



Subjectification: the relevance of Butler's analysis for education

Bronwyn Davies

To cite this article: Bronwyn Davies (2006) Subjectification: the relevance of Butler's analysis for education, British Journal of Sociology of Education, 27:4, 425-438, DOI: [10.1080/01425690600802907](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690600802907)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690600802907>



Published online: 20 Nov 2006.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 4553



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 41 View citing articles [↗](#)

Subjectification: the relevance of Butler's analysis for education

Bronwyn Davies*

University of Western Sydney, Australia

In this paper I explore the process of subjectification (sometimes also called subjectivation, or simply, subjection) through which one becomes a subject—a process that Butler describes in terms of simultaneous mastery and submission, entailing a necessary vulnerability to the other in order to be. I examine the conceptual work Butler has undertaken to extend the Foucauldian concept of subjectification, and I draw on some encounters between teachers and their students in order to make these processes of subjectification understandable in the context of education. I conclude the paper with some notes toward an ethics of classroom practice.

Introduction

In educational contexts students and teachers are usually understood in liberal humanist terms; that is, as autonomous individuals with varying degrees of freedom to choose what kind of a person to be. Butler uses the concept of subjectification¹ to provide a different insight into how we become who we are, and what we are. Her analysis enables us to re-think our understandings of those students who are marginalised in schools, and also has strong implications for the ethics of teaching practice. What Butler does not do, as a philosopher, is link her analysis to the details of everyday lives in educational or other settings. That linking is left to those of us working in the professions, who want to see what implications her thought has for practice. What I will do in this paper is link Butler's theory to various educational moments so that its possible uses in education can begin to be teased out.

What Butler's theoretical work has so powerfully elaborated are the paradoxical conditions through which the accomplishment of subjecthood is made possible. Whereas Foucault's interest is primarily on those larger discursive shifts over time

*Narrative, Discourse and Pedagogy Research Group, University of Western Sydney, School of Education, Bankstown campus, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith South DC, NSW 1797, Australia. Email: Bronwyn.Davies@uws.edu.au

through which different kinds of subjecthood become possible—or impossible—Butler's interest is in how subjection works on and in the psychic life of the subject. According to Butler, at the heart of becoming a subject is the ambivalence of mastery and submission, which, paradoxically, take place simultaneously—not in separate acts, but together in the same moment:

The more a practice is mastered, the more fully subjection is achieved. Submission and mastery take place simultaneously, and it is this paradoxical simultaneity that constitutes the ambivalence of subjection. Where one might expect submission to consist in a yielding to an externally imposed dominant order, and to be marked by a loss of control and mastery, it is paradoxically marked by mastery itself... the lived simultaneity of submission as mastery, and mastery as submission, is the condition of possibility for the subject itself. (Butler, 1995a, pp. 45–46)

The individual subject is not possible without this simultaneous submission and mastery. The formation of the subject thus depends on powers external to itself. The subject might resist and agonise over those very powers that dominate and subject it, and at the same time, it also depends on them for its existence:

We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from outside ... But if, following Foucault, we understand power as *forming* the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are. (Butler, 1997, p. 2)

The subject does not have an existence that lies outside of or prior to these acts of formation. It does not construct its own conditions of possibility separate from its performance of itself within those conditions.² In becoming that possible subject, however, it reiterates and confirms those conditions that make it, and go on making it, possible. Those conditions of possibility are embedded not in discourse alone, but in mutually constitutive social acts:

At the most intimate levels, we are social; we are comported toward a 'you'; we are outside ourselves, constituted in cultural norms that precede and exceed us, given over to a set of cultural norms and a field of power that condition us fundamentally. (Butler, 2004a, p. 45)

This should not be confused with a determinism in which subjects are passively and inevitably shaped according to one set of discursive practices within a monolithic moral order. Butler's subjects have agency, albeit a radically conditioned agency, in which they can reflexively and critically examine their conditions of possibility and in which they can both subvert and eclipse the powers that act on them and which they enact:

[T]o claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency. For what is it that enables a purposive and significant reconfiguration of cultural and political relations, if not a relation that can be turned against itself, reworked and resisted? (Butler, 1995a, p. 46)

Of the active practices through which these (un)determined subjects might be said to construct themselves, Foucault reminds us that: 'these practices are nevertheless

not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, his social group' (1997a, p. 291). 'In this sense', Rasmussen and Harwood (2003, p. 26) observe, 'the subject is not imagined to be an object whose recognition is induced by the mechanisms of truth, power and the self, but rather that the mechanisms of truth, power and the self actually bring about the creation of the subject'. And that subject, by its very existence, reiterates and confirms those mechanisms of truth, power and the self.

Central to the dual process of submission and mastery in the formation of the subject are the mutual acts of recognition through which subjects accord each other the status of viable subjecthood. Nevertheless, Butler observes, the subject disavows its dependence on that other who 'recognises' it, and in that act of recognition, constitutes its existence through the terms in which recognition takes place. 'Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency' (Butler, 1997, p. 2). The agentic subject disavows this dependency, not out of a flawed capacity for reflexivity, but because the achievement of autonomy, however illusory it might be, is necessary for the accomplishment of oneself as a recognisable and thus viable subject.

The first example is taken from a study (Davies, 1996) in which teachers document their work with students through videotaping episodes in the playground, transcription and analysis of those episodes, and through observations of their own and others' work, which they recorded in their journals. In this study I ran workshops in which the teachers collectively developed their skills to reflexively analyse the documented interactive moments. This interaction of teachers with primary school students beautifully illustrates the complex simultaneous processes on the part of the students of recognition, of the take-up and subversion of power, of the disavowal of dependency, and of the accomplishment of a sense of autonomy and freedom from the power of the dominant other to grant particular kinds of recognition. It is possible to see how these processes take place through the reiteration and repetition of the discourses through which they are subjected. Paquita, one of the teachers, wrote:

On the playground, Theo, Ned, Miles and Patrick are involved in a fight. Theo and Miles are on the ground rolling, hitting and punching each other. Ned is standing, kicking Miles. Patrick is watching. The fight is about the disappearance of a lost plastic horse they have been playing with. They think that Miles has hidden it. The teacher sees the fight and calls for them to stop it. They don't stop and she has to intervene to pull them apart. Theo runs away and the other three continue the fight by throwing verbal abuse at each other. Several times they try to engage in physical fighting again.

[Interruption—the bell rings]

The students wait to talk to the teacher about the incident. While they wait, they discuss together a story they will deliver to the teacher. They have stopped fighting. Ned leads the others with the story line. (Another teacher observes this happening).

[Interruption while they walk over to the teacher's room to discuss the incident]

On the way to the teacher's room the students laugh with each other. They posture in surly ways towards the teacher when they arrive at the room. She tells them that they are obviously not ready to discuss the incident yet. She separates the students and leaves them to think about the incident. She speaks to them individually about their behaviour. The consequences of the behaviour are that they have reduced time on the playground the following day because they have to see the teacher before playing and convince her that they will play safely.

[Two days later]

Ned and Theo are walking down the corridor past the teacher who had intervened in their fight two days earlier. They speak pleasantly to her, saying 'Hello, Paquita.' She replies. The boys are followed by their own teacher who looks angry because they have just been very disruptive in her gym session. The students move down the corridor, embrace each other and sing to each other (not provocatively, but loud enough for the teacher to hear), 'We are the naughty boys ...'. They continue down the corridor laughing. (Davies, 1996, pp.165–166)

Ned and Theo subvert, for the moment, the category of naughty boy, asserting themselves as powerful, and as independent of the teacher's controlling gaze. At the same time, as Butler points out, any attempt to oppose subordination 'will necessarily presuppose and reinvolve it' (1997, p. 12). They both do and do not escape the dominating force of the category and of their positioning within it. In order to understand subjectification, we must grasp this double directionality, this impossible doubleness of subjection: we are both acted upon and we act—not in separate acts of domination and submission, but with submission relying on domination/mastery, and mastery relying on submission. This does not mean, as the 'naughty boys' show, that submission means we are engaged in a powerless form of mimesis, since power can eclipse the original conditions of possibility—it can create something unintended in the dominant discourse at play. The boys submit to Paquita's definition of them as naughty, but they do not, apparently, submit to what Paquita regards as the appropriate emotion of shame, or the appropriate desire to reform. The definition of naughtiness is prior to them—it is outside of themselves, it is imposed on them and they both take it up, wilfully, and at the same time subvert the relations of power in which the teacher's use of the naughty boy category, intended to rein in their power, is appropriated in an extension of their power. As Stern, in an analysis of Butler's work, points out:

The process of reiteration by which subjects are continuously constituted opens a space in which the constituting forces are open to be reworked. 'The subject is a reworking of the very discursive processes by which it is worked' such that "agency" is to be found in the resignification opened by discourse' (Stern, 2000, p. 113, quoting Butler, 1995b, p. 135).

Butler (1997, p. 14) elaborates this point as follows:

Power acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion, and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject's 'own' acting. ... The notion of power at work in subjection thus appears in two incommensurable temporal modalities: first, as what is for the subject always prior, outside of itself, and operative from the start; second, as the willed effect of

the subject. This second modality carries at least two sets of meanings: as the willed effect of the subject, subjection is a subordination that the subject brings on itself; yet if subjection produces a subject and a subject is the precondition of agency, the subjection is the account by which a subject becomes the guarantor of its resistance and opposition.

Subjection and the curriculum

Studies of syllabi undertaken from a Butlerian perspective show how the curriculum might present the terms of submission for students and what students are to become, while at the same time covering over the relations of dominance and submission. They do so through couching the learning process in terms of a mastery that the individual student is driven, by himself/herself, to acquire, driven through its own needs and anxieties and desire for self-esteem (Honan, 2002, p. 5). Eileen Honan, in a self-ironising moment, describes herself as my Ph.D. student, struggling with her own dual mastery and submission in the very process of trying to understand what Butler was saying about mastery and submission. Her story shows how the interaction between us constructed her as an individual agent in control of her own learning and at the same time created the conditions of possibility through which her struggle could take place (I was in Helsinki on study leave at the time of this exchange):

When I was writing my thesis, I would write a draft of each chapter and send it to my supervisor who would comment and critique it, ask questions, pose problems, etc and send it back for another rewrite. At one stage, Bronwyn sent me an email saying, 'How much of what you say is happening is covered by Butler's statement that, "the more a practice is mastered etc?"'. I read this quote, read the pages surrounding the quote again and again, and couldn't possibly understand the relevance to the chapter I had sent Bronwyn. What on earth is she talking about? How is this relevant to the chapter I have written about the discourses about literacy operating within the Queensland English Syllabus? I struggled, I complained, I cried, until finally after about two weeks of struggle, I got the courage to write to Bronwyn. I don't understand the relevance of this bit of Butler's. What have I missed? Where am I going wrong? Why did you suggest it? The reply I got was, 'It's alright, don't worry about it if it's not going to help! I felt I had struggled for nothing—why all the tears of anger and frustration? So good I thought I can stop worrying about that. And then a couple of weeks later it hit me—oh of course that's what it means—and that makes so much sense—and of course this understanding now changes my analysis of the data I had collected. (Honan, 2002, p. 2)

Mastery is thus constructed as an individual accomplishment through which the individual becomes an appropriate, effective, active and informed Ph.D. student/citizen/subject. This was so, as Honan points out, not just for herself as Ph.D. student, but for the hypothetical students constituted through the Queensland English Syllabus that she was studying. The purpose of constituting the appropriate(d) subject is stated quite clearly in the syllabus: 'By the time students complete the compulsory years of schooling, they should have developed their ability to use English as *active and informed citizens*' (Department of Education Queensland, 1994, p. 26; my emphasis). The student who is constituted in this syllabus document is:

... a subject who is, at one and the same time, required to master the practices of literacy mandated in the syllabus, while becoming subjected to the requirements of these practices ... The syllabus works as a governing mechanism, where ... governing works to construct the 'double' subject Judith Butler refers to who must, necessarily at one and the same time, be master of certain literacy practices, and submit to those practices. (Honan, 2002, p. 1)

The syllabus presents itself as liberating students through literacy in order to become individuals; that is, active agents, who will 'choose' to be active citizens. Honan argues that it is at the same time clearly a form of government of students. She draws on Foucault's (1994, p. 341) definition of government where he says that government, in the sense he wants to use it, does not 'refer only to political structures or to the management of states', but also designates 'the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed'. It includes 'modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, that [are] destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others' (Foucault, 1994, p. 341). Government is manipulative in this sense and it contains and shapes the conditions of possibility available to school students.

One might say of Honan's observation that the syllabus is a governmental document. Well of course, we might then add, schools are responsible for turning students into the citizens that the country wants. Yet both English teachers and syllabi such as the Queensland English Syllabus (and, one might add, Ph.D. supervisors) *de-emphasise* the governing of subjects, as if there were something unspeakable, perhaps even unethical, about the governmental power that teachers might wield in setting up conditions of possibility for their students. So much is the autonomous individual constituted as central to the educational enterprise that teachers can feel quite upset if their power to constitute their students becomes visible to themselves and those around them (Davies, 1996). The responsibility and power to shape students inside the range of possible subjectivities, subjectivities that are recognisable as viable ways of being, are thus papered over in this emphasis on the freedom of the subject who is actively shaping itself through engagement with the syllabus or in Ph.D. studies. Foucault (1994, p. 332) observes of this paradoxical doubleness: 'Never, I think, in the history of human societies—even in the old Chinese society—has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques and of totalization procedures'.

The freedom of the individual subject that makes its subjection invisible is not, in this understanding, simply an illusory freedom. 'Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are "free"' (Foucault, 1994, p. 342). Freedom does not vanish when power is exercised. Teachers, in shaping the conditions of possibility of their students, do not wholly determine who their students are. The relation is much more complex.

The crucial problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude (how could we seek to be slaves?). At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. (Foucault, 1994, p. 342)

The 'naughty boys' clearly took great pleasure in exercising freedom not to submit to the emotion of shame and not to submit to the requirement of reform. It is important to note here, as well, that teachers are equally caught in relations of mastery and submission in being and becoming appropriate teachers. I will come back to this point in the concluding notes on ethical practice.

Teachers' reflexive examination of classroom practice

How might we take up these questions of power and freedom in the everyday world of classroom practice? In a classroom scene documented by Robyn Hunt (Davies & Hunt, 2000) the teacher's power is invisible to her in the conduct of her teaching-as-usual practices. In becoming a researcher of her own classroom as part of her 'Master' of Education degree, however, and using a video camera to enable her to see what she would normally not see, she made visible the double moves of individualising and of imposing the conditions of possibility on the children. In the attitude of teaching-as-usual, we think of learning as an individual activity. We assess *individual* performances and take ourselves to be legitimately doing so. Many classroom rules are about ensuring that the work that is done is the assessable product of individual students. The following transcript of a videotaped episode in Robyn's classroom shows a group of students producing themselves as individuals doing reading according to the teacher's definition of how this is to be done. In adopting another position than teacher, and asking how she and they produce particular kinds of classroom order, another perception of what is going on becomes available. What follows is Robyn's reading of the students' production of the reading circle as she came to see it through viewing and re-viewing the video recording of it.

Achieving a reading circle

A group of eight students is seated in a circle on the floor with their teacher. She asks for a volunteer to commence reading. Jamie starts, the other students being required to follow in their books and to wait for their turn to read. Turns are allocated on a volunteer basis but everyone eventually has to read. They understand 'everyone will have a turn'. The group proceeds to read, each in turn until Leigh is the only person not to have 'volunteered':

Robyn: Leigh, would you like to read? [long pause] It's your turn. [Leigh raises his book and leans over towards Jamie. Jamie 'shuffles' over towards Leigh. Jamie proceeds to read by leaning close to Leigh and saying each word softly near his ear in such a way that his activity is not easy to see or hear. Leigh 'reads' by repeating each word one-at-a-time as Jamie speaks them. Jamie holds the reader in front of his face. None of the students comment on this, verbally or non-verbally. All seem to accept 'Leigh is reading'. He completes his turn.]

[We wrote together in analysing this episode:] The students in this episode complied with Robyn's definition of this situation: 'this is an oral reading lesson in which you will each read'. They remained seated and attended to their books during the entire episode. Confident readers volunteered eagerly but all students accepted that they would have a turn and would 'read'. Leigh, although reluctant, demonstrated his commitment to school and a willingness to work within Robyn's definition of the situation though he knew the task he was required to perform in her definition of it was beyond him. He accepted the condition

'I must read'. With some specific assistance from Jamie and with whole-group cooperation, he found a way to comply with the condition that everyone must read which required disrupting the teaching-as-usual assumption that 'reading' is an individual rather than a group task, at the same time leaving this assumption intact for the teacher by keeping their action invisible. These eight students, and Jamie in particular, collaborated to enable Leigh to position himself as one who is willing and able to participate in the teacher's agenda. They knew, unlike the teacher, until that point, that such a positioning must be a group rather than an individual production.

[After Robyn had studied the video recording to see the work the boys were doing to maintain the classroom order that she desired, she] talked to Leigh and Jamie about Leigh's reading:

1. Robyn: I wanted to ask you two about ... do you like reading Leigh?
- 2 Leigh: Yes [quietly]
- 3 Robyn: You don't mind when it's your turn to read? [pause] I sort of noticed a couple of times that you seemed a little nervous and I notice how Jamie was helping you [pause]. Do you realize how he helps you when it's reading time? [to Jamie] what do you do?
- 4 Jamie: I help him say what the words are
- 5 Robyn: Yeah [to Leigh] how does that make you feel?
- 6 Leigh: I don't know
- 7 Robyn: Do you like it when Jamie helps you read?
- 8 Leigh: [Nods]
- 9 Robyn: Yeah, yeah it's nice when you've got someone to [to Jamie] how did you decide that you ought to help Leigh?
- 10 Jamie: I don't know [pause] I just knew he didn't know what the words were so I helped him
- 11 Robyn: And how do you know that?
- 12 Jamie: He couldn't say them. (Davies & Hunt, 2000, pp. 114–115)

In this observation and the later conversation, Robyn is moving from one who simply conducts the practices of teaching-as-usual, to one who also turns her reflexive gaze on her practice to ask not only how those usual practices reiterate and sustain the relations of power in which her readings are not questioned, but also to search for a form of agency in which the possibility of resignification of herself, and of her students, is opened up. In this reflexive moment she can ask the students how they constructed a scene that they knew could be called from that more usual perspective 'cheating'. In order to do so she positions herself as one not making such judgements; that is, for the moment, interacting with them as researcher who wants to privilege their knowledges rather than her own. They cautiously assess the position she is speaking from to know the import of her questions and therefore how to answer them. The correct answer to the question in lines 1 and 3 might have been, for example, 'I can't read', and Leigh responds either softly or with silence throughout, indicating his uncertainty about the unveiling of Jamie's collaboration with him in producing him as one who can read. When the teacher positions Jamie as helper (line 3), rather than, say, as one who has collaborated in an episode of cheating, Jamie picks up and uses this word (lines 4 and 10) to position himself as someone who behaved properly in response to what seemed obvious—that Leigh could not do what was required in a reading lesson

as it is collectively defined in this context unless someone told him how to say the words (line 12).

In both of these examples of performative acts of literacy, of Eileen as Ph.D. student and of Leigh as reader, mastery is desired and struggled over. In the usual everyday individualistic versions of human activity, it is read as an individual struggle even though it is accomplished collaboratively. Ph.D. students rarely reveal, as Honan did in the earlier example, the power struggle between themselves and their supervisors; they rarely write their theses as an engagement, sometimes painful, sometimes pleasurable, with the supervisor and her knowledges/the knowledges through which she is subjected. The thesis, usually, is accomplished, within the genre of Ph.D. theses, as an autonomous journey.³ Students in classrooms, similarly, generally seek a mode of performativity in which they can be read as accomplishing themselves as autonomous, and preferably, as the right sort of subject. Failure to accomplish oneself as autonomous and as appropriate can be very traumatic (Davies *et al.*, 2001). Students work very hard to embody themselves as appropriate and appropriated subjects, and losing their footing—being seen to be incompetent or inappropriate—can be very painful (Davies, 2000). Leigh's caution in the interview is presumably geared to the desire not to come undone, not to lose his footing, not to be deemed inappropriate. Although teachers are able to construct themselves as benign for the most part, they are also very uncomfortable when their power is flouted and the students do not actually struggle (as Eileen did, and as Leigh did) to accomplish themselves as having the right kind of desire to accomplish mastery. Paquita, the teacher of the naughty boys, was floored by their unexpected take on her work with them on their behaviour that showed first, in the moment of greeting her, a masterful and appropriate(d) identity, and in the next moment, a deliberate subversion of her power.

The accomplishment of mastery

The accomplishment of mastery is not simply an act of willing submission. In addition to the kinds of difficulties outlined in the earlier examples, subjects may be involved in taking up subject positions for which they have little or no first-hand knowledge. Their accomplishment of mastery involves both an imaginative capacity to form themselves out of the not-yet-known, and a set of culturally sanctioned signifiers of the thing they see that they must become—the Ph.D. graduate, the one who is no longer deemed to be naughty, the good citizen who can read. The appropriate knowledge may lie outside one's grasp. Boys, for example, to be recognised as appropriate boys, must perform themselves as heterosexual before they can know what that might mean. In order to be recognisable as heterosexual, they may engage in signifying practices through which they abject the 'other', cast it out from the self. They may revile girls and 'sissy boys', for example, in attempts to signal: 'this is what I am not'. They accomplish this through acts that signal 'this is what disgusts me'. Through such practices they may gain for themselves a sense of being heterosexual and they may gain recognition from others as one who is recognisable as heterosexual and

dominant (Davies, 2003; Renold, 2003; McInnes, 2004; Robinson, 2005). As Mac an Ghaill (1996, p. 200) observes: 'Externally and internally males attempt to reproduce themselves as powerful within social circumstances which remain out of their control'.

Abjection works at the level of individual borders in defining that which it is possible or not possible to be (Davies, 2004). The 'abject', according to Butler's (1990, p. 133) reading of Kristeva, is a 'structuralist notion of a boundary-constituting taboo for the purposes of constructing a discrete subject through exclusion'. To be not abject is to have control of the body and its functions, but the *recognition* of what will count as abject is regulated and authorised by the hierarchical discourses and practices of government. Within this relational state of play in classrooms, each student's positioning of herself and her positioning of and by others is always tenuous and open to re-inscription, both as other and as that which is to be abjected (Davies, 2004).

Mastery is not continuously available nor is it available to everyone. Students are constantly at risk of being recognised as inappropriate and incompetent (Davies *et al.*, 2001; Rasmussen & Harwood, 2003). In each of the examples so far there is a struggle to accomplish a position in which one's mastery is recognised and accepted. Exclusion from mastery and from viable subjecthood does not only occur through the absence of acts of recognition, however. Exclusion may also occur through the categories that pre-exist the processes of subjectification. Butler (2004b) analyses laws and medical practices through which physically bi-sexual individuals are forced into being socially and discursively either male or female. Burns (2004) argues that such practices are inherent not just in law and medicine, but also in education, since science curricula, for example, also make unspeakable and unthinkable the possibility of viable intersex subjects. In Butler's (2004b, p. 57) analysis of the struggle of intersex subjects she explores the relations between the 'variable orders of intelligibility' and the 'genesis and knowability of the human'. She says 'it is not just that there are laws that govern our intelligibility, but ways of knowing, modes of truth, that forcibly define intelligibility'. She asks in relation to the politics of truth and relations of power 'that circumscribe in advance what will and will not count as truth':

What counts as a person? What counts as a coherent gender? What qualifies as a citizen? Whose world is legitimated as real? ... By what norms am I constrained as I begin to ask what I may become? And what happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the given regime of truth? This is what Foucault describes as 'the desubjugation of the subject in the play of ... the politics of truth' ... This relationship is an urgent one; it carries a certain theoretical urgency, precisely at those points where the human is encountered at the limits of intelligibility itself. (Butler, 2004b, p. 58, citing Foucault, 1997b)

Subjects, and this includes school students, who are constituted as lying outside intelligibility are faced with the constitutive force of a language that grants them no intelligible space. When they speak, they speak with a language that has already constructed the category they might have inhabited—as intersex, for example—as unintelligible. They must engage in performative acts through which they can be recognised as *either* male *or* female—not both, not one *and* the other. The dynamics

through which failure of recognition takes place are not just part of a language game. The available meaning structures are deeply inscribed in our bodies, in our emotions and in desire. The film *The Crying Game* graphically presents the moment of shock, and subsequent violent abjection, when the desired sexual partner unexpectedly turns out to be both male and female. Meaning systems and bodily affect are both constituted through the conditions of possibility made available within any culture. So while as subjects we may generally disavow our dependence on others who constitute us as viable subjects, such stark examples make plain the work that is done both in constituting ourselves and being constituted by others as viable subjects, and also the work that is constantly needing to be done to maintain our access to the desired positioning of viable subject. We do not all have equal access to viability. Sometimes, as in this intersex example, our bodies do not conform to the available meaning system. Or when we fail to learn to read, we are at risk of being caught out as one who is unable to be recognised as a proper citizen. Sometimes we are caught between more than one meaning-system. The naughty boys successfully displayed dominant heterosexual masculinity in the playground, only to find themselves humiliated and shamed, and unrecognisable as viable in the teacher's eyes unless they gave up such accomplishing of dominant male identity.

Notes toward an ethics of classroom practice

Our responsibility, as educational and social scientists, is to understand, to the extent that is possible, the complex conditions of our mutual formation. We must understand our own contribution to creating and withholding the conditions of possibility of particular lives. We must constantly ask what it is that makes for a viable life and how we are each implicated in constituting the viability or non-viability of the lives of others. In the work I undertook with Robyn Hunt we defined 'teaching-as-usual' as a dominant discourse in which the teacher has an habituated sense that she is the one who unquestionably knows what is going on and who has the authority to assert the correctness of that view. In contrast, Butler offers the concept of ethical reflexivity 'which involves remaining vulnerable in the face of normative constitutive practices' (Ellwood, 2006, p. 3). In acknowledging that mutual vulnerability in relations with each other—teachers vulnerable to students and students vulnerable to each other and to teachers—we can reach for an awareness of the work we do in recognising each other:

Consider that the struggle for recognition in the Hegelian sense requires that each partner in the exchange recognize not only that the other needs and deserves recognition, but also that each, in a different way, is compelled by the same need, the same requirement. This means that we are not separate identities in the struggle for recognition but are already involved in reciprocal exchange, an exchange that dislocates us from our positions, our subject-positions, and allows us to see that community itself requires the recognition that we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition. (Butler, 2004a, pp. 43–44)

An ethical reflexivity is an uncomfortable reflexivity that 'seeks to go beyond the confession/absolution tendencies of some forms of reflexivity, and, in acknowledging

the impossibility of a thoroughly transparent and nameable knowledge of oneself, accepts “the uncomfortable task of leaving what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar” (Ellwood, 2006, p. 5, citing Pillow, 2003, p. 177). The full knowledge of self that is implicated in humanist ideals of ethical practice, must, in this understanding, be put aside in favour of an awareness of the emergent process of mutual formation. The recognition of the unfamiliar in oneself opens up, in Butler’s thinking, a new approach to the other, one that does not mark off such absolute boundaries between oneself as the known and the other as the unknown:

I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others. I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am is the enigmatic traces of others. In this sense, I cannot know myself perfectly or know my ‘difference’ from others in an irreducible way ... I am wounded, and I find that the wound testifies to the fact that I am impressionable, given over to the Other in ways that I cannot fully predict or control. I cannot think the question of responsibility alone, in isolation from the Other; if I do, I have taken myself out of the relational bind that frames the problem of responsibility from the start. (Butler 2004a, p. 46)

This concept of responsibility is almost opposite to the ‘responsibilisation’ currently espoused in the neoliberal forms of government that dominate the globalised world (Rose, 1999; Davies & Bansel, 2005). ‘Responsibilisation’ in neoliberal forms of government requires each individual to accept responsibility for self but to shed any responsibility for others—except to participate in acts of surveillance and control (Davies *et al.*, 2005). Neoliberalism heightens individuality and competitiveness seeking to shape each student as an economic unit of use in a market economy. Neoliberalism’s (usually implicit) intention has been to make democratic citizens both more governable and more able to service capital (Crozier *et al.*, 1975). Neoliberalism as a form of governmentality works by convincing students and workers that there is no choice at a systemic level. Instead, their power lies in their individual choices to become appropriate and successful within that (inevitable) system. Such a system is extraordinarily difficult to reflexively examine and may, through the discourse of inevitability, dismantle resistance to itself.

Butler’s proposal is in profound contrast to this end-driven market model of the individual. The social, psychic and intellectual work is, rather, emergent. Our responsibility lies inside social relations and inside a responsibility to and for *oneself in relation to the other*—not oneself as a known entity, but oneself in process, unfolding or folding up, being done or undone, in relation to the other, again and again.

Teachers may say they have little room for movement within the institutions of schools and within the framework of state syllabi to shift their practices. Yet teachers have been shown to routinely subvert official documents and practices in the interests of what they believe to be good teaching (Honan, 2004, 2005). It is not enough, however, to engage in passive resistance, to engage in good teaching in the privacy of the classroom. We must take responsibility for examining the documents and discursive practices that are taken for granted in our schools and universities, and ask: what conditions of possibility are they creating and maintaining for us and for our students?

In what ways do those conditions of possibility afford our students a viable life? And in what ways may they be said to fall short of adequate care?

Notes

1. Also sometimes called subjectivation, or simply, subjection.
2. As Rasmussen and Harwood (2003, p. 28, citing Butler, 1993, 1994) point out, performance in Butler's framework is not what is anticipated in the usual dramaturgical model:

Butler is very careful to distinguish the concept of performativity from notions of performance: 'while the latter presumes a subject, the former contests the very notion of the subject' (1994: 33). Performativity is usually associated with speech act theory and 'in this framework, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names' (1993: 13).

3. An exception to this is Paula Smith's thesis later published as *Mapping the Whirled* (Smith, 2003)

References

- Burns, K. (2004) Review essay, *Discourse: Studies in the cultural politics of education*, 25(4), 495–506
- Butler, J. (1990) *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York, Routledge).
- Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'* (New York, Routledge).
- Butler, J. (1994) Gender as performance, *Radical Philosophy*, 67, 32–39.
- Butler, J. (1995a) Contingent foundations: feminism and the question of 'postmodernism', in: S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell & N. Fraser (Eds) *Feminist contentions. A philosophical exchange* (New York, Routledge), 35–57.
- Butler, J. (1995b) For a careful reading, in: S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell & N. Fraser (Eds) *Feminist contentions. A philosophical exchange* (New York, Routledge), 127–143.
- Butler, J. (1997) *The psychic life of power* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press).
- Butler, J. (2004a) *Precarious life. The powers of mourning and violence* (London, Verso).
- Butler, J. (2004b) Doing justice to someone: sex reassignment and allegories of transexuality, in: *Undoing gender* (New York, Routledge).
- Crozier, M., Huntington, S. P. & Watanuki, J. (1975) *The crisis of democracy. Report on the governability of democracies* (New York, New York University Press).
- Davies, B. (1996) *Power/knowledge/desire: changing school organisation and management practices* (Canberra, Department of Employment, Education and Youth Affairs).
- Davies, B. (2000) *(In)scribing body/landscape relations* (Walnut Creek, Alta Mira Press).
- Davies, B. (2003) *Frogs and snails and feminist tales. Preschool children and gender* (2nd edn) (New Jersey, NJ, Hampton Press).
- Davies, B. (2004) Identity, abjection and otherness: creating the self, creating difference, *International Journal for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood*, 2(1), 58–80.
- Davies, B. & Bansel, P. (2005) The time of their lives? Academic workers in neoliberal time(s), *Health Sociology Review*, 14(1), 47–58.
- Davies, B. & Hunt, R. (2000) 'Classroom competencies and marginal positionings, in: B. Davies (Ed.) *A body of writing* (Walnut Creek, AltaMira Press), 107–131.
- Davies, B., Dormer, S., Gannon, S. Laws, C. Lenz-Taguchi, H. McCann, H. & Rocco, S. (2001) Becoming schoolgirls: the ambivalent project of subjectification, *Gender and Education*, 13(2), 167–182.
- Davies, B., Browne, J., Gannon, S., Honan, E. & Somerville, M. (2005) Embodied women at work in neoliberal times and places, *Gender, Work and Organization*, 12(4), 343–362.

- Department of Education Queensland (1994) *English in Years 1 to 10 Queensland syllabus materials. English syllabus for years 1 to 10* (Brisbane, State of Queensland).
- Ellwood, C. (2006) Coming out and coming undone: sexualities and reflexivities in language education research, *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, 5(1), 67–84.
- Foucault, M. (1994) 'The subject and power', in: J. Faubion (Ed.) *Michel Foucault. Power* (New York, The New Press), 326–348.
- Foucault, M. (1997a) The ethics of concern for the self as a practice of freedom, in: P. Rabinow (Ed.) *Michel Foucault. Ethics subjectivity and truth* (New York, The New Press), 281–302.
- Foucault, M. (1997b) What is critique?, in: S. Lotringer & L. Hochroth (Eds) *The politics of truth* (New York, Semiotext(e)).
- Honan, E. (2002) Double moves, paper presented at the *Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education* (Melbourne, Australian Association for Research in Education).
- Honan, E. (2004) Teachers as bricoleurs: producing plausible readings of curriculum documents, *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 3(2), 99–112. Available online at: <http://education.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/2004v3n2art6.pdf> (accessed June 2006).
- Honan, E. (2005) Teachers as bricoleurs resisting mandated curriculum, paper presented at the *Discourse, Power, Sustaining Resistance Conference*, University of Plymouth, UK, 21–23 March.
- Mac an Ghaill, M. (1996) Deconstructing heterosexualities within school arenas, *Curriculum Studies*, 4, 191–207.
- McInnes, D. (2004) Melancholy and the productive negotiations of power in sissy boy experience, in: M. L. Rasmussen, E. Rofo & S. Talburt (Eds) *Youth and sexualities. Pleasure, subversion, and insubordination in and out of schools* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan).
- Pillow, W. (2003) Confession, catharsis or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175–196.
- Rasmussen, M. L. & Harwood, V. (2003) Performativity, youth and injurious speech, *Teaching Education*, 14(1), 25–36.
- Renold, E. (2003) 'If you don't kiss me you're dumped': boys, boyfriends and heterosexualised masculinities in the primary school, *Educational Review*, 55(2), 179–194.
- Robinson, K. (2005) Reinforcing hegemonic masculinities through sexual harassment: issues of identity, power and popularity in secondary schools, *Gender and Education*, 17(1), 19–37.
- Rose, N. (1999) *Powers of freedom* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Smith, P. (2003) *Mapping the whirled. Syncopations in the life of a woman religious* (Melbourne, Spectrum Publications).
- Stern, D. (2000) The return of the subject? Power, reflexivity and agency, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 26(5), 109–122.