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Chapter 12

Assembling selves
‘Choice’ and the classed and gendered schooling experiences of ‘marginalized’ young women

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This is generalising, I guess, but their households tend to not value education or professional employment, and the kids I see – a lot of them want to do [a course in] ‘Hospitality’. That would be seen [by them] as a really high thing to work towards, whereas for me, that would be one of the lower things that I would want for myself. ‘Beauty therapy’, ‘hairdressing’ – it's not high academic achievement. And it just seems to me that their parents don’t place a huge value on it – on education.

The speaker here is a community health nurse who works in an economically disadvantaged locality with groups of young women. In the above statement, she positions herself very clearly in relation to the young women and their families, weighing up and judging them against her personal aspirations and beliefs. Her statement suggests that she finds the young women’s career choices (‘hospitality’, ‘beauty therapy’, ‘hairdressing’), if not ‘lacking’, at least limited. Her own educational qualifications locate her as a professional and probably middle class in terms of income. Ironically, she too has chosen a traditionally gendered profession. Yet, shared insights into why such choices are made, a feeling of kinship with the young women, indeed a reflection on why these may be the only options available for many young women – these are all absent from her remarks. Class status – or lack of – as determined by their non-academic aspirations, appears to colour her judgement of their choices.

Historically, working-class women’s lives have been scrutinized with regard to ‘respectability’ (Skeggs 1997, 2004), and decisions about how they ‘choose’ to live have been used to classify them into the categories of ‘deserving/undeserving poor’. However, in the twenty-first century, the surveillance of economically disadvantaged women and the ‘choices’ they make regarding schooling, work and family has intensified. Moral judgments about their lives, such as those made by the community nurse above, have taken a particularly pernicious form due to the contemporary emphasis on the discourse of the ‘freely choosing individual’.

Discourses of ‘choice’, how these operate in and through education, and how gender and class identities shape and/or limit life options are the foci of this chapter. The community health nurse, above, reiterates a governing principle
concerning education that permeates many post-industrialized countries in the twenty-first century: the pursuit of ‘high academic achievements’ is now a requisite in order to attain the necessary credentials to succeed in the knowledge economy. Today, in Australia, as a result in part of the work of feminist educators a generation ago, many more young women move through education in a linear, predictable fashion, that is completing Year 12 and proceeding to tertiary studies. However, those young women from lower socio-economic backgrounds who ‘choose’ to leave school before gaining the high school credential, often for a variety of reasons, are categorized within public debates as ‘at risk’, labelled as ‘marginalized’, ‘in need’, and occasionally ‘dangerous’.

To think beyond the labels, categories and value judgments, it is necessary to ask how young women who have left school early construct their identities and live with their choices – in short, what sense do they make, what stories do they tell of their decisions to break away from conventional educational pathways? This chapter draws on interviews with three young women who chose to leave school early, that is, before gaining a Year 12 credential. Through an analysis of their narratives, the constitution of their gendered and classed identities through school experiences is explored.

**Contexts**

‘At risk’ and ‘marginalized’ youth are constructed in policy discourses and in mainstream media as economic and social problems, for example, as a growing group of ‘losers’, dependent on the public purse because they are lacking in necessary skills to contribute to the national economic well-being; or as a real or potential threat to the social order, through becoming teenage ‘welfare mothers’, drug users, or alienated and hopeless young people (Peel 2003). Failure to gain high school qualifications is currently used as a major indicator and predictor of long-term individual social and economic problems (Bessant *et al.* 2003).

In Australia, large-scale statistical surveys (for example Lamb and McKenzie 2000) and educational reports (Collins *et al.* 2000) also emphasize how early school leaving places youth ‘at risk’ economically, socially and educationally; however, these studies speak more about *effects* of such choices rather than the actual processes and contexts of decision making. Such data continually reiterate the importance of school retention and need for meaningful educational options, particularly for economically disadvantaged young people, but provide few insights into how decision making might be understood – from young people’s perspectives – or the critical moments in young people’s lives when choice and/or agency might be redirected.

In many instances, of course, leaving school is not a matter of choice *per se* – or at least of choice as the term is typically used. In the UK, Osler and Vincent (2003) note the many ways that schools can exclude young people, through sanctions such as ‘stand-downs’, suspensions and expulsions (p. 40). They demonstrate how such sanctions are used with specific groups of students, often
in unfair, discriminatory ways. However, exclusion from educational settings is not a one-way street. Osler and Vincent (2003) also delineate the ways in which girls 'self-exclude' from schooling through truanting, non-participation in class activities or because of pregnancy, and examine the range of reasons for doing so, which include boredom, bullying and lack of connection.

In Australia, Teese and Polesel (2003) argue that standardized curricula and assessment practices operate as devices to rank, compare and exclude particular groups, notably students who are economically disadvantaged. They state:

> While economic change has concentrated more and more of total employment in jobs that require completion of school and further education, many young people are unable to manage the demands of a curriculum that continues to serve as a vehicle of comparison and selection.

(Trise and Polesel 2003: 149)

Thus, 'exclusion' from education – whether understood as a means used by authorities to discipline recalcitrant students, or self-exclusion as a measure of lack of interest and alienation from curricula and assessment practices – is of widespread concern. While the outcome is similar, that is, particular groups of young people exit early from schooling without the requisite credentials, I want to problematize how ‘choice’ is invoked to explain early exiting. Specifically, I examine the concept of choice from two separate angles. First, I consider how the young women who participated in our research interviews make sense of their own educational experiences, how they construct themselves as able to choose – or not – in the kinds of stories they tell about themselves. Second, I also analyse the stories they tell for evidence of how discourses of social class and particular notions of the feminine may have played a part in shaping their decisions. Much research and policy discussion proceeds as if young women are either hapless victims of their classed backgrounds, inadequate individuals lacking the resources to make the ‘right’ choices, or irresponsible and selfish welfare mums. However, I suggest here that closer attention to the narratives of young women who have left school early can offer better ways to understand some of the crucial influences that shaped their decisions. Through critically analysing the stories they tell, it may be possible to identify where schooling practices can improve so that these young women’s ‘choices’ become regarded as valid ones.

**The project**

'Choice' has been a central concept in the work of a research project entitled, 'Young women negotiating from the margins of education and work' on which this chapter is based. One purpose of the project was to move beyond the statistical, large-scale studies of 'at risk' and 'marginalized' young women, to examine the influences and critical moments that informed the choices made by young women concerning whether to stay on or to leave school early. Individual interviews and
life-line reflection and projection techniques were used with three different groups of participants: economically disadvantaged young women who were designated as ‘at risk’ of leaving school early; their mothers; and young women who had already left without completing a Year 12 credential.

The three young women, Louise, Anna and Ellen whose narratives are discussed here, were among a larger group of early school leavers who volunteered to participate in the study. They were identified through a ‘snowball’ approach, that is, we asked earlier participants, including the group of young women still at school but thinking of leaving, and their mothers, to suggest other young women they knew who had already left. We also contacted community workers, including health professionals, social workers and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers to nominate young women whom they knew had left before completing Year 12 and who might be willing to participate in the study. While a number of the young women interviewed had been expelled or asked to leave school by the authorities, Louise, Anna and Ellen all described themselves as choosing to leave. Before considering their stories, I briefly discuss the theoretical framework that informs this chapter.

Theorizing ‘choice’

How subjectivities, agency and choice intersect has been a focus in feminist poststructuralist theorizing over a number of years (see for example Davies 1994, 1997; Jones 1997; Middleton 1995; Weedon 1999). Accounts of subjectivity as negotiated, fluid, changing and changeable, encapsulate the idea that individuals in different contexts and at different times may choose to act upon competing beliefs and values and take up contradictory positions in different discourses. However, what it means to choose is not understood within this approach as always deciding rationally, or even consciously. Instead, as Hollway (1984: 238) suggests, people ‘invest’ in particular discourses, act upon particular values and beliefs because of some sort of ‘pay off’ or ‘reward’. She argues that through such investments, the affective dimensions of agency come into play.

Poststructural theorizing of subjectivities stands in contrast to a liberal humanist construct of the self as unified, fixed, rational and coherent. Despite much poststructural critique, this remains a powerful and privileged conceptualization in which the self is equated to the ‘freely choosing individual’. ‘Choice’ here is understood as a rational decision arising from consideration of a wide range of options, with many alternatives available to all individuals.

This discourse of the ‘freely choosing individual’ is both powerful and pervasive in Westernized cultures, perhaps because as Rose (1996: 17) argues:

The forms of freedom we inhabit today are intrinsically bound to a regime of subjectification in which subjects are not merely ‘free to choose,’ but obliged to be free, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice under
conditions that systematically limit the capacities of so many to shape their own destiny. (emphasis in original)

Rose identifies a major contradiction generated by discourses of individualism and free choice. The ideal of the freely choosing subject is constituted in the political, social, economic and educational discourses of Western democracies, and is inextricably linked to taken-for-granted beliefs concerning individual rights and equal opportunities. Such shared beliefs play out daily in a range of discursive practices in which the individual is constructed both as always able to choose and as responsible for their choices. However, a semi-invisible effect of the practices that emphasize the individual's capacity to choose (and to be held responsible for their choices) is that the state may no longer be held accountable for ensuring that all citizens are treated equitably and fairly. Because, in the choice discourse, the individual is valorized as self-reliant and self-sufficient, the notion of the collective – that is ‘the public good’ – is negated. In turn, governments are then free to abscond from their responsibilities, for example, to redistribute resources equitably or to address systemic forms of discrimination. The needs of those groups who experience oppression or who are socially or economically disadvantaged may be dismissed or denied, or they may be held accountable for their own disadvantage.

Indeed, in this privileged discourse, the freely choosing individual is idealized as one who is free from the constraints of their socio-cultural (including the social categories of gender, ‘race’, social class) grouping and one who can always choose ‘freely’ without regard to the ‘conditions’ by which many people’s choices are deeply restricted. Yet, while such beliefs are espoused as ‘truths’, they may operate to subvert or ignore the ways in which subjects are discursively produced within specific contexts.

Rose (1996: 196) makes this point when he argues:

it is important to recognize simultaneously that this ... is not a free space: persons’ relations to themselves are stabilized in assemblages that vary from sector to sector, operating via different technologies depending upon one’s identification as adjusted or maladjusted, normal or pathological, lawbreaker or honest citizen, man or woman, rich or poor, black or white, employed or unemployed, ... in the new territories of exclusion and marginalization brought into existence by the fragmentation of the social.

Contexts matter in setting the parameters of ‘choice’ and in constituting the subject and the degree to which they are seen and see themselves as ‘free to choose’. What is constituted as normal or critiqued as pathological is also determined through discursive practices. Educational practices, including curriculum and assessment processes, interactions between teachers and students, relations among students, all operate to construct some students as ‘successful’ and others as ‘losers’. Gender relations and socio-economic status, while
refused or underplayed as key signifiers within the liberal humanist discourse of individualism, nevertheless still operate as factors in assembling the self – and in constructing judgments by others as worthy – or not.

In Rose’s terms, then, the status attached to the subject via the discursive practices of education may construct conditions that restrict ‘free choice’. I want to argue that in schools, particular ways of performing the ‘feminine’ in relation to class may operate to proscribe a range of choices for ‘marginalized’ young women.

**Socio-economic status**

As a number of theorists have noted (Meadmore 2004; Reay 1998; Skeggs 1997; Walkerdine *et al.* 2001; Yates 2000), class in the twenty-first century signifies more than economic status. Lawler (1999) draws attention to the complexities of class by saying:

The inequalities of a class society do not end with economic inequality: indeed, economics may not necessarily be the most meaningful way to talk about class. Rather, in the complex interplay between economic and cultural configurations of class, it may be cultural factors which are the more apparent indicators of class distinction and class inequality.

(Lawler 1999: 4)

To address the ‘cultural configurations of class’ as a measure of ‘class inequality’ requires an understanding of how on a daily basis, through ordinary interactions, gendered and classed subjectivities are constructed (Allard 2004). Taken-for-granted exchanges between teachers and students, for example, operate to provide some students with a sense of achievement and others with the knowledge that they have been judged and found wanting (Lynch and Lodge 2002; Plummer 2000). Failure to perform correctly – and what constitutes ‘correct conduct’ in educational settings is closely linked to having access to particular kinds of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) – directly and indirectly impacts on both a sense of self and how that self is constituted within the context of education. Elsewhere I have discussed how different forms of social capital may be devalued within educational settings, particularly that acquired and deployed by marginalized young women (Allard 2005). Lynch and Lodge (2002) argue that within schools, this failure to recognize different forms of social and cultural resources, other than those that are held in esteem in schools, is a form of ‘cultural domination, symbolic misrepresentation or non-recognition’ (p. 181). Lawler (1999) argues the need to recognize the psychological and social damage constructed within the class system that follows from such failures.

Psychic-social damage can occur on several levels. Positioning oneself in the discourse of ‘freely choosing individual’ means that whatever happens – whether good or bad – must be understood as a result of one’s own (rational) choices. Here,
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achieving academic success is not perceived as due to one’s privileged location in an economically or socially well-resourced family. Rather, academic success is viewed as due mainly to ability and hard work. Therefore, achievement is credited to individual effort rather than owing, at least in part, to the forms of cultural and economic capital that are inherited rather than earned, and which are privileged in the structure and processes of mainstream education systems (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

In turn, in this discourse, failure to do well at school can be explained as failure to really try, due to low aspirations or not valuing education (as suggested in the comments of the community nurse), or as a result of individual (irresponsible/irrational) choices, for example, getting pregnant or opting out or choosing to live off welfare. Choosing to leave may be caused by curricula or pedagogical practices so ill-suited to one’s gendered, cultural or classed experiences as to be alienating – yet such an interpretation disappears in the discourse of the ‘freely choosing individual’. To try hard and to subsequently fail in settings that are alienating, without having the means to understand how education operates to disadvantage some students and privilege others, requires that one accepts the view of oneself as not competent or not able enough. This can produce the sort of psychic-social damage to which Lawler refers.

To consider these ideas further I now turn to the narratives of three young women as they recall their schooling experiences. Louise, Anna and Ellen all lived in the same economically disadvantaged area on the rural-urban fringe of a major Australian capital city. All attended the same high school, although Louise at 18 years old, had left school only two years before her interview, whereas Anna and Ellen, at 26 years old, had left school eight and ten years ago respectively. They were interviewed individually.

When asked to discuss her reasons for leaving school, Louise said:

I basically wanted to piss my mum and dad off ... Because I’m sort of, I don’t know how to put it without hurting my sister’s and brother’s feelings ... I’m the sort of smartest kid out of us all. Like I’ve got the straightest head on me and like everything like that, so they sort of put all their trust in me to go all the way through high school, and I didn’t, so they got disappointed. And that really felt good to disappoint them once in a while because I was making them happy all the time and I just wanted to do something for me for once - so I left school and they cracked it with me.

But then the bad stuff started to happen. I had to pay rent and I had to buy food and I had to go out and get a job. In other words it was the worst mistake of my life just to piss my mum and dad off.

In her narrative, Louise offers two related reasons for choosing to leave school at Year 11: first, to ‘piss off’ her parents and second, to please herself. She claims that her parents saw her as the smartest of the three kids, with the ‘straightest head’, trusted to go through school, a daughter who usually made her parents
happy. She is, in short, a 'good girl' in this interpretation. Louise also presents herself as a person who seldom did anything for herself and who is perhaps too willing to please her parents. Here the 'choice' to leave school may be read as both a rebellion against the 'good girl' image and a chance to satisfy her own desires. However, in this story, choosing to suit herself brings unexpected and undesired consequences: her parents 'cracked it' with her (and so no longer saw her as the good daughter); they also decided she should pay rent and buy food and find a job – that is, take responsibility for herself and her actions. In being the rebel, in suitting herself, Louise's choice brought on her parents' displeasure and no real personal satisfaction. In keeping with the discourse of freely choosing individual, she now must accept the consequences of the 'worst mistake' of her life. (And perhaps, by doing so, regain her parents respect and reclaim her image as the good daughter.)

In another part of her narrative, Louise offers a somewhat different perspective of herself. When asked to reflect on herself as a schoolgirl, Louise's recollections indirectly suggest other factors that may have influenced her decision to leave. She describes herself as someone who was viewed by her teachers as 'Little Miss Attitude':

Yes. Because everything they would say, I would have to come back and say something else. I'd have to get the last line in. I was one of those kids in high school. I don't know, I got along with most of my teachers, it was just the fact they'd set work and then they wouldn't explain it. Like they'd set work up on the board and they'd go, 'Do this' and it's like, 'Hey, what have I got to do with it?'

She is aware that performing in this way marked her out as a problem and worked against her in terms of relationships with teachers and the other girls. She elaborates by saying:

I was the entertainer plus the [one with] most attitude of all in high school. I think that's why I got picked on most of the time. Because most of class clowns are boys but you know, me doing it, it was a bit rude. ... I don't know because it was just weird being the tomboy of them all and they [other girls] would just take it out on me ... So I wasn't really in the group ...

The images that Louise uses here evoke a number of binaries. For example, that she was the 'entertainer' or the 'class clown’ suggests that she played to an audience of other students; she says she was ‘picked on’ suggesting that she was a victim and that there were bullies in the class; she describes herself as ‘tomboy’ in contrast to perhaps the more traditional constructs of the feminine and that the other girls in class punished her for this incorrect performance ('would take it out on me'). Her behaviour in class (the one with the ‘most attitude’, ‘rude’) made her not one of ‘the group’ – and clearly there was a powerful group of girls who
were able to treat her as an outcast. Teachers, according to Louise, viewed her as a problem, a student with attitude and so failed to take the time to explain what she needed to know when she did not understand.

In contrast to the earlier story that Louise tells concerning why she left school (that is to please herself; to disappoint her parents), where she presents herself as able to choose, even if her decision brought dire consequences, Louise’s comments here, when read in terms of class values and gendered expectations, suggest that she performed ‘incorrectly’. That she queries the teachers concerning how to do the work is not in itself problematic — many students do so. However, perhaps it is the manner that she uses which makes teachers understand her as having an ‘attitude’, and so hear her request for help as a challenge rather than as a serious need. Polite, well-spoken requests rather than what might be interpreted as critical demands are the means to achieve successful interactions with teachers. Such knowledge is part of the social and cultural capital that educated parents are able to provide to their sons and daughters. As Teese and Polesel (2003: 137) argue, educational success is contingent on ‘behaviours of a certain kind, the openness of educated families to this appeal, and their capacity to respond to it’ (emphasis in original).

Additionally, her interactions with teachers are viewed by the other girls in class, according to Louise, as inappropriate for a girl. Behaving as a ‘class clown’, or behaviour which displays ‘attitude’ would be tolerated from boys, she suspects, but such behaviours work against her because the other girls (and possibly teachers) see her as performing incorrectly within the prescribed gender relations of the classroom. Here she alludes to how she thinks other students viewed her but she does not question their right to bully her or make her feel like an outcast. It is clear from her comments that her behaviour does not fit the norm. While there might be nothing inherently wrong with the way she behaved (that is, as a tomboy or an entertainer or class clown), this understanding is not part of Louise’s assessment of the situation. She seems to accept the treatment rather than hold accountable those who treated her badly.

By choosing to present herself as ‘little Miss Attitude’, Louise can (again) claim the mantle of rebel, rather than accept the role of victim in the story of her schooling. She presents her behaviours as a choice on her part rather than a lack of knowing how to gain the help and acceptance that she desires. Nor does she overtly name the (bullying) behaviour of her classmates as a reason for leaving school. Is it safer (or more socially acceptable) to say that she chose to exit school to please herself? In a sense, she did please herself by escaping from being made to feel like an outsider. Yet this is not how Louise justifies her decision.

There is, of course, no definitive or single interpretation of Louise’s story concerning her schooling experience and her decision to leave. However, by looking closely at the narrative that she assembles, a deeper, more nuanced reading concerning her choice is opened up for examination, one in which the ‘conditions’ under which she makes her choices can be foregrounded and explored.
Anna, unlike Louise, described her schooldays as ‘easy’. At the time of the interview, Anna was 26. She had been with her partner for seven years and had three children, ages five, three and one year old. In recalling herself as a schoolgirl, she speaks of being well liked by her teachers, a trusted student who regularly earned ‘A’ grades, a highly competent sportsperson who made the ‘All Australian Squad’ in basketball, played for the state team at 16, and was also a skilled referee. Unlike Louise, Anna was not picked on, and knew how to fit into the social order at school. While her home life was fairly difficult, school was a ‘refuge’ to her from the ‘troubles at home’ with her mother. She recalls her time at school:

I think it was easy for me. Like easy. Even though I had all my troubles happening at home with mum and everything, school was like a refuge for me. I loved it. It was like ‘Oh God, let’s get to school. Let’s get out of the house.’ No I found it really easy, made friends easy, never got picked on.

So, why then, when school was a source of pleasure rather than shame, a ‘refuge’ in contrast to the chaos of home, a place that she ‘loved’ rather than dreaded, would Anna choose to leave? Asked to reflect on her reasons for leaving school, she said:

I just had enough of school basically. That and the fact that in Year 11 when you get to choose your subjects for VCE [Victorian Certificate of Education] I had no idea what I wanted to go into at university. Like it was just, ‘Well, you have to choose your pathway because if you don’t have that right …’ and I said, ‘Well, I don’t know what I want to do. What if I just do a bit of this and a bit of that and a bit of this?’ And they said, ‘All right, do that’.

And when I finished Year 11 – and I passed all my subjects in Year 11 – and I was like – ‘Well?’ They said to me in Year 12, ‘Well, what subjects are you going to do?’ and I was like, ‘Well, I don’t know – I still don’t know what I want to do.’

And they said, ‘Well, you are going to have to pick something.’ I went, ‘Oh, OK’ and I decided, I can’t even remember what it was at the time, something like, some silly idealistic thing like flight attendant or something. I don’t even remember and they said ‘Well, you’re going to have to go back and do your subjects in Year 11 to get into that pathway.’ So I would have had to repeat, well not repeat Year 11, but do other subjects. […] I just sort of lost it from there. I just went, ‘Oh, another fricken year of school.’ And … I just went, ‘No, this is just too much.’ I said, ‘I’m leaving …’ And I figured if I wanted to, I’d go back to school and it just never ended up happening.

Anna presents herself in this narrative as instrumental (‘I’m leaving’). She was not excluded from school due to her failure to perform correctly or her inability to manage the work (‘I passed all my subjects in Year 11’). She had the personal skills/resources to get along well with teachers and with peers. Provided with the necessary information, and enough emotional support, Anna may well have
chosen very differently. Anna, older by eight years than Louise, and with more distance from the experience when she reflects on it, seems better positioned to understand her ‘choice’ as a result of specific conditions: because the school failed her through bad advice, lack of sound career counselling, and perhaps, failed to recognize that she did not have the social capital necessary to make an informed choice concerning her future. Nevertheless, she describes herself here as having ‘lost it’ – and perhaps she means her patience with the whole process that required her to know more than she did, or could, know. She did not anticipate that her ‘choice’ would be so final: ‘it just never ended up happening’. And in actuality, it was not. Anna, at 26, has mapped out a plan to return to study in order to qualify as a midwife – a career that she learned about through having her own children.

Ellen, too, was 26 at the time of the interview and had one daughter, aged six. She left school when she was told that, due to her academic problems, she would need to repeat Year 10. Ellen speaks of her ‘self’ as a schoolgirl in different terms than those chosen by Anna and Louise. She describes herself as having ‘to work very hard at everything’, particularly ‘anything theory based – English and that sort of written stuff’ and says she was ‘terrible at maths’. But, like Louise, she too describes herself as ‘not one of the popular’ girls:

You know, in schools, there’s popular groups and there’s, you know, geeks ... I wasn’t one of the popular ones but I wasn’t one of the geeky ones. I was one of those people that knew everyone, flitted about from group to group ... But the teachers knew, and generally, the popular kids were the kids that did well in their studies ... and like the teachers kind of knew who they were. So they all got a lot more help. I suppose, I mean – I wasn’t a troublemaker but I was always disruptive ... That was always sent home on my reports. ‘Ellen would do very well if she applied herself and stopped being so disruptive’ ... the teachers never really made it so that you thought you could go and ask them for help ...

Like Louise, the images she used to describe herself as a schoolgirl set up a number of oppositions. For example, in contrast to the ‘popular kids’ whom the teachers knew and helped, she was neither popular nor geeky. While she ‘flitted’ from group to group, she remained unknown to the teachers and therefore felt unable to ask for help. While she claims to not be a troublemaker, she was consistently presented in reports as ‘disruptive’. Thus, although she felt ‘unknown’ and therefore unhelped, she was known to the teachers, but only as a problem.

Yet, her days at school were not wholly negative. She also says she was ‘sports mad’, ‘lived for sport and friends’. She participated in athletics, track and field, basketball, softball but adds that this was not ‘so much through my high school years. I played netball through my high school years because that was the “in” thing for girls back then. No, I lived for the sport days’. Again, examining her narrative through the lenses of gender and class, what becomes apparent in the story she assembles is that her passion for, and skills in a range of sports were not
recognized or valued by the school. Such constructions may be read as indicative of an endorsement of a particular kind of femininity within this school setting: that is, 'popular', someone whom the teachers liked, self-confident enough to speak up and ask questions, good at 'theory', but not a girl who saw herself as a 'tomboy' or a 'footy girl' or 'class clown' or who was rude or 'in love' with sports.

In Ellen's story of why she chose to leave, there is a certain sense of resignation and acceptance concerning her failure to perform well in school. In this, her comments are suggestive of the psychic-social damage to which Lawler (1999) refers. While Louise describes leaving as the 'worst mistake' of her life and Anna can speak with enthusiasm about her four-year plan to return to school to do a midwifery course, there is something of a worn-down acceptance in how Ellen presents herself. At age 26 she says:

I don't really think about myself as much as I think about what I'd like my daughter to be doing. ... like I wouldn't say I've had a crappy life but I haven't been able to do what I would like to do and I would like for M. [her daughter] to do whatever she wants to do.

She wishes for her daughter that which she did not manage for herself: the chance to do whatever she wants – to be/become the freely choosing individual who dreams and achieves with no barriers or conditions to hold her back. This desire might be read as a clear example of how the discourse of the choosing subject is constituted in such a way as to make invisible the very conditions that work to limit such choices.

**Reflections**

A critical reading of these three young women's narratives highlights how class and gender subjectivities are called into play through schooling practices. The young women referenced specific experiences that influenced their respective decisions to leave school: for Louise, being made to feel a social outcast; for Anna, needing to choose subjects without clear career advice; and for Ellen, the sense that she was visible only as a problem, a fleeting presence in the company of girls who seem to be better able than she to gain the help needed. Such experiences informed their individual decisions to quit school. Within each of these accounts, there is an unspoken awareness that some students do know what they want to do by Year 10 or Year 11, do know how to fit in and perform correctly, and therefore do make informed choices regarding their future lives. These girls who do are the positive image against which these marginalized young women are compared and compare themselves. In their individual stories, Louise, Anna and Ellen suggest that they are aware of how their personal desires and needs were not met through their schooling experiences. Yet each of them takes the responsibility – and the blame – for her choices.
The emphasis on choice as a means of constructing the individual biography is a widely shared and publicly endorsed discourse. However, the limits to which any one person is able to act unilaterally to determine their future need to be recognized – and addressed through schooling and social justice initiatives. Taking up a position in this choice discourse requires that one disregard the material and embodied boundaries that do actually exist. For example, the limits that people living in poverty face in accessing expensive, or even modestly priced, educational courses or in attaining the ‘extras’ that others who are financially better-off take for granted, or the limits that young women such as Anna or Ellen or Louise face in not having the cultural or social know-how to make informed decisions or to ask for help in the ‘right’ manner.

Educators, health and social workers and others who work closely with economically disadvantaged young women need to consider how such decisions to leave may be governed by gender expectations and classed experiences of schooling. How curricula, classroom relations, assessment practices and pedagogies work to promote constructions of correct class and gender relations can be a powerful influence on whether young women choose to go or to stay. Failing to measure up or fit into these governing processes may mean that the decision to leave is made more as an escape from an unpleasant and unproductive setting rather than a choice to move into something better and more satisfying. Reading the narratives of economically disadvantaged young women for such influences is a useful strategy to begin imagining better options and alternative choices for these young women.

Reworking curricula and assessment practices, rethinking what constitutes certain kinds of acceptable behaviours, finding ways to give recognition and to stop blaming those who do not demonstrate mainstream notions of correct class or gender behaviours are all necessary steps along the way. Together these may help teachers and others to attend to alternative ways of being in the world, ways in which individual choice and available options are reworked through valuing difference.

On a wider level, the incessant focus in policy documents and in the media on the wonders of the freely choosing individual ignores how discursive practices of class and gender operate to signify ‘otherness’. These practices operate to position some as superior and others as inferior. Understanding ‘otherness’ as constructed through social, political and economic discourses, where some are privileged and others are not, emphasizes that identities are socially constituted, rather than simply individually created. Such knowledge of self as connected to and part of a larger collective might free those who are constructed as ‘other’ from self-blame and guilt. When collective experiences of particular groups, including young marginalized women are not validated, or when there is no shared sense of belonging provided, these omissions can cause psychic-social damage. Validation of shared experiences might, at the very least, offer a way for those whose classed or gendered identities are discursively positioned as ‘other’ or ‘inferior’, to understand how collectively whole groups can be – and have been – marginalized.
Such knowledge makes visible the constructed boundaries that limit real choice and offers a space to refuse the position of inferior.

Finally, a failure to deconstruct and critique the governing discourse of the freely choosing individual allows young women like Louise, Anna and Ellen to take the blame for their own ‘failure’ rather than recognize their right to be treated in socially just ways. Within the free choice discourse, independence, self-determination, self-reliance and personal accountability are endorsed values. In this way, valorizing the ‘freely choosing individual’ as the desired persona of the twenty-first century signifies that across a range of domains, for example, the economic, social, cultural and educational, the obligation of the state to provide for the needs of the community’s more vulnerable members can now be negated or ignored. This is what I understand Rose to mean when he refers to the ‘fragmentation of the social’ (1996: 196). In this governing discourse, the notion of the ‘public’ and the ‘public good’ can be dismissed or denied. Instead, we are left with only the context-free individual, accountable for his or her own well-being without recourse to structures of support and without claim to the right to be recognized as connected to the wider, social community. Thus, the needs and desires of marginalized young women not only go unrecognized and unanswered, but they may leave schooling believing that they have only themselves to blame. This obliteration of the social contract and denial of ‘the public good’ does not serve the interest of any but those who are among the most privileged, economically, socially, educationally and culturally. This will not do.

Notes

1 This three-year project was funded through an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (2001–4) and was located in two states, Victoria and South Australia. J. McLeod, J. Kenway and A. McKinnon of Deakin University were Chief Investigators along with the author of this chapter. Specifically, the research project aimed to:

• Identify the common and diverse needs and interests of different groups of young women in two locations characterized by poverty;
• Examine survival strategies and crucial turning points in the lives of these young women;
• Compare their life circumstances with those of their mothers (or mother figures) in order to analyse cross-generational continuities, disruptions and contradictions;
• Explore both the perceptions that teachers and other key youth service providers, such as youth and employment agency workers, have of these young women and their mothers, and the interactive dynamics between these groups
• Analyse this range of data in relation to current theories about social and gender justice, and further the conceptual understandings and methodological approaches of research on disadvantaged young women and educational and social injustice and justice;
• Recommend ways in which education and youth services may best assist young women to deal with the difficulties their circumstances evoke, and promote justice in schooling and youth services.

2 Pseudonyms are used throughout.