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Post-school dilemmas in diminished society: Working-class mothers' perspectives of choices and realities in their communities

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This paper provides insight into working-class parents' views of the structural and systemic injustices shaping post-school options and opportunities in contemporary Australia, drawing on interview data with a group of mothers living in growth corridor suburbs in the outer west of Melbourne. Illustrating aspects of Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism", the paper examines the concepts of diminished society and collective community afforded by success through education, an aspiration and achievement unequal among young Australians. As Reay (2017) argues, an ideological narrative that positions individuals as being responsible for their own achievement through education sets many up to fail. This paper gives voice to the lived experiences of this individual responsibilitisation. We draw on elements of Marxist analysis, a subset of critical theory, whereby economic circumstances are the basis upon which political and

ideological realities are built, critiquing the ways in which neoliberal social and economic policy and ideology are normalised (Tyson, 2015).

***Keywords**: youth, post-school pathways, social class, parenting*

Introduction

This paper explores the concept of diminished society as illustrated by the experiences of those living, working and putting their kids through school in two localised communities in outer-suburban Melbourne. It draws on research from a project that investigated local perceptions of the value and costs of post-school education and training for residents of two adjacent communities often characterised by their intersectional socio-economic disadvantage and cultural complexity. This research sought to learn from community members what factors they saw as informing the pursuit of these post-school options. The factors they described might be broadly categorised as social, geographical, economic and cultural impediments or enablers. Put another way, one of the notable themes that emerged from interviews with parents, was an awareness of distinct social class constraints, a strong belief that not all paths into, through and out of school were equal.

While the project canvassed the views of an array of community members who self-identified as having an interest in contexts of post-school training and education in the area, this paper discusses in depth the responses of only one of these participant groups, parents, or, more precisely, mothers. What these mothers described of their day-to-day lives illustrates the increasing pressures and stresses - the affective experience - of contemporary working-class life as the omnipresent backdrop of their lives, informing their ideas of what they imagined possible or achievable for their children as they exited school. Indeed, all mothers self-identified as working-class. Such a clearly stated social class positioning is notable in contemporary Australia in which traditional class distinctions have become obliterated by decades of neoliberal mythology positioning us all as an amorphous and vaguely defined middle-class (see for instance, Threadgold & Gerrard 2022; Paternoster 2017; Sheppard & Biddle 2017). Describing her frustration with the government, for example, one mother explained, "working-

class people get squat...sometimes I think I'd be better off unemployed" (Anne) while another stated, "working-class people get forgotten" (Karen). An awareness of social inequality and the lived experience of its injustice is articulated powerfully by both these mothers.

This paper positions this data within a socio-political context of neoliberal policy and practice in relation to post-school education and training, arguing collective responsibility for young people's futures has been eroded. It uses critical social inquiry to, "confront injustices in a particular society or public sphere within the society" (Down et al 2018: 7). We argue that, while imperative to all socio-economic and cultural development and growth in a society like Australia, education cannot compensate for a lack of society. As Reay (2017: 11) contends, in the contemporary anglosphere of the western world, we have an education system "enmeshed in, and increasingly driven by, the economy, rather than one...capable of redressing economic inequalities." In this context, young people must learn to function within the economy, to transact their education in a saleable way, surviving in a society of limiting and limited opportunity. The problem, this research found, is not young people lacking aspiration or sufficient personal motivation to become entrepreneurial, but rather families feeling such a heavy weight of financial pressure and social expectation in their day-to-day lives that big aspirations, including those for post-school higher education and training, are constrained, consigned to the too-hard basket of the future imaginary.

Where in the past, the pursuit and attainment of post-school education, training and qualifications were deemed an investment in a more financially prosperous or secure future, this research found that there was a distinct lack of belief that such investments might "pay off" in the long-term. When surviving is at the forefront of your mind, aspiring becomes a fanciful luxury. Indeed, as many have argued, the neoliberal language around individual choice and aspiration presupposes problematically that a level playing field exists from which all young people decide what to do with their post-school lives (see Gale & Parker 2014; Zipin et al. 2015). Zipin et al (2015: 229) characterise this as a "landscape of declining opportunity", especially for those on the socio-economic fringes of society, giving rise to an impulse by policymakers to invoke an often superficial language and policy direction aimed at

achieving "equity" through increasing educational attainment. Young people's choices about education and training are "embedded in different kinds of biographies and different opportunity structures" linked closely to classed positions (France and Roberts 2017: 50-51). The limiting factor, circumscribing these young people's pursuit of post-school education and training, is a labour market and school system not only ill-equipped for, and stubbornly unresponsive to, the harsh conditions of decades of globalisation and neoliberal politics, but often responsible for perpetuating these inequities.

This paper draws on critical theory as a liberating influence (Bohman, 2021), aiming to explain and transform circumstances that enable domination and constrain freedom. As a theoretical framework for social inquiry, critical theory has enabled us to draw on the primary source ethnographic interview data and illuminate the lived experiences of the invisible forces of social class and neoliberalism which influence, directly and indirectly, post-school choices and opportunities for working-class young people. More specifically, we draw on elements of Marxist analysis, a subset of critical theory, whereby economic circumstances form the basis upon which social, political and ideological realities are built (Tyson, 2015). In doing so, we critique the ways in which neoliberal social and economic policy and ideology are normalised. Marxist theory reminds us that we are 'programmed' by these ideologies, whereby modes of power are normalised to the extent that those who subscribe to them perceive them as natural ways of being and doing (Tyson, 2015). Indeed, as we draw on Marxist analysis, we bring the material and historical circumstances of these mothers' lives to the centre of our discussions, interrogating as we do the implications and the ways in which they enable and constrain perceived post-school choices of young people, and impact the realities of their lives. The utility of this approach is in helping to elucidate aspects of these mothers' reported lived experiences and perspectives, positioning them within the broader socio-cultural context of a society offering diminished opportunity and rewards for their children. This analysis is, therefore, posited in terms of Marxist theory, conjuring the now infamous neoliberal maxim that there is no society, only individuals and families. We do so to actively resist these oppressive structures, allowing for alternative visions of what ought or might be, to emerge from the pragmatics of oppressive structural and systemic injustice that shapes life choices and realities.

In this paper, we first provide a brief overview of the relevant literature on social class and the factors that impact post-school choices and pathways, then present the communities as significant identities, arguing that place plays an important role in shaping ideas and choices, cultivating a sense of what is real and what might be possible. We then discuss the interview data, describing and contextualising the ideas, thoughts and reflections shared by the mothers as they responded to a series of questions about post-school options and preferences for their children. This analysis is structured around the key themes that emerged, the socio-cultural broader concepts that shaped both the discussion we had and informed the perceptions they expressed. The paper concludes by drawing together the threads of this discussion, arguing that the utility in contextualising these women's experiences and opinions lies in part in humanising issues often abstracted into the socio-political realm of the impersonal public narrative, through which people are often depicted as abstracted statistics.

Literature review – On class, neoliberalism, choice and the realities of diminished imagination

Enhancing individual credentials and qualifications, and increasing personal skills, cannot change the structure of the labour market. This is, posit France and Roberts (2017), the flaw with the rhetoric around the "learning society", presupposing that entrenched structural and systemic issues, including those to do with class and opportunity, can be nullified by individual action alone. Zipin et al (2015: 230) describes the false promise of the "massification" of qualification attainment as failing to correspondingly massify gainful employment opportunities, instead generating "too many people with educational credentials for jobs which become correspondingly more competitive and difficult to secure". Wilson (2017: 117-118) describes this as part of the "hustle" we all must engage in not only to ensure we receive a pay cheque but to "care for each other in an increasingly insecure and unstable world." While the hustle is universal, transcending lines of race, class and gender, Wilson (2017) argues that the most consistent result of this pressure is the social dislocation it engenders, though it is not experienced in equal or equitable ways. Similarly, Giroux (2014: 10) argues that the cultural narratives of contemporary societies no longer “speak of justice, equality, liberty and democracy” but instead disable collective

imagination. Progress is no longer believed possible and the constraints of just getting by, of the hustle, predominate. This is, Giroux (2014) argues, the violence of organised forgetting, orchestrated intentionally by those who benefit from neoliberalism. Reay articulates the pressure increasingly felt by individuals to take responsibility for their own educational achievement, especially unjust for those denied access to an equitable share of opportunity.

> *Recent governments...have viewed creating aspiring students as more effective and clearly cheaper than putting money into education... (positioning) the working classes as responsible for their own educational success without providing them with the resources to make that success possible. (Reay 2017: 102)*

Neoliberalism presents a seductive mythology, nullifying our imaginations and hopes that things might be otherwise. We are positioned, as Reay (2017) describes, as responsible for realising our own potential, agentic, in the pursuit and achievement of our own goals. So intent is the neoliberal project on engendering coercive personal responsibility in its citizens, that "the self-actualised and self-managing individual is central to such neoliberal visions" (Trnka & Trundle 2014: 139).

Neoliberalism is a type of capitalism, a set of economic policies and supporting ideas (Connell 2013b) that privatises profit while socialising debt. The casualisation of work offers a useful illustration of this concept, Dawson and Hetherington (2018: 19) explaining, "casualisation...transfers risk from downturns in business from the employer to the employee and it reduces the bargaining power of workers." Relations of care are broken through mechanisms that disintegrate dynamics of reciprocity. The notion of the social good has been marginalised, a buried discourse replaced only by the rhetoric of neoliberalism, a language of individual rights, economic efficiency and choice. Equality, under neoliberalism, is not something that should be guaranteed by the state or common principle. It is something that we must earn, or more precisely win, through competition. Put a little differently, neoliberalism has us competing for equality in the market (Wilson 2017: 56).

The process of voiding the collective memory that things might be otherwise is made complete by the discourse of rationality. Education

is seen as an investment, "since the benefits of the education and training accrued to the individual alone...the individual should bear (all) the costs of this training" (Welch 1997: 8). Our capacity to imagine a community premised on collective, shared wealth and wellbeing has been subsumed by a narrowing vision looking only towards individual consumerism. The "do what you love" (DWYL) philosophy so prominently promoted to young people, argue Down et al (2018), is a product of the neoliberal idea of self-responsibility, seductive enticement to aspiration and agency, that fails to account for the exercise of democratic choice now being exclusionary, available in reality only to those with the "right educational credentials, and the financial and networking resources required to enable the choice" (Down et al 2018: 54). Engendering the myth-belief that opportunity is equal and universal promotes delusional thinking. Berlant (2011) terms this widespread social phenomenon "cruel optimism", arguing that the effect of neoliberal policies is far-reaching and varied. She describes the dimensions of the "set of dissolving assurances" in the realms of, "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality" (Berlant, 2011: 3).

In September 2018, the Australian Senate tabled an inquiry into the future of work and workers (Commonwealth of Australia 2018). It describes the changed nature of society for young Australian workers, noting that "for the first time in history, the wealth accumulation trajectory of the generation of workers entering employment is well below that of their predecessors at comparable ages" (Commonwealth of Australia 2018: 14). It describes young people facing high levels of under-employment, casualised employment and working in positions for which they are over-qualified, documenting young Australians facing a range of exclusionary barriers to entering secure employment (Commonwealth of Australia 2018: 16). Social mobility in Australia is second worst in the OECD, despite the rhetoric representing Australia as a country in which everyone gets a "fair go" the evidence suggests otherwise. Children of families at the bottom of the income ladder have little chance of moving up the class ladder, with only 12% of children of manual workers becoming managers (ACTU 2019: 24). Young people in Australia today face the most insecure working conditions of any demographic group in the country and "the erosion of the standard employment relationship has been experienced most directly, and

most painfully, by young workers" (Carney & Stanford 2018: 16). While Australia enjoys one of the highest rates of post-school education and training attainment in the developed world (approximately 50% of 25–34-year-olds holding some qualification) they must contend with the prevalence of insecure work, unprotected by the traditional arrangements.

Stanford (2018) documents the redistribution of money in the Australian economy, citing globalisation and neoliberalism as significant factors precipitating this decline in what he terms the labour share of the country's wealth (GDP). He identifies four key trends as symbolising this decline in labour share, including the expansion of "non-standard and precarious employment", a steep decline in trade union density, the erosion of minimum wage policy and the restructuring of Australia's unique awards system (Stanford 2018: 29). The ACTU (2021) indicates that Australia has one of the highest rates of insecure, casual and precarious work in the developed world. It is in this socio-economic climate that young Australians enter the job market post-school. Such a view helps us to make sense of the perspectives offered by these parents.

Methodology

With "non-standard and precarious employment" (Stanford 2018: 29) and steadily declining social mobility nationally (ACTU 2019: 24) becoming increasingly normalised in ways that position such trajectories acceptable, unquestioned and legitimated, this research sought to explore the ways in which various stakeholders within two communities perceived, experienced, and navigated post-school choices, and their absences. The research this paper is based on is drawn from a broader project that developed two sources of data; anonymous electronic surveys and focus groups with four respondent groups - local employers, teachers, parents and young people - within the two neighbouring communities over a period of approximately two months. Ethics was approved by the supporting institution, as well as by the Victorian State Government Department of Education and Training. The research project was widely advertised by the commissioning organisation, which has extensive contacts with individuals, organisations and schools within the communities. Survey links were distributed through these organisations. In addition, simplified versions of the plain language statements were disseminated on social media informing

prospective participants about the project and inviting them to contact the researchers. All surveys had unique hyperlinks, allowing relatively easy distribution to those wishing to participate. Participants were also invited to take part in focus groups through these channels. In all cases these were done with informed consent, participants were provided with plain language statements outlining the nature of the research, agreeing any resulting publications based on their contribution would be anonymised.

It must be acknowledged that those who replied to the survey and agreed to participate in focus groups may have self-selected based on a pre-existing interest in, and possibly knowledge of, the specified subject matter. For instance, many of those who completed the surveys had a relatively high degree of experience with VET in some capacity as well as some familiarity with the sponsoring community organisation. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge this potential bias towards those already pre-disposed towards vocational education and training or with a preference to VET over, for example, university education. These issues will be explored in more detail in the analysis and discussion of the data.

The surveys asked those who either resided or worked within either of the two communities a range of questions about the post-school options for young people, the value of VET and university education and the role of governments in the provision of such services. While the questions focused broadly on perceptions of post-school pathways and opportunities, this paper's analysis will concentrate on the responses to open-ended questions asked in semi-structured interviews with parents during which respondents' views of the value of post-school education and training were canvassed. To anonymise respondents' identities, each is referred to by a pseudonym. Questions were open-ended and of a general nature, allowing participants to respond in ways in which they felt comfortable. Where sensitive issues might have emerged, such as in relation to various life stressors, interviewers were careful not to probe deeply but rather allow participants to speak to the extent they were comfortable to do so, and to redirect lines of questioning to a more general nature where necessary. All participants were offered details of support organisations and helplines as a matter of process.

Critical Marxist theory was considered when drafting the open-ended

focus group questions, inviting participants to reflect on their lived experiences and represent their views. Lived experience in qualitative research seeks to represent and understand participants' experiences, choices and options (Given, 2008), and their absence, speaking to the personal and unique ways in which experiences are influenced by subjective factors including, but not limited to, identity encompassing variations of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, political associations, and the varied roles and characteristics that impact how individuals live their daily lives (ibid). Following this premise, questions were developed which pursued participants' experiences with post-school choices and how they lived through and responded to these, providing opportunities not to critique individual lives, but to explore the distinctions between lives and experiences to understand why some experiences might be privileged over other (ibid). Questions about how parents viewed and prioritised the value of VET and university education in contemporary Australia are included in this data set, as are questions about the broader socio-political and economic issues that might impact these perceptions and shape the relative notion of choice in thinking about post-school education and training. These broader contextual questions and answers helped to inform a more nuanced understanding of what the influences were on these expressed preferences, and an idea of how these parents viewed their world, and the political influences that shaped their kids' lives became clear. Thus, a Marxist analysis, this paper focuses on the production and reproduction of the opportunities and perceptions of post-school education and training through the lens of a particular demographic; anglo-celtic Australian, English-speaking, working-class mothers in these two communities. This contribution to the field gives voice to the lived experiences of mothers, an insight into what it means to be a working-class mother, the affective responses to the cruel optimism of a society with decreasing social mobility, the tensions of which were evidenced by these parents.

Respondents to both the survey and focus group interviews were asked questions about their personal demographic background, such as education level, job type and whether they worked as well as lived in the communities being studied. Participants were also asked about their place of birth and linguistic background (if they spoke a language other than English). While overall, respondents to both forms of data collection were mainly Australian-born and predominantly English-

speaking, survey participant parents were more representative of the diverse communities in which they lived than the mothers who chose to participate in the focus group interview. Although cultural and ethnic diversity is significant in the Australian context and a key demographic that might influence post-school choices, the self-selecting nature of the methodology meant that, although unintended and in line with ethics approval, focus groups were only able to be undertaken with those who volunteered.

Although these parents were all mothers, gender being a consistent factor in those who also responded to the survey, these women who took part in the focus group had either no formal post-school education or limited vocational training qualifications and worked in industries and roles for which they were not well remunerated. They described working in low-level administration jobs and other roles typically referred to - and remunerated - as low or unskilled. Their personal experiences of navigating the tough realities of financial and familial responsibilities came through strongly throughout the discussion, informing their aspirations for their children.

Economic pressures shaped their views on what was and what might be possible, recognising that such experiences of financial pressure were not evenly shared in our society. It is this broader awareness which is of significance to this paper, and something that participants were aware of: choices, simply, were, they all agreed, mitigated by one's access to capital. For example, the desire for steady, paid work was the overriding concern amongst them all with a preference for skilled trades over jobs that required many years of higher education.

Data was analysed drawing on elements of Marxist analysis, a subset of critical theory, whereby economic circumstances are the basis upon which social, political and ideological realities are built (Tyson, 2015), and whereby economic power is simultaneously social and political power (ibid). Thus, this research drew on critical thematic analysis whereby the researchers reviewed the transcripts, identifying key themes in line with the research questions and through a Marxist lens seeking to draw links between the everyday lived experiences of participants and the broader social, economic, and political context into which they were lived out. The analysis that follows, first introduces and gives context to the two communities, drawing on participants'

voices themselves, followed by expanding on the key themes of cost-of-living pressures, diminished collective society, the importance of community, the commodification of education and the adverse effects of neoliberalism on wellbeing.

The Communities

The western suburbs in almost all eastern state capital cities of Australia have a long-standing historical reputation for being comparatively undesirable places for the aspirational middle class to live and work. These communities were selected for this research because of the deficit, class-based cultural cringe that has persisted despite recent incursions extending the west as the city grows to accommodate its five million plus people, through deliberate planning initiatives along growth corridors (State Government Victoria, 2012). This perceived east-west cultural bias and division was reflected by the participants, who spoke of feeling that living in the West carried with it an inherent stigma, understood as implicitly connected to social class and opportunity.

> *"All the good stuff is on the other side of town...we don't really have any TAFEs or unis" (in the west)*

> *"Ah, the Bronx!" (reaction from Easterners when they learn you live in the West)*

> *"They've (the eastern suburbs) got the stuff (crime) too but they pick on us the most" (Karen)*

The City of Brimbank is located in the north-western suburbs of Melbourne. City of Melton is the next council area further west. The City of Melton, at 527 square kms, is considerably larger, geographically, than the City of Brimbank at 123.4km, while the population is comparable in size, 181,000 and 196,000 respectively, and encompass 18 suburbs. This section gives a sense of both the 'average' and complexities of these council areas relative to socio-economic and educational disadvantage and the variance of this within each council

area, measured by SEIFA data[1]. In the City of Melton, the average SEIFA level is 981, compared to the Greater Melbourne average of 1,026. Within the City of Melton, however, dis/advantage varies from 852 in one suburb to 1,087 in another. Similarly, the City of Brimbank averages a level of 930, whilst extending from a score of 852, significantly disadvantaged, to 1,064, relatively advantaged in some pockets. Both council areas reflect significant levels of disadvantage, with some areas experiencing profound disadvantage. The 'Dropping off the Edge 2021 Report' examines complex disadvantages in communities throughout Australia, measuring 37 indicators across every community (Tanton et al. 2021) painting a picture of where "disadvantage is concentrated... forms of disadvantage overlap and...multilayered disadvantage becomes difficult to escape, with some communities experiencing persistent disadvantage over many years" (Tanton et al. 2021: 8). In the Brimbank and Melton council areas, most suburbs are within the first or second quintile, reflecting the most and second most disadvantaged levels in the country. At best, several suburbs are ranked in the third quintile. Indeed, such a pattern is replicated across the bulk of the western suburbs, relative to the eastern suburbs, the data reflecting multiple, persistent and deep disadvantages, in the west relative to the east of Melbourne. Patterns of education reflect far higher rates of low educational attainment (<year 11) than average. Trade qualifications range within the council areas, with an overall average to slightly above average attainment. The numbers of those attending TAFE similarly vary, similar to the average, while university qualifications and attainment are significantly lower than national and Melbourne CBD averages.

"The cost of living…it's just too hard."

Zipin et al (2015: 232) argue that in research about post-school opportunities and preferences, social conditioning and cultural expectations engender responses about the need to aspire towards upward mobility "by means of a meritocratic principle of hard work." This, they contend, is evident when research is done into low-SES

1 In Australia, the SEIFA index of dis/advantage measures the relative economic dis/advantage of communities based on ABS data including income, educational attainment, un/employment, jobs in relatively un/skilled occupations and other variables that broadly reflect disadvantage (Profile id. n.d.c). A lower score reflects a greater disadvantage, while a higher score reflects less disadvantage (i.e. greater socio-economic advantage) and is measured against the average population-weighted level of dis/advantage in Australia, positioned as 1000 (ibid).

communities. The apparent need to aspire to higher education and career trajectory goals is seen as the "right" thing to say, especially when being interviewed by researchers with higher degrees. However, this research found that responses varied, with the mothers expressing ambivalence about investing too much in higher education, instead explaining, "I prefer (a) trade...because office jobs, everything goes offshore." (Anne) Indeed, in focus group conversations with these mothers, discussions were frank. Mothers were direct and seemed grateful to have a forum in which to connect with other parents who 1. held similar views regarding schooling and post-school options, and 2. were similarly disenfranchised or disillusioned by schools, the limitations of education and any trust in 'the system' or society to provide viable employment options and adequate economic security for their children.

The following section analyses the data from focus groups with these mothers under the interrelated themes of commodification of education, adversity and wellbeing, post-school choices, lost hope and lack of trust surrounding what we argue represents a broken social contract. This discussion is contextualised by an exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of these themes, significant because it enables us to connect isolated anecdotes and views of parents. We map them together to demonstrate a broader phenomenon in which at least some families in these communities are living and experiencing but which we suggest is far more broadly applicable in contemporary Australia as we explore the complex intersections of class, education and post-school options in an increasingly unequal neoliberal society.

The commodification of education

Although all the parents described struggling with financial pressures – "Our wages don't (go up)" (Karen); "Two parents have to work" (Sarah) – they all chose to send their children to schools outside the (free) government system. As one mum explained, this was because "you expect more when you pay the money." (Sarah) Others agreed with this sentiment. The theme of the omnipresent strain of financial pressures felt by these parents re-emerged throughout the interview. This, for instance, was how one mother described the pressure of putting her kids through the local Catholic school: "Four kids, it's twenty grand a year, we've had to sell our house, mental breakdowns, I have a husband that's

just...basically I'm like a single mum where I have four kids and him and I find, why am I doing all this?" (Karen) The layers of challenge here are notable. Due to a lack of trust in the capacity of local government schools to provide adequate education for their children, these mothers had imposed on themselves a financial pressure that caused inordinate stress.

However, when asked if the expectation was being met by the private schools, the answer was negative, and a good deal of time was spent criticising teachers and schools for perceived inadequacies. "Teachers don't want to work...I complained about teachers (at my child's school)" (Sarah). Implicit in this explanation is a trust in the unspoken contract of capitalism that suggests if a commodity (good or service – like school education or shoes) costs more, it will be of higher quality, and you'll achieve better outcomes: "You expect more when you pay the money." Sarah describes struggling with debt to pay school fees at the school she sent her four kids to, indeed all three mothers sent their children to low-cost private schools and all expressed feelings of having been let down, with little trust in the efficacy of the education system to provide the outcome they thought they were buying for their children (a secure pathway into adulthood). School education appears to be viewed as a transactable commodity to be bought, sold and the final products traded in the "free market" (see, for example, Connell, 2013a; Connell, 2013b). However, this financial cost imperative, the literal cost of doing the best thing for your children, increases the pressure on already stretched household resources and these parents worried about the length of time, and thus growing cost, that schooling now takes.

Neoliberalism, adversity and wellbeing

The high cost of living and the toll it takes on a family's cohesion and mental health was consistently raised against the premise that "Our wages don't go up" (Karen). Indeed, the cost of living is going up and "real wages" are going down (Jericho, 2022), a pressure disproportionately impacting lower-income households, an increasingly significant issue in Australia as we write this, a situation dramatically exacerbated in the months since this data was collected.

> *The cost of living, we've just had to downsize because it was just killing me, the cost of electricity, how are kids supposed to cope*

> *with $800 electricity bills, cause that's what I get...it's just too hard. You can see why so many people in society get depression, and I fell in that trap at one point because, you know they keep putting, you know we get nothing from the government. (Karen)*

Karen explained, "things are a lot less secure. Kids these days, they have to do something after year twelve whereas it used to be year 9 or 10." Sarah agreed, stating that it was "unfortunate", that kids now had to finish year 12. Anne contextualised what she viewed as a generational shift, describing that, "when we were their age, it was a lot more secure. I went straight from year 12 into a job." Ultimately these mothers shared the sentiment "You want more (for your kids). You don't want them to struggle like you did...it's a lot harder for kids these days...if we don't help them, who's going to?" (Sarah).

The parents were asked if they worried about their children being able to buy a house in the future, traditionally the marker of economic security and the Great Australian Dream (Maclennan et al. 2021), after emphatically stating that they felt opportunities were more precarious for the young generation. Anne replied, "I do. I say to my kids, don't end up like me, a single mum in administration. You need to get a job where...you're happy...a job that will help pay the bills and enable you to go on a holiday or you know have the little bit of finer things in life...I don't think my kids are ever going to move out...you want a job that you know is not going to go offshore that's a little bit more secure." Karen agreed, explaining that when she was young, "I went straight from year 12 into a finance job...but I don't see that happening today... Year 12 is the bare minimum." These mothers speak to a time, prior to the 1980s, when young people from low SES communities could trust in a reasonable life trajectory that was not primarily reliant upon success in school (Zipin et al 2015: 242). Indeed, until the 1970s large numbers of people across industrialised nations left school at 15 or 16, moving seamlessly into employment, while the relatively privileged few continued with school or college and, even fewer, went on to university (France & Roberts 2017: 40). Participation in some form of post-compulsory school education has since become normalised (France & Roberts 2017: 40), the reality these mothers describe. Simultaneously, as noted by the neoliberal imperative, individuals are responsible for their own educational and employment circumstances (Zipin et al 2015; France & Roberts 2017: 41).

Although the mothers were concerned for the future of their children, there was also a strong sense that there was cause to be concerned at present. As one mother explained that her family accessed "government services which are free", the conversation turned to mental health services, which all participants had accessed for their kids. This fact alone is striking: every parent had the need to access mental health services for their children. Here, mothers spoke positively of services: "The services that are being offered to kids that aren't coping are amazing. My daughter was bullied…and tried to kill herself. If it wasn't for the government and Headspace, I don't know what I would have done." (Anne) Sarah refers to going through the "same thing", her child having had "three goes" [attempts at suicide], agreeing that Headspace was invaluable. All believed the community needs more of these services, Anne describing the difficulties she had accessing affordable services for her husband. "I tried to get help but the only help I can get is if I pay a hundred and something dollars concession, I don't have that." Karen concurred, pointing out the tough choices you had to make in accessing expensive services, describing them as a challenge to access "unless you have money, and you do it for your kids first, yeah?" Significantly here, the conflation between financial pressure on families, children's (perceived) insecure futures and well-being was notable amongst these mothers who reflected on the mental health impacts for themselves and their children. Tellingly, recent research looking at the conflation of health, work and income in Australia provides stark confirmation of the very direct link between mental health and well-being, and income and disadvantage (de Leeuw et al 2021). Indeed, the authors conclude:

> *There is a clear gradient with the incidence of mental health conditions increasing for those whose equivalised household incomes are in the lowest four groups of the income distribution and those who live in the lowest five groups of SEIFA, in geographic areas of relative disadvantage compared with advantage (de Leeuw et al., 2021, p. 22).*

Post-school choices

When asked about the influence shaping their perceptions about the value of post-school education and training options, responses were

varied. They all agreed it was beneficial to have VET and university options close by where their families lived. The overarching sense that staying local mattered in all things was a consistent theme throughout our discussion. Indeed, all the mums said they'd like to see more TAFE or private VET colleges in their communities, while they were less enthusiastic when asked if it'd be useful to have more university campuses nearby. In terms of a future for their children, all spoke of trades, none felt comfortable talking about university as a realistic option for their kids, nor did they mention careers for their kids involving university education. All agreed that the cost of going to university was prohibitive for working-class families. For Karen, there was a sense of security that came with a trade:

> *I prefer a trade...because I think office jobs...everything goes offshore... technology just eliminates a lot of the jobs, so I prefer him to do a trade ...I want a job that's secure.*

While for both Sarah and Anne, what their children were "capable of" and what they enjoyed was important.

> *With mine, a trade is better for him than being a lawyer or whatever...at the end of the day it's what he's capable of. (Sarah)*

> *I'm not fussed, I tell him it's what you enjoy doing, if you enjoy cake making or if you enjoy a trade...he could be a cleaner or a gardener as long as he's happy and working and he's an honest man...I'm proud. (Anne)*

Such positions invoke a sense of cognitive dissonance and contradictions for these mothers. For instance, if it is up to the young person and what they are capable of, then why distrust government schools? If there is an emphasis on what makes them happy, why the fear of insecurity? And yet, the overwhelming fear, it seemed, was that their children wouldn't be able to afford to buy a house. This notable recurrent theme is seemingly the end goal of all schooling, post-school education, and employment. Such a measure reflects what Berlant (2011) refers to as "cruel optimism". Like post-school employment options, the circumstances around home ownership in Australia have shifted, and the myth of home ownership as widespread, equalising and secure (Arundel & Ronald, 2021: 1123) undermined. The "Australian Dream", prominent in Australia's popular imagination for decades (Maclennan et

al. 2021) has come undone for many, as property prices have continued to exceed wage growth.

Individualism is a dominant social value in Australia manifest in the concomitant obsession with personal home ownership, underpinned by the faith in social mobility (Maclennan et al. 2021). The aspiration, therefore, for these mothers is a perception of financial security for their children, a freedom from the burden of the pressures and associated mental health impact of the economic fragility, and indeed liberation from the neoliberal project of scarcity. The aspiration of home ownership and the attendant financial security, however, is increasingly mythological, "detached from the reality of contemporary housing market developments" with empirical data pointing to declining access to home ownership across income and age groups, and worsening inequalities (Arundel & Ronald, 2021, p. 1136), another example of the cruelty of optimism and an operating feature of neoliberalism whereby commodification functions through perpetuating exclusion (Connell, 2013b).

Lost hope and lack of trust: The social contract

For these mothers, there was a distinct sense of multiple tensions held simultaneously, some contradictory and some seemingly insurmountable, a lack of hope for the financial stability and therefore general well-being for their children, perhaps a projection of their own lack of financial stability and precarious wellbeing. The lack of trust in the system to provide adequate social welfare was a key issue, while simultaneously, where the system did provide schooling at low costs, these mothers didn't trust that this would be adequate to educate their children and instead chose to pay thousands of dollars a year on school fees for each child. This contradiction is stark.

Here we have mothers reflecting that while they placed their investments in education as the hope for their children's future, such investment has not paid off, and they are left without hope for their children's future, or further engaging in cruel optimism. Sarah's emphatic assertions that "if we don't help them, who's going to help them", sums up the general lack of trust in the social contract, while Anne described a gaping hole in the provision of a societal safety net: "That gap's too big and a lot of kids are slipping through the system." All

parents were asked if they felt confident in the government to provide the services the communities needed. All replied that they had no confidence in any level of government. When asked if they were aware of who the relevant government representatives in their communities were, all replied they did not. This critical position of the government's abdication of responsibility to them and their communities dovetailed with the perception of the rising cost of living. For example, Anne described the privatising of essential services as indicative: "If they (the government) didn't sell everything and kept...the electricity and things here...They don't care about...us. The prices go up every year, we can't cope."

A recurrent lament through the discussion was the pressure on parents to help their kids (financially, emotionally etc.) without systems in society to support them, the responsibility falling onto the individual. When asked what they thought of the local council? "I hate the council... they just take our money, that's about it" (Karen). When asked whose responsibility the provision of public services related to education and training for their kids was, they replied it was the state government. However, it was clear in the elaboration on this answer they instead felt a great deal of pressure to personally compensate for the government's insufficient service provision. This theme of personal responsibility recurred throughout the discussion. The closely related concept of the diminished welfare system for the working class also emerged, summed up in these comments:

> *It is our responsibility to provide for our kids...but you know when it is too hard for you to pay for it, they give everything to the health care card people and the workers...are not better off, and they get left with nothing and you've got nowhere to turn to, so I think there is a huge gap. (Anne)*

> *I asked for some help with something at (child's school) and they said, oh, you don't have a healthcare card we can't help you...I'm worse off than these people. (Sarah)*

The provision for a health care card in Australia is limited to those on extremely limited and low incomes, most often to those reliant on welfare payments, providing an income below the poverty line, offering discounted costs for health care, including doctors, specialists and

medications. It is used as a barometer of other concession measures, such as water, gas and electricity, car registration, TAFE fees, recreation facilities (such as public swimming pools) and public transport. For these mothers, while their incomes and family circumstances did not warrant a health care card, the economic pressures permeated every aspect of their lives, exacerbating challenges to well-being and engendering a sense that the future was, in all ways, precarious. This feeling of uncertainty seemed to play a cumulative role, compounding their own anxiety around wellbeing, exacerbated by the sense that society - government and council - had abandoned them.

Conclusion

Under neoliberalism, individuals must take responsibility for their present and future, becoming self-actualising lifelong learners and entrepreneurs, navigating their own achievement of well-being, lest they have only themselves to blame for perceived "wasted lives" (Zipin et al 2015: 229). Considering the demographics of these mothers' communities, their descriptions of their circumstances that inform their views of post-school choices and realities, we reflect on what Zipin et al (2015) refer to difficult times as "lived conditions fraught with structural obstacles that thwart even the most reasonable strategies for pursuing futures hopefully" (Zipin et al. 2015: 228). Cruel optimism, as coined by Berlant (2011) and adopted by Zipin et al (2015), refers to the notion that feeling hopeful in the face of such conditions seems futile and punishing. This idea usefully describes the feelings expressed by the mothers interviewed in this study, who, universally, spoke of their acute anxieties around the precarious futures of their children as they exited the school system. Indeed, the overwhelming consistency these women expressed, contextualised in terms of a fundamental distrust of the state to provide and take care of these young people, is notable.

What has been witnessed over years and decades in many advanced economies, including Australia, has been a retreat from an understanding of education as something of personal and social worth towards a definition of education in instrumentalist economic terms. Down et al (2018) suggest that the myth-notion popularly peddled to young people that education is a magic formula for securing a job, is a potentially damaging illusion, positioning the individual as an all-powerful consumer-fixer of the social and economic inequities

inherent in a society of grossly uneven opportunity. Deeming and Smyth (2014) argue that neoliberalism heralded not incremental change to the Australian welfare state but rapid and radical reconfiguration. Education, they contend, is at the vanguard of the social investment approach to social policy. Eviscerated society (is) one that is stripped of the thick mesh of mutual obligations and social responsibilities characteristics of civil society demonstrating a lack of democratic imagination.

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