

**THO06266**

**THE GOOD STUDENT: POWER, SUBJECTIVITIES AND SCHOOLING**

**GREG THOMPSON**

**MURDOCH UNIVERSITY**

**Abstract**

*Schools are places where student subjectivities are negotiated and contested in a variety of spaces. This paper argues that schools organise the possibilities for student subjectivities through a set of discourses that construct idealised notions of the good student. Whilst some discourses occur across educational sites, in practice these sets of discourses construct a unique vision of the good student in each specific school site. This vision is articulated in a variety of ways in each school, however, the result is that each student is enmeshed within a complex nexus of power relations that they can contest, negotiate or accept. Most of the time, students engage in a swirling set of subjectivities that encompasses these possibilities in various ways at various times.*

*This paper problematises commonsense notions of the good student at one school site. One intent is to give voice to the lived experience of students who find themselves the site of these technologies of power. These technologies construct a set of commonsense expectations of schools – amongst which is the desire to produce the good student. Another is to use a Foucaultian analysis that rejects the good/bad binary that underpins many commonsense understandings of what students should be.*

**Introduction**

Schools and schooling could be generalisable as one of the few core experiences of most young people in the Western world. Since the late eighteenth century, education has become a key concern of Western society as the complex task of governing and producing citizens has led to the creation of institutions that Western society has come to accept as appropriate and commonsense – in short, ‘normal’. One of the key institutions that underpin this task of governance is the school. Schools are places where a multitude

of functions and relationship continually shape and reshape the attitudes and experiences of those who become the citizenry largely desired by the state. However, schools and the processes that underpin schooling are anything but 'normal'. I advocate thinking about schools and schooling as places where power is manifestly at work in a multitude of ways to create certain kinds of subjectivities deemed suitable for that governable citizenry. My wish is to better understand some of these processes that occur in schools and to look at ways these processes leading to certain kinds of subjectification could be opened up and new possibilities created. In particular, I am interested in the concept of the 'good' or the ideal student. I see the discourses around the 'good' student as a significant organisational process in determining what kinds of subjectivities each school creates.

### **Methodology**

The data collected comes from a wider study that uses qualitative research methods to examine idealised notions of the good student in secondary schools. It adopts a case study approach that identifies specific schools as the case that is being studied. As part of this, focus group research was used to interview students in Year Eleven about their experiences and opinions surrounding idealised notions of the good student. In each case site, the staff (normally the principal and Year Coordinator) selected students who they believed most suited certain student types: the academic achievers, the sports stars, the quiet students and the rebels. These groups were chosen, not because they represent a definitive list of student subjectivities, but because they represent a wide range of student experiences of schooling. The focus groups were of three students.

### **Case Site**

There is a large degree of sameness about mainstream secondary schools in Australia. Church School is no different.<sup>1</sup> The school itself appears 'normal' – it has classrooms and laboratories, ovals for students to play on. It has a mandated curriculum that means while each school may have a slightly different range of subjects, there will be more subjects the same than are different. Each of these subjects will be assessed in similar ways, often

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the anonymity of the school, the pseudonym Church School has been used throughout this work.

through similar instructional styles. Church School is one of these schools. It is a systemic Catholic secondary school that caters for around 870 students. Currently it is going through a transition from five to six streams.

Church School is located in the outer suburbs of a capital city in Australia. It was built in the urban rural fringe, and around the school one can still see horses and small farms operating. The suburb it is in is relatively new, but it sits alongside traditional suburbs that have often been seen as the poorer socio-economic suburbs. Being on the urban rural fringe means that there is a disparate student population. Some come from wealthy homes in the hills, while others come from less affluent surroundings. Some students come from families that still maintain farms whilst others live in new suburbs.

### **Theoretical Background**

This paper adopts a Foucaultian analysis as a lens through which to examine the education world, in particular to problematise the idealised notion of the good student. It sees the school not as an oppressive place, but as an institution filled with a variety of competing discourses that are involved in a continuing process of competition. Rather than accepting schools as a priori fact, they are accidents of history, and what we have been taught to see as commonsense is, in fact, as strange as any other facet of human experience. Schools are possessed of a nexus of power games and permutations of possibility that produce certain kinds of subjectivities. Foucaultian ethics asks to see schools not as good or bad places, as successes or failures, but rather as accidents that are waiting to be explained. I advocate thinking of this problematising of key technologies of schools such as idealise notions of the good student as a tool in creating possibilities for different forms and relations of power to exist within the school system. Idealised notions of the good student involves a complex set of discourses that involve subtle power relationships, producing students who fit certain subjectivities predetermined within the institution. This is not to say that students will have the same subjectivity. I acknowledge that each experience is unique. Rather, I am trying to build a case for understanding the good student as a set of spaces radiating from certain ideals, that each student is

encouraged to locate himself or herself in. These spaces entail certain kinds of values and attitudes; they correspond with behaviours and relationships. This requires a step away from the binary of the good/bad student through an examination of the ways that students operate within a power nexus that is relational to these idealised forms of the good student.

Foucault identified three techniques of power in *Discipline and Punish* that he stated formed the basis of disciplinary power in the above-mentioned institutions. These were the powers of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and the examination. The power of hierarchical observation is also called surveillance. The purpose of this technique of power was to organise disciplinary power into “an integrated system, linked from the inside to the economy and to the aims of the mechanism in which it was practiced”.<sup>2</sup> Institutions became places where the individual was watched and carefully broken down into a set of practices and behaviours. The space of these institutions became carefully organised to ensure that the disciplinary gaze was able to see clearly what the individual was doing, monitoring and coercing through the use of inferred surveillance. In this way, “the disciplinary institutions secreted a machinery of control that functioned like a microscope of conduct; the fine, analytical divisions that they created formed around men an apparatus of observation, recording and training”.<sup>3</sup> Hierarchical observation became a power based on measuring through observing. It places the individual in a matrix of power that records and reports on the conduct of the individual. In this sense, it is a coercive power, communicating to the individual that there are acceptable forms of conduct which are endorsed and rewarded. It acts as a disciplinary tool because it often functions as a ‘discrete’ set of processes “for it functions permanently and largely in silence”.<sup>4</sup> However, it is also indiscrete because “it is everywhere and always alert”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin Books, London, 1991. p.176

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p.173

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p.177

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

The normalising judgment can be considered that of the action, and threat to action, of punishment within the disciplinary institution. If the hierarchical observation recorded the individual, the normalising judgement was the imposition of correction as a means to punish “the whole indefinite domain of the non-conforming”.<sup>6</sup> For it to be effective, schooling needs to be corrective, because corrective punishment has the express purpose of narrowing the gap between the non-conforming and the conforming, by making the non-conformist more like the conforming – the ‘normal’. Foucault states:

Discipline rewards simply by the play of awards, thus making it possible to attain higher ranks and places; it punishes by reversing this process. The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenises, excludes. In short, it *normalises*.<sup>7</sup>

For example, we see this process in schools in the awarding of grades. Disciplinary power invests the individual with the characteristics to make the individual useful and productive to the state.

[Disciplinary power] does not link forces together in order to reduce them; it seeks to bind them together in such a way as to multiply and use them. Instead of bending all its subjects into a single, uniform mass, it separates, analyses, differentiates, carries its procedures of decomposition to the point of necessary and sufficient single units.<sup>8</sup>

Foucault argued that it did this through the technology of the examination by utilising a “normalising gaze”, where the process of surveillance results in the differentiation of the individual in relation to a loosely defined but well understood category of the “normal”.<sup>9</sup> In the school, Foucault wrote that the examination became one of the central technologies:

The school became a sort of apparatus of uninterrupted examination that duplicated along its entire length the operation of teaching. It became less and less a question of jousts in which pupils pitched their forces against one another and

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p.178

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp.181,183

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p.170

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* pp.186-187

increasingly a perpetual comparison of each and all that made it possible both to measure and to judge.<sup>10</sup>

There were many facets of this kind of examination. One of them was the desire to turn an individual like a student into a “whole field of knowledge”.<sup>11</sup> Part of the power of the examination is its ability to coerce the individual to become something that they may not have been previously. Thus it created a normalising gaze that “manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected.”<sup>12</sup> The field of knowledge transforms not just the body of the individual, but their thoughts and actions as well, what they see as appropriate and inappropriate, the correct way to respond, to desire, to live – it normalises the potential of the individual through training the body and the mind.

The good student is one of the key organising principles of mass, compulsory schooling in the Western tradition. By this, I mean it is a clear goal implicit in the organisation and rationale of schools. In many of the realities of schooling, I argue that when the good is mentioned, its shadowy nemesis the ‘bad’ lurks in the same process of classification. To put it another way, the discourse of the good student is often defined in opposition to a supposed ‘bad’ student. However, I intend to move beyond such a simple binary of good and bad to advance the notion that the good student forms an idealised norm against which all student subjectivities are compared, contrasted and measured. In this sense, whether a student is defined as being good or bad, they are being compared to an idealised set of discursive practices. This research opens up possibilities to interrogate these positionalities, particularly among students, as contested and evolving relationships of power. When I use the phrase the good student, I envisage the phrase representing the notion of the discursive space around the discourse of the good student. By this I mean the Foucaultian idea of discursive practices that are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak”.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p.186

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* pp.184-185

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* p.49

Foucault stated: “The aim of all these institutions – factories, schools, psychiatric hospitals, hospitals, prisons – is not to exclude but, rather, to attach individuals” to these institutions.<sup>14</sup> Part of the success of the deployment of power has been to govern not through fear, but through shaping the desires of the individual. Notions of the good student are a powerful set of discourses because they have created within the individual a desire to be a good student. To problematise the good student is to locate the good student in the context of pedagogy – one of the human sciences that Foucault maintained was involved in “objectivising” the subject.<sup>15</sup> How has the ‘science’ of pedagogy created the discursive spaces into which the knowledge that outlines the good student manifested itself in different contexts? In this sense, I argue that one of the key achievements of pedagogy has been to create a desirability around this good student in terms of its practice.

However, for a school to function there needs to be some commonsense understanding of what the good student is and should be. Against this, all other student subjectivities are judged. Foucault wrote:

In discipline, punishment is only one element of a double system: gratification-punishment. And by the play of this quantification, this circulation of awards and debits, thanks to the continuous calculation of the plus and minus points, the disciplinary apparatuses hierarchised the good and the ‘bad’ subjects in relation to one another.<sup>16</sup>

The act of this judgement is to locate the individual within a spatial matrix of power. The location of the individual within this matrix prioritises certain kinds of positionalities whilst alienating others. There are also many positionalities that are in a state of flux within this matrix, sometimes good, sometimes not good. I seek to understand these micropractices of power that operate in constructing the commonsense notions of the good student. Homi Bhabah writes about this as the hybridity of identity, or the

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, “Truth and Juridical Forms” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Penguin Books, London, 1994, p.78

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, “Subject and power” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Penguin Books, London, 1994, p.326

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *DP Op Cit*. pp.180-181

“emergence of interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences are negotiated”.<sup>17</sup> Using a postmodern frame including the work of Foucault, Bhabha argued that there is a necessity to move away from seeing a singular subject identity to the ways that identity is a negotiated vision that throws up ‘in-between spaces’ and possibilities.<sup>18</sup>

In Foucault’s text *The History of Sexuality* is the shift in emphasis from objectification of the individual to the subjectification of the individual as an active participant in their own subjectification, one of the technologies that constitute bio-power. He posited that this was achieved through the use of disciplinary technologies that desired a normalisation of people’s values, attitudes and expectations that were often self-regulatory. Foucault holds that in liberal democracies, power is concerned with the technologies of the self, which:

Permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.<sup>19</sup>

A significant part of this technology of the self is the examination of how individuals are taught to take ‘care of the self’.

In a series of lectures given in 1979, Foucault sharpened his critique of bio-power by focussing on the ‘pastoral’ nature of power. For Foucault, pastoral power represented part of the project of individuality. Pastoral power represented “the development of power techniques oriented towards the individual and intended to rule them in a continuous and permanent way”.<sup>20</sup> Pastoral power was that form of power that focussed on the individual, with the intention of seeing that individual govern himself or herself. Pastoral power is, in effect, that governing principle applied not to the population, but to the

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<sup>17</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, p.2

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p.1

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” in *Michel Foucault: Ethics Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 1*. Penguin, London, 1997, p.225

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Omnès et Singulatim*: Towards a Critique of Political Reason” in *Michel Foucault: Power Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 3*. Penguin, London, 2000, p.300

individual. The flip-side of pastoral power is the power of the state. Both governmentality and pastoral power reflect Foucault's interest in the macropolitics of power:

Our societies proved to be really demonic since they happened to combine those two games – the city-state game and the shepherd-flock game – in what we call the modern states.<sup>21</sup>

The third part of Foucault's examination of the intersection of the macropolitics and micropolitics of power is found in his work on governmentality. Foucault argued that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there began to emerge a new rationality of the state concerned with what was appropriate, and in what form, to govern. As part of this, a new sense of government was needed to create the individual as object; to define, to label, to categorise and through this to promote certain types of subjectivities. In a series of lectures, Foucault coined the phrase 'governmentality' to describe how the 'art of government' changed as the problem of an increasing population forced the state to alter its tactics. For Foucault, governmentality can be understood as:

The tactics of government which make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not, the public versus the private, and so on; thus the state can only be understood in its survival and its limits on the basis of the general tactics of governmentality.<sup>22</sup>

I would argue that the school is a crucial site of this governmentality, a place where individuals govern themselves through and within the government of others. The ways that students negotiate their positionality within the case site offers a lens as to some of the ways that schools operate in constructing certain kinds of students, and therefore, certain kinds of citizens. The following section is a report on the student responses from the focus groups. It uses the theory of Foucault to unmask some of the relations of power that occur in this specific case site.

## Results

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p.311

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, "Governmentality" in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (Eds): *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with Two Lectures and an Interview with Michel Foucault*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hertfordshire, 1991, p.103

## Achievers

Achievement oriented students were selected by the staff because they were considered to be academic success stories. All of them had achieved a number of awards and commendations during their middle school years. As expected, these students nominated academic success as one of the defining characteristics. *“I think the good student does do well. They do what the teacher wants them to.”* This sense of academic achievement was crucial to be considered a good student, largely by the teachers and parents. These students maintained dominant discourse when they revealed a belief that academic success was due to positive moral characteristics such as determination and hard work.

*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. That's why I think the middle class, smart people actually do better, because they have this drive.*

Doing homework meant that the staff in the school viewed the student positively. The success she achieved was ‘deserved’ because she worked hard for it. Carmen Luke posited that one of the key discourses in schooling was the influence of a Protestant ethic of education as righteous work as a means to “inculcate children with Christian morals and values while teaching them to read and write”.<sup>23</sup> It is not surprising to see these Christian values reshaped to construct a dominant discourse of what the good student is to be. Students articulated this as a set of behaviours largely between teachers and students that reinforced the docility of the good student. Students nominated obedience, responsibility, behaviour in class, and respect for authority as key behaviours in the ways that teachers constructed subjectivities of the good student.

Interestingly, the student referred to the academic achievers as middle-class. In her mind, this had less to do with a socioeconomic statement of class distinction, and more to do with recognition of the hierarchy of students within school. From her perspective,

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<sup>23</sup> Carmen Luke, *Pedagogy, Printing, and Protestantism: The Discourse on Childhood*. State University of New York Press, Albany, 1989. p.137

academic achievers occupied the middle place of the hierarchy of students. They were neither as popular as some groups, nor were they as ostracised as others. Student held that academic success did not translate into either popularity or admiration from their fellow student.

*I think in terms of popularity if you are more sporty than brainy that makes you more popular. I think students would think a good student has more to do with sport but parents and teacher think it is more towards intelligence and grades.* The inference that these students made was that for students the good students were the popular ones. Most students, they reported, aspired to be valued by their peers for attributes other than academic success.

These students were very aware that being labelled a good student involved being continually measured and assessed against a nebulous criteria that was largely imposed on them by groups outside of their control, particularly teachers. *"I am a good student because teachers and parents have the view that I am."* This view was constructed through copious amounts of surveillance; the teacher evaluating behaviour in class, performance in tests and written reports. These students believed that these were inextricably linked to the ways that they negotiated the power games with teachers, parents and their peers.

*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 so extreme. Ms X is - I wouldn't say 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 really do think about it.*

It is this ability to negotiate these relations of power that allows these students to maintain their status as being among the good students in the school. This then has flow on effects for the student.

*I think with marks as well ... if you are the type of person who gets the top marks I think it is harder to mark you if you do a bad test or a bad essay, I think they are*

*more reluctant to give you a bad mark and if someone else that usually gets bad marks did a better essay well they are still going to get marked lower than us.*

One of the critical points that this research demonstrates is the sets of experiences that students are continually managing the relations of power that underpin the subjectivities they are encouraged to inhabit. These students were very aware that schools were places where being certain kinds of students resulted in certain kinds of possibilities and treatment. The quote above demonstrates that students believe even the marks they get correspond in some way to how they are viewed by the teacher doing the marking. In this sense, they are articulating recognition that the surveillance they are under is subjective and constant and that it is possible to use this in more productive ways within the school environment. This awareness flows into how they comport themselves in day to day situations in the school. It brings for them what they believe are some positive repercussions. *“If we talk in class it’s okay, but if other people talk in class there’s trouble.”*

One of the things that was most obvious, however, in talking with these students was their awareness that to be the good student, they had to trade off certain other positionalities within the school such as some elements of popularity. One got the sense that the students were wistful about the knowledge that at Church School you could not be both popular and good.

*In Year 8 when I got Dux it felt good, I was really happy, mum was really happy. But the aftermath, school was a lot different. And then getting it in Year 9, Year 10 and then people come and say ... you want them to be proud of you but every time you are in a class, I know that now, I don’t have any privacy at all. You get Dux you are really happy about it but then it feels like no one else is. Before no one knew who you were. Like you’d sit in a classroom and the relief teacher would call the roll and look and see which one I was and I was seen as the girl who was good at school. I wasn’t seen as me. Because it was Year 8 and everyone is getting to know you and they didn’t get to know I was. I’m not the little girl who sits in class and does all the work, I’m a lot different. Like they stuck me in a little box and said that’s who you are. And then some people who get judged like this, I know it didn’t happen to me, but they try to prove themselves and they think they have to rebel against everything else, like go to a party or whirl up in a shorter skirt or something. Like it’s sad and frustrating they have to do that.*

In part, I believe that this quote demonstrates that there existed at least two powerful, competing discourses that these students had to contend with. Firstly, I would argue that each student desired to experience success and to be judged as a good student in the eyes of teachers and parents. However, this desire inevitably led them into conflict with their perception that the traditional notion of the good student was not valued highly by their peers group. These competing discourses on success locate individuals within relations of power that they position themselves within. This explains this quote that talks about students feeling embarrassed to be rewarded in front of their peers.

*Every time I go up there I'm embarrassed. I don't know ... I just see people looking at me. I shouldn't feel embarrassed ... I spent hours doing all that work. You just want to scream. You get a test result and you get 80% but there might be an error and you mention it to the teacher. Everyone says you are just trying to get extra marks just because you are a good student; you already did better than everyone else, sort of like that.*

## **Sports Stars**

The group nominated as Sport Stars by the school consisted of one female and two male students. They came across as confident and engaging young people who appeared generally happy in their outlook. The first thought that struck me during the focus group was how socially aware they were, and how sophisticated and aware their understanding of the social dynamics of schooling. For these students, schools were places where differentiation between different groups occurs – they viewed this as the natural order of things.

*It's like the good students and the popular student and there is everybody else. I think you could put the sporting group in there as well. I think there are those three groups and everybody else is trying to find that recognition as well.*

These students nominated three main subject position based on either popularity, school success or sporting success. In their experience of schools and subjectivities, they argued

that each student in some way shaped in response to one, if not more, of these subject positions. Every student was in some way negotiating how he or she saw themselves in relation to how these subjectivities allowed possibilities for them to act. Each of these subject positions had its own rules and expectations, which students did or did not abide. For example, these students defined the popular students as the risk takers that other students looked up to.

*I reckon the most popular student would be the person who goes out on the weekend and gets trashed or like everyone wants to be like them but they don't. Like everyone looks up to them going out, taking the risks and stuff. But no one else will do it because of getting into trouble if they do it.*

Correspondingly, these students were acutely aware of the social hierarchy in schools and their place within it. They saw schools as places that actively sought to establish and maintain hierarchies of student subjectivities. Teachers attempted to establish a hierarchy based on academic performance.

*Like ... 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, whatever. 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.*

This quote demonstrates the way that schooling is as much a spatial/body deployment of power as it is an exercise on the mind, identity and body of the student. What I find most interesting is that this hierarchy is instituted by teachers, but the negative or positive experiences are enforced by the students themselves. It would be wrong to suggest that the maintenance of subjectivities in schools is done by the staff. I would suggest that students are responsible for a lot of the ways that subjectivities are assigned and maintained with the school community. The following quote is an example.

*When people from J Block (where the good students sit) go and do something like drinking, it's like "Why are they drinking"? Because they don't do it like every weekend.*

When students play a part that they are not expected to, the student group acts quickly and in a variety of ways to communicate that this behaviour is not acceptable form someone who is not meant to play that role.

For this group, the good student was defined as much by their body as by their academic success. *“They don’t muck up in class. They are quiet people they just get in and do their work.”* This docile behaviour in the class was matched by an acceptance of the school rules regarding uniform. *“The way they dress. Always dress well – they never get uniform slips.”* It would seem reasonable to posit that the sport achievers would generally have active bodies and that they may find the constraints of the traditional classroom difficult. The projection of the good student as one who is a docile body is a significant perspective on the ways that schools shape subjectivities. Academic success was also a significant characteristic of the good student. This academic success, in contrast to the previous group, was constructed very much as an inherent capability rather than a process of hard work. In this way, these students perhaps sought to explain away their perceived failings at not being the good student that they felt teachers admired. The end result of this they stated was a special kind of relationship between the good student and their teachers. *“They appear to be really good friends with all the teachers. They can just walk up to them and have a full conversation with them.”* When it was time for these students to nominate the groups of students found in the school, they were able to give a large list of the different groups. Interestingly, they spoke about how the groups were spatialised throughout the school so that the good students sat in one area, the different sub-groups that formed the popular group sat in another so that there was a clear definition to each group. I would argue that this made the boundaries very clear between groups, which has the effect of hardening student subjectivities and making it more difficult for students to manipulate the identity subscribed for them.

These students were quick to define the good student as existing through the approval of the teacher. *“They always talk to their friends and teachers. All the good people are in*

*one group and they (the teachers) have all the not so good people in the other group.”* In the eyes of these students, teachers saw students as belonging to either the good or the not-so-good group. This meant that these students mainly associated themselves as a part of the not-so-good students. They felt that this was largely the doing of the staff, that the ways that the school saw them had been chosen without any agency on their part. They saw that there was a perception of themselves, a subjectivity that they were forced to work within, that they did not always see themselves in.

An issue that stood out for me was the sense of attachment to the school of these students. Each of them could recall a number of times when they had been rewarded for being a good student. This is despite the fact that they were not judged by the staff to be high achievers academically. Many of these times had to do with representing their school in a sports event and doing well.

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

The end result of this was that the student felt an attachment to the school through a feeling of pride in its sporting success. However, this attachment was offset by the processes of surveillance that effectively separated each student from the other, meaning that this feeling of pride was largely an individual, personal thing kept hidden from other students. It was acceptable to be attached to the school, as long as this was a personal, secret feeling that other students could not see. In this there is the desire to be average, the desire not to be noticed in front of peers because this could attract negative responses. At the same time, being less than average could attract negative responses from other groups.

*I was happy I was away when my report arrived. Because you might not be failing anything but if it is lower than the average in the class then it is the end of the world. You are going to die sort of thing if you are not up there above average or at least average.*

## Quiet

The quiet group were the most difficult to interview as they found voicing their opinions very difficult. In particular, they found it very difficult to relate their experiences to being a good or not-so-good student. There may be a number of reasons for this. Firstly, I think the most obvious reason is that they were chosen by the staff at Church School because they tended to blend in; to say or do very little that would bring them to the attention of either the staff or the students. Perhaps motivating their subjectivity was not a disrespect for authority or sporting or academic success, rather it appeared to be a desire to escape notice. In this sense, this particular group appeared to have shelved any sense of critical awareness of the power relations that occur in schools, and the variety of ways that they can exist within these relations. It was almost as though they traded off a sense of agency for a less confronting anonymity. These students appeared to neither resent nor embrace the idealisation of the good student.

Not surprisingly they tended to give, I believe, answers that confirmed the dominant discourses of the school. Good students for them were intelligent, but they were also students who avoided confrontation at all costs. *“Good students are the students who don’t upset anyone, who always avoid arguments. Especially with teachers.”* In their responses, these students gave more answers (at a ratio of 4:1) that spoke of a docility of both behaviour and attitude. *“They sit down and shut up.”* For them, the good student was a student who was barely noticed and who acted in such a way as to agree with the values and attitudes of the teaching staff. *“I reckon the teachers want someone who they can teach. Someone who sits there and doesn’t make stupid remarks.”*

This docility impacted on all of their relationships – at home they believed that parents wanted someone who would *“do what their parents want them to do.”* They seemed unwilling to venture as to what students wanted in a good student except that *“They are good at sport.”*

This leads me to posit that these quiet students were the students that struggled the most with the idea of schools as technologies that set up 'diaspora'. By this, I am referring to Bhabha's work on the hybridity of identity in how individuals negotiate their way through the infinite maze of positionalities in relation to the self.<sup>24</sup> My contention is that these students were the ones who the most compliant in accepting their subjectivity, and appeared to have never considered that there were other ways of being within schools. Whilst they acknowledged that there were other groups of students within the school, they never gave the impression that they thought they shared any similarities with any of them, or any moments of similar experience in school. This is perhaps best reflected in the fact that they could not recall any experiences that constructed them as sharing in either the discourses of the good or the not-so-good student. "*I don't know. I don't notice that much what teachers do.*" In part I believe that this is because the utilisation of the hybridity of experience combines both an element of risk-taking and a sense of critical awareness, often subconscious, that things do not have to be as they are. When applied to the subjectification of the self, I would argue that this focus group exhibited a lack of both risk taking and critical awareness of their positionality. Firstly, they appeared comfortable – perhaps safe – within their docility. Secondly, they had perhaps traded the more chaotic experience of confronting and negotiating positionalities because they were uncomfortable with the prospect of taking risks. Risks get you noticed, and can quite often have negative consequences.

## **Rebels**

The group classed as rebels were chosen by the staff because they were those students who they felt had exhibited the most confrontational behaviour in the school. Their school record was littered with incident reports, detentions and suspension for a variety of behaviours. All of the participants were male. Going in to this focus group I was intrigued at how these students had experienced their schooling, and in what ways they responded to the idealised norm of the good student.

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<sup>24</sup> Bhabha, *Op Cit.* pp.4-5

Like the other groups, these students felt that the good student was one that exhibited attitudes and behaviours that they did not necessarily see within themselves. *“Someone who studies hard. Does all their work on time. Is nice to the teachers.”* For these students, success at school could best be defined as a set of docile behaviours, rather than a level of academic success. Doing your work on time is a very different emphasis than achieving well in assessments. As well, these students identified the good student as someone who *“stays out of trouble.”*

This difference was further highlighted that they thought that what teachers wanted in students was sets of behaviours that would allow teachers to maintain positive and friendly relationships with students. However, these relationships were dominated by the ability of the student to meet the teachers’ expectations in regards to attitudes and behaviours. *“Teachers want students they can be friends with, talk to them, ask them how they are. They think the same way.”* These students were very aware that different stakeholder groups held different expectations. They believed that parents wanted academic success and students valued popularity above other things, particularly in relation to after school activities such as parties and socialising. This supported the attitude of the sports stars, that it was an element of risk-taking and social success that students looked up to. This caused problems, however, because the expectations of popularity often conflicted with the teacher’s desire for a controlled learning environment. *“Student’s want someone who is funny. Cracks the class up, although this can get you in trouble with the teacher.”*

By positioning themselves as rebels, these students were aware that they compromised their relationship with teachers. However, by doing this they believed that they gained popularity from students – a trade that they were prepared to make.

*Sometimes having a reputation is good, sometimes it is 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.*

These behaviours meant that these students were able to consider themselves as part of the popular group.

*In F Block there is like a supergroup, the Wogs, the Surfies, the Punks that are like the popular group that don't do that well at school. We are the cool group because we are so big and we can look down on the other smaller groups.*

What characterised these groups was a disrespect for authority and demonstration of certain behaviours, both inside and outside of school, that could be seen as socially inappropriate such as drinking and illegal activities.

These students had many stories of feeling victimised by their experiences at school, particularly from the staff. However, in their opinion this was worth it because they believed that they sat at the top of the social hierarchy, and that the rewards that this brought far outweighed the negative consequences. One of the ways that this attitude manifested itself was in the ways that they talked about other groups within the school as being inferior to them. *"It's like the SRC. It is just a gay club for people to go to so they don't get hassled at lunchtime. No one listens to them. They are not the leaders of the school."* They positioned themselves in opposition to many of the values and attitudes of the school, and felt that those who exhibited obedience or demonstrated allegiance to the school were at the lower end of the social hierarchy.

## **Discussion**

This study demonstrates that schools are places that construct certain kinds of people suitable for a particular type of disciplined society. The good student is one example of a technology of power that is deployed within the institution to shape the self. The students at Church School were engaged in a daily invention of the self in relation to competing discourses about what that student should be. Being a good student involved negotiating within the parameters of what different groups expect. The study asked students to differentiate between how teachers, parents and other students defined the good student. This they were able to do. What is more interesting was that they were also able to

differentiate between hierarchies of student definition. This meant that students were aware that there were certain types of behaviour that were acceptable to one group and not acceptable to another. An example of this is the teachers 'pet'. These were students who were believed to actively campaign to get noticed by the teacher in an attempt to win the trappings of positive attention: praise, leeway with late homework or assessments and better treatment within the class. "*Students don't really like 'teacher's pets'. 'Teacher's pets' are bad.*"

It is these competing discourses that situate the students in conducting themselves in certain ways. I would argue that this is a key factor in the positionality of students. The students interviewed in these focus groups had been positioned in different ways through their response to the expectations of the school. Each of them was defined in different ways by the staff of the school as fulfilling certain characteristics. However, there is little doubt that the students were critical in the maintenance of the hierarchies of the good student as they identified students as belonging to certain groups, and used this location as a way to control the behaviours and aspirations of different types of students. In this sense, students are 'policing' the subjectification of themselves and other students, and through this policing construct certain ways of being for themselves. Foucault argued that one of the key technologies of the institution was its ability to 'attach' the individual to the institution as a means of getting them to police themselves.<sup>25</sup> I argue that this attachment is not necessarily to the institution, but to that identity or sense of self that the individual has become used to operating within.

The experiences of these students suggests that the idealised construct of the good student that operates at Church School is a transient one, continually in a state of flux. This is in part explained by the nature of education itself and the competing discourses that operate within the education world. Another reason is the unique culture of Church School that works to construct different versions of the good student that whilst sharing many

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<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms" in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Penguin Books, London, 1994, p.78

characteristics with other schools, is unique in its deployment of the technologies that construct that good student.

This traditional orientation of the school is reflected in the responses of the students that academic success is 'deserved', and is the result of the desirable (to parents and teachers) attributes of hard-work and perseverance. The principal nominated a desire to see the school improve its academic performance as one of his chief goals. This became the push for excellence, one of the key values of the school. It is not surprising to see that this definition of excellence as academic achievement had been taken up by the students as a key platform of what makes a good student at Church School. This was coupled with a belief that teachers and parents saw a good student as well-behaved and hard working – all attributes that could be seen as discourses associated with more traditional philosophies of education. However, these dominant discourses also served to produce certain kinds of relational subjectivities. When asked about the good student, each group spoke almost wistfully about the good student as someone that they were not. For example, the achievers nominated sporting and social success as central characteristics of the good student. They projected the good student as a desire for attributes that they did not have. Likewise, the sports stars spoke of how academic success was one of the most significant things, possibly because it was something they had not experienced. For each group, what is crucial is that they saw themselves in relation to the good student as not complete, as lacking. Foucault wrote about how institutions through the deployment of the human sciences, creates the category of the individual as a way of separating them from the masses.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the individual becomes known and disciplined. I would argue that the idealised deployment of the good student in Church School acts as a technology that separates the individual, and places them in a hierarchy with or against other positionalities.

An example of this is the ways that the students dealt with the problematic of success. Each student was very aware that there was a social hierarchy of groups at Church School, and which group students identified themselves with or where identified with

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<sup>26</sup> Foucault, *DP Op Cit.* p.186

resulted in different expectations and ranges of experience within the school setting. Whilst I believe that students genuinely desired to be known as good students and receive the resulting rewards, they were very aware that this inevitable led them into conflict with what they perceived as student opinion of the good, the socialising rebel who was popular because of their risk taking behaviour. This manifested itself as what the principal called the 'Church School cringe' or what students felt as extreme embarrassment to receive rewards in front of the group. Part of this, I believe, was well expressed as an awareness that receiving these awards announced the student as belonging to a particular type of student – that of the good student.

### **Conclusion**

The intent of this report has been to problematise the notions of the good student through the testimony of students in a secondary school in Australia. Idealised notions of the good student are central in constructing the positionality of the students. They relate themselves, and others, to perceptions of what the good student is. These discourses, and the ways they are deployed in schools, construct different types of students within the school community. Each student, as part of the process of schooling, is forced to negotiate within the nexus of these discourses. These negotiations are not constant and fixed, but rather evolving and subject to an infinite range of possibilities. The students at Church School spoke of how they were positioned against the idealised notions of the good student, and how this manifested itself in different ways. Some students spoke of the ways that different types of students receive different treatment, whether it was from teachers or from other students. Students also demonstrated an awareness that their positionality within the school was functional – they traded off certain types of rewards for the possibility of others. Some students argued that to be popular amongst their year group, the behaviours and values required often led them into conflict with staff. Other students spoke of how academic success, whilst valued highly by teachers and parents, often led to ridicule from other students and feelings of embarrassment. It is the deployment of these power relations that coalesce around the idealised notions of the

good student that produces certain kinds of subjectivities, certain kinds of students and most likely, certain kinds of citizens.

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