I decided to come home on the Queen Elizabeth. So you can tell that I’m completely unsupervised. And I’m drinking on the Queen Elizabeth. And there was a ship comedian, and he was plying me with drinks. I had no regard for myself. Anyway, I was with this guy, and he was something like 45, and he kept giving me drinks. And they were free. And then he raped me. And I was bleeding. I was bleeding and saying, “Please stop, you’re hurting me.” I was bleeding everywhere, and he said, “You told me you weren’t a virgin.” Like, I got ripped to pieces. He was harsh, and I was bleeding, and it was awful. So I spent the rest of my trip trying to avoid him. I didn’t know how to do better. That was, like, the story of my life—I didn’t know how to do better.*

Like Sara’s, Beth’s figured world of home included the unfortunate and violent experience of being raped. The coda that Beth used, “I didn’t know how to do better,” a phrase she also said is “the story of her life,” reveals that she believed that she had some responsibility in her rape, in the same way that she had responsibility for her clothes being stolen on the Queen Elizabeth or in her lack of ability to pack for a ski trip. Beth narrated her experiences of her figured world of home as taking responsibility—dare I say blame—as a sort of overcompensation for the lack of responsibility her parents took in their daughter’s life. Much like Sara, who took on the role of parenting her parent, Beth took on the role of parenting herself and not meeting her own
standards of parenting. In Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) literature, this is called self-parenting (Oliver-Diaz & O’Gorman, 1991).

Beth’s rape experience, like Anna’s, included a man taking advantage of her after she consumed a lot of alcohol. While there are differences in the narration of these two women’s experiences, neither woman blamed the person who raped her. Anna made the decision never to be in that situation again, to be careful of who she befriended, and to avoid alcohol; Beth’s rape narrative included alcohol and a sweeping statement that put the onus of her rape on herself in her comment, “I didn’t know how to do better—that was the story of my life.” If anyone was to blame in either of their narratives, they both tended to blame themselves. This is not uncommon in rape survivors, a testament to the deeply embedded, internalized misogyny wherein women’s learned behavior is to protect the feelings of men, regardless of how violent and dangerous these men are toward them (Bartky, 1990; Kitzinger, 1991; Rich, 1979).

This internalized misogyny is also woven into the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity; Beth felt her “job” as a student, a sister, a daughter, and a young woman was to ensure the safety and comfort of her brother while in school. This “job” of making sure her brother was OK was an integral part of the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity, occurring at both home and school, that favored the feelings of Beth’s brother over the safety and well-being of her own body, mind, and spirit.

**Sexuality**

**Beth**

**Figured world of school.**

*I was also falling in love with girls and teachers and terrified about that because I thought, “Well not only am I fat, ugly, stupid, but god, am I gay?”* So I just thought,
“One more fucking thing.” So I never did anything about it. And I tried to hide it, but I would be moaning and pining over these teachers.

Beth authored herself as “bad,” “very bad,” “a nightmare,” “fat, ugly, stupid,” and while it provides an explanation for how she was acting out, I think the primary reason for her acting out was that she was gay, and because she did not have a safe place to talk about this, it came out in this “bad girl” way. Her inability to say or ask for what she needed intellectually, emotionally, or sexually formed the foundation for her “bad girl” identity. I am using quotations around “bad girl” in an attempt to challenge this misogynistic label. If I could replace “bad girl” with its literal meaning here, I would name it the self-loathing, self-sabotaging internalization of a patriarchal, heteronormative system of beliefs, woven into the thick fabric of Beth’s figured world of school. She was oppressed in both her figured worlds of school and of home. To make matters more intense, because Beth attended more than one boarding school, her figured worlds of school and home were enmeshed, offering few to no outlets for her to feel safe.

So my father said, “You’re out of control. You have to go to the Bunch School in Connecticut,” which is where his sisters had gone to school. And I did not want to go to Bunch. But I had to because they had complete control over everything, and so I went to Bunch.

Beth narrated a continuous loss of agency in her figured worlds of home and school, consistently narrating the theys in both figured worlds as authoritative figures and gatekeepers wielding their power in a detrimental way. Thus began Beth’s second boarding school experience.

I remember at Bunch I did an experiment. I was so aware of pink, yellow, and green. All the girls—almost all of the girls came from Lake Forest, they came from Greenwich, they came from Grosse Pointe, they came from Darien. They all came from communities like
that. And there was this uniform: it was pink, yellow, and green sweaters. And so you’d go into their rooms, and you’d see stacks of pink, yellow, and green, and Top-Siders, and we all looked the same. And I thought to myself, “OK. Maybe you just haven’t tried hard enough. So just put on the pink, yellow, and green, and talk about the boys and just be like them.” And I just couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it. I tried so hard, and then I realized I cannot do this. I’m constitutionally incapable of being this way. That’s when I went over to the dark side. That’s when I’m going to be bad. It was after that experiment.

The “pink, yellow, and green” sweaters were symbols of heterosexuality and heteronormativity in Beth’s figured world of school. The “uniform” of heteronormativity was something that Beth attempted to wear but could not. She used AA discourse to explain her realization that she was “constitutionally incapable of being this way.” In AA, the reference to being “constitutionally incapable” is in regard to the success rate for people who have entered Alcoholics Anonymous. “Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves” (Big Book, 1939, pg. 58). Beth situated herself as being “constitutionally incapable of being this way.” I consider “this way” to mean conforming to the heteronormative structures by which she was surrounded and that she attempted to adopt as her own.

Beth narrated this realization as a pivotal point wherein she “went over to the dark side.” Once she decided that she was constitutionally incapable of being straight, of fitting in with the straight, good girls, she decided to be bad. Beth narrated her own agency, even through this challenging time; she was saying that she made a decision to adopt the identity of “bad.” This was a powerful pivot in both her identity formation and her schooling experience, both of which
inform the other. It also speaks to the internalization of “good girl” versus “bad girl” ideologies and gives great insight into the internal struggle of one “bad girl” who thought she had no other option than to be bad because, given her sexuality, she could not conform to the heteronormative expectations laid out by her figured world of school.

I had a very bad attitude because I was with the kind of girls I had grown up with: It was pink, yellow, and green. It was upper-middle class WASP. I mean, some of them were unbelievably wealthy. They were straight. They were thin. Most of them had mothers that were thin and attentive. Not all of them, but most of them. And they were straight and giggly and into boys. And it was, like, everything that I wasn’t. So, I was like this hideous thing, back in with that group of girls.

Beth referred to the “pink, yellow and green” types of girls quite a few times in her memories about attending Bunch, referring to the colors of popular cable knit sweaters, but they were symbolic of much more than a fashion statement. Beth began to describe the symbolism of the “pink, yellow and green” in this excerpt: they represented the upper-middle WASP socioeconomic class; they represented heterosexuality; they represented thinness; they represented young women whose mothers were also “thin and attentive.” Beth was saying that the “pink, yellow, and green” represented everything that she was not. While she did identify as a WASP, she did not identify as straight or thin, nor did she have a mother who was attentive to her needs. Beth’s coda in the above excerpt was her self-authoring as “this hideous thing, back in with that group of girls.” She authored herself as an outsider; the type of girl that was symbolized by “pink, yellow and green” was the antithesis of what Beth was.

I started asking all these girls, “Have you lost your virginity? Have you lost your virginity? Have you?” So that’s how I led that stirring the pot thing again. Because I
knew that I couldn’t compete with being straight, cute, bubbly, perky, the boyfriend, the good student, so I guess I decided if I can’t be good, then I’m going to be a fucking nightmare. So that’s what I did. I stirred the pot.

Beth described her acting out as “stirring the pot.” What is most important in the above excerpt is her choice of characteristics with which she could not compete: “straight, cute, bubbly, perky, the boyfriend, the good student, good.” A deep-seated system of beliefs, evident in Beth’s list of the qualities she did not possess, molded the qualities into a simplified, overarching concept of good. Beth did not identify as good; she did not identify as a good girl; she did not identify as a good student. And, according to the qualifiers listed above, most of her “bad” had to do with the fact that she was not straight.

I was very worried about people knowing that I was gay. I so didn’t want to be gay. So I was a troubled child at Bunch. And the thing that really bothered me was that my friends got sent to the shrink, and I never got sent to the shrink. I was like, How could this be possible, that they’re sending the people around me to the shrink, but not sending me? So I felt so invisible—again. Like, “Look what I’m doing; it’s so awful! And yet you’re sending other people who aren’t obnoxious and hostile and defiant!” I felt so invisible. It was awful.

This comment speaks to the double bind of what it means for girls and young women to be simultaneously hypervisible and invisible. Beth’s actions screamed for attention; her acting out was intentional, as she made clear when she reflected on the lack of consequences and the disappointment she experienced not receiving the attention she was seeking through such extreme actions. “Look at what I’m doing; it’s so awful!” was a plea to pay attention to her, to treat her with the same concern with which her peers were being treated, like getting sent to the
shrink. Beth authored herself as a “troubled child,” following her assertion that she did not want to be gay. Beth took up the identity of “troubled” in relation to her sexual identity. Between the worry that other people knew she was gay and her internalized shame of not wanting to be gay, Beth’s “trouble,” although it was internalized, was nurtured by external sources of homophobia, structured within the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity (Carlson & Roseboro, 2011; Evans, 2009; Rich, 1979; Robertson, 2017).

The hidden curriculum of heteronormativity, as it manifested in each woman’s figured world of school, coupled with the entrenched misogyny they faced across their figured worlds of home and school, has greatly influenced how they have lived their lives, performed their identities, and most importantly authored themselves within their figured worlds. The discourses they drew on to author themselves were informed by a redemptive and, at times, compassionate discourse, greatly paralleling the discourse of AA. The figured world of AA acts as a means by which to locate deeply embedded beliefs about Self and offers a space to make sense of the past in the present. It is imperative to read, within the structures of schooling, what these women are shown in this chapter to have explored and the method by which they took up and made sense of such difficult topics, the method of sharing through (re)collective narrative.
Chapter 5: Invisibility/Hypervisibility

Anna

Figured World of Home and School

My home life was kinda a mess. No, it wasn’t a mess, it was a shit show. Pardon my Greek. And I think a lot of people knew that. So you know, when I showed up to school and I didn’t have my homework done, it was kinda looked over because of my home life.

This excerpt reflects Anna’s invisibility in school and how it was informed by what was going on in her figured world of home. It speaks to an unavoidable denial that feeds into the education system and that is a mirror of what happens in the personal figured worlds of home. This denial occurs when educators see that someone is having an incredibly hard time at home and make some kind of decision to “go easy” on the student in her figured world of school because of the stress that they assume or know the student is experiencing.

This is actually a disservice because what Anna—and, as this chapter will show, Sara and Beth—described was not being seen or validated by her teachers and instead being invisible. There is an all-or-nothing mentality that informs what happens in the figured world of school and the figured world of home, which Anna described in the preceding passage. Her home life was a “shit show,” as was known to many of the people in her figured world of school. In turn, when she came to school without her homework, it was excused and overlooked, seemingly without a discussion.

I am arguing that there is a fine line between punishing a student for not having her homework and completely ignoring the fact that she doesn’t have her homework, and, to use Anna’s vocabulary, “be curious” about why she doesn’t have her homework. My concern is that
a bigger message illustrated to girls like Anna is a “Don’t ask; don’t tell” model fostered from a broad culture of denial that informs these girls’ figured worlds of school and home. The disease of alcoholism fosters a culture of denial within the microstructure that is the individual alcoholic, but denial is also a part of the mesostructure of home. Wherever the alcoholic lives, the community of home is also deeply affected (Alanon Family Group Head Inc., 1997; Haverfield & Thiess, 2015; Werner, 2016). The figured world of school also fosters a culture of denial: coworkers quietly resenting one another yet unwilling to communicate with each other to resolve their resentments; power dynamics between administration and faculty, faculty and students, faculty and parents; displaced policies, favoring a lack of humanism in the name of a neoliberal agenda. Especially when these women are coming from homes with alcoholism, other addictions, and a wide variety of abuse, denial is deeply woven into the fabric of their experiences in school and home, and thus, so are their varying degrees of hypervisibility and invisibility.

I think one of my most memorable teachers was Mrs. Chalk. She was this big, heavy-set black woman. She had these big eyes that bulged out of her head a little. Not a little—a lot. I feel like her eyes were always on me [laughing]. But she was tough, man, she was really tough. And, uh, if I didn’t have my homework—this is after I moved back in with my mom—she would—no pep rallies. We were made to sit in her class and copy from the dictionary. I sort of attribute my love of English and words to her. She changed some things for me. She changed the game a little bit. Um, at some point you do it enough—and I did it plenty—and I learned to love learning new words. And like [laughing] she made us listen to opera while we copied from the dictionary. I think I made it all the way up to the Fs.
I mean I was in there a lot and, uh, she always said to me, “There’s no dumb question. The only dumb question is the one you don’t ask.” She also said to always ask a lot of questions. I don’t know, I always felt supported by her in some way. I wrote a poem in her class. We were supposed to write a poem about Africa—starving children of Africa. I don’t really remember what was going on at the time. It might have been a huge thing at the time. And I remember the poem. I mean, I got such credit for it! It was in the school paper; everybody was talking about it. I remember getting so much attention. And, uh, I think I was moved by what was happening. She moved me, and I was moved, and I wrote the poem.

The excerpt is about Anna’s most memorable teacher, Mrs. Chalk, who did not ignore the fact that Anna consistently did not have her homework. Anna said that she felt like Mrs. Chalk’s bulging eyes were always on her, which means that she was quite literally very visible to Mrs. Chalk. Anna described Mrs. Chalk as “tough” and also as a character in her figured world of school who “changed the game.” As I will cover later in this chapter, Beth also referred to the “changing of the game,” in relation to her figured world of school and a specific teacher’s (positive) influence on her. This idea of the figured world of school as a “game” is of interest if for no other reason than the fact that it speaks to a puzzle that these women learned to solve. For both Anna and Beth, the “game of school” was about navigating the relationships and rules within their figured worlds of school in order to feel and be successful. Success is qualified here; in Anna’s story, it meant being visible and gaining positive attention by writing a poem that was later published in her school newspaper. It seems that the game that changed was that Anna became interested and invested in school because Mrs. Chalk gave her attention. She became visible to Mrs. Chalk in a way that was not true of other teachers. Anna was encouraged by Mrs.
Chalk to ask questions—a lot of questions—so Anna became visible to this teacher, and she was “moved” to write a poem, to find pleasure in learning new words because a connection was made between her and Mrs. Chalk.

I was like, “I’m gonna really work on this.” It just kinda came out of me. It literally just came out. I got a lot of attention around that. It was really bizarre. It was fun. It made me so uncomfortable; I didn’t want credit. I was very uncomfortable with the attention—any attention made me uncomfortable. I felt like attention raised questions, and people would find out how I was living at home. I don’t know. I just I didn’t like the attention. I wanted to be more under the radar.

Even though there is a juxtaposition at the end of this passage, where Anna stated that she didn’t like attention and would rather go under the radar, the attention that she received from Mrs. Chalk was a very specific kind of attention. It focused on Anna as an engaged student within her figured world of school. The attention that Mrs. Chalk offered to Anna didn’t involve or refer to Anna’s figured world of home, the type of attention that Anna didn’t want to be public knowledge, that engendered shame about her abusive, unsafe figured world of home. Instead, Mrs. Chalk’s attention provided a safe space for Anna to be a student in her figured world of school, similar to the safety that was provided by her foster family to be a child in her figured world of home.

I didn’t have the opportunity to be a kid at home. I was a parent. I was a housekeeper. I was a babysitter. I was a—I raised my little sister. So when I got to school I could be a kid. So I really was—and magnified.

Again, Anna referred to the intersection of her figured worlds of home and school wherein the nonkid identities she took on at home (parent, housekeeper, babysitter) shifted into opportunities
for her to embody what it meant to be a kid within her figured world of school. This “magnified” kid identity, as is visible from the excerpts that follow, jutuxtapose Anna the invisible nonkid at home with Anna the hypervisible kid at school. To be a magnified kid at school meant receiving negative attention; Anna experienced her socioeconomic class as informing her visibility in school, based on her superficial appearance and her decision to engage in fighting (an arguably “male-dominated” activity that penalizes girls and women more harshly than if they were boys based on the misogynist expectation that “boys will be boys”).

*I needed a lot of attention. I wore my mother’s clothes a lot of times. I mean, I made my own clothes [snickering] in the winter, I had jeans, and then I grew so fast that in the summer I just cut all of the jeans off because by the winter again, they were going to be high waters. Now they’d be shorties, which is cute. Back then, it was because you are poor and you can’t get new jeans [laughing]. I wore my brother’s shoes and his hand-me-downs. I was very fidgety I think. I was uncomfortable in my own skin, and I think it showed. Um. I got in fights all the time.*

Anna was visible in her figured world of school due to her superficial appearance (wearing her brother’s or mother’s clothes), appearing “uncomfortable in [her] own skin,” and getting into fights. There was an irony in Anna’s visibility, which she highlighted in the following excerpt. The irony is that this “magnified” kid identity in school, which brought her attention and made her visible, was, at its root, the same identity that made her invisible within the same figured world. She described how the two identities, hypervisible and invisible, coexisted:

*You know how you see on TV, where your parents sit you down and they’re like, “Well, you’re going to high school now, and what kind of plans do you have for the future? And would you like to do this class or pursue this scholarship or that scholarship?”*
Anna described how a canonical narrative within a (fantastical) figured world of home informed others’ figured world of school.

I never had that. It never, never came up in my home. And I was flying blind, and I made a lot of mistakes. And I struggled. And I think it would’ve been really helpful if someone—if the school didn’t assume that someone was helping me with this. Because it felt like heavy decisions. I mean, between middle school and high school, it felt like a big change. Not, uh, not like you know, moving from seventh to eighth [grade]. But it felt like a big change to me . . . people drove to school. Your future’s really coming now. I don’t know. I didn’t have that conversation, so I was flying blind when I got to high school.

The imagery in Anna’s proclamation that she was “flying blind” parallels that of being invisible. It evokes a lone bird, without guidance from its flock, traveling around a boundless sky. The expression “flying blind” was originally used by air fighters in World War II, when they couldn’t see the horizon and had to rely on intuition or other instruments while in air. Anna is a fighter, literally and figuratively. She authored herself as a lone fighter with no sense of direction offered from the characters in her figured world of home or her figured world of school. She was visible because she stood out due to her superficial appearance, and yet she was invisible because she received no attention, no help, in the form of guidance from the adults in either of her figured worlds.

I demanded attention. I think that at home I competed for the attention—the attention and the affection for my mother, from her boyfriends, from my stepdads. And, uh, like I said, I was flying blind a lot of the time when I left the house. I mean, your school career changes as you get older. You know, you begin to identify yourself as a teenager and as a woman and as a citizen, decision maker—just as a lot of things—and I needed help with
those things. So I think my cries for attention were sort of statements of fear: I’m scared.

I don’t know what’s happening. Help me. Uh, and my sort of rebellion—I, I started to do this thing where I didn’t have my homework and I didn’t care. Cries for help. Um, I wasn’t bold enough to do anything more than that.

Anna authored herself as a teenager, a woman, a decision maker, and a citizen as those identities related to her evolution in her school career. She admitted to competing for attention in both figured worlds of home and school, thus revealing her invisibility in both worlds.

And it’s easy, easy, easy to feel sorry for myself. I had very little control. I feel like I maybe could’ve done more. I could’ve asked my friends to take me to school. I could have defied my mother and done it on my own. I don’t know, I could’ve done a lot of things.

But it’s very different where you live in a place where I lived, and you’re 30 minutes away from everything, and you can’t get a job because you don’t have a car, and you can’t get a car because you don’t have a job and all these things. And also, I didn’t know how to do any of it. I made the best decisions I could with the information I had.

I don’t think I was prepared for what I was going through in middle school because I had a taste of what it was like to live a normal teenage life, and I had to go back to how shitty it was. And I knew how shitty it was going to be, and it was even shittier than I thought it was going to be, you know?

And having to base my decisions on the fact that I wouldn’t be able to get to and from school—I could’ve absolutely had a music scholarship or an athletic scholarship—one hundred percent. I could’ve had both, probably. So, there’s a lot of regret that I didn’t make better decisions for myself. And I carried that weight with me. And I knew
that I had to make such big decisions at home by myself so I didn’t leave much time for myself, you know?

Anna has taken responsibility as an adult for actions she took (or didn’t take) as a child and teen. She was still “flying blind” in this excerpt, as she referred to “big decisions” she took on by herself, specifically related to her figured world of home. Similar to the way in which Beth talked about how she “didn’t know any better” (than to be raped, or how to pack for a trip to San Maritz) or how Sara talked about how she didn’t know better than to pull the fire alarm at school because she thought it would bring her dad to school and make her less alone, Anna spoke about taking an action without the supervision of adults in either of her figured worlds and suffering the consequences, which, for all three of these women, were initially negative.

Lack of adult guidance in both figured worlds of home and school led to feelings of isolation, literal isolation—in Sara’s case, being placed in special education classes, and for Anna, missed opportunities for music or sports scholarships that she knew were at her fingertips. All three women spoke about taking matters into their own hands, acting as the adult in their figured worlds of home and school, while still officially being children and suffering dramatic consequences that left them traumatized, stigmatized, and isolated. Anna narrated one of the biggest conundrums of the hyper/invisible girl as it related to these women in their figured worlds of home and school: She was a one-woman show, “flying blind” under the radar of the characters in her figured worlds of home and school, as she performed her “togetherness,” all the while, like Sara and Beth, internalizing extreme feelings of loss, aloneness, and confusion—feelings that she shielded from everyone else—thus creating a shield of invisibility around her.

I needed help, man. I really did. I was—I was lost and, uh, I hated men. And I needed a lot of help. I really did. I think I definitely pushed the boundaries that I was comfortable
Anna authored herself as lost, in need of a lot of help and as the class clown. These identities that she took on were in response to her underlying need for attention, her invisibility in two worlds where she wanted to be visible. This experience stands in contrast to the joy that Anna expressed as she recalled her fondness for Mrs. Chalk and the difficulty she had in receiving attention in a positive light due to her published poem, after receiving negative attention, or for receiving no attention for years within her figured world of school.

The way I felt in school is that if you weren’t involved in cheerleading or clubs or music or any—you weren’t involved, you weren’t important. You weren’t considered. It was—it was a very definite divide. There were the kids who would end up being nobodies—pregnant, jobless, whatever—and then the ones that would succeed. And I felt like there was a huge, definite line in the sand you know. From families who had money and structures in their home, and the ones that didn’t. I mean, I think there’s that generic “You can be anything you want!” or “You’re all special!” There’s a definite line. And I think no matter what I do today, no matter how much success I have, no matter where I’ve been, no matter what I’ve done, I’m always going to be that kid on that other side of the line.

Anna was referring to the way that (her) socioeconomic class informed her identity then and now as being “that kid on the other side of the line.” Anna’s invisibility related directly to her school’s culture of prioritizing and giving attention to the students who were involved in extracurricular activities and watching them succeed. Anna narrated this “definite divide” as she organized those who were “nobodies” versus those who benefited from the canonical school
discourses like “You can be anything you want” or “You’re all special.” Anna authored herself as being one of the “nobodies,” on the other side of the line drawn on the basis of socioeconomic class (Anyon, 1997; Apple, 1978; Bourdieu, 1973; Fine & Burns, 2003).

I mean, other than the obvious—you know, the kids who wore clothes from the Gap and the Limited and the Dazzle Doctors and the parents who were together and homes they grew up in, to the rest of us, who bounced around and the statistics were that we would be pregnant before we graduated high school. I will always feel like I’m a part of that crowd, that group, that side of the line. And it was the other side of the tracks. No matter what I do. No matter what I accomplish or choose to do, I will always feel like—because that was engrained in me. Um, the kids who had families, who had homes, who had clothes, wanted for nothing, finished their schoolwork—they did extracurricular activities. They had friends, they had close friends who did things. They vacationed—you know what I mean? We did not. And that became very clear to me. And I guess, I guess that was huge—that formed a huge part of my identity and formed how I see myself with the rest of the world. And if I’m successful, if I have a nice home, and if I have a family, it’s all a lie. Because I will still be that girl. So it’s troublesome I guess.

This “other side of the line/tracks” identity was the one identity that Anna still seemed to hold onto or at least refer to explicitly in her present life. As she stated, it was ingrained in her that no matter what she did, no matter what she accomplished, she would always be “that girl.” Anna’s reliance on her production as she stated, “no matter what I do, no matter what I accomplish,” is molded into the nation’s capitalist structures, reinforced by bureaucratic institutions such as school. Anna received the message within her figured world of school that because she had
neither money nor the means to engage with school in the ways that other, more privileged people did, she was less visible and less important.

Sara

Figured World of Home and School

_I needed the constant encouragement that somebody believed in me, and I just wasn’t getting it. I just needed more attention at home and at school, and I wasn’t getting it. I think that’s the bottom line._

Like Anna, Sara narrated her schooling experience via the lack of attention she received and needed from the people in her figured world of home as well as her figured world of school.

_**My mom hit another bottom, and at this point we were also living with one of her boyfriends who beat the fuck out of her, and there was really no room for me and my brother in that house.**_

“Hitting a bottom” refers, in AA and other 12-step programs, to an experience or experiences that represent the worst or lowest point of a person’s disease—in this case, Sara was referring to her mother hitting another bottom in her alcoholism. When someone hits a bottom, the obsession of their disease (in this case, alcoholism) overtakes every thought and action, clouding reality, preventing the affected person from showing up to daily life routines such as showering, eating, and in Sara’s mother’s case, caring for dependents. Sara’s mother “hitting a bottom” significantly impacted Sara’s invisible status within her figured world of home, as she claimed there was “no room” for her or her brother. Anna referred as well to her lack of freedom to be a kid at home because she was “in the politics of [her] mother’s relationships.” Sara also articulated her lack of freedom—having no room to be—within her figured world of home, due to an abusive relationship between her alcoholic mother and her mother’s boyfriend.
The second time I did kindergarten, I came to school—you know there’s a little coat rack, and your name is there, and then—it’s winter time at this point—and you take your boots off and you put your shoes on. And we were—my dad had left, and they had divorced again, the second year of kindergarten. And, um, I was kinda tight with my dad. My mom was kinda falling apart, and she had started drinking, and so things are not good at home. I had winter boots, but there wasn’t like the traditional, “I’m getting you up for school; I’m packing your lunch . . .” there was that sometimes, but it wasn’t consistent. And that had to do with hangovers and emotional states and depression and everything else like that.

Sara narrated how her figured world of home impacted her figured world of school. Her mother and father had divorced each other for the second time, and neither of her parents was available or consistent with his or her parenting. Similar to how Anna narrated the ways in which her figured world of home informed her figured world of school, Sara’s lack of guidance and support at home directly contributed to her experience in and of school.

And I got on the school bus, and I had no socks on. I had no shoes to change into at school. I had put my winter boots on, and so I got to school, and I didn’t take my shoes. And my teacher was like, “You need to take your boots off and change into your socks and shoes.” And I was like [shakes head]. And she was like, “You need to take your boots off!” And I took my boots off finally; I was really fighting it. And I was really embarrassed because I had no tennis shoes.

Embarrassment and shame were common feelings expressed by many of this project’s participants. In this case, Sara was embarrassed because she did not have tennis shoes to change into, and her teacher was asking her pointedly to do something that she was incapable of doing.
Sara’s declaration, “I was really fighting it,” is striking. Was she fighting her teacher’s request? Was she fighting her embarrassment that she didn’t have other shoes to change into? Was she fighting a bigger narrative of the loss of her father and mother? When I interviewed her, I understood this “fighting it” to mean that she was fighting the embarrassment of not having shoes to change into, combined with the embarrassment associated with her teacher asking her to do something that she could not do correctly. This dynamic—being asked to do something she was unable to do—was a familiar one to Sara. It was a dynamic that never got easier and eventually led to her leaving school entirely in the eighth grade. Sara was both hypervisible and invisible in this situation: she was hypervisible because she stood out from her peers, not having her tennis shoes to change into, refusing to follow the demands of her teacher; she was invisible because she had a legitimate reason as to why she was refusing her teacher’s demands but unable to express that reason. Her invisibility was produced through a loss of voice in that moment (and others) where her gestures of “acting out” were in fact covering for her lack of security, located in her literal voice as well as the material needs that were being asked of her from her teacher.

And there was an assembly that day, and the teacher’s response to my having no socks and no shoes was to punish me and not let me go to the assembly. So, the class lined up to go to the assembly, and I was put in a chair in the corner of the classroom. I was left alone in the classroom. She turned off the lights—there was windows—but still, she turned off the overhead lights, and it was dead silent, and everyone else went to the assembly, and I was left in the corner with bare feet. And I was freaking the fuck out. I was so scared and not wanting to be there alone. And I just remember being like, I didn’t know what to do.
This heart-wrenching scenario in Sara’s figured world of school, in which she, as a kindergartner, was left barefoot and alone in a classroom that was “dead silent,” unable to know what to do, parallels her figured world of home. Sara’s experience of both worlds was fraught with navigating the question “What do I do?” in worlds where adults were assumed to be the providers but consistently did not meet her needs. This was also a moment of invisibility for Sara. Her punishment for not having proper attire was to isolate her from the rest of her peers and deny her existence, by leaving her in an empty, dark room. Like Anna’s experience feeling the double bind of invisibility/hypervisibility due to her socioeconomic class and superficial appearance, Sara navigated her own hypervisibility/invisibility.

This is totally going to make me cry right now. And there was [she starts to sob] a fire alarm in the classroom, and I remember thinking, if I pull that, my dad’s a cop, so he’s going to come on the fire truck. I can’t believe I’m crying so soon into this! And so I pulled the fire alarm, which was kinda great because everyone was in the gym. It was totally a punk rock thing to do in kindergarten [she laughs through her tears]. I pulled the fire alarm, and I saw all the kids pass by, and they were all going out. I guess they would put kids in lines—it’s so funny, I haven’t thought about this stuff in so long—and all the kids got in their lines, and I remember thinking after I did it, “Oh fuck. That was not a good thing to do.” But then still being like, “There’s still a chance my father will come on that fire truck.”

But what was happening was that I was told to stay in my chair, and I was getting up and looking and seeing the kids go outside, and I would get scared and go back to my chair. So everybody left. And now everybody in the school is outside, and I’m still inside because the teacher didn’t come back for me. So I’m still not getting rescued—I can’t
believe how intense this memory is for me. This makes my entire life make so much sense to me. She didn’t come back for me. And I was left in that room. I could see out the window, all their lines. Then the fire trucks came, and I was still in the corner, and as soon as I heard the trucks outside, I was like, “Now is when you make a run for it.” And I can’t remember if I put my boots on or not—it was winter, so it would be intense if I didn’t, but I don’t remember if I did—and I ran out and I ran to the first fireman I saw and I said, “Do you have my dad my dad?!” And I just remember them being really confused because they didn’t know what was going on.

Sara’s narration of her experience of being punished and abandoned by the adult in her figured world of school greatly paralleled the abandonment she had experienced in her figured world of home. Yet even in her navigation of figuring out what to do, she authored herself as struggling with following the rules given by her teacher—in this case, to stay in her chair. There was a real sense that even in her fear of being alone in a dark classroom, embarrassed for not having shoes, angry for being punished for something beyond her control, she was aware of not wanting to break the rules (even more) by getting out of her chair. More to the point, Sara was abandoned by the adult in her figured world of school, not picked up and invited into the lines being formed by all of her peers as they briskly filed out of the school building.

So, that brought me to the principal’s office. And then I was in the principal’s office and just being yelled at for pulling the fire alarm like, “You can’t do that! What makes you think you can do that?” And they tried to call my mom, and they couldn’t get my mom on the phone; you know, this is pre–cell phones, pre–answering machines.

I don’t think I—I didn’t go back into regular classes after that. I went into special ed. I think that’s what started my special ed career. It’s also worth mentioning that I—
was pretty special. [She laughs nervously.] I was already wanting to dress like a boy. And I was wearing my brother's clothes. And my mom was home perming my hair so I had this orange Afro—orange, curly hair. And then I was wearing swimming goggles that I found at the pool, even during the winter. And they didn’t know what to do with this kid.

This was a poor neighborhood, in the '70s, outside of Chicago. Like, it was get in line or get the fuck out. So that was the thing that started my special ed.

Sara was punished for not having shoes to change into and punished for pulling the fire alarm and disrupting the school day. But for Sara, the disruption of her school day began before she arrived at school, and it continued to be rattled and unraveled as she experienced punishment based on her socioeconomic class and her non-gender-conforming appearance. The aftermath of that memorable day also informed a permanent physical displacement from her general education classroom environment to a special education environment. The subjectivity with which Sara was treated leading up to being placed in special education is not uncommon with students who are labeled as and perceived to be students with special needs (Dudley-Marling, 2004; Goodley, 2017; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013). Sara again straddled the line between being both hypervisible and invisible: her hypervisibility manifested by her being subjectively placed into a special education classroom. She was hypervisible to her teacher and her peers as an “other” student who did not conform to classroom protocols (in this case by not having tennis shoes to change into and by refusing to follow her teacher’s orders). Yet she was invisible, as a girl coming from an impoverished household and neighborhood, who was living the life of a small adult as she took care of her alcoholic and neglectful mother while warding off sexual predators when she was not in school. Her invisibility is palpable, her hypervisibility, acute.
Sara’s figured world of home informed her figured world of school. She was a student with special needs: she needed an empathetic teacher, she needed a safe place to be a kid, and she needed to feel included. Instead, she was punished with a subjective and stigmatizing label and was displaced into a special education classroom. She was visible in a way that doesn’t fit into the mainstream curriculum of what it means to be a student in “general” education, and what it means to be a “general” girl. She didn’t play the game or fit the mold of “general” and was thus placed in a special education classroom. Sara was displaced and rejected from her general education class because she did not fit the motto of “Get in line or get the fuck out.” In Sara’s figured world of school, this was the expectation of “good,” based on a classist and heteronormative rubric that she did not meet, beginning at a very young age. This narrative highlights the double bind of being invisible and hypervisible, a theme that the majority of the women in this project alluded to.

*First grade was Mrs. Novak. Looking back, she seemed super patient with me. I mean, I still got in trouble. My experience was I had ADHD, and I was undiagnosed, and there was a lot of trouble going on at home, and so school was an equally safe space and terrifying space.*

Sara referred to her figured world of home as a site of “trouble,” while her figured world of school was a site of both safety and terror. Sara also referred to her undiagnosed ADHD as a significant factor in her experience in both figured worlds of home and school: her lack of a diagnosis left her unseen and invisible in both of the worlds that were shaping her identity. She was invisible in her figured world of home, in the sense that she had basic needs that were not being met, in addition to the fact that she was parenting her parent while also being raped by adults. Sara was invisible in her figured world of school, as she authored herself as getting into
trouble, while also being undiagnosed with ADHD. There seems to be a relationship between the two, which is not uncommon. Her invisibility in this case was about her ADHD contributing to her getting in trouble at school, combined with her troubling figured world of home. Sara did not have a place to be seen (read: understood, acknowledged in a positive way) in either of her figured worlds. Thus, her invisibility of needing what she could not express contributed greatly to her experience in both figured worlds. What children cannot express, they act out, and what Sara acted out got her into trouble at school while she was enduring a “troubling” life at home.

When it was really bad I would get sent to the principal’s office, and my big, fat, principal would send me to my counselor’s office. That was OK. She would always—it always helped. The little therapy things, like the visits to the social worker. I remember leaving there and being like, “It can be OK. I can go back to the classroom and learn something.” But I would have to get those little pep talks all the time.

Sara’s relationships with her school counselors were some of the most important she made. It was in her counselors’ offices over the years that she felt the most safe and visible. Sara described receiving “little pep talks,” which she needed “all the time” in order to have confidence in herself and her ability to learn. The simplicity of a “little pep talk” is noteworthy, particularly in how, in actuality, everyone needs “little pep talks,” regardless of age or (dis)ability. To Sara, they were “little pep talks,” but I understand them as “being seen and heard,” which is something everyone needs in order to feel a part of a community (Ginwright, 2016), which is also something that Sara (and Anna and Beth) lacked in their figured worlds of school and home.

I think I was just soaked in shame. I knew I was a bad kid. I knew I was stupid. I knew that I couldn’t do what they wanted me to do, that I was a burden, and that I was bad.
You know? I was bad. And that nobody wanted to be around me. So, like, my existence more than anything. And riding the short bus—because I was in sped. It’s fucking genius of them: 100 fucking feet away from the long bus stop. But if you rode the short bus, you had to wait at the short bus bus stop, which was so close to the regular bus stop. So it just separated me and the deaf kid and the kid with CP standing next to each other, and we were so close to the other kids but you’re not allowed to like mix it up. The segregation was intense. And them not knowing what to do with you. I remember that too: like, they don’t even know—I’m so poisoned. I just remember their faces and them not knowing what to do with me.

Sara authored herself as “bad,” “stupid,” “a burden,” and “poisoned.” The shame that she narrates is associated with taking up all of the aforementioned identities, which she later simply called “my existence.” Sara was all of these identities; all of these identities made up her whole, her “existence,” as she authored herself as being “soaked in shame.” The image of Sara being “soaked in shame” is powerful. The identities of “bad . . . stupid . . . a burden . . . poisoned” leave no pockets for breath, for air. She was completely consumed with these (self-deprecating) identities, absorbing them like a porous sponge, “soaked in shame.” Shame is an invisible emotion. Sara, like many of the participants in this study, alluded to it often. It is an embodied, internalized emotion that is invisible to outsiders but visceral in its existence within the person experiencing it.

Like, a lot of the shame is about the reflection that I saw. Like, the reflection was intense. Also in the positive way, the reflection was intense. So, those ladies that were really nice, like the counselor; those reflections were saving me because their reflection was of smiles and of “You’re good and you’re sweet and you’re OK.” Reflection was huge, cuz
you can’t see yourself as a kid. You can’t see yourself as an adult. So, all I could see was what was being reflected. So, reflection was huge, and that was a lot of shock. Like, anger, and frustration and pushing away or dismissing or—it just seemed like I was toxic. I never thought about the reflection part either. Like, that’s all I would get—the way that other people looked at me.

Sara consistently referred to shame and anger in her schooling narrative. Her identity was being illustrated to her by the characters in her figured world of school—some positive, most negative. The positive reflections were “saving her,” reminding her that she was “good” and “sweet” and “OK,” identities that were being challenged by the negative reflections from other teachers who labeled her as “poisoned,” “bad,” “stupid,” and a “burden.” These reflections, both positive and negative, are also symbolic to the constant negotiation between the hypervisibility/invisibility that she authored throughout her schooling narrative.

*It was super clear that I couldn’t read. And I couldn’t do math. I never carried any books. I remember at the beginning of the year I would get a book, but I never knew what to do with it. It didn’t make any sense. Like, it felt good to have it, and then it felt shameful to have it because I couldn’t do anything with it. I remember looking at the pictures and looking through it and being like, “Oh this is a science book!” or “This is a history book.” Those books never stayed with me because I never knew what to do with them.*

*And I was just getting ready to go into sixth grade. And they kept putting me through the grades. And I think this school just wanted to get me out of there. Like, they weren’t holding me back anymore. I think they were just like, “We gotta get this kid outta here.” So, I went on to sixth grade in the summer between fifth and sixth grade. There*
was a lot more sexual abuse happening and a lot going on with my mom and home. I was just off. And ready to fuck shit up.

In this excerpt, Sara’s figured world of home includes juggling sexual abuse with her inability to read or do math, and her memory of how the characters in her figured world of school handled her was not to ask her what was going on or to provide more support for her but to pass her through the grades she wasn’t legitimately passing because she was, in her understanding, a burden to them. Sara ventriloquized the characters in her figured world of school, saying, “We gotta get her outta here,” which speaks to Sara’s lack of safety and visibility in her figured world of school. At a time when her figured world of home was also incredibly unsafe, Sara’s body and psyche were being forever shaped and molded by these traumatic experiences occurring in both figured worlds of home and school. These experiences offered Sara a similar message—you do not matter.

I think there was a talent show in the seventh grade, and I did Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean,” and everyone was freaking out. Like, I did really good. I was lip-synching, and I did all the choreography that was on MTV. My counselor, Mrs. S., told me I was talented. She said, “You are talented. You are a dancer.” She was just encouraging me, and break dancing was big then, so I started hanging around break-dancers.

Sara recalled being visible to her peers in a way that wasn’t consistent with her schooling. More often than not, Sara described her experiences in school with a sense of heaviness, as if recalling these memories brought her right back to the difficulties and trauma she faced both in and outside of the school building. Mrs. S., her guidance counselor, was the one consistent adult in her figured world of school who gave her positive attention and encouraged her to celebrate her
talents. Specifically, Mrs. S. helped Sara to identify as a *dancer*, which became her first profession after dropping out of school in the eighth grade.

The final memory of eighth grade was Ms. S., my guidance counselor, told me I needed to be practicing my dancing and asked me if I had a routine that I could show to her. That was homework that I could do. And she got me out of school for an audition at the high school for performing arts. I remember being so excited and so terrified; it was an open audition. She was like, “You can do this!” She really believed in me. But nobody else knew we were doing it. My mom didn’t know we were doing it. She took me out to lunch afterwards. But I did really good at the audition. And then I remember her calling me into her office like sometime later and me being like, “I’m in fucking trouble again.” And her telling me that I got into the school. And they held a meeting with the dean of the school, and my mom showed up.

And that is where they determined that I couldn’t do it because I was—my academics were too low—and I got into too much trouble. Which is so heartbreaking. And not only was I not going to be able to go to the high school of performing arts, I was going to have to go to this high school that was [she starts sobbing] called “STEP,” which was, like, policed. Oh my god! I’ve never talked about that [she continues to cry heavily]. Holy shit. I never knew that I had feelings about that like this. So they were like, “No.” I remember Ms. S. freaking the fuck out. Like, she freaked the fuck out. I just remember her looking at me and she was crying and was like, “This is not you. This is not you.”

Mrs. S. was one of a few people who saw Sara in a light that was beyond her superficial appearance or her “troubled” actions toward her peers and teachers. In the eyes of Mrs. S., Sara
was visible in a way that she had not experienced from any of the adults in her figured world of school thus far. This excerpt is another example of a “reflection” that Sara referred to when talking about her ability to read her teachers’ faces and know or interpret how they felt about her, a quality common in children of alcoholic parents who do not have the ability to express themselves verbally. In this case, Sara narrated a painful experience, wherein she was receiving contradicting “reflections.” On one side, her counselor was telling her, “This is not you,” while on the other side, she was being denied access to a school and, even more importantly, was being denied an opportunity, a dream.

_She was screaming at them, “How can you do this?” And the dean was like, “She can’t succeed at anything.” And my mom just wanted to go along with what the dean said because he was the authority, and she couldn’t control me anymore, and she was so deep in alcoholism at that time; she was, like, not coming home for like seven days at a time_ [she continues to narrate this story through tears and deep breaths]. _That was that._

Again, Sara’s figured world of home and school informed her ability to succeed. Sara’s story of denial to access, of a denied opportunity, parallels her mother’s inability to show up for her at home or to advocate for her within her figured world of school. Specifically, Sara narrated this experience as one in which her mother could not “control” her anymore and saw the dean of the performing arts high school as the person of authority; what he said about her daughter was regarded as Truth, finite, inarguable. Jean Anyon (1997) highlights the difference in socioeconomic status of parents and students in relation to the power dynamics that are established within the figured world of school, specific to administration and teachers. Anyon states that students and parents from lower socioeconomic statuses communicate from an assumed place of powerlessness, not challenging or questioning the (assumed) authority of the
teacher or administrator with whom they are speaking. In the foregoing excerpt, where Sara was
denied access to the performing arts high school by the dean of her school, she—once again—
was invisible, not only within her figured world of school but at the intersection of her figured
worlds of home and school. Her dean denied her access to a potentially rewarding future, and her
mother quietly subscribed to the belief that he knew what was best for her daughter. All the
while, Sara somehow got lost in the planning of her own future.

I failed eighth grade, of course. I mean, failed seventh grade, and they pushed me into
eighth gr—I failed every year, and I got Fs consistently. I consistently got Fs, but they
would push me into the next grade because they didn’t want to deal with me. So I failed
eighth grade, and there was going to be a graduation for me, but I wasn’t going to stay at
that school. They were gonna put me in STEP for the next year. I didn’t go back to school
in the eighth grade. I think there was another month and a half left. The high school of
the performing arts would’ve been in the fall. And I just didn’t go back. I felt like I started
achieving a different level of disconnect and detach. And I started using heroin. It was
painful. It was like the message I was getting was, “It’s stupid to have dreams. You’ll
never be able to achieve it.” And they were just looking at me saying that I wasn’t
supposed to get off my block. “What are you doing? What makes you think that you can
do that?”

Sara refers to “they” a lot in this frame story within her schooling narrative. I read the theys as
those characters in her figured world of school (the dean of the performing arts center, her
principal, her teachers) in conversation with those characters in her figured world of home (her
mother, her sexual abusers, her mother’s boyfriends). None of the theys was advocating for her
or reflecting through their words or actions that they believed in her. She was invisible in her
figured world of home and toed the line between hypervisible and invisible in her figured world of school.

Sara ventriloquized the reflections, inquiries, and assaults of the characters in her figured world of school, saying, “It’s stupid to have dreams. You’ll never be able to achieve it. . . . And they were just looking at me saying that I wasn’t supposed to get off my block. . . . What are you doing? What makes you think that you can do that?” They were the amalgamation of the reflections from the characters in her figured world of school, who did not see her. These messages that she recounted speak to the socioeconomics of hope; Sara received the message from her figured worlds that she was not supposed to leave her block, that she was supposed to remain poor and limited in her dreams.

Sara’s invisibility within her figured world of school speaks to a theme narrated by many of this project’s other participants. She was seen in a positive way through the eyes of her counselor. She was encouraged to follow her dancing talent; she was provided the opportunity to perform as a means to attend a school that would foster her talents; she had an advocate in Ms. S. The tragedy was that the advocates in Sara’s life were outnumbered by the people who saw Sara as someone who required more policing. Sara was hypervisible to the dean, her principal, and her mother; according to her, she was seen as someone who “[couldn’t] succeed at anything.”

Because it is evident from Sara’s narrative that Ms. S. saw her in a very different light, this tension among different ways of seeing Sara is noteworthy. The relationship between Sara’s hypervisibility, the way that she ran around the playground with wild hair askew, gaining the name “Tornado,” being thrown against a wall for falling asleep during reading time, versus Sara’s invisibility, being passed through every grade she failed because “they” didn’t want to “deal with” her, presents a seemingly dichotomous tension, and yet many of this study’s
participants expressed iterations of this same sort of tension. What does it mean to be invisible in school? What does it mean to be hypervisible in school? And what does it take to be seen, as a young girl in school?

Beth

Figured World of Home

One Christmas vacation, I came home, and then I was going to San Maritz. There was a ski trip. This is—I can’t believe I got these opportunities. Really. But I was so miserable, I couldn’t enjoy them. Anyway, I’m going to San Maritz, and I’m going skiing. And I’m wearing a pair of Top-Siders with no socks. And that’s how I go to San Maritz. No boots. No socks. I had no idea what it was going to be like. My parents were drunk. So they would criticize me, but it’s not like they would ever help me. They wouldn’t be like, “You know, you’re going on a trip. You’re gonna want to think about what you want to pack. There’s going to be a lot of snow. So maybe you want to pack some boots.” Like, nothing.

I was so on my own.

Beth narrated her figured world of home as a lonely one. There is a quality of invisibility associated with being “on my own” and “so alone.” In her recollection of packing for San Maritz, Beth narrated her interaction with her parents as one of criticism rather than support. The image of Beth wearing her Top-Siders without socks while on a skiing trip is also reminiscent of Sara’s boot/shoe experience, which isolated her from the rest of her class. Beth’s invisibility around her parents related to their lack of mentorship. Similar to how Anna and Sara authored themselves within their figured worlds of home, Beth took on a self-parenting role due to the fact that her parents were not available to her as role models or reliable, supportive people.
Alcoholism has been labeled “the disease of isolation” (Wilson & Smith, 1939) because so many people enter into AA with a sense that they are alone and that they are the only people who are experiencing life in such a difficult way. Be it the way she drank, her childhood, or any or all aspects of her life leading up to coming into the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous, the nonsober alcoholic’s tendency is toward a sense of “terminal uniqueness” (p. 31). This terminal uniqueness is what separates the alcoholic from her potential community; it feeds into the disease of isolation that keeps the alcoholic apart from rather than a part of. A part of what makes AA revolutionary is that hearing the stories of other people who felt alone, unique in their drinking or their life stories, sheds light on the disease of isolation among self-identifying alcoholics.

**Figured World of School**

*I remember in the first grade when the teachers would give out tasks and things, that I was almost always the last to get chosen. They’d get to me last. And it was really frustrating because I wanted to be a part of things earlier. And I remember I would go up and say, “Well, what about me,” and they’d be like, “Stop. We’ll get to you later,” and sorta being irritated with me. I could tell they were irritated with me for doing that.*

Beth narrated herself as somewhat of an outsider in her figured world of school. Like Sara, when Beth vocalized her need to be seen—also an indicator of her invisibility in school—she was met with punishing, “irritated” words from her teachers. There is a double bind here: Beth was asking for what she needed. She needed to be seen. She needed to be a part of her classroom community. If she did not ask for what she needed, she could be overlooked, remaining invisible. But by asking for what she needed, she was taking a risk of being “too” outspoken, irritating her teachers and becoming hypervisible in a way that continued to keep her as an outsider in her figured world of school. This bind, I argue, is gendered and more complicated for girls and
young women as they learn to navigate the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity and oppressive patriarchal standards.

Let me just go to second grade cuz this is where it starts to get not good for me at school. Grades second through ninth were hard. So in second grade all of our reading is group reading. So I’m a really good reader, and interested, and I’m listening to people [she narrates her peers]: “and then . . . we . . . went . . . to . . . the . . .” and I’m so bored. I’m out of my mind with boredom. So we have these big books, and so I’m always reading ahead. And I’m reading ahead because I’m so bored. And inevitably, the teacher would call on me, and I wouldn’t be paying attention, so they thought I was stupid. And I got put in the lowest—like the bottom—even though they knew that I had scored at a fourth-grade reading level. But it was like, I was bad—I mean, nobody asks, “Why aren’t you paying attention?” Because I would’ve told them, “I’m bored and I’m reading ahead.” But what was going on for me wasn’t part of what mattered there. It was, “You’re not paying attention; you’re not doing what you’re supposed to be doing.” So that’s when I started getting put into the stupid groups. And I’m so not stupid [she says as she bursts into tears].

The sentence “What was going on for me wasn’t part of what mattered there” speaks to the invisibility and lack of agency that Beth had in her figured world of school. She recalled her teachers placing her in “stupid groups” when they knew that she could read at an advanced level. Beth narrated this experience as if she was being punished for making herself visible to her teachers, who easily overlooked her. The boredom of not being challenged and having that be mistaken for being “bad” is somewhat of a canonical story within many participants’ figured
worlds of school. When Beth took matters into her own hands, attempting to stay connected and challenged by reading ahead, she was punished by being put into the “stupid” groups.

The invisibility comes into play because her teachers knew that she tested on a fourth-grade reading level, so there was a disconnect that made her smaller—invisible—to her teachers, according to her narrative. Beth authored herself as “bad,” not through her own words but through a ventriloquizing of her teachers, who, she perceived, saw her as “bad” because she would not pay attention to the group reading. Nevertheless, she authored herself as “bad,” a taking-up of an identity that was reflected to her (as Sara described it) by the characters in her figured world of school. This is a subtle but important memory because Beth took up the identity of “bad” simultaneously in her figured world of home (for not dressing like a good girl) and her figured world of school (for not following directions like a good student) while she also juggled the pressure of being a protective sister.

And then I think I was also mad about that. I couldn’t articulate exactly why I was mad, but I think I was mad because I knew there was this huge thing that they were missing.

And I also didn’t know how to articulate it and stand up for myself. Plus, I thought that nobody would care if I did anyway, so I just kept doing what I was doing.

Beth authored herself as “mad” as she navigated the memory of being invisible and misunderstood within her figured world of school. There is an overwhelming sense of solitude in her recollection: “There was this huge thing that they were missing . . . I thought that nobody would care if I did anyway, so I just kept doing what I was doing.” Beth stated that she did not know how to stand up for herself, and she had little faith that even if she did, she would be acknowledged. Beth articulated a lack of agency in her own education. The characters in her figured world of school were depicted as annoyed with her, impatient, and lacking empathy.
Most importantly, Beth authored herself as mad while remaining invisible to the characters in her figured world of school, who should have been able to offer her help.

*I think it was in the third grade I got even more bored. So it was so much harder for me to pay attention because everything just got even slower. I wasn’t paying attention, and I was angry. And I think at that point in school I started causing trouble. But I’m a sneaky trouble causer.*

Beth authored herself as a “sneaky trouble causer” at a time when she also authored herself as bored. This is crucial for understanding Beth’s—and many students’—schooling experiences, such as in what it means to be a “troubled girl” in school; who decides she is troubled and for what reasons? Beth authored herself as a trouble causer, a specific consequence of being bored and angry due to the slower pace of her schooling.

**Figured World of Home and School**

*I mean, I was in so much trouble at home that I knew that if it was obvious what I was doing I would just get punished even more. So the kind of trouble I would cause is kinda stirring the pot and pointing things out—things that I knew would kinda get other people’s goats. Cuz I was good at knowing what would do that. So that’s how I started to entertain myself.*

The identity that Beth took on as a “sneaky trouble causer” was another way that she “played the game” (of school). She identified as bored and angry in school and got in “so much trouble” at home. The “sneaky trouble causer” identity was a way to keep herself entertained—a true playing of a game—as she dodged authoritative figures in her figured worlds of school and home. Remaining invisible was an important skill to have when attempting to be sneaky, an
identity that Beth seemed to take pride in as she authored her experiences within both figured worlds.

*What’s interesting is that I would say, “Well, what’s that one gonna do?” So it’s interesting because I was giving myself my own education. I think this is a generous way of saying this, but I had to give this to myself because it wasn’t happening in the classroom.*

Here, again, Beth’s recollection of her self-education was heavily weighted with a sense of solitude. She was angry, causing trouble, and giving herself her own education. Beth played the game by reading people (like Sara looking at her teachers’ reflections) in her figured world of school; she kept herself interested and engaged by wondering what individuals were going to say or do throughout her school day. This is reminiscent of adult children of alcoholics, who learn to “read” people and observe people in a very particular way (Alanon Family Group Head Inc, 1997). It is important to note that the way in which she chose to entertain herself was probably also informed by the alcoholism in her figured world of home.

*So seventh grade is really when I saw—I really got what it meant to be in the stupid classes. I mean, I already knew that everything got slowed down more. I knew I’d be more bored. I knew they wouldn’t pay attention to me. Because even though I was in all the stupid classes, they didn’t give me any attention. They gave it to the people who really were dumb. So it was like even though I was in an idiot class, I wasn’t getting any attention—so that’s why I was giving myself attention, I guess.*

What Beth narrated here was her invisibility and her self-reliance, contributing to a larger theme in this research, which is *survival*. Beth did not relate to being an “idiot” or “stupid,” despite the fact that she was a part of the “idiot/stupid class” community. She narrated her seventh-grade
experience as one of being acutely aware of her talents, which contrasted deeply to the community she was placed in by the *theys*—the characters who held all of the power within her figured world of school. She is hypervisible in her non-“idiot class” as someone who was annoying and bad and could not stay on task; she was invisible in her “idiot” class, as she was not receiving the services and in-depth attention that her peers received. Beth’s response to the lack of positive attention she received was to offer that attention to herself. This was a radical act of self-care and means of survival for a seventh grader, let alone an adult. I will return to this radical notion of self-care as it relates to survival in the next chapter, but it should be noted that these self-soothing strategies are agentic ways in which these young women survived in their figured worlds of both home and school. This is not hyperbole. The strategies that the participants in this research project adopted in order to survive their home lives and school lives are agentic acts of bravery.

> *I think it was in eighth grade that I got into a history class where the teacher actually wanted us to think. And I did amazingly well because I was interested. It wasn’t, like, “Here’s the class; here’s the assignment; you need to spit it out like this.” And he pulled me aside one day and said, “You know, you’re a leader. You really have leadership ability.” And nobody had ever said that to me, but I had always felt that it was true. But I thought, “How could that be true? Because I’m always in trouble.” And they think I’m stupid and disrespectful. So that was the first time that I felt somebody saw me for who I actually really am, as opposed to who I look like on the surface.*

Beth narrated the first time that she felt visible in her figured world of school. She was not being silenced, nor was she being rewarded for conforming—both of which are equal experiences of invisibility. She was told that she was a leader, a feeling that she admitted to having embodied
but having been unable to connect with, since she had adopted the messages from other teachers that she was “stupid and disrespectful.” There is a marked double bind in knowing oneself—or at least, thinking one does—but receiving information, either explicitly or subconsciously, that one is the opposite of one’s self-perception. Beth knew intuitively that she was a leader, and she took up this leader identity. But she was also denied this identity by characters in her figured world of school until being partnered with her eighth-grade teacher. What is striking is the tug-of-war in knowing oneself while at the same time being actively denied the validation that is essential to the healthy development of self-esteem in children and adolescents. Neither the characters in Beth’s figured world of school nor the characters in her figured world of home were validators of (her)Self.

In ninth grade, I think I had moved up from the idiot classes to the medium classes at that point. And I went to the principal and said, “I don’t know what’s going on here. Now, in math, I probably should be in the medium classes. But why you’re not putting me in the top classes like English and history—whats wr—I don’t know what to do! Would you please help me? Once I am this, am I always going to be this?” And I remember the principal was really impressed that I had done that and then I was allowed to go to some of the top classes, just because I asked. And I did it because I was humiliated and so afraid of having to go that slow again and not being challenged.

It seems like a very rare situation where a freshman in high school would take on this much responsibility and be motivated by humiliation and fear to approach the principal and ask to be placed in different, more stimulating classes. In one sense, this is a story about a young woman finding her voice, using it, asking for what she wants, and being rewarded for it. In another sense, it is a multilayered account of a young woman being her own advocate because no one
else sees her. The imagery of Beth moving through her worlds is full of solitude and loneliness. The moment that she called attention to the identity formation around being in the “stupid” classes—when she said, “Once I am this, am I always going to be this?”—she called attention to a system of tracking students. For many students, especially students in low-income communities and students of color, the answer to that question would be “Yes. Yes, once you are ‘this,’ you will always be ‘this,’ and in fact, it will follow you beyond your figured worlds of home and school.” This was the case for Sara, who was told who she was and was not and dropped out of school almost immediately afterward.

Beth described another rare situation within her figured world of school, where she became visible to her teacher:

_I started smoking pot in ninth grade, and I gained 40 pounds. I blew up like a balloon. I remember my ninth-grade homeroom teacher pulling me aside in the hall and looking frantic. She asked, “Beth, what is going on?” And I was so humiliated. [Her eyes begin to well with tears.] She didn’t do anything wrong, but what was I going to say? I couldn’t say what my life was like or what I was doing. I mean, what I was doing was illegal with the pot. But it was also escaping. And, you know I was never going to talk about what was going on at home, and so I just said, “Nothing.”_

In her moment of visibility, she also authored herself as “humiliated” and unable to talk about what was going on in her figured world of home, which at this point was greatly influencing her figured world of school. This is a canonical schooling story. There is clearly something going on with Beth, but when questioned with a voice of concern by her teacher, telling the truth was not an option. How then do educators phrase questions differently? Or, how do educators ask
students in such a way that they might feel more comfortable to divulge what is going on? This is another solitary moment that Beth narrates wherein her words are thoughtful and self-protective.

*I think there were five emergency school meetings over the two years I was at Bunch because of stuff that I had done. And I remember the headmaster announcing at one of them, “We have a cancer in our midst.” And he was talking about me! “We have a cancer in our midst” was me! Cuz what I had done, I never gotten caught; I don’t know if they knew it was me. But I was The Cancer.*

This is a powerful memory because it is a powerful statement, a powerful label given to Beth from her headmaster. To be labeled “a cancer” is to be identified as a potentially deadly disease, signified by an unwanted growth or tumor, formed by malformed cellular structures. And Beth, not knowing if the characters in her figured world of school—the *theys*—knew that she was specifically the cancer, took on the identity of The Cancer.

*And then I would sit there and think to myself, there’s something so wrong here, and I was able to express it in a bad way. But I felt like on another level, when is someone going to take seriously who I am? And that was the best way I knew how to express it. But I also knew that I was perceived as a cancer in our midst.*

Beth continued to narrate her hypervisibility within her figured world of school. She was hypervisible because she acted out her feelings of anger through defiant acts such as smoking pot and drinking openly, and yet she remained *invisible*, as she wasn’t sent to the shrink like her peers, and she gained the label of “a cancer” but was never named. She was simultaneously the anonymous cancer and the hypervisible “troubled” girl.

*So I felt awful about it, but I also felt proud. And I also felt like, you shouldn’t be underestimating me. Cuz I guess that’s what I was used to—ignored or shut up or you’re*
an idiot or you’re bad—I mean, other than that teacher who said, “What’s happening to you?” in the hallway when I blew up from smoking pot, I don’t remember other people trying.

Beth ventriloquized other people’s voices as they labeled her “an idiot” and “bad,” as she narrated her fractured self. On the one hand, Beth felt “awful” about being “The Cancer”; on the other hand, she felt a sense of pride as she narrated her resentment toward those characters in her figured world of school who did not see her, help or, or see through her destructive actions as a cry for help. Beth was navigating as an adult, through her schooling narrative, the invisible/hypervisible conundrum that both Anna and Sara also narrated.

I should mention the headmaster had a wife named Dorothy Pine. And I loved—I got to love her. She was my English teacher, and I would torture her in class. And I remember once doing something with an assignment; I did it backwards or sideways. I did it wrong, whatever it was. But I did it intentionally; it was clever! It was wrong, but clever. And she lifted up my work and this look came over her like, “You little shit,” and as soon as I saw her face when she recognized what I had done, I knew I had gotten her. And then she looked at me and she started laughing with me. And that’s when I started loving Dotty Pine. And I remember her coming up to me and saying, “You know, you’re really OK.”

And I think that was the first time anybody had ever said that to me. And that changed everything because then I started—I didn’t change everything in terms of what I was doing—but I wanted her to respect me because I respected her so much. She was the first one who was like, “I really like you.” She somehow got me. She got in. Even though there wasn’t any holding me or counseling me or getting me into therapy or anything like
that, but I think she got who I really was. She didn’t treat me like a criminal, and so I stopped being a criminal around her.

Beth described being visible in the eyes of Dotty Pine. She ventriloquized Dotty Pine’s initial reaction to her intentional wrong assignment as, “You little shit,” quickly followed by a knowing laugh. This memory felt momentous to Beth as she narrated it because as she was being made visible, she was connecting with a teacher, and she expressed a love for Dotty Pine that she had not expressed up until that point. It is almost as if Dotty Pine “played the game” with Beth—Beth had written the rules, and Dotty Pine read them and was playing with them—an experience that Beth was used to doing alone.

“She didn’t treat me like a criminal, and so I stopped being a criminal around her” is a poignant coda to this memory. Beth authored herself as a noncriminal specifically in relation to Dotty Pine, whereas the bulk of her schooling career, she had described herself as a troublemaker. As Beth was made visible in the eyes of her teacher, a character in her figured world of school, she simultaneously decided not to take on the identity of “criminal” when she was with that teacher. The intimacy of this relationship, established by Dotty Pine’s vision of Beth and Beth’s willingness to change, created a sense of hope in Beth’s schooling story. It also highlighted an invaluable, powerful moment of intimacy between teacher and student; it shifted Beth’s intentions and identity for Beth’s greater good.

*Once I left Bunch, I knew that my life of crime was over because it felt so bad. Being a criminal—that kind of a criminal—meant that I had to hide and sneak even more. I was committing my entire being and energy to pretending to be one thing on the outside and having a completely different set of goals on the inside. So I guess it was—that’s how I kept myself interested and occupied and engaged—doing terrible things. But I learned so*
much doing that. I mean, I wish that was not the path that I had to take. But basically I felt so alone and so isolated, and I could not believe that no one ever grabbed me and said, “Something’s wrong. We’re gonna get you help.”

Beth authored herself as a criminal, describing the modes of survival she used while participating in her figured world of school—“I had to hide and sneak; I was committing my entire being and energy to pretending to be one thing on the outside and having a completely different set of goals on the inside; I kept myself interested and occupied and engaged [by] doing terrible things.”—but has done much more than that in this recollection. She has described her experience as a fractured Self who pretended to be one thing while identifying as something else, something with which she already had practice in regard to hiding her sexuality. She also described her invisibility when she stated, “I could not believe that no one ever grabbed me and said, ‘Something’s wrong. We’re going to get you help.’” Even though Beth took up the identity of a criminal, she narrated the experience of an invisible girl in school, in need of attention, living a duplicitous life in order to survive both figured worlds of home and school. Beth, like Sara and Anna, referred to the energy required to commit to one identity (a criminal) knowing that she identified with a completely different identity (an invisible girl). These modus operandi are not hyperbolic; as Anna, Sara, Beth, and many other participants in this study indicate, their acts of criminality were invitations to be seen, heard, and most importantly, cared for.
Chapter 6: Survival, Resiliency, Hope

Survival

Anna

Figured world of home and school.

I used to get in fights a lot for my brother cuz people would make fun of him, and I would just lay into them. I remember getting in fights on the school bus quite a bit because that’s the time where it’s unsupervised. And, um, the fights never stopped for me. People makin’ fun of him and whatever. If anybody looked at my brother or my sister wrong, I mean I had to fight them. I had to. It wasn’t a—I wasn’t a bully by any stretch. I had a trigger. You know; if it was pulled, it was pulled. It was almost like I had a—I didn’t have a choice. Um. [Long pause.] My little sister, we rode the school bus together, as well, and—do you remember Kill Bill? [I nod.] Do you remember when she would go off into that crazy mode and start killing everyone and it was like the sirens [she makes the noise of the sirens] that’s how—that’s the best way I can describe what happened to me. It happened—I mean I fought until I quit school.

While Anna’s survival isn’t specifically mentioned in the foregoing excerpt, it is certainly a story about protection, which is a form of survival. I think it speaks to the different identities Anna wore, most of which played a significant role in how she survived both her figured worlds of home and school. It is as if Anna admitted to not having control over her actions. She narrated many fights in her schooling narrative, none of which were about hurting the other person but were, rather, about protecting herself or someone she loved. Both Anna and Sara referred to physical strength when authoring themselves within their figured worlds of home and school.
Both took up the identity of protector and even the role of partner to their respective mothers at times. By fighting to protect herself and her family, Anna also modeled through her actions that she would not put up with her brother or sister being disrespected or made fun of. This physical act is an act not just of defense and protection but of survival.

Toward the end of the first interview, I asked her to describe who she was as a learner. Anna’s response echoed her independence, which was somewhat forced on her, due to her need to self-parent. She defined herself as someone who was “strong” and “made good decisions,” attributes that she stated were useful for adapting and protecting oneself. Her choice of language in “adapting” and “protecting” oneself parallels the language of survival; adaptation and protection are two crucial skills needed to survive.

*I mean I would like to think I was strong and made good decisions. Um, I don’t know that I always did. I don’t always know that I learned from the decisions I made, but I think if I was scared, I ran away, and if I didn’t know what to do I didn’t do anything, and when you—I think those are two very useful tools when you have to learn how to adapt and protect yourself.*

*Sometimes I wish it were simple, like “I made As and Bs, and then I met a boy, and then I made some Cs, and then my parents yelled at me, so then I went back to As and Bs, and then I went to college, and I met a boy—or whatever—and I made Cs, and my parents cut me off, and then I got As and Bs again. And then I got a job . . . [laughs a lot] I wish sometimes that was my story. But, uh, how I lived makes me curious about myself. I don’t—I don’t fit into a mold. And I don’t know much about my mom, and I don’t know much about my dad. I know some things. It makes everything so . . . mystical*
for me. Um. There’s no obvious roads. There’s no obvious choices. There’s no easy answers. Every decision that I’ve made has been half faith and half survival.

This powerful last sentence speaks to Anna’s decision-making process within her figured worlds of home and school. It speaks to her relationship with her foster family, her biological mother, her stepdads, her desire to play football, her desire to play percussion in the band, her desire to beat Bobby for first-chair trumpet, her desire to protect her siblings at home and at school (including on the bus). Anna is saying that somewhere between her hope for herself and her future self, she relied on faith and survival as tools that would help her in her uncertain and often violent figured worlds of school and home.

**Sara**

Figured world of home and school.

No book in the house. Not one. A cookbook, maybe, but that didn’t get used. When people had books in their house I just laughed. I was like, “Why do you have a library in here?” I didn’t take books home from school. I didn’t read. It’s so weird. So you know, there was no news. There was no education. It was survival mode, purely. It’s crazy. There was some local news, and that was about weather and plane crashes.

Books and news were symbols of education to Sara, and she did not have access to either. Sara’s figured world of home dominated her ability to show up to her figured world of school. Being in “survival mode” meant constantly being a parental figure to her mother while also protecting herself from the sexual predators who infiltrated her life beginning at the age of 4.

I don’t know how I ended up starting eighth grade because now I’m drinking and using pot, and I may have tried cocaine for the first time. And my mom is so far gone. Shit with my mom is so far gone. I’m doing tons of acid. I’m using all the time. I just became a full-
fledged addict. The other important thing that happens is that I am introduced to Michael Jackson, and I started dancing. That’s the other thing that I’m really, really good at. So when I’m not high, I’m dancing my ass off. I started hanging out with Puerto Rican kids. There was a lot of drug dealing, pot dealing, and now I was like making out with kids in gangs. That was seventh grade summer. Eighth grade I was dancing all the time. Getting wasted all the time.

I had just turned 15. I was dancing like a motherfucker. And I found heroin for the first time. Punk rock and heroin, in a studio apartment, cocktail waitressing and fucking everybody. But dancing was the thing that kept me alive, knowing that I was going to be a dancer. So yeah, that’s the—I don’t really know how to read. I could do basic math. Like, um, addition and subtraction, that’s it.

Sara’s statement, “dancing was the thing that kept me alive,” is no hyperbole. Having something she was good at gave her hope, which is something many of the participants of this project referred to both directly and indirectly. Having hope in her future as a dancer was one of Sara’s saving graces, just as Anna found hope in playing the trumpet and competing with Bobby for first chair.

Beth

Figured world of home.

And I remember getting to San Maritz with Top-Siders and bare ankles, and it was freezing. So I was constantly compensating for all this stuff that I didn’t know and then pretending like I wasn’t, so that—that takes so much energy. But I remember thinking that I had to spend more time anticipating and preparing because bad things could happen, because I was really unprepared. And part of that was I would hate myself for
that—I had never been to San Maritz! I didn’t know! I really didn’t know! But I would beat the crap—“You stupid fucking idiot”—I would do what my parents did to me.

Beth narrated her figured world of home via the frame story of her trip to San Maritz, wherein she did “what [her] parents did to [her],” which was beating herself up by speaking self-deprecatingly, with convicted hatred for herself. She also narrated in this story how much energy it took to pretend she knew what she was doing, evincing an expenditure of energy similar to that taken out of Sara to juggle parenting her suicidal mother while attending school and attempting to pretend everything was fine at home, as well as the energy that Anna expended, protecting her mother, brother, and sister from her alcoholic stepfather(s). All three women—and many more of the participants in this project—referred to the amount of energy it took to survive in both their figured worlds of home and school. What they and so many of the participants described was not just about abuse or lack of parental support; what Beth, Anna, Sara, and most of the participants described was survival.

Beth’s drive to compensate for what she did not know was not about proving something from an adolescent ego; rather, her energy was spent on preparing for the unknown—a setup for failure feeding the whirlwind of self-hatred and deprecation. A 15-year-old Beth, traveling to a place she had never been before, without guidance from her parents, held onto a narrative about how she should have known more or known better. Beth authored herself through the discourse of a fractured self; she was self-hating, self-deprecat ing, and compensating for what she could not admit to not knowing. This fractured self is something I explore again in Beth’s case study and as a greater theme across the majority of the interviews I conducted.
Figured world of school.

So, I started saying something like, “I’m not an idiot.” And they were like, “Prove it.” But the way to prove it was to be obedient and do it the way they wanted me to. And I remember in seventh grade—maybe that’s when my hormones kicked in, because I had been miserable and in agony—so even though I kinda knew what I had to do in order to conform and pass, I had so much crap inside of me that I couldn’t really get myself to do it, except in classes where I was interested.

Beth narrated more rules to the game of school. Specifically, in order to prove that she was not an “idiot,” Beth needed to be obedient and follow all the rules. She mentioned that perhaps one of the reasons she could not bring herself to follow all of the rules was her hormones. Beth took up the identity of a “nonidiot,” expecting to prove herself to the characters in her figured world. And, as with most of us, conforming and proving herself was much easier in classes she was interested in.

I do not know whether Beth was equating her hormones to the “crap inside” of her, but what is striking is the way in which she acknowledged the potential influence her hormones had over her “misery” and “agony.” I think this is another way that Beth used self-deprecation as a means to explain her unhappiness within her figured world of school, when there was plenty to be miserable about, regardless of hormones.

So, at that point I had started the, what would be called the “A and D student thing.” If I wasn’t engaged or interested, I just—I mean now, as an adult, I can probably explain it because I know from neuroscience and all this other stuff that when all your energy is going to survive, you don’t have energy to just decide, “I’m going to put my energy here,
here, and here.” So I only put my good energy into the things that I like. Cuz all my energy was in, like, not killing myself.

Beth described a new part of the playing the game discourse, which she calls “the A and D student thing.” She likened it to another means of survival, where she reserved the “A” student identity for subjects and classes that she liked. This echoes Sara’s proclamation, which is described in a later section, that all of her energy would go to staying out of prison for homicide if one more man raped her. What Beth described in “the A and D student” discourse is not dissimilar. Both women discussed a skill set that is learned in response to trauma, which is typical of (but not limited to) children of alcoholic families. There is a necessary compartmentalization that is required in order to survive home, school, and life. Beth and Sara (and, in ways that will be covered in the next section, Anna) learned to compartmentalize their energy, which they experienced as a challenge to their sanity and identity, to survive their figured worlds of home and school and not kill themselves or others.

In the following excerpt, Beth narrated her schooling experience as one in which she needed to pretend in order to survive:

*I mean the schooling was ridiculous. It was basically a place to warehouse rich kids and children of diplomats. I remember being terrified being in this culture, and I was pretending that I knew what I was doing. So that was another part of my personality—the fake it till you make it. I definitely had an edge, and I’m not an edgy person. So it didn’t feel good. It was kind of aggressive and hostile because I felt like I needed to protect myself. But I was terrified.*

Beth authored another part of her fractured self as the “fake it till you make it” personality, one that relates as well to her anecdote about having no idea what to pack for her trip to San Maritz,
in which she essentially blamed her ignorance on herself. The other aspect of the “fake it till you make it” personality that Beth highlighted was her edginess, a trait that she adopted as a way to protect herself. Sara, as well, adopted the identity of the bully to protect herself. These are important cloaks, worn as identities, that each of these women outlined. Both took up a hostile persona when, in reality, they were both full of fear. I consider this taking-up of a separate identity an act of survival, and it should be considered as such in frameworks for antibullying campaigns and in the labeling of young women and girls with any sort of emotional or behavioral (dis)ability.

_I guess there was, like, stuff that they wanted me to learn, versus the stuff that I was learning. And I guess in a way the stuff that I was learning was much more important than what they taught me. I mean, they taught me enough to get by in life. They taught me reading skills, and they taught me how to write. I actually don’t want to minimize that, but in terms of what I was really learning—it had nothing to do with that. It wasn’t until college that I wanted to focus on what I was learning. Because I was too tormented. I was surviving. I was experimenting. I was finding out how far I could go. I was finding out how much I wanted to compete or how little I wanted to compete or how bad could I be. I mean, it was all kind of internally generated assignments that I was giving myself because I was bored._

Similar to the way in which Beth described her fractured Self, she juxtaposed the intended curriculum in her figured world of school against the “internally generated” curriculum that was most influential to her. Her “internally generated” curriculum consisted of learning how to survive in both figured worlds of home and school and her overall understanding of what type of learner and person she was. In her words, her internally generated curriculum helped her to know
how competitive a person she was, how “bad” she could be, and what kind of experimentalist she was. Beth’s description of this internally generated curriculum also speaks to the agency she took on while in her figured world of school. This unique way of learning was in response to a greater issue, which she located at the beginning of her first-grade year and that followed her to the end of her high school career, which is the fact that she was bored. Beth created a curriculum for herself to keep herself/elves entertained, occupied, and at the very least, engaged. This isn’t the hidden curriculum, but it is a hidden curriculum, adopted by and conditioned to the needs of a girl who was labeled “a cancer” by characters with power in her figured world of school.

Resiliency

Anna

Figured world of school.

I remember there were a few teachers that are worth mentioning. Um, I had a science teacher that I really loved. I think mostly because I liked science. I mean, I felt like it was tangible information—it wasn’t going to change. I mean, the sun was the sun, the moon was the moon, the earth was the earth. Social studies was something I struggled with because, again, I felt like anybody could be saying these things. I felt like anybody could say, “This is how it was” and “This is what people should do.” And, um, I feel like it was very suggestive, as opposed to the earth is the earth, and the sun is the sun, and bugs are bugs. So I really liked science for that. I felt like I could trust it, and I— I really liked my science teacher. I remember she was a redhead [laughs]. And she was really kind, and she was warm, and she was gentle, and her approach to me was, “You ain’t got your homework, kid?” And I’m like, “Yeah no, I don’t. Again.”
Anna referred to her science teacher as “kind and warm and gentle.” The chaos of Anna’s figured world of home paralleled her appreciation for a subject like science, which was consistent, objective, and “trustworthy” and depicted a comfortable degree of uniformity. The subject of science, as Anna recalled it, was the opposite of how she experienced most of her world(s). Science was consistent and matter-of-fact. Science was reliable. Most of Anna’s recollections about her figured worlds of home and school are in opposition to this consistency. Anna also referred to her visibility in her science teacher’s classroom, wherein it was noted that she did not have her homework but she was not punished. It was acknowledged, but she was not shamed. Anna was visible to her science teacher and, in turn, had fond memories of both her and the subject.

Sara

**Figured world of home and school.**

*Like, we lived in a pigsty: nothing was getting done; there was no food—needing school for needing food. There was a lot of hungry and a lot of need for being fed. I remember thinking, “Well, maybe I can stay at school so that I can eat.”*

Sara narrated her schooling experience as one that provided her with something that was typically associated with what the figured world of home “should” provide. In addition to her figured world of school providing her with a safe place to sleep, it also provided her with another basic need—food. Sara didn’t have access to food within her figured world of home, so, resourcefully, she considered school a place to meet her needs—a home away from home. She referred to her need for school to satiate her need for food, which is powerful because it is an example of her figured world of school as a site of physical rather than intellectual nourishment.
It speaks to Sara’s resilience and resourcefulness as she navigated both figured worlds of school and home, all for the sake of surviving.

In the most basic of provisions, Sara’s figured world of school offered a safe space to sleep and eat. Her figured world of school was one that provided her with basic needs, typically associated with what a figured world of home is expected to provide. This overlapping of roles between the figured world of home and the figured world of school is more common than I think policy makers and educators would like to believe. While there is a plethora of research highlighting the archetypal teacher-as-mother (Noddings, 1984; Luttrell, 1997; Maher & Tetrault, 2011), there is a dearth of studies that make clear the integral connection between and overlap of students’ figured worlds of home and school. Educators, policy makers, and researchers cannot talk about one without talking about the other.

I’m lucky. I’m lucky I made it off my block. I was not supposed to make it off my block.

Alcohol or drug addiction was going to kill me. Murder was going to put me in prison if I was raped one more time. All of these things added up. I’m a lucky motherfucker.

A discourse of resilience is embedded in many of these women’s narratives. Sara adopted the term “lucky” to describe her resilience. From her perspective, she owed it to luck that she made it off her (impoverished) block, gotten sober, and refrained from murdering her sexual predators.

If I had a way to talk about my feelings or to talk about the experiences that were going on, even if I wasn’t able to fully acknowledge everything, like if I had some kind of an outlet—I mean, what was amazing about getting sober is that I had a place to start talking about what I was feeling. I wish someone was telling me that my feelings hurt but that they weren’t going to kill me. I never heard that before, you know?
An iteration of the discourse of hope and resilience can be found in the discourse found within Alcoholics Anonymous. Sara, as well as many of this project’s other participants, referred to AA as a community that has provided a lot more than information on how to stop drinking. AA was a community that taught Sara how to express herself and how to talk about her feelings in a way that she wasn’t able to do as a nonsober young woman.

**Beth**

**Figured world of school.**

One day in fourth grade—so I was with the teacher who was all over me, and I didn’t know how to say, I don’t know how to do anything better than how I’m doing. I’m bored. I don’t know what to do. I was so filled with shame and humiliation; I felt like everybody knew there was something so wrong with me. But I remember, like, coming to—Like, I had this awareness out of the blue that I had to do something different. Because if nobody was going to help me do anything different, and if I didn’t do something different, I was going to flush myself down the toilet. And what I had to do different was play the game.

And so that was my awakening. And I literally did an about-face in school. I started paying attention. I started trying in the things that I was interested in. I was always good at sports, so I was very engaged in that. And I would really try—I mean, I would still explore and read ahead, but I made an effort to realize that I’m in this world where they’re in control; they’re the ones calling the shots; they have complete control over me; they can decide that I’m stupid. They can watch something like that happen, so I have to conform. Or at least pretend that I’m conforming.

Beth identified as being filled with shame and humiliation—feelings with which Sara also identified. She drew on the discourse of AA to highlight the awareness she had about needing to
do something different from what she was doing. Beth said, “I remember coming to,” as she unpacked the realization she had about needing to “play the game” to succeed in school. In AA, “coming to” is a phrase that is used to describe a moment or series of moments in an alcoholic’s life that mark a shift in her drinking or a shift in her life. There is the literal “coming to,” out of an alcohol-induced blackout, wherein the alcoholic “wakes up” to her surroundings. There is also a “coming to” that alcoholics frequently use to describe a realization that they can no longer live their lives as active alcoholics—that they need to find another way of living because drinking is a self-destructive act that no longer serves its purpose in their lives. Beth’s “coming to” in the fourth grade had a similar arc, as she realized that being a “sneaky trouble causer” was no longer serving her; she woke up to the fact that if she wanted to succeed in school, she needed to find a different means of entertaining herself because the old way of self-entertaining was also self-destructive.

Beth engaged in a discourse of solitude as she narrated, “Because if nobody was going to help me do anything different, and if I didn’t do something different, I was going to flush myself down the toilet.” The imagery in Beth’s narration of herself is remarkable. She was a fourth grader faced to make a decision—on her own—to act differently or else flush herself down the toilet, an isolating and difficult task. There is an intentionality behind it, like a suicide, taking life into one’s own hands.

Beth also narrated her figured world of school filled with characters who “have complete control over [her].” These characters were all-powerful and had the ability to decide whether or not she was “stupid.” And so, in response to the characters within her figured world of school, Beth decided to “play the game.” And the game was to conform to the standards by which the
characters in her figured world were holding her. In her figured world of school, Beth had no agency until she decided to play the game.

And it worked. I remember I got two little awards: one was for best female slugger because I was good at softball and hitting things, and another one was most improved because it was in an instant that I changed. And I think they could see it. And I do remember Ms. West looking so happy for me [her voice quivers]. But I could never talk to her about anything.

Beth’s description of the consequences of her decision to “play the game” through the seemingly happy face of Mrs. West recalls Sara’s narration of seeing the “reflections in [her teachers’] faces.” Both women found relief and shame, respectively, in their teacher’s reactions to their conduct within their figured worlds of school. For Beth, “playing the game” of school meant following directions, even if that meant going against her intuition or what she felt was most beneficial to her personal learning. For example, before Beth decided to “play the game,” she read ahead because she was bored at the pace at which her classmates were reading and was therefore placed in the “stupid” reading group. After Beth decided to “play the game,” she read ahead but committed to “conforming” to the way her reading group was led, thus multitasking what she wanted to do with what she was supposed to do, a fine line to walk. The reward that Beth received for this immediate change in behavior, the “most improved” superlative, speaks to the archetypal “good girl” and “bad girl” within the figured world of school. It is not until Beth changed her behavior—a behavior that she adopted to remain intellectually stimulated and engaged in her own educational experience—that she was rewarded. Beth stated that she needed to “at least pretend to conform” in order to survive within her figured world of school, and she became visible to the characters in her figured world of school once she learned how to play (and
perfect) the game of school. Like a chameleon, Beth transmuted her invisible “sneaky trouble causer” self into a visible, conformed, most-improved self. This act of conforming was an agentic move on Beth’s part, as she stated that she did so in order to “survive” within her figured world of school. Her decision to “play the game” was a survival tactic that provided a promise of resiliency that Beth took up as she recalled the awards she had won—material symbols for an embodied change in behavior.

Hope

Anna

Figured world of home and school.

What really affected my school work was moving in with my foster parents and then moving in with my mom and that feeling of hopelessness and, um, as that came and went, my interest in education came and went. It’s important because it’s the difference between having hope and not having hope. I think it’s the difference between defeat and possible success; not sure success, but possible. At home I was scared, constantly in a state of self-preservation and survival, and then when I went into foster care I felt taken care of. I felt safe. I felt free to explore. Uh, whereas at home I had to—there were things I had to do that took priority over—what I wanted or how I wanted to spend my time. I wasn’t given a choice at home. At home I cleaned. At home I protected my sister and my mom. I mean, at home I was in the politics of my mother’s relationships.

And when I went to foster care, my time was scheduled not in terms of running the household or protecting my family, but going to church, spending time with my foster grandmother, schoolwork, and hanging out with my foster sister on the trampoline. Every night after dinner I remember going to bed, where I lay there, not in fear or like dreading
the next morning or wondering what kind of drama was going to happen that night. Just to, like, think and dream about what I wanted, how I wanted my day to go the next day because I felt a little bit more—not in control of it—but it was a poss—that I had possibilities other than fear or worry. [Her eyes well up with tears as she recalls this memory. She takes a deep breath in and exhales slowly.] So, it was nice. It was really nice and, uh, school went—I was able to show up and just be a student. And I did something that I loved. I loved playing the trumpet. It became part of me. It became part of how I identified myself; I was a musician. I was no longer just—I no longer only identified myself with only negative things. I had something positive to identify myself with, and I wasn’t confused about it. I was a really good trumpet player. And I was a really good student. I was a really good sister. And I was a really good daughter, and I participated at church.

This excerpt highlights the double bind that Anna faced in her figured worlds of home—in foster care and with her biological mother—and how her experiences in each home contributed to her experience in her figured world of school, as well as to the multiple identities she took up in both figured worlds of home(s) and school.

In Anna’s figured world of (foster) home, she had the freedom to be a kid. This freedom also allowed her to explore her identity as a student because her (physical, emotional, and intellectual) energy wasn’t bifurcated through a survivalist lens between home and school. When her home life was safe and consistent with routines, Anna experienced hope and success in her figured worlds of home, stating with confidence, “I was a really good sister, and I was a really good daughter,” while simultaneously experiencing success in her figured world of school, stating, “I was able to show up and just be a student. I was a really good trumpet player. I was a
musician.” The hope and the freedom to explore her identity not only as a trumpet player but as a musician is significant. Anna’s exploration and declaration of a musician identity was inspired by the agency she had to explore who she was and who she wanted to be when living with her foster parents.

When living at home with her biological mother, she was “in the politics of [her] mother’s relationships,” protecting her mother and her siblings from abusive partners, and living in a constant state of fear and worry.

_I was always so worried. I didn’t know what was going on. I was fighting with my stepdad because he wanted to smoke marijuana in the house, and I didn’t want my little sister to see it or be around it. And so I made him go outside, and I felt like I was enforcing some of the rules in the house, and I was always worried about that, like what would happen? And, um, you know, holidays were totally f*cked up. It—that time—and again I was in foster care for about a year a half, and I was great in school. I wasn’t worried about school. I could be a kid. And I had hope, and I had a chance. I wasn’t afraid that I was going to go to my mom’s and she was going to be bloody. And I just wasn’t afraid._

Anna authored herself within the interstices of her figured world of home and her figured world of school. Living with her mother meant not being a kid and not being a good student, whereas living with her foster family meant just the opposite. Fear ruled Anna’s identity shaping and overall sense of (un)safety both in and outside of school. It was her experience living in foster care that awarded her “hope,” not just in her relationships at home but, more importantly, in her identity as a student, a kid, and a musician.
They took me and my foster mom into the band room. It was not much bigger, and there were instruments everywhere, and he handed me the mouthpiece that goes on the trumpet, and he says, “Make this noise,” and it was like a duck [she makes the noise as she purses her lips together in a tight-lipped quack]. And then I did it, and he was like, “Perf—that sounds amazing!” I don’t remember learning it. I don’t remember starting. I just remember getting really good at it really fast.

And I remember there was this other girl in school, who was biracial. I believe she was half black and half white, and she was like the richest girl in school or something like that, and she played the trumpet. Her name was Bobby. She always had a French manicure, and I couldn’t believe I was doing the same thing that she was doing. I couldn’t believe it. Every day I would go to that class, and I would feel so intimidated by her, and she was—she was first chair. She was the best. And I wanted to be better [smiling]. It was the only way I was going to be better than—I had to be better than her. I had to get good at this. I had to. And it’s the way I approach pretty much everything. I have to be the best, you know? The competitive nature came out full force, and it was the first time in my life—well, no, it was the second time in my life that I felt that way. I mean, when I was playing football with all the neighborhood boys, I had to be faster, tougher, stronger, and now with my trumpet.

So when I got home from school I didn’t have to clean an entire house. I did my homework, and I practiced the trumpet until the sun went down. And I would sit out—I remember we had this backyard with a picnic table, and I’m sure the neighbors frickin’ hated it, but I pointed it out to the woods, you know, away from the houses, and I would sit out there, and I would quietly—as quiet as possible—I would practice, and I would
learn every piece of music. And I became first chair. [She narrates this anecdote through a huge grin.]

During this time period that Anna beat Bobby for first-chair trumpet, her figured world of home was also stable, due to the fact that she was living with her foster family. Because Anna did not have to worry about cleaning or protecting herself or her siblings from abuse, she had time to focus on practicing her trumpet and committing to being a kid and a student. Anna became first-chair trumpet because her figured world of home and school were not warring with each other; she had the energy that was required of her to do well at something in school because she was not overextending her energies in her figured world of home. Anna was agentic in her schooling experiences because she was not juggling the physical, emotional, and psychological burden of being a forced “adult” in her figured worlds of school and home.

Anna authored herself as a musician, a “really good trumpet player,” as well as a “really good” student, sister, and daughter, taking these identities up confidently. Anna’s trumpet was an artifact within her figured world of school. It was both trumpet and symbol of her ability to be a student and kid in both of her figured worlds; it was symbolic of positive identities (musician, good student, good sister, good daughter); it was and is symbolic of hope and success in both figured worlds of home and school.

I think around the eighth grade they sent me back to live with my mom. I was devastated, and I lost hope again: hope in the system, hope in adults. I lost hope, and I said, well, “I’ll ride this out, I’ll finish school, and I’ll join the military.”

The sense of loss was palpable as Anna narrated her movement from a safe, joyful life with foster parents, back to the dangerous, neglectful life with her biological mother. Anna set an intention to join the military, based on her understanding that by doing so, her college education
would be paid for. It was almost as if joining the military was her silver bullet; when all hope was lost, there was still the possibility to buy her freedom and independence by going to college. But even Anna’s fantasy of attending college and getting away from her figured world of home required financial assistance, by way of joining the military; even in her dreams of freedom, she held steadfast to the idea that it would still require her to give something of herself. Even hope comes at a cost.

**Sara**

*Junior high was so much better than grade school. It felt safer. We were in a better neighborhood. We were living in the projects—in and out of different projects—when I was in grade school. And then we moved into a regular apartment in junior high school. And the school was really different; it was really different. There were kids that were like—not everybody was dead poor. So it was a mix of people. So the gym was really nice, the library was really nice. And I think that that was the thing that made me feel like, “I can do good this year.” Like, it didn’t feel as ghetto. And I really wanted it. So it was a different class bracket.*

Sara narrated the transition from elementary school to junior high school as one that offered a new sense of hope. This newfound hope was directly related to the socioeconomics of both her figured world of home and her figured world of school. Not surprisingly, as Sara’s physical home space was upgraded and further removed from poverty, her physical school space reflected the socioeconomic shift, providing nicer spaces in which to work and play. Sara had hope because she was surrounded by symbols of hope: a nice library and a nice gym. Sara’s hope was birthed from a socioeconomic privileging in her neighborhood and therefore her school district (Anyon, 1997). She felt safety and a sense of hope in this school that she had not felt until then.
Chapter 7: Implications

The purpose of this research project is to highlight how women in AA come to understand themselves through their schooling stories so that educators might glean from firsthand experiences how to educate and proactively support young women and girls of varying socioeconomic class, race, ethnic, and sexually oriented backgrounds. Additionally, this research attempts to highlight and briefly examine the implications of the relationship between public health and women’s health issues specific to sexual violence and the disease of alcoholism. My hope is to create a counterconversation to the heteronormative, patriarchal structure that defines past and present health and educational standards. An unintended discovery of this research is the way in which these women referred to the role of alcoholism as a family disease and the impact the disease had on their figured worlds of home and school.

**How Do Women in AA Narrate Their Schooling Experiences?**

The three case studies I used reflected the experiences of the majority of the participants in the overall research project. The deductive topics that Anna, Beth, and Sara addressed—sexuality, gender performance/gendered expectations, rape, invisibility/hypervisibility, survival—were topics that surfaced in most the interviews with many of the participants. All three women narrated their schooling experiences to include both their figured worlds of home and school, both sites providing overlapping and intersecting sources of trauma (unavailable guardians, addiction/alcoholism/mental illness, a lack of physical and emotional safety) as well as momentary relief (supportive guidance counselors, teachers, extracurricular activities). The women in this study did not narrate their schooling experiences as if they were limited to the physical confines of school. Rather, their schooling narratives reflected a dialogue, a tension,
between both figured worlds of school and home. This seemingly obvious finding is invaluable
to education in general, as policies continue to dismiss and inorganically detach (that is, engage
in forms of denial of) the figured worlds of school and home, as students are “prepared” for “the
real world” and/or “college readiness.” What the women in this research project contribute to
education (and health) policy through their schooling narratives is that the two figured worlds
cannot be detached from one another if educators want to thoroughly address the needs of
students while also teaching content. It shows that, in fact, in order to teach content, educators
must first be willing to spend time looking at what students—and, more specifically, female-
identifying students—are bringing with them from their figured worlds of home.

Carol Gilligan’s attention to girls’ emerging selves highlights something many of the
women in this research address: “As the river of a girl’s life flows into the sea of Western
culture, she is in danger of drowning or disappearing” (1990, p. 5). How then, can school
policies prevent this from happening to future generations of girls? Relying on the foundations of
both feminist and queer theory, it is imperative that teachers and school culture at large are held
accountable for the norming of (hetero)sexist and misogynist agendas. Such regimes of truth
must be actively challenged and replaced with language and actions that promote the voices and
overall presence of girls and women. This includes (but is not limited to) carefully choosing
literature written by and representative of women of diverse experiences (as opposed to literature
written by historically glorified straight white men); the use of pronouns that represent girls and
women when making generalized statements about all students; mindful noncorroboration of
school rules that promote rape culture or shame girls for their appearance. For instance, instead
of sending girls home or giving them detention for their choice of apparel, a school culture that
fully supports its female students would send boys home or giving them detention for making inappropriate (i.e., violent) comments.

Jean Anyon’s reminders that thinking in such a microscopic way will only lead to microscopic change are relevant here. On one hand, to incorporate any queering of (hetero)sexist curricula is a small action toward change; I know this because it is a part of my pedagogical practice as a professor of pre- and in-service school teachers, and I have the pleasure of watching my students change in thought and action over the course of a semester or more. On the other hand, what is not being addressed in this chapter is the macroscopic issue of heterosexism and misogyny that extends far beyond the classrooms, informing the greater political economy. What my students’ students experience in their classrooms is the same violence that informed the election of the least qualified white man over the most qualified white woman as the United States’s 45th president. Perhaps this will be the beginning of a more macroscopic project; I do believe that where there is discourse, there is room for change.

There is more to unpack around the culture of denial in both home and school. For starters, echoing the belief of bell hooks (1994, 2003), who refers to one’s individual social location as a jumping-off point for locating one’s assumptions and expectations of others (in the classroom), I posit the invaluable nature of teaching teachers the concept of self-reflexivity. When I teach about empathy, I am not teaching a concept but am instead modeling a way of being, a way of living, that extends far beyond my classroom. Teaching empathy requires a huge amount of willingness to be vulnerable. I unpack this with my students—the pros and cons of being vulnerable and the ways in which self-reflexivity inform educators’ ability to see where to bring in components of their own social location that both help and hinder the pedagogy and, thus, the students. I refer back to the microscopic versus macroscopic solutions that I have to
offer. I see, read, and hear the connections between the cultures of denial at home and at school, through not only the narratives of the participants of the study but through the newly discovered social locations of my graduate students. The beliefs they impart on their students are familial, historical beliefs that have been passed down to them from their own experiences of schooling and parenting. This means that the potential for sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and homophobia to seep into their own pedagogy is highly likely. By creating a discourse for and around these “-isms,” I offer them space to struggle, challenge, and reflect, in order to re-create a more expansive discourse for them and their students. This is reflective of a pedagogy of hope that Paulo Freire (1994), bell hooks (2004), and Shawn Ginwright (2016) frame their work around and that has become most pertinent in my own teaching/learning practices. The pedagogy of hope is also embodied in the empathic listening and speaking skills that are modeled within the figured world of Alcoholics Anonymous.

**What Discourses Do Women in AA Draw on to Author Their Identities?**

The pedagogy of Alcoholics Anonymous, paralleling that of narrative medicine, includes both a speaking and a listening component. It entails active listening, without interruption, as one alcoholic shares her “experience, strength and hope” (Wilson, 1939, p. 37) on a topic related to the disease of alcoholism. Because it is a self-referential program, participants are encouraged to keep the focus on themselves, even when they relate to another member’s vocalized experience.

Many of the participants in this research relied on the discourse of Alcoholics Anonymous; the discourses they relied on were redemptive, as they authored themselves within their figured worlds of home and school simultaneously as victims of rape, verbal abuse, and neglect, while authoring themselves as resilient survivors. Anna authored herself as a musician, a good daughter, a good sister, and a good student as she simultaneously authored herself as able
to “just be a kid” while in the care of her foster family. These identities were juxtaposed to her identities as a protector to her mother and siblings and as a nonkid when not living with her foster family. Sara authored herself as her (dis)ability label, ADD, as she narrated her tumultuous experiences with her negligent mother as well as her abusive teachers. But/and she also authored herself as “a really good dancer” once she was visible and truly seen by her middle school guidance counselor. Beth authored herself as “the cancer” to which the headmaster of her school alluded while also authoring herself as “so not dumb” and a “sneaky trouble causer.” Similar to the ways in which drinking nonalcoholics enter the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous and begin to author themselves as (nondrinking) alcoholics—a seemingly fractured identity—these three women, in addition to many of the other participants in this study, authored themselves in fractured ways that allowed them to be survivor and victim in the same breath. This speaks to their resiliency but also (and more importantly to the point of pedagogy) to the redemptive and agentic discourse found within the pedagogy of Alcoholics Anonymous.

What Educational Policy Implications Can Be Drawn From These Narratives?

Narrative Medicine

According to Rita Charon (2006), “narrative knowledge and practice are what human beings use to communicate to one another about events or states of affairs and are, as such, a major source of both identity and community” (p. 13). I like to think of narrative medicine as the foundation for solution-based implications in this research project. It is the healing, community-building, sense-making, identity-forming tool that was uncovered during the actual process of interviewing the participants. Following is an email that I received from Anna after our second interview:

Hi Mikela,
Thank you for today. What a cathartic experience. I felt more comfortable talking to you than I did months of speaking to a therapist. (Anna, email correspondence, 14 April 2014).

Narrative medicine in practice seeks to create a safe space for the patient (interviewee, client, student), in the way that Anna, my very first participant, highlighted in her email to me after her interviews. Designed to encourage doctors, nurses, and various medical practitioners to come to know their patients not as their symptoms, but as whole-bodied people with stories that explain not only why they have landed in the emergency room but who they are as people before arriving in the emergency room. Narrative medicine is “clinical knowledge, fortified by the knowledge of what to do with stories” (Charon, TedXAtlanta, 2011). Narrative medicine is a response to the data-driven culture that has influenced the medical institution as well as the institution of education; it honors the power of storytelling as much as it honors the specific skill set of bearing witness to and collaborative meaning making of these stories in order to know the patient as more than her ailments. Narrative medicine suggests that doctors, teachers, and others seek to understand those who are coming to them for help as authors of personal narratives that tell a much more intimate and detailed story than an ailment checklist on a clipboard or standardized test scores will ever offer.

**Alcoholics Anonymous and Narrative Pedagogy**

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their personal stories with each other to maintain their sobriety and help others get sober. The root of AA is sharing openly and honestly so that one person can be healed of his or her secrets or fears and another person may hear the honesty and feel comfortable to share her own secrets and fears. Using a redemptive narrative template, the community of Alcoholics Anonymous has grown
exponentially in the years since its establishment in 1934. The power of the AA narrative is not limited to what is being narrated but how it is being received by the audience. Who is hearing one’s own story through the voice of someone else? Layers of life experiences, grief, frustration, and shame are shared and absorbed in great detail by members of this program, the entire process a radical act of healing through sharing and relating. The pedagogy of AA, like that of narrative medicine, has the potential to inform and implement a more empathetic and holistic approach to pedagogical structures within the institution of school.

Women’s Ways of Knowing (Belenky et al., 1986) echoes the pedagogical practices of Alcoholics Anonymous, honoring “connection over separation; understanding and acceptance over assessment; collaboration over debate” (p. 34). Belenky et al. criticize the “banking method” of education (Freire, 1971) wherein teachers are authoritative figures who deposit knowledge into their students’ passive brains. Instead, they praise the “teacher-as-midwife” model, drawing knowledge out of students, showing them, collaborating with them. The narrative community of AA, the collaborative community of Belenky et al., and narrative medicine are models of communities and communication that value human connection rather than human production or diagnosis. As Rita Charon (2006) states,

In an age of specialization and fragmentation, how satisfying to discover the deep, nourishing bonds that hold us together—storytellers all bearing witness to one another’s ordeals, celebrating our common heritage as listeners around the campfire, creating our identities in the stories we tell. (p. 11)

Telling stories—whether in a 12-step format or sitting in a room with close friends—is a radical act of intimacy. I integrate storytelling into every university class I teach, most of which are Common Core and assessment heavy, as a way of connecting to my students and modeling to
them how they might also use storytelling to engage their students, thinking and acting beyond
the tightly wound curricula with which they are working. For instance, in a course that centers on
writing appropriate lesson plans for inclusive classroom teaching, I ask my students to freewrite
about a lesson or activity they enjoyed when they were their students’ age. I ask them to write in
depth about their experience and the feelings this activity conjured for them; I then ask them to
read and share the memory with the entire class. What unfolds is a community of reengaged and
reinspired teachers, having made a personal connection to the seemingly laborious activity that
many of them resented at the beginning of the class. I observe students nodding, smiling, and
making connections to one another’s stories of intrigue, success, and creative or intellectual
stimulation. This act of sharing narratives inspires my students to re-create lessons not as a
burdensome job but as a means to engage their students in the same way that they were once
engaged. The use of narrative sharing and listening reminds them of multiple fond memories
that, once uncovered, can then be used to inspire a new generation of learners.

When I entered into the rooms of AA nearly 11 years ago, I was a nascent high school
special education teacher and an inchoate member of Alcoholics Anonymous. I have come to
realize through the course of the present research and writing just how influential both
identities—as an educator and a nondrinking alcoholic—have been on this research project. The
figured world of school and the figured world of AA have contributed to my own identity
formation in sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradicting ways. During my first
semester of this doctoral program, a professor advised a class of which I was in attendance not to
make our research “me-search.” I hear his voice echoing critically through my mind as I admit
the one thing against which he advised. And then I am reminded what this literature and this
overall research project has taught me about the invaluable panacea of honest sharing, active
listening, and the overall benefits (intellectually, personally, physically, spiritually, and communally) of connecting with others through self-authoring. Informed by the figured worlds in which everyone lives and in which everyone has participated, personal narratives are a radical means to liberate each other and oneself from the oppressive self-defeating stories that people tell themselves and a proactive way to talk back to the positions, labels, categories, and identities that are given to individuals. Portelli (1990) states, “An inter/view is an exchange between two subjects: literally a mutual sighting. One party cannot really see the other unless the other can see him or her in return” (p. 31). By incorporating interviews with a diverse pool of women across race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and sexuality, this research project extends well beyond “me-search” and into the crevices, bones, and muscular structures of “we-search.”

What brought me into this doctoral program was an honest desire to bring awareness to the undeniable interconnectivity among the education of women, their health (physical, emotional, intellectual, and sexual), and their overall welfare beyond the figured world of school. I had no idea how I was going to take on such a project until all the pieces came together. By interviewing women in one figured world and asking them to talk about another figured world, I was able to see the participants—through their collective voices and identities and through sinews of understanding and discourses—make some connections that highlighted the invaluable experiences of schooling, both the oppressive and liberatory structures that have been in place over many generations.

**Future Research**

My future research endeavors include making more explicit the connections between the culture of denial found in homes where alcoholism and addiction are present and the culture of denial within the figured world of school, as narrated by participants in this study. This
connection is invaluable to the discourse around the relationship between public health and
(public) education.

Narrative medicine, as it stands, is used in training health care professionals. I am
currently in conversation with the assistant to the founder of the Narrative Medicine Program at
Columbia University, Dr. Rita Charon, to work collaboratively on creating a curriculum, using
narrative medicine as a foundation but aligning it specifically to preservice and in-service
teachers working for the New York City Department of Education. I intend to continue this work
and bring it out west with me, as I begin my tenure track career at the University of Redlands,
where I have applied for a grant to work with the Santa Ana School System, creating empathic
curricula for teachers working with students with (dis)abilities.

I am also passionate about continuing to queer the norm both in and outside of the figured
world of school, making visible the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth. Specifically, I am
interested in highlighting the relationship between the subjectivity of students labeled as having
special needs and those students who also identify as LGBTQIA+. Additionally, I am interested
in created a curriculum for pre- and in-service teachers that revolves around queering the
heteronormative structures and current curricula that (mis)inform and ostracize students, as well
as contribute to the instantiation of historically misogynistic and patriarchal values both inside
and outside of school.
Appendix

1) Tell me about your schooling experiences

2) While in school, were you in any special classes?

3) If so, were there stigmas or labels regarding people/ you in those classes?

4) When you think about your experiences in school, who are the teachers that stand out in your mind and why?

5) When you think about your experiences in schools, who are the students that stand out in your mind and why?

6) How would you describe yourself as a student?

7) How would your teachers describe you?

8) How would your peers describe you?

9) What did you learn about yourself in school?

10) Do those things that you learned about yourself apply to how you see yourself today?

11) What were the challenges/ advantages of being a girl in school?

12) What current events do you remember occurring when you were in school?

13) What, if anything, about your schooling experience, has contributed to how you see yourself in adulthood?

14) When you think about school, is there a movie, poem, book, song, t.v. show, etc. that represents your schooling experience?
References


