

'I'LL GET MY FANTASTIC ATAR AND NEVER LOOK BACK': UNDERSTANDING TEMPORALITY AND FUTURE ORIENTATION FOR YOUNG WOMEN IN THE SENIOR YEAR

Shane Duggan

Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne

Abstract

This article considers how time is imagined, lived, and desired in young women's lives as they undertake their senior year. Building on an extensive body of scholarly work on this topic, I argue economic and competitive imperatives have intensified for many young people in recent times, manifesting in an educational apparatus that increasingly defines the parameters of success and achievement in terms of self-regulation and personal responsibility. This article draws upon a series of interviews and asynchronous 'blog' posts from a year-long study of 13 young people engaged in their senior year enrolled in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) in Melbourne, Australia. It suggests that the intensification, compression, and control of time in educational discourse around the senior year plays a powerful role in self making for young women in particular. For these young women, traditional 'blueprints' for making a life sit alongside and in conversation with a highly individualised understanding of how those narratives might be realised amid a background of significant cultural and social change in Australia. Thus, I suggest that continual self-improvement, and future orientation are positioned as necessary attributes in senior curriculum, and these do significant work in orienting young women's aspirations in modern times.

Introduction

Ana: it's always been, like, uni or nothing, for me, like, I've never accepted the idea of going to TAFE...my parents both went to uni and they were the first in their families, so you know, it would be going backward not to.

(Anastasia, City High, Interview, 14 October)

For Anastasia, that she would attend university after school was never a question. Late in her final year of secondary schooling (Year 12), she commented that given her parents had both gained university qualifications, anything less from her would feel as though she were '*going backward*'. In Australia, as is the case in many post-industrial economies, the final years of schooling have come to be seen as a pivotal moment for defining young people's futures, both in economic and social terms (Furlong, Woodman, & Wyn, 2011). Heightened visibility of the final year in particular in Australia, and extensive public interest in University admissions rankings (ATARs) for comparing school sites has meant that for young people, the senior years of schooling are increasingly experienced as a decisive marker of social and personal success. Anastasia's statements highlight the social and political construction of hierarchies in which not only levels of attainment, but also particular ideas of the 'future' are privileged in contemporary discourses that take participation in senior secondary education as the norm.

This paper considers how assumptions around the future and the implicit value of senior secondary participation circulate in the stories that these young people tell about their final year experiences in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). It argues that economic and competitive imperatives have intensified for many young people in recent times, manifesting

in an educational apparatus that increasingly defines the parameters of success and achievement in terms of self-regulation and personal responsibility both in the present and in their imagined futures. To do this, I explore the relationship between the present and these young people's imagined futures in three main ways. Firstly, through engaging with what Adam (2003) suggests is the increasing commodification, compression, and control of time in modern times, this paper suggests that increasingly neo-liberal notions of the future underpin the expression of desires, aspirations, and 'future selves' for these young people. Second, it highlights how seeking out independence and taking responsibility both in the present and future are mediated by popular discourses for 'making a life'. Finally, I argue that for these young women, many expressions of individual choices and aspiration seem to orient toward an idea of the future which has qualities of gender traditional middle-class pathways. I make the case that this may be seen as paradoxical in light of recent scholarship in youth and educational studies, in that whilst there is recognition of the significant pressure to take responsibility for finding novel ways of making a life in new and uncertain times, many young people's aspirations sit in-line with those of previous generations.

The research archive

This paper draws upon data collected from my doctoral research which investigated how young people navigated the final year of secondary schooling and imagined their future lives. The temporal boundaries of the study were the beginning and end of their senior year. Whilst this was not a tracking study or a study of young people's destinations, it nevertheless employed a qualitative longitudinal approach in two distinct ways: first, it examined young people's narratives over the duration of the senior year (Year 12) and second, it explored their imagining of the future through prospective and retrospective accounts of themselves. The study comprised repeat interviews, focus groups and blog posts from thirteen Year 12 students enrolled in the VCE attending three contrasting co-educational government secondary schools. Twelve of the participants were young women and while this was an unintended feature of the study design, it emerged as an important factor in the narratives and for the analysis that was possible to draw from this research.

The design of the study sought to capture processes of change and continuity over a specific period of time. It adopted a qualitative longitudinal sensibility, that is, it was attuned to questions of temporality, duration, change and continuity, and to subjectivity as an ongoing process of self-making (McLeod & Thomson, 2009). The use of online and offline methods generated an average of twenty separate contributions from each participant over the duration of the study. This approach allowed for analysis of change and continuity across short units of time, as well as over the entire year.

Positioning the VCE

For the participants in this study, the VCE was, in their words, preparation *for* life, a '*stepping stone*,' a '*cornerstone*,' and '*the first step to the rest of [their] lives*'. Decision-making around the transition from school to post-school is at once a heightened moment of social and cultural significance, as well as a highly affective individual experience. That is to say, in popular discourse, participation in the VCE is taken as an indicator of future personal success. This is

maintained on two levels, both through public attention to the value of 'scores' and 'pathways,' and also via the day-to-day practices of teachers, parents, and the young people who engage with it.

Over the last 30 or so years in Australia – as in many other developed countries – there has been a marked spread of what can be called a neo-liberal reform agenda across many public sector domains (James et al., 2010). These policies are typically characterised by a focus on market deregulation and the embedding of efficiency and effectiveness measures in capturing the everyday activities of individuals in their work, consumption, and indeed educational engagements (Rose, O'Malley, & Valverde, 2006). Alongside this, university pathways have crystallised as the most desired post-secondary destination for both middle and working class and all forms of post-compulsory education have been increasingly positioned in policy and popular discourse as a social and individual 'good' that leads to increased employment opportunities and better life and work conditions (Stanwick, Lu, Karmel, & Wibrow, 2013). A key feature of this has been a continued shift toward positioning young people as future 'human capital' in the 'new' labour market that emphasizes mobility, technological innovation, and a highly skilled labour force (Sellar, 2013).

In this paper, I recognize the structural and economic shifts which position senior secondary schooling credentials such as the VCE as the dominant and normative pathway for many young people. I argue that in the narratives of the young people in this study clear there is evidence of an unproblematic regard for higher education, despite the resounding evidence which suggests a decline in the surety of entrance to the labour market in Australia (Sellar, 2013). For the young women in this paper, productivity and meaningfulness are intimately tied to a markedly individualized responsibility for their own efficacy in managing the day-to-day. University aspirations are implicit in these narratives, and sit alongside the promise of future happiness and meaningfulness if the VCE is lived 'correctly' and 'productively'.

Young women in modern times

There is general agreement that young people inhabit markedly different economic and social conditions to that of their parents in many post-industrial countries (Cote, 2000). Both economically and politically, as well as socially and culturally, young people face an intensification of neoliberal market politics, as well as globalization of cultural markers and individual subjectivities (Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2008). Alongside this, neoliberal ideals in public and educational policy debates continue to emphasise targets, marketization, and voice of 'enterprising individuals', with minimal concern for how those ideals work to produce or reinforce inequalities between groups and indeed for those who do not embody those aspirations or desires. These two conditions are amplified for young women, who in embracing the freedoms of the 'new economy,' are positioned as enthusiastic consumers on the one hand, yet still face high levels of work insecurity and poorer life outcomes than young men on the other (Stanwick et al., 2013).

In an Australian context, there is longstanding recognition of the enduring differences and similarities in young people's engagement with study, work, and leisure practises (Harris, 2008). Harris (2008, p. 481) notes that it is critical to interrogate 'which young women and

which young men' are taking up and engaging in new subjectivities, and to recognise that 'youth participation...continues to be structured by gender, alongside other dimensions of social experience'. Similarly, for Nayak (2003, p. 320), young people's identities continue to be 'closely intertwined with family histories, gender, place, class, region, and locality'. In this sense, normative renderings of young women in relation to conventional gender stereotypes continue to have salience in popular and policy discourses. As Harris (2008, p. 484) pithily notes, 'there is an intense focus on young women as the vanguard of the late-modern socio-economic order'. Walkerdine (2003) echoes this, arguing that wholesale shifts in labour market participation by young women over the last five decades, whilst enabling some participation in the economy and leading many to associate with the ideals of an aspiring 'middle class,' has also reified many traditional boundaries and exclusions for women in particular, and worked to produce new forms of subjectivities which both enable and constrain young women's actions. As she suggests, increasingly, young women's worlds are dominated by a 'difficult and shaky self-invention, speeded up and broadened under neo-liberalism [in which] we are all parvenus' (2003, p. 244). Thus, this paper concentrates on two young women from my Doctoral studies as I argue that it is young women in particular who experience the seeming paradox of senior secondary and tertiary educational attainment as 'common sense,' yet still face many gendered archetypes for making, and realising their aspirations in line with traditional notions of making a family and stable life in the future.

Despite significant gains in women's rights over the last half century, many young women are 'actively re-energising [normative ideas] through the seductions of individual success, the lure of female empowerment and the love of money' (McRobbie, 2000, p. 212). For both McRobbie (2000) as well as Kehily and Nayak (2013, p. 87), young women 'live the contradictions of the past' in that they must imagine and construct themselves in response to continuing labour market inequities on the one hand, and an institutional and policy landscape, which prefaces becoming 'somebody' successfully on the other. I now turn to considering notions of time and futurity, and in doing so, I foreground Walkerdine's concerns in particular in asking how ideas around success and aspiration create, for the participants of this study, particular 'futures' which are 'liveable' alongside those which are not.

Thinking with time in youth research

Young people's future orientation is an important concern that underpins the conceptual, as well as methodological and empirical considerations of a significant body of youth scholarship. McLeod (2014, p. 312) pithily suggests that whilst significant work has been done to conceptualise the relationship between the past and the lived present—with varying degrees of success—dominant ways of conceiving temporality do 'not so nimbly evoke the dynamic and unpredictable interactions between past, present and future'. Considering the future in these terms does significant work to structure the kinds of identities young people in particular can be said to inhabit, and conversely, how they might realise those in the present. For Miller and Rose (2008, p. 7) for example, thinking in terms of the 'future' arises out of an assemblage of aims and targets upon which popular culture, organisations and 'individuals judge and evaluate themselves and their lives,' as well as seek to 'master, steer, control, save or improve themselves'. Importantly, these 'aims' and 'targets' are designed to remake the

present *in* the future, and condition young people's day-to-day practises such that they reflect a 'good' life.

The 'future' is often taken to mean various things in youth research, and some slippage between those uses is evident in contemporary scholarship. Adam (2010, p. 47) argues that '[c]ontemporary daily life is conducted in the temporal domain of open pasts and futures...[which are]...projectively oriented toward the "not yet"'. She usefully suggests a distinction between *future presents* and *present futures*, the former for guiding our anticipation for change and the latter which we take up in the everyday tasks of prediction and enactment. For Adam, future orientation is a necessary precondition for participation in many aspects of social, cultural, and civic life, with both our anticipations and anxieties, as well as our predictions and yearning for certainty, making up, in a large manner, our ability to meaningfully plan and act in the everyday. These anticipations and anxieties operate in and on young people's day-to-day practises, their anticipation and meaningful planning for the future, as well as in broader understandings around their activities and identities.

For this paper, privileging a temporal lens is important for understanding the various markers of transition that these young women can be said to pass through in the passage from 'youth' to 'adulthood'. As I show below, it is also an important dimension for understanding how young people more generally—as well as the institutional and cultural frameworks with which they engage—make sense of, and understand their orientations toward the future. In the remainder of this paper, I follow the trajectories of two young women—Anastasia and Pari, who capture, quite uniquely, notions of living the future in their interactions with the VCE, and through the maintenance of 'fantasies,' to use Walkerdine's term, about how the future could look if they engaged with the present in the 'correct' way.

Making futures

Ana: You're kinda brought up with this belief that...once you finish Year 12 it gets better and everything gets easier.

(Anastasia, City High, Interview, 14 October)

Anastasia was enrolled in only the fifth cohort to have completed the VCE at City High since its reopening in 2004. Despite a strong focus on student wellbeing and inclusion, Anastasia noted that the college was highly oriented toward academic outcomes. The school offers some alternative qualifications through partnership with a nearby College, however '*they are not really pursued by many...university is still the number one for most [students]*' (Vicki, VCE Coordinator). When I first met Anastasia, she commented that she had '*pretty high hopes*' for her final year, and she echoes this above—with effort for one year making for an 'easier' future.

In the weeks prior to the 'General Achievement Test' (GAT)—a compulsory, whole-cohort examination that assesses general capabilities for the purposes of scaling and moderation—Anastasia suggested:

I think sometimes we take our education for granted and forget just how much we are receiving just by attending high school...I'm not just talking about the amazing things we learn each day but I mean if you finish the senior year levels at school you have such a greater chance at surviving in this world with a comfortable job and life then [sic] anyone

else who hasn't received education.

(Anastasia, City High, Blog Post, 28 June)

In defining '*receiving education*' as synonymous with senior secondary attainment, Anastasia highlights two related ideas. Firstly, her differentiation of those who '*finish the senior year levels*' from those who haven't '*received education*' is a pertinent example of what Kelly (2006, p. 23) calls *imagineering*, that is, a repositioning of what is traditionally considered to be a social imperative within an economic common-sense. This has compounding effects for cultural and social discourses surrounding senior secondary curriculum in that choice, competition, and individual initiative are seen as principal virtues for young people-as-consumers to exhibit. The conflation of '*receiving education*' with what it means to '*survive in this world*' and indeed as equally important to '*the amazing things we learn each day*' reflects a 'common-sense' of both the purpose of education as preparation for life on the one hand, and as providing an economic foothold on the other.

Additional to '*being brought up with the belief*' that senior secondary attainment provides a '*greater chance of surviving in the world*', Anastasia's statements highlight the social and political construction of hierarchies in which not only levels of attainment, but also particular kinds of *thinking* are privileged in both institutional and popular discourse. Late in her blog post, Anastasia makes an accidental slippage: '*a comfortable job and life then [sic] anyone else who hasn't received education*'. The slippage between 'then' and 'than,' might be read as elucidative of a system that valorises university pathways and reifies the hierarchy between those futures, which are liveable, and those that are not. Year 12 here is not merely a pathway to tertiary study—it is a mandatory qualification for entry into meaningful work and life. As Walkerdine (2003, p. 238) argues, in recent times, senior secondary education and the emotional, cognitive, and affective challenges associated with it are increasingly 'demands for upward mobility' which predetermine the kinds of lives young people, and young women in particular, envisage, orient toward, and articulate through discourses of wealth, acquisition, and mobility.

The shift to an educational environment in which tertiary rather than secondary education is seen as the 'compulsory' level of educational attainment reflects 'a profound and irreversible change in the relationship of education to the labour market for young people' (Cuervo & Wyn, 2011, p. 18). Importantly, it is also an indicator of increased mobility in Australia and other post-industrial economies that reflects a progressive broadening of access and equity. As Anastasia comments in our interview late in the year:

Thinking [about] next year kinda scares me because, for a while for me, it's always been uni or nothing, for me. I've never accepted the idea of going to TAFE and if I don't get the enter score I want that still scares me—even though I know there's a lot of other ways around it but I just can't get my head around that. Nup, uni and that's it, I have to get this, I have to get in to a uni *somewhere*. So that's what scares me if I don't really get up to that. Thinking ten years down the track after uni is a lot easier because I just know that I just want to be a good person

(Anastasia, City High, Interview, 14 October)

In recent times as Cuervo and Wyn (2011, p. 21) argue, the dominant policy framework which views post-compulsory education as the single pathway for young people is a view of becoming-adult which 'assumes that failure to take...[a university pathway implies]...a

failure to achieve another step toward adulthood'. Whilst competition in educational attainment is not a new phenomenon, the increasingly precarious and uncertain environment young people face as they move through secondary education programs presupposes that they become flexible, and entrepreneurial learners who are able to successfully sell their 'product' whilst negotiating the risks of a neo-liberal market economy (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007).

Discussing what she termed the 'horror stories' of VCE participation, Anastasia suggests:

Ana: I think that a lot of people sort of have, like, 'oh no, if I screw up Year 12 then...I've screwed up my life forever'

(Anastasia, City High, Interview, 14 October)

This sentiment is common for many of the young people in that they see the VCE as the normative pathway as discussed above, but also as a fundamentally *individual* journey replete with challenges, breakdowns, stress, and pressures, but also real and tangible risk of failure. Brown (2011) highlights the idea of senior secondary school completion as a 'pay off' or a means by which young people mediate the expectations placed upon them by their social, familial and institutional network. As I argue below, this normality manifests in particular ways and affects these young women differently at different stages of the year. '*Get[ting] up to that*' is something personal for Anastasia as it is for other young people, it reflects not only rising to the challenge of the VCE, but also being a '*good person*' in the future. For Anastasia, thinking ten years into the future includes the assumption of university attendance as unproblematic, and helping her to realise herself as a 'good person'. In the next section, I consider how for Pari, notions of 'making a life' are bound up in mediating the distinction between what she terms 'traditional' Indian culture and her own aspirations for engaging in 'helping' work in the future.

Living futures

Pari, a young woman born in New Delhi who moved to Melbourne when she was twelve often remarked that she felt 'trapped' by the expectations of her parents, and of what she regarded as the pressure of her Indian heritage. Pari maintained a strong social life throughout Year 12 of mainly fellow Indian students at Mount High, a large school of over one thousand students situated in a broadly middle-class area roughly twenty kilometres to the east of Melbourne. A conversation I had early in 2012 with the young women at Mount High, illustrates how for Pari, family expectations and attainment are intrinsically tied to the VCE:

Pari: It's just more dependent on stereotypes where you're like, your parents are like 'you have to go to a good uni and to get into a good course, and if you don't get into a good course you're not going to get good money and if you don't get good money you won't be able to get married, and, you know, I'm exaggerating obviously. It's not like that for every single...if you put it down to the 'curry' stereotype, kind of thing.

Hina: ...everyone around you...

Pari: [continues]...everyone around you pretty much has to be happy with your marks...and it becomes that whole thing about family morals...

(Focus Group Session, Mount High, 4 May)

Later in the year Pari suggested that although she wished to change her initial choice from Medicine—which she felt she would not enjoy—to Agricultural Science, in which there were

'plenty of jobs,' 'real opportunity to travel back to India and elsewhere,' and a 'really outdoorsy kind of life, which I think I would love,' her mother was insistent that medicine was a 'more suitable goal to have'. In protesting her mother's involvement in her preference of university degree for the following year, she commented:

Pari: I know I could choose to do Med later if I wanted to, and it might not be the same as going straight in. I want to learn for me, and I don't want to do this for my parents or to help people or because I should. I wanna learn something new.

I do want to still help people and go back to my country and, you know, I actually want to help people...Ag Science gives me the possibility to do something at the front, you know?

(Pari, Mount High, Interview, 4 September)

Pari's desire to refashion her aspirations in accordance with what she feels will make a 'good life' has two significant dimensions. In the first, it reflects a loose aspiration to 'make a difference' and also signals her own commitment to the 'type of course' she perceives Medicine to be. The expectations and hopes of her parents are an important factor, however what is central for Pari is the notion of 'helping' at a large scale. Second, it creates an idealised future in which success in achieving her post-school aspirations is unproblematic and attainable if she chooses the right path. Successive policy reforms in Australia have led to desire for university pathways as a kind of 'rational behaviour' which all young people are expected to pursue. As Sellar (2013, p. 250) suggests, under these conditions, secondary education is refigured such that 'the pursuit of economic self-interest within [tertiary educational] markets is the most appropriate means' of achieving their aspirations. In his view, aspiration is considered both as an innate property and also key responsibility of young people, realised primarily through senior secondary participation and active desire for a university pathway.

Pari affirms Brown's (2011, p. 11) suggestion that contemporary policy and curriculum 'stresses the importance of aspiring to become *something*'. The language of '*that whole thing about family morals*' as being implicitly tied to academic success mobilises a neoliberal conception of schooling in general, *alongside* normative expectations of what success looks like for these young women. In this view, Pari's aspirations are tied into a sense of community in which her own education manifests as the aspiration of her family unit. For Pari, 'Med' or 'non-Med' pathways are equally possible, and despite some resistance from her parents regarding her shifting goals, the future is full of open possibilities in which making a life means being successful in her aspirations. Importantly though, by our last correspondence, Pari had enrolled to study Medicine at a large prestigious university in Melbourne.

In my first focus group at each school site, I asked what the young people saw as the 'culture of the school'. She commented:

Pari: I do feel that...there is a sense that we are different and that we have different, umm, expectations of education. I have that stereotype of that really hard working Asian person, but I'm not doing many of the Asian Five¹, which is really strange

(Pari, Mount High, Interview, 23 May)

For Pari, particular practices 'mark' her as 'Asian' in her school environment. Conformity to those practices, through maintaining a pro-school orientation hardens the categories associated with *being* of a culture. For Pari, to be 'cultured' manifests both in strategies for engaging with school in the present, and also orients her toward a high-status career path for the future. The different 'expectations of education' for Pari are a way of making intelligible a shared understanding of what education is for, and the unique ways in which that is supported or constrained by family, peers, and the school environment both in the present and the future.

The conflation of familial expectations and educational success is characteristic of what Walkerdine (2003, p. 240) argues is a form of advanced liberal regulation where young people are 'presumed by, as well as being the intended product of, contemporary forms of education' and governance. The insistence that '*everyone around you pretty much has to be happy*' is structured around the ways familial and social expectations of aspiration and achievement are embedded within the function, and the lived experience of the VCE. In articulating the importance of 'stereotypes' Pari self-corrects her own expectations for her future '*where you're like...*' to '*[where] your parents are like...*'. Her ambitions, as well as her ability to define them are bound up in what she sees as normative given her cultural 'stereotype': a 'good uni,' 'good course,' 'good money,' and ultimately a hetero-normative life.

In the final section I bring these narratives together to consider the ways in which the VCE codes and is codified by heightened attention to the pathways of young people from secondary education to further study and work in modern times. I also consider how this heightened attention, for these young women, works to produce an individualised conception of what and who they can 'be' in the future, and that this is in many ways mediated by what can be called normative middle class pathways.

(Re)Making Futures?

The stories that Anastasia and Pari tell about their experiences of the VCE emphasise high achievement on standardised tests and aspiration for university pathways as key indicators of success both in the present and the future. Year 12 for these young women is not merely a pathway to tertiary study—it is a mandatory qualification for entry into meaningful work and life. As I suggest above, this too is tied to a very strong sense of upward mobility and social class maintenance. For these young women, not pursuing a university pathway '*would be going backward*' given what their parents had given up for them to study, or the education level of other family members.

¹ I quizzed Pari on the meaning of the term 'Asian Five': to which she responded '*There's Chemistry, Math Methods, another Maths, Physics, then Bio or, no, English. It's English because you're forced to do English*'. These subjects are anecdotally considered to be taken up primarily by Asian learners for their lack of interpretive, or language-based tasks, paired with favourable scaling in the calculation of a student's final ATAR.

To Walkerdine (2003, p. 240), the rise of neoliberal discourses around self-production, responsibility, and self-management, coupled with aspirational notions of wealth generation and success has led to a conception of youth who must 'produce themselves as having the skills and qualities necessary to succeed in the new economy'. These young women highlight the two-fold effect of this. First, participation in senior secondary education has become synonymous, as Anastasia suggests, with being successful in life. Second, high achievement is taken as reflecting an essential quality of these young women, and one which reflects both their own aspirations and desires, but also, as in Pari's case, the continued generational mobility of her family. On the one hand, these narratives suggest that notions of 'autonomy from family' and 'transition-to-adulthood' still dominate thinking around young people, and on the other, it foregrounds middle class aspirations of upward mobility as a core imperative of engagement with schooling in general, and senior secondary curriculum in particular.

A dominant technology of senior secondary attainment is the way in which policy and curriculum are affectively orientated toward a vague future happiness and meaningfulness in which inform 'not what *might* happen, but what *will* happen if you live your life in the right way' (emphasis added, Brown, 2011, p. 11). Subjectification is classed, gendered, and often racialised such that some young people are expected to do well and maintain a pro-school orientation, yet for others, their day-to-day realities are less overtly governed. For Anastasia and Pari, certain types of day-to-day activities, habits and dispositions are idealised such that the 'successful' and 'prudential' student is defined in terms of 'desirable' personality traits such as 'diligent,' 'ambitious,' and 'hard-working'.

For these young women, forward planning and 'future-making' are fundamental elements that make up their identities in the present. Orienting toward the future does significant work to mediate the pressures associated with participating in the high-stakes curriculum of the VCE. Importantly, Pari and Anastasia maintain and carve out a growing sense of independence and responsibility across their final year of schooling. In this sense, future making involves independence *from* notions of mandated participation and parental restriction, as well as independence *to* take up responsibilities and carve an image of the future in their engagement with the present. Anastasia's yearning for independence and her positioning education as an absolute 'good' and a marker of responsibility and independence is deeply suggestive of what Kehily and Nayak (2013, p. 59) call the 'generational histories' of middle-class aspirations around earning, academic success, and 'having it all'. Like many of the young people in this study, participation in the VCE and the expectations of their parents are both the integral for their future independence, but also the key elements of the present they seek independence *from*. On the other hand, the dogged determination of Pari's highly aspirational narrative around pursuing a high-status and high-visibility future focused on 'helping' straddles her day-to-day realities of demands around her familial expectations of educational success. Here, independence means moving *to* an increased sense of control within her own life.

The compression of time into distinctive periods which must be successfully navigated or 'passed through' produces what Adam (2003) names a 'clash of temporal logics' within modern social conditions in which certainly, stability, and linearity are being displaced by rapid changes in technological capabilities, connectivity, and accompanying shifts in the

labour market. Many theorists have considered the far-reaching implications of the 'neoliberal imaginary' in which economic imperatives attempting to 'control' the future manifest in performative orientations and practices in the present (Maguire & Ball, 2012). As Giddens' (1991, p. 77) writes, self-identity 'implies the control of time...not of the "absolute present", but as a mode of controlling the available time of the lifespan'. In this sense, self-worth and self-realization involve partitioning and conditioning one's activities in the present with the future constantly in mind. For these young people, the future is *living* within the present in the types of relations they enter into, and their intended and unintended consequences.

For Anastasia and Pari, notions of family reflect a highly supportive environment that they draw upon in facilitating their future 'transition[s] and the possibility of change' (Walkerdine, 2011, p. 270). Future orientation is a significant factor here, both in terms of maintaining focus on '*receiving education*' in the present, as well as holding a sense of what the future looks like. The relationship between these two sometimes-complementary and sometimes-competing imperatives is for these young women a tension that participation in the VCE is positioned alongside, and which creates an intermediary zone that aspirations for the future may be rationalised against.

Conclusion

This article has developed an analysis of the narratives of two young women completing their final year of schooling which maintains a qualitative longitudinal sensitivity in considering how they orient toward the future, and how their aspirations affect their interactions with the Victorian Certificate of Education in the present. Drawing upon Adam's (2010) understanding of the future as both enacted through prediction and aspiration as well as in anticipating the kinds of futures that people can orient toward, I have explored the complex ways that the increased visibility and attention on the VCE has positioned it as an individual and collective 'good' which demands particular sets of practices and encourages highly aspirational narratives for young people. Emphasising the processes, alongside the aspirations that young people engage in when moving through the highly regulated and instrumental spaces of the senior years of schooling is generative for considering how broader policy and popular discourses manifest in particular forms of aspirational narratives over time. Pairing a qualitative longitudinal sensibility with a theoretical approach that highlights the productive and constraining capacities of neoliberal market imperatives is particularly suited to this task for its ability to position everyday stories within the continued intensification and individuation of young people's lives.

Sensitivity to the compounding effects of discursive categories such as gender and race continues to be an important consideration for scholarship investigating the lived experiences of young people moving from secondary education to further study and work. Whilst considerable scholarship in policy and research circles has sought to redress structural and popular inequities that young women, and young women from minority groups in particular face in engaging in formal education, significant challenges remain; even for those young women who appear 'in the middle'. For these two young women, the highly codified nature of what 'success' looks like works to produce an individual responsibility for engaging with the VCE, and also in aspiring for the future. It seems to concentrate their aspirations such that

particular pathways are more or less meaningful than others; both in terms of their own anticipated trajectories, and also that of their families and school communities. Positioning the VCE as *the* pivot for having a '*greater chance at surviving in this world*' does significant work in individualising risk and success for young people, yet it masks the deeper structural shifts and challenges that they face in making a life in late modern times.

Close attention to the stories that people tell about their present conditions, as well as their aspirations and hopes for the future suggests a way of examining young people's lives which takes seriously the broader conditions they face as well as their micro- effects and lived realities. The significance of privileging time in youth research is in decentring developmental approaches that assume linearity in the passage of young people from 'youth' to 'adult' in favour of seeing young people's subjectivities as continuously unfolding and in process. It allows questions of change and continuity to be examined through sustained engagement *with* participants. However, it also invites prospective and retrospective stories, attending less to 'what happened' in their lives to this point, and more around who young people feel that it is possible to 'be' as they move through the highly codified and instrumental spaces of senior secondary education and the transition to tertiary studies and work. Thus, this article offers an approach which emphasises how young people perceive the possibilities available to them in their lives, which has resonances not only in considering the experiences of young people in their final years of schooling, but also in examining their interactions with the broader intensification of neoliberal imperatives in their lives.

References

- Adam, B. (2003). Reflexive Modernization Temporalized. *Theory Culture Society*, 20(2), 59-78. doi: 10.1177/0263276403020002004
- Adam, B. (2010). Future Matters: Challenge for Social Theory and Social Inquiry. *Cultura e comunicazione*, 1(1), 47-55.
- Brown, G. (2011). Emotional geographies of young people's aspirations for adult life. *Children's Geographies*, 9(1), 7-22.
- Côté, J. E. (2000). *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity*. New York: NY: New York University Press.
- Cuervo, H., & Wyn, J. (2011). *Rethinking youth transitions in Australia : a historical and multidimensional approach* (Vol. 33). Parkville: Youth Research Centre.
- Furlong, A., & Cartmel, F. (2007). *Young people and social change : new perspectives* (2nd ed.). Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.
- Furlong, A., Woodman, D., & Wyn, J. (2011). Changing times, changing perspectives: Reconciling 'transition' and 'cultural' perspectives on youth and young adulthood. *Journal of Sociology*, 47(4), 355-370.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Harris, A. (2008). Young women, late modern politics, and the participatory possibilities of online cultures. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11(5), 481-495.
- Harris, A., Wyn, J., & Younes, S. (2008). *Rethinking youth citizenship : Identity and connection*. Melbourne: Youth Research Centre.
- James, D., Reay, D., Crozier, G., Beedell, P., Hollingworth, S., Jamieson, F., & Williams, K. (2010). Neoliberal Policy and the Meaning of Counterintuitive Middle-class School Choices. *Current Sociology*, 58, 623-641.
- Kehily, M. J., & Nayak, A. (2013). *Gender, Youth & Culture: Global Masculinities & Femininities* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Kelly, P. (2006). The Entrepreneurial Self and 'Youth at-risk': Exploring the Horizons of Identity in the Twenty-first Century. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(1), 17-32.
- Maguire, M., & Ball, S. J. (2012). School-to-work transitions. In N. Lesko & S. Talburt (Eds.), *Keywords in youth studies tracing affects, movements, knowledges* (pp. 344). New York: Routledge.
- McLeod, J. (2014). Temporality and Identity in Youth Research. In A. D. Reid, P. E. Hart, & M. A. Peters (Eds.), *A Companion to Research in Education* (pp. 311-313). Netherlands: Springer.
- McLeod, J., & Thomson, R. (2009). *Researching social change : qualitative approaches*. London: SAGE.
- McRobbie, A. (2000). *Feminism and Youth Culture* (Second Edition ed.). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Miller, P., & Rose, N. (2008). *Governing the Present: Administering Economic, Social and Personal Life*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Nayak, A. (2003). *Race, place and globalization : youth cultures in a changing world / Anoop Nayak* (1st ed. ed.). New York, N.Y. :: Berg.
- Rose, N., O'Malley, P., & Valverde, M. (2006). Governmentality. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, 2, 83-104.
- Sellar, S. (2013). Equity, markets and the politics of aspiration in Australian higher education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 34(2), 245-258.
- Stanwick, J., Lu, T., Karmel, T., & Wibrow, B. (2013). *How Young People are Faring 2013: The national report on the learning and earning of young Australians*. Melbourne: Foundation for Young Australians.
- Walkerdine, V. (2003). Reclassifying Upward Mobility: Femininity and the neo-liberal subject. *Gender and Education*, 15(3), 237-248.
- Walkerdine, V. (2011). Neoliberalism, working-class subjects and higher education. *Contemporary Social Science*, 6(2), 255-271.