Youth and the Critical Agenda: Negotiating Contradictory Discourses

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Abstract

Syllabus and policy documents in many states and countries around the world, and more specifically in Queensland are underpinned by an emancipatory agenda, in particular the principles of social justice. Educators are called upon to achieve this through a pedagogy which is immersed in the language of critical theory.

Two elements that underpin emancipatory politics, that is, a transformative attitude towards the future, and the aim of overcoming the illegitimate domination of some individuals or groups by others, seem to be unobtainable within a choice generation, with its focus on lifestyle and consumerism. This paper focuses on the discourses of youth that are legitimated through the accounts of young people for whom emancipation is not a key issue. Such students may achieve the syllabus outcomes related to the critical agenda, yet it begs the question: Are contemporary youth making choices that further the critical transformative cause, or are our critical pedagogies simply serving to perpetuate dominant understandings? This paper explores and interprets performative accounts of youth and their multiliterate lives, within a critical poststructuralist framework.

Introduction

Life is characterised by instability and change for youth in contemporary, globalised society. New meanings for old words, the creation of hybrid texts, hybrid languages and communication forms, and explorations into the electronic and digital world, are some of the ways that youth create evolving discourse communities. Additionally, intersecting influences of family, popular culture, schooling and society for young people often involves negotiating multiple contradictory choices. Within this globalised context, schools compete as a sphere of influence over the civic choices and practices of young people. Thus, many states or provinces across the world, including within Australia, New Zealand, Canada, UK and the US have, at different

times, developed syllabus or curriculum documents underpinned by an emancipatory agenda. Such an agenda particularly promotes three common principles of social justice which, for example in Queensland Australia, are referred to as diversity, equity and supportive environments. Such principles are outlined in a way that encourages active, informed civic participation.

This article explores the impact of this agenda on a small group of white, middle class, 16 year-old students in a Queensland (Australia) school which has a well-known reputation in the local educational community for enacting these emancipatory syllabi through critical pedagogy. First, I outline some of the direct and indirect (often contradictory) influences on these young people, including popular culture, schooling and societal issues. I then explain the focus and methodology of the research project which has informed this article and provide evidence to show that these young people are able to use sophisticated language to discuss and critique social issues and texts however, they are not quite so prepared to problematise their own investments or practices. Finally, I suggest that the critical agenda would benefit from a poststructural turn, which acknowledges complexity and asks students to explore the multiple options available to them; the possible outcomes or impact on self or others that particular choices may have; and the processes of subjectification (or shaping of identities) that have influenced their decisions and actions so far.

Youth and its Multiliterate Culture

Young people today are growing up in a world that is characterised by change, new technologies, globalisation and turbulence. Frequent intercultural interactions with a wide variety of multimodal, multimedia and hybrid texts for various personal, social, school and work related purposes, reflect changing social and economic purposes.

Young people have varied perspectives and priorities, and experience a range of circumstances across the world (de Castro, 2004). Increasing access to products, lifestyle commodities and cultural trappings through multi-media texts including the World Wide Web, has created a number of niche markets and hybridised youth cultures across the world. Transnational, national, regional and local factors influence youth style and participation (Butcher & Thomas, 2003) in different facets of their cultural lives. Global networks enable individuals to be part of multiple and overlapping social communities based on such things as interests or hobbies, work, ethnicity and sexual identity (Kalantzis, 1997). The potential to be part of a 'social community' is possible even if members live significant distances from each other. This changing nature of 'community' has contributed to changing values for young people towards self-enlightenment and self-liberation as they actively and continuously form new connections in family, the workplace and society (Beck &

Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) in a bid for individual fulfilment. Youth respond to such influences in multiple ways, including the ways they react to, and derive pleasure in their worlds, so it is important to consider individual choices and spheres of influence within the broader context of what is commonly termed 'youth culture'.

Lived experiences and subjectivities: Plaisir vs Jouissance

According to Kenway and Bullen (2001), pleasure is an important ingredient in youth culture, and they draw on the work of Grace and Tobin (1997) to suggest that the pleasures that are evoked are of different kinds. *Plaisir* is defined by Grace and Tobin (1997) as a pleasure derived from conforming or relating to the social order, so students would display behaviours that are in-sync with social norms, and they would derive pleasure from praise and reinforcement of such behaviours.

Jouissance, on the other hand, is defined as a voluptuous pleasure which knows no bounds, and is derived from transgressing the social order (Kristeva, 1982/1980; Grace & Tobin, 1997; Kenway & Bullen, 2001). These students take pleasure in acts of resistance to social norms and hegemonic systems, and invest in a subculture of rebellion (Wyn & White, 1997). Girls in particular, may celebrate their capacity to exploit and use different forms of sexual expression derived from their view that their sexuality is 'natural', and by freely expressing it, they are breaking down and challenging patriarchal values within the school hierarchy (Blackman, 1998).

Different reactions, choices and behaviours even in response to the same stimuli (in this case the Queensland English syllabus as taken up in a school English program) suggest different methodologies. In order to explore the impact of the critical agenda at this school, a multi-layered poststructural approach has been taken, with *difference* as the starting point.

Contradictory Discourses of Schooling and Society

Gee (2000) suggests that we are in the midst of a major shift in how we react to, and work within our physical, social, biological and mechanical worlds. He variously uses words such as 'chaos', 'complexity', 'flexible', 'fluid', 'dynamic', 'adaptive', and 'networks' as the catch words in our 'new capitalist' society. No longer do we subscribe to 'top-down' authoritarian, hierarchical power systems within organisations, where workers will be told what to do by someone higher up in the power structure. Flexible teamwork and harnessing available resources on a global scale, is the name of the new game, so workers are allegedly more autonomous, more involved and active citizens, and more adaptable social beings within the new global knowledge economy (Kellner, 2002). These changing characteristics of workers and society have taken place within, and been fuelled by neoliberalism (Phoenix, 2003), which serves to *individualise* workers to take responsibility for self-fulfilment and achievement (Beck & Beck-

Gernsheim, 2002). This process of socialisation, according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, releases workers in the new economy from traditional fixed ties such as family, occupation, neighbourhood, region or culture as they enter the workforce. Community-oriented policies and production-based lifestyles are being replaced with market-oriented policies and consumption-based lifestyles (Côté, 2002), and such a system and its philosophical underpinnings has been normalised through the hegemonic practices of governments, schools and social institutions over the past thirty years. Singh, Kenway and Apple (2005) suggest that individuals are induced to play the enterprise game as they see their own interests being served by such a culture, which results in a powerful, persuasive environment of calculative and self-centred views of the world. Phoenix (2003) argues that neoliberalism is about "continually changing the self, making informed choices, engaging in competition, and taking the chances offered by the market and the government to consume and take advantage of lifelong learning" (p. 229), however it is assumed under such a system, that every individual is autonomous and therefore able to take advantage of what the market offers.

Many schools (and specifically the site of this study) are drawn into such neo-liberal discourses of individualism as students are encouraged to compete for individual accolades. Yet contrary to this, and at the same time, schools are advocating the critical agenda through curriculum and policy documents, including the ideals of active participation for social change and the 'common good', social justice, supportive environments and equity for all. Indeed, a closer look at the Queensland English syllabus (Queensland Studies Authority, 2005) even reflects contradictory discourses about how to enact critical pedagogy. A key goal of this syllabus is active participation for social change, however this is to be achieved through text analysis and the production of texts which largely remain within the institutional boundaries of modernity in which schools remain firmly anchored (Macdonald, 2003). It is not unreasonable to suggest that such activities could be described as passive rather than active when utilised as forms of civic participation.

The Research Process

This article is drawn from a larger study of critical pedagogy and youth which aimed to explore the impact of the critical agenda (as endorsed in Queensland syllabus documents) on the lives of middle class students for whom emancipation was not a significant issue. Key foci of the study included accounts of embodied multiliterate practices, intellectualisation of texts and contexts, positioning of self and others, and resistance to hegemonic discourses.

The methodological framework is informed by critical poststructuralist theory, whereby it is possible to *see* the multiple discourses through which we are inevitably

and contradictorily constituted, and to *position oneself differently* in relation to existing discourses so that oppressive and inequitable discourses may be dismantled (Davies, 1994). Whilst Marxist theory and poststructural theory could be seen as incompatible, Peters' (2003) work is helpful in making sense of a theoretical framework that draws upon both. He suggests that Marxist critical theory has not become extinct or over-ridden by a newer poststructuralist theory; rather it has been strengthened by poststructuralist readings. Peters (2003) argues that a 'complementary thesis' is entirely feasible, whereby poststructuralist readings of Marxism are suspicious of meta-narratives or 'truths' and understand Marx's 'power' differently – "to view it, in Foucault's terms, as pervasive, productive, positive and operating as the micro-physics of everyday life" (p. 122). In this way, by using such a 'complementary thesis', I am able to draw upon the transformative possibilities of critical theory, overlaid with a poststructural lens, so as to explore the complexities of the enactment of critical pedagogy.

Methods

The research was conducted at a State High School in Queensland, chosen because of its reputation in offering programs informed by critical pedagogy, particularly in relation to visual and multimodal text. The participants were drawn from a group of students at the school, identified by their English teacher as being competent in visual and critical literacy, so the possible transfer of such abilities into their everyday lives (according to their accounts) could be studied.

The data used for this paper are drawn from the accounts of three participating Year Eleven students (each of whom was 16 years old at the time) and were gathered from a number of sources, including the use of a multi-modal popular culture text (a display advertisement and publicity campaign constructed as part of normal class activity) as a prompt for discussion, learning conversations (Thomas & Harri-Augstein, 1985; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997), semi-structured interviews and group discussions.

I utilized an approach to data analysis that is informed by the tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA). I used Fairclough's (1992; 2003) linguistic point of reference, that of Hallidayan linguistics which is concerned with the social character of text and the relationship between language and other elements of social life. More specifically in the analysis for this paper, I have found textual analyses of transitivity, lexicalization, mood, modality and cohesive devices have yielded the most fruitful results to describe the discourses of youth that are legitimated in these accounts. Analysis of the specificities of the texts in this way, allows me to explore how the participants' language is used to position themselves and others, and to legitimize their dominant cultural maps (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, & Roberts, 1978) or hegemonic assumptions.

I have also drawn extensively from Fuller and Lee's (1997) application of Halliday's interpersonal function of language, which is concerned with the interactions within and between texts, or the enactment of social relations, and how this can be related particularly to dimensions of power and solidarity as part of broader institutional discourses. They use the term 'collusion' to describe the way in which (con)textual participants negotiate the relations of power in any text or context.

Fuller and Lee take Fairclough's (1992) term 'manifest intertextuality' and refashion it as 'manifest dialogia' to reflect their intersubjective motivations. They suggest that manifest dialogia is realized grammatically on a scale from 'other-ness' to 'own-ness', through:

- Quoting, or making another's text explicit in one's own;

- Interpolation, or explicitly constructing a dialogue between textual interlocutors such as I believe/argue or you think; and,

- Probabilisation, or evaluations around the probability or surmisability of propositions such as maybe, apparently. (Fuller and Lee, 1997, p. 415)

This perspective was particularly useful in the analysis of how the participants' changing personae within textual instances, along with their weaving of other texts into their own, can determine the extent of their collusion in school contexts.

The other significant focus in my analysis of the data is Kamler's (1997b; 1997a) and Threadgold's (2000) use of embodiment and performance. I looked to the language in the data sessions to explore the centrality of the body in the participants' accounts of lived experience, multiliterate practices and positioning of self and others as they take up particular subjectivities within the institutional settings of which they are a part.

Data and analysis

My initial analyses of the data transcripts revealed three intersecting, overlapping and often conflicting discourse areas within the accounts of the youth participants. These were: discourses of youth; intentional discourses of schooling; and discourses of society. The discourses of youth included talk about their own practices, investments, values and beliefs; and talk about their peers and influential adults. The intentional discourses of schooling included talk about subject hierarchy or dualism; curriculum issues including intellectualisation; school performance and expectations; positioning of teachers and students; and collusionary behaviour. The discourses of society included talk about multiliterate practices; social issues; positioning of and by parents; and societal expectations of teenage behaviour and characteristics.

I identified a number of common threads in my analysis that were traceable through these three discourse areas, across different texts and from each of the three participants. These included:

- Youth positioned through bodily practices and performative statements,

- Youth described through good/bad binary student discourses,

- Youth as negotiating slippery roles and scales of expectation,

- Youth as individual agents with expectations of agency, and

- Youth positioned as distinct from adults.

I will provide examples of and discuss each of these areas in turn (although they intersect and overlap), including a pastiche of extracts from the data transcripts and my analysis of them. In the interests of space here, I am unable to include full transcripts or in some cases, larger chunks of transcripts, however my assemblage of the pastiche in some way reflects the assemblage of intertextual links and chains of any text, where decisions are made (either consciously or unconsciously) to include and/or omit particular elements. I will however, endeavor to explicate how the extracts relate to the discursive events from which they are drawn.

Youth positioned through bodily practices and performative statements

The subjectivities of youth that are spoken in these texts tend to rely heavily on bodily practices such as *using* the internet, *playing* console games, *playing* sport, *doing* drama, *sleeping/having sex* with people, *working* either in school or out of school… or not. This of course must be considered in terms of the interview questions being asked, such as what they do on weekends or which practices they engage in, however even in instances where questions did not specifically relate to practices, the participants often used bodily practices as descriptors of self or others, and in some cases, own practices were used almost as a 'yardstick' for the practices of others, whereby the speaker was able to indicate their 'authority' to speak about and pass judgment on such matters. For example, the body is inscribed in the discourse through descriptions of gayness, anti-gayness, Christian or non-Christian activities/beliefs, slutty behaviour, radical actions and regulated behaviours, many of which overlap. Performative statements indicating either what self or others do, or what they will do, are evident in talk that positions both self and others.

Text 1

MR: Do you think some families do? (care about friends who are racially or sexually different)

PH: Oh definitely. Like some kids here do. Like some of my . . . like not close friends, but you know, friends of friends, like next level out, not quite acquaintances . . . like they're very strong Christians . . . you wouldn't tell, but they're very strong and they believe in creationism and against evolutionism and um, they're very very anti-homosexual and like I wouldn't have know about it, unless I'd brought it up, well not brought it up . . . I was in a legal studies . . . I don't do legal studies, my friends do, and apparently it was the entire class basically against 2 people, and one of them I wouldn't have guessed that she was so anti gay. And a few others I have . . . well other people have told me, but I never notice they're anti gay. (Paul Interview 2)

Paul's use of adverbs to indicate strong probabilisation (Fuller & Lee, 1997) of Christian and anti-gay beliefs such as "very strong", "very, very anti . . . " and "so anti . . . " seem to be used here to illustrate that such beliefs should be evident (in appearance and/or in bodily actions) as he goes on to say "I wouldn't have guessed" and "I never notice". His lexical choices link 'Christians' with 'anti-gayness' in a manner that seems normal, and later he also describes particular bodily practices that indicate 'gayness' such as crossing your legs in a certain way. Bodily practices are also used to pass judgements on girls at the school.

Text 2

MR: Now in the last interview you talked about when you were in grade 8, you know the whole popularity thing . . . um, and you talked about some of the girls there, the popular girls as being slutty . . . and . . . well can you tell me whether you think popularity is linked to sexual behaviour? Or is that what slutty means? Is that what you . . . ?

PH: Well, there's acting slutty and there's being slutty . . . I can't remember which one I meant.

MR: Well tell me what slutty means.

PH: Acting slutty is acting like you want to have sex, being slutty is having sex with people.

MR: So you think they were acting slutty?

PH: I'd say so, like yeah, because um . . .

MR: So what sort of behaviours would you characterize as acting slutty?

PH: Ummm . . . well Cath and Paula, two girls here, you can cross out their names . . . they um, they I don't know . . . they kind of talk about their

breasts like in a conversational manner, and oh . . . yeah, they act slutty, I don't know if they are, but they talk about giving blow jobs to people . . . I don't know if they do or not, but they definitely act slutty. And then there's Kelly, whose in my English class . . . um, she sleeps around, she has sex with people, but . . . and she'll bring it up in conversation only if it's mentioned, so she doesn't act slutty unless you know, it's what the conversation's about, but I'd say she is . . .

MR: So you think if you sleep with people, you're slutty?

PH: Oh well, sorry I . . . personally I do, because I don't sleep with anyone and don't really want to at the moment, but um . . . (Paul Interview 2)

His lexical choices pre-suppose a relationship between 'popular' and 'slutty', and the term slutty is an attribute used to describe girls who exhibit different categories of behaviour. His use of the processes 'acting' and 'being' are used respectively to mean 'talking about sex' and 'having sex'. The former, a performative statement is given more negative emphasis through the strong modality of the adverb 'definitely', and the low probabilisation (Fuller & Lee, 1997) of bringing it up 'only if it's mentioned'. It seems that talking about sex is being constructed as worse than doing it.

Throughout the Year Eleven data in this study there is consistent use of a cause/effect cohesive structure using such indicators as 'because', 'so' and 'that's why', with participants indicating reasons for why things are, or why they believe. . . This may be attributed to a number of variables: for example the interview genre of this discursive event, whereby questions need answers; the approval sought by the participants who position themselves as 'good students' in their successful collusion in the interview; or the participants buying into the discourses of schooling whereby students need to provide evidence of achievement or 'rightness'. Here Paul justifies his viewpoint and gives himself authority to speak and judge through his unsolicited statement about his own behaviour regarding sex, through his interpolation of textual interlocuters (Fuller & Lee, 1997) Cath and Paula and Kelly and his indication through the circumstance 'at the moment' that he will eventually have sex, but that it isn't important at this time in his life – read 'good boy' who is focused on school. Such a construction of being 'good' is also linked with 'doing as you are told' or regulating your behaviour.

The schooled, regulated 'docile body' (Foucault, 1977) is legitimated in the accounts of these youth as they talk about "sitting people down and teaching them" about alternative beliefs (Ellen, interview 2), "doing what the teacher wants" and "trying to keep my grades up" (Matt, interview 1). The material processes, passive and active voice respectively, and pronouns used, indicate actions to regulate others who don't display appropriate behaviours (them) and actions to regulate self (my, I). Then even

within the interview "please tell me if I'm boring you . . ." (Paul, interview 1), the verbal and behavioural processes, imperative mood as well as the use of the cohesive device ellipsis in Paul's statement, where "I will stop talking" is left unsaid, indicate a conscious acknowledgement that he accepts that I can regulate his behaviour if I choose to, that he should regulate his own behaviour (as good students/teenagers do), yet at the same time is seeking my approval to keep going – an appropriate collusionary tactic in the interview genre. Such regulation is linked with the next discourse for discussion.

Youth described through good/bad student discourses

Youth in these accounts seem to be described in terms of dualistic notions of good/bad. Table 1 shows various language descriptors from the data that indicate 'goodness' and 'badness', along with my description of the language forms.

There is an interesting juxtaposition in these accounts, whereby such dualistic discourses of good/bad are reinforced through comparison/contrast cohesive structure, using conjunctions such as 'whereas' and 'but' to compare behaviours (material processes and performance), relational processes of having particular attributes and strong modality to indicate definite values. Doing well at school by trying hard, getting good grades and not antagonizing teachers, seems to be highly valued by these students who buy into such discourses. At the same time, there is an indication of complexity and multiplicity in their accounts of youth, as they discuss degrees of particular categories. For examples, having Christian morals is taken on as a relational process by each of the participants to legitimate and authorize their opinions about particular behaviours, yet there seems to be a sliding scale of those morals or Christian attributes that are desirable and those that are not. Adverbs such as 'really', 'hyper' (to magnify the attribute), 'very', 'so', 'completely', 'actually' and 'fairly' are used to indicate degrees of acceptability, and the 'good' students are deemed to have the authority to decide what is at the higher end of 'good' and what is not as they invest in 'plaisir' performances that give them power in the school setting. Ellen suggests (interview 2) that sometimes you "pretend to poke fun, not actually poke fun" at others. Presumably sometimes such behaviour is acceptable if you don't 'really' mean it. It is interesting to note that these 'good' students, who position themselves as open-minded and politically correct, also have strong opinions about particular social issues.

> Text 3

> PH: I have a theory . . . black people can get money just by complaining about things, so they'll have a hundred percent tolerance as long as they can keep on getting money for complaining, for example um . . . I can't think of an example right now. And like the women's lib thing, it's still going . . . the ridiculous claims . . . 'cause they know they can make financial gain easier, so . . .

'Good' Descriptors		'Bad' Descriptors	
Descriptor	Language form	Descriptor	Language form
Trying hard	Material process	Don't try	Negative material process
Getting A's	Relational process	Close-minded	Attribute
Open-minded	Attribute	Sleeps around	Material process
Caring	Attribute, related to performativity and performance	Slutty	Attribute, related to embodied performance
Don't sleep around	Negative material process	Talks about body / sexual acts	Performative statements
Have Christian morals	Relational process	Have hyper-Christian morals	Realized through modality, Relational process
Make choices / judgements about what is good / offensive	Realized through conjuctions (whereas, but) and modality (degrees of)	Popular (shallow)	Attributes, also realized through embodied performance
Gain approval	Realized through high modality for good characteristics	Sports jerks	Participant, also realized through embodied performance
Politically correct	Realized through low modality when describing other	Antagonize the teacher / ratty	Material process, embodied performance, attribute
Regulated bodies	Performance and performativity	Dumb	Attribute, related to embodied performance
Individual agency	Realized through material processes and adverbs of manner	Discriminates against gays	Realized through verbal and material processes

Table 1: Good/bad discourses of youth

MR: How are they making financial gain?

PH: They sue companies . . .

MR: So you don't think those things are important?

MC: I do.

PH: I think they're claiming that they want acceptance, but what they do want is special treatment . . . not all woman, I don't want to generalize, but I'm saying people who want to go out and complain about police*men* instead of police*women* and men make more money . . . I don't think they're trying to get acceptance, they're just trying to get money.

MC: I think that fundamentally they'd like to be accepted, but they just can't see it happening and there's always gunna be other people searching for . . . money probably.

MR: Ellen, what do you think about this – a female perspective?

EP: Um, when we talk about this I feel like one of the guys. I don't feel like I get treated any differently. (Year 11 group Interview)

So it seems that despite criticizing 'bad' youth for discriminating against gays, it is acceptable for 'good' students to dismiss race and gender issues as money-spinners. Matt interjects (turn 5) to state that he cares about such issues (politically correct), yet his language in turn 7 indicates he is still positioning women as a homogenous group (they) who want and need to be accepted but won't ever gain such acceptance. In an earlier interview he suggests that "I still think that man is a more neutral word for both sides", and "we can still use those terms without any of the intention behind it". He doesn't want to offend, yet he normalizes gender terms without interrogation. Here he also refers to money (turn 7). This may be his way of rationalizing support for certain groups over others, as they (other people) are all looking for money, so we (society? those of us who don't complain?) can only support some – again a sliding scale. Paul seems to accept some women (the ones who don't complain), yet not those who are outspoken about 'ridiculous' claims. Ellen dutifully plays the game when asked to comment, by not offending anyone, not complaining, and identifying with the boys through her behavioural process 'feel like' (one of the guys). Sliding scales and slippery roles seem to be a recognized part of youth discourse, as I will explain below.

Youth as negotiating slippery roles and scales of expectation

These youth talk about youth and youth culture in terms of change, busy-ness, roles they negotiate, and scales of expectation from peers, teachers and parents. They see senior (Year 11 and 12) as bringing with it new and higher expectations, whereby

they have more homework, they do extra-curricula activities at night and on the weekends, and the pressure is exerted by teachers (they) to go to university.

Text 4

MR: Do you think [school] should connect more to kids' needs and interests and lives?

MC: Yeah, probably, but also I think it's changed a lot now. I think back then, that was an accepted way to get into uni, but now we're sorta . . . they see it as . . . you have to do well at school and you're not gunna get to uni unless you do well at school, so . . .

MR: And yet we have quite a lot of people who go back to uni when they're mature age, don't they? And actually don't need an OP score to get in. It's interesting . . . it's very highly valued isn't it?

MC: Yeah, yeah. I think they put a lot of value on . . . you have to go to uni. There's a message there that you have to go to uni, like I just . . . it may be a propaganda thing, but I . . . my brain has been trained to think that I have to go to uni . . . I can't not go to uni, cause . . . (Matt, interview 2)

The relational processes "have to" do well, "not gunna get to uni unless . . ." and "have to go to uni" indicate the acceptance of the direct relationship between doing well at school and going to university, and the unspoken relationship between going to university and life success. Part of successfully colluding in discourses of school is negotiating the role of 'good' student, so even though they might be asked to make decisions, think for themselves, be independent and critical (in this and many school programs), they must do so within the boundaries of 'acceptable' behaviour and 'acceptable' criteria, where what is acceptable is decided by others (teachers).

There are also different levels of behaviour such as 'caring'. Paul says that he sits with the people 'who care the most about school' (he positions himself with the authority to speak and judge as a 'good' student who gets 'A's), which assumes that others might care, but not as much as he and his friends care. Juxtapose this against his accounts about levels of caring in terms of social issues.

Text 5

MR: How about in Australia, like homeless people in Australia?

PH: Um, I don't have much experience with homeless people in Australia really, just . . .

MR: Do you ever think about it, that maybe you know . . . what they do or don't have access to or . . . ?

PH: No, not really.

MR: Do you think you should?

PH: I don't really think so, cause I think, um . . . there are other people who kind of care more . . . I mean, I care about the human race as a whole, but I don't care enough to do something about it.

MR: You don't?

PH: No, not really. If there was an easy way, but I'd rather dedicate my life to doing something else. (Paul, interview 2)

Here, Paul suggests that caring less is acceptable because other people care more. He indicates that if there was an "easy" way he might do something, and his use of the process "would rather dedicate" justifies his attitude because he will choose another equally important "something" to do with his life. Caring more in individualist settings such as schools, where by caring, you improve your own chances, is more highly valued than caring more for social good. This sentiment intersects with the next discourse that I will discuss.

Youth as individual agents with expectations of agency

Youth are constructed variously as having a repertoire of choices, where they choose particular performances of self based on salient needs and/or desires at particular times. Choosing to get a part-time job, which extra-curricula activities to become involved in, which subjects will ensure the best final OP (overall performance) exit measure and which social issues to care about, are all discussed with different degrees of modality and probabilisation. There seems to be an acknowledgement from each of these participants however, that it is up to the individual to make the right choices and that if you are marginalized, you only have yourself to blame.

Text 6

MR: Have you ever thought about how sometimes those kids who aren't doing as well, maybe they don't have access to the internet, or maybe they don't have access to the sorts of things that you have access to?

PH: Well, the only people I know who don't do well, it's either cause they don't try, or . . . don't try slash don't care . . .

MR: Or maybe don't care about what's being offered?

PH: Yeah, so I don't know anyone who's been marginalized by all that.

MR: Do you think there might be people though?

PH: There could be, but I've no way of . . . getting into contact with them, cause yeah . . .

MR: Do you ever think about that, that maybe kids don't do well because of other reasons, not just because they just don't care?

PH: No not really, cause I'm just of the belief that you can do well if you try. (Paul, interview 2)

Paul uses a definite cause/effect structure, where the blame for lack of success at school is placed squarely on the student. He distances himself from those that "could be" in that situation (low modality) through this relational process and the physical notion of having no contact with such students and no conceivable way of communicating with them. Through this linguistic manoeuvre, he places himself in the group that takes pleasure from trying and making the right choices (plaisir), with no tolerance or understanding of those who may take pleasure in rebelling against such values (jouissance) or those that are unable to compete. It seems that sliding scales in this instance are not acceptable – either you take control and achieve success or you don't, and suffer the consequences.

Youth positioned as distinct from adults

There is a thread running through the data which suggests a definite binary between adult and youth. The students talk about "when I grow up" (Matt, interview 2), being "disowned" by your parents if you're gay, and needing to be regulated to make the right choices or "people would do all the subjects that don't help them out in the long run" (Ellen, interview 2). Older is constructed in some ways as wiser and more sophisticated – a word used by the researcher and taken up by Matt (interview 1) as a suitable descriptor (attribute).

When asked who they admire, both Paul and Matt indicated that they admire their parents (perhaps a collusionary move in this discursive event to gain approval from the researcher). Interestingly both had parents who bucked the system, dropped out of school early, and then went back to university later to gain qualifications in their fields – exactly the type of behaviour that is unthinkable for either participant. Different rules perhaps apply for adults.

Discussion and Conclusion

Critical pedagogy at this school may well be providing these youth with some tools for describing (metalanguage) and understanding social issues and social change, yet

their salient priorities regarding life issues and school performance are based on individual notions of success, where choices need to be made based on how they will benefit self (consistent with a neo-liberal rather than an emancipatory discourse). These students are quite adept at intellectualising texts and to some extent, contexts, however they do not purport to engage in any real transformative social action, and they choose certain 'popular' social causes to 'support' at least in theory. They do not seem inclined at this time to problematise their own practices or investments, nor do they show evidence of understanding the subjectification processes which have led them to their current beliefs, actions and values. These students show evidence of being regulated by a school system that mirrors broader social discourses of individualism and self-preservation. They are being rewarded for colluding successfully in such a system, yet at the same time are being encouraged to critique notions of power and think in ways that can enact change for a more just and equitable society. This seems to be difficult terrain for students to navigate, and it is understandable that these students provide contradictory accounts of their practices and beliefs.

Inevitably there can be no easy 'answer' to the issues presented here regarding the enactment of a critical agenda by youth. However I call for a critical pedagogy with more of a poststructural flavour, that explores the processes of subjectification of students, whereby they examine and understand why they make the decisions they do; what has shaped, and continues to shape their behaviours, actions and language use; what consequences or outcomes such behaviours or language may bring; how particular behaviours, actions and language can be used in manipulative ways; and what equally viable alternatives there might be. Interrogation of 'self', rather than just interrogation of texts needs to be a strong focus in the enactment of a critical agenda, and the complex, multiple and often contradictory subjectivities of youth need to be acknowledged as they negotiate the shifting terrain of their intersecting discourse worlds, and focus on salient priorities at different times in their lives. Such interrogation of self and context may prompt students to achieve more than just successful grades at school. Rather, it may encourage these students to interrogate self within broader socio-political and socio-historical discourses; to make more informed decisions and choices about those practices or issues they are prepared to invest in and those that they are prepared to change at different times in their lives; and may lead to more 'active' civic participation.

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