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Youth and the Critical Agenda: Degrees of proximity and distance

Introduction

Intersecting influences of family, local and global popular culture, schooling and civic

responsibility for young people often involves negotiating multiple contradictory

choices. Within this broad 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 (the site of this study),

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 school which has a well-known reputation

in the local educational community for enacting these emancipatory syllabi through

critical pedagogy. While these data relate specifically to the Queensland context, I

suggest that the findings have much broader implications for any enactment of a

critical agenda. First, I outline some of the direct and indirect (often contradictory)

influences on these young people, including the ways in which popular culture,

schooling and society encourage both individualist and 'common good' agendas. 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 from a distance; however they are not quite so prepared to problematise the close proximity of their own investments or practices. Finally, I suggest that the critical agenda would benefit from a more poststructural turn, which acknowledges complex issues of abstraction and material experience. An agenda which asks students to explore the multiple performative 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), including more abstract engagement with texts, 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, schooling and work related purposes, reflect changing social and economic purposes. In a society characterised by risk and individualism (Bauman, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), with increasing levels of responsibility and choice (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Wyn & Woodman, 2007), young people face new imperatives to perform identities and to generate new forms of expression and participation. 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, and make choices about performing identities in different ways at different times. Hence, in order to explore the impact of the critical agenda at school, a multi-layered poststructural approach should be taken, with *difference* as the starting point.

Contradictory Discourses of Schooling and Society

Ways of engaging in contemporary society are beset with contradiction. Bauman (2000) suggests that loyalty and dedication are juggled with keeping one's options open. Respecting organisations is juggled with resisting and enacting change. Flexible teamwork is juggled with individual drive for success. Workers are allegedly more autonomous, more involved and active citizens, and more adaptable social beings within the new global knowledge economy (Kellner, 2002), yet what of those who don't know how to compete, or don't have the resources to do so? And how do people deal with having such choice at their disposal?

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 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) which is an 'official' curriculum text at the site of this study, 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 and abstract rather than active material performances of civic

participation. Such activities are distanced from the actual choices that young people make, and possible consequences of such choices.

The Research Process

The purpose of this research is to question the capacity of socially critical pedagogical and curriculum approaches to be genuinely transformative such that young people lead lives where social justice and social betterment are paramount. The study seeks to understand the extent to which the young participants are prepared to invest in such principles when they are part of a choice generation, with its focus on lifestyle and consumerism. The participants highlighted in this article are a group of white, middle class high school (16 year old) students in Queensland, Australia, for whom emancipation *is not* a key issue in their lives. They were identified by their English teacher as highly competent in the critical strand of the English syllabus. The critical strand of the syllabus requires students to demonstrate an understanding of common principles of social justice, such as: equity, diversity and supportive environments, through active civic participation.

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 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 (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; Thomas & Harri-Augstein, 1985), semi-structured interviews and group discussions.

I utilize an approach to data analysis that is informed by the tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA). I use 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. 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 (1997a; 1997b) 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. Of

particular interest is how these young people 'perform' their role as students and as

civic participants.

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,

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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

I 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 do, 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.

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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)
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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.

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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)
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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.

Paul introduces this story about the 'two girls' in response to the interviewer's reference to his previous comments about passing judgement on female peers. He needs to defend his previous point, and he does so by telling a story that portrays a familiar social discourse of strong moral judgement about girls or women who talk about or have sex in ways that typically 'other' them (de Castro, 2004) as immoral. He interpolates particular attributes from *Cath* and *Paula* (pseudonyms), such as 'breasts' and 'blow jobs' which may be perceived by me as an adult in this interview context to be inappropriate conversational topics at school. He lexically links such topics of conversation with acting 'slutty'. Paul's comments here are used to highlight the differences between the girls' behaviour and his own as he "confesses" that he doesn't 'sleep with anyone' at this time in his life. By drawing supposedly negative behaviour of others into the conversation, he effectively performs his own "good boy" positioning which strengthens the authority of his opinions in this and other interviews. Nayak and Kehily (2006) suggest that being a 'proper boy' or 'proper girl' is a 'fantasy that is both hankered after and embodied through an approximation of its norms' (p. 465). Identifying as such runs the risk of losing other identifications such as in Paul's case, that of a stereotypical 'normal' adolescent male who is obsessed with and has sex. Paul gambles on his potentially 'abnormal' positioning in this interaction with me as an adult educator, who could be predicted to read this as an example of his restraint and his admirable focus on academic matters, rather than as a chink in his masculine teenage identity. He can be seen as disrupting the 'norm' for a higher purpose as opposed to being rejected by potential sexual partners. At the same

time, his stereotypical assessment of the 'slutty' girls is expected to be accepted as true. The 'girls' are not positioned in any complex way, such as discursively enacting gender identity in subversive or parodied ways (Butler, 1990) in front of male peers. Their use of particular language may be fascinating or even erotic to Paul, yet he describes it only as 'slutty' because 'proper girls' don't talk like that. Further, these 'popular' girls have previously rejected him as a worthwhile contender for attention, thus positioning them as unworthy of any favourable comment.

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'. 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.

Insert Table (1) Good/bad discourses of youth here

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 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 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
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1. 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…
2. MR:    How are they making financial gain?
3. PH:    They sue companies…
4. MR:    So you don't think those things are important?
5. MC:    I do
6. 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.
7. 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
8. MR:    Ellen, what do you think about this – a female
         perspective?
9. 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)*
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Matt introduces the attribute 'whole' up-front to emphasise that this kid needs to *get*

over the fact that he's black. When I interject, he justifies his view using the figurative

material process 'he *plays* on it'. This suggests that 'the kid' is metaphorically

'playing the race game' – a visible discourse in society where if you identify as

Indigenous you can get anything you want, including handouts. Matt's low modality

(probably) indicates his dilemma of wanting to be seen as a 'good' student who is

politically correct and in-synch with school values (Lesko, 2001), while at the same

time colluding with his peers about unfair monetary claims by certain groups. He

doesn't want to offend, yet he normalises gender terms without interrogation.

Elements of peer collusion are evident as Paul steps in to support and embellish

Matt's argument (pitting youth against adult). 'Us' against 'them' is a familiar

discourse in generational debates, and as the adult interviewer, I am positioned in this

context as the 'them' or the 'other' who is questioning their beliefs and ideals. So

even though Matt does not mention 'the kid's' name, Paul actively takes up the story

as though it is a familiar and therefore tellable tale. He uses it as a way to explicate

his 'theory' about black people. Paul minimizes the importance of race issues and the

disempowerment of Indigenous people by showing outrage that 'black people can get

money' *just* by complaining. His use of the mood adjunct 'just' indicates his

vocalised position on Indigenous issues. He reinforces this argument through his use

of the comparative 'like' to draw parallels with other participant groups that are also

posited as financial drains on society, such as 'women's lib groups'. His use of the

attribute 'ridiculous' to describe the claims that such groups make, indicates his lack

of sympathy, or at least unwillingness to financially support, disempowered groups in

society. These groups are posited as active rather than passive agents through the

processes '*can get* money', 'they *make*', and '*sue* companies'. This positioning of

such groups performs two linguistic functions here: it suggests that such groups are

not disempowered or marginalised as they have agency, and it is a negative appraisal

of this particular kind of agency (which supposedly disrupts the harmony of *dominant*

groups).

It is accepted in these accounts that one can dismiss race and gender issues as money-

spinners, a reductionist account (Young, 1990) that is shaped by institutions such as

the family and the school (Blackman, 1998). Matt interjects to state that he cares

about such issues (politically correct), yet his language indicates he is positioning

women as a homogenous group (they) who want and need to be accepted but won't

ever gain such acceptance. Paul seems to accept some women (the ones who don't

complain), yet not those who are outspoken about 'ridiculous' claims – a sliding scale

of acceptance. Ellen performatively portrays gender as unimportant in this context

when asked to comment *as a female*, by refusing to be drawn into a gendered

discourse. She doesn't offend anyone, doesn't complain, and identifies with the boys

through her mental process 'feel like' (one of the guys). Ellen's response is consistent

with findings from other research studies which suggest that a belief in individual

agency means that the impact of gender is downplayed in her life (see Dwyer & Wyn,

2001; Roberts & Sachdev, 1996; Willis, 1998).

Because subjectivities are formed within discourses, they 'remain subject to the

complex discursive interplay, strategic repositioning and repetitive regulations'

(Nayak & Kehily, 2006 p. 467). These students can be seen as positioning self in

relation to raced and gendered 'otherness' which they disavow. They implicitly

suggest through these accounts that *they* would never be claiming money for *no*

reason, nor would they complain about *historical* issues which are not relevant in

post-feminist and enlightened contemporary society. Political statements such as those made by Prime Minister John Howard in an address to the Australian Reconciliation Convention on 26 May 1997 suggest that no-one in Australia should feel guilt or blame for past wrongdoings in relation to Indigenous Australians, and that it is the future which needs to be the focus, rather than the past (in Luke, 1997). Such discourses invite dismissive or *get over it* attitudes to race issues such as the ones evident in these accounts and deny the historical emergence of truth in terms of discontinuity and contingency (Foucault, 1988; Harwood & Rasmussen, 2007).

Currently in Australia and elsewhere it seems that another 'wave' of ethnic and racial disharmony has become apparent (Menadue, 2003), with recent popular media texts running articles about 'white supremacy'(Box, 2006; Pittam, 2006) re-emerging in Australia and America, accusations of public hatred of the Australian Muslim community (Kerbaj & Megalogenis, 2006) particularly since the terrorist events of 9/11; and the highly publicized Cronulla riots in Sydney (Burchell, 2006), which have sparked debates about the 'incipient racism at the nation's core'. The uncertainties of a globalised market economy have induced concern over the inability of the state to provide stability and protection for its citizens, and Singh (2005 p. 117) suggests that a 'politics of resentment' against racialised 'others' has emerged to deflect attention from the disinvestment of the state in educational and economic security. Singh argues that discontent has been fuelled by state-based incitement of fears of racialised 'others', and this attribution of blame for perceived declines in lifestyle has been variously reconstituted in waves since the 1980s. In many ways, these recent events have given licence to 'ordinary Australians' to convey racist viewpoints which are seemingly based upon the safety and economic interests of 'the common Australian'.

Similarly, feminist agendas are under fire from 'ordinary Australians'. Schoene (2006) argues that many contemporary young women regard feminism as a thing of the past as gender equality is supposedly now self evident and more ambitious feminist concerns can be put down to 'starry-eyed utopianism' (p. 134). Paul's comment about the insignificance of gendered language such as *policewomen* and *policemen* suggests this attitude that women already have equality, so idealistic notions of changing such wide-spread accepted terms is simply taking things too far – trouble-making behaviour from people who are never satisfied. He doesn't elaborate on *how* women will 'get money' from such claims; however the material process 'trying to get money' is used to cast negative aspersions on those who push boundaries too far from what is accepted by *normal* (powerful) groups. The verb 'trying' indicates that they are not successful in their quest; hence Paul's views are validated. Sliding scales and slippery roles seem to be a recognized part of youth discourse, which is further evidenced 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.

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Text 4
MR:    Do you think it(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…
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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)
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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 of 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.

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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
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> 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.

Discussion and Conclusion

Critical pedagogy at this school seems to 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). Degrees of proximity and distance; abstraction and material experience influence how these young people 'perform' as students. The expectation of high university entrance scores is currently in close proximity to their lived experiences, demanding individual performances that collude with school values. Being able to analyse texts and use sophisticated metalanguage in abstract ways, is required for such performances, and they are adept at such activities. The expectation of material enactment of the critical agenda on the other hand, asks for levels of care about issues that are quite distant from these white, middle class students' lives. Further, they are encouraged at school to keep their distance (materially) from those marginalised or minority groups who would potentially disrupt their focus and their goals (for example those who might rebel against the system for a variety of reasons), yet at the same time are encouraged

(abstractly) through text analysis to empathise with and champion such groups. 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 (including abstract text analysis); 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. 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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Table 1 Good/bad discourses of youth

'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