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Acting, accidents and performativity: challenging the hegemonic good student in secondary schools

Abstract

Current educational practice tends to ascribe a limiting vision of the good student as one who is well-behaved, performs well in assessments and demonstrates values in keeping with dominant expectations. This paper argues that this vision of the good student is antithetical to the lived experience of students as they negotiate their positionality within complex power games in secondary schools. Student voices in focus group research nominate six rationales of the good student that inform their 'performances' of the good student. Understanding the multiplicity and dynamism of the good student is an educational imperative as schools seek to meet the changing needs of society in the new millennium.

Introduction

Schools exist to produce good students. This is one of the commonsense assumptions that informs much of what is done in schools. The vision of the good student is powerful because it immerses the student within competing and contradictory discourses and micropractices of power. This paper presents research to argue that the good student is an evolving multiplicity that is experienced differently and dynamically by students. It builds on educational research that problematises those practices in schools that govern, and encourage young people to self-govern, the subjectivities possible in the terrains of schools. Schools could be freer places for young people, but much of what in constructed as 'good' in the good student is best thought of as a set of discourses that, perversely, limit the possibilities for students to be creative and experimental of their selves. This denies them opportunities to explore the "arts of existence" Foucault felt was necessary to challenge the

modernist ontology so powerful in institutions such as schools.(Foucault 1990, 238) Mainstream schools in Australia still tend to utilise a narrow vision of what it means to be good that is exclusive and repressive, and forces students to position themselves against visions or ideals of studenthood that are hegemonic in practice if not in intent.(Youdell 2004)

This paper reports on a study conducted in Western Australia that investigated the visions of the good student in three schools. The purpose of this study was not to compare the vision of the good student found in each school, but to look for those discursive similarities that occur across the three school sites, and to ask students how they moved within the terrains of the good student within their school. I suggest that looking at the similarities in the truths that students speak across school sites may be the best way to understand how the good student is multiply positioned in differing contexts and locations to challenge the widespread acceptance of the "hegemonic good" in school and classroom practices in Australian contexts. (McLeod and Yates 2006)

The Current State of Knowledge

The good or ideal student has been a focus of considerable educational research. This research, increasingly informed by postmodern or poststructural theories of education, has challenged the ways that the good student is envisioned in schools. Ethnographic studies have explored the ways that gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and race have been both regulatory and productive of certain kinds of student subjectivities. (O'Flynn and Peterson 2007, Youdell 2004, Lesko 2003, Lesko 2001, McLeod 2000, Eckert 1989, Willis 1977) These studies have argued that gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and race are all highly significant in how the good or ideal student is represented in specific school sites, and that this has effects on life choices of people long after they leave school. (O'Flynn and Peterson 2007) The good student is discursive in that it communicates to young people their 'correct' comportment through the way each school values certain practices whilst discarding others, or how it communicates its vision and priorities to the wider school community.(Youdell 2004)

Researchers have examined the ways that the good or ideal student has been constituted through those practices of schooling "through which students are spoken into existence, and speak themselves and others into existence". (O'Flynn and Peterson 2007, 460) It is through the privileging of discourses and subsequent positionalities that schools construct fields or terrains within which young people can move. Youdell (2004) argues that these fields or terrains act to produce and constrain what students can be and how they can think about their lives and desires. Foucault (1998) argued that people draw on these types of cultural models to construct their understanding of their selves.

This constraint occurs through the deployment of binary thought that construct sensibilities through the privileging of one category. Davies and Hunt (1994) argue that schools are places where binaries act to constitute subjectivities in hierarchical ways. Thus, the good student becomes a terrain of social-discursive formations through which the student moves and becomes seen, at certain times and in certain ways, as being positioned within these hierachies. Using the work of Donna Haraway, Davies and Hunt (1994) see that one of the ways to counteract this binarisation within educational contexts is to consider the perspectives of those whose positions within the hierarchies that may be the most marginal and/or powerless. This is because the micropractices of power are most visible in their claims to truth. If we see schools as places of "subjectivity constitution", studies of subjectivity in schools should incorporate the perspectives of students as they have unique insight because of their positioning within matrices of power. (O'Flynn and Peterson 2007, 459)

Australian schools valorise a hegemonic good student that privileges a range of dispositions, behaviours and comportments that speak of Foucaultean notions of docile bodies and disciplined subjects. (Foucault 1991) McLeod and Yates define the hegemonic good student as the "student who

is good at doing what examinations require; who applies him or herself to the necessary study to succeed; and who does in fact succeed". (McLeod and Yates 2006, 52) This paper reports on a research study that asked young people to talk about their experiences in schools of the good student. These student voices suggest six rationales or discursive frames of the good student they encounter in secondary schools that they perform within, always attempting to maximise their positionality within the hierarchies. They also speak of ways that certain dispositions, behaviours and comportments are valued and endorsed while others are not. One student voice commented: *Being seen to be good is more important than being good.* This hegemonic good is exclusive, and this exclusivity is one of the "micropractices of power" that Foucault saw as symptomatic of the institution. (Florence 1998, 462) Secondly, the hegemonic good is usually deployed as a static, monolithic identity that fails to show the complexity of students' experiences, such as the ways that students change and evolve, move in and out of positionalities, and are exposed to competing and contradictory discourses that produce student subjectivities. Thirdly, as has already been stated, it is predicated in notions of the binary (such as good versus bad) that is seen as the "dualism that is an inherent part of Western thinking". (Symes and Preston 1997, 31) The effect of this binarisation is to position "the child as different and divided from what is normalised". (Popkewitz 1998, 35) This process of normalisation forces students to measure or 'know' themselves against "the disciplinary apparatuses [that] hierarchised the good and the 'bad' subjects in relation to one another." (Foucault 1991, 180-181)

Much research has been devoted to performativity in education, but this has largely been used to analyse the changing nature of teaching worldwide. (S. Ball 2001, S. Ball 2003, Burnard and White 2008, Nicholl and McLellan 2008, Troman 2008) I argue that the ways that students are positioned through performative policies is equally as significant as the experiences of teachers. Like teachers, students in Australian schools are exposed to cultures that prioritise measuring and testing,

reporting using mandatory standards and systems, state-sanctioned teaching methods, reformed organisational policies and reformed curriculum policies. In short, students are at the centre of those practices that value "modernist and bureaucratic performativity". (Burnard and White 2008, 668) The performativity of the good student is an important strategy of busno-power (or the ways that educational practices and pedagogies shape the subjectivities of students) that utilises pedagogy to "shape through choices in education the subjectivities of autonomous choosers". (Marshall 1998, 75) The ways that the individual is free to choose to be a good student, the choices that are made, the reasons for those choices and the impact of those choices is significant in the performativity of the good student.

This paper argues that the good student is best considered as a range of performances that are multiple, dynamic and contradictory, as students struggle to produce and position themselves within complex webs of power, or performativity. Performativity "precedes performance" in that it assembles those instruments and technologies that constitutes the available dispositions, behaviours and comportments of the subject. (Burnard and White 2008, 674) One student commented: *The good student is a good actor. You don't notice it, but you are putting up a shield around what you say and what you do.* This shield is the performativity of the student through powerful discourses that they read in their school. Performativity is the way that the self is constructed through acts of language or knowing. The self is performed in that it "exists in a fabric or relations that is more complex and mobile than ever before." (Lyotard 1984, 15) It is best considered as a technology that employs "judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change". (S. Ball 2003, 216) This shows that in schools, performativity is the way that the student is continually located or positioned in a relational way to produce a negotiated identity. This negotiated identity is "always located at specific 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits." (Lyotard 1984, 15) Thus, the good student can be considered as one of these 'nodal points'.

It is important to highlight that students are produced, and produce themselves, within the limiting frame of these nodal points because they act to strategically position themselves to maximise what they see as advantageous within multiple discourses of the good. Thus, it follows, that there are multiple ways to be good and also that students are actively producing themselves relationally to the discourses, ("a perpetual comparison of each and all that made it possible both to measure and to judge") because that is how normalising power is deployed in schools. (Foucault 1991, 186)

The genesis of this study begins with an extension of Foucault's methods that argues for research in areas like education that investigates those practices of power that occur at local sites, and which are so ingrained in our understanding that we no longer seem to interrogate them. (Kendall and Wickham 2003) The notion of the hegemonic good student is an example of a commonsense idea that is "related not to economic structures, to the economic relations of production, but to the power relations that permeate the whole fabric of our existence." (Foucault 2000, 17)These commonsense ideas are deeply hidden and deeply invested within the institutions that dominate our lives. (Foucault 2000, 17) The notion of the good student is often presented as the defining purpose of what schools exist to do and be. However, if we look at the school in a Foucaultean sense, there is no such thing as commonsense or 'normal', hence there is no essentialising vision of the good student. "Out of a chaotic set of possibilities for the organisation of popular education, modern forms of schooling came to gradually take a shape they still possess today." (Kendall and Wickham 2003, 123) Investigating the normalising vision of the good student entails problematising the organisation and processes of contemporary schooling. Methodologically, it is this practice of Foucaultean problematisation of commonly accepted truths that is the core of this paper. This strategy of problematisation requires asking questions of those practices that seem 'normal' or 'commonsense' but are really contingent and dynamic: those "accidents of history". (Kendall and Wickham 2003, 5-6) If we see the hegemonic good student as an accident of history, it is possible,

and very important, to investigate how it could be considered differently, and the best place to start is through the experiences of students.

Methodology

This data is taken from a wider study that investigated the visions of the good student in three secondary schools. These schools came from a variety of contexts and incorporated different structures and systems. The study used a number of data collection methods including field observation, discourse analysis of key school documents, principal interviews, discourse analysis of the physical architecture of the schools, contextual analysis of local areas surrounding each school and focus group interviews of selected students. Most important in this research was the diverse collection of voices of students heard through focus groups as they reported on their experiences as to what and who a good student should be. By prioritising student voices I see them as best able to recount how they experience those micropractices of power that inform their performativity. I concur with Davies and Hunt (1994) and Haraway (1988) that addressing those "marked and subjugated" offers a unique insight into school and schooling. I want to understand how students speak from the subject positions made available to them because discourses of the good student mark all students in a multitude of ways, albeit some much more than others. These focus groups were asked a set of open-ended questions about their knowledge and experiences of the good student. They were encouraged to discuss their answers with each other to allow them to explore their experiences and to share thoughts with each other.

In each school I interviewed four focus groups of three Year 11 students, using purposive sampling to get specific groups from the student cohort. By purposive sampling I mean a process where the researcher "wants to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation". (Neuman 2000, 198) To select students I used a protocol that I developed in a previous study. (Thompson 2008) I

asked the Principal to organise a selection panel to target certain categories of students. These categories were those students who excelled in mainstream sports (Sporting Achievers), those students who had the most recorded instances of formal discipline such as Detention and Suspension (Rebels), the students who had received the most academic awards (Academic Achievers) and those students who tended to be almost invisible (Quiet Students). I use these groups of students, not because they provide an exhaustive list of student positionalities within schools, but because it is most likely that these groups will be represented in each school and they are likely to have had different experiences. This means that the data represents a diverse set of perspectives because each of these groups inhabits a different positionality within the power relations of school hierarchies. It is important to note that these groups are not meant to be definitive or exhaustive of the possibilities and experiences of schooling. Rather, they offer a way to gather information from students from a cross-section of the population, so as to give breadth to their experiences of school. To choose the individual student participants that met the criteria for each group, each site set up a small group of staff that nominated potential students for each group. In each school, members of the group were either the Principal or Deputy Principal and the Year 11 Coordinator as these people have a good working knowledge of the ways that students perform in each school.

School Sites

Banksia College

Banksia College is a coeducational Catholic Secondary School located in the South East Metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia. The school was commissioned in 1984 in what was then the urban/rural fringe to the East of Perth. Over the years the urban sprawl has overtaken Banksia College, but it is still possible to see the transition from semi-rural living to urban living. In the 2001 Census, the unemployment rate in the area surrounding Banksia College was 10.7% compared with a state average of 7.5%. Of the local population, 2.7% held a Bachelor degree and only 0.2% held a postgraduate degree from a tertiary institution. Across the state, 9.4% held a Bachelor degree and

1.5% held a postgraduate degree. The median family income was $700-799 per week compared with a state average of $800-999 per week. These statistics, while incomplete, do present a picture of a suburb below the state average according to a variety of economic indicators.(ABS 2005)

One of the themes that ran through the various official documents of the school was the school as a place that should solve problems of economic disadvantage through the 'correct' training of young people in preparation of the good citizen. Discourse analysis of key school documents presented an image of a prescriptive school where practices were firmly directed at producing the good student as a docile and regulated body. In the College Organiser (a version on the homework diary) over 17 A4 pages of text were devoted to various rules and regulations: including uniform (5 pages), discipline (4 pages) and homework policy (3 pages). In the interview with the principal, the students were referred to as 'waifs' whose hope for salvation lay in the intervention of the school. He stated:

> *I'd like to think that through our pastoral care structure though we are picking up some of those little waifs and try to support them, because clearly for some of our kids this is the only normal place that they know. They are starting one hundred metres behind the start line so we have to be trying to work with them.*

For this principal, the good student was one who was "disciplined" and it was one of the roles of school to develop the systems and practices that allowed students to become disciplined. Banksia presented as a school prepared to intervene in the lives of students through correct training to ensure that its students became good citizens. Also significant was the discourse of the meritocracy – that success was entirely due to the abilities and characteristics of each student. When the good student is framed within these discourses, one of the visions that emerged was of the highly individualistic good student.

Jarrah College

Jarrah College is the amalgamation in 1994 of a two single sex Catholic secondary schools. In 2005 there were approximately 880 students at the college from Years Eight to Twelve. Jarrah College is located in a regional centre some 400kms from Perth on the coast. Approximately 8% of the population was Aboriginal.(ABS 2005) The unemployment rate for the area was 11.6%, significantly higher than the state average of 7.5%. The median family income was similar to the state average of $800-$999 per week. Less than 0.4% of the population held a postgraduate degree, while 3.9% of the population held a Bachelor degree, significantly lower than the state average.(ABS 2005) The median house price for the period was $275,000.(Real Estate Institute of Western Australia 2006) Only 21% of the population held any qualification outside of secondary schooling awards. 7% of the population had only received an eighth grade or lower education. 49.5% of the population had received an education of Year 10 or lower.(ABS 2005) These statistics present a view of an area where there is elements of economic prosperity but also indications of economic disadvantage.

One of the first things that stood out about Jarrah was how homogenous the school was. Despite being in a rural community that had a high indigenous population, the students who were enrolled at this school almost all white Anglo-Australians. In comparison to Banksia, Jarrah College seemed a school at ease with the values of the wider community. The official documentation of the school was brief and formulaic. When I asked the Deputy Principal in charge of Pastoral care for the Discipline Policy, I was told that he had never seen one and certainly never used it. When he did locate it, it was 12 months past its review date with no plan for any review. This can be explained by the position of the principal who argued that the school reflected the values that the wider community wanted. There was a sense that the school saw itself as part of the community – perhaps explained by the unique nature of being in an isolated rural community. One of the things that stood out was the emphasis placed on the good student conforming to wider community values. The school motto "For Others" was enthusiastically supported by staff and students alike. For the principal, a good student at Jarrah was a student who "*who gets involved in all sorts of activities around the school;*

who is part of the community and particularly someone who treats others with courtesy, consideration and care." This vision of the good student seemed to adopt a less paternalistic understanding of the role of the school in the community than found at Banksia.

Marri College

Marri College is a public, coeducational high school that operates within inner-city Perth. In 2006 there were approximately 576 students at the college from Years Eight to Twelve a significant decrease from 745 in 2003.(Education Department of Western Australia 2007) In 2006, the attendance rate at Marri was 81.1%, significantly lower than the state average of 88.0%.(Education Department of Western Australia 2007) Only 6 students, which represent 12% of the Year Twelve cohort in 2006, were studying the required number of TEE subjects to qualify for direct tertiary entrance.[i](Education Department of Western Australia 2007) Almost 20% of the student population were classified as Aboriginal, and the school ran specific programmes for Aboriginal students such as Aboriginal School Based Traineeships in conjunction with the Education Department.(Education Department of Western Australia 2007) Approximately 12% of the population was Aboriginal.(ABS 2005) The unemployment rate for the period was 8.3%, slightly higher than the state average of 7.5%. The median family income was lower than the state average at $589 per week. Less than 1.8% of the population held a postgraduate degree, while 15% of the population held a Bachelor degree. The median house price for the period was $239,000.(Real Estate Institute of Western Australia 2006)

Marri holds the reputation of being a difficult school whose recent history has been punctuated by violent student outbursts and low levels of student attendance, retention and success in TEE examinations. In this school there was a vision of the school as a place where the school needed to be engaged in promoting values and attitudes that students may not have been getting at home.

Marri adopted a highly vocational vision of the good student, where academic success was less important than contributing to the wellbeing of students through training. The principal stated: *I want them to come here and be happy and feel good about what they are doing and get some satisfaction out of it and learn stuff, and live a life that gives them some satisfaction, a sense of purpose.* The sense of purpose was deliberately clustered around vocational training. The school offered many more educational pathways beyond the standard split between tertiary and vocational streams found in Banksia and Jarrah. At Marri it was possible to undertake traineeships, technical and trade courses. As well, there were government funded educational programs for indigenous students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds designed to improve graduation. These programs were also vocational in their orientation.

Findings

The following list of six rationales of the good student is those discourses found across the three sites. The short summary of the threes sites above demonstrated some of the ways that they were different. The following section tracks some of the similarities in the discourses that construct the good student recounted by the students. It is not meant as an exhaustive list: rather, it is the organisation of the various discourses that the students gave voice to in the focus groups. It is these discourses that students see as contributing to the web of power that informs their performativity regardless of the differences in context of each school. Students spoke of a variety of discourses that they were aware they were exposed to, and the sense that these were omnipresent and multi-directional. These discourses were often competing and/or contradictory, and students spoke of ways they had to negotiate within the web of these discourses to perform as good students. For example, one student commented:

If you are seen to be studying that makes the teachers happy. Or if you are seen to be doing some kind of work that makes them happy. It doesn't matter how much you learn, being seen to be doing the right thing is important.

What follows is the ways that students feel, through a variety of measures and technologies (micropractices) that they should perform.

The docile and disciplined good

One of the strongest threads that emerged in the data was that of the disciplined student. One student voice said: *If you are a good student, your behaviour is good and your results are good as well. And you are doing your homework and your study.* The overwhelming majority of students discussed the good student in terms of behaviour at some time in their interview. This notion of good behaviour was highly visible for students as a site of surveillance and examination. (Foucault, 1991) Often, the behaviour became the key demarcation between the good and the not-good.

The docile and disciplined student was expected to demonstrate behaviours that showed respect for the authority figures in the school, particularly the teachers and school hierarchy. This meant adopting a performativity that prioritised accepting the power dichotomy between teachers and students. One student commented:

> *Sometimes you just shut up with them. You know that nothing you say is going to change the way they are going to teach you because they have the authority. Sometimes their values kind of seem contradictory.*

One of the key features of the docile and disciplined good student concerned the ways that the students comported themselves physically: for example, what they wore, how they wore it and how they used their body as an aspect of their performativity. One student stated:

> *The good student is a positive role model to the outside: they are friendly and neatly presented. They are not all scruffy and ripped clothes and everything. They try their best and do their bit for the school.*

The students were largely aware of the practices of surveillance and examination that occurred at their schools and how they were positioned as a result of that. In fact, some of their experiences were so extreme that it is very easy to see the ways that subject positions could be established through the pedagogies of the classroom.

> *We got ranked today in our Maths class, and that's how we sit like the people who got the lowest marks sit at the front and the people behind say "You are just sitting there because you are stupid. You are dumb. That's why you are in front of me." So students get really cruel if you get less than them. The person who got the lowest in the test sits at the front and it works its way to the back, which I think is pretty cruel because you don't want to share your grades with everyone.*

The pastoral good

Another strong thread concerned the policing and self-policing of the moral behaviours and values of the students. There was a general acceptance of the reasonableness of teachers transmitting and enforcing certain moral codes and expectations. This image of the teacher as 'shepherd' has strong religious connections that are explained through the historical significance of forms of Christianity in the advent of mass, compulsory schooling. (Hunter 1994, xviii) For students, this extended to seeing certain behaviours as an expression of moral values and individual worth. As well, there was a continued discourse that it was the job of the student to make others happy, such as teachers and other students. This is part of the performativity of the good student. The complexity arises when what makes one happy contradicts what makes another happy. One student highlighted this when he said:

> *If you are good and you get rewarded you get a certificate or a badge or whatever. If you are not then a lot of times the teachers will have like empty threats like "Next time you will get detention". But it is not cool to get rewards, people kind of look down on you. It is better to be good at sport, or pretty or a real rebel.*

This often manifested itself in students feeling extremely uncomfortable with receiving public recognition from teachers for academic success. One voice commented:

> *Every time I go up there to receive an award I'm embarrassed. I don't know I just see people looking at me, judging me. I shouldn't feel embarrassed, I spent hours doing all that work. You just want to scream.*

This often meant that students regulated the behaviour of other students and themselves through their expectations of what was right or morally correct. One student commented:

> *For example, Ms Jones is a good teacher. I wouldn't say she was opinionated but she has got very strong values and sometimes when I am watching something I think about it and I think she'd hate me for watching this. You learn not to say or do anything that challenges her opinions.*

In another school, a student commented: *The good student is meant to be quiet, like they are not meant to have opinions towards things that could be controversial. They tend to agree with what the teacher says.*

One of the most powerful discourses that emerged in this context was that of the meritocratic notion of the good student. To put this simply, many students maintained that academic success was an expression of moral values of hard work and diligence. One student voice maintained:

> *I do my homework because I'm learning from it. It's teaching me. I'm going to benefit from it. I'm thankful that I have the chance of an education, to become something. That's what gives me the drive to become successful.*

The bureaucratic good

The vision of the good student experienced by many seemed to ask the students to comport themselves according to a bureaucratic model. For these students, what was valued in schools was attention to detail, punctuality and organisational skills. One student commented: *I think the good student is someone who works hard with effort. They are on time. They do their homework. They hand things in on time. They remember what they are supposed to do.* These students saw the value in tasks such as homework and made sure that it was completed. Assignments were always completed by the due date and followed the correct setting out and other conventions. Another

dimension of this was that these students made the life of the teacher easier, and allowed the teacher to spend more time on other pedagogical tasks. In one school, a student argued that teachers like to be able to go about their core business (surveillance) rather than taking an active role in engaging students: *Teachers want a good student who makes their job easy so they don't have to work too hard, just be the teacher and sit back and mark students.*

There was a sense from the students that what was being performed was a semblance of the bureaucratic tasks that occupy teachers – an example of the performativity that has come to dominate much of teacher time. (S. Ball 2003) One of the manifestations of this was the idea that the good student avoided getting noticed in overt ways, either by staff or students because *it's bad to be noticed*. In another school, a student argued: *They don't muck up in class. They are quiet people they just get in and do their work.*

The gendered good

Much of the research on the good student has focused on the gendered nature of the performativity. (Davies and Hunt 1994, McLeod 2000, McLeod and Yates 2006, O'Flynn and Peterson 2007, Youdell 2004) My research confirmed that there was a significant gap between how the good student was performed due to gendered differences. One of the more significant was the idea that male students and female student seem to experience school differently because of their gender, and what is valued in one set of circumstances is often not valued from another. The good female tended to be more docile, organised, submissive, valuing of social success, static and silenced through many of the institutional practices. This vision of the good student often prioritised social success and cooperation.

> *I probably see a good student as an all rounder. They are successful, but it depends on how you measure success. Generally someone who puts in whenever they are needed or if they are asked to do something they pretty much say yes.*

In the focus groups, most of the academic achievers and quiet students were female. Alternatively, most of the sports stars and rebels were male. The student voices valued a good male student that tended to be more vocal, more of a 'risk-taker', more comfortable with success, valuing of individual success, dynamic and active. Many male students saw the good student in terms of social popularity more than academic success:

> *Parents want an A+ student, someone who does not have much of a social life because they spend most of their time studying. Teachers want students they can be friends with, talk to them, asks them how they are. They think the same way. Students want a popular student, but someone who keeps their mischief to after school.*

One of the key ways that this was evident was in how students tended to deal with conflict in different ways dependent on their gender. One male student commented on a highly masculine culture in the grounds of the school that resulted in behaviours and comportments that many would see as being counter-productive to resolving conflict. He stated: *A lot of people don't like braggers, or people who draw attention to themselves. You have to be careful that you don't step on people's toes at this school because you can get yourself into a lot of trouble.* The way to deal with conflict was often tied up with violence.

> *You can't back down. That's why you have people bringing knives and stuff to school because they are scared of the repercussions of walking away from a fight so a knife is one way of protecting yourself and stopping the fight by scaring them. I've seen pretty dangerous weapons at this school like bricks being thrown at teachers and baseball bats.*

In a similar situation at the same school, one of the female students responded to a conflict situation in a different way. She tended to absent herself from the school – a far more submissive strategy, although many would argue equally counter-productive.

> *I was good when I was younger but now I am not so good. I hardly come to school at all now. I used to come all the time but now I just get angry at the teachers so I don't come. Teachers just bust me and are always in my face.*

The conflictual good

One of the rationales most heavily mined by competing and contradictory discourses was that of the conflictual good student. These students valued behaviours that challenged many of the roles of the teacher as outlined in the disciplined good and the pastoral good. The return that they got was a high level of peer esteem. It could also mean that they were valued as types of leaders from the staff, who made special efforts to win them over. This also corresponded with a belief that the conflictual good was a student who took risks, who exhibited masculine characteristics of larrikinism and who adopted behaviours that were often neither docile nor disciplined. These behaviours often corresponded with the student having negative relationships with the staff. One student commented:

> *Sometimes having a reputation is good, sometimes it's bad. When the teachers joke around with you because they think that you are one of the tough ones, it is cool. Other kids respect that reputation. The flip side is that you always get blamed for things.*

Paradoxically, it could also mean that some staff warmed to them because of their liveliness or the ways that they challenged authority. At another school, one student argued: *Some teachers like it when someone who is not a goodie mucks around and makes it fun and the class more interesting. It is easier to do your work in a class that is fun like that.*

At another level, there were some students whose comportment seemed to indicate that their challenging of authority was a form of emerging critical awareness: they were asking questions of their world and some of the practices that were often taken for granted. One student stated:

> *Teachers reckon that we put people into groups but it's more them. Like they have their little group of students that they like and their little group that they don't like. And the people who they reward are the people they don't have to take their jewellery all the time or tell them off in class.*

The affiliated good

Foucault made the point that institutions want to create opportunities to attach people because it makes them easier to govern or discipline. One of the strategies of power found in the school is the strategic attempt to enlist the students as significant members of their community. The results suggest that the students who appeared to be the most successful were also those who recounted the most opportunities to attach themselves to the institution. One student commented:

> *I am a good student because of my extra curricular stuff. I'm not the above average academic person but I do SRC sport and stuff. I just play netball and the swimming teams and I would do athletics carnival but I am not allowed to.*

Another student commented:

> *I probably see a good student as an all rounder. Generally someone who puts in whenever they are needed or if they are asked to do something they pretty much say yes.*

Being affiliated with the school meant making the most of the opportunities that the school offered and demonstrating that you cared about the school community. Students were very aware that schools rewarded those that involved themselves in the life of the school and made the most of the opportunities offered. For the affiliated good, this involvement was more important than academic success. One student commented: "*I don't think academic success is as important. You can still have all those qualities of leadership and honesty and not be a high achiever.*"

For those who did not demonstrate their affiliation to the school, many of the trappings of success were denied them. For example, being nominated to a student leadership position was often seen as a mark of how well an individual contributed to the school community. Often these opportunities to attach themselves occurred outside the classroom, or in activities that seemed to the students to represent unusual educational experiences such as belonging to groups, playing sport, organising activities or engaging with pre-existing programs that occurred out of school hours.

However, the separation of the individual, which is part of the attachment according to Foucault, seemed to occur to all students. Some students spoke of ways they felt excluded from opportunities because their positionality was not expected to correspond with certain values. Other students found that past behaviours left them pre-judged to inhabit a certain performativity. Even those students nominated by the school as being academic success stories found that their positionality was often limiting. Overall, the students generally wanted to feel like they belonged to school.

Discussion

This study has examined those ways that students are enmeshed within discursive relationships around the good student that ask them to be performative. Part of the significance of this work lies in its aim to continue to explore those micropractices of power that are productive of the types of selves that we become. The visions of the good student deployed in schools contain powerful discourses that can be complementary, competing or even contradictory. Into this nexus of power relations is placed the student who becomes an 'actor', or one who negotiates and performs against or within certain hierarchical rationales of the good student.

This paper has been guided by the quote from Foucault that argues "we are freer than we feel". (S. J. Ball 1990, 1-2) Through accidents of history we have come to accept truths and practices as commonsense and normal, when they are in fact anything but. That schools exist to produce the hegemonic good student is one of the commonsense truths that has been accepted, but this understanding limits the ways that students can understand, and therefore act, in their schools. This paper has pointed out that the good student means different things to different groups and this necessitates students having to be negotiators and performers within these discourses.

Six rationales of the good student were found to occur across three school sites. These rationales contain powerful discourses that appeal to the student in multiple ways. Students are often aware of the ways that they are being positioned and continually act in ways that they see as maximising their return in various social currencies. For example, students recognised that various behaviours often drew rewards from teachers, but could also come with negative feedback from their peers. How they decided to act in light of these competing discourses is one of the ways that the good student is performative.

The significance of this performativity is that it encourages students to accept hierarchical discourses. The docile and disciplined student refers to the good student who comports themselves in appropriate ways. The pastoral student refers to the good student as one who accepts the guidance and wisdom of the 'shepherd' and who conducts themself as a member of the 'flock'. The bureaucratic student refers to the good student who is organised, neat and avoids the spotlight. The gendered student refers to the good student who performs according to dominant gender values. The conflictual student refers to the good student who, when judged from a different perspective, is valorised because they challenge authorities, demonstrate risk-taking behaviours and who often appear as 'cool' to their peers, although they often receive negative attention from the staff. The affiliated individual refers to the good student who demonstrates allegiance to their school: who feels that they belong and are valorised because of the contribution they make to the co-curricular life of the school. The rationales act as hierarchies against which the students learn to judge and locate themselves.

It would seem to me that the student experiences highlight the ways that they are measured through the processes and interactions of schooling. What is most obvious, and I think most

concerning, is that students understand themselves in hierarchical positionalities. This means that they are encouraged, through their experiences, to measure their performativity. The good student is one of many strategies of power that reinforce this in schools. Meritocratic, individualising discourses are dominant in schools because they are those that are most likely to produce the hegemonic good. While students experience schools in more dynamic ways, the vision they see deployed through their interactions with teachers, curriculum and assessment continually values narrow, limiting dispositions, behaviours and comportments. Students have opportunities to 'act', but their performances are also limited because they have been trained to see themselves in certain prescriptive ways. The challenge is to assist students in finding new performativities, to recast their subjectivities beyond that of the six rationales of the good student. This may be the best way to prepare people to respond to the imperatives of the 21st century, because it is highly doubtful that the maintaining of a disciplined citizenry will enable individuals to respond. To paraphrase Deleuze: the good student is part of what we are, and part of what we are ceasing to be. (Marks 1998)

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[i] In Western Australia, students must study a minimum of 4 TEE subjects in order to satisfy the requirements to be considered for university entrance.