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The ‘good life’ and the ‘rich portfolio’: young women, schooling and neoliberal subjectification

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This paper explores the ways two young women, living in Australia, make sense of themselves, their activities, and futures. The two young women come from two different schooling contexts—a prestigious private school and a government school. We analyse their self-narratives in relation to neoliberal discourse, and consider how, and with what effects, their school contexts privilege and make available neoliberal discourses, and work to produce different subjectivities and notions of ‘worthwhile’ or ‘good’ lives. Conceptualising schools as sites of subjection, we analyse the discourses that their respective schools make available to the young women, and how they have appropriated them. We suggest that the different exposure and access to neoliberal discourses position the women very differently in terms of future possibilities and work-life scenarios in the neoliberal economy. In that way, the article seeks to make a contribution towards understanding schools as implicated in social (re)production and in the (re)production of classed subjectivities.

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the ways two young women, living in Australia—Faye and Felicia (pseudonyms)—make sense of themselves, their activities, and futures. Using Faye and Felicia as two ‘cases’, we analyse their self-narratives in relation to neoliberal discourse. We also consider how their different school contexts—a prestigious private girls’ school and a government high school—privilege and make available neoliberal discourses, and work to produce different subjectivities and notions of ‘worthwhile’ or ‘good’ lives. Following the work of Kehily and Pattman (2006), Youdell (2004), Rasmussen and Harwood (2003), and McLeod (2000), we address schools as sites of subjectivity constitution. In understanding schools as sites for subjectification (Butler, 1997), we do not conceptualise schooling as in any way totalising or ubiquitously

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determining. Instead, drawing on Foucault’s (1980) notion of power–knowledge relations, schools are seen as providing possibilities and constraints, alongside other social institutions, through which students are spoken into existence, and speak themselves and others into existence. Following Ball (1990), we conceptualise educational sites as both subject to discourse, and as key institutions involved in the ‘selective dissemination’ (p. 3) of particular discourses. Through the privileging of particular discourses, to which they themselves are subject, schools make possible, as well as constrain, what students can be (Youdell, 2004); how they can understand themselves; how they can envisage their lives; how they can desire.

In analysing processes of subjectification within schools, researchers have foregrounded a number of social-discursive categories such as gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and race (McLeod, 2000; Rasmussen & Harwood, 2003; Youdell, 2005). In this paper, we explore the place of neoliberal discourses; that is, how these discourses could be said to have entered into the embodied self-performativities of two young women. Drawing on Gordon (1991), we understand, that within neoliberal discourses, ‘the whole ensemble of individual life is to be structured as the pursuit of a range of enterprises’ (p. 42). As Rose (1999, p. 138) elaborates, within neoliberalism ‘a person’s relation to all his or her activities, and indeed to his or her self, is to be given “the ethos and structure of the enterprise form”’. Within neoliberal regimes, he continues, ‘all aspects of social behaviour are now reconceptualized along economic lines’ (Rose, 1999, p. 141). As Apple (2001) states, neoliberalism ‘creates policies and practices that embody the enterprising and constantly strategizing entrepreneur out of the possessive individualism it establishes as the ideal citizen’ (p. 196). In our analysis, we will investigate how these practices play out in the two young women’s self-narratives.

To explore the effects of neoliberal discourses on the self-narratives and lives of the two young women, we operate with particular understandings of the self. Broadly, we draw on Foucauldian conceptualisations of the self as produced by, and constituted in relation to, discourse (Foucault, 1982). As Butler (1995, p. 138) writes:

Discourse is not merely spoken words, but a notion of signification which concerns not merely how it is that certain signifiers come to mean what they mean, but how certain discursive forms articulate objects and subjects in their intelligibility. In this sense ‘discourse’ is not used in the ordinary sense … Discourse does not merely represent or report on pregiven practices and relations, but it enters into their articulation and is, in that sense, productive.

In that way we argue here that neoliberal discourse, as a signifying practice, is a formative practice entering into the very production of what is intelligible and valuable. The discursively constituted self is conceptualised, not as passive receptors of discourse, but as strategically and actively engaged in negotiating and producing its subjectivities (Grosz, 1994). As Foucault (1996) argues, individuals draw upon available cultural ‘models’ (p. 441), or forms of individuality, to constitute themselves. Here we focus on some of the discourses that are available to the two young women, and how they take up these discourses in their own respective processes of coming to be, what Butler (1990) terms, culturally intelligible subjects.
A question of classed (re)production

This individualistic and entrepreneurial neoliberal subject, Walkerdine (2003) and Walkerdine et al. (2001) argue, is privileged within western contexts. It is also a subject that, as Walkerdine (2003) posits, is ‘made in the image of the middle class’ (p. 239). In that way, Walkerdine argues, neoliberal discourses work to (re)produce classed differences and incite particular classed subjectivities. From their analysis, Walkerdine et al. (2001) describe the British ‘middle-class’ young women and families in their study as constructing high academic achievement and exceptional performance as the ‘norm’. This ‘normal’ subject is a ‘bourgeois rational subject’ (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 214)—a subject that is traditionally characterised as a ‘masculine’ subject, and is privileged in the professional labour market. Discursively, this ‘high achieving’ subject is constructed in relation to the Other—’the non-working underclass’ (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 186). Positioned as the Other of ‘middle-class’ subjectivities, ‘working-class’ young women and their families are constructed as deficient, disadvantaged, and in need of intervention from the state or other institutions (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Hence, the subject who masters the neoliberal repertoires of self, will most probably be recognised as more competent, marketable, and desirable in a society where neoliberal discourses are dominant, and consequently be more likely to be endowed with particular cultural and economic privileges. Ultimately, as Walkerdine (2003, p. 239) asserts, subjectification is tied to the issue of inequalities associated with social and economic difference. Therefore, attempting to understand the subjection to and, indeed, the mastery of neoliberal discourse by individual actors, is about understanding one aspect of how social ‘class’ positionings may be (re)produced.

In this paper we suggest that different exposure and access to neoliberal discourses may position the students very differently in terms of future possibilities and work-life scenarios. Schools, alongside other discourse propagating sites, are central agents in providing students with repertoires through which they can make sense of themselves, what they do, and why they do it—for instance, by the way a school constitutes its priorities, how the teachers speak and act, how a school conceptualises and foregrounds certain practices and relegate others, and how it constitutes its infrastructure and policies (Youdell, 2004). The differences in the ways that different schools contribute to making students ‘proficient’ (or not so ‘proficient’), individualistic, entrepreneurial subjects contributes to the differences in the ways students become future citizens of the ‘knowledge economy’—a term frequently used by neoliberals to describe today’s western societies (Ralston Saul, 2005). A question that remains fairly unexplored is how neoliberal discourses take hold of bodies and desires (Davies & Petersen, 2005a), how they come to ‘govern the soul’ (Rose, 1990), how it is that neoliberal discourse becomes inevitable and naturalised, and taken for granted as a viable and appropriate way of making sense of oneself and others, and how it enters into embodied narratives about what counts as a ‘good’ life. Failure to understand neoliberalism at this level of subjectification arguably makes it more difficult to resist or subvert.
Method

In this paper, we present and juxtapose portraits of two young women and their respective school contexts. The idea is to vivify what we, in analysing the data, found to be two very different engagements with neoliberal signifying practices. As we have argued, we understand this difference to be, not determined, but shaped by their different school contexts. The students’ engagements with neoliberal discourses, we argue, are inextricably linked to the discourses regarding what it means to be a student and, indeed, a ‘good’ student circulated within their respective schooling contexts. The portraits thus aim to make it possible to listen to, and juxtapose, the details of Faye’s and Felicia’s particular and complex self-narratives. While their narratives have been shaped by many different relations, institutions, and contexts, such as the family, friends, and popular media, we draw particular attention to the contribution of their school contexts. In doing so, the portraits work to highlight the ways Faye and Felicia have had access to different storylines, metaphors, and subject positions, or have been invited, through their schooling, to become subjects who make sense of themselves and others in very different ways.

This paper draws on data from a three-year study carried out by the first author, Gabrielle, on the place and meaning of health and physical activity in the lives of young women (O’Flynn, 2004). The portraits that we draw/paint here bring together Gabrielle’s field notes, her interviews with Faye, Felicia and some teachers at the schools, and the schools’ official presentations of themselves on their websites and in policies made available. The young women in this study were recruited from two very different schools—Bloomsbury Girls’ Private and Sunnydale Department High School (all names of interviewees and schools are pseudonyms). When Faye and Felicia began their participation in the study they were in Year Eleven and were 16 years old. Both had agreed to be part of the detailed and longitudinal strand of the study, and interviews were held ten times over three years. In the following, we will first paint the portraits of the two young women and their school contexts. In the second portrait, Felicia’s, we will begin to juxtapose some of the differences in their narratives and school contexts, to highlight what we believe are some of the points of divergence. In the subsequent summarising discussion, we explicitly analyse and contrast the effects of neoliberal discourse on the women’s subjectivities, notions of ‘good’ lives, and possibilities as ‘successful’ citizens of the ‘knowledge economy’.

Meeting Faye

Faye was a Bloomsbury Girls’ Private school student. Bloomsbury Girls’ Private is a prestigious, independent, religious, girls’ school located in the metropolitan area of an Australian city. Historically, Bloomsbury served an affluent ‘middle-class’ clientele. One of the main focuses of the school’s policies and website is its aim to develop high ‘academic success’ and ‘academic excellence’.
The school’s website also promotes Bloomsbury’s ‘extensive co-curricular program’—a programme that includes drama, debating, music, choir, school sport, and the Duke of Edinburgh’s award scheme. Both the school’s curricula and extra-curricular activities are conceptualised as practices necessary for the development of particular, well-rounded, young women. The school’s Physical and Health Education policies and programmes, for example, prioritise the development of ‘independent, responsible and self-sufficient learners’, who can also work collaboratively and as a part of a team. Similar priorities are also promoted in the school’s documents, with Bloomsbury students defined as leaders, team-players, and adaptive individuals who ‘push their own boundaries’. These are qualities that are represented as being necessary for the development of young women who will lead ‘successful’ working and personal lives, and who will contribute, in a ‘productive’ way, to society. Comments from the school’s Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) teachers also showed a commitment to the development of these qualities, and thus the broader school aims:

We are very conscious of the fact that those are the skills that we are trying to develop—leadership, good sportsmanship, goal setting ... They’re something that we see as being very paramount to their involvement here, and fitting in with the ethos and the aims and policies of the rest of the school.

When Gabrielle met with Faye she would often think to herself, ‘This girl does it all!’ Faye would arrive to the interviews carrying loads of equipment—from tennis racquets to dance equipment, and piles of books. It seemed that, during her schooling, Faye made the most of the facilities and activities on offer—including school sports, choir, and the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme.

Faye constituted ‘being busy’ as an imperative. She must study, play sport, participate in voluntary work, be in the school choir, and love it. Faye talked about feeling pleasure in ‘being busy’, managing many tasks, and doing it all. At the same time, however, Faye talked about being careful not to spread herself too thin across activities. There must be a ‘balance’, she said:

[Participating in physical activity] helps me study a bit; like, if I do a sport in the morning it helps me to study better during the day. I think it’s a good balance; even though study is important I don’t think you should be studying all the time; yeah something [another student] was saying; she was saying it’s better to be busy because it shows that if you are busy and you have a balanced life then in terms of study you perform better; whereas if you have lots of time to do certain studies you don’t perform as well because you keep thinking that you have got time and you don’t use it wisely.

Juxtaposed to the ‘productive’ activities of sport and choir, Faye talked about watching television as a ‘time-waster’—she talked about it as making her feel like she had not done, or achieved, anything. Being ‘active’, on the other hand, made her ‘feel good’. She talked about feeling pleasure in ‘doing something’ like going to the gym or going on a hike—pleasures that were tied to her using her time, in her words, ‘usefully’:

on hikes because it’s like a whole day thing, I end up feeling like I’ve actually done something useful with my day, like I haven’t gone and watched TV for the whole day or
something. So I think it makes me feel better in that way in that I'm actually getting out somewhere and doing something instead of staying at home or something like that.

For Faye, one activity that seemed anything but a time-waster was the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme—a scheme that she had become involved in through her schooling. According to its website, the Duke of Edinburgh scheme is an international award that provides opportunities for young people to be recognised for their involvement in a range of activities, including community service and physical recreation. The scheme has three levels of ‘Awards’—Bronze, Silver and Gold Awards. To achieve the awards an individual must complete a specific amount of hours in the areas of ‘service’, ‘skills’, ‘adventurous journeys’, and ‘physical recreation’. Individuals must obtain their Bronze awards before they attempt the Silver, and so on.

Faye had been involved in the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme since she was in Year Eight (13–14 years of age). She was working towards achieving her silver medal. Through her participation she had worked as a volunteer planting trees, and worked for a foundation helping homeless people. Her favourite part of the scheme was the hikes. The hikes were fun, she said, and challenging, and provided the opportunity for her to see new things. She also stressed that the hikes also meant developing certain skills—such as independence, responsibility, risk-taking, and decision-making:

Gabrielle: You mentioned skills before. What are those skills?
Faye: A lot of the things are just like common sense in a lot of different situations. Being able to judge what you are capable of, and what everyone else is capable of, and also taking responsibility for yourself. I mean you become a lot more independent, I think, and learn to make your own decisions and more ready to just go out there.

The teachers at Bloomsbury also talked about The Duke of Edinburgh Scheme. They, like the young women, talked about the scheme in terms of developing the skills of leadership, independence, and self-awareness. As William, a PDHPE teacher, stressed when asked about the scheme: ‘it’s invaluable and we’ll continue to do it and continue to get good value from it’. As explicitly taken up in William’s talk, the scheme seemed to reflect perfectly the ‘value-adding’ culture mobilised by the school—a culture Faye, and other young women from the school, seemed so familiar with, and so practised in citing. While Faye did not explicitly use the term ‘valuing adding’, she continuously took up the notion that the extra-curricular activities, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme, added ‘value’ to her life, self, and most importantly, to her future. In terms of future possibilities, Faye also recognised that her participation was about the tangible ‘value adding’ of the medals and the certificate—a certificate that would ‘look good on their resume’—which is a reason for participating in the scheme espoused on the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme’s website.

Gabrielle also met with Faye in the year after she had finished school. She had just begun her Engineering Degree. She seemed to be as busy as ever—trying out for the university basketball team, applying for a scholarship, struggling to find time for her
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friends, and keen to do well at her study. As she had done so in earlier interviews, Faye continued to talk about the imperative of being busy. She said, ‘I like the feeling of being busy. I think I’ve had this, for the past year I’ve had the feeling that I want to try and make the most of life … I like being busy all the time’. As well as her busyness and eagerness to ‘do it all’, Gabrielle was struck by the way that Faye continued, in her talk, to measure her life and future in terms of ‘productivity’, and by the way she continued to make sense of her participation in particular activities in terms of their ‘value-adding’ capacity. For example, Faye talked about the part-time work she had taken on in a clothing shop as a great opportunity to develop management skills. She said: ‘I think it’s just helping me gain some good skills which I think I might use in the future’.

Meeting Felicia

Felicia went to Sunnydale State High school. She, too, was in Year Eleven (16 years of age) at the time of the first interview. Sunnydale is a co-educational Government school located in the outer suburbs of the same Australian city as Bloomsbury. The school’s policies and website construct the purpose and priorities of the school quite differently to Bloomsbury’s. In these official documents they seem to anticipate a very different kind of student. On both Sunnydale’s website and in its welfare policy texts, the school prioritises ‘vocational learning’, the teaching of ‘basic skills’, and ‘student welfare’. The school’s policy states that it is committed to providing a teaching environment that develops ‘students’ literacy and numeracy skills and provide remedial assistance for students needing basic skills support in these areas’.

In relation to forming the well-disciplined student, the welfare policy outlines a very detailed description of the behaviour expected of students, and the practices to promote this. In the school texts, the purpose of the welfare system is explained in terms of providing ‘guidance and support to any student experiencing difficulties’. Through its emphasis on remediation and discipline, the welfare policy seems to anticipate a student who is likely to be struggling academically, and whose behaviour needs managing. There is a focus on ‘fixing’ and reintegrating problematic Sunnydale students into the school community and into the community at large.

At the same time as anticipating ‘bad behaviour’ from students, the welfare policy also described the nature of a ‘good’ student. A good student was described as a student who behaved well, and who did ‘their best’. ‘Behaving well’ was explained in terms of respecting authority, wearing the school uniform appropriately, and possessing an appropriate ‘work ethic’. This construction of the ‘ideal’ student was also evident in the interviewed teachers’ responses. For example, in the following quote, one of these teachers explains what she expects and wants from a student:

Okay, um, the one thing that I ask from all the kids I teach, no matter their background, their gender, their ability, is that they try their best and give their best effort. Obviously
they’re a lot easier to teach if they’re diligent and if they, ah, are here because they’re motivated, and here because they want to learn, but a lot of the time it’s not the case.

Both the official documents of the school and the teachers’ understandings seem very distant from the discourses and expectations circulated at Bloomsbury. ‘Doing your best’, regardless of whom you are (regardless of the factors that imply disadvantage in various ways), belongs to a discursive repertoire very different from the ‘excellent achieving and boundary pushing’ repertoire mobilised at Bloomsbury. Sunnydale’s policies anticipate ‘problem students’, who are likely to behave inappropriately, who are not motivated, who need to be monitored and disciplined, and who require basic skills training and opportunities to ‘build positive self-esteem’.

During the first interview, Felicia told Gabrielle about her family—she had one sister (two years younger than her) and one brother (who was 10). Just before the first interview, Felicia was practising a dance routine with her friends in one of the classrooms at her school. Gabrielle was invited to watch them perform. The girls cued the music, took their positions, and started—they giggled and laughed as they made their way through the dance. When they finished, Felicia said ‘we have heaps to practise … but it’s fun. We always have fun’. As Gabrielle and Felicia walked towards the playground to sit and start the interview, Felicia explained that she had organised the dance group with some friends. They wanted to enter the school’s talent competition—‘just to have fun’.

Over the course of meeting with Felicia for the interviews, Gabrielle came to find out that Felicia was the girls’ under-16 years school soft-ball captain. She had also, with a friend, organised a school girls’ rugby team. She was chosen as a school swimming captain for her school swimming carnival. She often was the main carer for her sister and brother after school, which involved her walking them home from school, cooking dinner for them, and helping them with their homework on most school nights. And she attended Spanish language classes on Saturday mornings.

Felicia did not list these activities in the interviews. Instead, she often told Gabrielle about them after the interviews and they were often only mentioned fortuitously. As such, it seems that Felicia either did not regard these activities as being ‘important’ enough to mention during the interviews, or perhaps there was something else about them that made them inappropriate, or irrelevant, to draw attention to. Another interesting difference between Faye’s and Felicia’s interviews was that Felicia’s responses to interview questions always seemed to be shorter and less ‘wordy’ than Faye’s, whose talk was often structured in well-versed, long responses, using words such as ‘achievement’ and ‘independence’. In other words, it did not seem that Felicia had access to, or at least a familiarity with, speaking herself into existence as a marketable, entrepreneurial, neoliberal subject. As other researchers have pointed out, classed differences are also manifested in patterns of talk and interaction (Bernstein, 1973). In the drawing of the two portraits of the young women, we became aware that Faye seemed more ‘present’ and also seemed to have ‘more to say’, yet this difference is undoubtedly also linked with how the young women, also in their respective schooling contexts, have been taught to answer questions and talk about themselves.
As well as in terms of the ‘amount’ of talk, the ways Felicia spoke about, and made sense of her participation in particular activities, was quite different to Faye’s. Her participation in soft-ball, dance, and other physical activities were mainly for ‘fun’, to be ‘with friends’ and to be ‘healthy’—with health being understood in terms of physical health and managing her weight. At times she even talked about playing sport, in her words, because ‘there’s nothing else to do’ and to not ‘get bored’. Another activity Felicia spoke of was her Spanish language classes. She did not talk about her classes in terms of ‘value’ adding, but as something her dad was making her do to maintain their language. When she stopped going to the classes after she had finished school, she explained that Saturdays were, in her words ‘boring’ and that the classes at least had given her ‘something to do’.

When Gabrielle asked her about her being chosen as a school swimming captain, Felicia was unsure about why she was chosen, and explained that she was not a leader:

Felicia: [Explaining photos she had taken for Gabrielle’s study] Well, these ones are of our swimming carnival which is held, I think, early or late February. And what we did, well like, we have all these house groups. Like they were different colours, like red, yellow, blue, and black, and white. And we were in the red, and like, the majority of my friends are in my house. So like, I got voted house captain [surprised]. So I got to be in charge of all the war cries and getting people into competitions and we were just like, we had just finished a war cry and I wanted a group photo.

Gabrielle: So what was it like being the captain?
Felicia: It was strange ‘cause I never really saw myself as a leader. But it was good.
It was so good. It was funny, ha ha …

Gabrielle: So why don’t you think you see yourself as a leader?
Felicia: ‘Cause I don’t know, I’m more like a follower. I like to fit in. I don’t like to over rule people ‘cause they’ll think that I’m bossy. I don’t know. ‘Cause I’m not bossy, I just see myself as an equal. But yeah.

When she talked about her job of looking after her brother and sister, she constituted it as a matter of fact, just the ways things are. She talked about how her mum and dad worked hard, and how she was the eldest, so she had to, and liked to, help out. In Gabrielle’s conversations with the teachers, they talked about, what they termed, their students’ ‘mixed up’ and ‘difficult’ lives. They talked about the difficulties of getting the kids into studying because they often ‘had to look after their siblings and even their parents’. Such practices were constituted as being negative and detrimental to their students’ lives—and, in particular, getting in the way of them ‘making it’. 

Felicia seemed to undertake many activities; she often initiated co-curricular activities at school, was often chosen as captain/leader in spite of her own understandings of not being ‘leadership material’, and was also ‘busy’ at home caring for her siblings. In that sense, we might see some very strong similarities in Faye’s and Felicia’s lives, both ‘busy’ and ‘active’ young women. Yet the way they speak themselves and their activities into existence, and, indeed, the ways that their respective teachers speak various activities and circumstances into existence, are starkly
different. The rhetoric of the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme, for example, is not available to Felicia to make sense of her self through. She is not, when she cares for her siblings, ‘developing her inter-personal skills’, nor do the teachers corroborate that discourse. When she is chosen to captain teams, she speaks not of ‘developing her leadership skills’ but, quite differently, in terms of ‘we’ and ‘us’, of friends, and that it was almost by accident that she was chosen as captain. She was a captain right here and right now, not constituting it in terms of future possibilities or a future successful self.

Discussion

By ‘listening’ to how the two young women speak themselves and their activities into existence, we suggest that upon leaving high-school Faye and Felicia are placed very differently as ‘citizens in the knowledge economy’. They will be placed differently in a society where neoliberal discourses and subject positions are valued and promoted; where everything is turned into marketable products and every activity conceptualised in terms of adding or detracting ‘value’. Their differences in familiarity with, and mastery of, the ‘value-adding’ discourse and the accompanying modes of relating to their selves, and their respective modes of desire, are different and will be recognised as more or less competent and desirable in the professional workforce (Walkerdine, 2003).

In our reading, Faye represents the accomplished ‘enterprise individual’. Throughout her schooling at Bloomsbury, and also through her immersion in other contexts, she has been subject to particular discursive practices regarding what it means to be a ‘good student’ and a worthwhile person (McLeod, 2000). As mentioned earlier, she has been embedded in a schooling context that constantly speaks of ‘developing skills’, and of activities as ‘adding value’ to the students. She has come to see herself as something that can be added to, that can be developed, as a project, a work in continuous process. The self that she performs, and continuously reproduces, is the ‘self as port-folio’ (cf. Gee, 1999—who speaks of the neoliberal ‘shape-shifting portfolio person’).

The activities that Faye undertakes to ‘better herself’ seem aimed at making the most of her life; they are aimed at adding value to her, for her to be happier, more successful and to have a ‘rich,’ ‘good’ life. While it may be argued that neoliberal discourse often is tied up with moralistic notions of the individual’s obligation to the ‘knowledge economy’ (Davies & Petersen, 2005b), Faye does not explicitly inscribe what she is doing as being for the greater good, or for ensuring Australia’s place in the global economy. Neoliberal technologies of the self, that Faye has taken up as her own, produce a very individualistic enterprise self (Apple, 2001), with ‘success’ being measured in similar individualistic terms, and with the self situated as a product to be continually worked on, developed, and enhanced. As Youdell (2004, p. 410) writes:

The education market place is necessarily underpinned by an individualism that is now so deeply embedded in popular discourse that its broad acceptance might lead one to
conceive of a hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) of individualism. This individualism can be understood as hegemonic (rather than simply popular) because it is embraced by the population at large while serving the interests of particular sections of the population and reproducing, or even exacerbating, the disadvantages faced by others. This individualism functions to further legitimate practises that locate responsibility for educational success and failure in the person of the individual student.

Through such a individualistic regime, Faye comes to make sense of the activities in her life as ‘opportunities’, possibilities, and vehicles for building and developing herself as a productive, useful, and ‘successful’ subject. Her activities are measured and evaluated in terms of adding value to her self as a moral, productive citizen—a citizen who not only looks ‘good’ on paper in the form of the portfolio or resume, but who lives the discourse, and whose life is made possible and constrained by constant imperatives to be and do more—imperatives that promote a sense of guilt and self-dissatisfaction (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Thus, such a subject position is not unquestioningly ‘problem free’—a critical point raised by Kehily and Pattman (2006) in their analysis of young people’s identity work in relation to middle-class identities.

Faye also masters the neoliberal philosophy of time. As Davies and Bansel (2005) argue, not being idle with one’s time, in fact ‘reducing idle time’, is a central feature of the neoliberal subject’s life. It is about ‘maximising productivity’ by leaving less time for breaks, or even reframing what you do on your break as being ‘useful’ and ‘worthwhile’. Faye has a category available to her to constitute activities that are not ‘useful’ to her; these activities are ‘time-wasters’. She enjoys activities that could be constituted as leisurely and as ‘fun’, but they also need—for them to be truly meaningful to her—to have a purpose; that is, to ‘have fun’ while not being ‘idle’. Being ‘busy’ is constituted as an indicator of getting it right, of living the appropriate, desirable, rich life of developing your skills, of making it, of making something out of yourself. In relation to that, the rhetoric around ‘goal setting’, that Bloomsbury’s PDHPE teacher accentuates, becomes interesting. The explicit setting of goals will ensure that the work on the self, the value adding, does not become haphazard or time wasting; rather, it ensures targeted self and skill development. Being ‘self-aware’ (i.e. knowing oneself as someone/something with strengths and weaknesses) helps this ‘product improvement’. For Faye, the ‘rich’ life is a life where every precious moment is packed with activities that all make her into a more desirable/marketable product. Pleasures are mercilessly associated with self-discipline and with living out one’s duty to participate in activities that are ‘purposeful’ and ‘add value’. In that way the neoliberal imperative to reduce idle time is a continuation of, perhaps even an intensification of, the Protestant work ethic described by Weber (1992).

In contrast, Felicia speaks of undertaking many of her activities in terms of ‘avoiding boredom’. That statement belongs to quite a different discursive repertoire, which does not imply that there is too little time. It does not imply that we are hastily aiming towards a future point and that we have to be very busy to get there in the shortest possible time. Rather, the image of ‘boredom’ signifies that activities are undertaken to lessen the tedium of time passing towards nowhere. With this also comes an entirely different set of moral imperatives and very different notions of a ‘good’ life. The neoliberal
cornerstone, the individual’s entrepreneurial drive and sense of obligation to put themselves out there (in the market place) (Walkerdine, 2003, p. 240), is negated with the continuous reference to ‘just having fun’ (fun with no endpoint or value adding outcome; in fact, ‘idle fun’) and being with friends, the continuous emphasis on the ‘we’ and ‘us’, on the collective and the sense of collectivity, and of not putting yourself out there, and especially not at the cost of others or communal bonds.

In Gabrielle’s talks with Felicia, there was no indication of Felicia making sense of herself in terms of a future market product, or of ‘the port-folio self’. The absence of such talk signifies a very different position with neoliberal discourse. She does not seem well versed in the rhetoric of self-management or of the self as entrepreneur. In a neoliberal sense, Felicia is living and propounding a less than moral and responsible life—a positioning that seemed to be corroborated by her schooling. She is not invited by her schooling to conceptualise her activities, self, or life in terms of market potential or value adding. Rather, her schooling conceptualises her life and activities in terms of limiting her potential and as a part of a difficult, problematic, disadvantaged life—characterisations that reiterate traditional ‘working class’ positionings and that echo Youdell’s (2004) ‘hopeless’ triage category deployed in educational sites to discursively produce deficient learner identities.

The respective schools, that the two young women went to, and, as we have suggested throughout, are key players in making available and desirable particular discourses. At Bloomsbury, it is taken for granted, and implicitly expected, that the students are ‘motivated’ and, also, ‘self-motivating’. Bloomsbury has a well-developed infrastructure to support the development of accomplished enterprise individuals. At Sunnydale, it is not expected that students are motivated; instead, they have to be motivated, they are ‘in need of monitoring’ and ‘motivating’. A ‘good’ student, at Bloomsbury, is someone who excels and pushes her own boundaries, and at Sunnydale, it is someone who does her best. By these schools continuously assuming, inviting, and applauding certain subject positions, certain subjects with particular desires and modes of being are likely to emerge.

Concluding remarks

While we suggest that schools like Bloomsbury are relatively more proficient in helping produce ‘successful’, neoliberal subjects, we do not wish to be seen to argue that other schools, such as Sunnydale, should immediately improve their efforts to create enterprise individuals, and that would somehow solve social inequity. The neoliberal subject, while perhaps more readily endowed with certain economic, social, and cultural privileges, is also, as Walkerdine (2003) has shown, a constantly ‘failing subject’; that is, a subject marred by constant dissatisfaction, guilt, and an imperative to improve (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Likewise, we do not wish to romanticise the position ‘out-side’ neoliberal self-practices; that is, Felicia’s subject position. We do wish, however, to draw attention to the discursive effects of particular positions in relation to neoliberal discourse, and to draw attention to the place of schooling in promoting particular subject position. In conceptualising neoliberal discourses as
possibly constitutive of classed positionings (Walkerdine, 2003), we have wanted to contribute to the complex and vital conversation about how classed subjectivities are (re)produced, and how schools may be actors involved in such (re)productions. That is, some schools seem to help produce students who desire and master what are commonly understood as ‘privileged’ subject-positions. In contrast, some schools also help produce students, who, upon leaving high school, are already speaking, acting, and desiring ‘inappropriately’, and even ‘immorally’, in neoliberal terms—terms that currently dominate and define what is a ‘good’, ‘worthwhile’ life in western contexts.

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