



# Living the Label: Youth work, young people, being 'at-risk' and community- based (arts/sports) programs

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## Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	ii
List of Tables .....	vi
List of Figures .....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	xi
Abstract.....	xii
Chapter One: Thinking about Risk .....	xv
Introducing the Study.....	1
Note to Self: Why Explore ‘Risky’ Labels? .....	1
The Research Focus.....	4
Note to the Reader: Youth and ‘Risky’, Sticky Labels .....	8
Significance of the Study.....	11
Thesis Outline.....	17
Chapter Two: Regulating Risk.....	22
The Question of Youth? .....	23
‘At-risk’ and...?.....	24
Policy and Risk.....	28
An Australian Perspective: Policy and Risk.....	36
Chapter Three: Precarious (re)Positioning.....	49
The ‘Risky’ Me.....	50
Looking for ‘Me’ and Finding Labels - Young People and Subjectivities .....	50
The Discursively Produced ‘Me’.....	52
Precarious Futures?: Young People and ‘Risky’ Labels.....	54
‘Risky’ Rural Spaces.....	55
Education and ‘Risky’ Identities.....	56
The Double Risk: Indigenous and Becoming ‘Me’.....	59
Gender, Popular Culture, Schooling and Working the Risky Edge.....	64
Young People Managing Risk.....	68
Popular Culture – Fame and/or Alternative Ways Out of ‘Risky’ Lives.....	72
Risk-taking, Gender and Schooling - with a Twist of Popular Culture.....	77
Programs, Policy and (Re) Positioning the Precarious ‘I’ .....	83
A Historical Understanding of Youth Work.....	83
Youth Work (Today) and Targeted ‘Risky’ Youth.....	85
Engaging in community-based Arts/Sports Programs.....	86

Community-Based Arts Programs.....	86
Community-Based Sports Programs.....	90
Mismatches: Policy and Practice.....	93
Chapter Summary .....	93
Chapter 4: Methodology: Understanding and Finding ‘Risky’ Spaces .....	94
Theoretical Framework.....	95
Introduction .....	95
Subjectivity, Power and Governmentality.....	98
Performativity.....	104
The Intersection of the Production of Text and Production of Self.....	107
Edgework.....	109
Section Summary.....	111
Method .....	111
Research Design .....	113
Ethnographic Elements.....	115
Researcher Reflexivity.....	115
Observation.....	119
Participant Observation.....	120
Interviews.....	121
Collection and Examination of Context-Specific Data .....	123
Phases of the Study.....	124
Recruitment.....	124
Data Collection .....	126
Demographics – Youth Workers .....	126
Analysis of youth worker data .....	127
Phase 2.....	129
Recruitment.....	129
Data Collection .....	129
Demographics – Young People .....	131
Analysis of the Young People Data.....	132
Chapter 5: Regulating Risk- ‘Risky’ Political Underpinnings .....	136
Introduction .....	137
‘Risky’ Aims.....	140
YAP1.....	140
YAP2.....	149
‘Risky’ Fun and Contracts.....	152
YAP1.....	152
YAP2.....	158
‘Risky’ Mismatching – Themes Across the Seven Programs/Organisations.....	160

Access and Surveillance.....	161
The Funding Game.....	163
Outcomes vs Needs.....	165
Timeframes and Sustainability.....	167
Section Summary.....	168
Chapter 6: Working with Risk - Troubling & Reinforcing Labels.....	171
Introduction.....	172
Varying Degrees of Risk.....	174
The School/Education System is Flawed.....	183
Gendered Approaches to Regulation.....	194
Art and Sport: Transforming or Regulating ‘Risky’ Identities?.....	204
A Summary of the Ways Arts/Sports Practices were used.....	205
Fame as a Way Out.....	213
Chapter Summary.....	217
Chapter 7: Living with Risk – Risk with a Twist.....	221
Introduction.....	222
‘Risky’ Understandings: Risk, Recognition and Resistance.....	224
Defining the 'Risky' Label.....	224
Resisting 'Risky' Recognitions.....	230
Jump on Board the ‘Risky’ Fun Ride.....	235
Why Are You Here?.....	235
What is the Program About?.....	238
What Will You Take Awat From the Program?.....	241
‘Risky’ Education.....	246
Risk = fame.....	257
I'm a Big Bra Boy and I Don't Give a Crap.....	257
Hard Life = Shining Star.....	260
High-‘Risky’ Appeal – Young People Working the <i>Edge</i> .....	262
The YAP Boys.....	263
The YAP Girls.....	268
Chapter Summary.....	272
Conclusion.....	275
(End)note to Self.....	276
References.....	281
Appendices.....	302
Appendix A.....	303

Leaving the Field .....	303
Ethical Issues .....	303
Appendix B.....	306
Youth Workers Interview Questions.....	305
Appendix C.....	307
Youth Workers Demographics.....	306
Appendix D.....	315
Young Peoples Demographics.....	314

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1:</b> Summary of Youth Workers' Demographics (Phase 1) .....	127
<b>Table 2:</b> Detailed Demographics of Interviewed Youth Workers (Phase 1) .....	306
<b>Table 3:</b> Summary of Young People's Demographics YAP1 and YAP2 .....	131
<b>Table 4:</b> Detailed Demographics of Young People in YAP1 and YAP2 .....	314

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1:</b> Phases of the Study .....	112
<b>Figure 2:</b> Screen shot of L2L Brochure for Young People and their Families (outside) .....	153
<b>Figure 3:</b> Screen shot Screen shot of L2L Brochure for Young People and their Families (inside).....	155
<b>Figure 4:</b> Screen shot of the Links to Learning Guidelines 2012 .....	156

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This dissertation is dedicated:

*To my little 3 year old boy, Leo, who continually asked, 'Mum finish write dumb book?' Yes, my little boy, Mum has finally finished.*

*To my big boy, TJ (1994-2010), who should have been here to babysit his little brother so I could have finished the 'dumb book' earlier. Mum misses you dearly my big boy.*



## Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which the ‘at-risk’ label is designated to, negotiated, and lived by young people (who are considered marginalised or disadvantaged) participating in rural New South Wales community-based (arts/sports) programs. The study takes a qualitative (combinative ethnographic) approach and adopts Michel Foucault’s (1990, 1991) notions of governmentality and technologies of the self/control, where power is understood as being disseminated in various localised sites and relations, and Judith Butler’s (1993, 2006) notions of performativity, where the subject is understood as intelligible through discursive (everyday) practices. In doing so it explores how certain youth are constituted as ‘at-risk’ subjects by educational, social and community program funding policies, and how the programs, practices and perceptions of 11 youth workers (across the programs) contribute to and/or resist these processes. It also examines the ways in which 15 young people (aged 13-15 years) who were engaged in the community-based (arts/sports) programs construct and negotiate identities within discourses of risk.

In this thesis, I make four interrelated arguments:

- 1) Policy and youth workers’ understandings of the ‘at-risk’ subject, formed through previous relationships and pre-existing assumptions (i.e., ‘expert’ knowledge of youth) reinforce the notion that there is a youth problem that needs addressing, despite youth workers’ attempts to disrupt the ‘at-risk’ label inscribed in policy;
- 2) The ‘at-risk’ label governs the youth subjects in the community-based (arts/sports) programs in specific ways, including through self-governance where they are made responsible for, and managers of, their own ‘risky’ situations;
- 3) Although the youth identities (of the young people in this study) are ultimately bound within the ‘at-risk’ label produced by the program’s aims, the positions taken up by the youth workers and the young people themselves, popular and peer culture (including the programs themselves) has produced an attraction to certain aspects of being a young person ‘at-risk’ (where it appears the more ‘at-risk’ you are the more likely you are to be ‘famous’). In this context ‘fame’ (rather than educational success) is positioned as a ‘way out’ for marginalised or disadvantaged youth. Such space provides temporary enabling aspects and affordances for young people to ‘twist’ the ‘at-risk’ discourse;

- 4) The notion of *Risk with a twist* explains the simultaneous enabling and constraining processes and possible effects of the young people ‘living the (at-risk) label’. The enabling aspects include: 1) the young people’s retelling of ‘risky’ experiences (such as engaging in criminal acts and self-harm) brings kudos/fame in the peer group; 2) being ‘risky’ (e.g., by misbehaving at, or not attending, school) enables the young people to be selected in the (arts/sports) program; 3) some of the youth workers making certain young people feel special because of their ‘at risk’ status and; 4) the young people get out of school – a context where these young people feel they are treated unfairly by teachers and made to feel like ‘losers’.

These enabling aspects of ‘living the label’ are temporary in that (a) ‘youthhood’ is a phase of one’s life and being ‘at-risk’ of failing school only makes sense in relation to youth subjectivities and (b) once these young people step outside of their peer (and arts/sports program) group, their power or ‘fame’ is ultimately lost because while they can resist the institutional norms of the program, school or society, these young people cannot function ‘successfully’ within them. Therefore, the constraining aspects of ‘living the label’ are: 1) the narrow or culturally impoverished sense of what is deemed important to the young people denied power and failed by the educational system and; 2) the difficulty of escaping the label, once it is applied by self and others. As young people try to *escape* the constraints of society by engaging in ‘risky’ talk and practices, they further reinforce and validate these behaviours as identity markers that constitute them as ‘at-risk’.

This thesis makes a unique contribution to knowledge by using Lyng’s (2005) theory on edgework, in combination with theories of governmentality and performativity, to explain the seduction of youth to engage in ‘risky’ acts, as well as how these ‘risky’ youth identities are, in the end, constrained by dominant discourses and structures in society. Therefore, on the one hand, this thesis shows how youth work, program designs and associated educational and social policies can contribute to the neoliberal processes of governing young people and the neoliberal push for young people to engage in self-surveillance. On the other hand, the notion of *Risk with a twist* shows how young people living the label of ‘at-risk’ can find (ungovernable/disorderly) discursive space within dominant political and educational ‘at-risk’ discourses to twist this label and use it to ‘become somebody’ in their own (and possibly youth

workers') eyes and among their peer (and community program) group. Ultimately, however, it is argued that the very programs that are designed to counter 'risk' may actually (although unintentionally) work to maintain, create or celebrate it, which can make the young people feel even more alienated and disengaged from school and/or workforce when they return to these contexts. These contradictory, complex and messy findings raise questions in need of further research and have implications for young people, youth workers, educators and parents.



# Chapter One: *Thinking about Risk*

## Note to Self: Why Explore ‘Risky’ Labels?

...by looking at what problems interest us and at what questions we ask, we may discover an avenue that leads us to a better understanding of what is important and of meaning to each of us ... Your research is autobiographical in that some aspect of yourself is mirrored in the work you choose to pursue. (Peshkin & Glesne, 1992, p. 178)

As I sat writing this thesis, while in the final months of my doctoral journey, I was keenly aware that inside, and often outside, of this ethnographic study I was *working (within) the hyphen-spaces*<sup>1</sup> (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Fine, 1994). I was also mindful of Judith Butler (2005) problematising the process of giving an account of oneself. As I establish my narrative within this story I am reminded by Butler, that the ‘I’ who is telling it can only do so “according to recognizable norms of life narration...” (2005, p. 52), that our narrative identity is “embedded within normative societal structures” (Halsema, 2011, p. 124) and that we tell our stories within a context. I acknowledge, due to my narrative identity, that I found myself moving towards some positions, rather than others. As such, this played a role in the ways this study was produced and the analysis of data – which is further established in the methodology section. Following Bronwyn Davies’ lead, the telling of my somewhat disjointed story is not to unveil my lived experiences as “special or different, but to assert a communicational bond between the teller and the told within a context that is historical, social and political, as well as intertextual” (Hutcheon, 1989 cited in Davies, 1993, p. xi). So I ask myself the questions, why am I so passionate about this topic, so adamant to understand what connotations lie within the ‘at-risk’ label for young people, and how that plays out with those who choose to work with youth and in how we come to know young people today? Initially, my background in education (teaching), and work with young people and community arts, played a vital role in

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<sup>1</sup> Basically, to *work the hyphen* involves reflecting on how we affect and influence the situations and interactions within the spaces we observe as ethnographers, just by being there. The *hyphen spaces* are the spaces within the ethnographic observations where the boundaries between the researcher and those being researched become blurred.

directing my study towards youth and community-based programs. Much of my previous teaching was with rural young people whom schools had considered as being ‘at-risk’ of failing in regard to their education. As a fresh-out-of-university teacher, finding myself in situations where I was ‘losing control’ of certain 13 year old boys in my class, I recall thinking about the literature on how to teach students ‘at-risk’, all the behaviour management talk, and how to engage Indigenous students. All the things that had seemed useful at the time but had indirectly reinforced the labelling of those young people as being ‘at-risk’ via certain identity markers. The term ‘at-risk’ never quite sat right with me though. This became more apparent while engaging in community (drama) work with young teenage people considered ‘at-risk’ in local drama groups such as ‘Voices’ (Bradley, Deighton, & Selby, 2004). Yet I recall a pivotal experience during my PhD journey where, as a parent of a teenage boy, it had all come together in an insightful but upsetting moment:

*Monday morning. TJ puts his little blue book back in his bag. He hates coming here. He hates the private school uniform. He hates that there are no girls. He hates that when he does well in the assessments his mates treat him like a dog with snide remarks about his mum doing them for him. She never did. Even the teachers ask him who does his assessments. That was before. Now he just couldn't be fucking bothered. He makes sure that he barely passes his work now, but at least he fits in with his mates – well kind of. Even if he doesn't fit in with this private school. He pulls out the torn, dirty timetable and moves towards the right room. English. Smiling as he enters the room, John (his mate) blows a scrunched up wet paper wad at him through an empty pen casing. He laughs and sits towards the back of the room. A female teacher he has not seen before walks in and begins talking. She looks at TJ and says sharply, “Stop laughing and tuck that shirt in.” He replies, “But Miss I'm sitting down, does it really matter right now?” He feels embarrassed about his small build. His mates constantly jeer about him being a stickman. She responds, “Are you TJ?” He nods smiling. “Yes I thought so. They told me all about you and that you would be playing up for me today. Well that is not happening young man. Get out. You know where to go.” TJ looks at her confused. There is silence. He picks up his bag and leaves the room muttering ‘fucking bitch’ under his breath. He pulls his phone out and begins to text... ‘mum I'm wagging...’*

*“I am going to kill him...” I think furiously to myself as I read the quick text from my son. Breathing deeply the fury subsides, and slightly teary eyed I cannot help but smile a little. He knows how much I hate lies. This is the third time in a month the little text has come. Where was I going so wrong? Where had my beautiful, caring little boy gone? The counsellors said to make boundaries, the police had told me to take everything out of his room except a mattress, my friends and family just say he is going through a phase like everyone else’s kids. But it’s more than that, I know this. I have reached out for help but no-one seems to listen. It feels like people are judging me if I share the horror stories so I try to joke about it with work colleagues to hide how afraid I really am. Hell, I don’t even know really where to reach to – which is truly ironic as I have spent my professional adult life teaching or working with young people labelled ‘at-risk’. When did it get to this? When did he choose to dance around the outskirts of risk and why didn’t I see it coming? Did I put him there while I was trying to understand how other young people danced there? Or did he choose the ‘risky’ space, the song and how to move to it....?*

My teenage child was considered ‘at-risk’. It dawned on me that I was an *insider* and an *outsider* to risk discourses simultaneously, within and with-out of my research, just as Geetha Karunanayake found herself when engaged in her ethnographic work on a Sri Lankan tea plantation (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). At that time I had been heavily immersed, and somewhat struggling, in writing my theoretical framework. I had heard the metaphorical click inside my mind as emotion, everyday life and theory collided – leaving me questioning, in a Foucauldian sense about, “games of truth, games of power, and games around the self” (Kendall, 2011, p. 70). I questioned the conditions that allowed my child’s identity to be constructed within the ‘regimes of (at-risk) truths’, the power relations at play between policy and practice, between practice and the lived experiences of my son and I, and how we bent around, rebelled against or took up positions in discourses of risk in the shaping, and asserting (perhaps fulfilling) of our identities – in a surveillance society under a ‘normalising gaze’ (Foucault, 1977). By this, Foucault is referring to the way in which we are encouraged through norms of society to self-regulate certain behaviours that do not fall within the norm. For example, a subject of schooling does not fit within the norms of an acceptable student if they display inappropriate behaviour in the classroom, are truanting, having difficulties in learning environments and

come from a single parent family. From that point on my understandings of ‘risk’, with its negative impacts and positive appeal, underpinned my philosophies on teaching, on being a parent, on working with young people considered ‘at-risk’, and was the driving force behind my honours thesis (Hutchesson, 2005), and in turn, this dissertation. This personal perspective is an important aspect I considered as I analysed my data. There appears to be “an assumption built into many data analysis methods that the researcher, the method and the data are separate entities” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 414); hence the need to step back from the data somewhat. I must ‘confess’ (Kluge, 2001) however, it was impossible for me to be rendered completely invisible from the process of analysis, to navigate away from my position of a mother only momentarily when needed, to open spaces for reflexive scholarly insight. My own position as a researcher is ‘risky’ in the sense that it is always unstable and partial – not fixed or unified.

## **The Research Focus**

Having briefly foregrounded the uncertainty of the ‘I’ in my research, I turn to situating my research questions in a broader context. This study supports and builds on Johanna Wyn’s (2007) arguments around the need to rethink how we come to know young people, to demystify negative stereotypes and to consider diverse lived experiences, as this type of analysis is at the forefront of current youth research. I follow Wyn (2007) and Wexler’s (1992) lead in highlighting the significance of educational institutions in shaping *who* young people become, *how* they should be working towards becoming someone well, and *what* is their social wellbeing in regard to identity making (McLeod & Yates 2006; Smyth & McInerney, 2012). My study draws on the extensive work of Judith Bessant (1996, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2008a, 2008b; Bessant & Hill, 1997; Bessant & Watts, 2007), Peter Kelly (1992, 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2007) and Kitty te Riele (2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012) in regard to the historical construction of youth ‘at-risk’, the problematic impacts of the term, the ways policy impacts on the production of ‘risky’ identities in today’s society, and te Riele’s (2007, 2009) and Anna Hickey-Moody’s (2013) research with youth ‘at-risk’, educational and social policy, and youth focused community-based programs.

This study takes on board Wyn's (2007) argument, supported by the previously mentioned researchers, that the take up of instrumental, vocationalist<sup>2</sup> approaches to learning by Australian education policies, appears to result in a mismatch between policy aims/outcomes and what young people require "in order to learn how to live well" (p. 37). It does this through an examination of community-based (arts/sports) programs (partnered with schools) which, in my study, can be seen as a form of alternative education (te Riele, 2007) – some of which have vocational aspects included in the aims. In doing so, my study problematises the notion of there being one linear pathway (te Riele, 2004) for young people to 'wander down' in the transition of becoming an 'ideal adult' (Kelly, P., 1998). Specifically, this thesis examines the ways in which the 'at-risk' label is designated to, negotiated and 'lived' by young people (who are considered marginalised or disadvantaged) participating in community-based (arts/sports) programs. Considering the limitations of a doctoral dissertation, this work is centred on two small groups of young people (aged 13-15)<sup>3</sup> considered 'at risk', within two rural<sup>4</sup> New South Wales (NSW) community-based (arts/sports) programs<sup>5</sup>. It also involved interviews with 11 youth workers across seven programs (including the two above). It attempts to build on Wyn's argument that stresses the necessity of researching the lived experiences of young people "as a reference point for considering the relevance of current policy directions" (2007, p. 37). In this regard it aims to analyse: 1) the ways young people are constituted as being 'at-risk' through policy and practice; 2) how the young people considered 'at-risk' perceive the labelling processes themselves (such as being considered 'trouble-makers' in need of

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<sup>2</sup> Kelly (1999, p. 194) contends that vocational education and training (VET) is a form of governmental regulation where 'the emergence of VET in schools is marked by moves to identify those 'at risk'.

<sup>3</sup> The age variation becomes part of the problem/messiness of 'who' is 'at-risk' as youth 'at-risk' in policy and literature range from ages 10-25, yet they are often referred to as teenagers - which would imply 13-19 year olds. My focus was on ages 13-15 as this group was the main target for most of the community-based (art/sports) programs that were part of this study.

<sup>4</sup> Rural in the context of this study is understood as regional towns, 3 hours or more drive away from a major city and as having a population of around 40,000.

<sup>5</sup> I initially intended to focus my study on community-based arts programs in general. However, the only programs available to observe at the time of my data collection contained aspects of both arts and sports approaches and they were school partnered - although the school had no input other than choosing the students who would participate in the programs. Furthermore, some of the other community-based programs and organisations, where youth workers were interviewed, did not have a connection to schools, but they all used arts approaches in different degrees. Hence, for the purpose of this thesis and to avoid confusion, I shall use the term community-based (arts/sports) programs to describe all the programs that participated in my study.

intervention); and 3) how ‘living the (‘at-risk’) label’ can have enabling and constraining aspects to it. In other words, I wanted to understand how these young people were ‘living the label’ and what were the possible effects of this process.

It is imperative to note from the outset that although my analysis problematises certain aspects of the programs which were observed, this study does not seek to discredit the programs run by the passionate youth workers participating in the study, or to dismiss some of the benefits gained by the young people while engaging in the programs. It seeks rather to understand how the term ‘at-risk’ is used within policy related to the programs and how that impacts on the practices and perceptions of the youth workers running the programs. In turn, it then explores how both of these things play a role in performatively constituting young people as being ‘at-risk’. Moreover, it seeks to understand the ways in which the young people take up, or perform, alternative ‘at-risk’ or other possible identities (which, in a Foucauldian sense, enables and/or constrains them) within the boundaries of policy and everyday life practice. Its particular focus on Rural New South Wales (RNSW) comes partly from family and work commitments limiting the available areas for data collection, and from Australian statistics that suggest that populations of rural Australian youth are considered generally more ‘at-risk’ of early school leaving and social isolation, than urban youth (as shown below).

This study explores the ways in which policy and practice (within community-based (arts/sport) programs) reinforce and resist the processes of governance within a neoliberal welfare state<sup>6</sup> by attributing the ‘at-risk’ label to marginalised and disadvantaged youth.

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<sup>6</sup> Neoliberalism is understood in this context as a complex and nebulous form of politics and set of ideas that involves: 1) the rule of the market – “the idea that the market should be allowed to make major social and political decisions” (George, 1999, para. 2); 2) cutting public expenditure for social services – where “citizens are given much less rather than more social protection”(para. 2) ; 3) privatisation – “the idea that the State should voluntarily reduce its role in the economy, or that corporations should be given total freedom and that trade unions should be curbed”(para.2); and 4) moving from a position of ‘the public good’ or ‘community’ to individual responsibility. Grey (2010, para. 5) asserts “A neoliberal state can include a

It does so through a qualitative combinative ethnographic (Baszanger & Dodier, 1994) exploration of how youth are constructed by educational, social and community program funding policies that provide communities with funding and strategies to get ‘at-risk’ youth *back on track*, and by the practices and perceptions of the youth workers within the programs. As understanding young people’s issues through discourses of risk has implications for the ways young people under the ‘at-risk’ label are governed, it is important to understand how (and if) community-based programs and their staff construct *youth* under the auspices of ‘risk’. Furthermore, it is important to understand how these processes impact on the young people labelled ‘at-risk’ and (engaging in community-based (arts/sport) programs) how they construct and negotiate identities within risk discourses, to better understand the mismatches between policy/practice and the young peoples’ needs. As such, this inquiry aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do educational, social and community program funding policies constitute certain groups of young people, through neoliberal rationalities, as ‘at-risk’ subjects?
2. How do the programs, practices and perceptions of youth workers contribute to and/or resist these neoliberal processes?
3. How do young people construct and negotiate possible selves within the programs and through discourses of risk?
4. What are the constraining and enabling effects for young people labelled ‘at-risk’ within this program and discursive context?

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welfare state, but only of the most limited kind”. For the purpose of this study my focus on neoliberalism relates to how it affects state governance models of youth and community-based programs aimed at youth.

These questions are addressed using a theoretical framework that adopts a combined approach which includes:

Michel Foucault's (1997, 1983, 1990) notions of governmentality and technologies of the self/control, where power is understood as being disseminated in many various localised sites and power relations, such as within community-based youth programs (youth workers/practices), schools and the negotiation of self by the young people considered 'at-risk';

Judith Butler's (1993, 2004, 2006) notion of performativity, where the subject is understood as intelligible through discursive (everyday) practices; and

Stephen Lyng's (2005) theory of edgework, where voluntary risk-taking is understood in terms of the seductive, sensual side of taking risks, that requires one to work the edge/push boundaries (of sanity/insanity, consciousness/unconsciousness and life/death) by utilising finely honed skills to enter chaotic spaces (but remain in control) in an attempt to escape the constraining and regulating processes of governing bodies.

By taking up these approaches, this study understands that power, and the ways in which young people labelled 'at-risk' are governed, are linked discursively. This framework provides opportunities to explore the ways certain policies inform and shape youth workers' practices and influence the construction of youth 'at-risk' within community-based (arts/sports) programs (for youth workers and young people alike). It provides space to examine the ways these programs and their staff may unintentionally reinforce neoliberal regimes of governing groups of youth through the discourses of risk, despite the youth workers' good intentions and their advocacy against the use of 'risky' labels. Moreover, it provides opportunities to explore the constraining and enabling effects of the 'at-risk' label for young people within the programs.

## **Note to the Reader: Youth and 'Risky', Sticky Labels**

This thesis comes to fruition in a time where the idea of youth is dominantly viewed as a categorical 'work in process' and often the words 'risk', 'troubled', 'out-of-control', 'danger to society' and 'deviant' are thrown about in public, professional, political and

academic conversations (Kelly, P., 2000a; Sharland, 2006; Wyn, 2007). Fuelled by popular media and political concern, a prevailing way of thinking about youth is under the construct of being ‘at-risk’. This is a large group (you only need to be young and ‘at-risk’ of deviating from the norm to be in it). A group in need of intervention to help guide them into eventually becoming ‘worthwhile citizens (the norm)’ that contribute ‘meaningfully’ to the community - often by keeping them engaged in full-time study or work (Kelly, P., 1999; te Riele, 2004).

Many of Australia’s young people are finding the transition from school to continued study or work particularly difficult – and this is not just a recent phenomenon. The seventh annual Australian report by Dusseldorp Skills Forum (DSF)/Monash University - *How Young People are Faring 2005*- stated that ‘[t]hree out of every 10 young Australians has a precarious or negligible attachment to work one year after leaving school’ (Long, M., 2005, p. 54). It noted that the retention rate at secondary school was waning, and society was increasingly considering young people to be ‘at-risk’ of failing in educational pathways. The subsequent 2008 Report (*How Young People are Faring*) with DSF/Melbourne University, showed that although there was a downward trend in early school leavers (particularly females) who were not participating in either full-time work or study (26.5%), 13% of teenagers were still not in full-time study or work (Lamb & Mason, 2008). Furthermore, the 2011 Report (*How Young People are Faring*) showed that 16% of teenagers were not in full-time study or work and 32.7 % of school leavers did not engage in full-time work or education – which is “as high as in the recession of the early 1990s” (Robinson, Long, & Lamb, 2011, p. 11). The most current Report at the time of the study (*How Young People are Faring: The National Report on the Learning and Earning of Young Australians 2012*) indicates that approximately 15% of teenagers are not in full-time education or work, which is a slight decrease from the previous year (Robinson & Lamb, 2012, p. 10). Nonetheless, “Australia is below many other OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development] countries in terms of levels of participation in education, suggesting there is room for improvement” (Lamb & Mason,

2008, p. 3), with early school leavers in rural and remote areas facing higher rates of disengagement from study and the workforce:

Students living outside metropolitan areas are less likely to finish school, with 76.4% attaining Year 12 compared with 85% of metropolitan dwellers. The difference in Year 12 attainment according to home location was larger for males (70.4% compared with 83%) than for females (82.4% compared with 87.2%). (Robinson & Lamb, 2012, p. 11)

The most significant age group that the 2012 Report highlights as being at a higher level of risk was the 20-24 year olds<sup>7</sup>. The 2012 Report stresses the need for policy makers to address the transition issues of young people who are not engaged in education, employment or training pathways. Recent Australian policy change, such as increasing the legal school leaving age to seventeen<sup>8</sup>, has apparently focused on addressing the needs of ‘at-risk’ youth. Similarly, the push for vocational pathways for those young people not ‘fitting in’ to school environments is part of current policy development in Australia (te Riele, 2012; Youth Pathways Action Plan, 2001).

The above mentioned 2012 Report claims that research highlights “the risk of unemployment and other forms of exclusion for young people with insufficient education” (Lamb & Mason, 2008, p. 3), and recent school research shows that education can in some cases contribute to some young people’s experience of social exclusion. For example, Deborah Youdell (2003, 2006a, 2006b) takes a critical stance in contrast to the above statistical studies and questions the ‘at-risk’ label and its use. In her work on subjectivation and marginalised youth in the context of education, Youdell provides a lens through which to view the ways young people are positioned as impossible/possible learners (bad/good students). In this context, young people ‘at-risk’ “render themselves

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<sup>7</sup> The broad range of age groups within the definition of risk, and comments such as this, suggest there are varying levels of risk. While the Report’s suggestion of addressing transition issues attached to 20-24 year old group stretches the transition problems of youth from early school leavers to young adults. Interestingly, the young people who the youth workers (in my study) considered most ‘at-risk’ were 13-15 year olds. This adds again to the confusion of who is ‘at-risk’ and of what.

<sup>8</sup> This point is expanded on in the following policy and risk discussions in Chapter 3.

through the possibilities for practices of self, or discursive agency, that subjectivation brings” (Youdell, 2006, p. 4) because they are agents who act with intent to produce certain results. Although the ‘intent’ to act (as an agentic effect) is entwined within the (risk) discourse which produced/s it (Butler, 2004), “it is through the subject’s discursive agency, that the possibility of doing things differently, of acting purposefully to subvert established practices...is made possible” (Taylor, 2011, p. 3)<sup>9</sup>. Some researchers, such as Maguire, argue that there is no choice in identity construction for those students in danger of being excluded from schooling, as inter-sectionality of class, race and gender restrict the identities they may construct (2007, p. 31). Youdell (2006a), however, argues against this line of thought, suggesting schools can be implicated in the kinds of labelling practices that shape possibilities in the lives of young people. These labels can remain strong identity markers as a young person chooses or feels pushed to resist or move away from educational institutions. For those young people who are ‘at-risk’ of leaving school early (or have already left), often community-based programs are positioned as avenues for them to reconnect with social and educational networks<sup>10</sup> (Hughes & Wilson, 2003; Marsden & Thiele, 2000; Mills & Brown, 2004; O'Brien & Donelan, 2007). Yet the label of being ‘at-risk’ is one that may continue to stick to them regardless of changes in context, and can have constraining and enabling effects for young people within different contexts, such as school, work, peer and community-based contexts. This contradiction sits at the heart of my inquiry.

## **Significance of the Study**

This qualitative study considers the ways in which policy, the individual practices/perceptions of youth workers and the practices of community-based (arts/sports) programs shape the social experiences and subjective processes of young people considered to be ‘at-risk’. At the time of my data collection, the *NSW Youth Action Plan* (2006-2010) was in force, which focused on assisting Australian youth in reaching ‘their

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<sup>9</sup> Butler’s theories are further discussed in the theoretical section of Chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> The nuances of a number of community-based (arts/sports) programs are discussed in Chapter 3.

potential<sup>11</sup>, as citizens; with emphasis on certain areas including a sense of belonging to the community and learning and earning (Youth NSW, 2009). Often community-based programs, in general, are an access point for young people considered ‘at-risk’ of disengagement and of social exclusion, to build skills to help them re-engage in learning and/or the workforce (Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Hogan, 2005; Milner, 2002; O'Brien et al., 2005; Welch & Greene, 1995). However, the uncritical take-up and examination of such programs is problematic, so my research attempts to raise critical questions about the assumptions embedded in such programs. What if these programs actually work to reinforce, maintain or celebrate ‘at-risk’ behaviours among young people and then ultimately make participants feel even further removed from the educational system or workforce?

While there is a great deal of research which attempts to evaluate community-based arts programs for ‘at-risk’ young people, less attention is being paid to the perceptions and experiences of the young people in these programs. That is, most research simply asks young people to comment on what they did and did not like about the program or what they gained from it (Australia Council for the Arts, 2006; Brice Heath & Soep, 1998; Brice Heath & Wolf, 2004; Hogan, 2005; Mills & Brown, 2004) while other research assesses the outcomes of programs by following the life trajectories of the young people after they leave the program (Williams, 1995). Others, like Miller and Rowes (2009) in their article, *Cracking the Black Box: What Makes an Arts Intervention Program Work?*, review research evaluations and attempt to provide depth by examining more rigorously the components of the programs. However, they did so through using existing literature and not a hands on approach – which also has limitations in what can be examined, such as not being able to talk to, observe and interact with the young people involved in the programs. My research takes an ethnographic approach to ‘get close’ to the lives of the young people I am studying.

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<sup>11</sup> The notion of reaching some sort of potential, is a term that is problematised in the results chapters as it begs the question as to who decides the young person’s potential and in what way it is this potential framed, i.e. as the good subject of social (schooling) policy.

In regard to a sports approach, some international research is focused on reviewing community-based sports programs, which advocates sport as a way to address social inclusion (European Commission, 2007; International Olympic Committee, 2000) and antisocial behaviour (Morris, Sallybanks, Willis & Makkai, 2003). At the same time however, there is emerging literature which contends there is a lack of robust research (on community-based sports programs) clarifying why it is assumed sports programs can influence and impact upon the lives of young people considered ‘at-risk’ and address issues of social exclusion and/or antisocial behaviour (such as Kelly, L., 2011; Morris et al., 2003). My research addresses this gap by questioning this assumption and highlighting how the use of sport can (perhaps unintentionally) position sporting ‘fame’ (e.g., boys becoming a famous footy player) as a ‘way out’ for these young people, rather than educational success. It also raises the question of how sports (and arts) can be seen as just another form of regulation, particularly for boys.

As valuable as this collective body of research from both art and sport program reviews is, it does not tell much about *how* outcomes were or were not achieved and what was occurring within the groups as they work through the programs to produce the funding body’s desired outcomes. Moreover, as Colthard (1996) contends, outcomes in arts/sports based programs are mainly based on how well they moderate delinquent (‘risky’) behaviour. Framing ‘success’ in such a limiting way is problematic because it assumes there is an agreed understanding of what behaviours are deemed ‘risky’ and ‘non-risky’. Also, it does not reflect on how the policies, that inform and shape program outcomes (in conjunction with the youth workers’ perceptions), impact on the constitution of certain groups of young people engaging in these programs, and how these young people negotiate the construction of ‘risky’ identities.

Therefore, my study attempts to bring together policy, youth workers’ perceptions and practices within community-based (arts/sports) programs and the perceptions of young

people considered ‘at-risk’, to better understand the processes of subjectification occurring within the programs. What I found was that these processes play a role in the ways youth who are considered ‘risky’ negotiate, resist, reinforce and twist the ‘at-risk’ label. My research offers a discussion of rich ethnographic descriptions of two unfolding community-based (arts/sports) programs by examining processes and participant experiences rather than trying to measure outcomes or follow life trajectories. It also provides an analysis of interviews with youth workers across seven programs (including the two observed) about their understandings of and resistance to the ‘at-risk’ label and how they engage young people considered ‘at-risk’. It follows Amelia Curran’s (2010) research into the ways youth workers and community-based programs shape constructions of ‘at-risk’ youth, and builds on her findings by including the viewpoints of the young people engaged in the programs.

It also builds on Conrad’s (2004) theatre work with high school students considered ‘at-risk’ and the notion of voluntary ‘edgework’ (Lyng, 2005) by connecting this concept to governmentality and performativity. Similarly, it considers Linley Kelly’s (2011) work with young people and sports intervention programs, where she argues that although much research focuses on the community-based sport programs’ success in reaching outcomes, much of it disregards the fact that “sports-based interventions [may] risk legitimating a reductive analysis of these complex processes, highlighting individual deficits and de-emphasizing structural inequalities” (Kelly, L., 2011, p. 126). In other words, by targeting certain groups of ‘risky’ youth through sports intervention programs, there is a counter risk that the processes might encourage a shift in responsibility away from institutions, onto young people to regulate and manage their own ‘risky’ situations (an aspect my study examines). My study aims to generate insights into the ways in which the label ‘at-risk’ affects the young peoples’ lives and it seeks to build on and extend current literature that problematises the constant and unproblematised use of the label ‘at-risk’ (Foster & Spencer, 2011; France, 2007; Kelly, P., 2000a; te Riele, 2006). In particular, it exposes

and examines the enabling and constraining aspects/effects of living this 'risky' label and develops the notion of *Risk with a twist* to explain my key findings.

Therefore, as a result of my inquiring and analysis, I make four interrelated arguments in the chapters that follow. These are that:

- 1) Policy and youth workers' understandings of the 'at-risk' subject formed through pre-existing assumptions (i.e., 'expert' knowledge of youth) reinforces the notion that there is a youth problem that needs addressing, despite youth workers' attempts to resist the 'at-risk' label inscribed in policy;
- 2) The 'at-risk' label governs the subjects in the community-based (arts/sports) programs in specific ways, including self-governance where they are made responsible for, and managers of, their own 'risky' situations; and
- 3) Although some youth identities are ultimately bound within the 'at-risk' label produced by the program's aims and the positions taken up by the youth workers and the young people themselves, popular and peer culture (including that within the programs) produces an attraction to certain aspects of being a young person 'at-risk' (where it appears the more 'at-risk' you are the more likely you are to be 'famous'). In this context 'fame' (rather than educational success) is positioned as a 'way out' for marginalised or disadvantaged youth. Such 'fame' provides temporary enabling aspects and affordances for young people to 'twist' the 'at-risk' discourse and feel empowered.
- 4) The notion of *Risk with a twist* explains the simultaneous enabling and constraining processes and possible effects of young people 'living the ('at-risk') label'. The enabling aspects include: 1) generating culture - the young people's retelling of 'risky' edgework experiences, such as engaging in criminal acts and self-harm, brings kudos among the peer group in the sense of status (being the *top dog*), admiration, fame and glory (from their 'not-so-risky' and 'risky' peers alike)

and a feeling of pleasure; 2) legitimating themselves within in the culture - being 'risky' (e.g., by misbehaving at, or not attending, school) enables the young people to be selected in the (arts/sports) program; 3) defining themselves within the culture - some of the youth workers making certain young people feel special because of their 'at risk' status; 4) and establishing themselves within the culture - the young people getting out of school – a context where these young people feel they are treated unfairly by teachers and made to feel like 'losers'.

These enabling aspects of 'living the label' are temporary in that 'youthhood' is a phase of one's life and being 'at-risk' of failing school only makes sense in relation to child/youth subjectivities. Further, once these young people step outside of their peer (and arts/sports program) group, their power or 'fame' is ultimately lost because while they can resist the institutional norms of the program to varying degrees, the school or society, these young people cannot function 'successfully' within them. This means that the constraining aspects of 'living the label' include: 1) the narrow or culturally impoverished sense of what is deemed important to the young people denied power and failed by the educational system; and 2) the difficulty of escaping the label, once it is applied by self and others. By young people engaging in forms edgework, this risk-taking is viewed by societal and governmental systems as validation that these youth need to be regulated and encouraged to be self-regulators of their 'risky' situations and behaviours/dispositions. In a sense, as young people try to *escape* the constraints of normative society by engaging in the sensual side of 'delinquency' – where the buzz or high, and the illusion of control which accompanies edgework becomes a strong incentive (Miller, 2005) - these youth further reinforce and validate these behaviours as identity markers that constitute them as 'at-risk'. Therefore, this thesis shows how youth work, program designs and associated educational and social policies can contribute to the neoliberal processes of governing young people and particularly the neoliberal push for young people to engage in self-surveillance.

These findings support Wyn's (2007) argument focused on the need to 'rethink' how we come to know young people by drawing attention to how, for some young people, living the designated 'at-risk' label can be constraining yet simultaneously enabling within the bounds of community-based (arts/sports) programs. By bringing these dimensions of *Risk with a twist* to the fore, this thesis provides an understanding of how young people considered 'at-risk' attempt to negotiate, resist, take up and *twist* the label - which in turn offers possibilities for alternative understandings to classic and stereotypical notions of young 'risky' people. That is, my research calls attention to the need for policy-makers, educational institutions, social systems, youth workers, police officers, teachers, parents and young people themselves to recognise and accept multiple ways of knowing youth and/or being young – to open discursive and subjective possibilities rather than close them down.

## **Thesis Outline**

The current chapter has introduced the motivation behind my interest in researching young people involved in community-based programs targeting youth at-risk, outlined the study's context, established the research questions, and highlighted the study's significance and key arguments. The next chapter frames the notion of risk and its historical use throughout educational and social policy (internationally and nationally). I review the use of the term 'at-risk' throughout policies and programs to show how it is framed as being self-evident. I show (as te Riele, 2006 emphasises) that just by including the term 'at-risk' within policy (headings) it is assumed the reader will draw on a particular set of 'risky' discourses to come to know certain groups of young people. I examine and review research involving the impacts of neoliberalism on the construction of self, and the processes of governing youth under the discourses of risk, which constitute youth as 'at-risk' in certain ways.

Chapter 3 reviews current conceptual debates around ‘youthhood’ and predominant theories of understanding youth in contemporary scholarship. This chapter also examines particular aspects of youth in relation to identity work and in reference to the demographic markers of the participants in my study – rurality, Indigeneity, education, popular culture, risk-taking, crime, and gender. As this study is concerned with constructions of self, principally the taking up of and/or resistance to ‘at-risk’ positions, post-structural theorists Foucault and Butler are drawn on to understand the constructions of self within discourses of risk. Here, also, the notion of *Risk with a twist* is further explained as I draw on literature pertaining to voluntary risk-taking and popular culture glorifying risk-taking, to provide a framework for interpreting the enabling effects of the ‘at-risk’ label.

Chapter 4 presents a discussion of my theoretical framework and methodology. In it I elaborate more fully on the post-structural framework used for this study, and further discuss the theories of technology of self/control (power, agency, positioning and boundaries), governmentality (the production of the [neoliberal] entrepreneurial self) and performativity (citational processes and discursive practices). It also argues for, and describes, the combinative ethnographic methods adopted in this research, and discusses the two Phases in which the study was conducted:

Phase 1 - Interviews with 11 adult youth workers across seven community-based programs/organisations. These explored youth workers’ views of the interface between policy, schooling and community contexts, their strategies for achieving successful service provision for the young people with whom they work (including how they define ‘success’), and how they construct young people to be ‘at-risk’ and,

Phase 2 - Participant observations of, and informal interviews with, young people engaged in two of the seven community-based (arts/sports) programs over a period of 2 – 3 months. This phase sought to explore the ways in which young people considered ‘at-risk’ make use of these programs, and how they take up, resist and/or are constituted as ‘at-risk’ subjects. Follow-up questions for youth workers were also asked. The focus of analysis

in this phase was on the young people's lived experiences and their interactions with the program, the youth workers, each other and myself, while the interview data from youth workers across the programs was used to support or contrast findings and themes that emerged from Phase 2.

The findings are presented and discussed across the following three chapters. Chapter 5 addresses research question 1 (see page 7), and examines how educational, social and community program funding policies constitute certain groups of young people as 'at-risk' subjects. In this chapter I examine and contextualise the educational and social policies that informed and shaped the designs of the two observed community-based (arts/sport) programs, and the suggested practices of youth workers within them. I discuss the ways the policy and program guidelines can constitute 'at-risk' subjects in certain (often deficit) ways. This chapter also examines the ways in which policy and practice align or are mismatched, providing insight into how (neoliberal) policy at a macro level can utilise these types of programs as a tool of governance to encourage practices of self-regulation/the entrepreneurial self. Through this examination of policy/guidelines, I begin to build my first argument that policies are based on understandings of the 'at-risk' subject, which reinforces the *truth* of a moral panic related to the notion that there is a youth problem that needs constant attention. This is an important step in moving towards an understanding of how the 'at-risk' label may play out in the lives of the young people within the community-based (arts/sports) programs.

Chapter 6 addresses research question 2 and examines how the community-based (arts/sports) programs, and the practices and perceptions of youth workers, contribute to and/or resist these (neoliberal) governing processes. It also describes their interpretation of successful programs in regard to what works with youth considered 'at-risk' and how this relates to perceived needs of youth 'at-risk'. It builds on the previous chapter's argument that the policy and guidelines make young people responsible and regulators of their 'risky' behaviours, by emphasising how, at a micro level, youth workers' practices

and perceptions can encourage the young people within the programs to engage in self-monitoring/regulating practices. I further argue here that youth workers' understandings of the 'at-risk' subject through their pre-existing (expert) knowledge of youth further reinforce the notion that there is a 'Youth Crisis', and validate the viewpoint that problems of youth 'at-risk' require individual management instead of social policy management.

In addition, Chapter 6 particularly explores the youth workers' understandings of the label 'at-risk', and how this shapes their practices within the programs. It teases out gender disparities in youth workers' practical expression of approaches, and explores how their perceptions of boys being 'troublesome' and girls being 'troubled'. It reveals their perceptions on how educational institutions constitute 'at-risk' (deficit) subjects, and their beliefs about the benefits of community-based (arts/sports) programs for youth 'at-risk'. Moreover, it looks at how youth workers' practices subtly, and sometimes directly, contribute to the processes that constitute certain groups of youth 'at-risk'. In this chapter, I therefore raise and discuss questions related to whether youth workers in some programs might be creating the very conditions for the young people to be more rebellious/'risky'?; whether these practices open (ungovernable<sup>12</sup>) (Kelly, P., 2000) discursive spaces for the temporary empowering of young people; and whether arts and sports function as another form of regulation where young people are encouraged to take responsibility and manage their own 'risky' situations?

In Chapter 7 I address research questions 3 and 4 and provide further evidence to support the notion of *Risk with a twist*. This chapter examines how young people construct and negotiate possible selves within the community-based (arts/sports) programs, and the constraining and enabling effects for young people labelled 'at-risk' within these contexts.

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<sup>12</sup> I appropriate Peter Kelly's (2000, p. 472) use of the term "ungovernable" in relation to being a signifier of youth, who have historically been viewed as "occupying, certain "wild zones" in the collective imagination of modernity". The wild zones I refer to in this thesis (although perhaps in line with Kelly's usage) become spaces where edgework/risk-taking is rewarded and produces intelligible 'risky' identities.

I argue that many of the young people do not identify with the term 'at-risk' despite the two observed programs actually being called 'Youth At-Risk'. Instead, the young people describe themselves as being 'troublemakers' or 'getting into trouble' (e.g., at school or from the police). I build here on the arguments developed in Chapters 5 and 6 by considering the ways the young people have taken up, or are forced to take up, regulating or entrepreneurial selves to manage their own 'risky' situations, and examine how some young people viewed 'fame' as their 'ticket out' of marginalisation/disadvantage, rather than a more conventional academic or vocational route. I argue that popular culture, particularly within the context of the program, has produced an attraction to certain aspects of being 'at-risk', and demonstrate how engagement in voluntary risk-taking by the young people can be understood through the theory of edgework (Lyng, 2005). Moreover, in this chapter I argue that although the aims of youth workers and the community-based (arts/sports) programs entailed providing spaces and activities for the young people to engage in the construction and negotiation of possible alternative (positive) identities, this identity management occurs and is bound within the 'at-risk' label, and the positions taken up within discourses of risk by the youth workers and the young people themselves.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I summarise the key findings from this study, provide implications for policy and consider areas of further research. Fundamentally, this study is focused on the young peoples' point of views around the community-based (arts/sports) programs and their own place in the world. It explores how policy and programs (and the practices and perceptions of youth workers) play a role in the ways these young people see themselves living with the 'risky' label in the context of the programs, while attempting to understand how they twist and flip the label to assert identities that offer possible (powerful) alternatives to the classic or stereotypical 'at-risk' label. At the same time, this thesis highlights the culturally impoverished/temporary/narrow sense of what young people who are failed by the schooling system deem to be important to self, which

raises critical questions about what needs to be done to address ‘the system’ (not only the individual).



## Chapter Two: *Regulating Risk*

## The Question of Youth?

The question of youth, of what to do with them, of how to school them, or police them, or regulate them, or house them, or employ them, or prevent them from becoming involved in any number of risky (sexual, eating, drug (ab)using or peer cultural) practices are questions which have a substantial historical aspect. (Kelly, 2000, p. 463)

In researching ‘youth’ and discourses of risk, it is important to understand the ways in which young people are, and have been understood, within discourses of risk. The question of youth, as Kelly (2000, p. 463) emphasises, is not a new way of thinking about young people. Socially constructed identity markers may have changed as youth move from the labels ‘folk devils’ (Cohen, 1972), larrikins, delinquents and deviants (fainting at the gyrating hips of Elvis Presley), ‘victims of globalisation’ in the 1970s and members of a juvenile underclass (Bessant, 2002b), to the troubled and disadvantaged, marginalised youth ‘at-risk’ residing in the ‘wild zones’ (Kelly, P., 1999), marked by criminal and gang-related activities, drug abuse, and unemployment (moshing at ‘gangsta’ rapper concerts and ‘sexting classmates’). Yet the question has remained the same; what do we do about young people? – as if there is something fundamentally wrong with young people that warrants adult intervention. Kelly argues that “the crisis of youth-at-risk [has become] a key marker in debates about youth among intellectuals, social commentators, politicians, bureaucrats and experts in various domains of expertise” (2000, p. 463). This chapter considers the ways in which education and social policy (driven by popular media, moral panics and academia in various forms) problematises the category of ‘youth’ within the constructs and discourses of risk, to address the *question of youth*. Moreover, in order for this study to explore the ways policy and discursive practices play a role in shaping identity/subjectivities of young people considered ‘at-risk’ - within community-based (arts/sport) programs - this chapter foregrounds political underpinnings of the ‘at-risk’ label, and its historical and present day use. It highlights the theoretical framework used in this study (which is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4), and elaborates on the

notion of *Risk with a twist* – a notion that has many dimensions and is weaved throughout the entire thesis.

Traditionally, the period of time between childhood and adulthood has been flagged developmentally and socially in most arenas in western society as a tumultuous journey. Young people have travelled hand in hand with adult anxieties about them over the centuries, constantly being reformulated and analysed within ‘scientific and professional discourses [in regard to young] bodies, [young] minds and [their] relationships to each other and society’ (Rob Watts (1993-94) as cited in Kelly, P., 2003, p. 166). In relation to youth, “risk-based research is part of a long history of popular and scholarly concern about social and historical decline” (Bessant, 2001, p. 34). Bessant provides an example of this, highlighting how Pearson (1983) describes the ways in which different generations perceive they are “uniquely threatened by the signs and symptoms of decay and degeneration often signified by concerns about lawbreakers, vagrancy and the threat of hooligans” (2001, p. 34). Notions of ‘youthhood’, and “what it means to be young in contemporary times is hotly contested, with questions of agency and structure, individualisation, risk and regulation brought to the fore” (Sharland, 2006, para. 18) – questions that are pivotal to my research in understanding the ways the young people live the ‘at-risk’ label in the observed community-based (arts/sports) programs.

### **‘At-risk’ and...?**

‘Youth’ and ‘at-risk’ have become synonymous terms in educational and social research, and the focus of a wide range of discourses. Often these are competing discourses where young people are simultaneously perceived as a treasured resource [youth as our future] (Stephens, 2010) and as “endangered and dangerous...at risk from others, to themselves, and to the fabric of communities” (Sharland, 2006, para. 1; Kelly, P., 2000b, 2003). These ‘risky’ youth need to be protected, monitored, contained and sustained to become responsible adults. Those youth who stray from the *preferred path* (Kelly, 2000b) to

adulthood are constituted as ‘at-risk’<sup>13</sup>. Becker’s (1963) work on labelling theory focused on the “tendency of the majority to negatively label minorities as deviant from standard cultural norms” (Neary, Egan, Keenan, Lawson, & Bond, 2013, p. 120). In an Australian context we see this tendency in regard to Indigenous youth, rural youth, and youth from some non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) (such as young Sudanese refugees). This thesis is predominantly concerned with the terminology ‘youth at-risk’ and the ways representations of “crime, education, family, the media, popular culture, (un)employment, transitions...and risk intersect” (Kelly, P., 2003, p. 167) and impact on youth workers’ understandings of youth and the way they interact/work/provide services for young people considered ‘at-risk’ in their professional capacity. This thesis is particularly concerned with these intersections as “these understandings have real consequences in the lives of young people” (Kelly, 2003, p. 167). Bessant suggests that:

the discovery and the promotion of the ‘at risk’ category...[may have] supplanted older categories such as ‘delinquency’ and ‘maladjustment’ that were foundational to the sociology of deviance, [however] methodologies, epistemological assumptions and politics of governance inherent...remain the same...[identifying those who are and are not ‘at-risk’]...with one new and distinctive feature...the youth at risk categories are different from older categories in terms of their capacity to incorporate the entire population of young people. (2001, p. 32)

If we consider Bessant’s comment above, we can see on one hand, that there are certain populations of young people who are made knowable through the ‘at-risk’ category, while on the other hand the ‘at-risk’ category opens spaces for all youth to be ‘at-risk’ by the very nature of being *youthful* (Tidwell & Garrett, 1994). This raises the question, is it thus discursively the norm to be ‘risky’ and ‘youthful’, or are there varying degrees of risk? (I address this question across the three results chapters). Using the term ‘at-risk’ broadly,

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<sup>13</sup> I tread warily with this term ‘at-risk’, as many young people society places in this category (whom I have worked with) do not regard themselves as being ‘at-risk’, often being offended by such stereotyping. The notion of this term having constraining/regulating effects is also considered. I acknowledge and concur with te Riele’s (2006) suggestion of taking up a ‘new vocabulary’ (Comber, 1998, pp. 7, 17) and considering the use of ‘marginalised’ in place of ‘at-risk’, however as my study focuses on the actual term ‘at-risk’ and its usage, impacts and influences, it necessitates the use of the term, albeit within ‘quotation marks’ throughout my thesis.

creates confusion in constructing understandings of who is ‘at-risk’, what they are ‘at-risk’ of, and what should be done to intervene (i.e., who gets to intervene and how?). For, as the media, academia and policies stress, *surely* intervention is a necessity in the ‘risky’ process of a young person becoming a ‘productive’ adult. This need for governmental intervention for ‘at-risk’ youth is of particular interest to my study. As such, I follow the lead of Peter Kelly’s (1998) thesis, which (among broader aspects) explored the notion of youth ‘at-risk’ discourses, and considered the intersection of governmentality and the production of expert knowledge in the construction of the *truths* of youth (at risk).

Peter Kelly proposes that the idea of young people ‘becoming’ is informed by “discourses of Risk which mobilises a form of probabilistic thinking about *preferred* or *ideal* adult lives” (1998, p. 33), and the ways we come to know young people ‘at-risk’. Within this way of knowing youth emerges the notion of one linear pathway for the successful transition from unruly youthhood to an ideal adulthood. This notion of young ‘risky people’ ‘falling off the track’ - off the successful pathway to a preferred adulthood - is problematised throughout my thesis. Kelly reminds us, though, that “mobilising discourses of risk in the attempted ‘making up’ of certain types of (young) [people] can [also] bring into being *positive, progressive* potentialities” (1998, p. 17 original emphasis). It is within this line of thinking that the idea of *Risk with a twist* comes into play, as this study is interested in the enabling aspects and affordances (be they temporary or not) of being constituted as ‘at-risk’. I use *Risk with a twist* to describe (among other aspects/dimensions) a strong theme that emerged from the data on the young people, where the lure of ‘riskiness’ becomes particularly appealing when ‘fitting in’ to and/or exerting power over peer groups, or as a ‘way out’ of a life of hardship. In this sense, being labelled ‘at-risk’ opens up acceptable spaces to engage in risk-taking to produce a particular positive (yet, temporary) effect for the young person. This temporary enabling aspect of being labelled ‘at-risk’ is a novel finding emerging from this study that has not been discussed in past research specifically on community-based (arts/sports) programs in Australia.

The category of youth 'at-risk' is situated within a range of discourses across political, professional, and academic arenas, with Beck's (1992, 1998) notion of a 'risk society' being a tool often used when researching young people, risk and identity construction. While I consider Beck's contention that a 'risk society' signifies the overturning of traditional norms and values (Giddens, 1999) with a shift to individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernshiem, 2002) - where young people become accountable for their life decisions - my theoretical base gravitates towards Foucault's understanding of subjectivities and technologies of the self. Numerous debates (supporting and critiquing) circulate around Beck's work in regard to various areas including 'youth' (see current examples such as Farrugia, 2013; Roberts, 2010, 2012; Threadgold, 2011; Woodman, 2009, 2010), and his theories have been widely used in research on youth and risk. I take on board Giddens' (1991) notion that within discourses of risk young people are seen as engaging in Do It Yourself [DIY] identities. Yet I move away from the idea that this is a requirement, where they must produce choice biographies that "do not occur by chance or individually, nor voluntarily, nor through diverse types of historical conditions" (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994, p. 13).

Instead I take the viewpoints of Foucault and Butler in understanding the youthful self as being encouraged (through individualist approaches and notions of standardisation within neoliberal agendas concerning 'risky' youth) - to be responsible for, and managers of, their own 'risky' situations – situations that *are* affected by historical conditions and aspects of class, ethnicity, gender and socioeconomics. Furthermore, Giddens' notion of young people having 'choice biographies' (Rose, 1990) "ignores constraints on the choices available to young people" (te Riele, 2004, p. 246), and defines young peoples' 'problems' in such a way that it disregards the possibility that these 'problems' might be relational – "that is to say, how problems are defined and how they are experienced by the [young] people concerned, might be a powerful way of pointing to different and more effective approaches" (Smyth & McInerney, 2012, p. 191). Therefore, I adopt

Foucauldian and Butler's theories for this study, as they provide a lens to scrutinise constructions of risk and acknowledge the preoccupation with risk of today's society. For the context of this study a Foucauldian approach also provides opportunities to unpack the notion of *Risk with a twist* through a discussion of the enabling, as well as constraining, aspects of being labelled 'youth at-risk'. I discuss Foucault's and Butler's theories on the 'self' in Chapters 3 and 4 to further explain and justify why these approaches were adopted and why I combined these theories with Lyng's (2005) theory on edgework to interpret the lure of 'riskiness' that became apparent in the analysis of data on the young people in this study.

The young people who participated in this research have all been labelled by educators and policy makers as being 'at-risk' of leaving school early, of becoming disengaged from the work force, and of being socially excluded. In some cases they are seen as vulnerable to engaging in criminal activity. For the purposes of this study, the term 'at-risk' is not used to describe the young people, rather it is used in a context where I critique the continuous use of the label 'at-risk' and its effects. I critique the ways in which it comes to define young people's lived experiences, the way it regulates and governs, plus how it might offer some agency in the assertion of self-identity. Furthermore, I question and examine what roles policy and practice play in constituting the subject as 'at-risk'.

## **Policy and Risk**

The focus on youth policy is important insofar as government policies in a broad range of areas directly impact upon the life chances and immediate social situation of young people. State intervention is a central factor in the lives of the young. It shapes fundamentally the processes and dynamics of 'growing up', whether this be for the better or the worse. (White & Wilson, 1991, p. 1)

The following passages begin to trace the historical and current use of the term ‘at-risk’ throughout educational and social policy internationally (in this section) and nationally (in the following section). This activity in itself requires a dissertation of its own. Nonetheless, within the limitations of this study’s focus and context, I discuss the ways in which policy shapes, and has shaped, certain groups of young people in particular ways. I review David Zyngier’s (2011) work on categorising ‘at-risk’ literature in regard to educational policy, into three standpoints: Instrumentalist; Individualist; and Critical Transformative. This section also considers the impacts of neoliberalism on youth policy and education. This discussion is necessary as it provides a broader context in which to analyse and interpret policies and practices informing the two observed community-based (arts/sport) programs.

### *Youth Policy*

Policies shape the way youth is constructed as a social category (Cohen, 1997; Cohen & Ainley, 2000; Irving, 2005). An example of this shaping can be seen in Cohen and Young’s (1972, 1981) landmark studies that explored how British ‘mods’ and ‘rockers’ were constructed by media and policy makers as a threat to the social and moral order of society. Their work shows how groups of youth can be labelled as deviant and how ‘moral panics’ can possibly change “legal and social policy and even the way society conceives itself” (Cohen & Young, 1981, p. 1). Australia’s *Larrikins* (prior WWII), bodgies and widgies (1950’s) and ‘crazed teeny-boppers’ (McRobbie & Garber, 2005), were equivalent to Cohen’s (1972) ‘Folk Devils’ as being objects in media-orchestrated moral panics (Nilan, Julian, & Germov, 2007). White (2002) asserts that in today’s society, Australian media around youth and crime (for instance newspaper headlines such as: *Binge drinking: Now it's a teen epidemic* (Horin, 2002); *Crips and Blood* (Blair, 2013); *Sydney Youth Gangs, TEENAGERS aged 15 to 19 are Australia's most dangerous people* (news.com.au., 2013) has produced the notion of “some kind of youth crime wave” (White, 2002, p. 90) - a moral panic which is not supported by research or statistics (with

both the NSW Police Service Policy Statement (2005) and the ABS (2008) Report suggesting youth crime was decreasing).

The “generative role of language” in policy making shapes the way groups are represented and dealt with in social policy; such as youth being “troubled” and “at-risk” and “in need of intervention” (Bessant et al, 2006, p. 288). de Roeper and Savelsberg (2009) echo Cohen’s thoughts and challenge the ways in which policy around youth can create a binary divide based around flawed assumptions of what is best for youth ‘at-risk’. The term ‘binary divide’ is used in their work to describe how some policies encourage “leadership and creative endeavours for those students not considered at-risk, while other policies, focusing on [‘at-risk’ youth], take a remedial orientation” (p. 209) in which young people are identified as fitting ‘risk’ identity markers, are removed from mainstream schooling, and offered access or placed in programs, to correct their ‘risky’ behaviours. de Roeper and Savelsberg (2009) contend that this binary divide of policy approaches to young people reinforces notions of social difference, marginalisation and disadvantage, through policies discursively constituting certain groups of young people in certain ways. In the context of this study, I focus on young people aged 13-15 years old who are being constituted in ‘risky’ ways by being placed in community-based (arts/sports) programs that are targeting ‘at-risk’ youth.

A particularly direct example of the way policy and research in the United States of America constitutes the ‘at-risk’ subject and creates a binary divide is the *2013 National Youth Risk Behavior (Surveillance) Survey* (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013a). It is used in schools, and asks students to answer 92 multiple choice questions on their risky behaviours (including smoking, drinking, committing various crimes or being the victim of those crimes, nutrition and sexual experiences). The title of the document and the nature of the questions attribute certain negative behavioural aspects to groups of young people whose answers fall within higher levels of riskiness – constituting them as

groups that need intervention. The survey is used, among other things, to “measure progress towards achieving national health objectives for Healthy People 2020 and other program and policy indicators” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013b, para. 4). These results inform the ways policies are developed for certain groups of ‘risky’ youth. While such a direct survey is not yet in use in Australia, policy here still asserts groups of youth ‘at-risk’ are in need of intervention.

In my discussion below on Australian policy and risk, I provide a number of examples of how Australian policy engages in discursively constituting the ‘at-risk’ subject, and the tendency of policies around youth ‘at-risk’ to shift from assisting the individual, to becoming a way to meet targets. de Roeper and Savelsberg (2009) draw on White and Wyn’s (2008) work around youth and society to emphasise the ways these types of policies locate youth as ‘being a work in process’ – valued only as future adults. This approach labels youth as being either ‘on track’ or ‘at-risk’. This dual pathway (the binary divide) of policy – differentiates young people according to “perceived need” (de Roeper & Savelsberg, 2009, p. 211). Dywer and Wyn (2001) argue that Western youth are mostly defined in terms of their status as students by policy, where the historical question of ‘what do we do about young people?’ becomes the focus - particularly young people who resist educational norms or are ‘at-risk’ of leaving/being expelled from school early.

Research and policies sometimes approach the question of youth with differing agendas, practices, beliefs, interests, and assumptions about youth which can become particularly problematic (France, 2007). These approaches can shape the ‘youth question’, and ultimately impact upon how young people are constructed or constituted as ‘at-risk’ subjects, the opportunities available to them, and the ways they understand and experience ‘being young’. For example, Zyngier (2011, p. 1) analyses the vast amount of literature on ‘at-risk’ students and has identified three main standpoints in the literature which can intersect or dispute each other – standpoints that are taken up by educational policy and

practice. He describes the approaches as *instrumentalist* (rational technical), *social constructive* (individualist), and *critical transformative* (empowering). Zyngier argues that many policies and programs take an instrumentalist or social constructive approach and stresses (drawing on Rowe, 2003), that these approaches rarely “penetrate the classroom door” and focus on the individuals in a “blame the victim” stance (2011, p. 5). The instrumentalist approach views the students and their families in a deficit light [shifting the blame from institutions], highlighting their individual vulnerability. It recognises “problem behaviours as central to the at-risk issue, which necessitates intervention programs to modify the behaviour” (Zyngier, 2011, p. 5). This approach locates educational solutions within vocational goals, in an attempt to prepare these young people (who are ‘at-risk’ of failing school) for meaningful and productive employment. This approach also aligns with (neoliberal) governing processes that aim to regulate young people considered ‘at-risk’ to ensure they will not be an economic burden on society, but rather become productive citizens who will make a financial and social contribution to a neoliberal society.

The social constructivist view is “an individualist approach to dealing with student risk” where young people are singled out and removed from mainstream classes and placed into “preventative or ameliorative” (Zyngier, 2011, p. 5), programs. This approach commonly focuses on increasing educational attainment levels (disregarding class or social status), and creating more effective schools. Educational institutions are understood as being both part of the problem and of the solution, although it is noted by Budge (2000) and Zyngier (2011) that many attempts at solutions result in remedial classes instead of preventative ones – a situation that continues to disregard “the problem of risk itself” (Zyngier, 2011, p. 5). This point returns me to the question I raised above about whether community-based (arts/sports) programs for young people, like the ones in this study, are actually reinforcing the existing limitations and, in fact, further adding to the young peoples’ feeling of exclusion.

The critical transformative “view locates students’ disadvantages or risks in the conventional subject-matter and texts, the traditional teaching methods and assessment, which turn out to be the sources of systematic difficulty” (Zyngier, 2011, p. 9). This approach locates educational goals as social-democratic where importance is placed on young people developing “knowledge of their world and their ability to act within it” (Zyngier, 2011, p. 8). It understands all students as having the “capacity to engage willingly and actively in school” (p. 8) and that solutions lie in the ability of teachers to engage in a “paradigmatic shift in curriculum and pedagogy” (p. 8) to be able to understand the relevance of education to individuals from varying backgrounds, and to be more effective teachers. This third (social constructivist) approach is more difficult to achieve as it requires ‘proliferation of new practices of student support’ and a whole-school approach that needs to be “backed up and mandated by systemic guidelines, policies and appropriate resource allocations” (Strategic Partners, 2001, p. 12). The community-based (arts/sport) programs observed in this study tended to take an instrumentalist approach (despite a lot of the youth worker dialogue inferring to beliefs of the necessity of transformative approaches) – an approach that was informed and shaped by the youth workers’ cultural backgrounds, and educational and social youth ‘at-risk’ (neoliberal) policies. I will return to this finding in Chapter 6 when I discuss the youth worker data.

‘Being young’ in a neoliberal economy has been an area of concern that has troubled a number of critics and researchers particularly since the 1990’s (see Bessant, 2008a; Brown, Shoveller, Chabot, & LaMontagne, 2013; Kelly, L., 2011; Kelly, P., 2006, 2007; Smyth & McInerney, 2012; White & Wyn, 2008; Wyn, 2012). This concern has led to research enquiring how neoliberal policies, which inform the practices of people who work with youth, can intensify the ‘problems’ of young people and social exclusion (Barry, 2005). Under the neoliberal gaze, for instance, the concept of youth becomes known and understood through expert knowledges (Kelly, P., 2000a) “based on the calculating science of actuarialism and accountancy” (Peters, 2012, para. 13). Kelly

(2000a, p. 303) explores the notion of expert knowledges around youth and reminds us that:

Youth has historically occupied the ‘wild zones’ in modernity’s imagination. In these ‘zones’ certain groups of young people have been perceived as being ‘ungovernable’ and lacking in ‘self-regulation’. These representations of ‘deviancy’, ‘delinquency’ and ‘disadvantage’ have always been fundamentally shaped by race, class and gender and situated in relation to conceptions of ‘normal’ youth.

These representations of unruly youth residing in ‘wild zones’, married with discourses of risk and notions of uncertainty, have historically fuelled governing bodies to implement process and practices “aimed at regulating the identities of young people” (Kelly, P., 2000a, p. 303). Allen and Mendick contend that “the ability to overcome obstacles to ‘knowing oneself’ is central to the neoliberal project of self-actualisation...and that individuals are governed through such practices of self-making, compelled to engage in techniques of self-knowledge and self-examination to ‘realise’ their ‘true’ self” (2012, p. 461). Here, identity becomes a constant DIY construction where young people are considered managers of their ‘risky’ situations. In modern (neoliberal) contexts, media-staged moral panics, adult anxieties, and the attempt to regulate youthful identities, reinforce an uncertainty and fear about youth and their transition to a preferred adulthood. This uncertainty is a catalyst for the pursuit for certainty:

...in relation to; youthful behaviours and dispositions; young people’s motivations and desires; their *embodied, desiring, partial* and *provisional* subjectivities; and their *resiliency* emerge as the objects of institutionalized forms of expertise producing vast amounts of increasingly sophisticated ‘intellectually grounded knowledge’...about the past, present and future life worlds, life chances and life courses of populations of young people: expert knowledge which is produced and reflexively circulates, largely autonomously, structuring and restructuring, with foreseen and unforeseen consequences, a range of understandings about youth, and a range of governmental programs which are structured by these truths. (Kelly, P., 2000a, p. 303, original emphasis)

Kelly considers neoliberal governance, draws on Foucault’s theories on power and governmentality, and various research (such as Rose, 1990; Watts, 1993-94; White, 2008)

to problematise the pursuit of building expert knowledges about the *truths* of youth. He questions the dangerousness of this pursuit, as it progressively takes up approaches that include “sophisticated processes of surveillance, identification and intervention” which ultimately render certain populations of young people as knowable “only through these processes of representation” (2000a, p. 301) and through discourses of risk. My study is mindful of Kelly’s problematisation of “how we *do* youth studies” (2000a, p. 301) and of the necessity to “take seriously the proposition that the *governmentalization* of youthful desires, bodies, thoughts and actions which emerge as a result of the practice of youth studies may have profound, if unintended, consequences for the regulation of youth” (p. 312, original emphasis). As such, I do not specifically aim to build on expert knowledges at the risk of further rendering youthful identities as only knowable through ‘at-risk’ representations, but I seek to add to the dialogue about young people that problematises the constitution of youthful ‘at-risk’ subjects, and the ways community-based (arts/sports) programs can become part of the (neoliberal) governing processes to regulate ‘risky’ youthful identities (even when seeking to resist them) - and in turn draw on, and contribute to, the body of expert knowledges about the *truths* of youth.

Smyth argues that the taking up of neoliberalism by Australia and other western countries has been crippling for young people, resulting in educational policies aimed at providing outcomes that reflect “favourably upon educational systems, rather than improving young people’s lives” (2012, p. 180). Brown et al. maintain that current governance uses of the ‘at-risk’ label function as a tool to “reinforce a neoliberal agenda in relation to the health and well-being of young people” (2013, p. 333). Wyn emphasises that despite the current boost of intervention programs to assist young people with health issues (i.e. mental illness) “analysis of recent educational policies reveals that the goal of addressing young people’s wellbeing exists in a contradictory relationship with the (main) goal of education, which is to create a close fit between education and the needs of new and emerging economies” (2007, p. 37). It is within this contradictory relationship, between the possible/impossible learner and the acceptable/unacceptable student, that the ‘at-risk’

subject is made intelligible. Furthermore, Youdell asserts that “[neoliberal] reforms of this sort [within the contradictory relationship], [are] replete with the language of accountability, standards and high quality education for the total population” (2006a, p. 9). In turn, this fosters a competitive environment where schools must produce successful students who reach a certain set of standards. Thus, “where education is a positional good there are necessarily winners and losers – some children will inevitably be left behind” (Youdell, 2006a, p. 9). The binaries of winner/loser, possible/impossible learner, acceptable/unacceptable student, are of particular interest to my study, as it is through these binaries the young people are made known by schools to youth workers running the community-based (youth ‘at-risk’) programs that are shaped within neoliberal agendas.

The need to address (albeit briefly) the impacts of neoliberal reforms on education is important for this thesis. Although my study does not focus on educational institutions specifically, the youth workers and young people involved in my study discussed their perceptions of the impact of teachers/schooling positioning of the young people as ‘at-risk’. Providing some general understanding of the impacts of the neoliberal market on education here, allows me to engage in a richer analysis of their perceptions. The prior discussion focussed on broader international policy in regard to youth ‘at-risk’. The following section discusses the chronological use of the term ‘at-risk’ in Australian educational and social policies, youth ‘at-risk’ programs, and the ways certain groups of young Australian people have been, and are constituted as being, ‘at-risk’ through policy.

## **An Australian Perspective: Policy and Risk**

Almost two decades ago, Julian Pockock’s Australian Youth Policy and Action Coalition and Australian Council of Social Service Response reminded us that the:

...situation **of** young [Australian] people and the situation **for** young [Australian] people are in fact different things and reflect different viewpoints. The first reflects a process where young people are the subjects

of examination and policy response; a process where others examine their situation from a distance. (Pocock, 1995, p. 1, original emphasis)

The “situation **for** young people” reflects what is happening on a micro level in their lives. Keeping this important distinction in mind, the following discussion highlights how various Australian policies (and research) over the past three decades have discursively constituted certain groups of young people as being ‘at-risk’ via particular tangible identity markers<sup>14</sup>. These ‘risky’ identity markers, such as race, gender and socio-economic status, within policy also play a role in creating and reinforcing negative stereotypical images of youth ‘at-risk’ (for example, as young people unable to succeed in academic pathways, who have substance abuse problems and that come from dysfunctional families). It is important to understand these processes because it is through educational and social youth policies that the community-based programs and youth workers’ practices, that were a focus of my study, were shaped. Moreover, by understanding what is happening at a macro level (policy-wise), the analysis of the participating youth workers’ perceptions of who is ‘at-risk’, what they are ‘at-risk’ of, and what should be done about it, along with the observed practices (micro level) of these youth workers, can be analysed in greater depth - while also allowing me to look at how the young people in the study are subjects of examination, not only at a macro, but also, the micro level.

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<sup>14</sup> “While the term youth at-risk has not been operationalized, it would appear to represent a tangible construct instead of a socially constructed one that has been critiqued for reifying a new social identity of risk that pathologises youth of colour” and low income adolescents (Pica-Smith & Veloria, 2012, p. 34). Pica-Smith and Veloria provide an example from their research involving a group of university students deconstructing the use of the term ‘at-risk’ in education and human services. They found the students (mainly white middle class women) made assumptions of youthful ‘at-risk’ identities, based on tangible identity markers, such as colour (ethnicity), gender (mostly boys) socio economic status (poor, from the ghetto), and disability. Often these types of tangible identity markers become part of the body of expert knowledges around the *truths* of (‘risky’) youth (Kelly, P., 2000a).

Within the past 30 years the Australian government has been predominantly run by Labor and coalition governments – which have been, as Bessant suggests:

...steadily gravitating towards the middle ground where Australians confronted what Unger (2006) called a ‘dictatorship of no alternatives’. The policy framework that emerged in this period was oriented at a generic policy level to dismantling the old collective and protectionist character of what Kelly (1992) referred to as the ‘Australian settlement’ (1901-1975)...[where government] took on a distinctly neoliberal cast [i.e., a context in which understood the individual as responsible for their wellbeing/behaviour/dispositions and managers of any ‘risky’ situations]. (2008a, p. 27)

Bessant (2008a, p. 27) contends that the fallout from neoliberalism in Australia saw the withdrawal of long standing support services for young people and implies Australia “lacks a discrete or well-defined corpus of youth policy”. The term ‘at-risk’ in conjunction with ‘youth’ became a buzzword in the late 1980’s within Australian academia (Nardini & Antes, 1991). Tait (1993a) argues that on one level ‘youth’ is an artefact of numerous government forms, such as the Finn Report. The 1991 landmark *Young People's Participation in Post-compulsory Education and Training Report* (Australian Education Council chaired by Brian Finn) was aimed at increasing national educational participation and attainment levels in post-compulsory education and training. Tait contends that:

not only is the Finn Report significant in the administrative and cultural shaping of the category of ‘youth’, but also by employing the notion of ‘risk’, the Report puts in place yet another element of an effective network of governmental intelligibility’ in the ways certain youth become known as ‘at-risk’. (1993a, p. 123)

Tait (1993a, p. 130) highlights how the copious and painstaking accrual of data producing statistics for the report (i.e., in 1990 15.6% of Australian 15-19 year olds were ‘at-risk’ and by 1991, this had increased to 18.3%) actually makes possible, in a sense authorizes, the construction/constitution of the ‘at-risk’ subject.

te Riele's (2006) discussion of the Australian chronological usage of the term 'youth at-risk', highlights the tendency of the words 'at-risk' to be used casually in policies and research titles, delineating groups of young people without actually specifying what it is they are 'at-risk' of. Use of the term apparently provides enough discursive information to illuminate the reader as to what/who the publications are about. By including those words 'at-risk', an image is instantly formulated of a young person who is:

...disconnected from family and society (a lack of social capital), as not knowing what to do with their lives (a lack of identity capital, see Côté, 1996) and as not valuing or even rejecting the importance of education (lack of cultural capital). (te Riele, 2006, p. 132)

One only needs to search through a university library database using the terms 'youth' and 'at-risk' to see the plethora of examples of self-evident use of the terms in research titles (for instance, *Alternatives for Youth-At-Risk: Outdoor experiences for a special population* (1980), *Educating at-risk youth* (1988), *To the Point: Youth at Risk* (1990), *World Leisure international position statement on leisure education and youth at risk* (2000), *Youth at Risk: Recreation and Prevention* (2005), *Youth at Risk: A New Plan to Save The World's Most Precious Resource* (2010), and *Using Photovoice with At-risk Youth* (2013)<sup>15</sup>). Cinzia and Carmen assert that what "[t]he discourse of risk [so often does ignore is] institutionalized structures of inequality and a systemic analysis of what places youth at risk" (2012, p. 34). Perhaps the very category of 'at-risk' placates these structural and institutional inequalities of the need for institutions to take responsibility for them. This complication with the term is highlighted in research by te Riele (2006) and Conrad (2006) who each consider the dilemmas of focusing on negative characteristics of youth 'at-risk' and the perpetuation of viewing these youth in a deficit light (as discussed below and in Chapter 3).

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<sup>15</sup> In providing these examples I am in no way intending to demean the work of the researchers, and, in most cases, who is 'at-risk' is explained in the body of the work. These examples are just used to highlight the self-evident way the term was and continues to be used in titles, although a shift to alternative terms is evident in recent years, such as 'marginalised' and 'disadvantaged'.

The following discussion considers the problematic use of the term ‘at-risk’ as highlighted by the afore mentioned researchers moves and provides some examples of federal and state responses to the *question of youth* and the ways these responses (policies/programs) have used the term ‘at-risk’ over the decades, to target groups of young people. These examples have been selected as they were prominent responses to the youth question and they used the term ‘at-risk’. They demonstrate that the various markers attributed to the term ‘at-risk’ add to the confusion of exactly who is ‘at-risk’, ‘at-risk of what’, and how the term has, over the years, come to include a broad range of young people. The discussion follows te Riele’s (2006) work and shows how different negative images have been attributed to the ‘at-risk’ concept over time, which builds on stereotypical views of youth ‘at-risk’. Moreover, it highlights how the constant use of the term ultimately leads to the term being used as “shorthand, presumed to require no further explanation” of who is ‘at-risk’ and of what (te Riele, 2006, p. 130).

Throughout the 1990’s numerous reports and policies were developed that focused on ‘at-risk’ youth. For example the Department of Education Employment and Youth Affairs [DEETYA] National Youth at Risk (STAR) Program in the mid 1990’s was:

...a component of the Australian National Equity Program for Schools, which targeted students who [were] educationally disadvantaged. The objective of STAR [was] to identify students ‘at-risk’ of not completing secondary school and to encourage their continued participation by supporting a range of school-based projects at, or in connection with, government and non-government secondary schools. (Goldman & La Castra, 2000, p. 46)

The program was met with much criticism (Boss, Edwards, & Pitnman, 1995; Pocock, 1995), such as the following comment from the Australian Youth Policy and Action Coalition paper (The Bradley Review):

For young people that are not suited to the types of curriculum and teaching methodologies most commonly employed in schools, programs such as Students at Risk are not relevant. The program is attempting with

insufficient resources to keep many young people where they don't want to be, in school systems that do not focus on their educational needs or aspirations. Thus it is hardly surprising that it does not succeed with these particular young people. (Smith, 1994, p. 267)

“These particular young people” were understood as meeting a set of criteria or identity markers that alluded to a specific stereotypical ‘at-risk’ (from leaving school) identity. This program (among others) connected the ‘at-risk’ term with ‘failing’ education and established ‘at-risk’ youth as a dominant and somehow self-evident concept in Australian education and youth policy, and in youth programs (te Riele, 2006).

A Federal response in the early 2000’s was the development of the *Successful Outcome for Youth At Risk: A Resource Kit* (Apte, Bonser, & Slattery, 2001), funded by the Australian National Training Authority. It was designed to “support the professional development of educators in post school contexts who provide programs for youth at risk” (Apte et al., 2001, p. 7). The authors describe youth ‘at-risk’ as a “target group [that] is often found to be particularly challenging as they often require a lot of flexibility and emotional energy from staff” (p. 7). Their definition of youth ‘at-risk’ encompasses an understanding that young people can be ‘at-risk’ in numerous ways and places importance on the roles structural constraints play in marginalising some youth. This type of definition is very broad and the report suggests that youth ‘at-risk’ are “young people whose circumstances or experiences have led to their being marginalised from a range of social structures and groups, including educational organisations” (p. 5). Although the report speaks of marginalisation, this is seen to occur because of the individual and what is happening in their lives - so the blame mainly remains on the young people themselves. The report offers teachers/youth workers specific strategies that are effective with youth ‘at-risk’, which alludes to a sense of *all* youth ‘at-risk’ as meeting a set of criteria that enables them to work effectively if these strategies are used by teachers. I am not debating the potential success of the strategies in any way here. I am arguing that having a set of strategies designed for a group of ‘risky’ young people, positions them in certain ways that reinforce the notion that they only can be made intelligible, in educational discourses,

as ‘at-risk’ subjects - which yet again renders them knowable only as ‘at-risk’ subjects to society<sup>16</sup>.

In 2005, the stated target groups for the national ‘Success for Boys’ initiative by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), provided grants to schools, for ‘at risk and disadvantaged boys’ (DEST, 2005b). Interestingly, they separate the terms ‘at-risk’ and disadvantaged, which alludes to perhaps varying levels of risk, or that the ‘*at-risk*’ state may be based on the identity of the young person or be a voluntary state, while *disadvantaged boys* are so due to external factors. Boys most ‘at-risk’ in the context of this initiative were ‘those who [were] Indigenous, geographically isolated, from families of low socioeconomic status (SES), from cultural minorities, or who have a disability’. Yet again, tangible markers are used to identify the ‘at-risk’ subject – adding to the broadness of the term ‘at-risk’. At the same time, by narrowing the targeted ‘risky’ groups in terms limiting identity markers, such as race or SES, schools, youth workers, governments and/or community organisations can choose any identity marker and use it to gain funding for a particular group of young people.

Another example, *Youth on Track*, is a current early intervention scheme for ‘at-risk’ juveniles 10-17 years old, “designed to prevent them becoming entrenched in criminal behaviour” (The Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013, para. 1). Attorney General and Minister for Justice Greg Smith SC states:

Police and teachers who have regular contact with a young person are often best placed to identify those at risk of becoming involved in crime...[and that] police are often frustrated because they can predict which young kids fall through the gaps and turn into criminals. (The Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013, para. 3)

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<sup>16</sup> This particular project/report by Apte et al. (2001) is the basis for the ‘Links to Learning Program’ that is used as a funding body for one of the community-based (arts/sports) programs I observed. I draw on this report again in the results section in Chapters 5 and 6.

The markers used to identify *Youth on Track* participants are that they are:

...likely to have had their first contact with police before the age of 14, and they are more likely to be male and of Aboriginal descent. They are likely to have anger, violence and mental health problems, problems with drugs or alcohol, and poor literacy and numeracy levels. (NSW Attorney General and Justice, 2013)

The understanding of who is most 'at risk' here is quite clear even though they provide a number of markers – young Indigenous males. This discursive constitution of young Indigenous male subjects is very powerful and renders them knowable and intelligible only through 'risky' and negative discourses.

The above examples demonstrate that the 'at-risk' concept was, and continues to be, used in a self-evident manner in educational and social policy (te Riele, 2006) and how over time certain identity markers (such as gender, ethnicity, class, mental illness, association with illegal substances and criminal activities and difficulty at engaging in school) and attributes (such as being particularly challenging), discursively link certain groups of young people to the 'at-risk' category. In effect, constituting certain young people as certain types of subjects that are in need of certain control and monitoring to effectively transition to adulthood. For instance, Australian long-term economic priorities, as stated previously by the Rudd Government (when this project began), were "focused on enhancing productivity growth and lifting workforce participation" (Department of Education Employment and Work Place Relations, 2009). This was echoed by the Gillard Government in 2012/13 with further incentives and initiatives to keep young people at school – including increasing the legal age of leaving school (in NSW) to 17 years old (Education Act). The political and educational arenas in recent decades have focused on youth 'at-risk' with policies and funding being formulated around what particular category/ies of 'being at-risk' are circulating at any given moment in current research and

literature<sup>17</sup>. The key ‘at-risk’ categories of numerous policies, at the time this thesis was being submitted, were educational attainment and youth homelessness. The former, ‘educational attainment’, was the area of focus in my study.

Of particular concern to this study are those young people who are deemed ‘at-risk’ of being disconnected from society through lack of education because this was the main target group for the programs involved in my study. Australian research on young people consistently reports early school leavers as being an increasing section of society who are ‘at-risk’ of facing disengagement from study or the workforce (e.g., ABS, 2008; Dockett, Mason & Perry, 2006; Edwards-Groves, 2008). For the context of this study, policies circulating at the time of the data collection are addressed here in order to understand the ways they shaped the category of youth ‘at-risk’, and impacted on the funding and design of the observed programs. Of interest to my study are *The Finn Report* (1991), the *Social Inclusion Principles for Australia* (2008) and the *NSW Youth Action Plan* (2006-2010), as well as the *Links to Learning* program and the *NSW Policing Strategies for Policing Youth*, which directly funded the two observed programs in my study. I will draw on the nuances of the *Social Inclusions Principles* and the *NSW Youth Action Plan* below, while *The Finn Report*, *Links to Learning* and *Policing Strategies* are discussed accordingly in the results chapter focussing on policy (Chapter 5).

The cultural assumptions and policy discourses that construct ‘at-risk’ youth as deficit often take an individualistic approach that follows Beck’s (1998) notion of a risk society and Zyngier’s individualistic approach (as discussed previously). A prime example (at the time of my data collection) can be seen in the Commonwealth government document *Social Inclusion Principles for Australia, 2008*, which claims that those on the brink of being ‘at-risk’ will have the opportunity for “deep, intensive interventions [through and

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<sup>17</sup> One only needs to look back at the previous examples of policy documents and research titles over the last two decades to see how the focus changes and returns to categories such as education (literacy, numeracy, truancy), leisure (risk-taking), crime, healthy relationships and building life skills.

by services] ... helping [the individual] tackle their actual problems. Successfully overcoming social exclusion may also involve [the individual] learning to change deeply held attitudes and behaviours...” (Australian Government, 2008b, p. 3). This approach places the onus upon the individual to make changes and relocates the responsibility away from institutions and towards the individual; the person needs to change, not the system. The two programs observed in my study had an effect of engaging young people in this ‘instrumentalist’ way, as each program encouraged self-reflection and self-monitoring (a concept I take up further in Chapter 4) of *their* behaviour that was positioning *them* ‘at-risk’ – even though perhaps the programs were not intentionally designed this way.

The *NSW Youth Action Plan* (2006-2010) echoed the importance of inclusion and focused on assisting Australian youth in ‘reaching their potential’; with emphasis on certain areas including a sense of ‘belonging to the community’, and ‘learning and earning’ (Youth NSW, 2009). The phrase ‘reaching their potential’ alludes to the notion that ‘youthful subjects’ are transitioning to adulthood where they can “participate in society in ways that are meaningful and purposeful for themselves or society in general” (McGuirk, 2001, p. 2) – that as youthful subjects they are not yet ‘useful’ or ‘purposeful’ to society. The ‘learn and earn’ was the Rudd Government’s way, as Lammas contends, to address poor school completion rates. This “...‘carrot and stick’ model [was] designed to encourage disengaged young people to re-engage with training or paid work” (Lammas, 2013, p. 3), and reinforced the notion of one pathway for a successful transition. As te Riele highlights, there are “two assumptions inherent in much Australian (and overseas) policy for youth transition: that successful transition requires a linear pathway, and that individuals can choose their own transition pathway” (2004, p. 244). te Riele (2004) does not disregard the agency young people have in the choices of pathways, but suggests that there is a particular set of assumptions, of social norms, that positions youth as having one linear transition to ‘becoming’ an adult – disregarding the differing life experiences and “fluidity and complexity of young people’s lives” (te Riele, 2004, p. 245). According to the numerous political and academic definitions of being ‘at-risk’ described above, the

young people in my study were recognised as in need of controlling, monitoring and assistance to make this transition successfully. Finally, the idea of ‘belonging to the community’ also becomes problematic when we consider how does an ‘at-risk’ subject belong? Do they belong as they are, but need ‘fixing’, or do they only belong once they ‘change their risky ways’?

A more recent move by the Australian Government to address education and risk was in the form of a development that occurred towards the end of my data collection – that is, the implementation of policies around the new school-leaving age through Rudd and Gillard’s (2008) ‘Education Revolution’. te Riele (2012) examines the CoAG *National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions* and its impact on young people. This set of policies affecting secondary school advises that:

Following legislative changes across all states and territories, the old age-based school-leaving criterion (of about 15) has been replaced with an attainment-based school-leaving standard of completing Year 10. Moreover, upon completion of Year 10, an additional participation requirement makes it mandatory for young people to: ‘participate full-time (defined as at least 25 h per week) in education, training or employment, or a combination of these activities, until age 17’. (CoAG 2009, p. 6)

te Riele (2012) suggests that a majority of young Australians already meet the requirements (i.e., they were remaining in full time education), so the reality of the instigation of these policies is that they tend to target certain populations of youth, who are often already known as being ‘at-risk’: such as “Indigenous youth, homeless youth, youth with physical or health difficulties...or young people who find school difficult academically...or socially” (p. 242). As te Riele argues:

This has led to the ‘learning or earning’ tag for these policies. Coercion is achieved through accompanying eligibility restrictions for welfare benefits, both for income support for young people aged between 15 and 20 who have not yet met the target and for family benefits for their parents (CoAG 2009). Moreover, parents can be prosecuted and fined if their child does not comply with the policy. (te Riele, 2012, pp. 240-241)

te Riele's quote highlights that the focus of the legislation centres on young people and their families through an individualistic approach where they are required to 'get with the program' or be penalised. This approach assumes that all youth have the same choices available to them, despite school-based and societal barriers that may affect some. te Riele notes these barriers are either briefly touched upon or absent from policy documents. te Riele's (2012) draws upon discussions with young people (within her research and other ethnographic research on alternative education) in order to provide space for "their lived experiences to 'speak back' to policy" about possible impacts of the new legislation in ways that value their contributions (p. 242). Her results point to the underpinnings of youth policy being the belief that individuals should be responsible and have an understanding of the value of education in regard to employment. This in turn, takes the approach of blaming the victim, and leaving young people feeling 'dumb' and guilty about failing (comments that are echoed by the young people in my study, as shown in Chapter 7) – comments that are not accounted for in any way by the legislation. te Riele warns us that when legislation merely sets attainment targets, and meets them through coercion, the result "does not make for equity" (2012, p. 250) as was the intention of the legislation, and can, on the contrary, further disadvantage those young people who are marginalised.

In summary, then, this chapter has considered how policies over the years have begun to shape the ways the concept of youth is understood, particularly, youth 'at-risk'. It has highlighted how the term 'youth at-risk' has taken on a "life of its own" (te Riele, 2006, p. 130) – a term that needs no explanation to describe who these youth are, as the term has become self-evident. I also discussed the main policies that directly informed the community-based (arts/sports) programs observed in my study. Furthermore, this chapter has highlighted that, within policies and programs targeting youth 'at-risk', emphasis continues to be placed on the individual and their 'pathway' (as if it is an individual's choice) and the result of the shortcomings of their families or personal circumstance.

Moreover, they neglect to address the role that institutions play in creating and reinforcing inequalities for young people who are already considered to live within the risky margins. The following chapter moves away from policy and discusses the concept of ‘youthhood’ and different aspects that move across and within the axes of the risky identities most relevant to this study - such as rurality, education, Indigeneity, gender, risk-taking, crime and popular culture.



## Chapter Three: *Precarious (re)Positioning*

## **The ‘Risky’ Me**

This chapter provides a brief overview of the different ways in which a number of theorists think and talk about the concept of youth and identity, then proceeds to engage with the approaches of Foucault and Butler, which have contributed significantly to discourses of youth, subjectivity and identity work. To begin I foreground the significance of researching the socially constructed youth ‘at-risk’ label, which, in the context of this study, is informed and shaped by certain policies and practice. In doing so I: a) discuss dominant discourses of youth ‘at-risk’, highlighting particular aspects that are relevant to this study (rurality, Indigeneity, gender, risk-taking, crime and education); and b) examine literature on youth work, community-based (arts/sports) programs in general and their engagement with youth ‘at-risk’, highlighting the mismatches between policy and practice. To contextualise my *Risk with a twist* argument, I consider the influences of popular culture on young people, and on community-based (arts/sports) program design in general, as well as the seductive nature of ‘being risky’ and becoming ‘famous’, which certain media and reality television [RTV] shows present as a means to escape a ‘hard life’.

## **Looking for ‘Me’ and Finding Labels - Young People and Subjectivities**

Historically, there have been/are different ways of constructing adolescence and identity. For instance, in developmental approaches, adolescents are understood in much of the psychologically-oriented research literature as moving toward self-understanding, which is conceptualised as a cognitive representation of self in relation to others. It is a time of risk-taking, experimenting and coming to understand boundaries, until a stable adult identity is developed (Erikson, 1968). Some argue, “real or imagined, an adolescent’s [teenager’s] developing sense of self and uniqueness is a motivating force” in identity formation (Santrock, 2003, p. 292). A number of other theories move away from the distinct category of ‘adolescence’ and suggest people have a self-identity, which is the outcome of a process where individuals reflect upon and construct biographies; in other

words, identity is seen as a continual process, taking place not just in adolescence but throughout our lives (Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1990; Heaven, 1994).

In thinking about notions of self, I am aware of the multitude of (historical) understandings within a vast array of literature, and the limitations of this thesis in providing a full account of them. Postcolonial (Muecke, Hall) poststructural (Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze), feminist (Butler, Lesko, McLeod) and post-Marxist (Giddens, Beck) theories have provided opportunity to “reclaim and celebrate displaced identities...[with the] status of identity opened up to spatial and temporal mutability, plurality and fragmentation, social and psychic manifestation, and the bounded politics of inclusion and exclusion” (Nayak & Kehily, 2006, p. 460). In this sense, identity is how we view ourselves (past, present and future), while subjectivity/ies frame/position the possible ways in which our identity can be constructed (McLeod & Yates, 2006; Stokes, 2010). Primarily based in psychological concepts, James, Jenks and Prout (1998) describe young people in four ways: the socially developing child (participants seen as developing to adults); the tribal child (participants have social status, autonomy in a cultural world of children); the minority child (participants in a shared but adult world); and the socially constructed child (participants seen as part of shifting social structures). In this way they move the notion of the “socially constructed child” away from psychological or biological viewpoints. Bolin (2004, p. 239) discusses this notion as stemming from the Chicago School “where youth is socially constructed out of age cohorts and theories on generations, which are sprung from structural functionalistic and Marxist explanations”.

The “socially constructed child” can also be understood through a poststructural lens by exploring the “relationship between power and identity - which is at the heart of post-structuralist research” (Pratley, 2011, p. 68). Below I begin to unpack Michel Foucault’s theories of technologies of the self/control, and Judith Butler’s work with performativity in regard to young people and subjectivities. Butler’s work focuses on gender, but as gender is not the main focus for this study, I use her underlying principles of

performativity in the context of the concept of youth ‘at-risk’. When thinking about my theoretical framework I began by looking at the work of Beck and Giddens, however given that concepts such as gender and class emerged in my findings, ideas around individualisation and reflexivity could not offer the best explanation of my data. The following section begins to discuss Foucault and Butler’s theories on the self, as it was these theorists who informed/framed my study and guided the development of my research questions. Later in this chapter I will explain how combining theories of technologies of the self, governmentality and performativity with Lyng’s (2005) theory of edgework was useful in interpreting the findings that emerged from my analysis of data.

### *The Discursively Produced Subject*

James et al. (1998) conceptualised the socially constructed child in line with more recent approaches to identity taken up by post-structuralists. Such approaches (including the approach I use in this research) are often informed by the work of Foucault (1977, 1979, 1980, 1983, 1990) and Butler (1993, 1997, 2000, 2006). These approaches understand the subject as a product of discourse that is discursively produced through the intersection of what Foucault (1983) refers to as ‘technologies of control’ and ‘techniques of the self’ (Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou, 2003). To Foucault, the subject is understood as the sum of power relationships dominated by hegemonic discourses. In modern society, Foucault (1977) speaks of a normalising gaze brought about through acts of hierarchical surveillance and normalization of judgment. The shaping of behaviour is then achieved through the embodiment of a normalising gaze. In the context of my study, the normalising gaze becomes understood through expert knowledges or *truths* about what is considered ‘normal’, ‘acceptable’, ‘desirable’ or ‘deviant’ and ‘risky’ behaviour for young people. Technologies of control refers to institutions (police, schools, church, and prisons), techniques (rules, timetables, routines, normative practices) and power relations (hierarchical and non-hierarchical and institutionally sanctioned) that establish and maintain disciplinary structures and social norms - that are sometimes imposed, but at

other times implicitly recognised, even if not explicitly articulated. ‘Technologies of the self’ allow individuals with or without help, to “effect...a certain number of operations of their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct and ways of being...” (Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988, p. 17).

In taking this approach, the sociologist understands the self as having no definitive essence. Instead it emerges in multiple forms through differing ways, in numerous contexts, and in relation to certain purposes. Similarly, the subject can be re-negotiated to a certain extent, depending on the discursive practices it engages in (Davies & Harre, 1994). For example, the ways the young people in my study twist the notion of being ‘risky’ (through the retelling of their risk-taking) allows them to re-negotiate a ‘loser’ subject within schooling contexts to a ‘winner’ subject within the program/peer contexts. Butler adopts Foucauldian concepts in her substantial work on the self, performativity and citational processes (in regard to gender) that constitute the individual as a subject. These theories are expanded on in Chapter 4. They are important to this study because I am interested in understanding the ways certain groups of young people are discursively constituted (i.e., take up and/or resist subjectivity) through policy, institutions (such as high school/teachers) and practice (of the youth workers) as ‘at-risk’ subjects.

Taking up Foucault’s concepts of technologies of the self/control and governmentality, Kelly argues that:

...youth is an artefact of a history of diverse ways of thinking [and talking] about the behaviours and dispositions of those who are neither child nor adult. As an artefact of expertise, youth is principally about becoming; becoming an adult, becoming a citizen, becoming independent, becoming autonomous, becoming mature, becoming responsible. (Kelly, P., 2007, p. 42; also see Bessant, 2002a)

Risk narratives encompass ideas of young people not ‘becoming’ productive citizens (risking their transitional preferred, normative futures), due to the riskiness of the ways in which they act and think – the precarious positions they take up, fall into or are placed in by others. Here the essential pull to ‘become’ somebody *well* (Wyn, 2007) – to ‘become’ an ideal adult - is strong. Kelly stresses that “this sort of probabilistic thinking attempts to construct a series of causal relationships between these different configurations of time and space” (Kelly, P., 2007, p. 42) and that “there is also a sense in which ‘becoming’ automatically invokes the future. Youth, as it is constructed in at-risk discourses, is at-risk of jeopardizing, through present behaviours and dispositions, desired futures” (p. 42). In a sense, this idea of young people becoming or transitioning alludes to the assumption that if they follow the ‘right’ pathway, the ideal future (as a valued adult) will be waiting (Kelly, P., 2007). This way of thinking about youth is common throughout the policies that were discussed in the previous chapter, which discursively constituted certain groups of young people as ‘at-risk’ and in need of intervention to help them become worthwhile and productive citizens. If, as Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (2003, p. 2) suggest, identities are “intimately linked with politics of inclusion, exclusion... and self – and other – positioning”, then the value of attending to the perspectives of vulnerable young people in understanding the construction of possible subjectivities is clear. The following section considers the notion of the ‘at-risk’ subject and look at how concepts of rurality, education, Indigeneity, gender, risk-taking, crime and popular culture play a role in such identity work.

## **Precarious Futures?: Young People and ‘Risky’ Labels**

According to Tidwall and Garrett, the actual terms ‘at’ ‘risk’ when used separately are ‘implicitly and explicitly, [defined] in reference to social ills and personal pathology’ (1994, p. 444), however when the terms are brought together, as in the current combination of the words ‘at-risk’, the definition becomes clouded and less explicit. Taken up in this frame of mind, the boundaries of who is ‘at-risk’ and what they are actually ‘at-risk’ of, becomes unclear. Tidwell and Garrett suggest “this term is treated as

a label attaching to a global condition of the present” (1994, p. 444), with the present ‘fix’ (not future implications) being the focus. They further emphasise that this present ‘fix’ approach seems directed to “finding criteria to define a group as at risk, rather than to discover a way to ameliorate the risk factors in their lives” (Tidwell & Garrett, 1994, p. 444). With no clearly defined or reflexive meaning of ‘youth at-risk’ and with a simplistic focus on personal attitudes (te Riele, 2006), young people labelled ‘at-risk’ become vulnerable to a range of stereotypical images that are produced around the term. This was evident in the previous chapter’s discussion on the ways policy constitutes and addresses, or does not address, the needs of the ‘at-risk’ subject. There are a number of ways in which discourses of risk around youth become a means for rendering reality knowable, mainly by youth being understood through:

...the social scientific expertise of new class intellectuals [such as academics, psychologists, doctors] who claim some authority in telling the truth about youth, about present realities and probable futures, about the links between these different times and spaces and about the factors that place transitions between these spaces at-risk. (Kelly, P., 2007, p. 39)

With that in mind, and specific to this study are the *truths* (tangible markers) of rurality, education, Indigeneity, crime and gender as they relate to young people I have worked with here. These *truths* are inextricably entwined within and around each other. However, the following passages attempt to draw out certain nuances of the first three markers, so that I can then engage with the theory of edgework and popular culture to discuss performances of gender through risk-taking in regard to crime and schooling, and to examine the ways young people perform and/or are constituted as ‘at-risk’ subjects.

### *Risky Rural Spaces*

According to Cuervo and Wyn’s (2012, p. 10) work on young people and rurality, youth in the ‘bush’ is often defined oppositionally to urban youth through a number of dichotomies: 1) urban spaces being exciting, creative, progressive and sophisticated while rural spaces are stagnant, “culturally conservative” and disadvantaged in comparison to

urban spaces; 2) rural spaces as idyllic and peaceful (but motionless) while urban spaces are disordered, conflicting and erratic (but “vital and dynamic”); and 3) a more traditional approach where rural spaces are characterised as ‘community’ founded on social relationships of “sentiment, friendship and neighbourliness”, while urban spaces are associated with the idea of “association...contractual interests, rationality and impersonality”. In each binary above there remains a sense of rural life equating to various forms of disadvantage; being young and living in a rural town from the onset alludes to a sense of being ‘at-risk’. As Margaret Alston (2005) suggests, inequality appears to have a postcode with rural postcodes being over-represented. In many NSW regional and rural towns, young people not belonging to a church group or sporting team are more than often faced with a lack of social spaces for self-expression and challenging stereotypical identities (Kruger & Abbott, 2002). The Australian Report *How Young People are Faring '08* (Lamb & Mason, 2008, pp. 20 - 33) suggests that young people living in rural and remote parts of Australia are less likely to complete Year 12 than those living in cities, while the *How Young People are Faring 2011* report (Robinson et al., 2011) shows that as retention levels at school tend to be lower in rural and remote areas, a higher proportion of rural young people are statistically ‘at-risk’. It would seem ‘becoming somebody’ in the bush can be a ‘risky’ ordeal for some (Wexler, 1992; Wyn, 2007). In the context of this study, I am not interested in issues such as urban/rural dichotomies, nor do I seek to build upon knowledge about how rural life is experienced by the young people in my study. Instead, I focus on how rurality often works discursively to form the ‘at-risk’ youthful subject in a deficit light, through policies and community-based programs that respond to the statistical viewpoint that rural youth are more ‘at-risk’ of failing educational pathways than urban youth.

### *Education and ‘Risky’ Identities*

When thinking about the difficulties of remaining in educational pathways, social exclusion and rurality appear to go hand in hand according to youth statistics (Alston & Jenny, 2009). There is an abundance of literature on rural decline and the dropping levels

of employment opportunities for young rural people – with migration to cities becoming almost a necessity to gain employment. “This trend may add to the sense of social exclusion and individualized responsibility experienced by rural youth” (Onyx, Wood, Bullen, & Osburn, 2005, p. 21). Furthermore, Cuervo (2010) suggests the weakening of support structures (an effect of neoliberal government practices) and limited post-school options in rural areas has encouraged a push towards further education and employment in urban areas, which has seen rural high schools becoming “talent export industries” (p.127). My interest in the ways political, social and educational institutions and their relations and practices construct certain groups of youth as troubling or offending the normative construction of youth resonates with the following research which focuses on educational institutions and the ways certain binaries constitute certain groups of young people as ‘at-risk’. The following discussion examines how particular groups of young people are understood within schooling discourses as ‘at-risk’ subjects.

Tina Besley (2003), for instance, argues that many schools take up “humanist-existentialist psychological discourse” (p. 154) when thinking about youth. Whereby psychologised notions/developmental theories of adolescence are drawn upon to “label, diagnose, categorise, calculate, normalise, judge, totalise and even pathologise young people” (Besley, 2001, p. 1). Moreover, this approach views youth as being responsible for their behaviour and dispositions, with a need to manage these and reach a sense of self-actualisation. Besley (2003) argues that this approach is limiting and can reinforce labels – ‘mainstream’, ‘gifted’, and ‘at-risk’. Youth ‘at-risk’, among other groups, are constituted by the dominant society as 'other to the norm', defined (in relation to schooling) in terms of what they are not (te Riele, 2006; Youdell, 2006b). Youdell (2006a), drawing on Butler’s notion of performativity and Foucault’s theories on discourse and power, views educational exclusion (and inclusion) as being “produced through the mundane and day-to-day practices” (2000a, p. 13) within schools. Youdell argues that to explore these exclusions researchers need to understand that these “micro exclusions” are not just experienced by students, but are “constitutive of the student,

constitutions whose cumulative effects coagulate to limit ‘who’ a student can be, or even if s/he can be a student at all” (2006a, p. 13). Adopting this approach helps explore how certain students are designated ‘at-risk’– and given a discursive label derived from pre-existing expert knowledges of youth and discourses of risk (Kelly, P., 2000a). Moreover, it allows an examination of how this process occurs across different contexts politically, educationally and within the observed programs.

It is through, and in relation to, these existing knowledges and discourses producing the *truths* about youth, that subjectivity, in a post-structural sense, is continually re-made. Within the unfolding narratives of young peoples’ lives the negotiation of possible and impossible selves (as students/learners) occurs. For many who are unable/unwilling to fit into normative schooling discourses, the label ‘at-risk’ becomes an identifying marker in their subjectivities, and the push/pull to leave school increases. Gillbourn and Youdell (2000) contend that the convergence of discourses of ‘ability’ and (appropriate) ‘conduct’ are perplexingly linked (also with notions of class, gender, race). They contend that these discourses mediate each other in a profusion of ways that result in restricting possibility for a student – here the good student/bad student dichotomy becomes visible (Youdell, 2006a) and the ‘at-risk’ subject is constituted. What becomes problematic is that these are not just labels. Not only does the system recognise these young people through the labels as ‘losers’, but it limits the range of subject positions they can take up within schooling discourses. The problem of ‘risky’ labels, the lack of opportunities and the sense of ‘lack of freedom’, becomes a ‘push’ for young rural people to migrate from rural towns (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2004). Also, some young rural people (surveyed in the *Life Patterns* project<sup>18</sup>) see education as a way to achieve a livelihood in rural areas

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<sup>18</sup> ‘The *Life Patterns* research program is a longitudinal mixed-method study of two cohorts of young Australians making their postsecondary school transitions. The first stage of the project commenced in 1991, following a cohort of young people who had just completed their secondary education. The project has now been following this group of Australians for over sixteen years. During late 2005 and 2006 a new cohort of Australian students in their final two years of high school was recruited to the *Life Patterns* project both to follow this new cohort (who were born around 1989) in their own right, and also to compare the experiences of this second cohort with those of the first cohort (born around 1973) to explore how transitions have changed over the last two decades’ (Melbourne Graduate School of Education, 2013).

and others their ‘ticket out’ of rural life (Wyn, 2007). In each instance, this raises the question of what does this mean for rural youth for whom successful educational outcomes seem inaccessible or unattainable? What becomes of youth who have been constituted as impossible learners and unacceptable students? Can young people who are labelled and constituted ‘at-risk’ though educational institutions resist these norms and express a sense of agency? Does this labelling and the formation of dichotomies/binaries actually create a discursive space for young people to ‘run with the risk’? Can young people be viewed as losers in one setting (schools) but winners in other contexts (such as the informal aspects of community-based (arts/sports) programs)?

I am interested in participants’ perceptions of how educational institutions constitute and categorise them with ‘risky’ labels, and the ways in which rurality statistically becomes another marker to further constitute certain groups, such as Indigenous students, as being the *most* ‘at-risk’ of unsuccessful transitions to a preferred adulthood and the labour force (Robinson et al., 2011). I am also interested in the enabling and constraining aspects of being labelled young and ‘at-risk’, and, in particular, young, Indigenous and ‘at-risk’.

### *The Double Risk: Indigenous and ‘Becoming Me’*

In discussing Indigeneity within risk discourses and the constitution of the ‘at-risk’ Indigenous subject, it is important to understand that historically Indigenous peoples in Australia have suffered the ongoing search, usually prosecuted by non-Indigenous people, for a definition of their culture as a collective whole. By attempting to develop a comprehensive definition of ‘Aboriginal’ or what constitutes being ‘Indigenous’, we not only neglect to acknowledge the great diversity of lifestyles and circumstances of Indigenous Australians, we also “disembowel culture” and elide the histories of peoples who lived in this land before colonisation, and the complexities of contemporary Indigenous identity (Foley 1997, p. 1). The historical treatment of Indigenous peoples has become a significant challenge to young Indigenous peoples coming to terms with their

identity in the present day. The continual impact of colonialism and its repercussions, including systematic racism and poverty, are visible through the numerous statistics (see reports from Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008b) that link Indigenous youth ‘at-risk’ to high rates of crime and incarceration, high rates of suicide, and low levels of educational achievement. These statistical elements in turn join the list of factors (expert knowledges) used identify youth who might be ‘at-risk’.

Gale and Bolzan claim that the use of a risk framework fails ‘to account for generative social processes that give rise to and exacerbate specific risk factors’ (2013, p. 257). They argue the importance of understanding this limitation of the framework when thinking about Indigenous youth “where the longer term effects of colonial policy, institutionalised discrimination and contemporary racism, have led to social and economic outcomes of profound inequality” (Cunneen 2008, p. 52). Subsequently, it becomes apparent that the label ‘Indigenous Australian’ is constituted through stereotypical, culture specific, ‘risky’ discourses around what it means to be Indigenous. In a sense, Indigenous youth (and young people from other ethnic groups such as Maori)<sup>19</sup> appear to be positioned as being *at risk* of being ‘at-risk’ through their very cultural identity. Youdell’s (2006b, p.13) argument that ‘identity of the excluded group is fundamental to their exclusion’ is relevant here. For instance, Indigenous boys may be understood as being excluded from school and school life because they are Indigenous and boys. Being seen as a young person ‘at-risk’ in general, and the discourses under this collective term, means the construction of possible selves for many young Indigenous people can become a ‘risky’ and complicated journey.

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<sup>19</sup> Many of the young people participating in my study were Anglo Saxon (ten) and Indigenous (three), with two boys identifying as Maori – however the dialogue of these two boys suggested they connected in a sense with Indigenous culture in terms of racism and they offered very little dialogue that was focused specifically on Maori culture (with none at all provided by the youth worker participants). For this reason I have focused the literature on Indigenous students and how the Indigenous subject is constituted as an ‘at-risk’ subject through educational and cultural markers.

To date, there is a vast array of studies involving Indigenous adolescents in various areas of education (for example, Appleyard, 2002; Bourke, 2000; Buxton, 2002; Colbung, 2007; Craven, 2005, Craven, Parente, & Marder, 2004; Crawshaw, 2006; Daly, 2000; Dawes, 2011; Foley, 2007; Harslett, 1998; Heslop, 1998; Kemmis, 2004; Malin, 1998; Malin & Ngarritjan-Kessari, 1999; McHugh, 2004; Pascoe, 2004; Schwab, 2012). Collectively, such research shows Australia's young Indigenous peoples as being disadvantaged in contemporary schooling systems; however none of the studies draw on Foucault or discuss the constitution of the 'at-risk' subject. These studies do show, however, that it appears one becomes 'at-risk' of failing just by being Indigenous and being at school. Youdell (2006a, p. 13) views this positioning as 'identity politics in education', because it is the identity markers of a specific group that are foregrounded and 'where the exclusion/inequality is believed to operate'. Numerous Government reports and reviews (for examples see Australian National Audit Office 2002; Australian Parliament 2000, 2001; DEET 1989, 1995; DEST 2001, 2002, 2003; Groome 1995; Herbert 1999; Lovegrove 1986; MCEETYA 1995; NSW Department of School Education 1992; Tierney 1999; Watts 1981, 1982) have produced similar findings pertaining to poor retention rates and low educational outcomes for Indigenous youth. The National Youth Policing Strategy emphasises that "apart from gender, a disproportionately high number of Indigenous young people come into contact with the police" (Australian Government, 2010, p. 2).

Findings from other research focus on the impacts of loss of culture (such as Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012), disrupting dominant discourses (for example Brown, 2013; Palmer & Collard) and the importance of cultural healing (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation Development Team, 2009; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2008; Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2006) in respect to identity construction. A smaller amount of research circulates in regard to young Indigenous Australian peoples and identity (such as Groome, 1995a, 1995b; Purdie, 2000; Purdie & Stone, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). Much of this work draws on Giddens' theories of

(Indigenous) identity formation as being a fluid and ‘reflexive ‘biographical project’ (Giddens, 1991) and sees (Indigenous) identity as being a ‘risky’ and complex process. Collectively, in this research on young Indigenous peoples and identity, focus is placed on the benefits of positive Indigenous identities in regard to education and that a lack of positive identity equals failure and dropping out of school. The understanding that young Indigenous peoples, in a sense, lack positive identities, and that this absence ultimately leads to failure in educational pathways, becomes part of the expert knowledges on the *truths* of (Indigenous) youth (Kelly, P., 2000a).

Despite this kind of research being carried out with the intention to help Indigenous youth, it also reinforces the constitution of the Indigenous youthful ‘at-risk’ subject’ and further sanctions the need for (neoliberal) governing bodies to regulate the behaviour and dispositions of young Indigenous peoples – a population that the media often sensationalises within moral panics (Hickey-Moody, 2013). The studies cited above did not involve community-based (arts/sports) programs which highlights the need to examine how young Indigenous people perceive and experience such programs, especially given ‘Indigenous populations’ are often targeted for program funding. I also include the examples here to help emphasise that the (five) young Indigenous people in my study (including the two boys of Maori decent) negotiate the ‘at-risk’ label with a double dose of ‘at-riskness’, which was evident in my findings. Furthermore, this double dose of ‘at-riskness’ not only reinforces media sensationalised representations of, and fuels, moral panics about Indigenous youth, but also contributes to the formation of young Indigenous peoples being viewed as unsuccessful/impossible learners by the educational system.

Hickey-Moody provides a poignant quote in regard to moral panics, educational systems and Indigenous youth, in her book *Youth Arts and Education*:

On 13 October 2009, the national *Australian* newspaper published a story titled “Indigenous kids better off in jail”. The day beforehand the South Australian Attorney-General Michael Atkinson had stated:

This hard core [of criminals] needs to be put behind bars and kept there. We are dealing with an evil phenomenon...rehabilitation is not going to do anything. We have to keep them away from society as long as we can (Owen and Nason 2009). (2013, p. 47)

By the Australian media using terms like ‘evil phenomenon’, making suggestions such as ‘we have to keep them away from society’, and media (newspaper) titles such as *Getting Indigenous Youth out of the Criminal Justice System* (2009), *Indigenous Youth Crime Rates a ‘National Crisis’* (2011), *Black Sentences Soar as Juvenile Jails become a ‘Storing House’* (2012) illustrate how young Indigenous people have become ‘sites for the production of racialized moral panics’ (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 47). This production further reinforces the Indigenous youthful subject as being ‘risky’ and in need of policy/programs that focus on intervention and regulation, such as community-based (arts/sports) programs.

Although this study was not aimed at programs which specifically worked with young Indigenous peoples, it became apparent that the label ‘at-risk’ had subtle and often direct connections with Indigenous (and other ethnic) cultures (connections I elaborate across the three results chapters). Drawing on the above research focused on Indigeneity, identity and education, allowed me to analyse how the young people in my study are performatively constituted under the label ‘at-risk’ by considering aspects of culture - specifically the discursive *truths* of Indigenous culture that became apparent through dialogue with the young people. The following section shifts the focus from Indigeneity and identity/education/schooling to gender, to examine how boys and girls ‘work the risky edge’ (i.e., self-harming, criminal activity and risk-taking in schooling contexts) in different ways. Lyng’s (2005) use of the theory of edgework is useful to understanding the seductiveness of being risky, as elaborated below. In addition, I make connections between popular culture and the lure to be ‘risky’ (and potentially famous) as providing

an alternative to educational success as a way out of a 'troubled life' for the young people in my study.

### *Gender, Popular Culture, Schooling and Working the 'Risky' Edge*

Hannah-Moffat and O'Malley (2007, p. 1) assert that there is a shift towards thinking about risk (in a Foucauldian sense) as "the governmental technique, as a form of consciousness and action, and as a political issue, that shapes, and is shaped by, gender in contemporary society". Of interest to my study, was the apparent (and repetitious) re-telling of voluntary risk-taking by the young people participating in the programs, and the ways in which this risk-taking plays a role in how young gendered subjects are constituted under 'at-risk' labels. Stephen Lyng (2005) refers to voluntary risk-taking as 'edgework', where the seduction of 'working the edge' is strong, and becomes a way of constructing the self as in *control* within particular contexts. In the context of my study this edgework involved in the young people's narratives and accounts of practices of risk-taking with drugs, alcohol, crime, the use of expletives ('profane' language) and risk-taking in school classrooms and community program settings. Lyng and Matthews (2007) contend that this sort of edgework can be viewed in two ways. Firstly, it can be seen as a way to escape or resist key "structural [and cultural] imperatives" and "institutional routines [and constraints] of contemporary life" (2007, pp. 5-6) – to be free from "overwhelming social regulation" (p. 9). Secondly, if engaging in risk-taking is viewed "as integral to the fabric of contemporary social life", then risk-taking becomes part of the way individuals "integrate themselves into the existing institutional environment that valorises risk-taking propensities and skills" (Lyng & Matthews, 2007, p. 10).

In these ways edgework is seen as a way of understanding the seduction of confronting and pushing the edge where the subject places themselves "on the border between control and non-control, forcing him or her to rely fully on his or her pre-attained skills" (Lyng & Matthews, 2007, p. 10). The required utilisation of skills makes the experience more

than just a thrill-seeking activity, as the ‘edgeworker’ needs to be ‘good’ at the skills required to be successful when working the edge. Moreover, as edgework research focuses on the “formation of edgework communities”, relationships emerge “between successful risk-taking, group membership and status” (Workman, 2008, p. 28). The notion of edgework status is useful to my study in regard to the glorified voluntary risk-taking spoken and practiced by the young boys and girls participating in the observed programs (Lyng, 2005)

Lyng’s (1993, 2005, 2007) work continues to be adopted more readily in research that studies voluntary risk-taking, as he was at the forefront of connecting the concept of edgework to social theory, to social structures and processes, and to the analysis of crime. For example (and of relevance to this discussion), Olstead’s work on gendered risk-taking, “highlight[s] that edgework is not simply perceived, experienced or structured in gendered ways but that risk taking activities are themselves, part of the way in which individuals produce gender and identity” (Olstead, 2011, p. 87). The notion of gendered risk-taking and the ways youthful subjects are constituted in gendered risky ways, is taken up later in this chapter. While work such as that of Tulloch and Lupton (2003) in *Risk and Everyday Life* add to the ways edgework is understood through a sociological approach, it explores the more general seduction of the pleasures and sense of control that engagement in edgework alludes to, rather than placing a specific focus on gender. In contrast, use of the theory of edgework took a particularly gendered approach in the context of my study. Moreover, the risk-taking in my study was not high-risk sports, for example (as in Lyng’s [1993] original framing of edgework) but was predominantly criminal, drugs and alcohol-related risk-taking for the boys and self-harm, un-protected sex, and fighting for the girls. Within that mix sat the more subtle, but high impact, risk-taking within classrooms where the boys told stories which included verbal and physical resistance (throwing things, slamming doors, using ‘profane’ language), while the girls’ risk-taking was a form of verbal resistance, such as ‘telling teachers off’ and arguing through the use of expletives.

Australian research on risk-taking attitudes and behavioural patterns among different ages, genders, and generations (Abbott-Chapman, Denholm & Wyld, 2008), highlights the narrowing gap between levels of risk-taking among young males and females, and risk-taking such as smoking cannabis and cigarettes and drinking alcohol, were seen as normative practices among the young people, irrespective of gender. Blume (2011) indicates there are limitations with research around gendered risk-taking, while highlighting that other research, such as Byrnes, Miller and Schafer's (1999) study, indicates gender differences are regularly present when considering at a broader definition of risk-taking. Work by Dwyer and Wyn (2001) suggests that risk-taking by young people can be understood through the context of the challenges young people face today while they negotiate their ways through education and employment pathways and "come to terms to the institutional forces shaping their daily lives" (Lyng, 2005, p. 5). At the time of my data collection, the findings in the 2008 ABS Report, *Risk Taking by Young People* (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008b) indicated that young men (15-25) engaged more in risk-taking behaviours such as alcohol consumption, while young women (15-25) attributed to 60% of drug (self-harm) use that required hospitalisation.

Lyng's (1990) original framing of edgework had "limited resonance across gender, race and class lines" (Newmahr, 2011, p. 684) as it focused on male-dominated high-risk extreme sports. Lyng and Matthews (2007) began to address this limitation (as did others, such as Laurendeau, 2011; Miller 1991; Newmahr, 2011; Olstead, 2011) in their research on edgework and masculinity where they drew on Lyng's earlier work and that of Lois (1999), Ferrell et al (2001) Holyfield (1997, 1999, 2005) and O'Malley and Mugford (1994), to explore the ways engaging in edgework 'allows men to construct a new form of masculinity, one that is well suited to the political and economic logic of the risk society' (p. 82). Lyng and Matthews' (2007) work highlights that although accounts of edgework are dominated by males, this does not mean that all edgework "can or should be understood as masculine performances" (Newmahr, 2011, p. 684). Lyng and Matthews (2007) offer the notion that gender is often viewed through sociological stance

as a predictor in risk-taking, with males being more likely to engage in risk-taking, while females are adverse to these types of behaviours. Lyng and Matthews (2007, p. 77) then contend that there may be little difference between gender in the tendencies to engage in risk-taking, but that the difference perhaps lies in the types of risk-taking males and females are drawn to, and that they may “deal with the risks in gender specific ways”. Similarly, Laurendeau (2008) draws on Connell’s (2002) research on gender and Donnelly’s (2004) understanding of a risk culture to “offer a provisional model for how gender and risk intersect as participants in voluntary risk-taking crowd the edge” (Laurendeau, 2008, p. 297). Laurendeau’s work conceptualises the notion of ‘gender risk regimes’ and offers tools to explore the relevance of gender in edgework practices. Although the edgework discussed by Laurendeau (2008) and Lyng and Matthews (2007) focuses on high-risk extreme leisure sports, it opens up a space to begin to think about forms of ‘delinquent’ risk-taking/edgework and how young people use edgework (and the retelling of it) to feel empowered (albeit temporarily in many instances), and assert, negotiate and take up risky gendered identities under the ‘at-risk’ label.

My study, however, does not aim to determine which gender is ‘riskier’, but to understand the different (and similar) gendered risk-taking (perceived by youth workers and performed by the young people themselves) and how policy and practice understands, acts upon and constitutes the ‘at-risk’ subject through this risk-taking. In particular, I argue that the concept of edgework helps to explain the seduction of voluntary risk-taking among youth in my study (i.e., engaging in criminal acts (boys) or self-harm (girls) and causing ‘trouble’ in the classroom and in the community programs (both boys and girls)), as ways of constructing the self as in control within particular (peer, educational, local and program) contexts. Using youth, risk-taking and gender as a focus, the following discussion now considers criminal activity (i.e. drugs, underage drinking and stealing) media/pop culture and schooling to show how popular culture reinforces the view that being ‘risky’ can be an alternative ‘way out’ to educational success.

## *Young People Managing Risk: Substance Abuse, Self-harm and Stealing Cars...Why Not?*

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has found that while many young Australians are faring well, the *State of Australia's Young People Report* (Muir et al., 2009) suggests crime and violence remain key issues, although offending rates have been in decline of recent years. The statistics show that “young people (15-24) are more likely to engage in illegal activities than older people, and that young people are more likely to be the victim of violent offences” (Muir et al., 2009, pp. 113-115). The report highlights that “despite the decrease in youth offences over the decade, offending rates in Australia are still consistently highest among 15 to 19 year olds, followed by 20 to 24 year olds and then 10 to 14 year olds” (Muir et al., 2009, pp. 113-115)<sup>20</sup>. Variations across gender (and ethnicity) have also been noted. For instance, Carrington's (2006) work on female delinquency contends that more male than female youth come into contact with the police; however rates of female delinquency are increasing at a faster rate than for boys. *Risk Taking by Young People*, suggest boredom, peer group pressure and risk-taking behaviour (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008b) as likely reasons for engagement in crime, regardless of gender (or ethnicity). The Australian National Crime Prevention Programme (n.d, p. 2) suggests that young people engage in crimes due to: 1) substance use; 2) early school leaving; 3) gender (boys are more likely to offend than girls); 4) abuse - especially abuse during the transition to high school; 5) peer influence; 6) unemployment; 7) lack of supervision; and 8) individual characteristics (boys with difficult temperaments in childhood were more likely to be serious offenders in adulthood). These types of statistical analyses become part of the body of expert knowledge on the *truths* of youth and, in turn, this information shapes how governing bodies seek to address, intervene and regulate the ‘crisis of youth’ in regard to crime.

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<sup>20</sup> This statement reinforces the problematic nature of the construction of the ‘at-risk’ subject through age (as I noted in Chapter 1). According to these statistics ‘at-risk youth’ could be anywhere from 10 years of age to 25 years. This adds to the confusion of who is ‘at risk’ and ‘at risk’ of what, for surely the riskiness of a 10 year old differs from that of a 25 year old? Yet they all appear to be collectively constituted under the one label.

For boys and girls alike, research has found that young people tend to view illicit risk-taking as a way to belong to their peer group (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Johnson et al., 2008). A common, and well documented theme throughout the identity/risk literature, is the significance of peer group relations – with spending time with friends being a principal social activity and seen as a way to belong (Burman, Brown, & Batchelor, 2003; Griffiths, 1995; Hey, 1997), gain respect and status (Quicker, 1983), and ‘fit in’ (Batchelor, 2007). A broadly acknowledged common finding in this research is how the relationship between peer groups and the drinking context, impacts on the ways teenagers understand their alcohol-related behaviour (Honest, Seymour, & Webster, 2000; Johnson, 2012; Pavis, Cunningham-Burley, & Amos, 1997). Kelly, Advocat, Harrison and Hickey (2011) in their book *Smashed: The Many Meanings of Drunkenness and Intoxication*, highlight how drunkenness and intoxication (in young people) are understood/framed in many policy and governmental reports in a negative light. They suggest research like Midanik (2003) and Measham (2008), “argue that we should address the notion of pleasure and consider how drunkenness is linked in many ways to positive experiences, such as the use of alcohol as a social lubricant, a way to forget one’s problems and peer-related pressures which encourage people to drink for social acceptance all may act as positive influences on people’s drinking choices” (Kelly et al., 2011, p. 60). MacLean asserts that risk-taking by young people in relation to their identities “is framed by powerful stories about the necessity to demonstrate a capacity for negotiating danger” (2010, p. 158). Often deviant behaviours are utilised in apparent purposeful ways by the young people, when positioned in particular social contexts such as bringing illegal substances (cannabis, party drugs) to teenage parties, to be popular among peers who want access to such ‘drugs’, but who do not have it, or are afraid to acquire it themselves. These ways of working the boundaries (or ‘edges’) of risk become powerful practices in regard to identity assertion among young people. Much of the literature on crime and edgework tends to be non-gender specific, although Lyng (2005) suggests this is changing.

An example of research that explores edgework and gender is Batchelor's (2007) work with young (female) prisoners. Batchelor found that the risk-taking violent behaviour engaged in by the young women was seen as a way to connect to their peers, show loyalty and to 'fit in' on one level. Some of the young female participants spoke of offending and violent risk-taking as resulting in a boost of self-esteem and self-efficacy. On a deeper level it was about managing emotions. Violent emotions were expressed through self-harm and by hurting others. Batchelor (2007) notes there was a sense of the violent and offending risk-taking practices connecting with "masculine meanings (e.g. independence, strength, emotional stoicism, toughness)" (p. 215), which disrupts dominant discourses of the way to 'do' gender – young women were not supposed "...to steal cars [or] break into houses" (p. 215), for instance. Batchelor suggests this behaviour was a form of 'gender trouble' – disrupting the norm about how to be girls. Batchelor understands the girls as appropriating "an ideology of femininity according to which the use of violence was socially sanctioned" within the setting (p. 215). It was a way to take control of their 'out of control' lives. This interpretation is of particular relevance to my study in regard to being an intelligible (possible/successful) girl subject within schooling discourses, as much of the dialogue with the young female participants was around fighting and self-harm which positioned them as unintelligible (successful) girl subjects; rendered intelligible only through discourses of risk. These ideas surface again in Chapters 6 and 7, adding another level of complexity to the ways in which the young female participants were labelled and/or appropriated 'risky' identities, and how they negotiated these labels, through the retelling of edgework stories, to feel good about themselves.

As with Batchelor's work (2007), an increasing number of studies have adopted theories of edgework when exploring reasons for youth crime (Ferrell, Milovanovic, & Lyng, 2001; Halsey & Young, 2006; Hayward, 2002; Lyng, 1993; Miller, 2005). Lyng (2005) contends that an understanding of the sensual dynamics of crime, as highlighted by Katz (1988), has similar patterns connected with edgework practices. He views the main link between crime and voluntary risk-taking as an "inherently chaotic, anarchistic nature of

these two domains [i.e., crime and edgework] of experience” (p. 27). Miller’s (2005) work on young people and the sensual side of delinquency also draws on the work of Lyng (1990) and Katz (1988) to understand crime as “an array of reactions against mundane, secular rationality” taking place “within specific structural contexts” (Miller, 2005, p. 155). Here “crime is seen as a powerful, seductive, emotional experience” that allows young people “to transcend their otherwise routine mundane lives” (pp. 155-156). Just as the ABS statistics and the research mentioned above suggest, scholarly work has linked juvenile delinquency to fun or relieving boredom (for example Cohen, 1955; Ferdinand, 1996) with a new interest emerging in the sensation-seeking side of crime. Miller suggests that linking edgework to juvenile delinquency highlights the “relatively powerless, marginal social status occupied by juveniles” (2005, p. 156). He argues that the social structures that constrain young people can cause social exclusion or a sense of alienation, and that edgework is a way for these young people to escape constraints and regulation enforced and controlled by adults (through structures and systems, such as schools and the law) - to feel a sense of control of the self through working the chaotic edge.

Above I discussed how voluntary risk-taking can be viewed through a gendered approach which understands gender, risk and risk-taking as being interwoven and I have shown how this connects to youth crime. A main theme emerging from these studies is the seduction of ‘sensation seeking’ through crime – the rush a young person gets when engaging in ‘risky’ experiences that could get them into trouble (graffiti, shoplifting, burglary and drug taking) (Miller, 2005). Another theme in these studies is the hero/fame status they get among their peers for being ‘risky’ (Campos, 2005). Although I do not directly explore the reasons why the young people participating in the community-based (arts/sports) programs engaged in criminal activity, their informal dialogue over the course of my observations provided insight into their rationales for being ‘risky’. Also, understanding Lyng’s (2005) theory of edgework helps to build my argument around *Risk with a twist*. That is, it can be used to explain how the voluntary risk-taking of the young people in my study has not only positioned them to meet the requirements of accessibility

to the community-based (arts/sports) programs, but also provided them with a sense of identity among a peer group in which they can use the ‘at-risk’ label to realise self and feel powerful among their peers and within the culture of the programs.

Thus, the theory of edgework (combined with theories of performativity) allows me to expose the enabling aspects of the ‘at-risk’ discourse for young people and begin to fill gaps in the literature discussed above by considering how edgework applies to the peer context. It helps me argue that perhaps these programs at some level work (although unintentionally) to maintain, create or celebrate risky acts among certain groups of young people. Using this theory (combined with theories of governmentality) also allows me to highlight that these young people’s feelings of empowerment are ultimately constrained by dominant discourses and structures in society – a further twist to being ‘at-risk’. As I go on to demonstrate in the next section, however, there is a significant role played by the mass communications media in promoting voluntary risk-taking as enabling youth, functioning as a ‘way out’ of poverty, geographic disadvantage or isolation, and as a way to become somebody - become known or famous. For most young people who buy this dream however, their fame is experienced only in an ‘impoverished’, constrained and/or temporary sense.

### *Popular Culture – Fame and/or Alternative Ways Out of ‘Risky’ Lives*

This section examines: 1) how voluntary risk-taking is glorified in the media and becomes a way to gain fame and status among peer groups; and 2) how celebrity discourses (using examples from music and sport) can be seen as a ‘way out of a hard life’ for young people considered ‘at-risk’. This happens when the very same ‘riskiness’ that constitutes them as losers or unsuccessful/impossible (school) subjects twists into admiration that reconstitutes them as winners among their peers. In this way, young people considered ‘at-risk’ can simultaneously be positioned as winners in some contexts (e.g., in the eyes of their peers) yet losers in other contexts (e.g., the eyes of their school teachers).

Fischer, Kastenmu'ller, Greitemeyer, Vogrincic, and Sauer point out, "there has been a surge in the quantity of media content that glorifies risk-taking behavior, such as risky driving, extreme sports, or binge drinking" (2011, p. 367). An example they give (one that all the boys in the programs I observed spoke about) is the famous MTV series *Jackass*, which premiered in 2000. In this series of movies the main character Johnny Knoxville, and his band of merry risk-takers engage in all types of various potentially self-harming stunts (for instance setting themselves on fire, stapling their testicles together, and being shot at close range in the genital area with a paint gun). Fischer et al.'s (2011) findings suggest there is a strong connection between glorified risk-taking in the media and young people engaging in risk-taking in their own lives. In a sense, this type of edgework is similar to the graffiti artists in Campos's (2013) study, where the young people engage in risk-taking that "may be interpreted as a form of an identity and performative game" (p. 158). Where the game is based on adventure and (in a way) heroics. As these young people must imagine and engage in stunt/risk-taking that brings them to the edge, that will prove their 'toughness' as men. Furthermore, interpreting this type of self-harm risk-taking as being a 'way to fame' for some young people (such as in the movie *Jackass*) and to gain hero status (through social media such as Facebook, and mobile phones), opens up the possibility to explore how risk-taking/edgework can be enabling for the 'at-risk' subject. Even the 'risky' act of throwing a party can lead to fame these days. For example, the Australian *Party Boy*, Corey Worthington, whose 'riskiness' caused damage to his parents' house and neighbourhood in excess of a million dollars, but plummeted him into celebrity status overnight (Kakmi, n.d.).

Another form of 'riskiness' in the media that is glorified is the notion of a 'hard risky life' equating to success in certain reality TV programs. Graeme Turner (2006) argues "that the function of the media has mutated as it has increasingly directly participated in the construction of cultural identity as one of its primary spheres of activity" (p. 154). Allen and Mendick (2012) take up this understanding of a structural shift in western media in

their work on popular culture and identity, to show “how young people’s identity work through Reality TV [RTV] involves making judgements of different ways of being and how this (re)produces social class inequalities” (p. 460). They suggest that, despite seemingly equating success with a ‘risky’ or disadvantaged background, RTV ultimately focuses on a middle class subject who has agency and access to resources that are necessary for ‘successful’ identity construction. This focus produces an image of the working class subject as being ‘located outside of the good authentic self’ (p. 462). Their work demonstrates how young people (regardless of their socio-economic background) tend to find authenticity in RTV, where they can connect what they are viewing to their lives, which can be problematic. For example, in shows like *Australian Idol*, *American Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance?*, and *The X Factor*, a number of the contestants are portrayed through visual images and descriptions by the program hosts (and by the contestants themselves) as coming from hard/troubled lives – in other words, or in government speak, where they were ‘at-risk’ of failing to transition to a successful adulthood.

Take, for example, Stan Walker, who was the winner of *Australian Idol 2009*. Stan describes his life to the media as being akin to the families depicted in the 1994 movie *Once Were Warriors* which tells the story of an urban Maori family and their problems with poverty, alcoholism and domestic violence. Stan apparently discloses to the nation that his father was repeatedly gaoled for beating his wife and five children, including himself, which he claims to be the precursor to his drug taking and engagement in crime. Stan also suggests he was sexually abused and that his parents were drug dealers and both have spent time in gaol for drug offences<sup>21</sup>. This ‘riskiness’ becomes part of their intrinsic star quality (Turner, 2006). For the young ‘risky’ people who make it in the limelight, the emphasis (placed by the media) is on how their ‘riskiness’ (risk-taking) has made them

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<sup>21</sup> These details were taken from a compilation of media reports on [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stan\\_Walker#cite\\_note-truesurvivor-7](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stan_Walker#cite_note-truesurvivor-7) accessed June 2013

battlers, more self-determined, and that the chance to become a famous singer is their only way *out* of risk (not school or education).

Another ‘way out of a hard life’ represented in the mass media is the sport celebrity pathway. In a news article in the UK (2009) titled *Stars that had it hard: Chelsea new boy Yuri Zhirkov is the latest Premier League footballer who had a tough start in life...*, famous soccer celebrities are listed and described as having tough starts that included issues such as poverty, drugs, violence, crime, abuse, and difficulties in education. Just as these players are represented as using sport as a ‘way out’, so too are numerous Australian sport celebrities, particularly footballers. A recent article by Foster (2013) titled *Investing in Aboriginal youth will pay huge dividends* focused on Indigenous youth and football. Foster states ‘Football is a gate to the world, and we owe it to Aboriginal youth to give them the opportunity to follow the same path of John Moriarty, Harry Williams, Charles Perkins, Travis Odd, Jade North and the talented Sam Kerr and Kyah Simon’ (para. 2). Players such as John Moriarty and Charles Perkins have built a career in football after rising from ‘tough lives’. These two examples highlight that football can be a way to engage ‘successfully’ in the world. This notion is reinforced through the abundance of sports programs for youth ‘at-risk’ (as discussed in chapter 1 and again later in this chapter) that aim to improve the lives of youth ‘at-risk’.

Bamblett’s (2011) research highlights the ways overrepresentation of Indigenous people in popular sports (such as football) in particular ways adds to the essentialising of an Indigenous identity. His article provides an historical examination of how Indigenous sportspeople have been represented and understood in a dominantly deficit light. Of interest to this study is that it shows how representation through media and some research, although often written in a racist light, reinforces sport as a means to succeed as an Indigenous young person. Bamblett draws on a range of literature using quotes such as:

Society has a duty to foster Aboriginal sporting talent. In the past sport has been possibly the only area in which Aborigines have been able to achieve any sort of equality with Europeans. This is largely because of the

Aborigines' physical prowess. But it is also a reflection of the limited avenues open to Aborigines to express themselves (Harris 1984:21).

Sport, however, has another attribute: it is the avenue by which Aborigines and Islanders have earned and demanded the respect of non-Aboriginal Australia; it has given them a sense of worth and pride, especially since they have had to overcome the twin burdens of racism and opposition on the field. It has shown Aborigines and Islanders that using their bodies is still the one and only way they can compete on equal terms with an often hostile, certainly indifferent, mainstream society (Tatz and Tatz 2000:33). (cited in Bamblett, 2011, pp. 1-10)

These quotes highlight a dominant naturalising discourse about sports being the main 'way out' for young Indigenous people to succeed in society and gain some sense of respect - a discourse that provides a "restricted representation of Indigenous Australians...that foregrounds deficit and victimhood" (Bamblett, 2011, p. 1). My intention here is not to deny that these football players or Idol winners may have come from disadvantaged backgrounds, but rather to show how the media's overwhelming and sensationalised focus on this aspect of their lives, overshadows other aspects such as the hard work and dedication of these people and the financial support they may have been provided by television companies, record producers and sports-related corporations in order to help them succeed. The oversimplified representation of these celebrities has the potential to fuel the belief in young people that this status is achievable for all youth who are considered 'at-risk'.

My discussion in Chapter 7 shows that through their retelling of high-risk edgework narratives, the young people in this study demonstrate how 'working the edge' has afforded them fame amongst their peers and how the media can fuel a desire to seek fame as an alternative to educational success. These young people can escape a schooling context where they are rendered knowable *only* through 'risky' labels such as impossible/unsuccessful learners, and enter into a celebrity context where being rendered knowable through 'risky' labels becomes attributions of fame and success. Below I move

from broader media representations of high-risk edgework to the edgework that occurs within schooling contexts, both of which are fuelled by popular culture.

### *Risk-taking, Gender and Schooling - with a Twist of Popular Culture*

In this section I explore previous studies that assist me to understand 1) how boys and girls are made knowable as ‘at-risk’ subjects within schooling discourses; and 2) how the risky behaviours and dispositions of young people that position them as only intelligible as ‘at-risk’ subjects at school, become understood as successful masculine or feminine identities through certain media representations.

Dimitriadis (2005) contends that young people “construct, sustain and maintain notions of self, history, and community through popular cultural texts” (p. 6), often in ways that are more compelling than the ones offered in traditional schooling contexts and curricula (p. XI). Youdell’s (2006a) work on educational exclusion reminds us that in order for boys and girls to be rendered knowable as successful/possible learners and acceptable students they must act in certain ways that make sense of these labels within schooling discourses. For example, for a girl to be viewed through school discourses as successful she must continually cite the rules of being a successful female student – being co-operative, empathetic, and industrious (Youdell, 2006a, p. 44). Linley Walker’s (2012) article on *Girls, Schooling and Subcultures of Resistance* highlights the connection between high school teachers labelling a certain group of Australian working class young teenage girls as ‘at-risk’ (e.g., time wasters, having severe discipline problems, impossible learners, who teachers would actively avoid teaching). Walker explored the ways in which the young girls resisted the label, refused to be acknowledged as ‘dumb’ and took up ‘masculine’ behaviours (such as boasting about sexual experiences and fighting) in asserting their identities and managing risk. The young girls felt they did not resist schooling as such, rather they did not like the ‘bad teachers’ who could not, or would not, ‘do their job’, and who viewed the girls as problems, not individuals. This perception was

shared by girls participating in Martino and Pallotta-Chiaroll's (2005) research, however these girls were less outward when they pushed the boundaries and resisted in more passive ways than boys, such as by wagging school. Although the girls participating in my study also shared this perspective, their resistance was not always passive – taking up more 'masculine' forms of resistance like the girls in Walker's study. The young people in my study retelling stories about their risk-taking and resistance to teachers (such as wagging, confronting teachers who they felt treated them unfairly and fighting) positioned themselves as powerful, 'risky' identities within their peer groups, while also performing unconventional ways of being a girl – which in turn made them unintelligible within schooling discourses as successful students (a theme I take up in Chapter 7).

In considering how popular culture views the successful girl identity, I draw on Kim Allen's article *Girls Imagining Careers in the Limelight: Social Class, Gender and Fantasies of "Success"* who contends (supported by research such as McRobbie, 2004, 2007; Projansky, 2007; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008) that:

...popular culture has been identified as a key site in which the "successful girl" discourse of neoliberalism is reproduced...[and how] celebrity culture, alongside popular media is understood to articulate new ideals attached to "have it all" femininity orientated around social mobility and compulsory success, and self-reinvention and transformation through consumption. (2011, p. 151)

This depiction moves away from young women as just being viewed through traditional images of the sexed-up 'bad girl' stereotype (for example Carmen Electra) by also taking on the concept of *Girl Power*. This is where girls can "be who they wanna be" and "not take any shit" from others (Bell, 2011, p. 200), especially teachers, parents, police and where the taking up of stereotypically masculine ways of acting (such as fighting), is seen as being powerful. The catch phrase 'Girl Power' on one hand, embodies a "young women's new style of neo-liberal feminist display; a self-styled, sexy, brash and individualized expression of power" (Harris, 2003, p.40). On the other hand, there is an "image of young women as the new risk-takers" and that young women's 'risky' behaviour

has become a focus for more general moral concern about juvenile delinquency, nihilism and anti-social attitudes in recent times” (Harris, 2003, p. 41)<sup>22</sup>.

An example that comes to mind when thinking about media representations of the girl subject being rendered knowable as successful learner or an acceptable student, and the re-shaping of womanhood, is a famous Australian TV character (who oozes Girl Power but in a ‘bitchy barbie bullying’ form), namely one of Chris Lilley’s<sup>23</sup> main characters in his mockumentary *Summer Heights High*, Ja’mie King. Ja’mie’s racist, pretentious, private school girl character (who is extremely discriminative of the public school students who she is associating with on her school exchange) shows us an example of a strong, self-confident successful Australian female identity, who will do what it takes to get what she wants. Ja’mie is the classic neo-liberal girl subject - the private school girl - she has to prove she can have it all. Ja’mie positions herself as a winner throughout each episode, from her condescending assembly speech on the first day where she emphasises the winner/loser binary between private/public schools (stating “private schools create better quality citizens who earn lots of money...while wife beaters and rapists are nearly all public school educated”), to shifting blame on those public school girls she pretends to like - joking about them behind their backs (i.e. calling them “try-hard Asians”, “housing commission whores”) - by telling them to “take a joke”, “learn what a sense of humour is” and “honestly, build a bridge and get over it”. But even if she is constituted as a ‘winner’ she is constantly stressed and guilty that she is not working hard enough. The working-class girl (the girls who the character associates with in the public system) is

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<sup>22</sup> Harris provides the examples of this other risky image of girl power - “increased public debate, research funding and punitive legal measures are evident in relation to girls’ involvement in crime (especially gangs and violent crime), sexual behaviour (particularly teen pregnancy and STDs) and drug taking (including alcohol, cigarettes and especially ecstasy)...”(2003, p. 41).

<sup>23</sup> “In the acclaimed television series *We Can Be Heroes*, *Summer Heights High* and *Angry Boys*, and *Ja’mie King: Private School Girl* Chris Lilley skewers well-worn cultural stereotypes and television tropes. *Summer Heights High* follows three main characters: Ja’mie King as an exchange student at the co-ed public school Summer Heights High; Jonah Takalua, a Year 8 student of Tongan descent, and Greg Gregson (aka Mr G) a camp, megalomaniacal drama teacher” (Davis, 2012, p. 100). Of interest in the context of this study is Ja’mie and Jonah as the satirised depiction of their characters, using pre-existing familiar ‘risky’ identity categories, embody some of the characteristics seen in the young participants in this study.

prevented from being a winner in this sense because she is not even aware of neoliberal discourse in her working-class public school (Charles, 2010). Although attempting to mock stereotypes, this female character actually implies (especially to young people) that it is 'cool' to act this way and if you do you will be popular among your school friends. This can work to reinforce 'risky' behaviours in young girls, which in turn render them as unacceptable students within school contexts. The extreme rendition in Lilley's 2013 *Ja'mie King: Private School Girl* highlighted the performativity of the character's sense of self, and the emptiness behind this performance of Ja'mie's self obsession.

When thinking about research on young men, risk-taking and schooling, Jim Walker's (1988) classic Australian ethnographic work *Louts and Legends: Male Youth Culture in an Inner City School* is of interest. Walker followed the lives (in and outside of school) of a group of Year Ten boys (the footballers) over 5 years, focusing on their experiences of schooling, the ways they "tackled their problems...in which they encounter the agents of education and social policy" (p. 4) and their transition from school. Walker's descriptions of the boys who were considered *Legends* depict someone who would stand up for themselves and their mates, against authority or anything else that was physical, especially on the sporting field, "who showed prowess, and who engaged in daring or exciting escapades" (p. 3). It appeared playing football was a vital requirement to be a *Legend*. This hero/fame status within a schooling context was also evident in Wayne Martino's (1999) work on young Australian males in a private co-ed school setting, where the *cool boys* and *party animals* were footy players, drank alcohol and took drugs. Walker's book describes the ways some teachers saw the Legends as *top* students while others understood them as being *Louts*. The boys in Martino's research discuss how many of the 'cool' boys tended to purposely put education aside (in a sense taking a risk with their employment opportunities) - despite understanding the value of education - to ensure their hegemonic 'cool' masculine identities remained intact among their peers.

Youdell (2006b) emphasises how a boy is also subject to the rules of being a boy and, that within those rules, “the discursive practices that constitute certain heterosexual masculinities – entitlement, aggression, active sexuality – can constitute subjects that are incommensurate with school discourses of acceptable learners who are restrained, malleable and asexual” (p. 45). In other words, performing traditional masculine identities (such as being tough and aggressive) may be seen as accepted within peer groups and in the wider society, however when these identities are displayed in classrooms the boys are constituted by teachers as being unacceptable students. The risk-taking the young men engaged in, in and out of school, in Walker’s study, such as ‘risky’ behaviours in the classroom and high-risk behaviours out of school like drugs and underage alcohol consumption, seemed to sit within the social norms of masculinity and peer groups of being a *good Aussie bloke*. But far from being called ‘legends’, they were labelled by teachers as ‘deviants’, ‘at-risk’ (‘louts’ in the vernacular of an earlier time; Walker, 1988). They were named by policy as ‘at-risk’ subjects in need of regulation, and they were sometimes named as ‘losers’ by themselves and their peers - despite the young boys also believing their peers perceived them as ‘legends’ and ‘cool’. This ambiguity/tension is a dimension I build on in Chapter 7.

In considering some of the boys participating in my study, the discursive practices of hegemonic masculinity, and labels such as *louts*, *legends*, *larrikins* and *cool boys*, I am again reminded of Chris Lilley’s series *Summer Heights High*, and his complex character, Jonah Takalua – a troubled Tongan school boy. The ways in which this character seeks attention in the classroom and feels constantly under surveillance from the teachers and the schools – like he *can’t get a break* – was a common discussion amongst the boys in my study. Here the viewer can see through the TV series how Jonah is constituted by the teachers as an impossible learner, who engages in “performatives that do not make sense in the discourses that frame schooling” (Youdell, 2006b, p. 45). Yet out in the school yard amongst his peers he is perceived as a hero. As the series progresses the viewers watch as Jonah takes up, negotiates, resists and reinforces ‘risky’ labels. He is positioned in ‘risky’

ways by the teachers, yet, in a sense, sees through this positioning and gives it back to them. Then ultimately, he is excluded from classrooms, and eventually from the school itself. Although the series was a satirical comedy it resonated with many young boys in my study as if it was a window into their own life – and they would quote the show like a cult classic (i.e., “Sorry Miss, I’m just allergic to some shit up here. I must be allergic to your fart Miss”, “Okay Miss. You said put my balls on the ground! My balls are on the ground”, “Miss, look! Stop molesting my arm Miss!”). The lure of Jonah perhaps sprung from his anti-authoritarian and ‘smart arse’ approach to schooling when teachers were clearly treating him unfairly, and the swearing and rude stories he tells in the school yard enabled him to be seen as a cult hero.

In summary, it is important to consider gender when unpacking notions of risk in relation to risk-taking behaviours, popular culture and schooling, as gendered approaches to working with youth considered ‘at-risk’, and the gendered ‘at-riskness’ of the young people themselves are evident in my analysis. But rather than seeking a pre-existing or irrefutable ‘truth’ about young people’s gendered identities, I focus instead on investigating young people’s production and negotiation of subjectivities and how they assert certain ways of being a female or male ‘at-risk’ subject – and negotiate the affordances of this subject position within their peer culture.

The discussion now moves to a focus on youth work, particularly in the context of community-based (arts/sports) programs because youth work is primarily associated with youth ‘at-risk’, and such programs are common ‘interventions’ to address ‘at-risk’ youth. I consider the background to youth work, and examine the literature on youth work in community-based (arts/sports) programs to explore the ways these types of programs can become spaces for young people to negotiate, take up, resist, reinforce and twist the ‘at-risk’ label. Furthermore, examining the mismatches between youth work and youth policy offers possibilities to analyse the ways in which the youth workers in my study sought to

resist the ‘at-risk’ label - yet ended up developing programs which can be viewed as extensions of (neoliberal) governance, that ultimately seek to regulate risky youthful identities.

## **Programs, Policy and (Re) Positioning the Precarious ‘I’**

In this section I consider two questions in regard to the significance of my study: ‘Why youth workers?’ and ‘Why community-based (arts/sports) programs?’ The following passages address these questions by initially building an understanding of what youth work is and how community-based (arts/sports) programs engage youth in numerous ways, including identity work. An important aspect of this discussion is the ways in which popular culture influences these programs and its appeal for young people, particularly those youth labelled ‘at-risk’. The discussion then moves on to literature focused on the mismatches of policy and practice perceived by youth workers, and effected upon young people engaging in community-based (arts/sports) programs.

### *Working with Youth is ‘My Life Passion’!*

This section discusses the ways current youth work is intrinsically connected to youth ‘at-risk’ by firstly discussing the historical understanding of youth work, the changes of that understanding and exasperation experienced by youth workers regarding mismatches of policy and practice. Then I examine the how youth worker employment positions are advertised in ways that discursively constitute the young clients they will potentially work with as ‘at-risk’ before they even come in contact with them.

### **A Historical Understanding of Youth Work**

“Youth work in Australia has a long and generally distinguished reputation” (White, 2010, p. 1), with youth workers increasingly being understood as professionals. Batsleer and Davies (2010) contend it is difficult to actually have one definition of youth work, so they offer a number of aspects of youth work which include circumstances such as the

following: 1) Young people choose to be involved; 2) Youth workers consider what is happening in the young person's life as a starting point and then motivate/support youth to move beyond this; 3) The development of trust between youth workers and young people; 4) Youth workers aim to shift the balance of power/control within the programs to the young people to some extent; and 5) Youth work/ers reaches a diversity of youth with an understanding that equity and promoting equality of opportunity is focal to each program (pp. 1-4). By considering these aspects, youth work can be understood as a process where the youth worker and young people deconstruct socially constructed borders and boundaries (such as 'riskiness') through community-based programs (Coburn, 2010). This understanding appears to position youth work as in permanent opposition to the forces that constitute certain groups of youth (such as those considered 'at-risk') in a negative and apparently powerless light. White (2010) presents a collection of articles on youth work that discuss the exasperation of youth workers to the ways social and political trends impact and shape youth work itself, such as having to bend to political trends which may not meet the actual needs of young people. Batsleer and Davies (2010), however, contend that "youth work has always been compliant to prevailing social trends, caught perennially between the magnetic poles of rescue and reform, whether of institutions or individuals" (p. 153). This positions youth workers in tricky situations where they are required to follow these social trends and meet policy perceived needs of youth, and simultaneously resist them to meet the 'real'<sup>24</sup> needs of the young people.

One area of interest to my study is youth work, governmentality and the notion of a surveillance state. de St Croix (2010) draws on a number of UK youth policies to examine the ways young people are increasingly under state surveillance. UK policies such as *Every Child Matters* are comparable with Australia's Federal strategy *Closing the Gap*. In each there is a focus on a young person's 'journey/transition' to adulthood being under surveillance as it is seen as a precarious time, where certain groups of youth need

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<sup>24</sup> The term is used in this thesis not to suggest that I 'know' the 'real' needs of the young people, but to highlight that there is a difference in what policy, and sometimes youth workers, perceive as the needs of young people and what the young people themselves understand as their immediate needs.

intervention and regulation to ‘keep on track’ (as discussed earlier in Chapter 1). de St Croix (2010) discusses how youth work itself has become a form of surveillance, with youth workers required to keep and share records on young people through requirements of protection policies. de St Croix highlights that youth workers are increasingly under surveillance, and that within a “neo-liberal model, public services [such as community-based youth programs] are treated as businesses, given measurable targets” (2010, p. 152) where their public (youth) services/programs are required to show accountability for successfully meeting set outcomes about and for young people – in this context young people who are considered ‘at-risk’.

### **Youth Work (Today) and Targeted ‘Risky’ Youth**

Definitions of the term ‘youth worker’ in online job advertisements commonly indicate that youth workers are people who are foremost passionate about working with young people, and who believe in promoting the personal, educational and social development of young people mainly aged between 13 and 19, by developing positive skills and attitudes. The job advertisements suggest that as youth workers, they develop and facilitate programs aimed to engage young people, provide opportunities for them to be heard, value their opinions, redress inequalities, and empower individuals to address issues affecting their lives, including health, education, and unemployment.

Youth work is underpinned by a clear set of values. These include young people choosing to take part; starting with young people’s view of the world; treating young people with respect; seeking to develop young people’s skills and attitudes rather than remedy ‘problem behaviours’; helping young people develop stronger relationships and collective identities; respecting and valuing difference; and promoting the voice of the young people. (National Youth Agency, 2001-2013, p. 1)

When looking at these definitions of youth workers and youth work in employment advertisements it becomes clear, through the language used, that youth work targets certain types of young people, with certain types of issues. The words used in the above definition of youth work focus on inequalities and ‘problem behaviours’ (even though it

is used as an example of what not to focus on). The definition draws attention to, and hints at, what issues might be going on in the young people's lives. In many of the job descriptions viewed in my search for a definition of youth worker the phrase *will possess experience working with marginalised and at-risk youth* was prominent.

In answering my first question about why I selected youth workers for this study, it is apparent that from the initial stage of employment for youth workers, there is a strong understanding that they will be working with 'at-risk' subjects who are understood through pre-existing expert knowledge about the *truths* of youth (Kelly, 2000a). As my research interest lies with young people and risk, involving youth workers in my study became a vital point of contact to gain access to young people considered 'at-risk'. In answering my second question, the following section focuses on community-based (arts/sports) programs and the ways they engage young people. Although this study does not focus specifically on art products or on particular types of sports in the program (as the observed programs used the arts/sports within a broader range of activities) it is important to understand the appeal of these programs in general and the continual use of art/sport-based approaches for young people considered 'at-risk'. I also provide some examples of research focused on art-based programs, specifically, that have been used to make sense of young people's identity construction (McDonald, 1999; Conrad, 2006), and discuss how my study builds on their findings. I focus on art programs here because the data arising from the art element in my observed programs was much more prominent than the data found in relation to the sports element.

### *Engaging 'Risky' Identities: Community-Based (arts/sports) Programs*

#### **Community-Based Arts Programs**

There is an increasing body of research into the benefits of arts education and community arts programs/projects which emphasises the positive effects (such as building self-

confidence/esteem/worth and building skills) for young people engaging in the arts, and argues for strategic partnerships between artists, schools and community organisations (Department of Culture and the Arts, 2010; Dreezen, 1992; Gibson & Anderson, 2008). Although lagging behind international trends of the utilisation of arts education (Gibson & Anderson, 2008), creative arts practices are increasingly integrated into Australian school-based and community-based programs aimed at young people considered ‘at-risk’ (Australia Council for the Arts, 2006; Hopkins, 2011; Hughes & Wilson, 2003; Jones, 2000; Marsden & Thiele, 2000; Mills & Brown, 2004; O'Brien & Donelan, 2007). The Rudd Government had invested ten million dollars over a four-year period (at the time of my data collection) to promote participation in arts and cultural activities in local spaces (Garrett, 2007). Later, the Gillard Government’s *Youth Development and Support Program* (YDSP), under the *National Strategy for Young Australians 2010*, was developed to help re-connect young people with their communities through community-based arts programs. Not all of these programs, however, targeted youth ‘at-risk’ or enforced compulsory attendance (as did the programs in my study). So, initially I focus on how arts has been used (in general) to re-engage youth in rural NSW, and then I provide examples of programs and discuss research focussed on identity work among young people in arts programs that target marginalised or disadvantaged youth.

In RNSW much of the available funding for community-based programs at the time of my data collection was limited and related to welfare and the arts, not sports<sup>25</sup>. State and Commonwealth funding often supports programs/projects that use elements of popular culture to engage young people and offer them a medium for self-expression (Pope, 2007). Projects such as *Multi-Media Mayhem* (Brumby, Eversole, Scholfield, & Watt, 2007)<sup>26</sup>,

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<sup>25</sup> The sport programs within the local area of my study tended to be run by sporting organisations and targeted young people who could afford to attend them – perhaps this was due to the lack of youth focused organisations. For example, at the time of my study the only space offered/made known (through the local youth refuge that young people considered ‘at-risk’ could ‘hang out’) was shut down due to asbestos being found in the building material, and nothing was opened to replace that space.

<sup>26</sup> *Multimedia Mayhem*, utilising a creative arts approach, worked across numerous rural towns in an attempt to bridge the divisions between agencies, between countryside, town and city, between ‘good students’ and ‘at-risk’ youth, and between the young people of the region and the region’s decision makers.

and *Art Parking* (Australian Government, 2011)<sup>27</sup>, Abbot's (2001) work with rural youth and photography to open up spaces for their 'voice'; and Cassidy and Watts' *Snagged* (2004)<sup>28</sup>, has utilised multiple forms of expressive media and popular culture to open spaces for rural youth to be heard. As with most creative art programs, many arts-based programs in rural areas are based on the notion that rural youth who are disenfranchised from school may experience social isolation (as discussed previously), and may be drawn to spaces provided by community-based organisations – if their towns have provision for such services. The programs in this study were closely connected with schools, and conducted within school hours; however (and contrary to the definition of youth work we have seen above) some of the young people had been given no choice but to attend the programs, so that their interest in the alternate, arts-based activities on offer was irrelevant.

Research by Conrad (2006) on a school-based arts (Popular Theatre<sup>29</sup>) program with young (Canadian) Aboriginal people – *Living in the sticks* – sought to understand how generations of critical thinking (about youth 'at-risk' as deficit) can be manipulated in these artistic spaces, "while inviting poststructuralist engagement with the discourses that shape thinking and behaviour" (Conrad, 2006, p. 437). Conrad's study explored: 1) young people's beliefs about how particular lived experiences placed them 'at-risk' (being bored in a rural town = 'risky' behaviour); 2) the discourses that shaped these lived experiences

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<sup>27</sup> *Art Parking* provided film and social networking tools to open spaces for young people to have a voice in the community and dispel feelings of isolation often stemming from residing in rural locations. The Project involved workshops that were varied and tailored to suit specific community needs, taking place in schools, during holidays and as regular afterschool classes. It allowed young people from across the Central West of NSW to become involved and skilled in media production and digital storytelling (Australian Government, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> "*Snagged* was a play that sought to fill the gap and provide a voice for young rural people. It was founded on the assumption that it needed to relate to the 'lived experience' of the target audience if it was to be perceived by them as a credible, relevant and a life-changing event. Therefore, in addition to a literature search, interviews and focus groups were conducted with a group of Year 11 students from a rural community prior to and during the writing of the play. From the findings of this research, playwright Robert Kronk, director Howard Cassidy and a team of Performing Arts students from Central Queensland University developed *Snagged*, a play about life for young people in rural communities" (Cassidy & Watts, 2004, p.35).

<sup>29</sup> Popular Theatre is the use of arts for personal and social change.

to better understand their risk-taking (by adapting Lyng's (2005) edgework theory) and provide spaces for them to re-examine their beliefs on their risk-taking; and 3) the role of the arts in exploring these perceptions. The final performance in Conrad's research was a visual production that sought to disrupt and challenge dominant discourses. Like Conrad, I have adopted Lyng's (2005) theory of edgework to examine and discuss how the young people's engagement in voluntary risk-taking is viewed in positive ways. However, I do not seek to understand how their risk-taking disrupts dominant discourses, but instead seek to analyse how edgework provides opportunities for them to twist notions of risk as they negotiate 'at-risk' identities within the community-based (arts/sports) programs. Conrad offers a "reinterpretation [of the 'at-risk' subject] as a Foucauldian (1977) counter-narrative that unsettles the 'common sense' or taken-for-granted understandings of 'at-risk', for attention to knowledge defined as illegitimate by the dominant discourse allows the possibility of things to be otherwise" (Conrad, 2005, p. 38). I extend Conrad's work and incorporate the roles policy, practice and community-based programs play in resisting and/or reinforcing the 'at-risk' subject and the way the 'at-risk' label has enabling and constraining affects for the young people in my study.

Anna Hickey-Moody's research explores "how the arts are ways [for young people] of belonging, resisting, being governed, and being heard" (2013, Foreword). She draws on Kelly (2001) to engage in a "political critique of risk that problematizes youth arts programs" (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 56). Going back to Hickey-Moody's (2013) example earlier in this chapter, about the 'risky' connection between Indigenous youth and moral panics, she further links this connection to youth art programs, suggesting wide-ranging cultural angst in regard to how "citizenship and access to resources are managed explicitly through the ways that youth art programs perform modes of governance established within risk discourse" (2013, p. 56). Furthermore, Hickey-Moody asserts that a lot of research involving youth arts is based on an understanding that youth 'at-risk' are the 'proper subjects' to be engaging in arts programs. Hickey-Moody's work does not discount the benefits gained through using art programs with young people, but questions the ways in

which they can function as “a form of social and aesthetic regulation that places responsibility on young people to become readable through dominant popular aesthetic tropes” (2013, p. 59). This is useful to my study, as the question of arts (and sports) programs merely being other forms of regulation is central to my argument, and in Chapter 6 I show how program designs and youth worker practices often became an extension of neoliberal governance of youth within the programs, reinforcing both inequality, and the constitution of the ‘at-risk’ subject.

### **Community-Based Sports Programs**

Similarly, there is a plethora of literature connecting sports programs with successful outcomes linked to health-related, educational and social elements (for example Coalter, 2005; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Gould & Carson, 2008; Holt, 2008). Sport-based approaches in areas such as youth work are seen as positive activities for young people, particularly those considered socially vulnerable, ‘at-risk’ and *harder to reach* (Crabbé, 2007; Feinstein, Bynner, & Duckworth, 2007; Spaaij, 2009). Sports are “viewed as an opportunity to actively engage young people...across a range of issues including education, employment and training, community leadership and healthy lifestyles” (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Nols, 2013, p. 472). Morris et al. (2003) highlight that there is an abundance of scholarly work related to sport/physical activity being used to address antisocial behaviour displayed by certain groups of youth. In relation to this Coalter argues that use of sports-approaches as ways to alleviate risky issues faced by youth, “are mostly guided by inflated promises and lack of conceptual clarity” (2011, p.473; also see Kelly, L., 2011). In other words, such approaches are based on an assumption that sport will solve all ills. Coalter contends that there is a lack of clarity on why organisations (such as community-based youth programs) “assume that participation in particular sports programmes can have certain impacts on [the young] people participating in them” (2011, p. 473). Tacon (2007) highlights that the use of football (soccer) to help young people in regard to social inclusion is prevalent in sport literature, yet in line with Coalter’s (2011) assertions, claims that there is little research that rigorously evaluates football-based social inclusion projects.

The work of Nichols (2005) emphasises the benefits of using sport programs to reduce youth crime. He argues that there needs to be more than just generalisations about the benefits of sports, and he also provides a ‘how-to-do-it’ manual, aimed at managers of programs, policy makers, researchers and university students. Morris et al.’s (2003) Australian research looked at 175 sport based programs across Australia, and found that 81% targeted young people who were ‘at-risk’ of, or engaged with, drugs and criminal activities. They claim that the two main characteristics of sport and physical activity are that they 1) reduce boredom, and 2) decrease the amount of unsupervised leisure time (2003, p. 2). These characteristics of boredom and lack of adult supervision are also understood as reasons why young people commit crimes, as discussed previously in this chapter. These last points are of direct relevance to my thesis, as the youth workers involved in running the programs I observed perceived the use of sports as vital when reaching out and working with youth ‘at-risk’. This was particularly the case with boys, while a number of the boys in this study understood that becoming superstars through ‘footy’ was a ‘way out’ of a ‘hard life’.

The aim of my discussion to this point was to highlight how arts/sports programs and practices tend to target youth ‘at-risk’ as their potential participants, thus providing an understanding of why community-based (arts/sports) programs were chosen as sites to be studied. As discussed above and in Chapter 1, research reviewing these types of programs is limited in addressing what happens within the programs in regard to young people negotiating, resisting, reinforcing, and twisting ‘risky’ identities, and (neoliberal) governing processes. Accessing community-based (arts/sports) programs has provided opportunities in my study to observe, interact and explore the ways young people are constituted as ‘at-risk’ subjects within the boundaries of policy, practice and discourses of risk. Furthermore, these programs presented opportunities for me to explore the youth workers’ perceptions of mismatches that underpin the interplay between policy and practice.

### *Mismatches: Policy and Practice*

Cohen and Young's (1981) work highlights how research and policies overlap, and how tensions arise between these areas as they seek to solve the 'youth question'. These tensions or disjunctures impact on the construction of youth 'at-risk', with research showing that young people located within recognised categories of risk are particularly vulnerable to policy and institutional factors impacting on their educational and social experience (Apte et al., 2001; Collins, Kenway, & McLeod, 2000; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Kenway, 1997; White & Wyn, 2004). Of relevance to my study is research in the area of youth work which contends that youth workers in community-based organisations often provide a critical and formative context for ameliorating these disjunctures by building trust in community relations, liaising between young people and other social institutions, and developing young people's capacity for critical reflection and social engagement (Banks, Butcher, Henderson, & Robertson, 2003; Savicki, 2002).

By examining the lived experiences of young people considered 'at-risk' through community-based (arts/sports) programs I offer the opportunity for these youth to have a *voice*. Although this *voice* may be shaped by the adults involved, the political discursive boundaries of the programs and my representations of it – it is a voice that is often silenced in educational institutions. Juxtaposed to this, Batsleer (2011, p. 422) considers Cook-Sather's (2007, p. 394) question, "Does the demand for student voice 'welcome selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better exclude the margin?'..." Furthermore, this sense of seeing and hearing young people 'at-risk' within their lived narratives is fraught with restrictions – even though research around community-based (arts/sports) programs boasts success stories for those who participate (Crabbé, 2007; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). Batsleer (2011, p. 422) suggests that the overarching opinion that youth work is successful in engaging marginalised youth "is a direct consequence of pedagogic codes which position and classify identity-talk within a discourse of 'youth' occurring outside of school". Batsleer argues that although the identity-talk in these programs occurs

outside school, the ‘sub-voices’ cannot escape classification systems – and are “codified through the practices of forums/parliaments” (2011, p. 424). As I argue in the analysis that follows, the identity work/talk that occurs within such programs is bound by the intersection of national political, economic, social agendas and federal funding strategies that steer the themes of the projects. Moreover, the identity work is bound by how the arts/sports (and other activity approaches) are practiced within them, and by the restriction of access to specific groups of youth (Hager, 2003, p. 82) on the basis of their mismatch with formal schooling – thus reiterating the mismatch between policy, practice and the needs of young people.

### **Chapter Summary**

When professionals in educational institutions target specific youth to participate in community-based (arts/sports) programs, they are exacerbating the label of ‘at-risk’; making clear to the student, their family and society, that these young people are victims, in turn limiting their agency from them (Podd, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1996). Batsleer (2011) further stresses that despite producing spaces and avenues for youth to speak out, “homogenising “youth”...produces a discourse of riskiness or trouble. This discourse [in turn] offers powerful codes of communication which shape what counts as ‘voice’...” (p. 423). It would seem that as young people ‘at-risk’ (engaged in community (arts/sports) programs) explore possible selves and ‘become’ through productive discursive practices (Butler, 1993), they are limited by the risk discourse (reinforced by policy and often by the very program that aims to empower them) that allows them access to participate in the project. Nevertheless, my study shows they find space within dominant political and educational ‘at-risk’ discourses to twist this label and use it to ‘become somebody’ in their own (and possibly the youth workers’) eyes and among their peer (and community-based (arts/sports) program) group. The following chapter on methodology initially discusses the theoretical approaches of Foucault (1977, 1980, 1988), Butler (1993, 2000, 2004a, 2006) and Lyng (2005) that have been used to frame my research and guide my analysis, followed by a description and justification of the methods adopted in the study.



Chapter 4:  
Methodology:  
*Understanding  
and Finding  
'Risky' Spaces*

## Introduction

Poststructuralism...points to the continuous cocreation of Self and social science; they are known through each other. Knowing the self and about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical, local knowledges. Poststructuralism then permits – nay invites, no incites – us to reflect upon our method and explore new ways of knowing. (Richardson, 2000, p. 9)

This study takes a post structural approach to examine the production of social identities of young people considered ‘at-risk’ within the context of community-based (arts/sports) programs, and the ways these young people conform to, take up and/or resist norms of recognition. Norms of recognition in the context of this study include dominant discourses of (at-risk) youth, rurality, education, Indigeneity and gender. Such norms, according to Butler (2004b) provide the conditions for being recognised as a subject with a ‘viable life’. As indicated in Chapters 1-3, the study is informed mainly by post-structural theorists, including Michel Foucault (1977, 1983, 1990) and Judith Butler (1993, 2004, 2006), drawing particularly on the notion of performativity – a concept that enables a powerful appreciation of the ways that identities are constructed iteratively (Butler, 1993). Butler’s (2004) work, *Undoing Gender*, focuses on gender, however it can be employed in discussions focused on youth ‘at-risk’ to understand how when performing ways of being (for example gender, the impossible/possible learner or ‘ideal’ adult) it is often automatic, and stems from social norms.

The idea of a ‘viable life’ comes into play through Butler’s deliberation of culturally prescribed notions of being ‘human’ or ‘less than human’ based on recognitions of socially accepted norms and acceptance of desires to be different from the ‘norm’ through “complex citational<sup>30</sup> processes” (Andrew & Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1995, p. 2). Butler

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<sup>30</sup> Butler draws on Derrida in her understanding of citational processes, offering a notion of “citation” as ways in which “ontological norms are [discursively] deployed in discourse” (Salin, 2002, p. 62). For

asserts “the ‘citational,’ or repetitive and decontextualisable [not essentially situated] character of performative utterances’, provides opportunities where ‘marginal subversion’ of the governing...[social] norms can occur ‘through “resignification<sup>31</sup>,” or the repetition of a signification’ in alternate circumstances (Boucher, 2006, p. 117). For instance, the term ‘risk’ or ‘riskiness’, as attached to youth, may be resignified within the context of the observed programs through performative repetition of certain behaviours of self and understood in ways that differ from dominant discourses of risk. Butler provides a poignant example of the notion of iterability in an interview with Sarah Sahil:

...consider the word queer, which thirty years ago (even, twenty, even fifteen years ago) was considered profoundly derogatory and frightening as a speech act. I remember living in great fear of the word, knowing that I was eligible for it, thinking that once it actually landed on me I would be branded forever and that the stigma would do me in completely. (2004, p. 351)

For the young people involved in this study, the term ‘at-risk’ is recognised through prescribed understandings of socially constructed *repetitious* norms – ‘at risk’ as opposed to ‘normal’. Here the connection of performativity and processes of iterability are inextricably linked. Although the term ‘at-risk’ is more readily situated within government-speak, and ‘queer’ is situated within more social spaces, there remains a normative way to understand particular youth. For example, if we think of the word ‘trouble’ (when youth-speak for ‘risky’), in terms of the ‘at-risk’ subject it is viewed in a negative way. However, the young people in my study were able to ‘twist’ the notion of ‘riskiness’, refer to themselves as ‘trouble’ and attach this label to alternative, positive meanings that resulted in a (temporary) sense of control and belonging to peer groups (as shown in Chapter 7). Nevertheless, notions of being ‘at-risk’ and ‘young’ come within a

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example, a young person who does not fit into the norms of schooling discourses cannot be recognised as an acceptable student/possible learner and therefore are rendered knowable only as an ‘at-risk’ subject.

<sup>31</sup> Signification involves meaning making from signs/cues. It is a semiotic process. When resignification occurs it is seen as a type of semiosis, where the elements of new signs are removed from their original context/meanings and placed into other semiotic sequences (Holden, 2001). In Butler’s work on performing gender we see how citational processes offer spaces where ‘marginal subversion’ is possible to influence/disrupt gendered norms through resignification. Butler’s example of how drag performances resignify (or debunk) notions of gendered norms provides an understanding of gender being performative (Boucher, 2006, p. 117).

ritualised, repetitive production of performing social norms through the auspices of constraint, threats of ostracism, and within the boundaries of ‘successful transition’ to an ‘ideal’ adulthood. The stigma of the ‘at-risk’ label has numerous understandings in the context of this study (such as loser, impossible learner, someone who has fallen off the track), with young people, risk and education being strong focal points. These tensions are explored throughout the results chapters with particular focus on the (perhaps temporary) enabling aspects and affordances of being young and ‘branded’ ‘at-risk’ (e.g., the creative ways in which the young people twist the ‘at-risk’ label to their own advantage/to perform certain identities, especially among their peers).

Employing a post-structural approach, while also drawing on processes of performativity and citation, presents opportunities to connect language, power, social organisations and subjectivity – specifically in the context of policy and practice within the programs observed, and the perceptions of the youth workers and young people who participated in my study. Language is the centrepiece of the analysis. “Language does not *reflect* social reality but produces meaning and *creates* social reality. Language is how social organisation and power are defined and contested, and the place where our sense of self, our sense of subjectivity is constructed” (Richardson, 2000, p. 8). In the context of my study, the discursive naming or labelling of a young person ‘at-risk’ becomes part of the citational process of producing meaning of the term. Once labelled, it appears the only way the young people are then seen is ‘at-risk’ – they are not intelligible in any other sense. My interest in the lived experiences of the young people within the observed community-based (arts/sports) programs and the ways in which they twist notions of risk is seen as a site of opportunities to explore a) how particular discursive practices produce conditions for a range of possible experiences; and b) the meanings produced in relation to those experiences (van Manen, 1998). This line of thought is particularly interested in the social production of the social subject – how the self is constituted through the negotiation of discursive subject positions defined in policy and through social interactions between youth workers and young people.

The following discussion outlines the main underpinning theories drawn upon for this research. In particular, I apply theories of subjectivity and power as subscribed by Foucault and Butler, while keeping in mind Peter Kelly's (1998) treatment of Foucault's ideas on governmentality. I then further explore the ideas of performativity, the intersection and production of text/self, and discuss the constructions of the self in connection to the young people, youth workers and the roles policy and the programs, involved in my study, play in this construction. I also draw on Stephen Lyng's (2005) theory of edgework to understand the voluntary risk-taking engaged in by the young people in my study, and how risk is twisted by the young people in my study, to produce enabling aspects of the 'at-risk' label.

## **Subjectivity, Power and Governmentality**

Subjectivity is a concept with multiple meanings across a range of disciplinary fields. Sociologists of education with an interest in young people and subjectivity have drawn our attention to the usefulness of post-structuralist theory for understanding the contested and fluid nature of subjectivities as they are produced and negotiated in social settings such as schooling (for example see te Riele, 2007, 2009 and Youdell, 2003, 2004, 2006a, 2006b). My study takes up the notion of subjectivity as proposed by Foucault and Butler, understanding that an individual's social identity is produced by the operations of power that circulate through language and social relations. The self in this sense is seen as a subject who continually *becomes* through participation in shifting, and productive discursive practices such as those encompassed in discourses of risk. This means that our social "identities are thus points of temporary attachment" not fixed to subject positions, but constantly shifting through discursive practices that are constructed of, and for, us by processes within society (Hall, 1996, p. 6).

Importantly for this study, the becoming self is understood not merely in individual terms, but rather as reliant upon and vulnerable to more generalised norms of recognition that establish the terms of social life. As Butler puts it:

To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other. It is also to stake one's own being, and one's own persistence in one's own being, in the struggle for recognition. (Butler, 2004, p. 44)

Here Butler draws on, and builds upon, notions of recognition from theorists such as Hegel (1977), Taylor (1994), Honneth (1995), and Fraser (2003) and understands recognition as a process based on the operation of a particular set of socially-constructed norms and powers, in which the subject becomes an object of recognition. Who we can, cannot and wish to be recognised as, is determined by these norms. Recognition involves our relationship with ourselves and our relationship with 'others'. These insights provide an important backdrop to understanding processes of self as taking place within socially-situated contexts, and the possibilities for recognition of self and other that are made available to young people who are designated 'at-risk'. Through the kinds of social engagement typically involved in community-based (arts/sports) programs - sharing ideas, experimenting with performance techniques, negotiating difference, developing and re-working of texts - the becoming self (together with others) invites, explores and imagines what it is and might be. My analysis considers the ways in which notions of recognition discursively become apparent within discourses of risk, by analysing the use of the term 'at-risk' within policy (education and social), practice and the perceptions of the young people engaged in the observed programs. Of particular interest is the ways in which the youth workers, and more specifically the young people, resist, conform to and/or take up 'risky' recognitions.

The production of subjectivities through a negotiation of social and discursive practices, citational processes and the subject's unfolding narratives of lived experiences, raises

questions about the implications of power. For Foucault, power is not a concentrated force held by some and wielded over others, but rather it circulates within discourses and power relations that are neither fixed nor stable. In Foucault's terms, power operates in the production of self, and the ways in which the self can be known and knowable "...power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him [sic] belong to this production" (Foucault, 1977, p. 194). These ideas have important implications for understanding the effects of power that may not be made explicit, as young people may not have available to them an analysis of neoliberal governance that regulates them in particular ways through the programs. But these effects may make possible or limit their negotiation in the production/construction/positioning of self (Davies & Harre, 1994). In Davies and Harre's work on positioning and discursive practices, discourses are viewed as "an institutionalised use of language and language-like sign systems" (p. 45). They understand discourses as sometimes competing with each other or creating "distinct and incompatible versions of reality" (Davies & Harre, 1994, p. 46).

Post-structuralism recognises the power of discourses and discursive practices to shape and position the subject, while simultaneously recognising that the subject has some choice in those practices. By accepting the idea of resistance as an important aspect of the negotiation of power, the subject is seen as having choice and agency (even though this is sometimes seemingly limited or temporary). Karen Evans' (2007, p. 93) work on bounded agency is worth considering here. Evans stresses that "by examining bounded agency, the focus moves from structured individualization onto individuals as actors, without losing the perspective of structuration". The subject is not, in other words, merely controlled by surrounding social structures and practices, but may instead do significant work to become a particular self through "forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations" (Foucault, 1983, p. 211). Although the subject cannot govern discourses or their effects, "a performatively constituted subject can and does deploy discursive performances that have the potential to be constitutive" (Youdell, 2010, p.

224). This is done unconsciously and repeatedly, and sometimes intentionally, to produce particular effects. This work, nonetheless, remains within particular boundaries and discourses. It is through this approach, the understanding of subjects as being “subjectivated through ongoing performative constitutions” (Youdell, 2010, p. 224) that we can analyse the performatives of policy (Avis, 2003; Ball, 2000; Blackmore & Thompson, 2004; Lingard & Blackmore, 1997; Peters, 2004a, 2004b; Youdell, 2010). For example, Stephen Ball (2000) highlights the performative nature of educational policy technologies, in that they shape education and educational institutions in specific ways, fashioning “*educators and students as particular sorts of persons*”, while simultaneously subjectifying them (Youdell 2010, p. 226 original emphasis). Of particular focus in my study is the ways in which the youth workers and young people perceive the involvement of teachers/educational institutions in performatively constituting them within the category ‘at-risk’. I now move to discuss governmentality to argue the importance of thinking about, and problematising neoliberal governance of young people.

### *Governmentality*

Post-structurally speaking, and when considering notions of boundaries and agency for those subjects whose everyday realities are inextricably connected with discourses, policies and practices of risk, it is important to acknowledge the notion of governmentality. Foucault’s notion of governmentality is useful in understanding the intersections of the lived experiences of the young people, of educational/social policy, and the practices of the youth workers involved in the programs observed in my study (see Besley, 2010; Foucault, 1977; Kelly, 1998; Rose, 1996).

In Foucault’s (1991) view, “governmentality means the complex[ity] of calculations, programmes, policies, strategies, reflections, and tactics that shape the conduct of individuals - ‘the conduct of conduct’ for acting upon the actions of others in order to achieve certain ends” (Besley, 2010, p. 530). Taking this line of thought, the overarching

educational and social policies regarding ‘youth at-risk’ sit here, coupled with funding boundaries which dictate who is ‘at-risk’, and how the state should intervene. These are governmental technologies aimed at shaping the conduct of young people who are not seen as behaving within social norms – constituting certain young people ‘at-risk’. Governmentality involves “governing the self” and “governing others” (Lemke, 2002, p. 49). It involves the ‘how’ of governing the state and how an individual governs their own mentality or interiority in this process – linking technologies of power or domination with technologies of the self (Besley, 2010, p. 530). I am interested in how the young people in the observed programs ‘govern the self’ and how they regulate/constitute themselves through the label ‘at-risk’– particularly how they twist the label to produce a more powerful ‘risky’ self.

Governmentality results in the subject being individualized then correspondingly totalized. Besley provides an example “where students are individualized when they expose their personal experiences in classroom exercises...then for grading purposes, they are totalized when their experiences are compared with others, with norms” (2010, p. 532). The dominant discourse of ‘youth at-risk’ can be viewed in this sense, where the ‘at-risk’ individual subject is identified as needing assistance to ‘transition successfully’. The youth participants in my study were singled out by teachers or counsellors as individuals (with individual issues), and then asked (or told) to attend the intervention program. However, the act of singling out comes about through the young people meeting specific generalised/totalised identity markers/factors attached to being ‘at-risk’, while the approaches in the programs are based on a general (totalising) belief on ‘what works for youth ‘at-risk’”.

As Besley (2010, p. 529) suggests, governmentality “links two sets of ideas: government and self-government, and neoliberalism and the entrepreneurial self”. When thinking about young people, risk and the entrepreneurial self, Peter Kelly reminds us that:

Youth at-risk; the behaviours and dispositions that position Youth at-risk; the forms of future adult personhood placed at risk by these present behaviours and dispositions; and the forms of institutionalised, intellectually grounded knowledge that generate discourses of risk around certain, ideal, constructions of human identity become central concerns in this genealogy of the entrepreneurial self. (2006, p. 25)

The entrepreneurial self, Kelly suggests, has developed under the guise of particular approaches from neoliberal government agendas in regard to ‘problems’ pertaining to youth. These approaches assume the solutions reside “in the capacity of various authorities to develop in individuals a particular ethics of the self” (Kelly, 2006, p. 18). The entrepreneurial self is thus understood as a form of personhood, in which the individual is held responsible for their own conduct, “in the business of life; an enterprise, a project, a work in progress” (p. 18). Kelly argues that governmentality is useful in understanding the various attempts to “regulate young people’s identities through the construction of populations of Youth at Risk” (1998, p. 10). The direct and/or indirect placement of blame on the individual (youth) for their ‘risky’ behaviours, illustrates the ways in which power relations can be multiple and non-linear, involve persuasion, self-regulation and internalisation of dominant discourses of what behaviours and practices are acceptable and appropriate – as juxtaposed from the array of dangerous ‘ways of being’ (young), which fall under the elusive ‘at-risk’ label.

Within the context of this study (and through consideration of the ‘normalising gaze’, discourses of risk, and notions of the self as entrepreneurial) I question, like Kelly: “What are young people at risk of not becoming? What forms of identity are they at risk of not performing? What might be the grounds on which concerns with particular forms of identity be constructed?” (Kelly, 2006, p. 25). I analyse the ways in which the educational/social policy framing the observed programs, discursively defines ‘youth at-

risk' with set identity markers (essentialising<sup>32</sup>, totalising the subject). I examine how recommended general practices for working with 'youth at-risk' place onus on young people to regulate and manage their own risky situations/identities to find ways of 'fitting in'. Moreover, I show how youth workers reinforce this notion within the boundaries of risk discourses and essentially the ways in which the young people perform risk identities within these boundaries.

## **Performativity**

Performativity is understood here in terms of Butler's (1993; 2006) work in *Gender Trouble*. Butler proposes the notion of performativity as productive discursive practices – shaping, creating and producing subjectivities through performed words and actions that are not able to be separated from language and social practice. Hey asserts "[t]he central poststructuralist idea that the subject is an effect rather than a cause is the key to Butler's theories of performative identities" (2006, p. 444). Performativity, in Butler's sense, is a process of multifaceted contradiction of a seemingly fixed identity – so that it becomes one that is constituted and reconstituted (Davies & Harre, 1994). That is, that we are who we are due to our acts, behaviours and gestures. The subject that we are in any particular time and place is performed from the available repertoires that are made implicit and (re)enforced and situated within social contexts. The young people in my study were discursively produced as being 'at-risk', through policy and the norms of schooling. They performed themselves as youth 'at-risk' in the school setting, and subtly, though sometimes more directly, in the programs in which they participated and were observed. They were seen at times to 'perform back' what the youth workers wanted to hear (e.g., that they had changed) and at other times 'perform differently' (e.g., confessing 'risky' acts and being 'risky'), especially in informal program contexts such as when travelling on the bus or out for lunch (as shown in Chapter 7).

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<sup>32</sup> Essentialism is the belief that a set of particular characteristics make things what they are. Essentialism is where stereotypes are created by discursively reducing subjects, in this context young people considered 'at-risk', through their essential characteristics.

My interest in community-based (arts/sports) programs, and their potential as enabling spaces, means that these ideas around performativity have informed my thinking about the kinds of signifying practices utilised by the young people involved in the study, to performatively produce themselves within the terms of what Butler calls cultural intelligibility – “a normative framework, that conditions who can be recognised as a legitimate subject” (Lloyd, 2007, p. 33). In this instance, the ‘at-risk I’ is understood as a deviation from the social norms of school and society that enable conditions of a legitimate ‘I’ (Butler, 2006, p. 196). Those who cannot be recognised as having a ‘viable life’ (those who deviate from the norm) will have “impossible, illegible, unreal, and illegitimate lives” (Lloyd, 2007, p. 33) – they are deviant, and thus in need of control and intervention. Returning to Youdell’s dichotomy of good/bad student, possible/impossible learner, the intelligible subject must be “intelligible within [and across] the terms of those discourses through which particular axes of identity are constituted” (2006a, p.100). Of particular interest to this study are the axes of rurality, education, Indigeneity and gender.

In developing this theory of performativity, Butler appropriates and builds on the linguistic theories of Derrida (1989, 1992; Derrida, Creech, Kamuf, & Todd, 1985), using deconstruction as a tool of critique directed towards considering the role of discourse in predicating forms of identity. Butler argues:

To deconstruct the subject, is not to negate or throw away the concept...deconstruction implies only that we suspend all commitments to that which the term, ‘the subject’, refers, and that we consider the linguistic functions it serves in the consolidation and concealment of authority. (Butler, 1991, p. 159)

In the context of this study, I deconstruct the ‘at-risk’ subject to open up the term ‘at-risk’ to “a reusage or a redeployment that previously has not been authorised” (Butler, 1991, p. 159) within the boundaries of the programs. I do this by exploring the ways the young people in the programs flipped and twisted the label to produce enabling aspects.

Furthermore, drawing on Butler's reworked notion of interpellation<sup>33</sup>, as a potential performative, allows me to consider how recognition occurs by the naming of a subject (the norms of recognition) and how the ways a subject is named within those norms, functions in performative terms. Of particular interest is how the signifying practices of labelling, as well as the signifying practices of the young people's involvement in the programs I observed, support the production of a self with choices and agency within the 'at-risk' label. As Butler points out, "the question of agency is reformulated as a question of how signification and resignification work" (2006, p. 197).

Butler (1993, following Althusser) argues that signifying practices such as the act of naming are implicated in the subject's *becoming*. The repetition of such practices can be understood in citational terms, such that being named within particular discursive terms, for example, as 'boy', functions as a citation of all previous performances of 'boys' (Salin, 2002). This has important implications for my study, given my interest in the labelling or naming of certain young people as 'at-risk', and the repetition of those citational practices through youth-related policies and discourses. The 'at-risk' label used by youth workers, and others in community contexts, is understood as a statement or citation that interpellates certain young people as 'risky' individuals who pose a potential threat to moral and social order (Butler, 2006). By being named in this way, those deemed to be 'at-risk' of reaching this potential are 'hailed', or called to take up a social or ideological position based on their perceived and imposed differences from others (Salin, 2002). Youdell reminds us (in regard to performativity in education) that:

...performatives need to make sense to work – they have to be recognisable in the discourses that are circulating in the settings and moments they are employed. Within school settings, being a school girl or boy, being gifted, having emotional or behaviour difficulties makes sense. (2006, p. 44)

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<sup>33</sup> 'Interpellation is the constitutive process where individuals acknowledge and respond to ideologies, thereby recognizing themselves as subjects' (Nguyn, 2013, para. 1). By hailing or calling a young person 'at risk' they become positioned as such where the young person is forced to generate meaning and participate the practice of being 'at-risk'.

When performatives refuse to make sense, within what is recognisable as fitting in to the school setting, they may “fail or act to constitute the subject outside the bounds of acceptability as a student” (p. 45) - ergo they become the impossible learner (Youdell, 2006a). Notions of young people potentially (not) ‘becoming’ the *ideal* adult is prominent in my study, as discussed in each results chapter, yet a subtle theme flows through the data, that the young people participating in the programs observed, are not *ideal* students – hence, the risk of not transitioning into an *ideal* adulthood and in need of intervention.

Using Butler’s understanding of performativity provides a lens to analyse how the ‘at-risk’ subject might then negotiate this hailing, and how, moreover, they might exercise agency in resisting and creating new responses to such interpellations. In particular, by considering the subjective processes at work in community (arts/sports) programs, I will consider how young people draw on the discursive resources they have accumulated - their knowledge of popular culture forms (as discussed in the previous chapter), and performance techniques - in order to re/position themselves within the discursive and social order. Informed by these theoretical concepts, my interest is in exploring how this kind of discursive negotiation takes place in the interplay of power and language that shapes the young people’s subjectivities.

## **The Intersection of the Production of Text and Production of Self**

Although a number of the community-based (arts/sports) programs, at which the youth workers interviewed for this study worked, produced a creative performance, the two observed programs focused on musical skills, song lyrics, audio recordings and video footage compiled by the young people<sup>34</sup>. Therefore, I do not specifically focus on the art product of each program, but instead the processes of creating the product because it is through these processes that the young people were seen to negotiate the ‘at-risk’ label

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<sup>34</sup> As explained in the following section on methods, I encouraged (in one of the programs I observed) the use of song lyric choice, audio recording and videoing as mediums to capture moments young people felt were important to them. I analyse their choice of song lyrics and use of audio and visual recordings in Chapter 7.

and produce a sense of self. The process of producing musical or narrative texts is understood here not as a means of expression of an essential inner self, but rather as a means by which the young people involved in the community-based (arts/sports) programs engage with texts and with others through which the embodied self “is formed within the crucible of social life” (Butler, 2004, p. 26).

In the context of my study, the production of text can be viewed through: 1) how the young people in my research were already known to the youth workers through texts (media, policy, academia) prior to even meeting them - not the *truths of* young people themselves or their individual origins, but hegemonic understandings of who is a youth ‘at-risk’ and what they are ‘at-risk’ of – the expert knowledges on the *truths of* youth (Kelly, P., 2000a); and 2) the ways of creating creative arts products, in any number of forms, can be seen both as a way of constructing meaning through practices and processes (Dolan, 1993), as well as a way of producing the self through the production and creation of texts. Here, the work of Anna Hickey-Moody with young people, risk and youth arts is considered again<sup>35</sup>. As with Hickey-Moody’s (2013) ethnographic experiences, the actual creative arts products (music/video) that resulted in the programs are not the focus of my inquiry. This creative material did not always convey the young people’s perspectives as clearly “as the ethnographic tales from the field” (p. 4) that emerged through the creation and negotiation of these ‘products’. Nevertheless, I do make use of certain musical lyrics provided/created by some of the participants (across the seven programs where the youth workers were drawn from), to help enrich my analysis in specific areas. In some instances in this study, the arts were not used to achieve an end product for the public. Instead the art products were seen as individual accomplishments (in the music sessions) and a way to describe, discuss, and capture lived experiences of the young people (video footage/song lyrics). The latter art products were privy only to the young people, the youth workers and I. In each instance, the processes involved in

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<sup>35</sup> As discussed previously in Chapter 3.

creating the art form was where the actual intersection of the production of text and the production of self came about.

For young people the production of subjectivities is fraught with tensions and contradictions, as modes of self-representation and ways of speaking, doing and being may or may not, challenge and disrupt discursive norms of gender and youthhood. Yet recognition in relation to those norms remains closely tied to possibilities for what Butler (2004) refers to as a viable life. As Butler points out, subjectivity is not merely an individual matter:

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, 2004, p. 45)

This understanding of the social nature of subjectivity is necessary to consider how young people negotiate a self when they have been given the 'at-risk' label, and it is also necessary to understand the significance of community-based (arts/sports) programs as social spaces in which such negotiations take place in the dialogue and collaboration with others that occurs there. Through individual and collaborative production of texts, subjectivities can be explored through the spaces within the programs that enabled the young people to twist existing 'at-risk' discourses, and find new possibilities for potential recognition and viability. I now move to Lyng's (2005) theory of edgework to discuss how it links with Foucault's theories on power, resistance and limitations in the discursive construction of the self.

## **Edgework**

The understanding of voluntary risk-taking as edgework (the practices/processes) has been discussed in depth across Chapters 2 and 3. Here I discuss Lyng's (2005) work in

his book *Edgework: The sociology of risk-taking*, where he draws upon a variety of key theoretical stances to explain the multiple interpretations of the edgework phenomenon. Very basically, among these interpretations include: 1) Marx and Mead – seeing edgework as a way to “escape or resist key structural imperatives of late capitalism” (p. 7); 2) Giddens (1992) and Beck (1998) – edgework as ways to build skills that have “been increasing in demand by the risk societies evolving in the last two hundred years” (p. 7); and 3) Weberian concepts – where edgework is not about transcending the social reality of consumer society, instead it embodies an “extension of that reality” (p. 33). Of interest to this study is Lyng’s understanding of, 4) a Foucauldian approach to edgework - where edgework is seen as being “deeply rooted in the personal experience” (p. 39).

Lyng considers Foucault’s work on power, resistance and the existence of limits, and understands that by viewing domination as being “imposed through a system of micropowers” (p. 43) and the expansion of the technologies of surveillance and control where ways to resist this panoptic system are still active (here resistance is understood as exploring the limits), then edgework can be viewed as embodied practices. It is within these practices/edgework that the subject can put their “powers to work in discovering new ways of being” (p. 43). Lyng suggests that “because bodies can never be completely inscribed by power-knowledge arrangements, transgressing limits or edges in this way is to take up “...“an ethic of the self” – a project of self-creation that draws on the indeterminacy of the body to identify new possibilities of being and doing” (p. 43). In the context of my study, edgework is viewed as a way to escape the constraints stemming from (neoliberal) governance/domination that seeks to control young people who do not ‘fit’ within normal successful discourse of youth - through technologies of surveillance where young people are understood as being responsible and managers of their risky situations – are encouraged to self-regulate risky behaviours and dispositions. By engaging in edgework, the young people are empowered with a sense of control within the chaos of the experience. Here they are seen to push the limits and transcend the routines of institutional structures to twist the ‘at-risk’ label and overcome “the very

practice of subjectification and identity” (p. 43) – where the ‘riskiness’ that constrains them in schooling contexts, enables them in other contexts (peer/program contexts).

## **Section Summary**

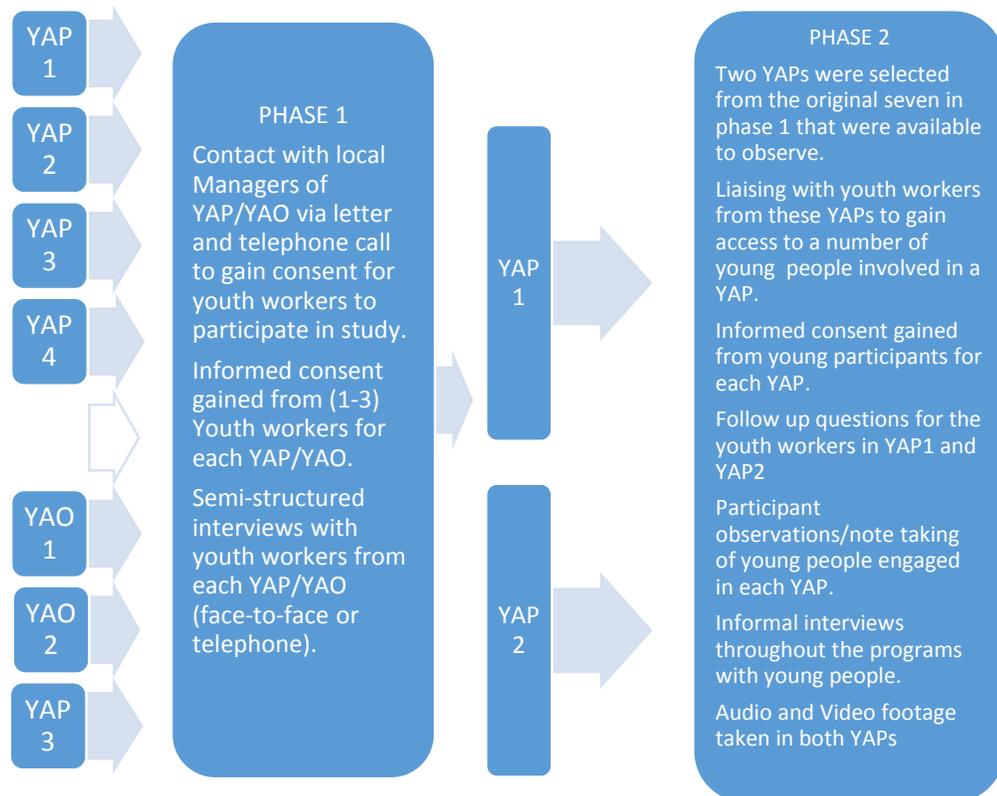
This section has provided a framework for my exploration of how the ‘at-risk’ label is designated to, negotiated and lived by the young people participating in the community-based (arts/sports) programs. It allows me to explore the ways educational, social and community funding policies discursively constitute the ‘at-risk’ subject through a production of texts, and how these policies informed and shaped the community-based (arts/sports) youth programs and the youth workers’ practices within them. Furthermore it offers opportunities to explore how, in the negotiation of the ‘at-risk’ label, the young people twist the label’s traditional meaning to produce enabling aspects and possible, alternative (powerful) identities. The next section discusses and justifies the methods and the ethnographic combinative approach used in this study.

### **Method**

This study employs a qualitative post-structural approach concerned with discourses and representation surrounding young people considered ‘at-risk’ – taking into account policy, the perspectives of youth workers, and, importantly, the perceptions of the young people themselves. It considers how young people are labelled in certain contexts, and how they negotiate these labels when constructing possible selves. Post-structuralists have understood research as “an interpretive space for inquiry which questioned norms of objectivity, emphasised complexity, subjective interpretive processes, performance, textuality, difference, uncertainty, politics, power, and inquiry as a moral as well as scientific process” (Denzin, 2008, p. 321; also see Lather, 2006). The qualitative research approach used in my study falls under the rubric of what Baszanger and Dodier (1994) and Silverman (2004) refer to as a *combinative ethnographic method* as it combines a range of tools for data generation across a number of sites and stages (e.g., Phase 1: interviewing 11 youth workers across seven community-based (arts/sports) Youth At-

Risk Programs [YAP] and Youth At-Risk Organisations [YAO]<sup>36</sup>; Phase :2 observation and informal one-on-one interviewing; follow-up questions; informal group conversations; and participant observation of young people and youth workers involved in two specific programs, YAP1 and YAP2). Refer to Figure 1: Phases of the Study.

Figure 1: Phases of the Study



My study acknowledges debates surrounding the ‘crisis of representation’ (Butler, 1993; Colebrook, 2000; Foucault, 1979; Wallmanberger, 2003) and takes Popoviciu’s (2006) stance “that post-structuralism: refuses appeals to epistemological absolutes and embraces the wisdom of a multiplicity of positions acknowledging the contradictions implicit in them and accommodating ambiguity” (p. 404 citing Hutchinson and Wilson, 1994, p. 3).

<sup>36</sup> For the purpose of simplicity I have given the community-based (arts/sports) programs/organisations involved in the study the following designated abbreviations - YAP (youth at-risk program) and YAO (youth at-risk organisations). The two programs I observed will be entitled YAP1 and YAP2.

In other words, my research produces representations of the ‘at-risk’ subject and draws attention to the ambiguity in the understandings of ‘at-risk’, ‘riskiness’ and risk-taking in policy and among both youth workers and young people themselves. Employing this combinative approach, meant I could explore the ways in which the term ‘youth at-risk’ underpinned policy (educational and social) and practice, directly and indirectly, across the YAP sites, while also examining the identity work/subjectivities of the young people within the context of the programs. Moreover, this method enabled me to “identify the different forms of action in which people may engage along with the possible combinations between them” (Baszanger & Dodier 2004 p. 10), such as the ways the young people engaged in and performed different/similar forms of voluntary risk-taking (edgework) in different contexts. The following section: 1) summarises why an ethnographic combinative approach was adopted; 2) describes the ethnographic elements used and 3) sets out a detailed description of the two phases of this study.

## Research Design

In the past half century, ethnography, among other qualitative work, has been widely used in educational research - although it does have a longer history in anthropology (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000). Ethnography is:

...a form of social and educational research that emphasises the importance of studying *at firsthand* what people do and say in particular contexts. This usually involves fairly lengthy contact, through participant observation in relevant settings, and/or through relatively open-ended interviews designed to understand people’s perspectives, perhaps complemented by the study of various sorts of documents – official, publicly available, or personal. (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4)

According to Silverman (1998, p. 10), a study becomes ethnographic when the researcher is “careful to connect the facts that s/he observes with the specific features of the backdrop against which these facts occur, which are linked to historical and cultural contingencies”. Additionally, this approach keeps in mind the tension between unravelling the participant’s perspectives “from the inside, while also viewing them and their behaviour

more distantly” (Hammersley, 2006, p, 11). An ethnographic approach enables the researcher to capture what people say and do as a product of how they “interpret the complexity of their world, [and] to understand events from the viewpoints of the participants” (Burns, 1995, p. 11). In other words, versions of reality/truths, as provided by the participants themselves, are accessible through ethnography, making it an ideal method for my research focused on the lived experiences of young people and the perspectives of youth workers who work with ‘at-risk’ youth.

Combinative ethnography (Baszanger & Dodier, 1994, 1997, Silverman, 2004) is an approach that allows the researcher to work simultaneously in different fields/sites to bring together “a casebook that can be used to identify the different forms of action in which people might engage, along with the possible combinations between them” (Baszanger & Dodier, 1997, p. 10). For example, this approach allowed me to observe the similar/different youth worker practices within the YAPs that reinforced or resisted (neoliberal) governance of the ‘at-risk’ subject. This approach breaks away from the idea that there is a “collective consciousness shared from the outset” (i.e., that all youth workers understand the ‘at-risk’ label the same way), and seeks to “identify certain cases as examples of general phenomena, yet with a great deal of freedom to move between levels of generalization and expose difference or the unexpected” (Baszanger & Dodier, 1997, p. 18) - for instance, the edgework phenomenon that was observed in both YAPs. The use of a combined ethnographic approach allows for the concepts and constructs generated from data collected from each program to be cross-checked across sites, as explained in the data collection and analyses sections.

I collected ethnographic data through interviews (formal and informal), observations and participant observation, to gain a more contextual view (not immutable *truth*, but a version of *truths*) of the participants and their local communities and to gain a multi-dimensional appreciation of the setting (Woods, 1999). Baszanger and Dodier (1997, p. 16) suggest

this approach allows the researcher “to make an inventory of [possible situations in each space/site] by studying the different communities and activities of which it is composed, that is, which encounter and confront each other in that space”. Combinative ethnography encompasses the notion that “research contexts are disparate, not coherent wholes. Contexts are thus studied in relationship to each other” (Pettinger, 2005, p. 353). So, I circulated between the sites, concentrated observations/interviews in certain sites depending on what data situations arose, observed/took field notes to collect and develop a “combined inventory of possible situations” (Silverman, 2004, p. 18), with a longer period of time spent in the two selected YAP programs (i.e., up to three months in Phase 2). This allowed me to compare and contrast (i.e., cross-check) my findings across both observed sites in order to draw out relationships across the data collected from each site and the themes emerging from my overall analysis. This also provided opportunities to draw upon a variety of personal narratives to enrich the data and add to the combined inventory - keeping in mind Popoviciu’s (2006, p. 406) suggestion that “the task of the post-structuralist ethnographer is to recognise the (politically led) narratives that enmesh how we locate and identify those subject to the research”. Throughout this process, I was required to exercise reflexivity, a key element of ethnography.

## **Ethnographic Elements**

### *Researcher Reflexivity*

In writing up my research, I became acutely aware that by looking at the ways the subject is constituted ‘at-risk’ (reading society as a text), my writing (the production of texts to be read and further interpreted by others) became another form of discursive practice that named the participants as ‘(at-risk) Others’, reinforcing the binary of mainstream youth and youth ‘at-risk’ (Flaherty, 2002a, 2002b; Pettinger, 2005; Willis, 2000). Pettinger (who uses a combinative ethnographic approach) explores the ‘crisis of representation’ and argues that this *crisis* has surfaced through the postmodern and post-structural focus on text and the production of text, and has become an issue for ethnographers, “whereby the right and ability of ethnographers to represent the social world has been challenged” (p.

349). Willis (2000, p. 113) suggests that ethnographies are viewed through the *crisis* as “constituting rather than reflecting their subject matter”. Pettinger (2005, p. 347) argues that “questions of representation are best engaged with while the researcher is in the field, gathering data” and that the use of combinative ethnography provides the possibilities for this to occur.

Therefore, I have endeavoured to take Pettinger’s (2005), Glucksmann’s (2000) and Wolfinger’s (2002) lead by attempting to “render transparent the relationship between data gathering, research questions and data analysis” through my narratives in this thesis – not only to acknowledge the binaries of self and other, but in an attempt to expose, critique and resist (not reinforce) the binary of mainstream youth and youth ‘at-risk’. I contend “that multiple researcher positions are possible, each partially an ‘insider’ position...[that] are socially situated in certain social roles and economic relations” (Pettinger, 2005, p. 348) – such as the roles I placed and found myself in throughout the study (e.g., researcher, participant, educator and mother). One example of the impact my role as researcher had on the participants and the programs I was studying was that I suggested (for data collection purposes) that the young people make use of my video camera and dictaphone (while I was and was not present) to capture moments, conversations, program sessions, outings and interviews (with each other and the youth workers), and to write or select song lyrics that best described themselves and their lives at the time of the program. These activities (i.e., the video/audio recording and song lyrics composition or choice) unintentionally became part of the YAP2 program and the youth workers intended to edit it to create a video tape of the program. As the final edited video goal was not achieved, my data focuses on the audio recordings and the unedited video footage. In this situation I was at times being recorded, so the researcher/participant and observed/observer boundaries became blurred and my presence had an impact on the program. I managed the self-other binary created through the relationships of researcher/researched, adult/young person and teacher/student by confessing and

incorporating my narratives with those of the participants; thereby making this process part of my analysis, as elaborated below.

In ethnographic studies, the researcher is pushed and pulled within the interplay of familiarity, and the need for distance from people and spaces they observe, participate with/in, and experience. Ruth Behar (1996, pp. 6-7), in her book *The Vulnerable Observer* asks the question, “[h]ow do you write subjectivity into ethnography in such a way that you can continue to call what you are doing ethnography?” The difficulty of separating oneself from the research stems from the “myriad of ways in which the self is intimately embedded in the ethnographic endeavour” (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003, p. 54); hence, the:

...growing, albeit contested, emphasis on reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourgois, 1995; Burawoy, 2003; Marcus, 1998), which signifies that the researcher is conscious of her/his relation to those she/he studies and to a body of theory she/he shares with other scholars, redirects attention to all aspects of social research. (Iverson, 2009, p. 10)

Reflexivity, in a poststructuralist paradigm, directs us to recognize that we position ourselves, and are positioned, differently in various situations (Richardson, 2000). As an ethnographer (researching young people considered ‘at-risk’), one needs to be aware of how and why close involvement in the research process contributes to the ways meanings are constructed between the participants and the researcher (Davies, 1999). Nonetheless, just being aware of the ways preconceived opinions, misconceptions, our identity markers and cultural capital can impact on data collection, does not necessarily mean the ethnographer will automatically know how to address the issues; often they are addressed as the research progresses and the process reflected upon (Hertz, 1997). In part, as an ethnographic researcher, I not only generated data from specific ‘spaces’, but I drew on practices of self-disclosure and incorporated personal narratives into the ethnographic texts (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001; Gilbert, 2008). The connectedness of family, my research interests, and likely participants, were instrumental

in this ethnographic study and necessitated consideration at all stages of the research; the interplay itself needing to be progressively considered and managed.

Engaging in this doctoral journey has been enlightening yet desperately heartbreaking with a terrible tragedy occurring in the middle of the journey; the death of my teenage son, whose schooling experience was documented in Chapter 1. I cannot remove my response to this tragedy from my analysis of the data as discourses of risk permeated each step of his passage through adolescence. The importance of revealing this tragedy is to explain how this has influenced the ways I attempt to position myself as a researcher, and has grounded the ways in which I have (dis)connected myself from/with my data. As ethnographic ‘narrators’ our interpretations of respondents’ stories are affected by our own knowledge, beliefs, assumptions and biases about the chosen research topic. The way I positioned myself, and was positioned by participants, influenced the kind of data I collected, and how I constructed the identities of those ‘others’ - which has consequences for the way these ‘others’ are perceived by scholarly readers (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Fine, 1994). My son’s presence was strong throughout the data collection, as a few of the young people observed and interviewed in one of the YAPs were associated with him on a social basis in and out of school. For this reason, often the boundaries of ethnographer and parent became blurred<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, prior to my son’s death, I was experiencing life as a parent of a young person considered ‘at-risk’, which impacted on the ways I viewed the YAP programs and organisations, and on my reading of interviews and observations collected for the study. These aspects are important to ‘confess’ as they shaped the relationships formed between myself (as researcher) and the participants of my study (youth workers and young people). Cunliffe and Karunanayake discuss the intricacy and impact of research-participant relationships, building on Fine’s (1994) theories:

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<sup>37</sup> This connection was mainly with one of the YAP2 boys (who is not identified here), although I did see the others in the company of my son, on occasion, outside of the program. Having said this, I was not privy to the family lives of the young people in my study, and I did not know their parents. The connection with this particular boy centred on social events such as lifts to and from teenage parties (with my son) and car trips down town and back after school and on weekends.

...understanding how we “work the hyphen” means reflexively probing how our presence influences and/or changes people and practices and how their presence influences us—intentionally or otherwise, surfacing the identity relations that may occur between ourselves and our research participants (e.g., Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008), and examining the implications for research practice. (2013, p. 365)

Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013, p. 368) talk of *hyphen-spaces* as what links *hyphens* – the “fluid relational spaces in which boundaries between researcher-researched are blurred, influence is mutual, and multiple meanings articulated and worked out in different ways by all research participants”. They argue this way of thinking and performing is beneficial as it closes the gap between theory and practice, resulting in a richer account. Perhaps I was working from an intersubjectivist problematic, because, as discussed in the Introduction, I seemed to be continuously *working within the hyphen-spaces*, positioning myself always in relation to my research participants as researcher, participant, educator and mother - shaping meanings between us. Thus, my metatheoretical assumptions influenced my recognition, experience, and the choices I made in the hyphen-spaces I encountered, and the ways in which I interpreted those encounters in my analysis (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013, p. 369). In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I endeavour to address my work *within the hyphen-spaces* as my own narratives (and those of my participants) unfold through discussion of themes emerging from the data. The ethnographic techniques used to collect this, namely observation, participant observation, interviews and the collection and examination of context-specific documents, are outlined and justified below.

## **Observation**

“All observation involves participation in the world being studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 416). The collaborative participant observer (Angrosino & de Pérez, 2000) can be pulled in different directions by factors such as gender, race, structures of power, and relationships built with the participants. My role as observer involved listening, recording, and asking questions in the observational ‘spaces’, which I supplemented by collecting

data from interviews, field notes and through visual and audio recording methods (Pink, 2007). As a researcher I was connected to the data/text and sat somewhere “between the ‘singular ‘I’, characteristic of narrative ethnography, and the absent ‘I’, which is typical of classic ethnography” (Silverman, 1998, p. 15). My observations and field notes were compiled with the post-structural understanding that how participants acted within each site was not limited to, or purely a product of, the situation observed.

What was observed cannot be taken for granted as everyday practice or even what happens typically in the programs – as my own behaviour inevitably affects the site (Hammersley, 2006). The youth workers’ perceptions and practices, and the young people’s perceptions and performances of identities, and my presence and interactions with both parties, shaped the observations within the boundaries of each YAP. For the purposes of this study, my observations focused on particular situations within the two programs, rather than observations of participants’ lives outside these contexts. This enabled a more detailed observation and analysis of the production and negotiation of ‘at-risk’ subjectivities and discourses within the specific social and arts/sports-based activities associated with the observed programs.

### **Participant Observation**

Historically, participant observation has been associated with spending a lengthy period of time in small communities. It has broader use in places such as classrooms, worksites and community spaces. This method is “accepted almost universally as the central and defining method of research in cultural anthropology” (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002, p. 1) - while also being accepted in social scientific inquiry (Atkinson et al., 2003; Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002; Iverson, 2009; Jacobs, 1970). Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (2003) follow Becker and Geer (1970) in advocating the potential benefits of participant observation to yield “a more complete record...and understanding of events...a holistic approach to data collection and interpretation” (Atkinson et al., 2003, p. 100).

In Phase 2 of the study, I moved from being an observer and interviewer to being a participant observer – a fully functioning member<sup>38</sup> in YAP1 and YAP2 with the participants being privy to my simultaneous role as researcher. In this role I needed to be mindful of the insider-outsider tensions for researchers and how these affected my position as participant observer (Labaree, 2002). Critics of ‘insider’ researchers contend that the “closeness to their research community clouds their views and leads to biased research findings. Insiders counter that their positioning provides a contextual understanding of the community that outsiders do not possess” (Innes, 2009, p. 440). I do not claim to be a ‘total insider’ to this group, sharing multiple identities and living under the label ‘at-risk’. However, as the parent of a young person who was considered ‘at-risk’ I moved through the social groups where the young people from the programs and my son circulated, and this positioned me somewhat as a “partial insider...with a degree of distance or detachment from the community” (Chavez, 2008, p. 475). As a participant observer, I spent a longer period of time with the participants in YAP1 and YAP2 to build relationships, and to interact in the processes of the programs in various roles (Atkinson et al., 2001). This extended interaction necessitated particular attention to the evolving roles and relationships that occurred with the young participants and highlighted the difficulties of leaving the field once the program/research concluded (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000). I discuss the concept of leaving the field along with the ethical considerations of this project in Appendix A.

## **Interviews**

Ethnographic interviews can range from spontaneous, informal conversations, to formally-structured meetings in bounded settings (Hammersley, 1992). Post-structurally speaking:

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<sup>38</sup> As a fully functioning member I engaged in every activity within each session (e.g., playing a game of touch football) instead of sitting back and observing. This way I was privy to the conversations that occurred within the sessions and able to closely observe the processes of ‘risky’ identity construction, negotiation and disruption through participant informal confessions and storytelling, as well as formal program activities (such as a poster session and guest speaker on drug use).

By reflexively turning theory in on its methods, post-structuralist research techniques are increasingly disconnected from epistemological privilege. In this way, research contexts are a locally produced accomplishment or arrangement of meanings. For example, whether interviews are structured, unstructured, semi-focused, or non-focused, they operate as strategies to produce information that is contextualised by local sensibilities and practices. (Popoviciu et al., 2006, p. 407)

In this sense, the interviews in this study are treated as localised strategies to produce information rather than *truth* or unbiased access to lived realities. Typically, research interviews play a part in the creation of data which may not have existed apart from the researcher's intervention (Silverman, 2004). Rubin and Rubin (1995) see qualitative interviews as a means of finding out what others feel and think about their social world/s, about exploring differences and similarities between the researcher and the researched. Atkinson et al. (2001) suggest ethnographic interviews can be adopted in "projects in which researchers have established respectful, on-going relationships with their interviewees, including enough rapport to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds" (Atkinson et al., 2001, p. 370). My role as the mother of a teenage son, and my background in local youth (drama) work and teaching, assisted me to build rapport with the young people in the programs, and my previous and continual connections with the youth workers helped to encourage openness in the interviews with these participants. While I remained aware of the rhetorical devices I employed as an ethnographer, my choice of methods provided opportunities to understand people's perspectives, and to make connections between what was said in interviews, and what was viewed in observations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2000, p. 200).

Informal (unstructured) interviews are common in ethnography and were utilised throughout the project phases as opportune moments arose (O'Reilly, 2005). However in Phase 1, a scoping stage intended to explore youth workers' views and experiences of professional practice with 'at risk' young people, I used formal (structured) interviews.

Informal interviews were adopted in Phase 2 using the data collected from the youth workers in Phase 1 to design some loose, open-ended follow-up questions for the specific YAP1 and YAP2 youth workers. In Phase 2, I also conducted informal interviews (conversations, session discussions) with the young people and the youth workers, while I was a participant observer at YAP1 and YAP2. Phase 2 lasted for three months in YAP1 and two months in YAP2, providing many opportunities for dialogue with all participants – and to share in the production of video (YAP1 & YAP2) and audio (YAP2 mainly) recordings of, and made by, the young people. This provided additional dialogue to analyse along with other, context-specific data.

## **Collection and Examination of Context-Specific Data**

The context-specific data I collected included: 1) ABS and local government statistics (socioeconomic statistics, employment rates, local industries, migrant population, census data), and 2) local newspapers, newsletters and program information flyers about youth programs 3) policy documents such as *The NSW Youth Action Plan (2006-2010)* and the *Social Inclusion Principles for Australia (2008)*, in particular the *Links to Learning Guidelines (2001; 2008; 2012)* – for YAP1 – and the *NSW Police Service Youth Policy Statement (2005)* – for YAP2 – as these informed and shaped the programs I observed. This information generated information to help me develop a rich and accurate description of the ethnographic sites, and to engage with a broader range of analytical possibilities – giving a more nuanced picture of how the participants experienced each place.

As noted above, Foucault's (1990, 1991) notions of governmentality were used as a framework to examine the ways that funding policies, guidelines and, in the case of YAP1, the marketing of the community-based programs (the language used within them), constituted the 'at-risk' subject. Combining this examination of documents with my analysis of youth workers' perceptions (from interviews in Phase 1) of YAP marketing, access, program design and funding resulted in a contextualised representation of the policies and of the youth workers' complex and messy understandings of the term 'at-

risk'. It also highlighted the mismatches of policy and practice across the programs in this study. The four main themes emerging from this analysis are presented and discussed in Chapter 5 to provide a context for the two subsequent results chapters (6 and 7). These themes are:

- 1) access to the programs reinforces stereotypical identity markers that constitute the 'at-risk' subject;
- 2) obtaining funding for programs requires youth workers to engage in *the funding game*;
- 3) although program outcomes might be 'successful' in terms of funding goals, young peoples' needs are not always addressed; and
- 4) youth workers' perceive that timeframes and sustainability are vital for an effective program that opens spaces for young people to transform identities.

## **Phases of the Study**

The project was divided into two phases: firstly, interviews with 11 youth workers across seven YAP/YAO sites (see Figure 1 for a list of these sites and Appendix C for a detailed table of youth worker demographics); and secondly, observations of, and informal interviews, conversation and participant-observation with young people, and follow-up questions for youth workers in two of the seven community-based (arts/sports) YAPs.

### *Phase 1*

#### **Recruitment**

Already having familiarity with local community-based (arts) programs meant that I was able to use convenience sampling as an initial means of recruitment among the YAP and YAO Directors. Initially, local rural youth workers (with whom I had established prior contact through previous creative arts programs) were approached to discuss the possibility of their organisation's participation in my study. Once this link was

established, I broadened network by approaching other organisations suggested by these initial youth workers. This snowball sampling method (Patton, 2002) provided me with a number of YAP/YAOs to include in Phase 1. Public lists online, which identified community-based organisations in the selected areas, were also used to ensure I had enough sites for Phase 1.

This type of sampling offered me opportunities to recruit from available sources perceived to be representative – in this case community-based organisations where youth workers, and young people considered ‘at risk’, were engaged in ‘youth at-risk’ programs. As the participants were not selected through probability sampling, they are not representative of the general youth worker or youth population; however this research is aimed at a more targeted and narrowly defined population, which is why probability sampling would not have been appropriate (Punch, 2001). This “accessible population is a subset of the target population that reflects specific characteristics with respect to age, gender, etc.” (Lunsford & Lunsford, 1995, p. 105) for example. Organisations in higher socioeconomic areas who provide activities for middle class youth would have been less likely to present opportunities to discuss ‘youth at-risk’ -‘at risk’ in the terms of social policy under investigation here.

The seven rural YAP/YAO were chosen as representative of more ‘grass roots’, smaller programs with different connections to the community from local NSW government-run organisations, and less bureaucratic interference. Interview participants for Phase 1 were selected on the basis of their roles as youth workers in community-based organisations that are peripheral to, rather than subsidiaries of, government departments or school institutions. This maintained my emphasis on the significance of community-based programs in attempting to engage young people in ways other than formal education. Interviews were held with one to three youth workers from each organisation.

## **Data Collection**

In Phase 1 I used semi-structured interviews to generate data from 11 youth workers across the seven YAP/YAOs in RNSW. An indicative list of questions was designed (see Appendix B) to initiate discussion around key themes, including: current youth policy and its effects on their work with young people considered ‘at-risk’; youth workers’ understandings of the ways that education impacts on the social experience of young people considered ‘at-risk’; and the ways in which youth work programs potentially address issues of social exclusion or marginalisation. I interviewed each youth worker once for an average of 30-50 minutes in Phase 1. This scoping phase provided me with the necessary information to reduce the sample size to two YAPs in Phase 2, and provide background data about the programs – what had been done in past and present programs, and what was seen to be working or not working. In Phase 2 I conducted informal follow-up discussions with specific YAP1 and YAP2 youth workers. These discussions focused on their beliefs about why the young people had been labelled ‘at-risk’; what practices/strategies the youth workers used in regard to working with young people considered ‘at-risk’; and elaboration of the youth workers’ perceptions of the role schooling had played in the labelling of young people as ‘at-risk’. These follow-up interviews (combined with the Phase 1 interviews) also helped me to build a relationship with the youth workers – relations which were pivotal in gaining access to the young people recruited for Phase 2. It is important to note here, that Phase 1 (and 2) was not about validating or debating the worth of the seven programs/organisations, as each one played an important part in connecting with young people who are considered ‘at-risk’ in different ways.

## **Demographics – Youth Workers**

The following table provides a summary of demographics of the participating youth workers in Phase 1. A more detailed table can be seen in Appendix C.

Table 1: Summary of Youth Workers Demographics

Youth 'at-risk' Community-Based (arts/sports) Programs Young People Summary			
YAP	Name	Gen der	Age
YAP 1	Shirley*	F	55-65
	George*	M	45-55
	Levi*	M	45-55
YAP2	Lynne*	F	35-45
	Max*	M	30-40
	Bob	M	30-40
YAP3	Kate	F	45-55
YAP4	Dan	M	25-35
YAO1	Melissa	F	30-40
	Jane	F	30-40
YAO2	Kris	F	25-35
YAO3	Levi (again from YAP1)	M	45-55

\* Follow-up questions were held with Shirley (Director), George and Levi (from YAP1) and Lynne and Max (from YAP2) in Phase 2.

### **Analysis of Youth Worker Data**

I transcribed the interviews verbatim and read them multiple times. Initially, I coded each transcript to find the common themes within each youth workers' responses. Then I generated common themes across the data set ('cross-case analysis'; Patton, 2002) by bringing similar coded segments together and dropping irrelevant codes to develop more refined concepts (thematic analysis; van Manen, 1998). The youth worker data was then interpreted using Foucault's (1990, 1991) notions of governmentality and technologies of the self/control, to understand the ways in which the programs and youth workers' perceptions and practices might contribute to the (neoliberal) governance of the young people in my study. I examined how, through the youth workers' mobilisation of

discourses of risk and expert knowledge about the *truths* of ‘at-risk’ youth, they were (unintentionally) encouraging the young people to engage in self-surveillance and self-regulation of ‘risky’ behaviours and dispositions. Furthermore this framework provided opportunities to understand how power is “disseminated in many various local sites and power relations” (Curran, 2010, 25), in this case, through the expressed and observed practices of youth workers.

Chapter 6 draws on youth workers’ perceptions and the practices I observed, to understand the ways in which policy, practice, beliefs, knowledge, assumptions and biases around youth labelled ‘at-risk’ interact to resist and/or further shape and reinforce the constituted ‘at-risk’ subject. Although I focus mainly on data collected from youth workers of YAP1 and YAP2, data from all the youth worker interviews are drawn on when discussing themes in the findings. The main themes that emerged from this analysis were:

- 1) the notion of varying degrees of risk when constructing youth ‘at-risk’;
- 2) the youth workers’ perception that the school system is flawed;
- 3) the youth workers’ practical expression of gendered approaches to regulation;
- 4) the youth workers’ perception that arts/sports programs provide spaces for the ‘at-risk’ subject to transform their negative ‘risky’ identities - to “save themselves from the perils associated with risk trajectories” (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 43) and
- 5) my Foucauldian interpretation that, despite the good intentions of youth workers, community-based (art/sports) programs can be considered another form of regulation.

## *Phase 2*

### **Recruitment**

Two YAPs were selected from the original seven sites. YAP1 and YAP2 become the focus of Phase 2 for one main reason, *timing*. YAP2 had not begun when I approached the youth workers, which allowed me to enter and observe the project from the start. YAP1 had been running throughout the year; however I approached the director at a point when quite a few new participants were entering their program. The other sites I approached had either just finished a program or were towards the end of it, so access was not viable. Despite this limitation, both YAP1 and YAP2 offered a number of dimensions that were not obvious in the other sites. Both were school-partnered, which opened up possible dialogue connecting perceptions of education/teachers impacting on the ways young people are constituted ‘at-risk’. Moreover, both were called Youth ‘at-risk’ programs, which allowed another dimension of discursive practice to be analysed. With assistance from the youth workers, one small group of young people in each YAP was approached and asked for consent to be observed in an existing program, and invited to participate in informal interviews.

### **Data Collection**

Phase 2 data collection involved participant observation and informal interviews with the young people recruited through the community-based (arts/sports) programs where the youth workers were employed (as well as follow-up questions with the youth workers). This phase focused on: a) the participation of young people in the two YAPs; b) the young people’s experiences of schooling; and c) their understandings about why they engaged in the YAP. The observations in this second phase took the form of observing and participating in weekly sessions, one day per week (over a period of 3 months for YAP1 [one day for the girls and one for the boys group], and over 2 months for YAP2). I continually moved between the sites as they ran, in part, simultaneously. As previously explained, I encouraged the young participants to use my video and audio recorder during

formal sessions (e.g., a group session on drugs) and informal settings (e.g., socialising with peers on the bus) to capture what was important to the participants at the time.

This video footage was recorded at times by the young people and at other times by me. Often the young people would take video footage while I was not present (although still within the program site) to record conversations and events. These recordings revealed sensitive information and confessions of practices involving crimes, drugs and other illegal activities. Although I used discussions from the footage, I have not included any images of the participants in this study to avoid recognition and because they were at an age where it might be difficult for them to have understood future consequences of discussing crimes, drugs and other illegal activities on recorded devices. The youth workers were present when these types of conversations (and ones that disclosed mental health issues) occurred, thereby in a sense, relieving me from the duty of care dilemma (refer to Appendix A ethical consideration). Two of the boys from YAP2 (John and Scott) dominated the use of the audio recorder, while all the boys took turns with the video camera. In YAP 1, I primarily used the audio recorder, with some video footage of the sessions being recorded by the young people themselves (e.g., asking their peers questions about the sessions). Their audio recording was conducted while I was present (with different young people holding the Dictaphone at various times). In both YAPs the recording devices were given back to me at the end of each session. The young people knew I would be using these recordings for research purposes and that the youth workers could access these recordings.

This phase allowed me to build trust with the young people, to observe their interactions with other participants and the youth workers within the programs, and provided me with the opportunity to further explore how these young people engaged in the production of self (particularly in informal ways) through/within a YAP. Furthermore, by observing the processes involved in the formal musical/art and sports sessions in YAP1 or YAP2, and

analysing informal video/audio recordings made by participants in both YAPS, the song lyrics shared by the boys in YAP2, and the conversations amongst the participants/peers on bus trips and lunch outings as part of both YAPs, I was able to explore the production of text (spoken/written/performed) and the intersection of self. That is, by focussing on the processes involved in the formal art or sport-related program sessions, and in the creation of art forms and art or sport-related performances (not the final products or final performances *per se*), in addition to the confessions made by participants in informal (peer) settings, such as when on outings or on the bus, I was able to collect valuable data that could focus my analysis on examining the ways in which the ‘at-risk’ label is negotiated and ‘lived’ by young people participating in RNSW community-based (arts/sports) programs.

### **Demographics – Young People**

The following table summarises the demographics and noted details of the 15 young people (ten boys and five girls) involved in YAP1 and YAP2 who returned consent forms (see Appendix D for a table with more detail). Those young people who identified as Indigenous or Maori are noted. Overall, there were ten boys and ten girls who participated in the YAP1 – with only three boys and five girls returning consent forms. The YAP1 director (Shirley) indicated the non-return was expected from ‘certain families’ but made no further explanation or comments when I asked her why that was the case. There were seven boys participating in YAP2 - all of whom returned consent forms. There was no solid understanding gained from youth workers in either YAP as to why specific individual young people had been included/asked/told to participate in the programs, other than vague notions that teachers and counsellors decided who should have access, that there had been inappropriate behaviour among some of the young people in classrooms (for both YAP1 and 2), and that the YAP2 boys had all had ‘brushes with the law’.

Table 3 – Demographics of the Young People in YAP1 and YAP2

Youth 'at-risk' Community-based (arts/sports) programs Young People Summary				
YAP	Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Cultural Background
YAP1	Yasmine	F	14	Indigenous
	Melinda	F	15	Anglo Saxon
	Kath	F	15	Anglo Saxon
	Lisa	F	13	Anglo Saxon
	Sarah	F	15	Indigenous
	Donny	M	15	Anglo Saxon
	Robbie	M	14	Anglo Saxon
	Paul	M	14	Anglo Saxon
YAP2	Jeff	M	14	Anglo Saxon
	MC	M	15	Indigenous
	Scott	M	14	Indigenous
	John	M	14	Maori
	Blake	M	14	Anglo Saxon
	Chris	M	13	Anglo Saxon
	Ben	M	13	Maori

### Analysis of the Young People's Data

My observational field notes, the recorded informal interviews and conversations, the dialogue from participant-made audio recordings and video footage, the participant-chosen song lyrics, and my observational notes from the unedited video footage for analysis were all electronically transcribed. The tedious and time-consuming process of transcribing this large volume of data formed the initial stage of analysis because I was immersed in the data for months. As I transcribed, I made analytical memos about what I was seeing and hearing in the data, and connections between the literature and my data (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). I returned to these notes later in the analysis to connect ideas and move from description to interpretation. After transcribing, I read through the texts, listened to the audios and watched the videos numerous times and coded the data and

sorted it according to common themes discernible across the different forms of data. Code words such as gender, drugs and alcohol, schooling, Indigeneity, sport, music and dance, peers, fame and pop culture, formed my initial raw data themes. The next stage of analysis involved drawing relationships across these themes and merging them to form more refined themes to represent the key findings (Patton, 2002; van Manen, 1998). Finally, I drew on the work of Butler and Lyng (and Foucault) to develop the notion of *Risk with a twist* to interpret my findings.

Butler's (1993, 2006) notions of performativity, where the subject is understood as intelligible through discursive (everyday) practices, and Lyng's (2005) theory on edgework from a Foucauldian perspective (both are discussed earlier in this chapter) provided an effective frame to make sense of the themes emerging in relation to the young people within YAP1 and YAP2. The notion of *Risk with a twist* explains the simultaneous enabling and constraining processes and possible effects of the young people 'living the (at-risk) label' that emerged through the analysis of the data in Phase 2. There are several clear enabling effects of 'living the label' for the young people in this study:

- 1) their retelling of 'risky' experiences brings kudos/fame in the peer group;
- 2) being 'risky' (e.g., by misbehaving at, or not attending, school) enables them access to the (arts/sports) program and gets them out of the school context – a context where they feel they are treated unfairly by teachers and made to feel like 'losers' and;
- 3) some of the youth workers make certain young people feel special because of their 'at risk' status.

The retelling of edgework experiences that the young people engage in opens possibilities for some young people constituted within policy, and by schools, as 'unsuccessful' 'at-risk' subjects, to twist/flip the label and to perform recognisable and powerful 'risky'

identities within the bounds of the YAP. Simultaneously with these affordances of risk, however, the constraining aspects of ‘living the label’ are:

- 1) the narrow or culturally impoverished sense of what is deemed important to the young people denied power and failed by the educational system and;
- 2) the difficulty of escaping the label, once it is applied by self and others. As young people try to *escape* the constraints of society by engaging in ‘risky’ practices, they further reinforce and validate these behaviours as identity markers that constitute them as ‘at-risk’.

It is important to reiterate here that my intent with this study is not to detract from the good work of the youth workers, who often went above and beyond the limits of their role to assist some of the young people to engage in the construction of possible positive identities. Nor is it to diminish the importance of national and state funding for passionate people to work with young people. My intent is to seek to understand how ‘risky’ labels are constituted within and through these programs (and the policies informing and shaping them). Moreover, I seek to understand and reveal how the young people engaged in programs targeted towards youth ‘at-risk’, recognise, take up/resist and perhaps purposefully use the ‘at-risk’ label to their advantage within the observed contexts.

In the following section I present the results of my analysis in three chapters that allow me to draw conclusions and implications from the study. Chapter 5 discusses the political underpinnings of the funding bodies for YAP1 and YAP2, and explores how the policies themselves constitute the ‘at-risk’ subject as a certain type of person – belonging to a certain group that is ‘at-risk’ of not ‘becoming’ ideal adults (Kelly, 2006; Wyn & Woodman, 2007). Chapter 6 draws on the youth workers’ perceptions and observed practices to understand the ways in which policy, youth work practices, and the beliefs, knowledge, assumptions and biases of youth workers around the youth ‘at-risk’ label resist and/or reinforce the constituted ‘at-risk’ subject. Chapter 7 provides space for the

unfolding narratives of the young people within YAP1 and YAP2 and their negotiation of the 'at-risk' label.



## Chapter 5: *Regulating Risk- 'Risky' Political Underpinnings*

## Introduction

This chapter examines how educational, social and community program funding policies constitute certain groups of young people as ‘at-risk’ subjects. To do this I analyse the educational and social policies that informed and shaped the designs of the two observed community-based (arts/sport) programs, and the suggested practices of the youth workers within them. My discussion focuses on the ways the policy and program guidelines can constitute ‘at-risk’ subjects in certain (often deficit) ways. Then it further explores the ways in which policy and practice align or are mismatched to provide an insight on how (neoliberal) policy at a macro level can utilise these types of programs as a tool of governance to encourage self-regulation and an entrepreneurial self. Through this analysis I provide evidence to build on my first key argument that policies are based on understanding the ‘at-risk’ subject through pre-existing assumptions (‘expert’ knowledge of youth), which reinforce *truths* of moral panics and the notion that there is a youth problem in need of constant attention. This examination of policy is an important step towards an understanding of how the (messy and complex) ‘at-risk’ label may play out in the lives of the young people in my study.

Following Curran’s (2010) lead, I highlight the strong connection between notions of risk, and the ways ‘blame’ is shifted from relational structural causes of risk to focus on the individual. Given the apparent synonymous nature of the terms ‘risk’ and ‘youth’ in contemporary society, it remains important to explore how policy, perceptions and discourses of risk play out within possible neoliberal spaces. I am interested in spaces such as community-based/school-partnered programs that aim to address issues of ‘risk’ in the lives of certain groups of young people to assist them in ‘becoming’ worthwhile, productive citizens. As Curran argues “it is not enough to establish that the term ‘risk’ is being used [in policy and practice]; it is also necessary to discover what meanings are being attached to its use” (2010, p. 51) and how this helps/hinders possible constructions of self for the young people involved.

Johanna Wyn's (2012; also see Andres & Wyn, 2010) recent work in youth studies highlights that generations are shaped by "education, labour market and workplace policies" (p. 270). Therefore, in reference to today's young people, this generation's "particular dispositions, goals and life outcomes [are] forged in relation to neoliberal policies" (p. 270). Peter Kelly (2011), (as discussed in Chapters 1-3), follows this understanding and takes up a Foucauldian analysis of neoliberal governmentality, arguing in numerous papers that young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are increasingly made knowable within neoliberal government spaces (Kelly, 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2006, 2007). Within this framework and studies of youth, the terms 'neoliberalism', 'risk', 'conduct' and 'agency' have become commonly used and often associated with governmentality. Research around the notions of 'risk' and 'youth' has been categorised by Zyngier (2011) (as discussed in Chapter 3) into three main themes (Instrumentalist, Individualist and Critical Transformative) with Instrumentalist and Individualist views being prominent in policies in regard to young people considered 'at-risk' – with a strong focus on the dangers of youth 'at-risk' not completing a successful educational pathway. Smyth and McInerney suggest the root causes of "policy relays of educational and social disaffection, stratification and alienation" (2012, p. 188), that impact upon young people, stem from the notion of a neoliberalised market.

There is a tendency in Australian education policy to label students struggling in relation to academic outcomes, as being 'at-risk', with policy identification taking a simplistic view of focusing on the personal attributes of these young people as the possible causes of their 'at-riskness' (te Riele, 2006, p. 139). For example, young people 'at-risk' of failing school are defined in policies (as seen in this chapter) through tangible markers such as, being Indigenous, from single parent families and engaging in risk-taking. Dwyer and Wyn (2001) suggest this approach differentiates a supposed problematic minority from a normal majority. Similarly, the policy assumption of a linear transition to adulthood, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, assumes all young people need to walk a

particular path to ‘arrive’ at adulthood. The continued mismatch of policy and experiences for young people in contemporary society reinforces the notion that a young person who is labelled ‘at-risk’, and ‘fallen/wandered’ off the path, is in some way at fault (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; te Riele, 2004). These mismatches can make it difficult for people who work with youth to meet their needs effectively. Nevertheless, research shows how youth workers in community-based organisations seek to address these mismatches (Banks et al., 2003; Savicki, 2002) through a variety of processes that often include using creative arts (Australian Council for the Arts, 2006; Hogan, 2005; O'Brien & Donelan, 2007; O'Brien et al., 2005) and sport practices (Coalter, 2013; Dinan, Thompson, Sellwood, Carless, 2008; Wright, Harwell & Allen, 1998). Commonly though, the bureaucracy around these approaches used by youth workers often stereotype youth ‘at-risk’ within their own community-based programs – (unintentionally) reinforcing the risk discourse.

Therefore, this chapter shows how, and in what ways, the aims of policy that informs and shapes the community-based (arts/sports) programs in my study, discursively perpetuate stereotypical notions of youth ‘at-risk’, despite trying to resist the notion of being ‘at-risk’. In particular, my discussion here addresses research questions 1 and 2:

- 1) How do educational, social and community program funding policies constitute certain groups of young people, through neoliberal rationalities, as ‘at-risk’ subjects?
- 2) How do the programs, practices and perceptions of youth workers contribute to and/or resist these neoliberal processes?

Within the context of national youth policy and state frameworks of youth ‘at-risk’ in Australia, I examine the policy and funding aims of the two community-based (arts/sports) programs observed in my research; the ways policy defines access to the programs; and the suggested practices for assisting youth ‘at-risk’. Two aspects that emerged from my analysis, *Risky Aims* and *Risky Fun and Contracts*, describe the targets of these programs and how these programs are marketed as ‘fun’, respectively. The

matches/mismatches of policy and practice generally across the collected data from all seven programs is discussed through four key themes: 1) Access; 2) The funding game; 3) Outcome vs needs; and 4) Timeframes and sustainability. I argue that the boundaries of ‘at-risk’ funding and the mismatches of policy and practice add to the messiness of the notion of being ‘at-risk’.

## **‘Risky’ Aims**

### *YAP1*

The first youth ‘at-risk’ program (YAP1) is a community-based (arts/sports) program funded through a targeted project called *Links to Learning* (L2L) developed by the NSW Department of Education and Communities. L2L focuses on:

...supporting non-government community organisations and local government authorities to assist them in working with young people who have left or are at risk of leaving school, so that they can reach their full potential. (Australian Government, 2008a, p. 1)

The phrase ‘to reach their full potential’ is littered throughout national and state policies associated with youth. As discussed in Chapter 1, this language positions young people as needing to transition to become useful to society (McGuirk, 2001) when they reach a preferred adulthood (de Roeper & Savelsberg, 2009). These types of phrases also reinforce the (policy) binary divide which separates young people into those ‘who can’, and those ‘who can’t’ succeed in school. The young people in YAP1, who are understood through policy as ‘at-risk’ and not ‘on-track’ to reach a valued adulthood, enter this program already rendered knowable through discourses of risk by policies that understand their life performance in particular risky ways - before they even access the programs. The L2L therefore focuses on notions of risk in regard to education and employment.

At the time of the data collection, L2L was informed by broader educational policies/reports (*Young People's Participation in Post-compulsory Education and Training Report* [1991] [the Finn Report] and *The NSW Youth Action Plan* [2006-2010]) where the focus was on retention of young people in schools to Year 12 or alternate vocational pathways and 'learning and earning'. In both documents the word 'pathway/s' is used to describe young people's transition to a preferred adulthood, reinforcing the notion that youth are on a linear pathway to 'becoming' ideal adults rather than simply being (non-adult) (Kelly, 1998, p. 34; also see te Riele, 2004) Although research such as Head (2007, p. 542) suggests that "a sole focus upon education and employment, as the foundational pathways into the adult world of productivity and responsibility, has been seen by many recent commentators as somewhat narrow" these systems continue to reinforce the notion of the preferred pathway – just as L2L and YAP1 program and policy guidelines do through their aim to keep young people on an educational/vocational pathway.

*The Finn Report* (Australian Education Council Review Committee, 1991) states that one of their major proposals was to improve "the transition from school for some 'at risk' young people" (p. xiii) – but there is no description of who these 'at-risk' youth are until much further into the report where the reader finds a definition (drawn from the *Freeland Report* [1996]) which includes – "Aborigines, teenagers from NESB, rural and isolated areas and early school leavers" (p. 133). It states that the Freeland report "systematically correlates [the above mentioned categories/characteristics] to aspects of poor education performance", such as early school leaving (p. 133). Following the definition is a set of specific strategies for each group of 'at-risk' youth (NESB, low socioeconomic status, rural areas, Aboriginal people, young people with disabilities, homeless young people, and young offenders). These strategies for how-to-work-with 'risky' youth become part of the "process for expert identification of Risk factors" (Kelly, 1998, p. 33; also see Tait, 1993), which in turn informs funding bodies, such as the L2L, and shapes the programs such as YAP, that apply to them for funding, (Kelly, 1998).

Similarly, the *Social Inclusion Principles* (2008b) informed funding bodies that worked with youth, such as L2L. I recall a quote from the *Principles* which claims that those on the brink of being ‘at-risk’ will have the opportunity for “deep, intensive interventions [through and by services]...helping [the individual] tackle their actual problems. Successfully overcoming social exclusion may also involve [the individual] learning to change deeply held attitudes and behaviours...” (Australian Government, 2008b, p. 3). In other words, the individual will be offered (put in) programs to ‘fix’ themselves and become good economic neoliberal subjects. The three policies/reports mentioned here frame youth ‘at-risk’ in a deficit light which attracts an “interventionist, regulatory regime” (Kelly, 1998, p. 36) similar to Zyngier’s Instrumentalist approach, where individuals (and their family) characteristics are highlighted as the fault that places them ‘at-risk’, and in turn necessitates interventions – interventions that require the individual to self-regulate and monitor their risky behaviours and dispositions. Bessant suggests the notion of risk “appears to involve, in Foucault's terms, dividing practices that distinguish between those who are ‘at-risk’ from certain ‘problems’ and those who are not” (2001, p. 32). The need to define youth ‘at-risk’ and establish boundaries before governmental power can be exerted, positions young people “through the individualization of risk and the responsabilization of youth” (Curran, 2010, p. 37). These strategies are ingrained within discourses of risk via neoliberal rationalities governing youth, where young people are understood as responsible for the negotiation of ‘risky’ situations.

Specifically, the L2L programs (thus YAP1 as well) target two main groups: “Early Leavers - young people who have already left school early; and Students at Risk who are enrolled in government high schools, between Years 7 and 12” (Australian Government, 2008a, p. 2), and who are identified (through pre-existing expert knowledges of youth) by school learning support teams, student welfare committees or regional teams as being “disengaged or at risk of disengaging from their school” (p. 2). YAP1 first applied for this funding (targeting students ‘at risk’) in 1994 as a pilot program, with its Director (Shirley)

– a participant in my research - obtaining the position then and retaining it to the present day.

The L2L guidelines identify a specific population to be targeted by programs applying for funding. These include: “young people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent; culturally and linguistically diverse young people; and the general youth (12-24) population [which as they state] may include members of the other mentioned groups” (Australian Government, 2008a, p. 2). The guidelines (which echo *The Finn Report*) define the parameters of students ‘at-risk’ (within the target population) as young people who may have one or the following situations:

- Enrolled but not attending school or particular classes
- Experiencing difficulties with school learning environment
- Without networks of support
- In geographic isolation
- Offending or at risk of offending
- Not currently participating in community or other programs and services
- Unemployment (not completed Year 12 or equivalent)
- Engaged in risk-taking behaviour
- Single parents
- Substitute or out of home care
- Other significant circumstances that prevent access to remaining in education, training or employment

(NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2012, p. 2)

Within these guidelines there is a strong image formed of who is ‘at-risk’. The identity markers listed here allow young people to become knowable to youth workers and teachers through policy. Using identifying (racial, socio-economic, locational) markers, or identifying factors that construct youth as being ‘at risk’, may help the young people to access resources and support that is beneficial to their wellbeing, but it ultimately reinforces stereotypical notions of the ‘at-risk’ label. When considering these identity markers and notions of governmentality, the “problems of disaffected and disengaged young people in schools are rationalised away in a policy sense [by] individualising the

issue” (Smyth & McInerney, 2012, p. 199; also see Zyngier, 2011) through approaches where young people (and their families) are positioned as the main source of problems for their ‘at-risk’ situation. These markers begin to differentiate who fits in with acceptable social norms and who does not. te Riele (2006) suggests that when policy draws on this way of understanding youth ‘at-risk’ through the binary of mainstream vs minority, it neglects to question what it means to be mainstream or ‘normal’, or “whether the mainstream is necessarily suitable or beneficial for everyone” (p. 139).

A prominent identity marker used by youth worker Shirley (YAP1), in our discussions, was “unacceptable behaviour at school” and “health issues that affect behaviour at school” (i.e., depression, bi polar disorders). This perspective aligns with the L2L marker that identifies young people who are “Experiencing difficulties with the school learning environment” as being ‘at-risk’ of dropping out. However, this marker is very general and can encompass numerous interpretations – which can be problematic. In YAP1 and 2, for instance, youth workers explain that the term ‘challenging behaviour’ is highlighted as a factor for students being considered for access into their programs – a term that has come to be connected with notions of youth ‘at-risk’ within discourses of schooling. It is problematic that teachers might interpret the elusive term ‘challenging behaviour’ differently depending on their knowledge, teaching experience, understandings of health issues, and how supportive their work contexts are for managing classroom behaviours – among other factors (McMahon, 2013). For example, some teachers might see ‘riskiness’ in inattention, others in interjection or resistance, while other teachers see failure to complete homework as challenging behaviours (McMahon, 2013). McMahon’s extensive analysis on the construction, and further reconstruction, of the vague term ‘challenging behaviour’ in relation to teachers’ perceptions of certain students, highlights a cloudy area for young people unable and/or unwilling to ‘fit in’ to normative formulations of the ‘possible learner’ (Youdell, 2006a).

It is interesting to note that there was no dialogue between youth workers from YAP1 and the teachers who nominated students as potentially ‘at risk’, which suggests that learning

difficulties may be a factor that influences teachers' decisions about which students would benefit from access to the program. It became quite obvious to me over the weeks of observation, that several of the young people did have learning difficulties, registered through the frustration and anger expressed when asked to read aloud in group sessions. Another marker in the L2L guidelines that identifies potential 'risky' candidates is that they are "engaged in risk-taking behaviour", and is of particular interest here. When considered through Lyng's (2005) theory of edgework, I will show in Chapter 7 how the young people in my study twist and flip the deficit implied in this meaning.

There was also an absence found in the L2L markers when considering the collective body of youth 'at-risk' literature. Surprisingly, despite past and present Australian youth 'at-risk' literature locating family as a causal factor<sup>39</sup> (Anderson, 1979; Candy & Baker, 1992; Corbitt, 1993; Cornwell, Harkin, Rowe, & Thompson, 1989; Hanewald, 2011; Russell & Batton, 1995; Tait, 1993), it remains absent in L2L's guidelines. Wyn argues:

...that the invisibility of families in young people's lives in both the sociology of youth and youth policy is in part attributable to the existence of hierarchies of power that operate across the fields of youth sociology and youth policy, and suggest[s] that this raises important issues for further consideration. (2011, p. 35)

For example, youth policy is dominated by an understanding of the concept of youth through developmental psychological ideas - where the family and youth become separated through belief that ideal adulthood can only be reached when a young person becomes independent of their family. I noted throughout the data collection that there was little reference to family life (or its impacts in regard to risk) by either youth workers or the young people, a finding I explore in the following two chapters. Similarly, the only marker that could link to rurality (geographical isolation) was not discussed as an issue

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<sup>39</sup> Factors such as young people living in families that are, for example, dysfunctional, living in poverty, where abuse, drugs and alcohol are prevalent, and where there is one parent.

by any of the youth workers in the YAPs. Yet, as shown in Chapters 1 and 2, statistically, rural youth are most ‘at-risk’ of failing.

The L2L aim (taken from the guidelines used at the time of my data collection) was:

...to assist young people who experience significant difficulties participating in formal learning environments to access, remain in or return to education or training in order to complete, as a minimum, two years post-compulsory education or accredited training.

The objectives were:

- to establish and maintain regular attendance and active involvement of participants in planned learning and support activities
- to set and achieve individually negotiated participant goals related to the development of key competencies and
- to negotiate and implement the initial steps of a pathways plan for each participant which describes how they will access and remain in education or accredited training after the Program. (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2001, p. 3)

The aims and objectives are focused on encouraging young people to regulate their behaviours (i.e., to attend the program regularly and to account for how they will get ‘back on track’) and to follow the suggested *pathway* to get them ‘back on track’ with the mainstream, ‘not-at-risk’ students. Again the notion of transitioning along a preferred pathway to ideal adulthood surfaces in policy. An important point to Riele (2007) highlights in her analysis of alternative education, where the L2L funding is also discussed, is that “the *Links to Learning* program does not mandate that projects focus on changing the young person. However, the location of most projects outside of schools and their short duration make a focus on changing educational provision less likely” (p. 59). The guidelines suggest young people ‘at-risk’ will be identified and offered access to the

program, which will assist them to find meaning and relevance in school, training or employment. Shirley from YAP1 explains:

We have a meeting at the beginning of the year with the school [local state high schools] and the student services person from district office and we sit down and say ‘Who do you think the target group should be?’ [Then the school counsellor] goes back to the year advisors and says ‘Right I need a list of people who would benefit from employability skills and personal positive attributes’. (Youth Worker YAP1)

Here we can see how the individual youth worker within the program interprets guidelines and outcomes through personal beliefs. Shirley has placed ‘employability skills’ as the main focus of the sessions. This is a predetermined focus where the actual needs of the young people being selected for the programs have not been considered – just the perceived needs (which may or may not be aligned) (Hager, 2003). This focus on preconceived needs aligns with the direct and broader policies which claim to know youth ‘at-risk’ and what they need - shaping YAP1 - instead of ameliorating these disjunctures/mismatches between policy and lived experiences of the young people (Banks, Butcher, Henderson, & Robertson, 2003; Savicki, 2002). During the course of observations, it became apparent that Shirley’s drive to find part-time employment for participants in the program was concentrated more towards the boys, while the development of ‘personal positive attitudes’ was the focus with the girls (a gender disparity that is further explored in subsequent chapters).

All the girls in YAP1 engaged in part of the program called *The Resourceful Adolescent Program* [RAP] (Shochet, Holland, & Whitefield, 1997; Shochet, Osgarby, & Holland, 1999; Shochet & Wurfl, 2006). The program has three components: 1) RAP-A for the adolescents; 2) RAP-P for parents; and 3) RAP-T for teachers. The main aims of this program are to “build resilience and promote positive mental health in teenagers. The program specifically aims to prevent teenage depression and related difficulties” (Queensland University of Technology, 2013, para. 1). All three components were available at the time of my observations, however from the discussions around the RAP

with the youth workers it appeared only the young people were participating in RAP A – despite the RAP designers advice that the whole program is needed for most benefits to be gained<sup>40</sup>. The RAP is usually delivered as a whole grade approach in schools, so as not to highlight to other students any young people who might be depressed or ‘at-risk’ of depression. YAP1’s approach was to have all the girls engaged in the RAP, which in a sense follows RAPs approach, but ultimately (perhaps subtly), reinforces the notion that girls ‘at-risk’ suffer from mental illness (or that girls are ‘at-risk’ of mental illness if they are not treated by these programs) – notions supported by statistics and research as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 (such as ABS, 2008b). These young people are being removed from school (whether voluntarily or through coercion) due to what is seen as ‘risky’ behaviours in the classroom. The marker ‘depression’ is recognised within the girls through their exposing of personal experiences (either themselves, or through their parents/counsellor/psychologist) and they are individualized as needing help. Following this, the young people (girls) are encouraged (apparently required) to work through the RAP workbook that seeks to address depression in young people (this information is readily accessible on RAP website). Thus, although who is ‘at-risk’ of depression is not made obvious in YAP1, the group is highlighted as *different* from the rest of their grade - and even from the YAP1 boys - as Besley suggests, “totalized when their experiences are compared with others” (2010, p. 532). This is a mismatch of suggested aims/practice of the RAP as the youth workers do not take up the suggested implementation of the RAP. The way the RAP is used within YAP1 creates/constitutes youth (girls) in crisis – with mental issues.

Shirley and the other youth workers involved in YAP1, emphasised the improvement of self-confidence and self-worth, in all participants, as vital factors in assisting young people to remain at school. Shirley suggested the main focus of the YAP1 is:

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<sup>40</sup> There was no mention of the teachers engaging when I had asked about the details of the RAP and how it works. The brief discussion I had with the youth workers about them not expecting ‘the parents’ to sign and send back my consent note, coupled with the absence of any reference to parents in discussions of the RAP, indicated that the parents were not involved either.

...to make them [young people] feel comfortable, make them feel like they are achieving and make them have more confidence when they go back to school and give them a variety of experiences. (Shirley, YAP1)

This approach aligns with the L2L aim, in that Shirley sees building positive personal attributes as part of helping young people remain in educational pathways. As Hickey Moody argues, this can be understood as a “self-salvation project” (2013, p. 59) where young people are required to self-improve for program outcomes demonstrating a decrease in delinquent behaviours (and other ‘risky’ markers) to be met successfully. The L2L guidelines describe the programs as doing more than just building employability skills. They are also claimed to be improving literacy and maths skills, computer technology, helping participants reach their ‘potential’, improving education, and employment and life skills<sup>41</sup>. It became clear to me throughout the observations that many of the young people engaged in the project had learning difficulties, and they suggested in informal discussions that these were partly why they ‘played up’ in class. I do step warily here however, as speaking of ‘learning difficulties’ risks pathologising young people further, in regard to risk and education. My intention here is to highlight that for these particular groups of young people, who made explicit claims in this area, there was no obvious support for learning difficulties during the program (a point I explore further in Chapter 7). This presents a clear mismatch between L2L policies (which suggest academic assistance) and practices (which focus on employability skills).

## YAP2

The YAP2 (a boys only group), in general, aimed to reduce youth crime, divert young people from crime, and prevent youth crime by building partnerships with schools and the community (NSW Police Service, 2005). The focus of YAP2 centred on enhancing effective relationships with ‘at-risk’ youth and police, to alter the negative perceptions of the police that the young people may have held, and to encourage them to remain at

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<sup>41</sup> Again, the idea of young people needing to reach their potential is emphasised, just as in the NSW *Youth Action Plan (2006-2010)* which, in a broader context, informs/shapes the L2L policies.

school. The NSW *Police Service Youth Policy Statement 2005* that was in effect at the time of the data collection, emphasised numerous initiatives already in place in regard to addressing young people's needs. Included in this list was the strong connection between the Police Liaison Officers and Community Youth Clubs "which provide ongoing opportunities for contact between police and young people in a positive, friendly environment" (NSW Police Service, 2005, p. 3). The Statement foregrounds the key state legislation that was in place at the time and that influenced the interactions between police and young people, including "the introduction of the *Young Offenders Act 1997*, the *Children (Protection and Parental Responsibility) Act 1997*, the *Crimes Amendment Legislation (Police and Public Safety) Act 1998* and the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*" (NSW Police Service, 2005, p. 6). The Statement highlights that "partnerships between young people, the community and the NSW Police Service [are] aimed at assisting young people develop the qualities to be responsible citizens and leaders and to avoid becoming offenders or victims of crime" (p. 14). Again the notion of a transition from someone who is young and not responsible to someone who is a responsible (adult) citizen is evident. This focus on the transition is also part of the neoliberal push to produce economically productive subjects that are not a burden on society or the judicial system. Moreover, the idea of the young people needing help to 'develop the qualities to be responsible' suggests the need for self-regulation of 'risky' behaviours and dispositions in order to steer clear of criminal activity – which places onus on the young people to change but disregards other relational factors (family, peers, education, socioeconomic status, rurality, gender and Indigeneity) that may be at play in criminal risk-taking (Kelly, 2006, te Riele, 2004).

YAP2 program was funded by NSW Police Service and run by police liaison officers (Lynne and Max) at a local community youth club. It was also accessed by students identified 'at-risk' through discussion with local high schools, based on behaviour and school attendance. However, it differed in focus from YAP1 because it specifically concentrated on recruiting young people who had already been involved in criminal

activity. This identity marker is misleading as the program claimed to be for youth ‘at-risk’, although the question of what exactly they might be ‘at-risk’ of was obviated as they were beyond this point and already engaged in criminal activity. Furthermore, my conversations with police youth worker, Lynne, revealed that a few of the boys were heavily involved in the court system, and she did not consider them ‘at-risk’, but as ‘offenders’ (which was also the name of the other police program [*Young Offenders*] run for youth with substantial engagement in the criminal court system). Perhaps they were ‘at-risk’ of being more ‘at-risk’ of social exclusion, or of going down a ‘riskier’ pathway involving more serious crime? This points to the notion of petty or youth/minor crime leading to serious ‘adult’/‘real’ crime without intervention through such community-based programs (AIHW, 2012). Whatever these young people were ‘at-risk’ of, this is a clear example of how messy and complicated the usage and definition of the term can be.

Invitation and access to the program was varied. The two older boys (MC and Scott) were ‘asked’ personally by the youth workers with whom they had regular police contact (as a result of minor offending) outside of school, to ‘help out’; whereas the younger boys were just ‘told’ by their teachers they would be attending – some boys did not even know they would be attending until the first day of the program. The older boys were considered more ‘at-risk’ by the youth workers and teachers alike, so the apparent benefit in this sort of approach or invitation here appears to be in the choice that is offered to boys who are actually already ‘playing with risk’. Perhaps this special treatment by the youth workers of the most risky boys is seen as a way to help encourage them to come, but nevertheless there does seem to be choice. Alternatively, the younger boys (who were just ‘toying’ with the idea of risk by causing ‘trouble’ at school and hanging around peers who were offending) were not given a choice to participate or not. Despite the varying degrees of risk, all the boys were being positioned under the one label ‘at-risk’. My *Risk with a twist* argument begins to unfold here, although the label is not being twisted by the young people directly. Being older and more ‘risky’ seems to have an enabling feature (in the program context) in that the older (most risky) boys were offered choice, and entered the

program with a sense of being mentors to the other young boys who ‘needed more help than them’ – despite the youth workers’ (Lynne and Max) perceiving these two boys as being most ‘at-risk’ of continuing down risky pathways. Another aspect of the programs, which could be viewed as an beneficial twist, is the idea that being ‘risky’ gets you out of school and ‘in to’ the ‘fun’ program.

## **‘Risky’ Fun and Contracts**

All of the YAP/YAO workers recruited for this study talked about elements of ‘fun’ as being a drawcard to engage young people considered ‘at-risk’, in targeted programs. The following discussion focuses on YAP1 and YAP2 and the ways they marketed their programs as being ‘fun’, as well as the signing of a compulsory contract by the young people to gain access to YAP1.

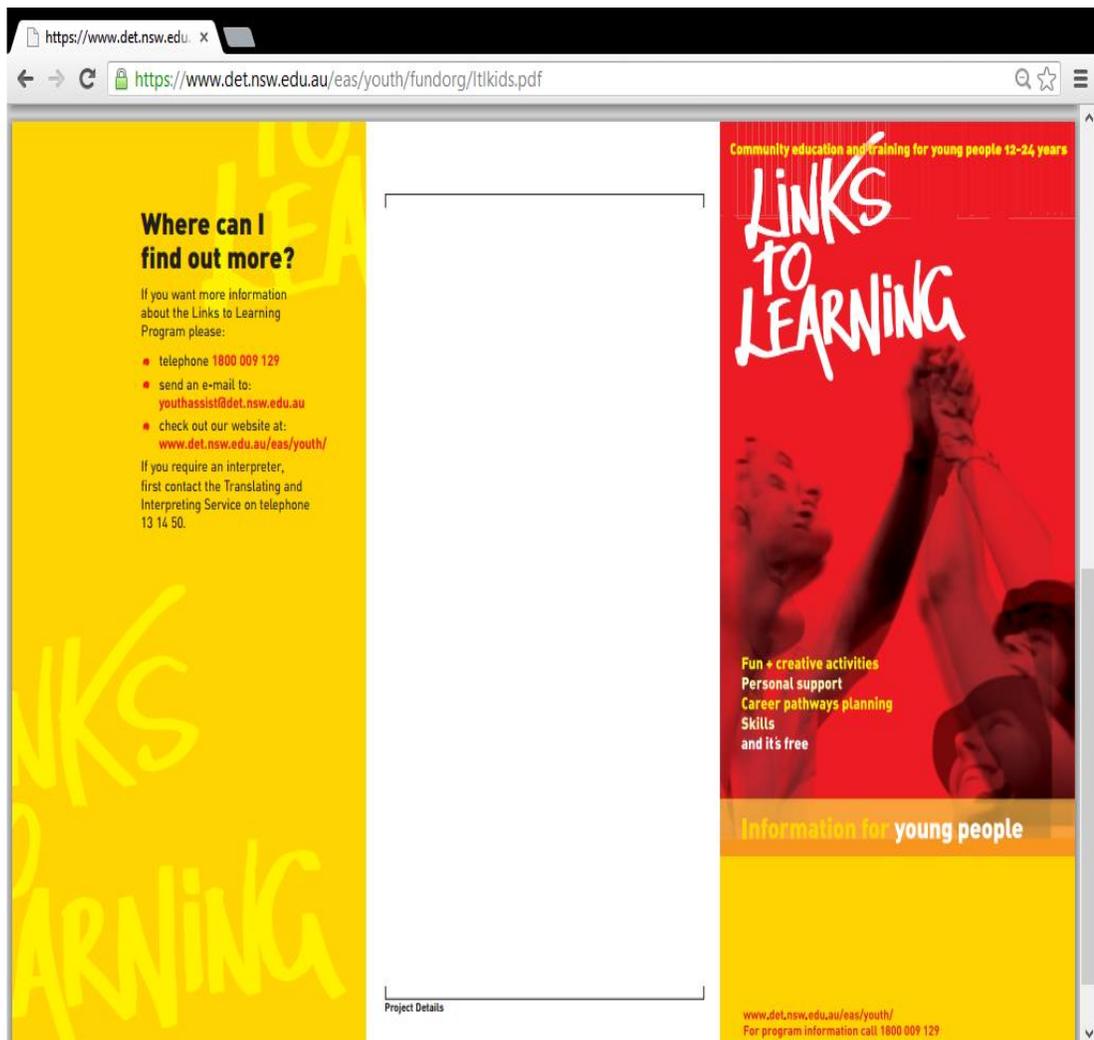
### *YAP1*

The way the L2L funding for YAP1 was marketed to young people and families, the perceptions of the youth workers, and young people’s understanding of the purpose of YAP1, were often contradictory. The program produces a colourful brochure for young people and their families that explains that the program is fun<sup>42</sup> and creative (refer to the screen shot, Figure 2).

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<sup>42</sup> From my understanding of the contract the young people signed to access YAP1, all the activities were to be engaged in. Some girls mentioned the RAP (as a weekly writing book exercise) was not what they considered as fun. The boys did not engage in this weekly RAP activity and all their observed activities, such as sport and music, were considered fun by the boys.

Figure 2: Screen shot of L2L Brochure for Young People and their Families (outside)

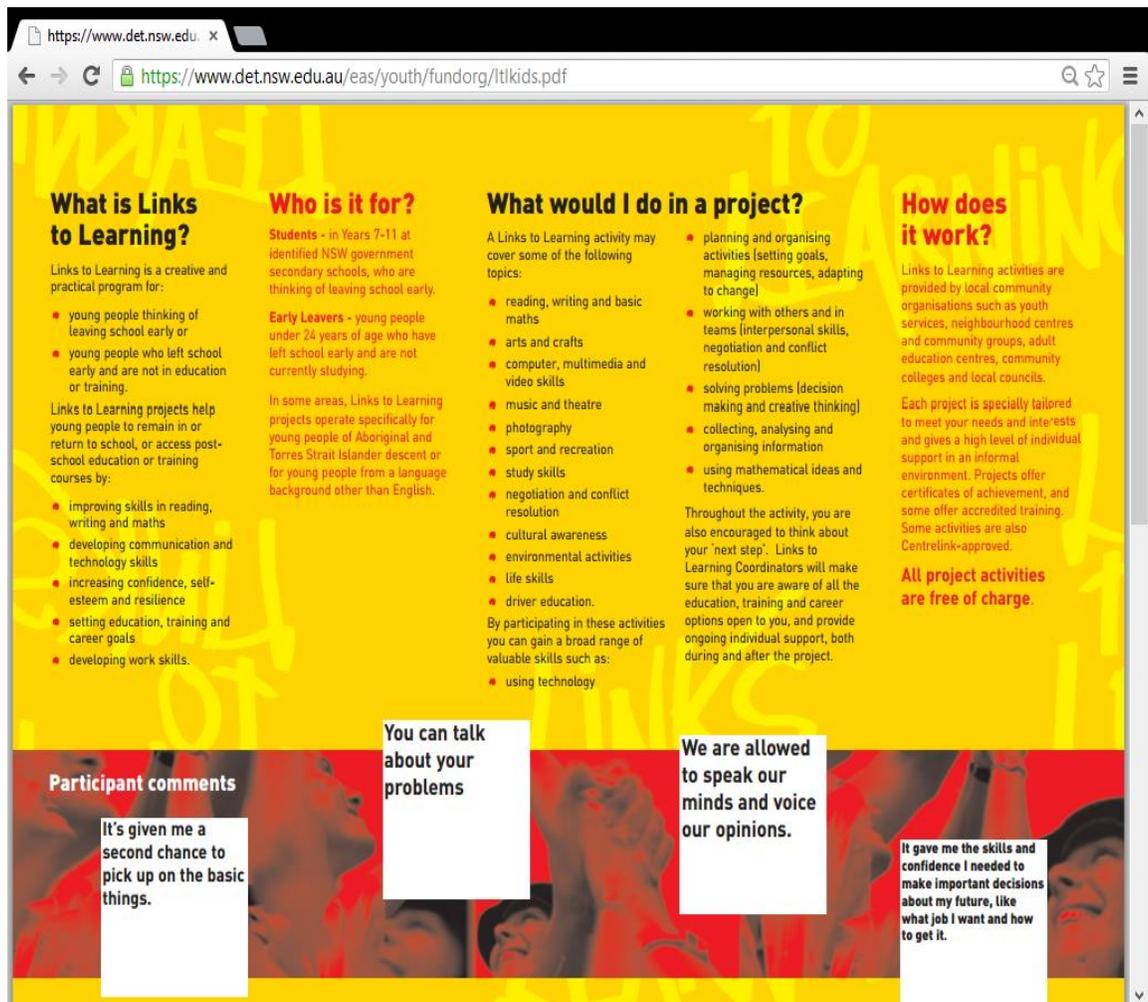


The second page of the brochure (Figure 3) explains that students will get personal support, learn career skills and that it is a free program. It tells young people and families that engaging in the program can: improve skills in reading, writing and maths; develop communication and technology skills; increase confidence, self-esteem and resilience; involve setting education, training and career goals; and develop work skills. There is a sense that the programs can be flexible, but there is no information to tell the reader what will actually happen in them. This brochure is a general marketing tool, as the community organisations/schools who apply, and are successful for L2L funding, design programs

geared towards what they perceive are the needs of the young people in their local areas. YAP1 involved one school day a week (for boys and a separate day for girls) where they engaged in various activities (such as, sports, a variety of field trips, eating out for lunch, a music session and the RAP for the girls). So while there is a sense of choice for youth workers designing the programs, all programs need to meet the same aims and objectives and show accountability for the L2L outcome suggestions – outcomes that are geared towards the objectives (as previously stated) of regulating young people’s behaviours and getting them ‘back on track’.

By examining this brochure, an image begins to build of a young person who is falling behind at school and who is missing the attributes and knowledge that perhaps are needed to succeed in school/career. That is, someone who has wandered off the linear pathway of becoming someone well (Wyn, 2007). Even the anonymous testimonies add to this image and idea of an ideal pathway, by suggesting that people who engage in these programs had not taken the ‘first chance’ educational institutions that had been provided for them, and that they perhaps do not have the skills to address decisions about their ‘preferred’ adult futures. The testimonies also imply that the young people ‘have changed’ as a result of their participation in the program, have gained confidence in themselves, feel valued and listened to and have future goals – in other words they have engaged in technologies of the self (self-regulation/surveillance) and are now performing as good neoliberal subjects (Butler, 2006; Foucault 1997): they have transformed identities as a result of participating in these programs. These testimonies align with what youth workers (in the next chapter) say they are aiming to do and with what past research in arts and sport programs have claimed are outcomes of these programs (Holt, 2008; Humphreys Wietz, 1996). These testimonies also align with what many of the young people in my study say in the formal program settings; even though they are in complete contrast to what these same young people confess and admit to in the informal settings of the programs I observed (as shown in Chapter 7).

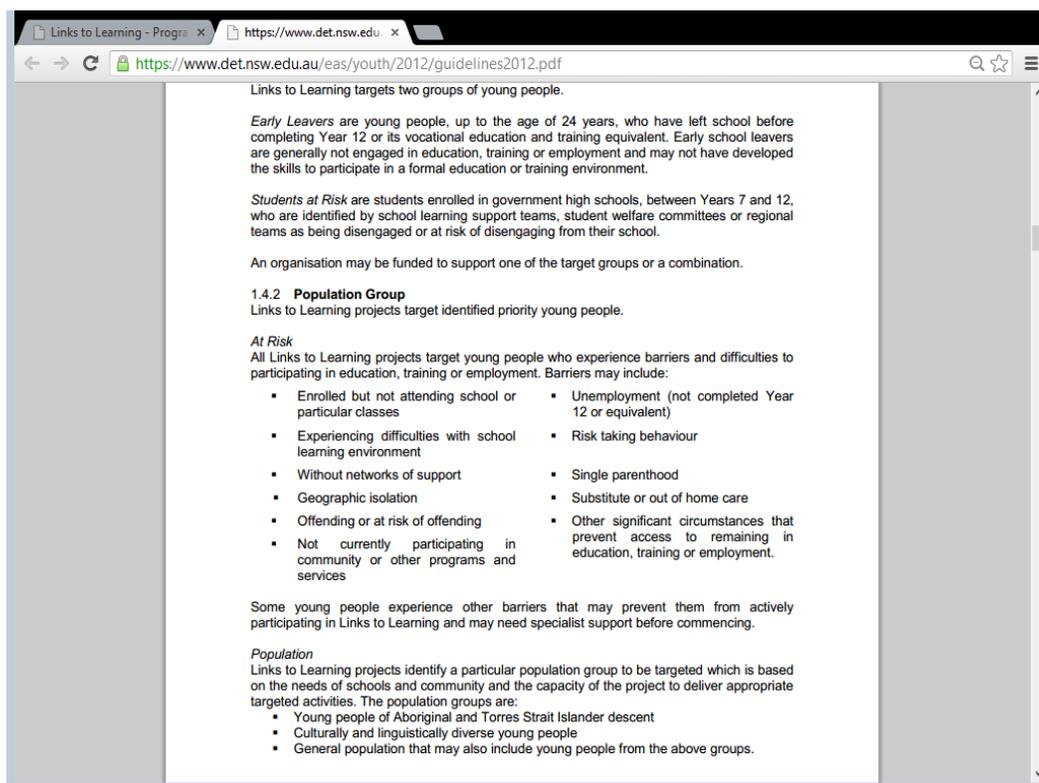
Figure 3: Screen shot of L2L Brochure for Young People and their Families (inside)



Another identifying marker representing the types of young people who attend these programs in the above brochures relates to socio-economic status. Mentioning the program is 'no cost' twice, in obvious ways, seems to suggest that young people who are eligible for the program may be located in certain socio-economic categories; adding to the image of the type of (young 'risky') person at whom the L2L YAP1 program was aimed. Furthermore, the brochure suggests the programs are open to anyone (between 12-24) who is interested and feels they want to leave school early (or who have already left), again adding an identifying marker to the growing list – 'at-risk' of failing or have failed school. This suggestion is also seen as a mismatch in the context of YAP1 as

students' access is determined by school counsellors and teachers and is based on these adults' beliefs on who (and what age group) would most benefit from the L2L program. The term 'risk' is not on the brochure, but if a young person or family member goes to the website link it clearly states the programs are aimed at youth 'at-risk', with the term littered through the guidelines and other related online resources, as shown in Figure 4 (which is a screen shot of the L2L Guidelines).

Figure 4: Screen shot of the Links to Learning Guidelines 2012 (which is the same information provided in 2009, at the time of data collection)



When Shirley (YAP1) was asked if the young people involved realised they were being singled out and labelled 'at-risk' she replied:

...that's not the way we sell it to them. We say: "The school thinks you have got this potential and we think if you do stuff with us for a while you might enjoy it". Then we say: "If there is something that you would like to do or a place you would like to visit and if we can fit that in the budget we can do it." (Shirley YAP1)

Nevertheless, in discussions with other YAP1 youth workers, I confirmed a unanimous belief that the young people are fully aware of being singled out and labelled as ‘troublemakers’. This awareness can be seen in Levi’s (YAP1) comment:

They know they have been labelled and acknowledged as being ‘at-risk’ and dysfunctional, from the schools. So they are not just ‘at-risk’ they are not just dysfunctional - but they have been labelled and identified and told and branded and popped in a little ‘at-risk’ box ... (Levi YAP1)

Often the young people in YAP1 (and YAP2) discussed their behaviour in school as ‘probably’ being the reason they were selected to participate in the program (this point is taken up in the following result chapters). However, despite Levi’s comment, when I spoke to the young people and confirmed that they knew they were being labelled, they did not use the ‘at-risk’ label themselves. As indicated above, and as I will elaborate in Chapter 7, the young people in my study tended to refer to themselves as ‘trouble’, rather than the policy and government speak of ‘at-risk’, even though they are aware society has placed them in this category. Before moving on, I note the use of the word ‘potential’ in Shirley’s comment above. By using these words/phrases Shirley is echoing the L2L guidelines and *NSW Youth Action Plan* (2006-2010). Although Shirley suggests they take a positive approach in marketing by talking about potential (instead of saying you are trouble in school so you have to attend a community program) this way of describing young people suggests the school (and Shirley) understands the young people’s ‘potential’ as being in their future selves – a potential they are ‘at-risk’ of not reaching without intervention/programs (an idea I explore further in Chapter 6).

A requirement of access to YAP1 is that the young people sign a contract saying they agree they will attend the sessions, instead of going to school, and abide by the YAP1 rules on behaviour:

What you can’t do at school you can’t do here and it’s harder here ‘cause we are with you all the time. And they find that really hard because they can’t just slink off behind the building...(Shirley, YAP1)

This seems to contradict Shirley's (YAP1) description of how the program is marketed to the young people and their families. It implies an assumption that the young people involved in the program will act in certain ways connected with stereotypical notions of youth 'at-risk' (those who 'slink off behind buildings' when things get 'hard'). The signing of the contract almost forces the young people to self-situate themselves as being 'at-risk' by acknowledging they have behavioural issues and characteristics that need addressing. This approach attaches certain 'risky' markers (such as inappropriate behaviours in the classroom) to the young people's social identities, which in turn can encourage engagement in forms self-surveillance (Brown et al., 2013; Foucault, 1977; Kelly, 2003). Moreover, as Hager (2003) suggests, approaches that target and offer/coerce young people into programs where access is restricted to specific groups of youth on the basis of their mismatch with formal schooling, reiterate the mismatch between policy, practice and the needs of young people.

By contextualising: a) the broader policies/reports (in place at the time of the data collection) and the L2L policy guidelines that define youth 'at-risk' in particular ways and allude to individual factors as causes of risk; b) the governmental marketing and the contract, along with c) the youth workers' interpretations of the L2L guidelines, and their program designs, I have argued that young people are understood in policies through expert knowledges about the *truths* of youth (Kelly, P., 1998). In particular, in this case, the *truths* were youth that are truants; that they engage in risk-taking behaviour; experience difficulties with school learning environments; have low socioeconomic status; and are 'at-risk' of mental illness. The initial processes from policy to program design are aimed at the individual's persona and characteristics that need addressing before a successful transition to an ideal adulthood can occur. The data on youth workers and young people in the following two chapters provide further examples of these processes of governmentality and add further dimensions to this argument.

## YAP2

YAP2 was marketed to the young people as an incentive/reward – an opportunity to spend a (school) day once a week where they would engage in ‘fun’ activities with police youth workers. Participants were picked up and dropped off from their homes, and provided with a free lunch – on the condition they attended school for the rest of each week. This community-based (arts/sports) program was called ‘Youth At Risk’ and it was advertised as such on the organisation’s website, with no information other than a contact number for the youth workers. The activities included: a trip to the cinemas, horse riding, rock climbing, go karting, and white water rafting. There was a session with a visiting (ex-footballer) guest about drug use and its ramifications (which culminated in the young people making posters depicting the risks of using drugs), and also a session doing karate/boxing games. When the young people were not travelling to these activities they played touch football inside the community youth centre.

This approach, as with YAP1, can be seen as an extension of (neoliberal) governance, where young people are singled out by police and teachers through their ‘riskiness’, and are placed into programs to help get them ‘back on track’. This approach characterises *Risk with a twist*, where you need to be deemed ‘risky’ to join the program, and by being ‘risky’ you can miss out on school, get a free meal, and do fun activities – so that in this sense risk=fun (and certain privileges). Moreover, this approach offers opportunities to explore how a young person can be rendered knowable *only* as an ‘at-risk’ subject (an impossible learner) in an educational setting, but even so can twist this label to perform intelligible and positive ‘risky’ selves in the context of the programs. These affordances (among others) associated with living the ‘at-risk’ label are demonstrated in Chapter 7. At this point, though I need to examine the various mismatches between policy and programs/youth workers’ perceptions across four key themes (Access; The funding game; Outcome vs needs; and Timeframes and sustainability).

## **'Risky' Mismatching – Themes Across the Seven Programs/Organisations**

Each program or organisation in the study highlighted mismatches in policy (such as not reflecting the differing life experiences of marginalised young people and using 'at-risk' as a blanket term) and practice (such as staff connecting with relational experiences of young people and trying not to use labels of risk). For example, access to YAP1 was determined by the display of certain types of inappropriate behaviour or the possession of a range of individual 'trigger' circumstances (such as culture, socioeconomic status, gender and mental health issues). This was in fact a broad range into which many students may 'fit'. Once identified, the young people were grouped together to participate in set activities aimed at empowering them in certain areas (i.e., self-confidence and self-worth and/or gaining employability skills). The youth workers made attempts to tailor activities towards the perceived needs of the young people involved, for example: sports, developing a resume and building interview skills for the boys (YAP1); and 2) the RAP for the girls in YAP2. Some youth workers seemed to consider relational experiences that played a role in the young people's 'riskiness' by drawing on information from the young people in focus groups (around lived experiences in families/schools/social contexts) before planning activities, as was evident in YAP3 (although this program was not among those I observed).

Nevertheless, the timeframe for each program limited the amount of individual preferences that could be incorporated into activities. For example, in YAP1 *all* the girls had to participate in the RAP program to explore aspects of self and depression. Although the whole group approach of RAP has been shown to be of benefit to young people when they are provided with an opportunity to cover certain issues simultaneously (Shochet, Holland, & Whitefield, 1997, Shochet, Osgarby, & Holland, 1999; Queensland University of Technology, 2013), emphasis on depression left little time to focus on other important individual issues the YAP1 girls may have needed addressed (other lived experiences that may have influenced their 'risky' behaviours). Moreover, RAP was used to not only help

the young girls work through/understand depression. The handbooks became a record of improvement to validate if the girls were getting ‘back on track’ by self-regulation and self-surveillance. Issues of access and choice/coercion were also evident across the seven YAPs/YAOs.

### *Access and Surveillance*

As noted above, there was an evident mismatch between current policy and historical understandings of youth work in the concept of voluntary engagement in community-based programs. Historically, it was understood that young people should choose to engage in youth programs (Batsleer & Davies, 2010). This ‘choice’ was deemed important in building trust and to the success of a program – as the young person is viewed as willing (seeking) to address an area in their lives (whether concerned with social isolation, drugs, mental health issues, or geared more towards skill building in sport/art). The youth workers of YAP1 and YAP2 allude to access being voluntary - regardless of the data from the young people contradicting this. The girls of YAP1 do discuss having a choice to attend or not whereas the boys (mainly from YAP2) felt they had no choice (but were still happy to participate). From my previous experience with local high schools and from the interviews with the youth workers from Youth ‘At-Risk’ Organisation 1 [YAO1], I ascertained that for a number of young people, participation in the YAO1 programs and/or visitations were required by the school for re-entry after suspension.

This notion of coerced or forced participation moves away from historical understandings of youth work, where young people came as voluntary participants. Forces such as neoliberalism have shifted (are shifting) this historical view as youth work is becoming increasingly accountable for meeting set outcomes that are informed by neoliberal forms of governance (Batsleer & Davies, 2010). Forced participation reinforces the belief that the conduct of the young people is questionable (through neoliberal rationalities) under the normalising gaze of social norms (Besley, 2010; Foucault, 1991). This in turn

necessitates the use of governmental technologies (programmes, policies, strategies, reflections, and tactics) to (re)shape the conduct of those young people. Brown et al. (2013) argue that although neoliberal policies take an individualist approach and seek to regulate and manage young people and their 'risky' behaviours, this 'appears' to happen through voluntary means:

However, many of the 'voluntary' regulatory practices that young people undertake in the name of health primarily appear to be achieved via a complex set of social relations that concomitantly render young people as both 'risky' and 'at risk', a threat to themselves and a potential threat to the social and health (and hence moral) orders. (p. 333)

Examples of this rendering can be seen in both YAP2 and YAP1, where, according to the youth workers, most of the young participants understood that 'getting into trouble' at school, and/or brushes with the law, and /or drug use, were the reasons they gained access to the program. They were 'at risk' of being 'risky' to themselves and society (Kelly, 1998); they were in need of regulation to get them 'back on track' – and this need was addressed in the programs using an instrumentalist approach in the program design (Zyngier, 2011). This type of approach encourages the young people to 'govern the self' and take up good economic neoliberal identities by being responsible for, and managers of, their own 'risky' situations – by engaging technologies of the self (self-regulation/surveillance) to change their conduct (Foucault, 1990). There is a tension/mismatch here between policy and practice. To operate at all the program needs to take such an instrumentalist approach as required by funding guidelines, despite youth workers' perceived resistance to schooling (which sits with the individualist approach), and their belief that young 'risky' identities can be transformed into positive ones (which sits within the critical transformative approach). Basically, regardless of what the youth workers believe, they need to adhere to the guidelines and play the funding game if they are to reach the young people they aim to assist.

## *The Funding Game*

A number of the youth workers emphasised that their goals were not always in line with the funding application requirements (YAO3, YAO 5, YAP3, YAP4) and others noted that until a program starts they cannot really know the actual needs of the young people involved (YAO2, YAP4). As discussed in Chapter 3, the design of community-based youth programs are influenced by and compliant with social trends (Batsleer & Davies, 2010). Curran (2010) suggests that one impact of a “neoliberal marketized funding relationship with government is that it off-loads public services onto social service agencies” (p. 79). In doing so, the youth workers, although able to work to some extent as independent entities, need to apply for funding that corresponds with particular political and social trends/mandates (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Rose, 1996). A number of the youth workers I interviewed felt they were often just ‘winging it’ in their funding applications – applying across the board. All but one youth worker did not like to use the term ‘at-risk’ in policy or funding applications; however they felt its use was necessary to attract funding. In other words, youth workers needed to strategically play the funding game or risk not having programs at all. Comments such as these below were common in the data:

I try not to use ‘at risk’ [now]. I ran a youth group in [a rural town] straight out of university and we used the term ‘at risk’ a lot. It was part of the policy, part of the program and the kids are set up in a negative light already. When policy comes to utilising the arts it is tending to take a more positive look, a sense of open creativity, however when it comes to government run bodies and youth centres, how it is all reported is under the auspices of being ‘at-risk’. At a micro level we are trying to change the use of those negative terms but at a policy level it is still there as it is easier to blanket things. (Kris YAO2)

That word is thrown around very casually in policies. It’s like they need to tick the box. People who work in youth work would see any youth ‘at-risk’... I would say that now that time has gone on and everything that is happening in society, everyone is at risk of so many things. But to get funding you need to target certain areas of risk that are the popular [areas] with policy. (Kate YAO1)

Levi (YAP1) expressed a number of times throughout the interview the negative and challenging impacts stemming from young people knowing they are labelled in ways such as ‘at-risk’; however, at the same time, he admits:

The words ‘at-risk’ are coming into funding right now, we [Levi’s community music organisation] have a funding agreement with the state government, our significant and base funding comes from state government DET around 20% and the rest of it is fees and anything else we can get our hands on. It is increasing to 30% under a new funding we are currently negotiating in which the draft has brought in words like at risk, marginalised which is fantastic because I think they should be there. This is a great time to do this now as we work with kids in remote areas, with Indigenous groups, other cultural groups that are clearly marginalised and so as far as we are concerned we can tick all those boxes which is fantastic and I think it is entirely appropriate. For us it is not about playing the game but it is gratifying to see them coming in because it doesn’t have to be a game for us because it is what we are committed to anyway. I don’t think there is anything negative in having to come up with labels or categories - it is just a practical way to do it. It is semiotics in a way, the meaning attached to labels when they are perceived as negative that is really unfortunate. There is nothing inherently wrong with identifying components of communities. (Levi, YAP1)

In each quote above there is a common theme that despite the youth workers’ strong beliefs against labelling young people ‘at-risk’, there is an essential need to use these labels in policy and funding. In line with Curran’s view (2010), ‘risk’ (understood through the neoliberal gaze) is a strategy that controls the environments that assist young people. Youth workers who may express their resistance the actual labelling of a young person as ‘at-risk’, may however manipulate the rhetoric (risk) into opportunity...as a tactic to be eligible for program development and funding (p. 76). This becomes problematic as Levi YAP1 and other youth workers explain, when the young people are aware of being singled out as being ‘at risk’ (of failing) – or as ‘trouble’ (risk by another name). Levi stresses “it is not about playing the game”, however it seems that a ‘game’ is exactly what is in play. There are set rules (technologies of government) for the game (programs) designed by the game creators (policy makers). The young people (players) are identified (performatively interpellated) as ‘at-risk’ and they access the game (programs/organisations) through policy definitions of ‘youth at-risk’ (expert knowledges of youth [Kelly, P., 1998]) – most

through coercion (as evidenced in Chapter 7 and supported in Brunila, 2013). The way the game is played (recommended and incorporated strategies) is defined by research and policy as being successful for ‘youth at-risk’ (based on risk factor information [Kelly, P., 2000a]), and the game itself (in the two main observed programs) must be called ‘youth at-risk’. These rules become clouded, complicated and contrary around young players who are aware it is their ‘at-risk’ behaviour (trouble making) that has placed them in the game and who are aware that they need to ‘change’ attitudes and behaviours to fulfil the game’s required outcomes (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Kelly, P., 2001, 2003, 2006) by engaging technologies of the self (Foucault, 1991). Yet somehow the youth workers need to play the game in such a way that the labels become obscured, that various relational life experiences (school, family, peer group, and health issues) of the players are taken into consideration, all while still achieving the necessary ‘successful’ outcomes required by the game makers – as the youth workers are under surveillance as well (de St Croix, 2010). A complex web of mismatches (policy/practice/beliefs/lived experiences/outcomes) becomes apparent as the game unfolds and the players (and youth workers) are interviewed and observed.

### *Outcomes vs Needs*

One obvious mismatch became apparent (in the two main programs) in relation to policy/youth worker determined outcomes and the young people’s needs. Both YAP1 and 2 seek to address truancy from school as an aim, with transition back into school as a successful outcome (aims and outcomes which are informed by the broader policies and reports at the time (such as *The Finn Report, Young People's Participation in Post Compulsory Education and Training*, 1991) and the funding bodies’ guidelines. The recommended strategies used within the programs seemed to successfully empower the young people with self-worth and self-confidence, and a sense of achievement, however (as discussed earlier in this chapter) there was no apparent support to address the learning difficulties many of the young people appeared to have, such as difficulties with reading and written expression. Batsleer (2011) further stresses that despite producing spaces and

avenues for youth to ‘successfully’ transition back into school it will be difficult for the young people unless they are able to learn. In this instance, specific young people have been targeted by the YAPs/YAOs by professionals (in educational institutions and youth services) to participate in community-based (arts/sports) programs which exacerbate the label of ‘at-risk’ and that by adopting a ‘blame the victim’ approach and deciding *for* them, instead of *with* them what their needs might be, the agency of the young person is removed or limited (Podd, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1996). As each program is completed, certain program outcomes are met (the young people express/perform back [Butler, 2006] their ‘altered’ attitudes) and these are reported back to funding bodies. The young people are then sent back into school, back into the same classroom, to engage in the same curriculum – perhaps feeling more confident, but still unable to learn effectively. Any learning difficulties the young people may have had are not addressed and remain part of the young person’s schooling experience. Perhaps the fact that only one of the youth workers had a teaching background has influenced the possible outcomes created for each program in this particular study (coupled with need to play the funding game).

This limitation to the skill set and background experiences or qualifications of youth workers in turn limits the degree to which a holistic approach can be taken in the programs. Looking back at YAP1, the L2L website suggests the programs they fund link in with Apte et al. (2001) *Successful Outcomes for Youth at Risk: a Resource Kit*. A main theme throughout this kit is the need for a holistic approach, which takes into account relational experiences and other aspects of young people’s lives that impact on their educational experiences, such as systems and structures. This is not apparent in YAP1. Thus, it would appear sometimes mismatches are not just in relation to policy mismatching with youth workers practice/perceptions, but the programs/practices mismatching with the policy suggestions.

Another tension in regard to outcomes vs needs arises around the idea of youth ‘voice’ within adult-run and adult-guided programs. In YAP4, Dan understands his arts programs for young Indigenous people struggling at school (or to remain at school), empowers them with a ‘voice’ through creative means. But as Cook-Sather’s (2007, p. 394) asks: “Does the demand for student voice ‘welcome selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better exclude the margin?’...” Does providing space for young people to disclose their ‘risky’ life stories further validate risk factor information (Kelly, P., 1998) being used to identify youth ‘at-risk’ and disregard the systems and structures that impact on young people’s lives to produce ‘risky’ behaviour? O’Brien and Donelan (2008) also question whether it is ethically appropriate for vulnerable young people to mark themselves by publically revealing their social disadvantage (p. 187) such as the young Indigenous people in YAP4 who were encouraged to compose, sing (and create video clips of) hip hops songs about their community in the wake of local riots (this point is taken up again in Chapters 6 and 7).

### *Timeframes and Sustainability*

I have already noted the issue of timeframes for the programs. All the youth workers expressed the need for the programs to be sustainable, so that the young people continue to benefit from the experiences. Most available funding, however, is limited in size which in turn limits the amount of time the program can run. All programs, apart from YAP1 (which ran throughout the year), were limited to 6 – 10 weeks for substantial programs, and 1-5 days for one-off programs. Dan (YAP4) was most outspoken about this mismatch claiming that sustainability and well-established community networking was vital to a “truly successful” community-based (youth ‘at-risk’) (arts/sports) program – one in which the goals focus on building/designing sustainable community-based activities that work to empower young people with a voice. He stresses that:

they [the funding bodies] want you to show how you will meet all the outcomes, but realistically you can’t do it in the timeframe...so you bullshit a bit. (Dan, YAP4)

George from YAP1 speaks passionately about sustainability:

The old system is that you are engaged [...] by a certain body of people or a governmental body to do a project which involves creativity that will enhance the wellbeing of the participants. But usually what happens is that it is short-lived, not enough funding. The project then stops. The participants aren't involved anymore and that's it... no one cares what happens to them once the money is gone. What we try and do is an ongoing process, that is sustainable that involves the community. It needs to be something that connects to community and is cross-generational and a space where stories are shared and become meaningful.

Kate (YAP3) also talks about the lack of sustainability in programs specifically directed at youth 'at-risk', explaining:

I think the kids that access the welfare services, and the welfare services do short programs 'cause that is usually how your funding comes in – little – bang, bang, bang. They are not sustainable and these kids then unfortunately get lost in the system again and again. So they come into these, if they can access them. They do their little bit and then they go back in to that same environment.

Kate here points to the apparent futility of programs that are insufficiently funded to actually make a difference in the lives of the young people they target. It appears that policy does not seem to align with 'real' issues (that need time to address) facing young people 'at-risk', but instead addresses stereotypical needs that meet funding requirements. Despite the youth workers' resistance to the way risk discourses establish "change as something that can be done quickly, efficiently, and individually through responsabilizing youth 'at-risk'..." (Curran, 2010, p. 64), the programs still need to fit within the funding policies/guidelines - where (as shown earlier) the term 'at-risk' is used to "accommodate the mandate of the funders" (p. 64).

## **Chapter Summary**

Through analysing the descriptions of the programs' aims, the access requirements, and the use of the 'at-risk' label in policy and funding process, it becomes evident how the

entrepreneurial self (Kelly, P., 2006) is encouraged, and young people are expected to self-monitor and manage their ‘risky’ behaviours and actions to best ‘fit’ within acceptable social norms so that program outcomes can be met. This analysis forms the basis for my argument that the ‘at-risk’ label governs subjects in specific ways within the community-based (arts/sports) programs. Furthermore, this is based on the understanding of youth through pre-existing assumptions (expert knowledges) and the use of identity markers to identify ‘at-risk’ subjects (Kelly, P., 2000a). These markers reinforce stereotypical beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, and bias previously held by those in school selection teams *and* the youth workers applying for the funding (in regards to YAP1 and YAP2) – so that youth workers’ understandings of youth ‘at-risk’ can be seen also to stem from these expert knowledges about youth (Kelly, P., 1998; 2000a).

While acknowledging the importance of all these programs and organisations, and the prevalence of substance abuse and mental illness among young people in western society, I want to emphasise here that despite the desire of the youth workers to avoid labelling the young people as ‘at-risk’ (of which I provide more evidence later), the actual existence of the programs depends on the young people fitting into a loose combination of ‘risky’ identity markers. In this way the programs indirectly reinforce and discursively constitute the ‘at-risk’ subject in specific pre-existing ways. Similarly, the programs, and practices within them, are informed and shaped by (neoliberal) policies and advice about engaging successfully with youth ‘at-risk’. So, as Curran (2010) emphasises, irrespective of the youth workers’ practices within the programs, “they are working within a framework of treating youth for the *systemic* problems they face” (p. 81, my emphasis). Curran contends that:

...this has two implications for the governance of youth. First, it validates a cultural belief that helping troubled youth through the allocation of individual aid is the acceptable, perhaps even politically progressive, way of addressing youth in trouble. Second, it infiltrates into the programs provided and run by youth workers. (2010, p. 81)

As te Riele (2006) suggests, and as I explore in the following two chapters, these processes result in further marginalising the marginalised. This is a key dimension of my *Risk with a twist* argument, where the very programs that are designed to counter ‘risk’ may actually (although unintentionally) work to maintain, create or celebrate it, which can make the young people feel even more alienated and disengaged from school and/or workforce when they step outside this community-based program context.



## Chapter 6: *Working with Risk - Troubling & Reinforcing Labels*

## Introduction

I argued in Chapter 5 that ideas of the entrepreneurial self (technologies of the self) were at play in policy which informs the community-based programs examined in this study, where young people are seen as having the capacity and responsibility to self-monitor and alter their 'risky' behaviour. Peter Kelly suggests that youth are constructed through "intersections of expert representations of crime, education, family, the media, popular culture, (un)employment, transitions, the life course, risk...and how we imagine these intersections produces our understandings of Youth" (2003, p. 167). Accordingly, following Curran's (2010, p. 38) lead, by exploring youth workers' understanding of the term youth 'at-risk' I generate insights into the ways young people considered 'at-risk' are governed and constructed through technologies of control. As "technologies of social control are representative of a dispersed and diffused form of the exercise of power, it is necessary to explore how they work within local contexts, rather than from the assumption of unilinear development" (O'Malley, 1996, p. 192). In this study the local contexts are community-based (arts/sports) programs and the youth workers and young people within those programs. The previous chapter has demonstrated how risk is used through policy as a technology for neoliberal governing processes to extend their reach to youth work and associated practices within youth programs, and how this shifts the responsibility of 'risky' youth issues (such as failing education, crime and underage drinking) onto the individuals to manage their own 'risky' situations.

This chapter draws on my interviews with the youth workers across the seven sites; with particular focus on the data from youth workers from YAP1 (Shirley, George and Levi) and YAP2 (Lynne and Max) given that Phase 2 examined the young people's experiences of these programs. My analysis of how the programs, and the practices and perceptions of youth workers contribute to and/or resist the (neoliberal) governing processes highlighted in the previous chapter. It builds on the argument that the funding policy and guidelines framing these programs make young people responsible regulators of their 'risky' behaviours, by examining *how* youth workers' practices and perceptions

encourage the young people within the programs to engage in self-monitoring/regulating practices. It further argues that youth workers' expert or dominant knowledges of youth further reinforce the notion that there is a 'Youth Crisis', which validates the viewpoint that problems of youth 'at-risk' require individual management instead of social policy management.

I begin by analysing the ways youth workers define young people 'at-risk' and the factors that contribute to this definition. I then analyse youth workers' resistance to the notion of a youth 'at-risk' discourse focused on 'blaming the victim' through their discussions of educational institutions in this 'risky' construction. Finally I will examine how youth workers' stereotypical and gendered understandings of youth 'at-risk' shape the design and implementation of the programs, and contribute to the governing of these youth 'at-risk'.

Therefore, this chapter addresses the following research questions:

- 2) How do the programs, practices and perceptions of youth workers contribute to and/or resist these neoliberal processes?

It also begins to address the research question:

- 4) What are the constraining and enabling effects for young people labelled 'at-risk' within this program and discursive context?

I will show that the youth workers' definitions of risk are messy, slippery (at times contradictory) and complex, and argue that this adds to the confusion of who is 'at-risk' and what they are 'at risk' of. I contend that regardless of youth workers' advocacy against use of the 'at-risk' label and their perceptions of the role education plays in the constitution of the 'at-risk' subject, their programs and practices are bound within neoliberal processes of governing youth 'at-risk'. These boundaries limit the youth workers' attempts to resist the 'at-risk' label to rhetoric, and ultimately they direct youth

workers' practices to discursive performatives (either direct or oblique) that work to reinforce pre-existing knowledge of youth in the constitution of the 'at-risk' subject. These arguments are made through four key themes that emerged from my analysis of youth worker interviews: 1) Varying degrees of risk 2) The school/education system is flawed; 3) Gendered approaches to regulation; and 4) Art & sport: Transforming or regulating 'risky' identities?

## Varying Degrees of Risk

In declaring all children to be at risk, Family First Aid held: "Children will be exposed to 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll' at a very early age. Teens will know other kids that do drugs, drink alcohol, or smoke cigarettes. Some parents will do all they can to raise their kids right — and their kids may still make poor choices. The statistics we have gathered are amazing. At risk youth can be either sex, any race, and any age. Each 'group' has a different area where they are at risk, but they are all youth at risk. (Stephens, 2010, p. 17)

Stephen's article *Youth at Risk: A New Plan to Save The World's Most Precious Resource*, (published by the Family First Aid International organisation which is designed for parents and teens to gather information about 'at-risk' youth and teen issues) paints an alarming picture that every young person has the potential to be 'at-risk' and that this 'fact' is a pressing issue, not only for society, but for individual families. Youth workers regularly expressed this taken-for-granted belief that *all* young people are in a position to be 'at-risk'. In particular, they believed that young people between the ages of 13 – 16 (the age range for which their programs cater) are particularly vulnerable to being or becoming 'at-risk':

...only because youth is such a turbulent time and there is just so much happening. I would say probably when I first started in this work, youth 'at-risk' were the kids that were on the street – were the kids that were at risk of certain things and they were a specific group. I would say that now that time has gone on and everything that is happening in society, everyone is 'at-risk' of so many things. (Kris, YAO2)

They all have the potential. It just takes one episode, one incident to scar a child and then it just continues. (Kate, YAP3)

Bessant argues that “the youth at risk categories are different from older categories in terms of their capacity to incorporate the entire population of young people” (2001, p. 32). The wide age range of youth, (from age 10 to 25 as pointed out in Chapter 1) contributes to this wide-net idea. The same idea - generated from the participants - that potentially there is an ‘at-risk’ generation of youth, reinforces the blanket effect of the term ‘at-risk’ (Tidwell & Garrett, 1994). Moreover, as suggested by Peter Kelly (2000) and Curran (2010) this notion provides opportunities for governing bodies to justify an “increased control over this perceived volatile population through the implementation of practices aimed at regulating the behaviours and dispositions of young people” (Curran, 2010, p. 45).

Nevertheless, despite this generalisation that all youth are potentially vulnerable, most youth workers still identified youth ‘at-risk’ as those being particularly susceptible to particular factors. These factors are usually stereotypical in that they revolve around certain images of youth ‘at-risk’ being involved in crime, drugs, truancy and social isolation. These normative *truths* about the potential for youth with these particular experience-sets not transitioning to a preferred adulthood come to be repeated in policy, research and popular media to the point that they appear as common sense (as argued in Chapters 2 and 3 and as evidenced in the previous chapter). These *truths* are often associated with factors such as growing up in single parent families, growing up in poverty, and being marked by gender, ethnicity and Indigeneity, all of which can be used to determine categories of risk. These factors all point to ‘at-risk’ causal factors being embedded in the individual’s character or circumstance. They come to justify the need for pre-emptive interventions and thus form the basis of community-based youth programs. The continuum of risk that has emerged as a generalisation in educational and social policy (broadly) and in funding policies framing community-based programs (specifically) was reflected among the youth workers’ definitions of ‘at-risk’. In individual cases this

becomes messy, slippery, complex, and at times contradictory - yet nevertheless seems to place onus on the young people to rectify their 'at-risk' situation themselves. For example, as one of the youth worker suggests:

I think it is just the risk of disengaging from the positive opportunities which are around them. (Kris YAO2)

This perception understands young people as having the choice to engage or disengage from positive opportunities and negates the consideration that structural causes play a role in limiting agency or coercing youth into 'risky' situations.

When interviewing the youth workers across the programs and organisations, it became apparent that although a number of their definitions were broad and engaged with the notion of youth considered 'at-risk' needing help to transition to an ideal adulthood, some respondents were specific and moved away from this stereotypical view of who is 'at-risk', understanding the label should be used only for extreme cases:

Well when I see 'at-risk' I think 'at risk' of suicide, of harm or of harming somebody else. So I guess that is our term that we really try and pick up on the clients...There would be scales of someone who needs assistance and someone that would be classed 'at risk' would meet that criteria and we would see that their needs would be higher than other clients as that would need early intervention than somebody who just needed some help from stress or anxiety from school or something. Cause they would not need that urgent 24 to 48 hour attention. It would be the people 'at-risk' of harming themselves or others that would need that. Only extreme situations would be classed as 'at-risk'. (Melissa YAO1)

Here Melissa defines the 'at-risk' label as an indication of the potential that a person may come to physical harm: the idea is weighted on a young person being 'at-risk' of dying. Melissa's casual mention of school in conjunction with stress or anxiety was interesting, as further into our discussion Melissa mentioned that some schools form contracts with young people who were considered 'at-risk' of failing in educational pathways, that required their participation in services offered by YAO1 (this service addresses

mental/health/social issues for young people and their families). It was also noted that many of the young people who approached or were referred to YAO1 were students ‘at-risk’ of leaving school early, of underage drinking and of drug use, even though they may not actually have engaged in any of these activities<sup>43</sup>.

What appears to be happening in the case of YAO1 is that despite Melissa’s (and their program’s) verbal avoidance of using the label ‘at-risk’ in stereotypical ways, and even in their online marketing approach which suggests they help youth who are having a ‘tough time’ (in regard to mental health issues), the workers at YAO1 acknowledge that often their clientele are young people whom educational institutions have labelled ‘at-risk’. Nevertheless, YAO1’s attempt to resist the ‘at-risk’ stereotype/label was evident in how they marketed the organisation and programs to young people face-to-face by visiting local youth events such as *Catapult* (a Youth Arts Festival), *Midnight Basketball* (basketball competitions run by youth workers at the local indoor stadium beginning at midnight on Friday or Saturday), *Battle of the Bands*<sup>44</sup>. By engaging with a wide group of young people at these events YAO1 sought to resist the notion that only certain types of ‘risky’ people used their services<sup>45</sup>. It appears that, perhaps despite the youth workers’ attempts to avoid labels, a negative stigma remains around organisations who help youth – if you need ‘mental health’ help you are a loser or only ‘losers’ attend these programs. To be known

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<sup>43</sup> While I was coming out of one interview with a youth worker I bumped into a young woman and her father. They explained that she had been beaten up numerous times by other young girls around town (in fact, her face still was swollen and bruised) and, as a practicing lawyer, the father had been unable to get the offenders charged and felt hopeless. He had approached YAO 1 as he feared she was ‘at-risk’ of becoming socially isolated, but he felt awkward as he did not consider his child ‘at-risk’ like ‘those types of kids’ who would usually be using this mental health-related service. This incident highlights the stigma that is commonly tied to YAOs in the local area (and the young people attending them).

<sup>44</sup> *Battle of the Bands* is an internationally renowned competition where “guitar-playing rockers, DJs, MCs and solo singers as well, pitting the most talented people from all walks of the media, marketing, digital and creative industries against each other in a gladiatorial match-up” (Mad week, 2013, para. 1) and are judged by a panel and audience response. Having attended numerous local ‘Battle of the Bands’, it was observed that mainly young people entered in this competition.

<sup>45</sup> After interviewing YAO1 youth workers, I approached my ‘at-risk’ teenager about us using the service, to which he responded: “There is no way in hell I’m going to that place, it’s for losers”. This prompted me to ask the young boys in YAPI involved in my study if they would use these YAO1 services, and they echoed my son’s comments (because of the perception that they are for people who have mental health issues).

as an intelligible positive male subject, one must not be seen as in need of help (O'Reilly, Taylor & Vostanis, 2009). This point is one I will return to in the next chapter.

The other youth worker at YAO1, Jane, expressed a different view, more in line with the types of things the other youth workers in this study mentioned. Jane (YAO1) explains risk as not only being at that extreme level that Melissa (YAO1) stated, but:

...I also see it as 'at-risk' of just the wheels falling off...just in some way...like 'at-risk' of going down a bad path and getting into drugs and alcohol and stuff like that...(Jane YAO1)

Jane's interpretation insinuates the notion of a pathway to adulthood (a transition) (Kelly, P., 1998; te Riele, 2004), where any young person could wander off the 'successful' (neoliberal), less 'riskier' pathway - the good pathway as opposed to the bad one that youth 'at-risk' travel.

One youth worker acknowledged the complexity of the notion of risk and demonstrated an understanding that her program was focusing on one area of risk:

The risk thing is a continuum really, but the bit we are doing is to keep them on an educational pathway so they are just not dropping out and thinking leaving school is a career move...(Shirley YAP1)

Shirley sees their programs as concentrating on aspects of educational risk – of youth 'at-risk' because of their lack of engagement with school, and difficulties in the classroom. Similarly, this understanding of risk is seen in literature such as Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) who suggest "one program, even an extraordinarily good program, cannot do it all. Young people do not grow up in programs, but in families, schools, and neighborhoods" (p. 172). This highlights the challenge for programs to take a holistic approach for youth 'at-risk', as suggested in the report *Successful Outcomes for Youth at Risk* (Apte et al., 2001) which informs YAP1's practices. But as Shirley intimates, how can one program

limited to one school day a week, change a life weaved with social (particularly educational) dislocation, exclusion, marginalisation and disadvantage? As shown later in this chapter, even taking an approach that focuses on retaining young people in educational pathways can also be limiting.

Although Shirley (YAP1) expressed her ideas on risk being a continuum, she actively avoided defining the term ‘at-risk’ in the interview. However throughout the weekly visits to the program sessions she suggested (through informal discussions) that being ‘at-risk’ entails having a troubled background, no access to sport if you are a boy, suffering from depression if you are a girl, and experiencing inappropriate behavioural issues at school (such as girls performing aspects of *masculine* identities – yelling and swearing at teachers to stand up for themselves in perceived unfair situations, instead of being submissive and quiet). This understanding shaped the approaches YAP1 adopted to work with the young people, particularly through her use of sport with the boys and the RAP with the girls, as explained in the previous chapter. Shirley’s naming of the young people and her discursive separation of their perceived risk categories by gender, functions as a citation of her previous experience with groups of young boys and girls who have participated in the program and those yet to (Butler, 1993).

All of the youth workers interviewed drew on their past experiences of working with ‘risky’ youth when explaining how they come to know ‘at-risk’ subjects (Kelly, P., 2000a). While there are obvious benefits of youth workers having experience, there is a problem when current and future participants in the program are defined ‘at-risk’ in relation to previous groups. This too easily ignores what might actually be happening individually in the lives of the young people who are currently engaged in the program. If, as Foucault and Butler propose, an individual’s social identity is produced by the operations of power that circulate through language and social relations, youth workers’ expert knowledges (of the *truths* of youth), render the young people knowable in ways that may reinforce and maintain deficit understandings of youth ‘at-risk’. This makes the

young people feel even more alienated and disengaged from school and/or the workforce when they step outside this context. Youth work that addresses perceived (as opposed to real) needs of young people limits the possibilities for self-recognition that are made available to young people identified with the 'at-risk' label. As Butler (2004) and Foucault (1991) contend, power produces reality.

Just as some youth workers made clear distinctions related to gender in terms of the degree of risk attributed to individuals, other youth workers saw cultural identity as being directly related to youthful 'at-risk' identities and marking higher levels of risk. Dan (YAP4) expresses his beliefs about young Indigenous peoples particularly falling into the 'at-risk' label:

I think most young people are 'at risk' especially Aboriginal kids...especially Indigenous kids would be in the more prominent group just because of their identity, that they don't have culturally appropriate systems in place to support that journey of finding out who they are and why my parents are angry and why I am angry? They don't have that emotional connection to history like their families do so they get lost and they get angry with everything and all like seven feet tall and it is scary the endemic violence in Aboriginal communities is a product of that. (Dan YAP4)

This way of thinking about young Indigenous peoples defines them first as 'at-risk' solely on the grounds of their cultural identity, then suggests that this identity places them in a vulnerable state where other categories of risk follow naturally. Statistically, of course, Indigenous children are seen as more 'at-risk' of failing school, of engaging in criminal activity and of living within dysfunctional families, as indicated in Chapter 3; so that Indigenous youth by definition, are 'at-risk' of being 'at-risk'. The youth workers (Lynne and Max), interviewed in YAP2, stressed that many of the young people they dealt with were of Indigenous descent. Youth, especially Indigenous youth, tend to be consistently associated with criminal activity, anti-social behaviour, drug abuse and social disorder. Youdell (2006b) sees identity, in this case cultural identity, as central to the processes of exclusion. Similarly, Butler's understanding of performativity and interpellation shows

that we become certain subjects because we are designated as such – despite the designation appearing to label pre-existing subjects. Indigenous boys/girls, as students, are described and attributed certain labels which constitute them as particular subjects that are already known; the ‘at-risk’ Indigenous youth or the impossible learner for example (Youdell, 2006a, p. 36). This understanding helps me show the ways in which youth workers take up and attach pre-existing labels to certain groups of young people, contributing to the constitution of these groups as ‘at-risk’ subjects, and to what is possible or not possible for them. For instance, Director Bob<sup>46</sup> (YAP2) constructs youth ‘at-risk’ as essentially a negative force which takes away opportunities for other ‘good’ youth, reinforcing a binary categorisation of good/bad youth. An excerpt from my observational journal exemplifies this finding:

I had casually asked, “How do you access young people considered at-risk?” To which he replied “Oh, no my idea starts with the good kids. I will get the good kids in and then maybe one or two bad ones can join the group... That is partly why this place has not worked, as the majority of kids are bad and the good ones don’t want to come here. So if we make it predominantly good kids then the bad ones might fall to positive peer pressure”. (Bob YAP2)<sup>47</sup>

Bob made it very clear that these “bad kids” were often Indigenous, or they were bored, came from troubled backgrounds, and basically had no respect for the agency and its history of providing community outreach programs. He suggested he had given up on the “bad kids”, and stressed the separation between the roles of the police (who run the YAP2 ‘at-risk’ program for young males at the same site) and his side of the organisation (which ran the indoor basketball, the dance groups, fitness sessions, and other various inexpensive community activities). His words implied that the police took care of the bad kids while he was going to focus on the good kids. Bob’s attachment of apparently pre-existing labels to the young people who used the organisation’s facilities is an example of the discursive performative, where he directly names social and biographical categories

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<sup>46</sup> Bob was the manager of the youth organisation where YAP2 was held, which was a YAO that has historically targeted young people ‘at-risk’.

<sup>47</sup> Bob had not given consent to being audio recorded, so this data is taken from my field notes.

(youth [kids]) and supposed binary characteristics (good/bad; Butler, 2006; Youdell, 2000a). The danger in discursively constructing youth ‘at-risk’ in this way is that it openly places the young people and their families in a deficit light with blame resting on the individual, rather than addressing social policies and institutions that may have played a role in shaping young people’s lives (Kelly, P., 1998, te Riele, 2006; Zyngier, 2011).

Before moving on to the next section, there are two main silences I wish to point out here. There was a surprising lack of dialogue in the interviews with youth workers in two areas that are prolific in ‘at-risk’ literature; rurality and family. Despite Australian statistics painting a picture of rural youth being more likely than urban youth to drop out of school, not one youth worker interviewed mentioned rurality or any risk discourses related to rural life for young people. This theme was, however, picked up by a number of the young people involved in the programs as a reason for participating in illicit activities, rather than as factors for school truancy – that rural life was boring for young people. Similarly, despite the wealth of ‘at-risk’ literature maintaining that family life was a causal factor for being ‘at-risk’ there was a notable silence across all the interviews and informal conversations with the youth workers in regard to the families of the young people. The only times the concept of family was raised was when youth workers in YAP2 and YAO1 casually mentioned family as being one of the catalysts for ‘at-risk’ behaviour in their program participants, and when a youth worker from YAP1 commented on her surprise that a certain boy was in the program, as he came from a ‘good’ rather than a ‘bad’ family<sup>48</sup>. The same YAP1 youth worker had also made the off-hand comment that I should

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<sup>48</sup> I pause here to recall my thoughts at that point, as this comment set off a chain reaction which saw me question the ways I saw myself as a mother, and as a researcher of youth. It sits here as an example of how difficult it is as an ethnographic researcher to be removed from the data we collect (as argued in Chapter 1). As I write this thesis I am aware that I can’t help but to draw on pre-existing identity categories to discursively construct myself to the reader as having a particular type of family life that equates with educational success. I had considered my little middle class family to be a ‘good’ family. All the adults in my son’s life worked hard, we lived in a nice, big new house with a pool, had lots of overseas trips, my son never went without, and I value the importance of education. I had entered the field with my own set of knowledge/beliefs/assumptions/bias around youth ‘at-risk’, as acknowledged in Chapters 1 and 4. I had initially attempted to remain on the fence somewhat and try not to judge the youth workers or young people. Yet at that point, during my interviews with youth workers, I began to feel a greater empathy for the young people in the programs and their dialogue around being *seen, known* in stereotypical ways - and less empathy

not expect my consent forms to be signed by the parents or returned to me. So, my data suggests that relational experiences such as family and location are not considered a main focal point in addressing ‘risky’ issues in the community-based (art/sports) programs in this study, despite expert knowledges about youth (statistics on youth, manuals on how to work with young people ‘at-risk’ and common findings in youth studies literature) suggesting these two factors do play a role in the young people’s ‘at-riskiness’. However, the police youth workers in YAP2 did speak of taking on the role of guardian, in a sense, for the young boys when they would represent the young person in discussions with their school teachers, as many youth workers felt the school system is flawed.

## **The School/Education System is Flawed**

I have already discussed the notion of youth transitioning to an ideal adulthood and pointed to Peter Kelly’s (1998) suggestion that “this contested transitional space...[is one where]... ‘becoming somebody’ is at the core of young people’s activities’ and where schooling is understood as ‘...a setting, a pattern of relationships and a series of practices which is a defining experience of present and future identity options and life chances for most young people” (p. 7). In each of the programs discussed by youth workers (particularly the two programs observed) the young people had been targeted through schools, because of their lack of attendance or inappropriate behaviour.

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towards the youth workers. This unintentional judgment further influenced the types of informal conversations that I had with young people and youth workers alike. Moreover, after reflecting on that particular comment, I was left wondering how the youth workers would view me if they had been privy to my situation – how could I be researching youth ‘at-risk’ when I did not even know why my son was considered ‘at-risk’? I wondered what labels they might use to designate who I was as a mother of an ‘at-risk’ child. This combination of thoughts, plus the passing of my son during my candidature, began to affect how I was reading and writing up the data. My supervisors had alerted me to the fact that I was tending to view the youth workers’ data negatively, as deliberately constraining the negotiation and construction of the young people’s identities within the programs. I had to step back from the emotions that I had connected to the experiences within and outside of the programs to engage in scholarly reflection and recognise the simultaneous enabling and constraining effects of the youth workers’ talk and practices that was emerging from the data analysis.

In YAP1 and YAP2, exclusion or suspension from school or the risk of leaving school early, in conjunction with stereotypical ‘at-risk’ behaviour (i.e. truancy, causing trouble in class) was the trigger for access into the YAP programs. The connection between leaving school early and being ‘at-risk’ of ‘not becoming’ a worthwhile citizen has been highlighted research to date (for example Bessant, 2002b; Kelly, 2000, 2000a, 2001a, 2003; te Riele, 2004, 2006, 2009; Youdell, 2003, 2006a, 2006b). Through discussion with the youth workers, and analysing the policies that informed the YAPs, it appeared that students were viewed by schools and agencies in terms of an excluded/included binary, and positioned through certain identity categories such as “race, ethnicity, social class, poverty, gender” (Youdell, 2006a, p. 13). On one hand, the powerful governing bodies and educational institutions render excluded students as powerless, in need of help to ‘get back on track’ yet simultaneously, with the neoliberal push for economically productive individuals, these same excluded youth are seen as having the ‘power’ or the capacity to work on their ‘at-risk’ identities so they can make the successful transition to adulthood.

The following discussion provides examples of the youth workers’ thoughts about schooling and the treatment within schools of young people considered ‘at-risk’. In general, they believed that the school system and its focus on curriculum rather than the young people they are teaching it to is flawed, and that the young people who do not ‘fit in with the norm’ struggle both academically and socially.

I begin with YAP1 and the director’s expressions of resistance to ‘blaming-the-victim’. Shirley (YAP1) believed that a flawed educational system (high schools) was the main reason for young people being labelled ‘at-risk’. She emphasised that schools/teachers do not take into account where young people are coming from, and that schools reinforce the ‘winner/loser’ binary (Davies & Harre, 1994; Youdell, 2006a). As Shirley explains:

You get to high school and it’s like a concentration camp, you move from room to room and you don’t own anything, people scratch the desk and spit on the floor, it is filthy it’s gross and nobody knows your name, you are not seated comfortably, there is no protection in the yard, there is all this bashing, it’s a disgrace. The school is more run on the prison system where their job

is to keep you in there but whatever happens to you in there it doesn't matter, as long as the teacher thinks they are covering their curriculum it doesn't matter. (Shirley, YAP1)

Here I see a clear sense of Shirley's distaste and dissatisfaction with contemporary high schools. It appears that this thinking comes from her own experiences as a student, and/or a high school teacher, as well as from the stories that she has heard unfold from the young people within the YAP programs she has run over the years. Notably, her perception of the school system seems to have influenced the practices she adopts within YAP1 (as shown later in this section). Shirley continues, drawing on her teaching background:

And the curriculum is crap and we all know it but they keep pretending to try and teach it but the kids are living such different lives now than when we were young, than when these teachers were young. We have these images in our heads of the one or two naughty boys or girls that might have been in our school while we went through but now those kids are the majority and the stigma remains though that they are losers even though there are so many of these kids...it's pretty clear to see that something is going wrong with the educational system for so many kids to feel and act this way now. If you haven't got a functioning human being it doesn't matter what is in the curriculum.

Shirley is clearly passionate about working with young people. Throughout her articulation of resistance towards the labelling of young people by educational institutions, however, she herself engages in the discursive construction of the 'at-risk' subject by directly naming them as 'naughty boys or girls' (like the *larrikins* and *louts* in Walker's [1988] research) - although this term has less defamatory connotations than that of 'losers'. This 'naming' is a process however, which is hard not to engage in since, as Butler (2006) suggests, all subjects are made knowable (made sense of) through intelligible discourses. Of note in this comment, is Shirley's depiction of youth 'at-risk' (naughty boys and girls) now being the majority, not the minority, in schools. If this is the case<sup>49</sup>, and most students are 'naughty' and behaving in 'risky' ways, then how do schools decide who is excluded or has access to YAP programs? If a majority of young people are

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<sup>49</sup> My experience with many teenage people in and out of schools, as a mother, youth worker and teacher, leads me to agree with Shirley's comment here.

drinking, smoking (cigarettes and pot) and risk-taking, which ABS statistics support (as shown in Chapter 3), then what makes particular groups of young people (students) more susceptible to the 'at-risk' label? Could it be personality clashes between certain youth and teachers? Could it be learning difficulties linking to 'challenging behaviours' in classrooms? (McMahon, 2013). Or does a young person need to have a combination of research and policy-based 'at-risk' identity markers to be part of this 'risky' population of youth? It seems that there are varying degrees of risk at play here.

Conversations with Levi (YAP1) about schooling and young people 'at-risk' were similar to, and built upon, Shirley's (YAP1) perceptions of schooling, in that he claimed the system needs to change to better meet the needs of all young people. In the following excerpt he considers the impact of schools' labelling young people with certain identity categories and grouping them together:

I suspect also as a group labelled 'at-risk' they come from similar backgrounds...so within the group there are layers of marginality and they have been brought together with this common label or common description. I suspect those various layers make them more vulnerable as a group and the low self-esteem is really ingrained. (Levi YAP1)

Levi's comments expand on Shirley's concern that labelling young people in certain ways makes them vulnerable, although we do not know exactly what they are made vulnerable to in this case. He understands the complexity of the label 'at-risk' and the ways the 'at-risk' subject is made known through multiple and intersecting discourses. This comment highlights the contradictions around this issue, as further on in the interviews (as discussed in Chapter 5) Levi suggests it is useful to use the 'at-risk' label indirectly through funding applications as a way to play the funding game. This is another example of the mismatching of policy and practice, where despite some of the youth workers' strong verbal advocacy against the use of the term 'at-risk', they are bound by the governing rules of attaining funding (often competitive) to help the young people they work with. The youth workers need to discursively form an image of a young person 'at-risk' that

complies with the identity markers designated through policy when writing applications and filing accountability reports, despite their resistance to educational systems' labelling young people 'at-risk'. Inside schools, teachers designate who can be constituted as 'at-risk', and "subjectivated through ongoing performative constitutions" (Youdell, 2010, p. 224). In turn, this reinforces images of a stereotypical youth 'at-risk' within schooling discourses. Moreover, this writing up and reporting of young people using identity markers adds to the body of expert knowledge about the *truths* of youth – further validating and reinforcing the constitution of certain groups of young people as 'at-risk' subjects in need of governmental regulation (Kelly, P., 2000a; te Riele, 2006).

Levi continued, further highlighting Shirley's anxieties about schools having a 'crap curriculum', by suggesting that the educational system itself needs to be held accountable for student disengagement, particularly the teachers:

I don't believe in the impossible learner...I see schools creating the impossible learner stereotype because it's peer development for the teachers [i.e., new teachers learn from more experienced teachers which may have particularly strong opinions on what constitutes an impossible learner], it is laziness, it's varying degrees of understanding and unfortunately teachers are teaching for different reasons I guess ; [it's curriculum, culture within particular schools], lack of patience, resourcing and lack of appropriate pre-service training. (Levi YAP1)

This comment positions teachers (particularly beginning teachers) as having agency to change the labelling processes, but lacking the capacity to confront dominant (neoliberal) practices within schools whether because this is too difficult, because they are too lazy, – or because they do not understand as they lack the training. Levi had paused for a while, then he reflected upon this comment. He revisited the notion of agency and suggested that teachers perhaps have no choice but to label and exclude some students:

It is easy, though, for me to say there are problems in schools with labelling and such ... but I chose not to put myself in a situation where I have to deal with that. If the kids don't want to be [in my classroom/program/music

sessions] they don't have to be and I don't have to come in so I can walk away so it's easy for me. (Levi YAP1)

I have had to give more, try harder to find the point of engagement with those kids than anyone else I have worked with before. I think it is because they have been knowingly labelled. (Levi YAP1)

Levi's first comment positions him differently from the other youth workers. He experiences multiple positions in his work, both within the wider community organisation and as a volunteer in YAP1. His comments suggest that, unlike a teacher, if the young people (students) display certain 'challenging behaviours' (McMahon, 2013) he can walk away, as a volunteer, and in a sense give up. The other youth workers however, all seemed to view working with youth as their life passion, and would battle to continue to work with youth 'at-risk' even when it is challenging. Levi's comments also hint at the notion that young people 'at-risk' are difficult to work with, and that engagement is a challenge. His comments also suggest that some young people act in certain ways that leave teachers no choice but to label them – that if they “cannot be responsible for themselves, then there is nothing left to do than to protect society from those who will not conform” by labelling them to justify their eminent exclusion (Curran, 2010, p. 82). On the other hand, Levi finishes the comment by suggesting that the young people perhaps also have no choice but to act in ways that self-fulfil the attached label. So the very act of directly naming an individual as 'bad' or 'at-risk' can be seen as having a self-fulfilling action.

Another youth worker from YAP1, George, also had very strong views about schools and the practices used within them, especially in regard to boys. In a conversation that took place on a bus trip to the lake, he explained, with some disdain, that:

...schools have no idea how to teach these boys, that these boys want to learn but there is no space for them to learn as no one is trying alternative ways for them to learn....

George had elaborated on his opinions of educational policies and bureaucracy, and how they were working against youth workers like himself, and offered the comment, “what’s the point when the system won’t change? But then someone has to keep trying” (George YAP1)<sup>50</sup>. George’s optimism was unmistakable in his dealings with the young people but nevertheless he admitted to sometimes feeling desolate at the idea of trying to go “up against educational policy makers and people who control funding, people”, he argued, “who have no hands on experience with young people in need”. This tension provides more evidence of how some of the youth workers’ philosophies/practices appear incompatible with youth/funding/educational/social policy.

The YAP1 youth workers were not alone in their concerns about schooling. Conversations with youth workers (Lynne and Max) from YAP2, also seemed to generate a very negative outlook on high schools. They discussed constantly having to go up to schools to talk to the teachers and intervene for the young people (in their program) when threats of suspension or the like arose. They suggested that, in many cases, the young person’s side of the story would be paradoxically backed up by the teacher<sup>51</sup>, but the student would still receive punishment or be excluded. Discussions with Lynne and Max (YAP2) over the weeks of observations, confirmed that they believed the teachers/schools were trying to get “these kids out before the law comes in” (Max), meaning that – if they can “get them out [of school] now”, they would have “seven fewer kids they would have to bother with” (Lynne). And if they do not get them out now, they will be “stuck with them” until they are 17 years old (Max). This line of thought echoes the suggestions made by Angwin et al. (2001) and Cooper et al. (2000), that young people sometimes are excluded or driven out from educational institutions through the school’s “actions or inactions...[or by] unofficial forms of exclusion by which schools persuade both parents and students

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<sup>50</sup> The idea of someone needing to keep trying with the young people and making young people feel special, accentuates that Levi’s comment about ‘walking away’, as alien to the historical context of youth work (Batsleer & Davies, 2010). From comments made by YAP3 and YAP4 youth workers, it was clear that they are there for the young people and know that working with youth requires an understanding that each young person brings different life experiences that can influence the ways they act/re-act in different contexts).

<sup>51</sup> Examples of these stories are seen in Chapter 7.

themselves to collude in their own exclusion” (Zyngier, 2011, p. 6), and that this seems to be commonplace for students seen to be ‘at-risk’.

The youth workers in this study appeared to understand the ways in which young people were excluded in schools, and by schools, which led to a sense of disillusionment with educational institutions. te Riele (2006) stresses that schooling enables and reinforces ways of knowing, labelling and excluding particular populations of young people who do not ‘fit in with the norm’. Understanding exclusion in this way seems to suggest the reason for the young people’s exclusion from school and inclusion into the YAPs, has something to do with the individual’s characteristics. I return to Youdell (2006a, p. 13) here, as she argues “that identity or group membership [such as youth ‘at-risk’] appears central to the operations of educational inequality and exclusion...[and that]...these are social processes...[that]...take place in society at large and in society’s institutions, including schools”. Cole and Masny suggest the neoliberal push of big business and societal apprehensions, leaves the “educational sphere riddled with power concerns and directives that alter [policy and] the practice of teaching and learning” (2012, p. 2). Foucault’s understanding that power resides everywhere, and “that the person is subjectivated - s/he is at once rendered a subject and subjected to relations of power through discourse” (Youdell, 2006b, p. 37) is useful in explaining the power relations evident here in regard to exclusion, inclusion and interventions.

Another commonplace practice in schools was stressed by Dan (YAP4), who ran an organisation that reached out to young ‘at-risk’ Indigenous people through a variety of creative arts programs. Dan discussed the concept of institutional racism, and emphasised the separation and exclusion of Indigenous students by schools/teachers:

...the schools encourage success for white literate kids and if there's a black kid in your class then the disturbing thing is that there is no system to help him adapt to that way of learning. They are just expected not to want to learn. And just the premise that schools are expecting these people to speak and write English like we do and not English the way they speak English.

They need to learn their own culture their own language and it should be in our capacity to help them do what they value, to help them trust our culture...

Here the notion of 'at-risk of being at-risk' (the double risk of being an Indigenous youth) is highlighted again, as noted above in regard to Dan's earlier comments. He has a strong sense of what he understands the 'at-risk' Indigenous subject to be and the mismatched expectations that schools place on such subjects. Youdell (2006b) might see this as a form of a discursive performative "deployed through silence, through what is unspoken and what is not done - the student whose social and/or educational unacceptability is constituted through the absence of an address" (p. 36). In this case, the absence of addressing a learning need and acceptance of different ways of learning, and the silent expectation that everyone should write one correct form of English.

There were other youth workers however, like Melissa and Jane (YAO1), who had a more positive take on schools. They suggest that schooling is only a part of the problem for a young person labelled 'at-risk' through educational institutions. They understand school as having:

...an impact, but not the only impact. In fact there is quite a large range of things that can have a negative effect on a young person's life that could be their family<sup>52</sup>, their home life, it could be their schooling, it could be the bullying they have had at school, it could be a variety of factors but it would only be one of many. (Melissa YAO1)

Both youth workers agreed that schools label children because of their inappropriate behaviour in class. But what can be read from Melissa's comment here is that they also understood risk as a continuum, just as Shirley (YAP1) did. Despite this understanding of risk, and the suggestion that schooling was not a major factor in the constituting of the 'at-risk' subject, I discovered, as the interview progressed, that a fair amount of their services were focused either on students or connections to schools. Perhaps this was

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<sup>52</sup> This is one of the few times family is mentioned by youth workers, as discussed previously.

because most young people attended school to some extent and that they saw connections with teachers as opportunities to reach out to youth in need who do not voluntarily access their services for various reasons (i.e., the stigma attached to mental health organisations, and the notion that ‘real men’ don’t need help; O’Reilly, Taylor & Vostanis, 2009). Whatever their reasons may be, the YAO1 services seem to contradict their stated motives to downplay the impact schooling has on young people. For example, further into the interview, Melissa (YAO1) states:

We spent a lot of time in our education programs last year...with adults who work with young people, like counsellors, teachers, social workers... up-skilling them to communicate with young people, to break barriers and make communication with young people and the early identifications... of what kinds of things can you pick up on before things go wrong. And even when we talk to [them and also parents] at events and things we try and help them decipher what would be a normal teenage behaviour possibly, and what might be an indicator of a mental health problem or a drug and alcohol problem.

Here the youth workers share an understanding of positive connections with schools (among other places that work with youth) where they view teachers as playing a role in preventive measures against ‘risk’ (against the ‘wheels falling off’) in regard to youth. However, when looking closely at this comment we can see that it reinforces the discourse of young people ‘at-risk’ being a population that are substance abusers, have possible mental health issues, and display certain behaviours that sit outside of ‘normal teenage behaviour’. These assumed characteristics become identity markers to help teachers decide who is ‘at-risk’ and who is not. Similarly, their baseline connection with schools was when students ‘at-risk’ had engaged in ‘risky’ behaviour. As Melissa (YAO1) explains:

We get a lot of young people who have been suspended from school and part of their reintegration back into school from their suspension is that they have to come to YAO1 and speak to someone. (Melissa YAO1)

This comment speaks again to the unequal power relations discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the ways some young people were apparently coerced by schools to

engage in YAP1 and YAP2, and earlier in this chapter when discussing the youth workers' perception of young people holding little agency in the processes of schools constituting them as 'at-risk' subjects. Here the young people are given the option by the schools of signing a contract that includes accessing the services of a mental health organisation, or total exclusion from school. For the young person (and their families) there seems to be little choice. Yet, as I discuss in the next chapter, young people are not passive in the construction and negotiation of their own individual or group identity, even within the boundaries of 'at-risk' programs they have been forced/coerced into attending.

Melissa and Jane (YAO1) suggest, further into their interviews, that the connection with their organisation as a requirement for re-entry into school is an extremely effective approach - but only *if* the young person takes advantage of the opportunities they provide to help work through issues. If, as Foucault (1977) suggests, power circulates within discourses and power relations that are neither fixed nor stable, this requirement (contract) produces unequal distributions of power, even while, as Melissa suggests, that the young people still have agency in that they can choose whether or not to actively engage in the activities/services YAO1 provides - or just 'turn up' to meet the requirements. Without dismissing the clear benefits for young people working with professional services, this type of contract leans towards the instrumentalist approach to youth governance (Zyngier, 2011) embedded in neoliberalism, where the young people must engage in work on the (entrepreneurial) self to rectify their risk (Kelly, P., 2006).

Another important point to be made here relates to the ways this type of contract constitutes the 'at-risk' subject. Within this contract, the process of discursive performatives is doubled (Butler, 2004). Firstly they are labelled by the school, who directly names them as being 'at-risk', then secondly they are sent to an organisation that works specifically with youth 'at-risk', and which, despite the youth workers being adamant they do not use the term, retains a certain stigma among young people (as

discussed in the next chapter). Therefore, not only do the schools reinforce the label, this fortification of the term is doubled as the young people are given no option but to accept they are ‘at-risk’ (to engage in self-labelling). It is the only way they can be intelligible (Youdell, 2006a). They are forced to get help to change their behaviours that do not make sense within normative discourses of intelligible (acceptable) students, or remain excluded from school - further adding to the interpellated performative of the ‘at-risk’ subject by validating that they require intervention and governance (Butler, 2004; Youdell, 2006a).

“[S]tudent subjectivities and educational exclusion...[are]...tied together by the network of discourse that make constellations of identity categories meaningful” (Youdell, 2006a, p. 33). The idea of discursive performatives is at play here as the young people are directly named by schools through access to programs and associated obliquely with certain discourses of risk. The conversations discussed in this theme highlight the ways in which the youth workers perceive the role schooling plays in naming (labelling) young people as particular types of students as ‘at-risk’, and recognising them as subjects who act outside the acceptable normative discourses of a good/winner/successful student. In turn, this limits what they can do and who they can be in school and youth programs. The tension here is that, despite the youth workers’ strong beliefs that the schooling system is failing the young people, their perceived resistance to risk discourses and their willingness to shift ‘blame’ onto institutional structures, their programs continue to focus on altering the young people’s ‘risky’ behaviours and dispositions. The next theme of focus is the gendered approaches to regulation used by youth workers aiming to alter youth identities.

## **Gendered Approaches to Regulation: Troublesome or Troubled?**

Throughout the data collection phases it became apparent that gendered perceptions and practices played a vital role in the design of the programs. In this section I explore the ways these (gendered) practices and perceptions of the ‘at-risk’ subject, constitute and

impact on the young people engaged in the programs in particular ways. Although I draw on data collected across the programs, there is once again a focus on data collected within the two observed YAPs, and more so in YAP1 where I could observe the same youth workers in the different gendered sessions.

From the start of the interview with Shirley (YAP1) it was evident she understood the boys as being easier to work with than the girls. In a discussion about access to the programs, Shirley (YAP1), said:

...we usually decide on [students from] Years 8 and 9, but with the girls I am beginning to feel that Year 9 is too late because they are more resistant and pressured. The boys are more immature so it is not quite as critical...the girls are much harder and in more dire situations than the boys... The girls are always more difficult since the [initial] program began...if the girls start to react you have got to stomp on them straight away because they like to run the place and they will run right over the top of you but the boys you can usually haul them back into line. (Shirley YAP1)

Shirley's comment above not only indicates the difficulty in working with girls who are 'more resistant and pressured' than boys, but broadly designates a higher level of risk to young girls - that girls are more likely to be in 'critical' need of help with their 'dire situations'. It would also seem that before the girls even arrive at the centre there is an expectations of them causing trouble. While Lynne and Max from YAP2 saw teenage boys in general as being more likely to be 'at-risk', as all prior 'youth at-risk' programs had focused on boys, they indicated that a girls' group would be more difficult to manage, as noted in my field observations:.

In an informal conversation with the YAP2 youth workers (Lynne and Max), the subject of single gendered programs arose. I had casually asked why their programs were focused on boys, and if they would be doing one for the girls. They both had laughed with Lynne stating...“Oh my god that would be hell. Could you imagine? We will probably do one with the girls at some point though.” (Observation Notes YAP2)

Although it was said in a jovial way, the fact remains that YAP2's previous programs had only ever focused on boys.

Throughout my time with YAP1, I engaged in numerous informal conversations with all the youth workers, and over time these revealed the effects of their perceptions about girls being more challenging to work with than boys. I return to Shirley's first comment where she discusses the ease of control over the boys as opposed to the girls. Shirley implies that girls are harder to get back in line if you let them get away with their efforts to 'run the place', and that the boys are 'immature' and easier to 'haul back into line'<sup>53</sup>. A similar dynamic was observed in YAP2, where the youth workers had developed good rapport with the boys and 'pulled them into line' a number of times without receiving any backlash. Shirley (YAP1) suggests that if boys are provided with activities like sport or work, then they can be managed and regulated (self-regulate). However, the girls are seen by Shirley as emotional and complicated so regulation is more difficult (they are less likely to self-regulate and more likely to resist) (Lanctôt, Ayotte, Turcotte, & Besnard, 2012).

In discussions about the success of YAP1, the youth workers focused more on the boys in regard to the positives of the program and the enjoyment/satisfaction gained from working in such an environment. For example, my first meeting with each group in YAP1 highlights the contrasting dynamics:

Shirley seemed excited the first time I joined the boys group. She introduced me...asking each of the boys to stop what they were doing and take turns to tell me their names and something interesting about

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<sup>53</sup> It was noted in my observation journal, and through discussions with the youth workers from YAP1 and YAP2, that these young people (boys) who would usually "deal out a world of pain" (George YAP1) on a teacher who had pulled them up on some behaviour at school, graciously accepted Shirley's and George's strict ways when they stepped out of line in the context of the community-based program.

themselves<sup>54</sup>. There was a lot of laughing and jesting by both Shirley and the male youth worker George with comments about this being a great way for the boys to practice being in an interview. This dynamic remained throughout all the observations of this group. The dynamic with the girls was completely different. I had walked into a silent room with the girls filling out their Resourceful Adolescent Program (RAP) workbooks. Shirley had paused briefly to say, “Girls, this is Rachael.” Then she looked back down at her computer, while they handed in their RAP workbooks and sat there quietly waiting for the music session to begin. It took a few weeks for me to feel connected with the girls’ group, and even though the mood lightened up in some sessions, such as music, the youth workers lacked that ‘playful fun’ that was so obvious in the boys group.<sup>55</sup>

Also, Shirley said that the boys were more likely to succeed in the programs, “were coming so far”, and would “take more home” from being involved in the program than the girls. Alternatively, a lot of dialogue around the girls in YAP1 highlighted the difficulties of and for the girls (acts of self-harm, depression, other mental illnesses, and low self-esteem, with each youth worker stressing that the girls “really needed help”). This finding explains why only the girls did RAP (as noted in Chapter 5), why the youth workers only had reports from external counsellors and psychologists on the girls, and why the girls’ attendance to the program was scattered. In addition, I had noticed that the same group of boys in YAP1 returned each week, while the girls group changed weekly with only a few regular participants, which could to some extent explain the different attitudes the youth workers, particularly Shirley, expressed towards the boys and girls.

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<sup>54</sup> This experience was very similar to my first meeting with the boys in the YAP2 group. The ease with which the young boys and the youth workers communicated and the comfortable dynamics of the group made the sessions ‘fun’ and my ‘fitting in’ to the group less difficult, as will be shown in the next chapter.

<sup>55</sup> I am aware that my presence (and gender) impacted upon the dynamics between the YAP1 and YAP2 boys and myself, and my acceptance into the groups - such as having a teenage son, being a woman, my age, having worked more with young boys considered ‘at-risk’, being obviously pregnant). Similarly I acknowledge there could have been numerous reasons why the sessions with the girls were quieter than those with the boys - such as tension between the girls and the youth workers, tension/awkwardness/unfamiliarity amongst the girls as they came from a number of different schools (while the boys came from the same one), and the presence of a stranger (me) who was not a youth worker. However, youth worker comments about things such as the girls being harder to work with seemed to connect with the ways they approached each group.

Similarly, in Lanctôt et al.'s (2012) article *Youth Care Workers' Views on the Challenges of Working with Girls* it is suggested that the small amount of literature examining youth workers' preference to gender shows that youth workers generally prefer to work with males than females. Their research showed that youth workers who had worked with both boys and girls tended to describe girls using harsher words, including adjectives such as: "...“manipulative”, “sneaky”, “devious”, “superficial”, “hypocritical”, “jealous”, “vindictive”, “hysterical” and “self-centered”. In contrast, practitioners were much more positive about boys who were usually described as more “sincere” and “active”, as well as less “spiteful”..." (p. 2245). Their findings suggest the main reasons for unwillingness to work with girls are "...the complexity of girls' needs, negative personal characteristics that complicate intervention, and fears and discomfort related to girls' sexualized behaviors and attitudes" (p. 2245). This finding was evident in my study because although the youth workers understood both sexes as engaging in similar types of risk-taking (i.e. underage drinking, smoking, inappropriate behaviour in classrooms) the youth workers' comments and gendered approaches suggested the girls' engagement in these types of risk-taking (more specific ones included fighting and self-harm [YAP1] and unprotected sexual relations linked with high consumptions of alcohol [YAP3]) were tied to low self-esteem and self-worth, and peer pressure. In other words, the girls were 'troubled' (or pathological) and their needs were complex (Green et al, 2000; Lanctôt et al., 2012).

Boys also engaged in the abovementioned forms of risk-taking, along with others including brushes with the law (there was a consensus among the YAP2 youth workers that in regard to criminal activity they came in contact with more boys than girls<sup>56</sup>) and fighting linked with high consumptions of alcohol and drug taking (YAP1, YAP2, YAP3, YAP4, YAO1). Boys were seen by youth workers as doing these things as forms of resistance (standing up to unfair treatment by police and teachers), peer pressure and

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<sup>56</sup> This is supported by Carrington (2006) and *The National Youth Policing Strategy* (Australian Government, 2010).

trying to be the ‘top dog’ (being masculine). There was a sense also that they were simply ‘boys being boys’ – the boys were ‘troublesome’ (Green et al, 2000 or just ‘Larrikins’; Walker, 1988). I expand on these gendered perceptions of risk-taking below as they appear to inform the youth workers’ practices within the programs. I will further explore the young people’s (performed) gendered risk-taking through Lyng’s (2005) theory of edgework in the next chapter as I move to consolidate the basis for my notion of *Risk with a twist*.

Despite the general perceptions of boys as troublesome and girls as troubled, there were disparities in the youth workers’ opinions. George (YAP1) felt the sessions should be offered to both boys and girls – a change that was made recently when he was in a position to alter the program design. Levi (YAP1) explained:

Overall I don’t think there were differences between the gendered groups. The subtleties and the timing varied but, the ways we dealt with each other varied a bit...like I deal with an adolescent boy differently I would a girl, and it’s tough for adolescent boys to focus (and good lord, with girls around!) and likewise. This is an enormous generalisation but I think the girls are better at negotiating themselves and activities with boys around even though it can be problematic, but they are better at that and have more nous about how to do that. (Levi YAP1)

Levi was unsure about the use of combined gendered sessions, and felt the boys would not cope well in such sessions (Shirley (YAP1) also commented on their ‘maturity’<sup>57</sup>), but his comments highlight that youth workers do approach young people differently depending on gender.

Kate (YAP3, which held mixed gendered sessions) stated in our interview that “although teenage girls these days saw themselves as powerful and in control [of their social and

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<sup>57</sup> This finding is interesting as despite Shirley describing the girls as being more mature, they are also contradictorally understood by Shirley as being harder to work with.

sexual identities]... teenage girls were most ‘at-risk’ of domestic and sexual violence”,’ which shaped the approach taken by the youth workers in formal sessions - with a focus on respect for the body and ways the boys could protect the girls if they became drunk at parties or were unaware of ‘risky’ situations. Kate believed combined gender sessions were imperative so that young people could work together to unpack their understandings of healthy relationships. This way of thinking about girls (as powerful and in control) highlights the notion of ‘Girl Power’ (as discussed in Chapter 3) - alluding to a subject who holds power and agency within the inventing and reinventing of possible identities (Harris, 2003; Robinson & Davies, 2008). Yet, although they are described as asserting powerful identities, the girls are still understood through notions of vulnerability and discourses of risk - in that their ‘choice’ to engage in ‘risky’ behaviours renders them knowable through pre-existing (teenage girl) identities as being vulnerable and submissive, or as “sluts” and “skanks” (Kate, YAP3). Either way, this way of constituting young teenage girls, and programs that seek to address this ‘risky’ behaviour, provides further validation of the (neoliberal) governance/regulation of youth (Kelly, P., 1998). This example reinforces McRobbie’s contention that “girls, including their bodies, their labour power and their social behaviour are now subject to governmentality to an unprecedented degree” (2001, p. 1). It would appear that doing gender under a ‘neoliberalized gaze’ can be ‘risky’ business - a business that sees young women as increasingly under surveillance, “much of which is constructed as ‘protection’” from “crises of identity, [low] self-esteem and [un]successful transitions to adulthood” (Harris, 2003, p. 41). The key tangible factor that highlights the different gendered approaches being used by the youth workers was the program design.

The YAP1 youth workers, particularly the Director (Shirley), who decided what would be included in the program, had strong opinions of what each gender needed to address in regard to their ‘at-riskness’. The activities for the boys revolved around sport, outdoor adventures, and team building experiences (YAP2’s activities for the boys were very similar). It became evident throughout my observations that the conversations between

the youth workers and the boys were geared around finding employment, having a ‘good attitude’ in life, and understanding ‘who you are’ (Shirley, YAP1). The girls were taken to dog shows and to farms to pet baby animals. The girls also went berry picking and had the option for a gym or pedicure visit. These outings, although conducted in single gendered groups, tended to be more individually focused than activities designed for team building.

Conversations between youth workers and girls focused on going back to school, the negatives of being ‘young mums’, on animals, music and feeling good about oneself. The only common activity (conducted separately) across the girls’ and boys’ groups was the weekly music session run by Levi (YAP1), and the occasional outdoor excursion together (to the lake, for instance)<sup>58</sup>. The program was designed around the youth workers’ perceptions of the needs of the young people attending. The design was not program-group specific, as youth workers from YAP1 mentioned that they do similar things each year. Given that youth workers designed the program before meeting the young people who would attend, it appears that the ‘perceived’ needs of young people were understood through expert knowledges on the *truths* of youth (boys need sport, girls need emotional support) – not through discussion with the youth themselves about their ‘real’ needs (Hager, 2003; Kelly, P., 2000a).

As there were clearly distinct gendered approaches in this program, I asked the youth workers about my observations. Shirley (YAP1) suggested that sports were a good way to get boys “back on track”, to give them self-confidence and something to do on the weekends and holidays (‘as many of them did not have male roles models to do stuff like

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<sup>58</sup> Each weekly session consisted of a set of morning activities run by the youth workers (usually the girls did the RAP and the boys played a game of ‘footy’ or cricket). The boys and girls came on different days. The music was a set weekly mid-morning activity run separately for each group (I discuss the processes occurring in these sessions later in this chapter). The young people had choice in what they would eat for lunch and then they could choose what activity would happen in the afternoon (from a list of youth worker suggested activities).

that with’). The girls were not offered sport as the youth workers believed they would not be interested. In discussions about why the girls were participating in the RAP, Shirley commented that it: “targets depression and anxiety. The boys don’t seem to have any of that so we just do it with the girls” (Shirley YAP1). This perception seemed to be shared by all the youth workers at YAP1.

Although I was told that the YAP1 youth workers had access to any health background information the parents and young people provided (as well as access to counsellors’/psychologists’ reports), and engaged in a brief training session around the RAP, none of them had a background in Psychology. Yet the RAP is a specific activity aimed at young people suffering from depression or ‘at-risk’ of depression (Shocket & Wurfl, 2006) that the youth workers had decided to incorporate into the program as they felt the girls suffered from depression<sup>59</sup>. By providing the RAP for *all* the girls in such a small group, it made it appear as if all female participants were experiencing some form of depression. This kind of activity appears to discursively constitute the ‘at-risk’ young (female) subject as being vulnerable to mental illness – reinforcing the notion that girls are ‘troubled’, and again highlighting the ways (neoliberal) governing bodies seek to regulate the youthful ‘risky’ female subject under the constructs of ‘protection’; that is, protecting them from themselves and their ‘riskiness’ (Harris, 2003).

With this in mind, then, I turn, inally, to an analysis which combines the youth workers’ notions that boys are more likely to succeed in school and employment than girls as a result of attending the program, the different gendered approaches and the ways in which the gendered ‘at-risk’ subject is constituted in the YAPs. I begins with a comment Shirley (YAP1) made:

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<sup>59</sup> The RAP was not a required activity by L2L, and there was no extra funding for its use – it was there purely because of the workers’ understanding that it was needed for the girls.

We also pay for some of them [boys] to get to tennis in the holidays as often it's the holidays when the wheels fall off. (Shirley, YAP1)

The YAP1 youth workers and I were having a conversation about the boys and sports. There was a young boy (Paul YAP1) from the program who had a particularly good rapport with Shirley. In response to this statement Shirley explained that Paul was not a kid that 'fits the bill' of a young person 'at-risk' and that he came from a 'normal' family with a mum and dad plus two siblings – although it was mentioned later that he had been coming to the program for over three years now. It was stressed that the whole family played sports and that Paul had the potential to 'succeed' in a career path in sports administration<sup>60</sup>. I had understood this YAP to be about helping all the young people identified as 'at-risk' to feel 'successful', to build skills, and have a sense of achievement to keep them on an educational track (within schools or TAFE). I interpreted this as an arrangement that favoured the child who youth workers considered least 'at-risk' (in relation to stereotypical markers of risk) – the YAP organisation even provided money to pay for extra tennis lessons during the year to help him reach his career goal. This favouring towards the least 'at-risk' boy was also evident in YAP2, where the police took the youngest boy who they considered least 'at-risk' as they had not engaged with serious criminal activity, and worked with him outside of the program - as he was expected to succeed in school (and life in general) more than the others in the program.

Although it seems common sense that a young 'at-risk' person who responds to the program might be more likely to 'succeed', and that going above and beyond to help young people is common to youth work, it would seem for these programs, that being male and less 'at-risk' (or having the stereotypical potential to stop being 'at-risk'), means you will gain more opportunity to succeed as a contributing, successful member of society) from engagement in such programs. This advantage accruing to the boys seems to be made possible through the perception of girls being harder to work with, the

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<sup>60</sup> One of the few times families were mentioned by youth workers.

difference in dynamics with youth workers and the gendered groups, and the idea that boys are just ‘troublesome’ ,and not ‘troubled’ like the girls (Green et al. 2000). This finding leaves me wondering if this is common to other community-based programs, and questioning what needs to be done to help some programs and their staff to engage more with those young people who appear to be seen as more ‘at-risk’ – especially the girls in this context<sup>61</sup>. Moreover, the next chapter will show that the young people perceived amongst peers and youth workers as the *most* (not the least) ‘risky’ are also treated in special ways by the youth workers and experience a degree of kudos/status<sup>62</sup>. Before this, however, I now move on to the next analytic theme which examines the arts/sports practices used within the two observed YAPs, and raises the question of whether art and sport are just another form of regulation.

### **Art and Sport: Transforming or Regulating ‘Risky’ Identities?**

This theme is developed in three stages. First, I provide a summary of the ways arts/sports practices were used across the YAPs/YAOs. Second, youth workers’ views the on ‘success’ of arts and sporting practices – which raise the question of creative voice or creative governance allows me to problematise the ways ‘successful practice’ is understood and how these approaches can be viewed as a tool of (neoliberal) surveillance and regulation. Thirdly, I consider the idea of ‘fame’ as a way out, where youth workers may be (unintentionally) governing young people towards particular, limiting aspirations such as a ‘rap star’ or a ‘footy star’, that diverges even more from what counts as educational success. Following Hickey-Moody’s (2013) lead, this discussion explores the problematic nature of the practices and programs in reinforcing certain neoliberal ways of thinking about and governing ‘at-risk’ young people, despite the advocacy and efforts of the youth workers to move away from the stigma attached to the ‘at-risk’ label.

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<sup>61</sup> This also raises a policy question (although not specific to gender, but pertinent here) concerning ‘reach and relevance’ – do the policies and programmes really reach those young people who are ‘deeply alienated’ or disengaged, or just those youth who are less ‘at-risk’ and more motivated?’ (Williamson, 2005, p. 23).

<sup>62</sup> Those young people within the extremes of being ‘at-risk’ appeared to miss out on the special treatment however when aligning friendships with the ‘most’ riskiest young people they were afforded a show of respect (be it real or a pretense).

## *A Summary of the Ways Arts/Sports Practices were used Across the YAPs/YAOs*

As seen in my discussion about youth work in Chapter 3, there is a strong expectation that it involves working with young people deemed ‘at-risk’ (and excluded from educational settings) through directly naming (citing) them as such within policies, research, media, and educational institutions (Butler, 2004). One of the questions I asked all the youth workers was ‘Why do you think youth work successfully engages young people considered ‘at-risk’? The following responses are exemplary:

What doesn't work is written work. Anything that is like school basically. Any kind of class moment where you stand up in front of the class and tell them how, works. Whereas a mentoring role works better. So we get my [work partner] at the front and he is as dark as your handbag and he swears and has funny teeth and the kids really connect with him. He kind of plays an informal role and I sit at the back with the tough kids and laugh and joke with them and just bring everyone together and it's just me and Jake [his partner in the program who identifies as Indigenous]. (Dan YAP4)

Like we sit here and have a cuppa with them but they never would do that with the teachers. We eat with them, they see us go to the bathroom...we are just normal. (Shirley YAP1)

...they are social gatherings...at grass roots level...not like school ...we are specialised in that field and we can engage quite quickly and all that type of stuff and that is what we wanted to do. (Kate YAP3)

Here schooling is cited in opposition to what youth workers do effectively, suggesting that educational institutions are less likely to succeed in engaging certain groups of young people because of the traditional and common practices used in classrooms, such as formal teacher-centred/led lessons and knowledge transmission (Ord, 2008).

The youth workers from YAP2 perceived their casual approach and interaction was imperative in creating and maintaining successful connections with the boys throughout the sessions. It appeared that when youth workers made young people aware that they were 'on their side' when it came to perceived unfair treatment by teachers, a strong connection and respect between youth workers and the young people was forged. The comments above suggest that the programs are places to relax and feel comfortable with people who are not there to tell them what to do, how they should act, and what they should know - places where they can have 'fun' and "perhaps have respite from managing the risks in their lives" (Curran, 2010, p. 71). Curran highlights how the youth workers in her study were understood as resisting neoliberal governance when the goals of the programs were about 'wellbeing, happiness, fun, and creative expression', as adopting this approach "limits the extent to which their programs take aim at preventing future danger and harm through the management of at risk, in spite of what their program goals are officially mandated to be" (p. 72). This points to a tension in my study where, although there is a clear sense of fun (creative expression and wellbeing) incorporated into the programs' goals, the 'fun' activities are used to encourage self-regulation. So what may be viewed at first as a break from their 'risky' lives (a form of resistance by the youth workers), becomes another form of (neoliberal) surveillance where the young people continue to manage their 'riskiness' while they are both constrained (and enabled) through the negotiation of their identity under the 'at-risk' label.

Nevertheless, a program that 'attracts' young participants is essential for engagement (Coburn & Wallace, 2011). For the two programs observed in this study the attraction was that the programs were marketed as 'fun' (plus the young people had a day off school and a free lunch) and this fun mainly related to arts/sports practices within the programs. All the YAPs and YAOs included in the study used elements of the arts to varying degrees to engage the young people. Dan (YAP4) worked with young Indigenous people in his program where the young people wrote and recorded hip hop songs to express their opinion on violence in their community. Kate (YAP3), working with Dan (YAP4),

engaged the young people with elements of drama to help them explore how they felt about relationships and to help them build a better understanding of healthy relationships. For example, with Dan's (YAP4) assistance, they might dramatically work through a hypothetical 'risky' party situation with a teenage girl who is heavily under the influence of alcohol and becomes the sexual target of a couple of young footy boys, also drunk. The young people in the sessions are then encouraged to discuss the scenario: what is happening?; why is it happening?; what should you do if you are there and observing this occurrence?

Melissa and Kate in YAO1 mentioned that some of their programs utilised the arts to help young people creatively express themselves (for example through painting or dance/music). The youth workers in YAP1 used Levi to engage the young people formally with music, where they had opportunities to use drums, guitars and keyboards as they learned to play the musical piece. YAP2 used the arts in one session to help the young boys to express their feelings about drugs, and introduced my idea of the young people using the video/audio recording to write or select song lyrics (as discussed in the methods section of Chapter 4). For the two observed YAPs, elements of sport were also used as engagement strategies. The sports used by the boys were mainly cricket and tennis in YAP1 and touch football and a boxing/kick boxing session in YAP2.

### *Youth Workers' Views the on 'Success' of Arts Practices - Creative Voice or Creative Governance?*

When asked why they used these approaches to engage with young people considered 'at-risk' there was a variety of response. In considering arts-focussed programs first, there was unanimous agreement that the use of creative arts (in combination with the informal relationships built during programs that ran for several weeks, at least) were a successful tool for engaging and empowering youth within the programs. Jane and Melissa (YAO1) indicated that they had had no training in utilising the arts within programs, so brought in

local artists to run programs. Their understanding of the use of arts was that it was a way to help increase individual confidence levels. As Jane explains:

Using the arts in our workshops was a good avenue for them to connect informally with people who could help...that was one of the big things - but also to learn new skills. A lot of them had low self-confidence and self-esteem so learning something new creatively built that self-confidence up again. (Jane YAO1)

Here (without demeaning the importance of building self-esteem) Jane's description alludes to using the arts to focus on DIY identities where the aim is to make youth 'at-risk into healthy young subjects, and where "art is cast as a mode of redemption and self-improvement" (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 61). This can also be seen in Kate's (YAP3) aims which focused on healthy relationships, improving interpersonal skills, exploring the students' understanding of relationships, discussing the 'riskiness' of some behaviours at parties and attaching it to an ethical framework of relationships. While using *Theatre of the Oppressed*<sup>63</sup> with Dan (YAP4), Kate engaged the young people in a dramatic form of analysing and questioning their perceptions of relationships, sex, risk-taking in relationship contexts - which can be empowering, yet can also be seen as another form of regulation where self-improvement is understood as a "signifier of the value of art" (Hickey-moody, 2013, p. 61).

Dan (YAP4) explained that his community-based arts programs focused heavily on the arts. Dan had strong opinions on the use of the arts as a successful tool when working with marginalised youth. He provided a video recording of a program he had just completed, where he and his partner, Joe, worked with a group of Indigenous youth and adults to create a video (with hip hop songs written and sung by the young people and interviews/songs from adults), that described how the Indigenous community felt about

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<sup>63</sup> *Theatre of the Oppressed* stems from the work of Augusto Boal and is used today as a form of social and political activism. It involves 'analysing and questioning as opposed to accepting and giving answers. It is also about using the body to "act" rather than just talk, discuss or debate (Centre for Community Dialogue and Change, 2013).

the media-covered riots that had occurred in their community just prior to Dan's program. Dan has a background in theatre media and has had training in the *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which influenced his approaches. This approach is very similar to the ways that Conrad (2004) uses Popular Theatre as an empowering pedagogy. Dan argues an arts-approach (particularly using hip hop) provides opportunities for young people to engage in a shared/common language to perform their identities. As he explains:

Using the arts [music/hip hop] is an easier way to communicate. And it's just a language that the kids understood like they're all into rap music and stuff and talking about similar issues about being black and race issues and the kids just relate to it as they already speak it. (Dan YAP4)

Dan's comment alludes to the assumption that young Indigenous 'risky' identities are 'all into rap' as they can identify with American 'black' rappers lyrics about 'risky' lives. Does this assumption validate another marker in the stereotype of the Indigenous young person – another way of knowing 'risky' youth? The use of hip hop with youth 'at-risk' is not a new approach in community-based programs as discussed in Chapter 3, with Greg Dimitriadis' (2001, 2005) research being prominent in connecting hip hop, youth and identity work. Dan's comments echo those of Dimitriadis (2005) about hip hop providing a space for "youth from all across the economic, ethnic and racial spectrum [who] are trying to define and redefine themselves in the face of massive and ever present uncertainties about identity" (p. xiii). However, a few of the young people involved in my study viewed being a famous 'singer in a band' (or 'footy star') as a 'way out' of their 'risky' lives, which made me question whether arts (and sports) programs might fuel unrealistic expectations and regulate youth (unintentionally) in a particular way – when coupled with media-sensationalised risk-taking and the notion that a 'risky' life equates to success for artists/athletes. For example, the way celebrity status is assigned to rappers ('Fiddy' cent, Tupac, Eminem, Biggie Smalls, Snoop Dog, Ice Cube for example - whose songs often tell a story of difficult 'risky' lives) or the way that a 'risky' young person can *become* someone successful through RTV (like *Australian Idol*'s Stan Walker) may set up desirable celebrity subjectivities and the "promise of upward social mobility" for these young people (Allen, 2011, p. 161; Allen & Mendick, 2012; Turner, 2006)..

Dan sees the performance involved in the programs as opening up a 'space' for young people to feel a sense of agency and empowerment:

They can't read and write very well but they can rap.... opening up space for a voice...a creative voice....they have ownership of the product... (Dan YAP4)

As Dan explained in his interview, during the programs he guides the young people to utilise their voice within the 'space' to express their thoughts on cultural and social issues:

The concept of working culturally with the kids' arts projects, sees them using cultural ideas to create a performance that is awareness-raising and more based around social issues than around just art. (Dan YAP4)

Dan's (YAP4) programs draw on identity transformation as a focus. However he also places emphasis on creatively 'giving voice' to young Indigenous people as the pivotal point of success:

With the young people it's about identity and knowing who you are and why your skin is the way it is, and where you come from, and why that means a lot to be proud of....and being able to communicate that. (Dan YAP4)

When I asked Dan why he believed these creative approaches worked, he hesitated, and expressed how surprised he felt after each program was successful; that he understood the ideals behind them but was always amazed at how effective they actually were. This type of comment was repeated by other youth workers throughout the interviews (Kate YAP3, Melissa YAO1 and Levi YAP1).

Levi (YAP1) describes an awareness of certain processes, including the struggle and negotiation of subjectivities and the defining of identity, authenticity and agency

occurring. However, like Dan, he cannot really describe or explain why this transformation happens, only that it does:

The thing about group music activities is that as activities they are not overtly or physically demanding. There is a sense of peer support as a significant thing. They don't rely on mobility particularly, individuals don't necessarily stand out as being particularly advanced or challenged so that sense of community within the groups develops comparatively successfully, with a fairly high level of success given that activity is facilitated intelligently and deliberately, hopefully skilfully and that by using those sorts of programs - not just only musical - but I am pretty clear that music programs are particularly successful, identity shift happens, it just occurs. (Levi YAP1)

In addition, Levi's statement points to engagement in arts/music activities as a possible way of causing a shift in identity for young people considered 'at-risk'. He contends that providing opportunities to engage in activities where everyone can be 'successful' means the program opens up the possibility for students to shift (transform) from an impossible/loser/bad student identity (constituted within schools) to a more socially acceptable possible/winner/good student one. George (YAP1) and Levi (YAP1) were strong advocates of the use of music and film/video in opening spaces for young people to negotiate positive identities and find a 'voice'. Levi (YAP1) further expands on his idea about identity shifts below:

What is transformative, the most important thing and the most significant thing is that identity shift. It is entirely possible for those kids to overcome that label with their identity as musicians or members of a group, to have a different identity. When those kids feel approval because of something they can do then that shifts their identity, it becomes a successful identity not a negative one, it becomes one where a kid can give pleasure and entertain by virtue of music and they feel that. So what that changes is self-esteem, approval, being identified as something other than kids who can't. (Levi YAP1)

Here we can see Levi's resistance to the 'at-risk' label and his perceptions of the transformative nature of music. The transformation, the identity shift, is viewed as something the individual does, something the individual needs to change about

themselves in order to be viewed intelligibly through discourses of a successful student subject, one who *can* as opposed to one who *can't* (Butler, 2006; Youdell, 2006a).

Again the notion of self-improvement/self-salvation as pivotal to the 'transformation' is evident here (Hickey-Moody, 2013). This idea of opening a 'space' is often referred to in art projects (for example, Abbot, 2001; Brumby, Eversole, Scholfield, & Watt, 2007; Cassidy & Watts, 2004), yet the 'space' in these projects is not really defined as transformative, but as a space for young people to challenge pre-existing identities and to define or redefine youthful identities in new ways. The use of the word 'transform' by both Dan (YAP4) and Levi (YAP1) suggests that music/art programs encourage an identity shift, but rather than a young person knowingly/consciously attempting to challenge or redefine their identity, this 'just happens' – resulting in a subject who 'can do' and young people who are more like those 'successful' subjects that are accepted within schooling discourses. Hickey-Moody (2013) and O'Brien and Donelan (2008) point out, though, that youth workers' and artists' belief "in the transformative power of the arts locks...[them] into an unwavering position of advocacy that prevent[s] them from reflecting critically on the young people's responses to the arts programs and the difficulties they might encounter" (O'Brien & Donelan, 2008, p.183). For instance, Levi (YAP1) argued that these 'spaces' provide opportunities for young people to take up alternative, 'successful' identities as opposed to the negative identities associated with being labelled 'at-risk'. However, this 'transformation' is what the youth workers see or hope is happening. Alternatively, my data (in the next chapter) demonstrates how the young people do perform very 'risky' identities within those same transformative spaces the youth workers see themselves creating. So, while the programs and youth workers open up space for youth, how the youth use this space is not always in the way the program intends.

Furthermore, the identity shift concept invites notions of governmentality, where this transformational space “links the constitution of individuals more closely to the formation of the [neoliberal] state’ and the shaping of the young peoples’ actions” (Brunila, 2013, p. 217). So although an identity shift may very well occur and provide positive, instant (but perhaps only temporary) effectiveness for the young people, the shift still occurs as the organised practices (or as Levi and Dan suggest, sometimes accidental practices) work to govern these young people who have been positioned “outside of educational systems and work life in particular (often limiting) ways” (Brunila, 2013, p. 218). One such limiting way these young people, particularly the boys in my study, are positioned (and in some cases position themselves) is as potential sports stars.

### *Fame as a Way Out?*

Sport was a common feature in both YAPS. Shirley (YAP1) agrees with the other youth workers in regard to the benefits of the music sessions, but for Shirley, sports played a vital part in ‘identity shifts’ for the boys in the program. Shirley understands sports (cricket, touch football, tennis) as a means to burn energy, a ‘way out’ from their ‘risky’ situations for the boys – either indirectly by keeping them busy on the weekend with supervised leisure activities so they do not get bored or get into trouble, or directly by directing them towards a sports related career (playing or administrative work). Playing sport together also allowed the young people to connect with the youth workers, engage with male role models, improve team building skills and develop their physical and mental skill sets. Shirley (YAP1) explained that this was a way to break the cycle of risk as it gave them a space to feel successful in.

The boys in YAP2 saw football as a ‘way out’ of their ‘hard’ lives (as shown in the next chapter). This points to the question I raised in Chapter 3 about popular culture and the lure to be ‘risky’ (and potentially famous) as providing an alternative to educational success as a way out of a ‘troubled life’ for the young people in my study. For example,

Bamblett (2011) contends that celebrity careers, such as those of professional footballers, are understood as alternative pathways for those (Indigenous youth) who are failing at school. Lynne and Mark (YAP2) did not utilise or encourage this idea of sport as a way out, but rather included touch football in each session as a group activity mainly to burn energy, encourage in team work and connect as a group - including the youth workers. This finding was surprising considering the large amount of research (as shown in Chapter 3) that links the reduction of youth crime to sports programs (such as Cameron, & MacDougall, 2000 and Nichols, 2005). However, by using sports (in particular 'footy'/rugby league) to connect with the young people in an attempt to change negative perceptions of the police – to ultimately help prevent these young boys from 'going down the wrong path' – the youth workers *were* using sport to reduce youth crime – they just did not do it deliberately or consciously.

It was clear that there were positive things happening through the use of sports - which is not the debate here – and, as with YAP1, these sport sessions were enjoyed by all. Among the YAP1 boys, it made no difference what your level of experience was at football, as the older, more experienced boys encouraged the younger less experienced boys by showing them different ball passing skills and they never lost their tempers when balls were dropped or goals missed. When I pointed this out to the youth workers they agreed, but confessed it was not what they had planned to happen and it does not necessarily happen in other programs – which echoes Dan's thoughts on being surprised when an approach works. This finding validates research, such as Coalter (2011) and Linley Kelly (2011), arguing for more robust inquiry into why youth workers use sport to reduce crime. Yet, despite the youth workers not specifically setting up being a successful sports player as a desirable subjectivity, I observed an underlying notion that footy/sports was being positioned (perhaps unintentionally by the youth workers) as a way out for these young people through their other activities, such as the session with a guest speaker about how drugs ruined his life.

This male guest speaker was once a professional footballer (rugby league) before his drug addiction pushed him to the point of holding his family hostage and landing him in gaol. His discussion focused on how he had an extremely difficult life growing up, how footy was the only place he felt confident and positive about himself, and how his decision to take drugs ruined his chance of a football career that, as he told the young boys, could have seen him 'have it all' (i.e., fame, money, a nice house, fancy car). Although the intention of the youth workers was to help make the young boys aware of the damage taking drugs can do, a number of the young boys in YAP2 talked about 'footy as the way out' (as discussed in the next chapter), particularly after that session. For example, during lunch that day there was talk about how good (Australian) football is and how good they (themselves) were at it – they believed they were good enough to be professionals. So this session with the guest speaker, in a sense, helped provide affirmation for their beliefs. There was also a session of boxing/kick-boxing which was aimed at boosting self-confidence and building skills and, as Lynne suggests, it allowed the boys 'to do something positive for a change that they know they are good at or could be good at', implying that they could make a career out of it if they wanted to or tried hard enough – reinforcing the need for self-governance.

In each YAP2 session, and in the daily footy games, the idea of self-improvement/self-salvation became apparent, as seen in the arts approach, with the inference that sports can transform negatively-viewed identities into positive ones – that sports can be a way out of a situations where 'riskiness' positions them as 'losers'. But at the same time, risk-taking becomes a way to get famous. Yet again there is a tension here, for despite the youth workers' claims that they did not encourage footy as 'way out', I saw the gendered programming and the assumptions they make, along with Shirley's (YAP1) explicit comment about "sport being a way out", as evidence that these programs do fuel or at least support this type of thinking. Moreover, there is the underlying sense provided by the youth workers' dialogue that these young 'risky' people feel very negatively about themselves, and that these programs allow them to finally feel positive about themselves,

which again points to the idea that something is wrong with them that they need to fix. However, in the following chapter I demonstrate the implications and effects of this type of thinking among the young people and show how the young people twist their ‘risky’ identities to make use of the ‘at-risk’ label in a positive light. It seems that being ‘risky’, in and of itself, is not always a bad thing, rather, it can be a good thing in their experience/from their perspective and provide affordances.

I have argued in this section that in a number of the YAPs there was an attempt by youth workers (via the use of arts/sports) to counteract what they saw as the negative effects of schools’ labelling youth ‘at-risk’ by providing space for young people to construct possible positive identities. In each instance though, the youth workers discussing the notion of an identity shift from loser/bad/unsuccessful/impossible learner to winner/good/successful/possible learner, implied that the young people had to be named, and discursively constituted as ‘losers/bad/unsuccessful/impossible’ in order for a shift to occur. Although the youth workers (and other artists/youth workers in art-based programs, and Shirley in regard to sport) see an identity shift approach as of immediate benefit to the young participants, my analysis complicates this: what does this mean for the young people; what effect does this have on the construction of possible identities within this transformational space bound by policy and discourses of risk; and are the young people engaging in an identity shift, or are they just performing the change? As discussed previously in Chapter 3, there is a plethora of research establishing the ‘success’ of community-based (arts/sports) programs in working with youth ‘at-risk’ (Dreezen, 1992; Gibson & Anderson, 2008). I do not debate these findings, and I acknowledge the fantastic work that was happening within the programs. What I do debate, however, is the way ‘success’ is defined and who is defining it – because such understandings/constructions of knowledge can shape how the programs are perceived to be ‘successful’. I have argued my case here by revealing the problematic nature of these community-based practices and programs in reinforcing certain neoliberal ways of thinking about and governing young people.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I expanded on the argument developed in Chapter 5, and demonstrated how the ‘at-risk’ subject is discursively constituted through policies, which, coupled with the youth workers’ understanding of the construction of ‘at-risk’ subject through ‘expert’ knowledges, reinforce forms of governmentality in that the programs/practices encourage the young people to engage in self-regulation and self-surveillance of their ‘risky’ behaviours and dispositions (Kelly, P., 2000a). Yet at the same time there is a sense among many of the youth workers that they do not want to openly label the young people as ‘at-risk’, perhaps because it is considered a derogatory term and they do not want to offend their participants, despite having to use this language to obtain funding. My findings show that perhaps what ‘risk’ is and who is ‘at-risk’ is not fixed (Foucault, 1980), but constituted by shifting and fluid discursive forces and processes (Butler, 2006). However, despite youth workers’ understandings and resistance of risky labels, their programs and practices (perhaps unintentionally) become an extension of the processes of governing bodies to regulate the behaviours and dispositions of young people who have strayed off the ‘desired’ pathway to adulthood. My argument here, consistent with the work of Curran (2010), te Riele (2004), and Peter Kelly (1998), is that despite the youth workers’ articulations of resistance to the ‘at-risk’ label, to truly resist neoliberal ways of governing young people ‘at risk’, they would need to resist designing programs that are informed and shaped by governing policies – that is, moving away from programs that aim to make youth “more employable, more educated, more agreeable, and more rational” (Curran, 2010, p. 67) and towards programs that focus on relational issues and the actual needs of the individuals within the programs.

The themes around degrees of risk, the ‘flawed’ school system, gendered approaches to programming, and art and sport as regulation (and/or enabling) that were unpacked in this chapter align with Zyngier’s (2011) instrumentalist approach, despite attempts by youth workers to not use the term ‘at-risk’ with the young people. As with the instrumentalist view, YAP1 and YAP2 base access to the programs through the identification of ‘risky’ markers such as problem behaviours (i.e. disrupting behaviours in the classroom and

criminal activity) as a core issue, and design programs based on the youth workers' perspectives that encourage self-regulation of these behaviours. YAP1 and the youth workers' practices also focus (as an instrumentalist approach does) on vocational skills for the boys to help get them 'back on track' and "prepare[s] students for (sometimes, but not always) meaningful and productive work" (Zyngier 2011, p. 2) – where the "beneficiaries of this approach are the broader economy and employers of labour" (p. 2). Furthermore, Zyngier suggests an instrumentalist approach views risk as pathological, in that understandings of young people's behaviours, dispositions and family in a deficit light "almost inevitably and inexorably lead children to succumb to risk" (2011, p. 3). An example of this can be seen through Dan's (YAP4) belief that Indigenous youth were most 'at-risk', due to their cultural markers – that by being Indigenous means there are a set of assumptions about failing school for instance, which will ultimately lead them to self-fulfil the 'at-risk' label. Anyone, it seems, could be at risk - even purely by genetics.

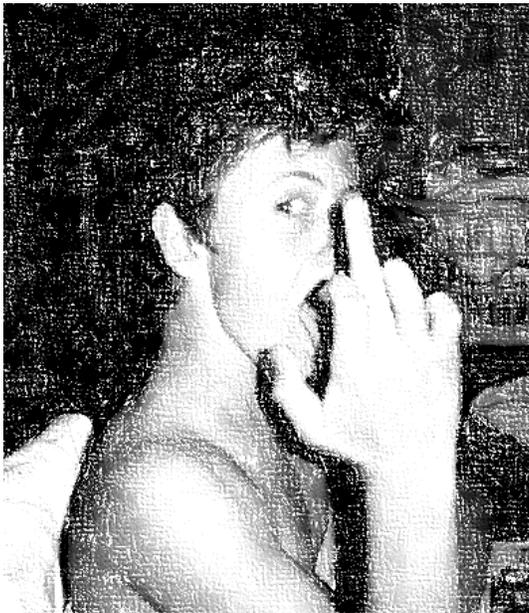
Although the youth workers understood that educational systems and structures were a big part of why the young people were labelled 'at-risk', as with an individualist approach, the program and the practices sit with an instrumentalist approach. Moreover, by youth workers acknowledging that certain groups of young people are defined by policy as 'at-risk' of failing or leaving school early, employing programs that are about altering the young people's 'at-risk' behaviour, and reporting about youth using identity markers constructed through expert knowledges of youth, they (the programs and youth workers) in effect, as Kelly suggests, render "government more *efficient* and *effective* by facilitating earlier *identification* of those at-Risk, and by targeting *interventions* to those most at-Risk" (1998, p. 192 original emphasis). As with Curran's (2010) findings, the two observed YAPs did provide for rewarding experiences for the young people participating (as a group), which moves away from a neoliberalised agenda focusing on individuals, yet overall the measures of success from the youth workers (and often the young people themselves, as shown in the next chapter) were based around effectively altering of individual behaviours and attitudes, irrespective of the fact that the youth workers across

all sites firmly expressed their thoughts on how school and current teaching strategies are not conducive of an inviting environment for certain young people. I do not dismiss the importance of building young people's self-confidence, self-esteem or self-worth. However, as te Riele (2006) argues, this importance does "not necessarily warrant targeting these groups of young people for intervention, instead of targeting school systems and societal factors" (p. 131).

Furthermore, as highlighted by Hickey-Moody, when the success of arts (and sports) programs are measured in terms self-improvement (e.g., Coalter, 2005; Department of Culture and the Arts, 2010; Dreezen, 1992; Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Gibson & Anderson, 2008) this approach can appropriate art/sports as a self-salvation project where such practices "emerge as active management and control of problem youth populations" (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 62) and ultimately reinforce that youth 'at-risk' are the 'proper subjects' for such community-based programs. The idea of the creative voice and creative sharing through formal art (and/or sports) sessions are ultimately bound within the regimes of 'at-risk' discourses where the young people are compelled to publicly confess their feelings and have them regulated. Hickey-Moody also emphasises that O'Brien and Donelan's (2008) analysis of art-based methodologies, questioned whether the desire for youth workers/artists to 'do good' is enough, and extends Peter Kelly's critique of risk discourses "by examining the conditions of possibility for enabling such discourses" (p. 63). Hickey-Moody suggests that "O'Brien and Donelan's (2008) concluding wish to do, "more than just good" is an invitation to not simply assist those 'at-risk' by using the arts to support them in becoming socially engaged, healthy, and skilled, but to dismantle the system that produces the risk" (2013, p. 63).

The next chapter examines how, despite the ways policy, programs and youth workers' practices reinforce notions of risk and self-regulation, the young people in this study can find their own creative ways within this discourse to 'confess' their experiences and

'twist' the 'at-risk' label. This is achieved not only by the young people performing back the notion of a 'transformed identity' to youth workers (in formal settings of the program), but also through performing 'risky' identities and feeling a sense of power among peers within the informal settings of programs (like at lunch and on bus trips). Therefore, my analysis in the next chapter highlights possible enabling (though often temporary) and constraining effects of the discourses that make an 'at-risk' subject intelligible within the opposing norms of society – for, as Judith Butler (1993, 2005, 2006) implies, as a subject, we are not anything until we have been discursively named as something that makes sense.



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## Chapter 7: Living with Risk – Risk with a Twist

## Introduction

Chapters 5 and 6 analysed the use of the term ‘at-risk’ and the ways young people were constituted through policy and practice as ‘at-risk’ subjects - with emphasis on the particular funding bodies and youth workers involved with the YAPs in this study. This chapter seeks to understand the perceptions of the young people involved in each of the two observed programs (YAP1 and YAP2). It examines their retelling of lived experiences and how particular discursive practices (within the programs via policy and the language, actions and attitudes of the youth workers) produce conditions for a range of possible experiences; and a consequent range of meanings produced in relation to those experiences. I am particularly interested in how these young people, previously constituted as youthful ‘at-risk’ subjects by their school settings (and by the programs themselves) are further encouraged, through (neoliberal) policy and youth workers’ practices, to take up more effective self-regulating identities - which requires the young people to be responsible for and manage their ‘risky’ situations.

While writing this chapter I was aware of Smyth and McInerney’s (2012) reminder that “[all] too often young people are depicted as passive victims of institutions that render them powerless” (p. 193). Yet I understand, as they did, that young people “do have agency, a capacity to speak back to the system[s that label them], and a sense of fair play” (p. 193). This agency was observed in my study through the young people’s narratives, where they could talk, for example, “with conviction about what makes for a good or a bad school and the attributes of good and poor teachers” (Smyth & McInerney, 2012, p. 193) or what constitutes a young person being ‘at-risk’ and why they believed they were not. Within this chapter I show how the young people defined the term ‘at-risk’, took up, ‘performed’ or managed the positions established by policy makers and youth workers, and how identity is formed/shaped by the young people in this context. My analysis shows that at times I saw the young people both ‘performing back’ what the youth workers wanted to hear alternatively, at other times, especially in informal settings I saw them performing themselves as very different subjects (the ‘riskier’ the better).

Therefore, in this chapter I address my last two research questions:

- 3) How do young people construct and negotiate possible selves within the programs and through discourses of risk?; and
- 4) What are the constraining and enabling effects for young people labelled 'at-risk' within this program and discursive context?

I argue that although these youth identities are ultimately bound within the 'at-risk' label produced by the program's aims, and the positions taken up by the youth workers and the young people themselves, popular and peer culture (including the programs themselves) has produced an attraction to certain aspects of being a young person 'at-risk' (where it appears the more 'at-risk' you are the more likely you are to be 'famous' in peer and celebrity contexts). In this context 'fame' (rather than educational success) is positioned as a 'way out' for marginalised or disadvantaged youth. Such space provides temporary enabling aspects and affordances for young people to 'twist' the 'at-risk' discourse and feel a sense of power. These enabling aspects of 'living the label' are temporary in that (1) 'youthhood' is a phase of one's life and being 'at-risk' only makes sense in relation to youth/schooling subjectivities and (2) once these young people step outside of their peer (and community-based program) group, their power is lost.

This chapter is framed in terms of five key themes: 1) Risky understandings: Risk, recognition and resistance – where I examine the young peoples' understanding of the label 'at-risk', and their resistance to stereotypical 'risky' identities; 2) Jump on the risky fun ride – where I examine the young people's perceptions of the community-based program and why they believe they gained access; 3) Risky education – where I explore the young people's perceptions of schools/teachers failing them and constituting them as 'trouble' (a label they cannot escape or come back from); 4) Risk = Fame – where I examine the ways in which some of the young people understood fame as a way out; and

5) High risky appeal: Young people working the edge – where I draw on Lyng’s (2005) theory of edgework to provide another way of reading ‘risky’ behaviour, and explore how the retelling of this edgework provides possibilities for young people to twist the ‘at-risk’ label and perform ‘risky’ ‘acceptable/positive/successful’ identities. As I discuss these findings, I make connections to the key themes raised throughout this thesis (Indigeneity, drugs and alcohol, schooling, employment, peers, and the seduction of ‘riskiness’). As a part of my *Risk with a twist* argument, I compare identity transformation as seen by youth workers (in Chapter 6) with the sense of identity I observed among the young people when they confess/retell their risk-taking in the peer group. Moreover, I compare how ‘success’ is defined and understood differently by the youth workers, by schools, by social norms, and the young people (i.e., success to them seems to be seen as being popular and ‘cool’ among your peers).

## **‘Risky’ Understandings: Risk, Recognition and Resistance**

### *Defining the ‘Risky’ Label*

The definitions of being ‘at-risk’ articulated by the young people in this study varied according to gender, race and age. Most of the younger participants (particularly the boys) responded to questions of ‘What do the words ‘at-risk’ mean to you?’, and ‘Who do you think would be ‘at-risk?’’ with ‘I don’t know’. This simple response could be seen as a way to avoid discussing issues that might cross over to their private, personal experiences, or it could be taken at face value<sup>64</sup>. Some of the older girls in YAP1 articulated their understandings of ‘at-risk’ by reflecting on personal experiences. However, their explanations place a distance between themselves and their definitions, as if, being labelled ‘at-risk’ referred to the ‘other’ or a ‘past self’ that had changed. As the girls explain, when they think of the term ‘at-risk’, they:

...think of the young people in today’s society skipping school, sneaking out, lying to parents and running away from home. I feel that if more things

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<sup>64</sup> Considering the age (mainly 13-14) of these boys, I have taken this type of response at face value. I did not want to question them further about it out of concern that I would appear judgemental or pushy, which could have negatively affected the researcher-participant relationship very early in Phase 2 of the study.

aren't done to help them, the chance of young people being 'at-risk' will just increase. I was labelled 'trouble' for a long time and I didn't see much point in trying at school because they would still see me as trouble because I hung with the wrong crowd but I did a lot of that sort of dumb stuff when I was younger. Fortunately I was smart enough to distance myself from most of the bad crowd and make my own decisions, but a lot of people I know didn't and they are the ones sitting at home with no job living off Centrelink and I'm here... but still at school...it's not easy to get away from the teachers remembering you as bad... (Kath YAP1, 15)

When I hear the young people 'at-risk' term I think about kids being brought up in troubled neighbourhoods and being brought up around drugs and alcohol at a young age. (Yasmine YAP1, 15)

The sense of distance that is constructed here is interesting as these young girls were a part of the group due to behaviour that their teachers perceived was placing them 'at-risk', yet their definitions seem to set them apart from the 'at-risk' stereotypes – they were not 'at-risk' they just 'mucked around at school a bit'. This is a form of resistance to being labelled 'at-risk' by distancing the current 'self' from the 'other'. The binary of bad crowd/good crowd, unsuccessful student/successful student becomes a way for Kath to distance herself – shifting from one crowd to the other. However, despite her voluntary shift the stigma of being labelled 'trouble' or 'at-risk' remains in her interactions with the teachers – the 'at-risk' label is hard to shake. Kath's understanding of 'at-risk' youth highlights the constraints of taking up 'risky' characteristics and behaviours, and aligning with other youth who engage in risk-taking – with an image of a young person doing nothing and living off welfare is part of a 'risky' future, which in a neoliberal sense is not a 'good economic subject'. Yasmine (YAP1) disconnected herself completely from the label, understanding it as belonging to much 'riskier' and more 'disadvantaged' youth than her – resisting the label, despite signing a contract to engage in a youth 'at-risk' program.

Notably, both girls draw on pre-existing ideas about who is 'at-risk' by associating the label with drugs and alcohol use, having 'troubled' home lives and getting into trouble at

school. Kath and Yasmine's comments also highlight that 'at-risk' is government/adult/youth worker speak, while 'trouble' or 'in trouble' is more aligned with how young people seem to view and talk about their riskiness. Yasmine is one of the only two young participants that touch on family in regard to risk, with her comment "*troubled neighbourhoods*" showing her understanding that risk is not just situated within the subject but brought about through external factors. "*Trouble*" is a common term all the young people in my study use when discussing their schooling and 'risky' social experiences. Moreover, the notion of the regulating/entrepreneurial self becomes clear in Kath's comment, "*Fortunately I was smart enough to distance myself from most of the bad crowd...*" where she sees herself as taking responsibility for, monitoring and managing her 'risky' situation – yet Kath is in the program; therefore, she is a 'failing' subject in terms of acceptable schooling and social discourses. This comment by Kath could also be interpreted as a performativity (Butler, 2004). By telling me she is not like she used to be, is she performing back what she believes the youth workers (and myself) want to hear (and what the program claims are its aims)?

This sort of self-reflection on the label was also evident among the YAP1 and 2 boys, however, unlike the young girls quoted above who attach 'risk' to their past identities, these boys connect with the label, in a sense expressing their understanding of the negative connotations of the label – 'being stupid and a loser' - as shown in the following comments:

Jeff: I guess someone like me, cause I always used to be in trouble with them [the police] and stuff...I was just doing the wrong thing that's why I got into trouble and I guess taking risks...

Rachael: What kinds of risks?

Jeff: Like drugs and drinking too much and doing shit that gets you into trouble.

Rachael: When I say the words young people 'at-risk' what do you think of?

Jeff: I don't know, like a loser...(Jeff YAP2, 14)

Someone stupid like me who can't do nothing right at school...(John YAP2, 14)

Just like the girls, these boys draw on pre-existing understandings of youth 'at-risk' adding trouble with the police and low intelligence to the mix. Yet, the boys' and girls' comments suggest a gendered way of seeing youth 'at-risk'. For the girls they take on an almost moral/nurturing/mentoring position about "*young people in today's society*", whereas the boys seem to have accepted it is their behaviour that has put them 'at-risk' (despite their stories later shared relating to the perceived unjust treatment by teachers). The YAP2 boys speak of themselves in very negative terms when discussing school. John's comment connecting risk to stupid and school reminds me of Zyngier's (2011) description of an instrumentalist approach in schools, where the young person's 'risky' behaviours are central to the 'at-risk' label being attached. By directly naming oneself a 'loser' or 'stupid' the boys reinforce (perhaps even validate) systems' and structures' constitution of the 'at-risk' subject – self-fulfilling the 'at-risk' label.

The oldest boy in YAP2 (MC) identified as being Indigenous. His definition of 'at-risk' was slightly confronting and revealed his understanding of stereotypes. He had looked directly at me when I asked the question, "What do you think about when you hear the words youth 'at-risk'..." and responded quickly, gauged my reaction, then had laughed loudly:

Me...cause I'm black....(MC YAP2, 15)

The expectation of being 'at-risk' through association of culture (because he was Indigenous) is clear in this comment. MC's comment echoes Youdell's (2006b, p. 13) where she contends that "identity of an excluded group is fundamental to its exclusion". In the context of my study, MC understands he is excluded from school because he is Indigenous, young and a boy. Whether MC's understanding of the 'risk' from being Indigenous stems from an historical context (through stories from parents and elders) or

from directly witnessing the media sensationalise the assumed connection between Indigenous youth and crime, drug use and truancy, is unknown at this point. However, the cultural association is clear, and it becomes more so throughout the sessions as his life stories slowly unfolded over the weeks. In the different stories MC chose to reveal, without prompting, he appeared distanced (by the neutral tone he used in their narration) from things that I thought would hold a great deal of emotion. These were stories such as finding a cut off finger on the kitchen floor after someone had broken into his family's house and walking in to his young sister's bedroom, to find she had passed away overnight from SIDS. Often these stories did not relate to events that were happening around us at the time which leaves me wondering why they were even revealed within those moments. Was MC sharing lived experiences to connect more with the group or to try and shock us? Perhaps he had never debriefed these experiences and was opening up space to do so? Whatever his reasons were, after each telling, it appeared he required no response (and received none) and he moved back into whatever the group was involved with at that moment. What was apparent though, was that drugs and alcohol, abusive behaviour, regular involvement with the police, and getting in trouble at school was part of his life. These events were discussed by MC as if they were just part of 'normal Indigenous life' – unsurprisingly, events that research, media and policies connect to 'at-risk' subjects (Russell & Batton, 1995) and events that are understood through neoliberal rationalities as validating the necessity for an instrumentalist approach (Zyngier, 2011). This "normalization of risk" was also noted in research with young people by Green et al. (2000, p. 117), although the risks in their study were focused on high unemployment, poor housing and environmental pollution. So, in a sense, what is evident in MCs talk is his understanding of the double risk of being young and being Indigenous (as discussed in Chapter 3).

The idea of Indigenous youth being 'at risk' of being 'at-risk' was reinforced by other members of the group, such as in the following comment from Jeff (who is not Indigenous), a 14-year-old from YAP2. While on a bus trip I had casually mentioned how gorgeous a young Indigenous child playing in the street was as the bus stopped to drop

off MC. Using an excerpt from my journal I retell Jeff's response after MC had alighted from the bus:

...yeah until he grows up and becomes a drug dealer and a dumb cunt and ends up in gaol and stabs someone. I asked "why do you think that?" He said because he is an Aboriginal. Look where he lives, this is what is going to happen to him. Look at those filthy dumb cunts look how they live. (Jeff YAP2, 14)

Although this is not a specific response to the initial question *who is 'at-risk'*, it is pertinent to Jeff's understanding that Indigenous youth are *more* 'at-risk' than him – in effect distancing himself from the higher end of the scale on 'riskiness'. This stereotyping of peers (according to varying degrees of risk) by other young people was also noted by Neary et al. (2013) in their work with young Scottish people and their displays of (risky) anti-social behaviour. Neary et al. explain how the young people they interviewed were from neighbourhoods that were understood as having a high rate of youth antisocial behaviour (through a household survey). These young people often fit the stereotype of the 'neds' (a group that was viewed (by youth and adults) as very risky/dangerous). Neds were known to carry weapons, wear similar clothes, have tattoos, and have difficult relationships with the adults in the neighbourhood – however the young people in Neary's study distanced themselves from the 'neds' by understanding they were not as 'bad' as them, despite adults often mistaking them for 'neds'.

The actual words Jeff uses here, 'filthy', 'dumb', and 'cunts', are visceral. In naming Indigenous people Jeff distances himself and constructs the Indigenous other - subjecting Indigenous people in general to abjection (loathed, expelled, rejected and found to be most horrid). Here we see he is forced to "both insist on the otherness of strangers and simultaneously, if unconsciously, recognise the necessity of their acceptance for the purpose of self-identification" (Palmer & Gillard, 2004, p. 75). In doing so, Jeff dissociates himself from those 'others' who he perceives as being in much more 'risky' predicaments than him, positioning himself within less 'risky' discourses. Thus, his abjection of Indigenous people and the desire not to be like "*them*" becomes part of

forming and self-regulating his ‘at-risk’ identity. I was surprised at Jeff’s (YAP2) comment as during the session he had stayed almost attached to MC’s side, which I assumed may have been due to their friendship. It now seems clear that this may have been for reasons other than friendship. Perhaps it was the power and protection that came from aligning with the *top dog* of the group (MC). Jeff’s feelings about Indigenous people ‘self-fulfilling’ the ‘at-risk’ label was emphasised again in the short song<sup>65</sup> he had composed for me as part of this study<sup>66</sup>. The following lines drive home the concept of ‘black = risk’ in his eyes:

*But those teachers hating on me and I always get the wrap  
And making me feel like I’m black....*

The line *making me feel like I am black*, (just as his previous comment about the child), alludes to a history of pre-existing identity markers that have been attached to the Indigenous subject. That being forced to feel *black* implies a whole range of unsaid ‘risky’ connotations – someone who is a trouble maker at school, ‘at-risk’ of failing at school, a second rate citizen. Yet Jeff contradicts his prior negative implications of being *black* (from his previous comment about all young Indigenous people growing up to be criminals) by specifically emphasising the unfair treatment of *black* youth by teachers. This makes me wonder if his previous comment about the child was born from racist beliefs or from his understanding of the impacts of moral panics around Indigenous youth - created and perpetuated in the media (Cohen, 1972; Hickey-Moody, 2013; Kelly, P., 2001). Perhaps he actually liked MC, but understood (through the media, family beliefs, and first hand witnessing of perceived unfair treatment of Indigenous youth by teachers) that being Indigenous means you are inextricably connected to risk whether you want to be or not - that the only way the system understands Indigenous youth is through deficit discourses – which is then hard to combat and becomes self-fulfilling.

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<sup>65</sup> This was part of the activities that I had instigated (see Chapter 4 on participant observation) where the young boys were asked to choose or compose a song that best described them and their life at this time of the program.

<sup>66</sup> It was not written down by Jeff, just told to me in a conversation with him towards the end of the program. Jeff expressed he had difficulty with/hated reading and writing which is why he preferred to verbalise the lyrics for me.

## *Resisting 'Risky' Recognitions?*

The connection of being Indigenous and being 'at-risk' was further emphasised by John (YAP2, 14), (who identified as Maori and closely associated his identity with the Indigenous identities of MC and Scott), in his choice of a song written by Flabba, Babba, Wabba, Jabba, Nyoongah, called *Out Da Front*<sup>67</sup>. His understanding though was not expressed in distaste about Indigenous culture (as Jeff's comment "*filthy dumb cunts*" implies) but through firsthand experience of being, as he says, *black* and seen in certain unrealistic, untruthful, ways as a person who belongs to a *black* culture. The following is a section that he particularly liked from the chosen song, explaining to me while laughing, that this is how 'white people saw black people':

*Find me out the front,  
Puffin on a bud man,  
Fuck these white cunts ay!  
I'm thinkin of getting mugged,  
Talkin shit, getting bashed cause I'm tipsy,  
Gotta call me uncle big Merv to come get me.*

*You can find me out the front, fighting every cunt,  
Off my head and half drunk,  
I lit the cigarette butts,  
I never went to school so I can't talk much,  
But please white fella spare a dollar for the bus!*

*When I roll up to your house I'm only wearing one shoe,  
Leave a couple hours later, somehow I got two,  
It's like every single day I'm getting blazed off the buds,  
Then I'm stealing M&M's from the pub and getting busted,  
Man then nothing changes call my niece up,  
Tell her I'm getting horny and I need a good FUCK  
At Mirrabooka, sniffin glue and getting caught and locked up by the pigs,*

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<sup>67</sup> This song was released online via Youtube. '*Out Da Front*' is a parody of '*In Da Club*', a hip hop song performed by American rapper 50 Cent from his commercial debut album, '*Get Rich or Die Trying*'. The music video opens with a scene in which an Aboriginal [sic] is shown awakening from a cardboard bed covered with newspapers. The video then changes to two [Indigenous] men being chased by police, while attempting to hijack a black Mercedes Benz. After outrunning them, they are shown standing in front of a parked vehicle situated in an alley. They then tackle an Asian child to the ground, before throwing punches to his face, and taking his money. This is later used in exchange for objects referenced in the lyrics' (Genius, 2013).

*let me go I gotta get home with 14 kids! 9 sisters, 12 cousins and I'm fucking the lot.*

The group had laughed when the song was played through John's phone, and as the laughter died down MC (YAP2) had said quietly "he meant it to be sarcastic like and stuff, but it's kinda sad hey? People reckon that shit is true". Noble (2009) suggests "recognition has become a central category in our understanding of both questions around identity, particularly in relation to ethnicity and gender, fundamental to the processes of interpellation that call us into being" (p. 878). Recognition involves our relationship with ourselves and our relationship with 'others' – in the context of John's and MC's comments, this refers to the ways they perceive that the majority of society recognises them (and in earlier comments, the way MC recognises himself through discourses of Indigeneity and risk).

The subject of self-recognition has been explored by numerous researchers (such as Fanon, 1967; Hegel, 1977; Honneth, 1996; Zahar, 1976) yet as Noble argues, "philosophical discussions of recognition inadequately deal with the *messiness* of everyday encounters, the plurality of forms of recognition and the practical orientations in social space they allow" (p. 879). A space where subjectivities are bound or 'frozen' moments, or snap shots of recognition are created and analysed/examined by researchers, where they take "a snapshot from a period of intense change and vulnerability and [make] it into the reified category of resistant or alienated 'youth identities'.." – essentialising youth (p. 887). Thus, Noble (2009) in his work with young Australian Arabic men, argues for a "situated politics of recognition" (p. 884) which takes into account that identities can be recognised in a number of everyday contexts and not reduced to one dimension (Andersson, 2000). Noble speaks of "*myth*interpellation, a recognition" (p. 884) where young people such as John and MC 'feel compelled to represent', to be interpellated as *only* Indigenous (or Maori as in the case of some of the YAP2 boys); eliding a sense of individualism. John's song choice and comments around it, emphasise the notion that the young people/Indigenous people were not really being 'seen' for who they were as

individuals, but instead seen as drug taking, uneducated criminals who lived in poverty and are engaged in incestual acts. John's resistance (and MC's) to being recognised in what they saw as inaccurate ways by society is complicated through their sharing of lived experiences that involve drug and alcohol consumption, and getting into trouble with the police (as presented later in this chapter). This contradiction alludes to Noble's idea of *myth*interpellation where despite their articulations of resistance, their stories show evidence that they actually do (at times) fulfil a recognition type – 'at-risk' Indigenous youth.

Moving away from a specific focus on Indigeneity and risk, but keeping in line with notions of attempts to resist the label, was the view expressed by numerous participants in YAP1 and YAP2 that their 'at-risk' identities were just a phase they were going through:

It is a teenager thing, they [police] like to pick on the teenagers. They don't like us. Like the security guards [in the mall], they don't like teenagers either, like he is trying to get me kicked out of me job. He thinks because I'm a trolley boy and I am young I'm gonna do something bad....he has got me in a category. Just like the police. Sometimes I respect them sometimes not. But one day it will be different... (Scott YAP2, 14)

Donny: I think I'd be happy to die from smoking. I would say to younger people don't smoke or smoke pot cause you get addicted to it though. I smoke it [pot] every day. It is so easy getting drugs...just a matter of knocking on a door.

Rachael: Will you ever stop?

Donny: When I am eighteen, I'll stop smoking and doing pot cause then you get in real trouble. Maybe also when I get a job cause there aint no way I'm turning up to work stoned. (Donny YAP1, 15)

I'm going to leave in Year 11 and I'm going to get a good job and keep out of trouble...(MC YAP2, 15)

Through the young people's "... 'situated vocabularies' of risk and everyday risk-taking behaviour" above, we can see that these boys are risk managers rather than naïve risk

takers (Mitchell, Crawshaw, Bunton, & Green, 2001, p. 217). This finding aligns with notions of the regulated self (Foucault, 1977; Kelly, P., 1998); but, in the case of these boys, it was in terms of regulating their timing and degrees of 'riskiness'. For example, Donny takes responsibility for his 'risky' pot smoking, and perceives himself as managing this addiction. He understands it is detrimental to his health, as he warns others not to do it, but he continues to do so in the belief that he is in control of the substance, not the other way around. Scott, on the other hand, is quite aware of the labels he attracts just because he is a teenager. He also articulates his understanding of what certain labels do in connection with each other – being a teenager, a trolley person and male places you in a particularly 'risky', albeit amorphous, category. Scott views this negative categorising as a phase, one that is regulated by age – once he stops being a teenager things will change, unlike Donny who sees his phase as ending once he decides it needs to end, that is, when he is 18 or gets a job he will become a 'good neoliberal' subject and take work seriously (like MC above).

This discussion has highlighted a number of ways the young people in the study understand the label 'at-risk'. Through forms of agency and resistance these young people connected personally in some sense to the label. Some young people distanced themselves from the label through their utterances, while others connected to its discourse/regime by embodying themselves within the label – they perceived themselves as living with and through the label. There was a sense of some control over their 'riskiness', that it was a 'risky' phase, one that had enabling and constraining effects, and one that would eventually see them turn out as 'good' subjects (as further demonstrated below). It was important that I initially explored what the young people understood as someone being 'at-risk' so I could further examine the young people's perceptions of the programs (YAP1 and YAP2). The following section provides evidence of how the young people twist the 'at-risk' discourse, engage in edgework, and perform differently in different contexts.

## Jump on Board the 'Risky' Fun Ride

### *Why Are You Here?*

In each of the programs the young people were asked why they believed they were involved in the group sessions and what they thought the program was about. The predominant response from the participants in YAP1 and YAP2 related to inappropriate behaviour at school. For example:

Rachael: Why do you think the school had you come here?

Ben: Because I have so many risks. Because I am naughty at school

Rachael: What do you mean by risks?

Ben: Like warnings like I'm taking risks to get into trouble and they keep them all on the computer. The teachers say this.

Rachael: Why do you reckon that is?

Ben: The teachers don't really like the Kiwi people they are racist... (Ben YAP2, 13)

Here the teachers/school are seen to use the word risk to describe the perceived inappropriate behaviours of certain youth/students. The *risk* demerit system used in the high school the YAP2 boys were enrolled allowed the teachers to decide what behaviour they felt was inappropriate. Once a *risk* was allocated to a young person it was recorded in a computer program to which all teachers had access. If the young person reached a certain amount of *risks* then they could be suspended. This practice seems particularly problematic as it reifies risk and becomes a recognisable 'thing' among students and teachers that serves to constitute YAP2 as a result of 'demerit points' rather than as a support and redirection place – which is confusing for the boys as they are actually rewarded for misbehaviour, rather than being alerted to the idea of risk as something that could have negative consequences for them. Ben takes responsibility for his risk-taking in school yet, at the same time, believes he receives so many *risks* because the teachers do not accept his cultural background.

Scott sees truancy as the main cause for his participation in the YAP, although he had stated earlier in a group discussion that he was asked by the police to be a mentor in the program:

I thought it was because of my attendance at school, because I hardly go to school. Like last term and usually if I go over 85% I get Abstudy money. I haven't really got any records at the cops because my mum's mate works there. (Scott YAP2, 14)

This comment shows that Scott is well aware of the connection between certain risk-taking he engages in, his education and access to this program. He also highlights his awareness of the ways in which youth are governed by commenting on welfare processes – money from the government given to young Indigenous people who remain in and regularly attend school. Donny believes he is in the YAP because:

My attitude...it has gotten worse. I had a bad attitude at school. I didn't use to do my work at school... (Donny YAP1, 15)

This is another example of how the young people take responsibility for their 'risky' situations, with Donny attributing his "*bad attitude*" as a cause of him being included in a program labelled '*Youth at-Risk*'. He offers that his lack of school work was a thing of the past, which suggests he may have re-engaged to a degree or that he has changed (or 'transformed' using youth worker speak).

In fact, most of the young boys seemed to suggest that their 'risky' behaviour in schools was the factor in their access, apart from one, who had explained:

I only got told yesterday I was coming here instead of school... (Ben YAP2, 13)

Ben's comment emphasises access to the program was not a choice for some (as discussed in the previous two chapters), even though a number of the youth workers from each YAP

described the process of participation as voluntary. The girls in YAP1 tended to suggest it was their choice to come to the program – they explained to me they did muck up in class, but ultimately they decided to come along and check the program out. Melinda (YAP1) hints at notions of depression as being a factor to her engagement in the program, as well as her ‘risky’ behaviour at school.

Mucking around at school...being too sad... (Melinda YAP1, 15)

Interestingly, this young girl had been involved in the program before I had arrived and she had engaged in numerous sessions using the RAP handbook (which focused on depression) which raised the question as to whether she felt this was because of the way the program had associated young ‘risky’ girl identities with depression, and whether her response would have been completely different if I had interviewed her at the start of the program.

Sometimes access to YAP2 caused confusion in participants:

I don’t know why I am here...I don’t do any drugs... I haven’t been that bad to really be with police. I’m only bad at school... (Chris YAP2, 13)

Chris appeared to understand YAP2 as being a program for young people who engaged in ‘risky’ criminal behaviour (YAP2 focuses on prior criminal activity as a prerequisite for access to the program) which left him confused as to why he was even told to participate in it. He does, however, allude to engaging in risk-taking at school. Here the notion of varying degrees of risk arises again (as revealed in the previous chapter about the youth workers’ understandings of risk) and Chris’s desire to be recognised through the variation – distancing himself from the perceived ‘real riskiness’ of the other members of the YAP. Yet naming himself as “*bad*” at school (just as in Donny’s earlier comment, “*bad attitude*”) suggests he does understand that his behaviour and/or attitude in a schooling context impacts on how he is rendered knowable as an unacceptable student (Youdell, 2006a) – where bad = risk.

The above comments highlight how processes of self play out in socially situated contexts (such as schools). The young people's comments suggest that they are recognised discursively (by teachers/schools and youth workers) as being 'at-risk', that they themselves take up voluntarily or involuntarily the label to varying degrees, which, in Butler's (2006) terms, interpellates them as a threat to social order in their classrooms and, in turn, society (Kelly, P., 1998). Being *seen* as a threat validates processes that govern youth in certain ways and validates programs that reinforce these processes as being necessary to 'help' these 'at-risk' youth become worthwhile citizens (Foucault, 1991; Hickey-Moody, 2013; Kelly, P., 1998). This section showed how the young people do not recognise themselves as 'at-risk' subjects according to government definitions – they are just mucking around at school – and it raises a tension between how certain youth workers (such as Shirley in YAP1) understood that the young people have a choice to come to the YAPs while some of the young people understood their attendance as a requirement. Thus, from the beginning, the young people recognise that self-regulation of 'risky' behaviours (mucking up, bad attitudes, taking drugs, committing crimes) and self-management of mental health issues will most likely be an aspect of each program – which can result in them 'performing back' self-regulating practices - as I discuss further in the next two sections.

### *What is the Program About?*

The young people from both YAP1 and YAP2 were asked in the initial observations and group discussions during sessions (that I ran, in the youth workers' presence) what they believed the program was going to be about. There were a variety of responses ranging from "getting free food" (all young participants mentioned this) to hanging out with "cool people" (a number of the YAP 1 and 2 boys mention this), as the following comments show:

Don't know what it is about but I think it's pretty good cause of all the activities and stuff... (Jeff YAP2, 14)

Fun and meeting more people... (Chris YAP2, 13)

I don't know...have some fun? (Ben YAP2, 13)

It's better than school and you get away from the mean teachers. (Lisa, YAP1, 13)

It's just relaxing and you get a day off during the week from getting into trouble. It's just fun to hang around other people who feel the same. (Robbie YAP1, 14)

Meet new friends, meeting chicks [when they do combined activity days] is also a bonus. (Donny YAP1, 15)

I just like to come here cause it gets me out of class... (Jeff YAP2, 14)

The notion of the programs being fun was a common theme through the conversations with the young people. As discussed in Chapters 3, 5 and 6, the idea of 'fun' is key to engaging young people in community-based programs, where the 'fun' activities are seen as healthy – as opposed to the 'fun' that is seen as a contributing factor to youth crime/juvenile delinquency (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008a, Cohen, 1955; Ferdinand, 1996) - the latter aligning with the criminal edgework the young people in my study engage in outside, and retell inside, of the program. Although the young people, myself and the youth workers from the YAPs clearly enjoyed the 'fun activities' (white water rafting, rock climbing, music lessons and playing sport), the underlying aims of 'having fun' were to encourage young people to self-regulate their 'risky' behaviours so they could return to school as more acceptable students who could now reach their potential – an instrumentalist approach (Zyngier, 2011) cloaked by fun activities. Similarly getting out of school was another plus for the young people. Here lies an enabling effect of being 'at-risk' - the chance to get a day off school each week to do something fun and rewarding. However, this enabling aspect of 'getting out of school' is simultaneously constraining as access to such a program reinforces to teachers/schools, peers at school, the young people's families and the young people themselves, that they

are 'at-risk' (trouble, trouble makers, bad), they do 'muck around' at school, and they need to be removed and governed.

The use of these draw cards (fun and not going to school) by the youth workers become complicated and confusing. A main aim of the programs was to retain young people in educational pathways (reduce truancy). All the young people were privy to this aim as it was explained to them from the outset that a requirement for weekly access to the YAP sessions was that they attended school for most of the week. So, on one hand, their risky behaviour is the reason they gain access - the 'riskier' you are the more likely you are to gain access to the fun program that gets you out of school (risk=rewards). On the other hand, to be able to continue to take advantage of the drawcards the young people were required to self-regulate their 'risky' behaviour (risk=no rewards/required change). Then, if you are a boy, some of your 'risky' behaviour within the fun activities in the programs is accepted by the youth workers as 'boys just being boys' and often ended up with everyone laughing (risk=rewards). While if you are a girl and 'muck up' in the fun activities in the programs you are 'come down on hard' by youth workers, and understood as difficult to work with (risk=no rewards/requiring discipline). The problem with this type of motivation (fun and getting out of school) is that it reinforces the idea that school is not a rewarding a place to be. Furthermore, although this type of motivation works well for programs such as YAP1 (which runs weekly throughout the whole school year), for most community-based (arts/sports) programs which attract limited funding (projectisation – quick fix programs; Brunila, 2013) and can provide only short term programs (like YAP2 that only lasted 6-8 weeks) - what happens with the young people and their schooling when the programs stop? The next section analyses the young people's perceptions of the 'benefits' of the programs to elaborate on how the YAPs can be viewed as a tool of (neoliberal) governance.

### *What Will You Take Away From This?*

The young people were asked throughout the observations what they believed they would gain, or had taken away already, from the programs. All the boys discussed the fun they had in the program, while the girls talked positively about the music skills they had learnt. Other responses varied, however a common theme was that the programs changed them in some way. The following comments are examples from the YAP2 boys:

To keep you out of trouble...but not sure what I'm gonna get out of it yet really. (MC YAP2, 15)

They [police youth workers] are here to help me be better behaved at school. (Chris YAP2, 13)

Going back to school and getting back on track and stuff like that. I do want that but I just want the teachers to get used to that I want to be there and just give me a break. (Scott YAP2, 14)

These YAP2 boys focus on their behaviour as solutions to avoid being 'at-risk' (just as they understood their behaviours were the cause), yet Scott (YAP2) points out that 'risky' labels can stick (Youdell, 2006a) when he talks about wanting the teachers to understand that he has changed (as elaborated in the crossing 'risky' lines theme below), and that the youth workers were helping them to 'get back on track' (Scott) and self-regulate these 'risky' behaviours. The main aim of YAP2 was to alter the negative perceptions the boys may have held about the police in general, the secondary aim was to encourage regular attendance at school (as with YAP1). The YAP2 youth workers suggested that the program was not about changing the young peoples' risky behaviours in, and attitudes towards, school - despite the boys appearing to understand the program as doing just that. The focus of YAP2 was on building trust with the young people in an attempt to help them from going down the 'wrong track' (criminal-wise). However (as discussed in Chapter 5), the YAP2 program funding body was aimed at programs that connected with young 'risky' people, educational institutions and community organisations. So perhaps the stated aim of retaining young 'risky' people at school was one to satisfy the perceived needs of the schooling administration and the funding body. Indeed, reports, such as *NSW*

*Police Service Youth Policy Statement* (2005) that informed/shaped the program, connect educational difficulties/early school leaving to juvenile delinquency. Whatever the case may be, the YAP2 program directly and indirectly reinforced to the boys that they need to engage in self-regulation to ‘succeed’ (in regard to neoliberal-based funding outcomes) in the program and in their future lives (Hickey-Moody, 2013; Kelly, P., 1998). Moreover, Scott’s comment above, where he states *get “back on track”* demonstrates that some participants were well aware of the notion of one linear transition to adulthood - in this case, that he is ‘at-risk’ of failing unless this program (and the youth workers) help him get back on the preferred educational pathway (Kelly, P., 1998; te Riele, 2006; Wyn, 2007).

Both the boys and girls from YAP1 commented in similar ways to the YAP2 boys:

I didn’t use to do my work at school but now I kinda feel like doing work now. It’s kinda changed my attitude to school. (Sarah YAP1, 15)

I reckon responsibility about my actions. (Donny YAP1, 15)

I don’t really know because I haven’t been here for very long but probably respect people a lot more...before I used to have a bit of an attitude and I guess I was a bit shy before. I have to treat people the way I want to be treated. (Robbie YAP1, 14)

This program makes me happier and more sensible and I like stirring George (YAP1) and I never would have done something like tennis or this music. I can’t afford to do some of this stuff. (Paul YAP1, 14)

These comments from the young people (as with the previous comments), emphasise that they had some understanding that (formal) ‘success’ (within the neoliberal-based funding program outcomes) was only possible if they realised the causes of their ‘risky’ behaviour and that management of such behaviour was their responsibility. This self-blame, self-acceptance and recognition was necessary if they were to become knowable as an

‘acceptable’ student (Youdell, 2006a). I pause here to establish that I understand the benefits and the necessity of an individual taking some responsibility for their ‘risky’ actions. This is *not* in debate here. What becomes problematic though is that by teachers, youth workers, and young people (students), accepting youth are responsible and managers of their ‘risky’ situations, this acceptance validates processes of (neoliberal) governance over youth and negates the roles that institutions play in constituting certain groups of young people as ‘at-risk’. Butler’s (2004) work on performativity is useful in understanding how the young people ‘take up’ and accept their risky behaviours as being pivotal to their ‘risky’ situations – they are ‘risky’ subjects because they have been designated as such by educational institutions and governing bodies, and need to perform as such. However, this apparent accepting responsibility by the young people may also be viewed as *performing back* to the youth workers and I what they believe we want to hear, to ‘belong’ to the program peer group (as everyone else was sharing similar narratives of ‘self-improvement’) – to be recognised as someone who has the potential to be a ‘good neoliberal subject’. Were they, in a sense, playing the system?

Another common response among the YAP1 boys (that could be understood through theories of performativity and governmentality) was in regard to employment. A strong philosophy pushed through YAP1 by youth workers was that gaining part-time employment is a way of combating the perceived negative impacts of schools constituting the boys as impossible learners through discursive performatives (Youdell, 2006a). This instrumentalist approach is part of the program’s solution for keeping the boys ‘on track’ (Zyngier, 2011). The following comment was common among the boys in YAP1:

I wouldn’t have a job if I didn’t come here. Cause no one would ever give me a chance and George (YAP1) and Shirley (YAP1) helped me. (Paul YAP1, 14)

The boys who had gained employment with assistance of YAP1 youth workers projected a sense of being proud and feeling empowered - which they credit to the youth workers. This push to gain employment by the youth workers aligns with neoliberal rationalities.

For instance, the neoliberal ways in which the problem of youth unemployment is psychologised, ‘at-risk’ subjects are identified through factors of risk which have been established through expert knowledges of the *truths* of youth and ‘risky youth’ must be governed or fixed. This identification renders the subject as an ‘enterprise’ (Kelly, P., 2006b, p. 18; O’Malley, 1992; Rose, 1996) - a ‘risky’ subject who is offered opportunities to change (in youth ‘at-risk’ programs). The subject is compelled to conduct themselves in certain ‘non-risky’ ways (as this is their responsibility, despite what relational factors brought about their ‘risky’ situations) and must engage in activities that ‘fix’ their ‘risky’ identities in order to render themselves employable. Yet again, the young people’s talk around ‘I am a good employee subject’ begs the question – to what extent is this talk a form of agency within the boundaries of a program, that is, are they *performing back* preferred identities? Take this conversation for instance:

Robbie (YAP1): My attitude’s changed and I volunteer for things, well I am not as stupid as I was, I don’t drink like Donny does and I don’t smoke bongos and no matter what, I will always have a job. I have had a job since I have been old enough to have one.

Donny (YAP1): Bullshit that’s why you argued with your mum for three hours so you could get out of work.

Robbie shows me he is a good neoliberal economic subject by professing he has, and always will, have a job, while simultaneously distancing himself from his ‘risky’ stepbrother Donny. Donny on the other hand (who often retold his ‘risky’ life stories to the group and I) catches Robbie’s comment and contradicts it, implying Robbie’s talk is a performance for my benefit – that he understood what discursive performatives were necessary for him to be viewed in ways other than ‘at-risk’. If the dialogue about changing and self-improvement were about performing back ideal, preferred identities, then these young men understood how to ‘play the system’ – they had agency and they could choose to engage or disengage with different identities (Evans, 2007). Consistent with Youdell (2003), I draw on Butler’s (1997) adaptation of performative interpellation, where a subject has linguistic agency, to make sense of the agency seen in the young people *performing back*. Youdell contends the “performatively interpellated [‘at-risk’] subject is simultaneously enabled and constrained through [risk] discourse[s]” (p. 7) but has

linguistic agency. This is evident in Robbie and Donny's comment above where Robbie (for instance, who has been performatively interpellated by schooling and access to the YAPI program) uses linguistic agency to offer an alternative identity in his discussion with me (that he has engaged in self-improvement when he says "*I am not as stupid as I was*"). His agency is temporary, though, as his step brother counteracts it by debunking his 'new' good neoliberal economic identity and reinforcing that this type of agency is not one where the "sovereign subject" can exert his will, but instead it is agency which is a "derivative - an effect of discursive power" (Youdell, 2003, p. 7).

In problematising and analysing the dialogue of the young people, I am not discounting the benefits for the young people, such as the potential for gaining a constructive sense of self-respect, self-worth and self-confidence. However, neoliberal rationalities that shape youth 'at-risk' programs use these self-improvement activities as another form of self-regulation. Similarly, if the youth workers then report in their statement of outcomes (which go back to neoliberal governing funding bodies) that the young people did gain self-respect, self-worth and self-confidence it validates the "*sophisticated* attempts to differentiate among Youth(ful) populations, via the identification of Risk(y) behaviours and dispositions", that can jeopardise (place at-risk) the successful transition to the preferred adulthood (Kelly, P., 2000b, p. 489 original emphasis). Moreover, like Roth and Brookes-Gunn (2003), I question whether improving young people's perceptions of themselves and/or transforming their 'risky' identities (and whether it occurred or not) through spaces created via arts/sports approaches alone, are enough to increase retention at school when the young people are placed back into unwelcoming environments that *have not* changed or transformed. This next section addresses the question I pose here and provides space for the young people's narratives about school to unfold and be explored.

## **'Risky' Education: '...you never get back to the line, just can't cross back, to get back to that place where it is ok....'**

A strong theme across both YAP1 and YAP2 (and consistently in a number of the other YAPs) is that the young people involved in the programs were highly aware they did not 'fit into' or were 'not good enough' for 'traditional schooling' and that teachers were just waiting for them to fail and prove the label/stereotype to be correct. The discussion below shows how the boys' narratives of their interactions with teachers begin to uncover the discursive masculine performatives of the boys – aggression, challenging teachers' comments, standing up for themselves and 'mucking up in class' and the combination of feminine and masculine performatives the girls take up – avoiding peers who are 'risky', challenging teachers and fighting (the bad-girl femininity; Messerschmidt, 2004). Using Butler and Foucault, I show how this performative constitutes them in schooling discourses as unacceptable students and impossible learners (Youdell, 2006a). The following comment by Scott (YAP2, 14) highlights this point:

Rachael: Can I ask you about school now? What is your first thought of school?

Scott (YAP2): What are they going to get me into trouble for today? I go to school and I get suspended or I get blamed for this and that. Sometimes I think it's cause my mum is a DoCs [Department of Community Services] worker, it's like they want you to get in trouble so it's her fault and she loses her job because she is probably making five times as much as them anyway. I reckon I walk in and they think I don't want to learn and that I'm gonna muck up. I walked in there yesterday, it was the first time in about two weeks. I couldn't be bothered. The first thing he [the Deputy Principal] said was, 'What are you gonna do wrong today?' I was standing in front of the heater cause I was so cold. He said, 'Are you coming to class or are you just gonna muck up and do nothing or go to sleep?' ....The Deputy Principal, I swear to god, he just follows me around like he wants to get me into trouble and kick me out.

Rachael: So do you think that in the beginning you did any of the things the teachers accused you of doing?

Scott: Yeah I did, but then I was just categorised, it's like you got a label on ya, like he is the naughty kid, let's get him in trouble today. Like they are out to get me. The principal is alright but the Deputy is just an idiot, they think they know what they're talking about but they don't and when the teacher talks to them they believe the teacher over you because they are adults and they are gonna tell the truth and I'm a teenager so I must be lying.

Half the time they are lying though. If they respected me I'd probably respect them more, if they actually gave me a bit of a chance and stuff like that. But if they are going to treat me like shit I'm going to treat them like shit. You gotta give something to get something back you know.

Here Scott clearly articulates his experiences of school as being challenging before he even sets foot in the classroom. He perceives the teachers to be against him no matter what he does, and that they have very low expectations of him to learn, but high expectations of him to engage in risk-taking. Scott feels he was constantly under surveillance by teachers and the Deputy, not because he was engaging in 'risky' behaviours, but because he had misbehaved in the past and they were waiting and expecting him to do so again in the future. This pressure drove him to truancy. Tait's earlier work on 'at-risk' youth highlights that "the notion of 'risk' has become interwoven into the fabric of the disciplinary school, such that young people can now be measured against a graded, cumulative, and importantly, a calculable set of 'normal' risks - both by their age category, and by the severity of the risk involved" (1993, p. 2). For the young people in my study being 'at-risk' appears to have a cyclic nature. For example, Scott's (YAP2) above comments form an image of a young person who perhaps falls into set identity markers formulated by research and taken up by policy makers to identify youth 'at-risk'<sup>68</sup>. The young person then perhaps does something inappropriate, fulfils the prophecy of being 'at-risk' and is treated as such within institutions. The young person then feels unable to be *seen* by teachers in ways other than being 'at-risk', so they resist the label; however they resist it in ways that actually reinforce the label. So, yet again, they fall into the set identity markers of being 'at-risk' and are repeatedly and continually treated as such. However, the enabling twist in fulfilling this 'at-risk' identity becomes evident when they are understood as being 'cool' in their peer's eyes and find amusement (i.e., get a kick or a buzz) out of being seen as 'risky', as shown later in this chapter.

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<sup>68</sup> For example, broader markers such as socioeconomic status, gender, culture and localised examples such as challenging behaviours at school and truancy.

The feeling of being categorised or labelled (as Scott suggests above) and unfairly treated by teachers is echoed in the other participants' (girls and boys) comments about schooling:

Yeah once I said to him [the teacher] that there was a scratch on the back wall and he instantly sent me to the principal and told him I did it. I was just telling him about it and I didn't do it...He sends you to C12 [the principal's office] for anything, you try and reason with him but he just won't listen, he like holds grudges against us. (Sarah, YAP1, 15)

Ben: The teachers don't like me and Damian, my older brother, because we stick up for ourselves because we don't let people walk over us and don't like us, so we keep getting told we are on risks...but once you done one thing it's really hard to come back. They tell each other... all the other teachers.

Rachael: So part of the issue is that the school or teachers don't give you a chance?

Ben: Yes and nothing I can do to change it. I'm here cause of the risks and because I got suspended because everyone wants to fight me and Damian and the teachers keep kicking me out of class and won't let me go to class. This kid wants to fight me, I don't want to fight him, but I get kicked out and he gets to stay in class...he doesn't come here or nothing...no risks. (Ben, YAP2, 13)

Ben (YAP2) questions why he is the only party to get 'risks' when another child supposedly threatened to fight him. This comment echoes Youdell's (2010) discussion of discursive performatives being deployed through silences or absences in addressing events that happen within schools – by Ben believing the school refused to address the other young person's behaviour, the school reinforces in Ben's eyes (and perhaps his peers and other teachers) that he *is* a 'risky' subject that needs to be dealt with. Sarah's (YAP1) comment above was similar to those of the boys' in YAP2 and representative of other girls' stories in YAP1. Each young person had a story that related to the teachers not respecting them or 'giving them a fair chance'. There appears to be a shared understanding (among the young people) that once a young person has been constituted as being an unacceptable student within schooling discourses there becomes an expectation or assumption by teachers that the young person will probably misbehave, or be the instigator of certain inappropriate actions, in the future. In other words, these young

people are only rendered knowable as impossible learner/unacceptable student through schooling discourses (Youdell, 2006a) – and trying to break the constitution of being an ‘at-risk’ subject is next to impossible for some. That is, the label sticks, regardless of (perceived or real) changes in the young person’s attitudes or practices and regardless of the current circumstances surrounding the situation at hand.

This expectation of the teachers that these young people will continually fail/muck up, and the engagement of the young people in voluntary risk-taking, is an example of how subjects self-fulfil labels. The school discursively names the young person ‘at-risk’ through a mobilisation of diverse techniques such as the ‘risk demerit system’, identification via ‘risky’ markers that are validated by policy, and placing them in ‘at-risk’ programs. The young people understand they are ‘different’ and ‘trouble’ through their perceived unfair treatment by teachers/school administration which limits agency and restricts them to only being known as ‘at-risk’ (trouble) – so they take up ‘risky’ identities and fulfil the label (Youdell, 2006a). I argue that within the limited/restricted space they do have agency (not just linguistic) (Butler, 2004; Evans, 2007) where their voluntary risk-taking (i.e. throwing things in class, wagging and swearing at teachers, that can end in suspension or expulsion) – that is, their engagement in edgework (Lyng, 2005) - can also be understood as a way of feeling in control within an environment where they are constrained and controlled (rendered powerless) through neoliberal rationalities that work within the schooling context. Yet even though this agency and engagement in edgework provides opportunities to resist the institutional norms of the school and society, these young people cannot operate ‘successfully’ within them – this is an ironic twist to ‘riskiness’ when the young people attempt to twist the ‘at-risk’ label. I will provide more evidence for this argument as the data in this chapter unfolds.

MC (YAP2, 15), was the only one to show a differentiation between school as a system and the teachers. MC understands school itself as being ‘alright’, he has his friends there

and gets to do sports, but he understands the teachers as being the cause of his angst at school:

MC: School is alright, it's just the teachers. They are annoying. Like they tell me to do my work like so I done my work and then, like, just keep whinging about me, especially the lady teachers...they, like, target me...they reckon I'm, like, a bad kinda person...they think I'm a little bastard cause I muck up at school sometimes. (MC YAP2, 15)

His description of teachers thinking he was a “*bad kinda person*” moves away from the descriptive terms the other boys used like ‘dumb’, ‘stupid’ or ‘loser’ and centres on a more personal all-encompassing word - it was not that he was a bad student, or bad at certain academic aspects - he believed they saw him as a bad person in general. Consistent with Gillborn and Youdell’s (2000) research on how “institutional discourses of ability and race coalesced to exclude African-Caribbean students from educational opportunities” (Youdell, 2003, p. 9), where they offer an understanding of how race becomes a marker, MC’s comment (and those made by Jeff and MC in the earlier sections) allude to a racial identification of his ‘riskiness’. MC has been performatively interpellated as an ‘at-risk’ subject through various contexts in his life (school, court, the YAP; Butler, 2004). So when MC labels himself a “*bad kinda person*” or ‘at-risk’ because he is black (earlier on), and Jeff’s earlier racist comment claiming that all Indigenous people are “*filthy dumb cunts*”, we can see that “these names are not understood as descriptive. Rather, the deployment of these names is taken as a moment in the constitution both of race identities and individual subjects within these terms” (Youdell, 2003, p. 10). Thus, MC understands himself as a bad person, and ‘at-risk’ because he is black – this is how he has been performatively interpellated through media, structures of governance, welfare and educational systems – where race is understood as a “discrete and authentic marker of [risky] identity” (Youdell, p. 10).

In John’s (YAP2, 14) comment below, he crystallised his disappointment and distain about teachers thinking they “*know*” him and he explains why he acts in ‘risky’ ways:

I don't like any of them [teachers]. Nobody. I'll kill them all. Every time I go in class it's shit. I'll kill them all. Yeah I hate them before I even go in the classroom cause they hate me...they reckon I'm trouble...I'll give them trouble. (John YAP2, 14)

Although John's comment is alarming and inappropriate, it is evident that for this young man the perception that school has failed him is strong – strong enough to want to “*kill*” someone. This was said in front of the youth workers who appeared to take this comment as just an expression of his anger towards schooling, not a direct (actual) threat a particular teacher/s. John had also discussed in other conversations he was unhappy with his life and used alcohol and drugs to escape from thinking about it (I return to this point later in this chapter). John's comment “*they reckon I'm trouble...I'll give them trouble*” and Scott's (YAP2) earlier comment that “*if they are going to treat me like shit I'm going to treat them like shit*” are examples of how the young people can be understood as using the label back in the teachers' (or schools') faces. That is, how the young boys are resisting institutional norms, yet (as we see again) cannot operate ‘successfully’ within them – in effect self-fulfilling the ‘trouble’ label. In fact, all the young people interviewed believed most of the teachers were against them and that despite their attempts to “...‘renegotiate risk identities’ they continually ran into barriers within the dominant discourse that prevent[ed] trying on new ways of being” (Silverstein Touzard, 2010, p. 103).

While on a bus trip with the YAP2 boys one of the police youth workers instigated a conversation about school experiences. My notes recorded in my journal that day show the main points in the boys' conversations:

...when you get to school and ‘you cross that line’, or if the teacher pushes you and ‘you cross that line’ it is so hard to come back across. Once you do something in the morning then the teachers ‘bitch about you’ to the other teachers (with particular emphasis on female teachers) and the expectation of teachers thereafter is that you will automatically be on the ‘wrong side of the line’. The teachers' attitudes and the way they ‘come at you’ in the classroom is already aggressive ‘so you never get back to the line, just can't cross back, to get back to that place where it is ok at school and you are

right for the day...so you are gone'. Thereafter, you never get a second chance so once you have crossed that line a couple of times then that's it with teachers.

These types of accounts and the comments made earlier by the participants in both YAP's lend "credence to the theory that the negative perceptions and behaviours of adults contribute to young people's sense of alienation, encouraging the young people to respond with negative behaviour themselves" (Neary et al., 2013, p. 121) and in turn making them feel like they are not seen for who they believe they really are. That is, the idea that one or two 'risky' encounters at the beginning of the school day (or even the week) can define a young person as *only* knowable through 'at-risk' identities that need to be treated with intervention, discipline and/or removal - despite their resistance to be being defined in 'risky' ways.

While trying to resist (or twist to their advantage) the labels and ways that society knows or recognises young people through traditional risk discourses, these young people must "engage in relationships with others [such as teachers] who (consciously or unconsciously) reproduce traditional risk discourses [of youth]. Since staff seem to usually hold the most power in these relationships, youth struggle to negotiate alternative identities," (Silverstein Touzard, 2010, p. 103). This struggle is evident in the above comments and it leaves the young people with an apparent overwhelming understanding of never being able to change how they are seen by certain teachers other than as someone who is, and will always be, 'at-risk' (trouble). In each instance, the above comments were followed by a story about their reactions to teachers who label them – throwing oranges at them from the bus, playing pranks, 'going off' at them when they feel unfairly treated, and skipping school. These reactions by the young people were apparently met by physical frustration from certain staff members (pushing, shoving the young people out of classrooms) which added to their building disdain for those staff members and their strong feelings that school has failed them as they do not 'fit in'. I highlight here that I understand these young people's perceptions of unequal power relations, and being

rendered powerless by teachers and school systems, is far more complicated than just ‘let’s blame the teacher’. Power in this case is relational (Foucault, 1979; 1991). Just as the teachers have authority to act in certain ways in regard to certain students, so too do students hold agency and power to act in certain ways that challenge teachers, and reduce them to aggression – power is relational because it is constantly produced between the teachers and the young people (as well as between the youth workers and the young people, and among the young people themselves). However, given that my data is from the young people’s perspective I recognise the one-sided nature of this analysis/interpretation.

For a few young people (MC 15 and Scott 14 YAP2, Kath YAP1, 15) there was a sense of understanding the cycle of being labelled ‘at-risk’ and the need to break the cycle. Brown et al. (2001) suggests, “young people at-risk also clearly understand that the nature of the school culture and ethos is critical to their attachment to school, in both a positive and negative way”, (cited in Zyngier, 2011, p. 8). The main comments (particularly those made by Kate from YAP1 and MC and Scott from YAP2) about breaking the cycle are focused on changing peer groups (self-regulating their social life to better ‘fit in’ with acceptable student identities at school). They stress that they ran with a “*bad crowd*” that did lots of “*crap things that got them in trouble*”. The notion of a bad crowd is further reinforced through social media where, “... ‘Bad Kids’ whether they may be graffitists, train-surfers, drug takers or rave party goers remain a staple feature of media reports and commentary,” (Bessant & Watts, 2007, p. 201). Although these young people do not blame the “*bad crowd*” for their behaviours, they do understand that hanging out with like-minded peers enables those ‘risky’ behaviours. The young people speak of deliberately distancing themselves from the “*bad crowd*” as part of the self-regulation of their ‘risky’ behaviours.

Many of the “*bad crowd*” the boys spoke of were young people not living with parents, excluded from school completely, hooked on drugs, and engaging in criminal activities. Here the notion of variations of risk arises again. Most of the older boys in YAP2 *were* taking drugs (so they explained) and *were* involved in criminal activities (as the police suggested). So what made this “*bad crowd*” even more ‘risky’ than them? This leads to a related question, if a majority of young people engage in smoking, underage drinking and soft drug use (as indicated in the ABS 2008 Report on Youth and Risk) which puts most young people, in a sense, ‘at-risk’ (in terms of physical and mental health issues, and brushes with the law) then why are the young people in the YAP programs (engaged in the same illegal activities) identified as more ‘at-risk’ than other young people? It would seem the pivotal factor is **education** – you can be ‘risky’ in a number of areas (i.e. underage drinking, soft drug use) but if you fail to stay on educational pathways (to become good economic neoliberal subjects) then you are in need of governance. At the same time, even though the YAP 1 and 2 boys (who were considered ‘at-risk’ via the education factor and crime) were doing similar things to the “*bad crowd*” (who did not attend school at all), they were (at least to some extent) not as ‘bad’ as “*bad crowd*” – and in some cases it was viewed as ‘good’ by the young people in YAP 1 and 2.

The nature of the ‘at-risk’ label is taken up by the young people in my study in some schooling circumstances as a positive identity-marker. As discussed above, many of the young people observed in both YAPs felt ostracised within the classroom and unable to engage in the set work. By displaying certain ‘risky’ behaviours they come to the attention of the teacher and are removed from the classroom so they do not have to do the set work – it seems to be a way for the young people to avoid school work without admitting the learning difficulties they may be having. Similarly, a certain peer group kudos comes with displaying risky behaviours (engaging in edgework in the classroom). As Donny (YAP2) explains proudly:

The rest of the class think I'm really funny when I get ripped into and kicked out, I think it's awesome when they think I'm funny and they all wanna be like me but they are too scared to hey.

With the apparent popularity of misbehaving in class comes a sense of power and control for Donny. If we understand this through Lyng's (2005) theory of edgework, Donny voluntarily engages in a form of low-end risk-taking. Although he is not pushing the boundaries of life or death, (whether his reasons are to perform back his 'at-risk' identity to teachers, or to just have a bit of fun) by working the edge in the classroom he pushes the boundaries of exclusion/inclusion in school (with teachers and peers) – just as Chris Lilly's character Jonah in *Summer Heights High* does in an episode where the 'Islander boys' come late into class and the teacher reprimands them in a humiliating tone. Jona states, "people [teachers] think I am disruptive but I am just trying to make things more fun, more interactive...if people can't see that then fuck you" as he taps his pencils, pulls the blind string with his teeth, moves seats, calls students "homos" (because it is an English word and they are in English class) and tells the teacher, "fuck you" - eventually being kicked out of the classroom (as described in more detail in Chapter 3). Donny's behaviour is understood as out of control by teachers but he clearly understands what he is doing, working the edge with skill to push the teacher *just* to the limit, which gets the perceived desired result from the rest of the class. Yet this is a temporary 'risky' twist as ultimately being kicked out of the classroom reinforces him being constituted as an 'at-risk' subject with adverse effects. By viewing Donny as in control of his 'riskiness' one might say he is engaging in a form self-regulation (which neoliberal rationalities desire) but the regulation is not in an attempt to become known as an acceptable student (Youdell, 2006a), but to further assert his 'risky' identity.

Considering the end of Donny's comment "*they all wanna be like me but they are too scared to hey*" at face value, it would appear he sees himself as a desirable subject who is the envy of others - reinforcing the appeal of performing 'risky' identities differently. Donny and the other boys in YAP1 (Robbie, Paul) and YAP2 (MC, Scott, Jeff, John) perform identities within schooling contexts that are somewhat like the *Legends* in Walker's (1988, p. 3) research - they stand up for themselves against authority or anything

else, they played footy where they displayed prowess, and engaged in daring or exciting escapades in and out of school, (behaviour and dispositions that embody a hegemonic masculine identity). Yet the perceived hero status that comes from twisting risk in my study appears to only sit within a peer context, unlike in Walker's work where the *Legends* were often viewed by teachers as *top students*. Living the 'at-risk' label for Donny (and the other boys) in the classroom may be difficult at times (as seen from his comments throughout this section) but there is a seduction in twisting the 'riskiness', subverting discourses and (re)constituting himself within the boundaries, where, through edgework, the young boys put their "powers to work in discovering new ways of being" (Lyng, 2005, p. 43).

Within the seduction of peer fame, and the edgework in the classroom, there seemed to be the illusion (or perhaps just youthful optimism) that regardless of their 'risky' behaviour (voluntary or forced) they would eventually get through school satisfactorily. A common response by the young people was that they would 'stay to Year 11 and then get a good job' - which may be mainly due to the legal requirements currently in place in Australia around the age of leaving school (age 17, as per CoAG, 2009). These types of responses produced (once again) an image of the young people being in control of the 'riskiness' of their lives – that they needed to (and were capable of) 'playing the system' to self-regulate 'risky' behaviours so they could remain in school even though they remain unintelligible as acceptable students/possible learners. Here I am reminded of Alloway et al.'s (2004) research with rural students and their perceptions of education being a 'ticket' out of small towns. Despite the young people being adamant they would stay at school there was an underlying theme of the lure of 'risky fame' and, as evidenced in the previous chapter, and reinforced below, sport/music were viewed by the young people (and perpetuated/fuelled by popular media which presents desirable celebrity sports and music star (and risky) subjectivities) as other ways of 'getting out' of the 'risky' rural spaces they were in.

## **Risk = fame**

### *I'm a Big Bra Boy and I Don't Give a Crap...*

At the time of my observations an Australian young man, Corey Worthington, was a hot topic in national and international media in regard to the out of control 'risky' underage party he held in 2008, where his parents' house and neighbours' properties were damaged by party goers to a cost in excess of one million dollars (Farouque & Cooke, 2008). Media titles such as *Legend, Moron or just a Naughty Boy* and nationally-televised interviews with news reporters, provided an image of an over confident 'I'm Mr Popular now and I don't need to apologise' attitude (Farouque & Cooke, 2008). When asked what he wanted to say to young people wanting to have a party like this, his response was 'Get me to organise it for you'. The reporter had continued and appeared frustrated, asking 'Well, are you going to say sorry?' His reply was 'No way!' By engaging in 'risky' behaviours Corey became a megastar almost overnight on YouTube and was even invited onto the reality television program *Big Brother*. This sends a strong message that positioning yourself as a youth 'at-risk' and taking up stereotypical 'risky' attributes can potentially make you famous. Corey has a cult-like following of teenagers *still* (5 years on), as can be seen on his public Twitter page (<https://twitter.com/CoreyWorthington>), with talk of the American *Project X* movie apparently based on his 'legendary' party (Harris, 2012).

The young boys in YAP2 had expressed how "awesome" Corey Worthington's party must have been when I had deliberately brought up the subject in one of our sessions. The idea that you could get famous overnight was very appealing as the conversation led them to recall some of their own party stories:

Once we were at this party of this kid whose mum and dad had kicked him out of. He knew they were on holidays so he broke in and had a party but things got really bad and this one kid got really fucked up on drugs and started ripping the house apart and stealing shit. There were knife cuts in the lounge and shit everywhere pulled out of cupboards. Then we all piss bolted and someone called the cops and they came around. Most of us got away but a couple of people got caught and took by the cops....(Ben YAP2, 13)

Although this party did not make the national news it had circulated around the schools as an ‘awesome party’ with the boys who ‘got away’ from the ‘cops’ being heralded by peers as heroes. They had also expressed their belief in Corey “*getting a shit load of cash*” (MC YAP2, 15) as he was on TV being interviewed and on *Big Brother*. Corey’s *Legend* status with teenagers appears to have re-positioned the ‘at-risk’ subject into narratives of belonging – where ‘risky’ becomes a desirable subjectivity and the riskier you are the more of a *Legend* you become. This type of dialogue brought the conversations around fame being positioned as a way to escape ‘a crap life’ if you were not very academic. Jeff (YAP2, 14) even included this perception in the song he had composed himself for me:

*Don't know much bout writing songs  
Don't know much bout making tunes  
I don't know why I'm here cause I don't do any drugs.  
I'm a big bra boy and I don't take crap  
But those teachers hating on me and I always get the wrap  
And making me feel like I'm black  
Wanna be a big footy star make the crowds roar  
Gotta get out of this place so I don't get chased down by the law.  
Wonder if I'll ever see my name up in lights  
I'll spend money, have loads of sic parties and as many girls I like.  
(Jeff YAP2)*

Here Jeff (YAP2, 14) shares his aspiration to be a famous footy player (MC also felt this way) and imagined footy as his ‘ticket out’ to start again with a clean slate. His lyrics imply certain ways to feel powerful (sport, girls, fast cars) which align with the ways young working class boys in research by Walker (1998) and Martino (1999) asserted masculine working class identities. With regard to sport, as with the boys in Walker’s (1998) study, participating in rugby is a way to assert and be rendered knowable as having powerful, masculine, acceptable identities – where being ‘risky’ is normative within (professional) football discourses. This is evident through the numerous media reports that circulate relating to Australian professional football players being charged or convicted of sexual assault, drug taking or drunk driving offences - such as *Stewart charged with sexual assault* (ABC News, 2009), *Newcastle Knights star Danny Wicks*

*charged by police* [on drug offences] (Proudman, 2009), and *NRL Origin player James Tamou arrested for drink-driving* (AAP, 2013). I noticed that MC's prowess as a football player in the touch footy weekly sessions at YAP2 (and in local games) and his assertion of a tough, 'risky' masculine identity positioned him as powerful and the *top dog* of the group – as form of fame in a peer context.

Jeff's use of the term *big bra boy* alludes to a connection with the notorious Abberton brothers who were self-labelled the Bra Boys. In 2007 the Abberton brothers released a surf documentary called *Bra Boys* (Sunny, Jai, Koby & Dakota, 2007). Produced in the wake of the 2005 Cronulla riots it is a movie that "actively participates in struggles over history, identity and belonging within the public sphere" (Butler, K., 2007, p. 392). As Kelly Butler (2007) explains, the documentary *Bra Boys* "draws upon the seductive power of the iconic battler trope to advance a testimonial narrative of triumph over adversity" (p. 391). The boys in YAP2 constantly referred to each other as *Bra* (just as my teenage son and his friends did). Perhaps they saw themselves in some sense as the iconic battlers – the underdogs struggling to be heard. Their comments throughout this chapter create an image of young 'risky' males who can't get a break in schooling, society, and with the police. Despite the boys' perceptions of these institutions or groups of people putting them down and labelling them as trouble, they continue to battle – twisting the 'at-risk' label to perform 'risky' identities that can be made intelligible as possible/positive/'successful' identities through fame, footy, popular culture and criminal discourses, especially among peers.

Another example of the seduction of risk-taking resulting in fame was the admiration of all the boys from YAP1 and YAP2 for Johnny Knox and his movie series *Jackass* where they get paid lots of money to basically push their pain and humiliation levels to the limit in the most ridiculous and often disgusting ways they can imagine – firecrackers launched from their bottoms and having a bowel motion in a display toilet of a bathroom shop while

people were shopping for example (Sharp, 2001). The media glorified risk-taking of Johnny Knox and his ‘risky’ followers (Fischer et al., 2011) was a topic of conversation in both YAPs. Some of the boys from YAP2 had even made short movies on their phones of themselves and/or their peers engaging in dangerous risk-taking and describing themselves as “*crazy tough mother fuckers*”. For instance, MC (YAP2) showed us his version of what he called, ‘MC style *Jackass*’, where he was jumping out of high trees onto people, having someone hit him in the head repeatedly with a ping pong ball at close quarters, and being thrown violently from a moving trolley onto concrete (this and other forms of risk-taking are explored further in this chapter through theories of edgework). MC had boasted about putting it up on YouTube/Facebook and had already had thousands of hits – the boys had been impressed by his video which further strengthens the seduction of ‘risky’ fame in peer and celebrity contexts.

### *Hard Life = Shining Star*

Unlike the boys in YAP2, most of the girls from YAP1 seem indifferent to the idea that fame would provide an *out* from any of life’s issues as they feel they were not ‘at-risk’. Although there was one young girl (Melinda, YAP1, 15) in the sample who writes and sings songs, as well as plays the guitar, and believes she just needs to get her band famous for her life to ‘finally fall into place’. When I initiated a conversation on risk and fame, all the girls agreed that being ‘risky’ and having a difficult life was the key to becoming famous in many fields, particularly reality TV. This finding is supported by Turner (2006) who argued that ‘riskiness’ becomes part of a young person’s intrinsic star quality when they are in the limelight. They discussed numerous examples from programs like *Idol*, *The Voice* and *So You Think You Can Dance* where the media presents an image that young people with traumatic childhoods excel in areas like arts. The following are examples of their responses:

I think that when a singer has been brought up around troubled neighbourhoods they can use this as a vote of confidence and help them strive to move forward and get out of their troubled life and into something they are good at or enjoy. (Yasmine YAP1, 14)

And I think you can become a singer or famous from talent not just from your background, but I think it makes a way better story and you get picked over someone who just had a normal life....but doesn't make you a better singer or actor. (Kath YAP1, 15)

Hard life = shining star.... (Melinda YAP1, 15). *Something I saw written on her hand after a discussion about troubled lives and fame.*

Unlike many of the boys' attraction to the 'risky' fame (where the more dangerous the risk-taking the more popular you become), the girls understood that a 'risky' hard life gives you the power to struggle against all odds, against adversity (like the Bra Boys), and makes you a strong person who can roll with the punches (Butler, K., 2007). Kath, highlights how a 'risky' life makes the contestant of a reality show interesting to the public as it "*makes a way better story*" - so such people are seen as more likely to be picked for RTV programs like *Idol*.

The girls excelled throughout the weekly musical lessons and clearly enjoyed uncovering abilities they were unaware of which made me recall Levi's (their music teacher) strong belief that music can help transform 'risky' identities to positive possible selves. Melinda (YAP1, 15) took the lessons very seriously and often pulled me aside to sing a few lines from a song she was writing. Within the music lessons she was able to 'shine', where she could take up a position of power in the group which fosters a sense of peer fame for her. Yet this power and fame only lasted until the lesson had stopped – temporary empowerment or a temporary identity shift or transformation (through youth workers', Levi and Dan's, understanding). Almost all of Melinda's conversations with me included an element of music, talk around how one day she would never have to deal with all the 'crap' in her life as it would be gone, and that she would not be depressed once she was a famous singer. It was clear Melinda has talent as I watched her play the guitar and listened

to her singing. Being someone famous was Melinda's possible/positive/'successful' identity she was so desperate to construct. Allen (2011) emphasises how fame has become an aspiration for many young girls and that "theorizations of celebrity" have been used to understand the ways "popular culture has been identified as a key site in which the 'successful girl' discourse of neoliberalism is reproduced" (p. 151). Moreover, how social positions can be mobilised through "celebrity machines" (p. 161).

Melinda is not understood as a good neoliberal girl subject. Melinda's working class background, her engagement in self-harming, 'riskiness' at school and mental health issues do not allow her to be made knowable as a 'possible/'successful' girl' subject in schooling discourses. But the lure of being 'discovered' on shows like *Idol* or even local events like *Battle of the Bands* are not, as Allen (2011) stresses, to be understood as delusional, "but are constructed through very powerful and persuasive discourses of celebrity which offer possibilities and promise of upward social mobility" (p. 161). This possibility, coupled with the understanding of a 'risky' life increasing your chances of being 'found' and accepted by the public, positions 'fame' as Melinda's 'ticket out' to a better life where she can be recognised as a 'risky' but possible subject. For the boys, 'footy fame' was similarly positioned as a 'way out', as shown in Chapter 6. The next section moves away from the appeal of 'risky' fame to examine the appeal of young people engaging in voluntary risk-taking through Lyng's (2005) theory of edgework, and how by engaging in edgework the young people twist the 'at-risk' label to produce enabling effects of 'riskiness'.

### **High-'Risky' Appeal – Young People Working the *Edge***

My use of Lyng's theory builds my *Risk with a twist* argument to explore how the young people in my study negotiated the 'at-risk' label to produce enabling effects. As with Conrad's (2004) study on youth 'at-risk' and arts programs (which also used Lyng's (1990) earlier edgework theory), I emphasise here that by using edgework I am not

discounting the unhealthy realities of some of the young people's risk-taking, nor the relational situations that may have brought about the risk-taking, for example:

...social constraints such as personal limitations, restrictions imposed by the family, limitations determined by family circumstances, the pressure to fit in with peers, an authoritative and restrictive school environment, pressure to do well at school, negative social relations based on gender, class, race, ethnicity or culture. (Conrad, 2004, p. 121)

The following discussion focuses on the ways in which the retelling of (gendered) edgework experiences by the young people (from YAP1 and YAP2) is a way of performing 'risky' identities that enable them within the boundaries of the YAPs, as opposed to the perceived constraining affect these performances have within the school environment.

### *The YAP Boys*

As touched upon in previous sections, there is a seduction to risk-taking/edgework, where certain 'risky' behaviours are perceived by young people as being enabling (Lyng, 2005). In this section I discuss the 'risky' appeal of high-end edgework such as underage drinking, substance abuse and criminal activity (that is prevalent in the lives of both YAP1 and YAP2 boys - and in the lives of the majority of young Australian people, according to the ABS statistics and reports). This appeal attracts a sense of being in control of the self amidst chaos and hones coping skills that Lyng (2005, p. 25) argues are pleasurable, attract a hero status among peers and are encouraged in employment such as the Defence Force, firefighting, legal professionals in high-stake litigation, and stockbrokers.

To highlight the sense of control expressed by my participants, I begin with a comment made by MC that explains that he *chose* to take drugs:

It was my decision to start taking [drugs] like cause I was with a group of bras down town and like we had money so we all put in...it's like we try

and make ourselves feel cool. When I was taking it I thought I was real cool and stuff like that. (MC YAP2, 15)

On one hand, this comment about drug use being ‘cool’, or MC being cool while smoking pot, could be understood through research on young people and risk-taking that suggests that ‘risky’, deviant behaviours are often engaged in by young people as a way to ‘fit in’ or remain with their peer groups (such as Becker & Luthar, 2002; Burman, Brown, & Batchelor, 2003; Griffiths, 1995; Hey, 1997; Johnson et al., 2008; Quicker, 1983). Moreover, some young people view ‘risky’ behaviours such as underage alcohol consumption, as pleasurable, not ‘risky’ (for example, see Harrison, Kelly, Lindsay, Advocat, and Hickey, 2011). Other studies, such as Crawshaw and Bunton (2009) on young working class English men’s experience of risk and drugs, suggest that in some contexts and settings risk is seen as a normative part of growing up, where focus is on how to manage ‘risky’ behaviours to an acceptable self-determined level. So, in a sense, the ‘riskiness’ in the young people’s lives is actually part of their ‘transition to adulthood’, and not understood as them ‘falling off the track’ (as through neoliberal rationalities), but instead as the young person ‘negotiating their path’. For instance, MC (YAP2) talked about being ‘at-risk’ just because he was Indigenous (a teenager and gets in trouble at school), and how ‘riskiness’ seemed to be intertwined with his life in general. However, I extend this understanding by engaging in Lyng’s (2005) theory of edgework when analysing MC’s and some of the other boys’ (such as Jeff and John from YAP1 and Robbie YAP2) drug and alcohol related risk-taking. Whereby, the consuming of excessive amounts of alcohol and the taking of drugs (which the boys from YAP1 and YAP2 indicated included smoking pot and taking ecstasy) offers a space where they are in perceived control of their bodies - a chaotic space in which they have deliberately placed themselves.

The boys’ comments throughout this chapter emphasise how they understand themselves to be in control of their excessive underage drinking and drug taking - that when they want to stop they can (Brown et al, 2013). That is, they can be understood as working the

edge of the high in the “wild zones”<sup>69</sup> (Miller, 2005), working the boundaries of life and death and the line between being seen as a hero/winner/legend or a fool/loser/lout - for pleasure, for control, and as a powerful practice to assert possible ‘risky’ identities to their peers. It is through this understanding that the possibilities of ‘different’ selves become available within the boundaries of the regulatory ‘at-risk’ discourse and risk-taking can be understood as rewarding, justified (Sharland 2006), contributing to a sense of self (Batchelor 2007) and/or a way to gain hero status among their peers.

The YAP2 boys use the retelling of not only their alcohol/drug related edgework, but also exciting criminal edgework, as leverage to be leaders in the group and get more attention outwardly from the youth workers. Despite (or because of) my audio recorder going constantly in discussions, the YAP2 boys happily and candidly recounted their stories. Below are a few examples taken from my journal notes (these were told in front of the police youth workers so ethically I was not bound to report their misdemeanours, many of which were more extreme than the ones relayed here). Although the edgework described below did not occur within the YAP, the retelling of stories (many of which the young people already knew about each other) to the youth workers and I, opened spaces (like on the bus trips to ‘fun’ activities) to confess and perform very ‘risky’ identities:

Most of the discussions occur in the bus. The boys would start talking about alcohol, drugs and criminal activity almost in an attempt to impress each other, perhaps to try and shock me and to see how much the police youth workers would listen to before having to act on something they have said. Jeff saw a car with the door open and the keys in the car and he was deliberating whether or not to steal it, but in the end he decided against it. John talks about getting his girlfriend a bike because (while walking) they came upon two bikes that had a ‘for sale’ sign near a telegraph pole and each bike had a \$50 sign on them. His reasoning was \$50 was a rip off, ‘who would pay that for them?’, so he took one of them. Jeff was talking about his brother giving him ecstasy so he could still play footy despite his sore

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<sup>69</sup> Here I am not referring specifically wild zones that Kelly (1999) refers to (where youth ‘at-risk’ are understood by systems and structures as residing), but instead as zones the young people enter willingly through the seduction/lure of controlling oneself in the chaos of risk-taking. Perhaps, though, each author (Kelly and Miller) is referring to the same zone, but interpreting it in different ways and from different vantage points (e.g., society vs the young person).

back and how it was necessary because it was the grand final. MC recalls buying, dealing and smoking pot on a regular basis. Scott's illicit tales unfold each time we travel on the bus like handling drugs, sneaking out of police stations and being chased down by the police.

The following comment by John was made at lunch where the topic of criminal activity was the focus of the informal discussion between myself and a few of the YAP2 boys, while the police youth workers were in earshot:

Once I was with these bad mother fuckers and they were hitting drunk old guys late at night after the pubs closed and taking their money. (John YAP2, 14)

These confessions are considered a form of edgework themselves, in the sense that the young people are taking the risk of revealing this information to us/in our presence (in the police youth workers presence). These young people are entering a linguistic space where they display agency through the retelling of the ways they controlled the chaos (getting away from the police when they were being chased, stealing and not being caught and taking drugs where the experience pushed them close to the limits of life/death). The 'seduction of riskiness' and edgework becomes apparent here as the stories around drugs, drinking and crime afforded temporary power to the person who could interpellate the captive audience (in the bus) with their stories of edgework, as witnesses to their empowering 'riskiness'. The more engaging the edgework was around drinking, drugs and criminal activities when it was retold in front of the police youth workers, the greater the power was on offer to be wielded by the storyteller.

The boys' resistance to the 'at-risk = loser' subjecthood can be seen through their re-framing of the very same category to 'at-risk = legendary status'. For example:

I wouldn't ask MC about those questions [drugs, alcohol, criminal activity] if I was you, you wouldn't have enough recording space....he is awesome. (Scott YAP2, 14)

I get invited to the parties cause they know I am fucking hectic to hang with and I can get the drugs easy...(Robbie YAP1, 14)

People think I'm a mad bastard when I smoke pot at parties...(Jeff YAP2, 14)

Rachael: Why do you guys do all these things ?

John: ....cause we can. We aren't stuck up fucking nerds and shit like that. We can go out and drink and do shit cause it's fun and everyone reckons we are the best cunts to hang out with. I ain't hanging out with no fucking nerds and staying at home on weekends. All the chicks hang out with us cause we doin' exciting things like getting chased by coppers and stuff. Me mum don't care anyway. (John YAP2, 14)

The above comments drive home the understanding that young people living with the label 'at-risk' can twist notions of 'riskiness' to resist being rendered knowable as only the loser/lout/impossible learner subject and become a *legend*, and that talking about their edgework experiences can be an expression of discourses young people deploy to make sense of and communicate this selfhood (Lyng, 2005; Youdell, 2006c). To be 'at-risk' in their understanding was to be popular, be sexually active and invited to "*cool parties*". The edgework experiences retold by the young boys mainly involved taking drugs and drinking underage and, in a sense, these criminal activities became a way to secure acceptance amongst peers at the expense of becoming socially isolated from networks such as educational institutions (Savelsberg & Martin-Giles, 2008). The behaviours that placed them 'at-risk' in the (adult) normalising gaze (Foucault, 1977), simultaneously afforded apparent popularity among 'not-so-risky' peers, and produced the perception of social power among 'risky' peers. Being 'risky' also could be viewed as having a double appeal for some because, if you were seen or known as being 'risky', there was an expectation by other peers for you to drink and take drugs. So, if the young 'risky' people were using these substances to "*forget about their shitty lives*" (such as John suggests YAP2) they could do so in public and be viewed by their peers as just being funny or deliberately acting the fool and as "*awesome*" or a "*mad cunt*". Also, despite the relative absence of discussion around family among participants in this study, John (in the quote above) makes reference to this mother when he says, "*Me mum don't care anyway*" – he

sees her as removed from or indifferent to his ‘risky’ actions. This finding highlights the importance of gaining the perspective of parents of young people labelled at-risk, a point to which I will return in my conclusion.

### *The YAP Girls*

As mentioned previously, the girls’ risk-taking was not focused around drugs and criminal activity, although they did discuss drinking to a small extent. Much of their social risk-taking (edgework) was around unprotected sex, fighting, and self-harming. Melinda (YAP1) appeared to use her edgework stories to gather an audience and hold centre stage – which had temporary success. Just as the YAP2 boys were afforded power through the retelling of their edgework experiences in order to be seen as tougher, cooler and as *legends*, Melinda wielded the afforded power to be positioned as the centre of attention. Unlike MC though, Melinda was not considered the *top dog* by peers so her apparent popularity when telling shocking stories was short lived – ending once the story had finished. The following excerpt from my journal was recorded after a lunch trip with the YAP1 girls in the presence of the youth workers:

Just as casually as MC (YAP2) had mentioned the death of his sister, almost jokingly over pizza today Melinda (YAP1) talked about how she has been depressed for three years. Melinda then talked in an excited manner and explained about cutting herself - then she seemed to take delight in showing us the pictures of her cuts and videos on her phone of her cutting herself. She had cut words into her arm “fuck you bros and wanna bes”. There was so much blood. She almost seemed proud of her scars and said that is why she wears singlet tops so we can all see them. She then went ahead and pointed out all the different scars on her body from cutting, doing it in such a way that I was placed in a position where I felt obliged to ask why she did it. She discussed again excitedly about the ones on her shoulder, arms and legs. This then opened up a discussion with the rest of the girls on cutting. Some of the other girls had cut. It was almost surreal as we ate pizza and they all talked in a seemingly light way about the cutting they were doing or had done to their bodies like we were just talking about what pizza toppings were their favourites or something. I asked Melinda why she cuts herself and she said it releases the pain she felt. That it hurt at first but then it felt

better. They then all talked about it being addictive and Melinda said she is trying really hard not to do it...<sup>70</sup>

Here we can see how, unlike the boys' boasts of inflicting damage on people or property, or of stealing, Melinda and the other girls focused on the appeal of inflicting damage upon themselves. This action was met with shock initially (as they all clambered to see the pictures responding with lots of "*Oh my God!*", "*Look at all the blood!*", "*Shit that must have hurt!*") but at the same time there was a sense of admiration for Melinda from the other girls. It then became a sharing point where they connected with her stories, instead of laughing behind her back (as was noted occasionally<sup>71</sup>). Melinda's retelling of self-harming (with visual aids) granted her temporary control of the group's conversation, which ended once the lunch had finished and we moved on to the next activity. Melinda's self-harming can be understood through Lyng's (2005) theory of edgework as a way to manage emotions where violent/depressive/painful emotion can be expressed through cutting (Batchelor, 2007). Melinda's graphic self-harming subjectivity only makes sense as an 'at-risk' subject through schooling and mental health discourses, however within the boundaries of the YAP, she twists the 'riskiness' to perform a different identity where risk equals (temporary) attention and popularity among the other girls and youth workers.

Another aspect of risk that arose from the YAP1 girls' dialogue was being 'tough'. As with the YAP2 boys, the pecking order among the girls' group became evident as the girls' stories of beating up other girls and hitting them with desks, were told on the bus trips to lunch and various activities. Batchelor's (2007) discussion on girls engaging in

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<sup>70</sup> The youth workers were present throughout the conversation. Interestingly, they joined in by viewing the photos but did not say anything. After the session had finished I asked the youth workers about Melinda's self-harming and they suggested that was something the counsellors and psychologist dealt with, not them.

<sup>71</sup> For example, one time after visiting a restaurant for lunch and walking back to the bus, Melinda explained how her parents were killed in a car accident, that she did not see her younger brother and that she was moved from foster home to foster home. The girls were listening intently as she held centre stage during the walk. I had sat up front with Melinda as she carried on with her sad story. Bouts of giggling and whispering were emanating from the back of bus. Afterwards, back at the centre, the youth worker (who had been sitting with the giggling girls) explained to me after I questioned Melinda's story, that the other girls knew Melinda actually lived with her parents (who were not dead) and little brother, and she had never been in foster care – that the other girls in the group thought that she was 'a joke'.

risk-taking - that was connected with masculine meanings - seems relevant here. Batchelor claims that the respect that was gained through the show or discussion of masculine performatives – physicality, a level of aggression, over-confidence, not backing down, and standing up for themselves – may provoke ‘gender trouble’ by the young girls taking up attributes of masculine gendered identities where violence is sanctioned and celebrated by their peers (Butler, 2006). One could even argue, perhaps, that by the girls taking up feminine/masculine identities, this may constitute them as possible/positive/‘successful’ (macho ‘kick ass’) females as seen in movies and TV shows (like Uma Thurman’s character ‘The Bride’ in the movie *Kill Bill*, Angelina Jolie’s character Lara Croft in the movie *Tomb Raider* and Sarah Michelle Gellar’s Character Buffy in TV Series *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*) and privilege them with a sense of Girl Power (Harris, 2003; McRobbie, 2007) in contexts like the YAPs.

These ‘girl power’ performatives, though, do not make sense in discourses of schooling and the possible/‘successful’/acceptable female student. In contrast to the McRobbie’s (2007) ‘top girl’ or Chris Lilly’s Summer Heights High character Ja’mie (who both perform good neoliberal female subjects), the young girls in my study are not self-regulating their behaviours and dispositions to be good ‘successful’ school girl subjects. Like the young working class school girls in Walker’s (2012) study, the YAP1 girls did not conform to the ‘acceptable female student’ through schooling discourses – they were not passive, co-operative, empathetic, and industrious (Youdell, 2006a). In fact, their gendered resistance to the dominant way to ‘do’ gender is understood through their retelling of edgework stories about engaging in unprotected sexual acts with numerous partners at the same party (Sarah YAP1, 15, Kath YAP1, 15) and in descriptions of fighting other girls because they were ‘smart arses’ and deserved it (Sarah YAP1). Olstead (2011) claims that by “theorising edgework as performative enlivens a view of risk-taking and gender as a politics of feeling involving subject agency, movement, corporeality and psychology” (p. 87). By the girls engaging in the retelling of their ‘risky’ practices in school and in the community they can be perceived as “dynamic political actors involved

in the social and emotional self in progress” (p. 87), where they may manage their risk, however not as understood through neoliberal rationalities, but by twisting the constraining aspects of the ‘at-risk’ label and performing risk differently within the boundaries of the YAP. At the same time, under a neoliberal gaze, notions of ‘risk’, when attached to ‘girl-power’ and ‘girls risk-taking’, contribute to a “splitting of young women along class and race lines as suffering from delinquency, disengagement or disease” (Harris, 2003, p. 41), where surveillance (by parents, teachers, doctors, youth workers, and the young people themselves) is seen as the solution. In this context, the subjectivating processes at work are understood in terms of the ‘at-risk’ girl student “being so because she is designated as such”, and that by “understanding these designations as performative reveals that *it is the very act of designation that constitutes these subjects as if they were already*” ‘at-risk’ students (Youdell, 2006c, p. 19 original emphasis).

As discussed in Chapter 3, there is a certain seduction to engaging in risk-taking or edgework (Lyng, 2005). Although, as noted previously, these young people are not engaging in high-risk leisure sports (i.e. base jumping, sky diving) which tend to be aligned with research on edgework, they are, however, engaging in high-end ‘risk-taking’ when they consume drugs and alcohol and take part in criminal activities or self-harming, in addition to the less direct risk-taking that occurs within educational institutions (for instance, inappropriate behaviour in class and truancy). On one hand, these degrees of risk-taking are viewed negatively through media sensationalised moral panics which generate cultural logics, or “conditions of possibility” (Kelly, P., 2001, p. 23), where youth ‘at-risk’ discourses serve as powerful *truths* about youth – risk-taking equates to ‘at-risk’ youth that are in need of regulation. On the other hand, without dismissing the seriousness of these types of risk-taking, there is a seduction in pushing or working the ‘risky’ boundaries that influence not only work on the self (Lyng, 2005), but also the making and retaining of peer relationships, the assertion of contemporary masculine and feminine identities, and even the acquisition of perceived fame through social media or ‘desired’ careers such as sports and music (Allen, 2011).

## Chapter Summary

This chapter has described how young people who are constituted ‘at-risk’ by policy makers, schools and youth workers’ perceptions, perform various forms of agency – some of which normative society may identify as destructive – that the young people in my study understand as an alternative to being a ‘loser’ in schooling contexts. Aaltonen’s (2013, p. 387) research around young marginalised people and bounded agency is echoed here. Agency is restricted for the young people in my research by the ways in which they are positioned within structures of power including educational institutions (Evans, 2007; Furlong, 2009). Aaltonen stresses the importance of recognising “that [especially] rule-breaking, which is among those limited options available to them, may be intertwined with attempts to cope with, to escape from, or to respond to difficult circumstances” (2013, p. 387) – bounded agency within ‘risky’ boundaries. Although these youth identities are ultimately bound within the ‘at-risk’ label produced by the programs’ aims, and the positions taken up by the youth workers and the young people themselves, popular and peer culture (including the programs themselves) has produced an attraction to certain aspects of being a young person ‘at-risk’. Such space provides temporary enabling aspects and affordances for young people to ‘twist’ the ‘at-risk’ discourse and feel a sense of power. These enabling aspects of being labelled ‘at-risk’ are novel findings that have not been discussed in past research specifically on community-based (arts/sports) programs in regional Australia. Understanding edgework as a form of agency opens up possibilities to explore the way voluntary risk-taking by the young people can be viewed as resisting the ‘at-risk’ label and twisting it to make ‘normative’ the male/female ‘risky’ possible subject – although bound within policy, programs and discourses of risk.

As the different stories and edgework narratives of the young people unfolded a common story was built. These young ‘risky’ people are told they need to change, not the system, yet without the skills to change, they cannot succeed in school (because the school system has failed them). On one hand it appears the approach is to make them ‘feel good’ about

themselves (perhaps as potential pop stars or footy players), give them a break from school and allow them to have fun. Then, these young people will supposedly go back to school as ‘changed beings’ and somehow they will complete high school. Moreover, the young people themselves say (i.e., perform back) that they have changed, but what I ultimately saw/heard being communicated was that they get a great sense of power and fame by being ‘risky’ at school, in the program and in their community. The seductiveness of ‘riskiness’ is so strong in a society that does not make them feel they belong or can be ‘somebody’ in any other way. My study highlights the narrow, temporary or culturally impoverished sense of what is deemed important to young people who have been denied power and failed by the educational system. There is a brief sense of power/kudos experienced by the young people among their peers, in the program and in the classroom, which indicates that they can resist the loser/lout/impossible learner identity to a degree, but when they step outside these contexts, they still cannot operate ‘successfully’ within the educational and social norms of a neoliberal society – the overall ironic twist to ‘living the at-risk label’. Therefore, the community-based school-partnered programs that are designed to counter ‘risk’ may actually (although unintentionally) work to maintain, create or celebrate ‘risk’, which can make the young people feel even more alienated and disengaged from school and/or workforce when they are expected to return to these contexts.

Clearly, the focus of this research was on the young people, rather than the policies about them per se. Nonetheless, I use certain policies to make the case that these policies constitute young people in limiting ways. Therefore, implications for policy and educational systems can be drawn from the findings. Notably, this is a small-scale study and it was not my intention to make broad generalisations about youth, education and associated policies; rather I wanted to better understand the experiences and perspectives of a group of young people in the Central West of NSW who were labelled ‘at-risk’ and locate their lived experiences in the complex network of relationships with rurality, Indigeneity, education, popular culture, risk-taking, crime, and gender through an in-depth analysis of particular community-based programs (and their associated policies and

practices). Although common themes were identified in my data, the issues facing each young person in my study are all unique in some way; therefore a blanket list of implications for policy is not appropriate. Keeping these points in mind, in the Conclusion I offer some implications and areas for further research. My study has shown that even well-meaning youth policies, associated programs and action plans can lead to unintended consequences such as the desire of young people to be 'risky' in order to feel a sense of belonging among peers, rather than 'belonging to the [normative] community', or the desire to become a famous sportsperson or singer, rather than 'succeed' in educational or employment contexts. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on the importance of young people 'learning and earning' in policy, without providing young people with the resources or skills to 'succeed' in school or employment, simply masks, rather than addresses, their needs.



## Conclusion

## **(End)note to Self**

*The Monday morning prior to ‘the wagging’ that day. At the private school gates. TJ gets out of our black Jeep Wrangler, his tie not sitting quite right, his embellished shirt hangs in an unstylish fashion over his slight build, his hair neat but still different. He was always different. He looks towards the steps of the private school and the Deputy with a fixed smile, who stands there straight and tall like one of the pillars along the beautiful old rural school building façade. TJ turns back to me and winks. Turns again towards the school and begins to whistle. I watch, with my heart sinking – feeling useless. The edges of his pristine white school shirt that were tucked in before they left home, somehow manage to be peeking out by the time he closes the car door. The ironed blazer he is wearing slowly comes off and is shoved in the school bag which is thrown over his slouched shoulder. One hand pulling more shirt out from his trousers, the other hand in his bag and I see him produce his little blue book, having it open for the Deputy on the steps to mark down his first negative for the week. I have sat many times at these gates in my car, watching this little routine. No matter how much I spoke to him about this matter in anger, with punishments, or with understanding motherly calm, the farce continued. Inevitably he would get three-strikes-you’re-out each week because his shirt was untucked.*

*Friday that week. I wait at the gates to collect TJ from afternoon detention, feeling very much the outsider, with waves of embarrassment and confusion propelling my anger. TJ’s little face comes into view. He saunters along as the other ‘trouble kids – ‘at-risk’ of not succeeding’- walk their different ways home. As he reaches the car his face lights up, “I made it through this week mum...only eight demerits instead of ten”. I ask how school was, my anger abating, “I love Friday detention mum, it’s what I look forward to each week”. I lightly touch his hand. My heart breaks. “Do you want some takeaway for dinner?”*

I began, and continued through this journey, occupying a complex and messy mix of positions as a mother, a qualified teacher and a researcher. As a mother, I wanted answers and needed an understanding of the ‘riskiness’ entwined with my son’s life. The above commentary finishes describing the lived experience of my son and I, retold in Chapter 1. I questioned in Chapter 1 the conditions that allowed my child’s identity to be constructed within the ‘regimes of (at-risk) truths’, the power relations at play between policy and practice, between practice and the lived experiences of my son and I, and how we bent around, rebelled against or took up positions in discourses of risk in the shaping, and

asserting (perhaps fulfilling) of our identities – in a surveillance society under a ‘normalising gaze’ (Foucault, 1977). My doctoral journey provided possibilities to better understand the ways a group of young people performed a ‘risky’ (empowering) identity within their peer group (holding agency), while simultaneously being performatively interpellated as a ‘risky’ disempowered identity within the context of schooling - by teachers - (which limited agency). In the example provided above, the dishevelled of my son’s school clothes is a performance where he self-fulfils the ‘at-risk’ label designated by schools and teachers – in this case, working to get a ‘strike’. On the other hand, it can be understood as him feeling in control of the self through engaging in (low-end ‘risky’) edgework in a schooling context where he felt constrained and regulated – where he did not ‘fit in’. Even by telling me he was wagging, or that detention was his favourite time at school, is a performance of an empowered ‘risky’ identity – where he pushes the boundaries of parent/child with skill (and agency) to gain a desired result – much like the young people in my study who appeared to be ‘working the system’ to their perceived advantage. That is, exposing the temporary enabling aspects of ‘living the label’.

Furthermore, as a teacher I was driven not only to *see* what was happening for young people considered ‘at-risk’, but to understand why and how things happen to young people that schools designate ‘at-risk’. Moreover, as a researcher I needed to acknowledge these positions of mother and teacher and although I felt (and continue to feel) real concern for the wellbeing of the young people in this study, I sought to distance myself from these emotions. I needed to do this to analyse this phenomenon of ‘at-risk’ youth and reveal the complex, messy, paradoxical and contradictory nature of how the ‘at-risk’ label is designated, negotiated, and lived by young people participating in RNSW community-based (arts/sports) programs in my study, rather than analyse or *prescribe* what I think is *best* for these young people and their wellbeing.

An implication from this study, (at the risk of being viewed as pathologising youth ‘at-risk’ in regard to not ‘succeeding’ in education), is the problematic and contradictory program design of YAP1 and YAP2 in their aims to retain these particular young people in educational pathways but without developing necessary skills to succeed in this setting. As mentioned a number of times in the results chapters some of the young people in the programs appeared to have learning difficulties. Comments from the young people about feeling “*dumb*” and “*crap at school*” because they are ‘dumb/stupid/losers’ and signs such as avoiding reading, getting frustrated when asked to read or write something for a program activity (especially the boys), encouraged me to think about notions of learning difficulties and the links this may have to them being constituted by schools as ‘at-risk’ subjects, and to their negative schooling experiences. Although I do not debate that positive attitudes are very important in returning to the classroom, these young people still were unable to understand and learn the content of lessons presented to them at school – which these young people discuss as an instigator of their inappropriate ‘at-risk’ behaviour. How are these students meant to ‘succeed’ in an educational context if they do not have the skills the system requires them to have in order to ‘succeed’ in that context? Or if they do not have access to positive school identities and relationships? This implication highlights the importance of the mismatch between youth workers designing programs around perceived needs that ‘fit’ with funding bodies’ guidelines and the actual needs of the young people who engage in these programs (Wyn, 2006). It also draws attention to the need to interview teachers and gain their perspectives on students who are labelled ‘at-risk’ and their perceptions on ‘riskiness’ and understandings on how young people they consider ‘at-risk’, and their families, navigate the designated label (in positive/negative or enabling/constraining ways).

My thesis shows that making sense of and recognising the complexity embedded in notions of risk, policy, practice, schooling and the lives of young people is a pressing issue for society, especially given that many young people are finding the transition from school to continued study difficult (see Note to the Reader in Chapter 1) and that the

popular media is glorifying ‘risky’ acts and desirable subjectivities (media with which many young people engage, as shown in Chapters 3 and 7). It is also a pressing issue for parents of young people as they each try to navigate through life. For instance, in the quote from Chapter 7 (page 267), John (YAP2, 14) explains why he ‘chooses’ to be ‘risky’ (“*We can go out and drink and do shit cause it’s fun and everyone reckons we are the best cunts to hang out with*”) and then he says, “*Me mum don’t care anyway*”, which implies that his mother is disengaged from, or indifferent to, what her ‘at-risk’ son is doing or feeling, but perhaps his mother has her own story to tell. The brief references made to family by the participants in this study points to the need for further research into how parents of children who are labelled ‘at-risk’ understand ‘riskiness’ and the impacts of ‘at-risk’ label. For example a follow-up study could be to interview the parents of the young people in this study to examine the ways they navigate the ‘at-risk’ label designated to their children by schools and through social policies. Therefore, as a society we must continue researching, talking and thinking about this complex phenomenon and finding ways to address the system that has given rise to these discourses and effects of ‘living the label’.

My doctoral research was never about seeking to understand how effective or ‘successful’ these community-based programs (designed for ‘at-risk’ youth) might or might not be in terms of meeting funding outcomes. Instead, I aimed to understand what was happening within the programs, how the ‘at-risk’ subject was constituted at macro and micro levels by policy, and the practices/perceptions of the youth workers within these programs, and how this type of labelling played out in the lives of the young people within the boundaries of the programs. I examined how the system, through educational, social and funding body policies, constitutes certain groups of young people as ‘at-risk’ subjects and attempts to regulate them in particular ways so that they will not be a burden on society, but instead become productive citizens who will make an economic contribution to a neoliberal society. More specifically, I was interested in how community-based (arts/sports) programs and youth workers’ practices and perceptions contribute to and/or resist the constitution of the ‘at-risk’ subject. Moreover, I was particularly interested in how the

young people engaged in these programs, negotiate the ‘at-risk’ label. In other words, I wanted to understand how these young people were ‘living the label’ and through this process I developed the notion of *Risk with a twist* (and its various dimensions) to explain the simultaneous enabling and constraining processes and possible effects that were occurring.

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# Appendices

## **Appendix A**

### **Leaving the Field**

One of the ethical dilemmas of participant observation in a study such as this is concerned with the ways the researcher builds relationships with young people who may be in vulnerable positions (asking for their trust, to be let into their lives) then ‘just leaves’ when the study has finished. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2000, p. 122) note, it raises the issue “that someone they had come to think of as a friend is going to turn back into a stranger” (p. 122). Iverson (2009) argues that the “disengagement aspect of the research process [should be] embedded epistemologically and methodologically in the prior phases” (p. 13) of ethnographic studies. Keeping this in mind, it was explained up front to participants that I would be only visiting the young people for the life of the study, and I reinforced this carefully throughout the visits via conversations. My leaving the field in YAP1 after three months was marked by celebrating the musical products of the program and its closure - the musical piece they had been learning to play through the program, was performed for the youth workers and myself. While the YAP2 participants ended the program after two months with a trip to a white water rafting centre and a go cart track. In each case the relationships formed with both the youth workers and the young people, made it difficult for me to just walk away. So occasional contact continued with a few of the youth workers for a couple of years, and occasionally with some of the young people through my son’s social interactions (prior to his passing) and since his passing through Facebook.

### **Ethical Issues**

The ethical issues considered for this study included working with youth in general, youth who were previously known to me, youth who had confessed engagement in illicit activities as part of this study, youth with mental health issues and Indigenous youth. Consent to carry out observation and participant observation at each site was gained from the program directors of each site (YAP1 and YAP2) on behalf of each of the program’s participants and youth workers. Informed consent was gained from all participants

involved in the study in Phases 1 and 2 and the parents/guardians of the young people in Phase 2 were also asked to provide consent. However, in the second phase, although the parents of YAP1 participants had all provided verbal agreement to the director, only a few returned a signed consent. This restricted who could be informally interviewed in this site (YAP1).

To ensure anonymity, all participants involved have been given random pseudonyms to be used in any academic writing related to this research. This was particularly important for those of whom I had previously known through my son. The audio and video recordings from the programs were safely and securely stored (password protected) on my computer, with parts of the YAP2 video footage also being stored on the police youth workers' computer.

As a number of the participants identified as Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander, I consulted the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies (AIATSIS, 2011) which suggest three areas to be considered:

- 1) *Consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding* - truthful dialogue on Indigenous research issues involves much more than a 'mere exchange of experiences, perspectives, questions, and ideas' (Long & La France, 2004, p. 1);
- 2) *Respect, recognition and involvement* - the issue of respect, recognition and involvement in relation to benefits and outcomes for any young Indigenous people involved; and
- 3) *Benefits, outcomes and agreement* - the difficulty of doing any form of research on or with Indigenous people that does not attempt to speak for them, or break their trust by looking for some deeper reality than their words convey. There must be some beneficial return for the exchange of knowledge.

While this research was not aimed specifically at young Indigenous peoples or their families, the first two points were considered throughout the data collection; however there was little opportunity to fully engage with them on their own since they were in the

larger group. In regard to the third point, I am mindful of the argument Muecke (1992) puts forward, that European ways of talking about Indigeneity limits the ways we come to know Indigenous peoples. I am also keenly aware of debates (often through a postcolonial lens) of Indigenous representation (for example Ashcroft, 2001; Bamblett, 2011; Langton, 1993; Mudrooroo, 1995; Muecke, 1992; Trees & Nyoongah, 1993); how does one (re)represent oneself when the methods of representation are intrinsically controlled by another? McLean (1998, p. 7) offers two ways '[m]aybe only one is correct, or perhaps there is truth in both of them. The first is that the othered [Indigenous youth in this context] get to speak through the very discursive logic of their exclusion. The second is that they get to speak through their own will and resistance' (McLean 1998, p. 7). For the purposes of this study I did not aim to single out the young Indigenous participants labelled 'at-risk' per-se, (nor explore historical representations), but I sought to understand the roles Indigeneity and notions of recognition/representation (in light of Foucault and Butler's work) played in the constructions of self within the discursive boundaries of risk discourses, policy, practice and the YAPs observed.

## Appendix B

### Youth Worker Interview Questions

Three key themes were addressed in the formal semi-structured interviews with youth workers. Below are the themes and indicative questions:

#### *Contextual Questions*

- Describe the general backgrounds of the young people who get involved in your programs; are they early school leavers or 'at-risk' of leaving school early?
- Describe the types of programs you run within the organisation.
- Describe the ways young people access the programs.
- Describe the ways young people engage in the programs.
- Describe what a successful and unsuccessful program; what works and what doesn't, and why?

#### *Professional Practice*

- What do you understand the term 'at-risk' to mean?
- Do you use this term in your work?
- How do you see your work helping young people who leave school early or are considered 'at-risk'?

#### *Policy*

- What do you see as being the main issues for the young people who engage in your programs?
- How do you see your programs meeting the needs of the young people involved?
- Do you see the term 'at-risk' impacting on your policies and funding opportunities?

## Appendix C

### *Demographics of Youth Workers*

Table 2: Detailed Demographics of Interviewed Youth Workers

Youth 'at-risk' Community-based (arts/sport) Program and Organisations Summary					
YAP1	Youth worker	M/F	Age	Youth work Background	Education
	Shirley	F	50-65	Teaching experience in high schools. Shirley was 'old school' with firm beliefs in using behaviour management and rewards with young people to alter inappropriate behaviour in school. She often related incidents with the young people to her dog behaviour book and experiences with training animals. She clearly enjoyed doing her job but confessed she preferred working with the boys as they were 'less difficult'.	Dip Ed – PE and Junior Science  MA Environmental Studies
	George	M	45-55	He had run and engaged in a number of programs with young and old people in regard to identity. Every situation with George and the young people demanded a metaphor and 'moral to the story'. He worked with the boys but was respected by both genders when they did the occasional combined activities. A strong advocator for the educational system needing to be stripped away and build back up to be relevant for today's youth.	Creative arts background – with focus on photography and film making.
	Levi He was interviewed	M	45-55	Worked mainly as a music teacher in Urban NSW areas. Now Director of a local rural	University Degree in Education and Music.

	not only as a member of YAP1 but as a Director of an organisation that focused on music and young people but not specifically youth 'at-risk'.			music organisation. He has a passion to work with young people and marginalised communities. He has very strong views about music opening up spaces to transform identities.	Currently engaged in a Doctoral study.
	YAP1 was funded by The Department of Education and Communities. The main program's aim was to help young people considered 'at-risk' to remain at school or an alternative educational pathway by boosting their confidence and helping improve life skills. There were numerous activities provided by the youth workers' that involved sport (tennis, gym, and touch football), visits to local organisations like the berry farm, cattle farm, dog shows, day trips to a local lake and a dam within a few hours drive, and trips to the cinema. A musical element was included weekly for both genders. The girls also engaged in the Resourceful Adolescent Program (RAP). This program was developed to build resilience and promote positive mental health in teenagers and is described more in the results section. The program specifically aims to prevent teenage depression and related difficulties. There was a lot of focus on the boys building up their resume and applying for part time jobs. Lunch was provided in each session by eating at various restaurants. This program was called 'youth at risk'. Both youth workers' and young people spoke highly of the program.			Length of YAP	Participants
				1 year program. 1 session per week (gendered sessions) for both girls and boys during the whole school year.	Year 8 and 9 girls and boys from local state high schools.
<b>Youth 'at-risk' Community-based (arts/sport) Program and Organisations Summary</b>					
YAP2	<b>Youth worker</b>	<b>M/F</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Youth work Background</b>	<b>Education</b>
	Lynne	F	35-45	Police career from a young age. Always worked in rural areas. She has a lot of experience with young people who have difficult lives. Passion for working with young	Policing

			people considered 'at-risk'. She has experienced being 'at-risk' as a teenager. Lynne was very strict but tolerant of many behaviours. None of the boys would stand up to her. Lynne had a rough childhood and experience with young people 'at-risk' in her own family. Very genuine affection shown to the boys and in turn she was highly respected by all of them. Lynne was a big believer of second chances.		
Max	M	35-40	Max began a Police career from a young age. He originally worked in urban areas with youth 'at-risk' in similar projects as this one. Moved to be part of this local rural youth at-risk program. Passion for working with young people. Shared a similar connection and respect with the young people as Lynne did. Less tolerant to inappropriate behaviours type but joined in sometimes to inappropriate conversations (on sex and sexuality) that surprised me. He held negative attitude towards schools in general and their treatment of these young people.	Policing	
Bob	M	35-40	Director of the community organisation. Saw his position as a marketing one. Limited experience working with young people. His focus was on the 'good' kids and he had little to do with the 'bad' kids the police dealt with. He strongly believed the reputation of the 'bad kids' were the reason the organisation was not being used to its full potential.	Background in management – pubs, etc.	
This program was police funded with the aims of helping young people who have had contact with the police due to criminal activity, remain at school and to help alter negative perceptions of the police held by the young people. Each session included a game of touch footy and an activity – mainly physical (rock climbing, horse riding, a boxing session				Length of YAP	Participants
				6 – 8 week programs. Once	Year 7-10 boys only.

	and go – carts/white water rafting). They also had a short session on drugs and throughout the sessions used the video camera/dictaphone to record skits/interviews on different issues and take footage of the activities. The young people also chose or wrote song lyrics that they believed best described their lives. Both PYW's and boys relayed how much they had enjoyed the program.				session a week during school term. One whole school day.	
<b>Youth 'at-risk' Community-based (arts/sport) Program and Organisations Summary</b>						
YAP3	<b>Youth worker</b>	<b>M/F</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Youth work Background</b>	<b>Education</b>	
	Kate	F	45-50	Worked in welfare area for the last 25 years. Began as voluntary supervisor at 18 at a youth refuge. Paid work for homeless youth. Plus voluntary work with street kids. Managed youth refuges. Taught at TAFE in welfare and in outreach courses (20 years). Recently started a consultancy agency and training doing professional development, supervision with youth workers' in the field and doing some primary education programs with youth at risk. Focus has been on violence prevention and youth at-risk through local rural youth centres. Heavily involved in community welfare activities. Passion for working with young people.	Diplomas involving Welfare and Youth Work.	
	For this specific program (with the apparent understanding that all young people were 'at-risk' with a lean towards girls being more 'at-risk' – a point discussed in the results section) they held focus groups with Year 9 students from two local high schools and asked questions around: what do you learn at school about relationships; what would you like to learn, describe relationships at your school; what do you think young people find challenging about relationships; and how would you like to learn about relationships. Consultations were also held around town at midnight basketball, and local youth support services. These focus groups provided a framework. Image theatre (run by Dan from YAP4) was used in conjunction with discussions about what do you want in a relationship and what are those emotions and attaching it to the ethical frameworks of relationships and the first one is care for self – with a strong				<b>Length of YAP</b>	<b>Participants</b>
				15 weeks – 2 sessions each week to cover all students. Occurred in the PDHD subject slot during	Year 9 girls and boys mixed sessions	

	<p>focus on sex. A short program 'Love Bites' was incorporated and the program culminated with a hip hop song being created by the young people with assistance from Dan. The 'Love Bites' is a domestic violence and sexual violence prevention programme which is a two day workshop formula that the government has been rolling out all over New South Wales, Northern Territory, and Queensland's. Love Bites is a program designed by the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) to educate youth in the fields of preventing domestic violence and sexual assault. The program involved discussions and activities on topics such as texting sexual materials, bullying, domestic violence, sexual harassment, sexual assault, what is consent and how to gain consent.</p> <p>Art sessions are structured with the aim of young people reinforcing what they have learnt through art and the media. The program was almost completed when I interviewed Kate so was not used in phase two. It was funded through a local arts grant and a National government grant.</p>	school time.	
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**Youth 'at-risk' Community-based (arts/sport) Program and Organisations Summary**

YAP4	Youth worker	M/F	Age	Youth work Background	Education
	Dan	M	25-35	No youth worker background. Artist. Background of student activism and protesting and as he states 'about pretty much anything that was a kind of tangible avenue for [him] to do things that were progressive and interesting and attacking the wrong around the world'. While engaged in a theatre media degree he started a company to work with Indigenous people using the arts. Heavily involved in community projects and life passion is to develop a self-sustaining network of	University degree in Performing Arts.  He studied the Theatre of the Oppressed in Thailand which he bases his philosophy on.

			creative arts/communication /filmmaking run by the Indigenous mobs across Australia to keep Indigenous culture alive and provide skills to empower young Indigenous people.		
<p>Dan runs numerous creative arts projects. His organisation is approached by local groups across the region to work with young people, particularly Indigenous people. The organisation is affiliated with a university. It started out with small community one or two day circus projects then as they began to understand more about working with young people the programs developed into creative hip hop workshops, using cultural ideas to create a performance. At the time he had just finished working on a project which culminated in a hip hop song written and sung by a group of young Indigenous peoples about wanting the older community to be positive role models. Dan was also working with Kate (YAP3) using image theatre with high school students to explore relationships. In one of Dan's (YAP4) ventures he engaged in a ten day community-based program with rural Indigenous residents of all ages (with a focus on youth) to share stories about the impact of violence on the community and the young people considered 'at-risk'. The program culminated in a short film with a combination of stories and songs from the elders in the community about the rift in cultural identity and moving away from 'community' (the need to come back together as one) by the younger generation (16 year olds to late 20's), and finishes with young children from the community singing songs about how life is made harder when people in their community engage in risky behaviour who are supposed to be their role models –asking the mobs to come together as one.</p>			Length of YAP	Participants	
			<p>Worked with YAP3 in the 15 week sessions.</p> <p>Other programs the group size varies depending on the funding.</p>	<p>Yr 9 girls and boys for YAP3.</p> <p>Ages 13-24 and also adults for other programs, depending on target group.</p>	
<p><b>Youth 'at-risk' Community-based (arts/sport) Program and Organisations Summary</b></p>					

YAO 1	<b>Youth worker</b>	<b>M/F</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Youth work Background</b>	<b>Education</b>	
	Melissa	F	30-40	Worked for a university in education management. Has done a lot of work in employment and at-risk programs for post placement out of gaol. Wanted to work with young people that was her passion and she felt she was good at it. Melissa was the initial development officer to get this organisation/project off the ground.	Degree in Psychology, Masters in Human Services	
	Jane	F	30-40	Background in youth work and counselling. Also does educational promotion, worked in schools but really wanted to work with young people who were challenged in regard to mental health, drugs, social isolation.	Double degree in Counselling and Education	
	This organisation has branches in many areas of NSW. It combines many different support services under the same roof to help deal with mental health and wellbeing of young people and their families. They also run numerous workshops to meet the needs of their clientele. Access is voluntary, however some high schools used the service as a requirement of access back into school when students considered at-risk were suspended. They take a holistic approach to helping young people by ascertaining their needs and referring them to the different support people within the organisation.				<b>Length of YAP</b>	<b>Participants</b>
					Many different programs are run so the length depends on the type of project.	Anyone from ages 12-24 can use this service.
<b>Youth 'at-risk' Community-based (arts/sport) Program and Organisations Summary</b>						
YAO2	<b>Youth worker</b>	<b>M/F</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Youth work Background</b>	<b>Education</b>	
	Kris	F	25-35	Worked in youth centres and ran youth workshops. Now working in a university/community arts collaboration position.		
	Kris worked in a position funded by a university which offered various grants and helped community groups obtain funding for creative arts projects. Kris was a contact for gaining access to other YAP/YAOs.				<b>Length of YAP</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Deals with the						

					funding for the community groups	
<b>Youth at-risk Organisations and School Partnered Community-based Creative (arts/sports) programs Summary</b>						
YAO3	<b>Youth worker</b>	<b>M/F</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Youth work Background</b>	<b>Education</b>	
	Levi Part of YAP1 as well	M	45-55	Worked mainly as a music teacher in Urban NSW areas. Now Director of a local rural music organisation. Passion to work with young people and marginalised communities.	University Degree in Education and Music. Currently engaged in doctorate studies.	
	Levi ran a community organisation that focused on music. They worked with a range of community members including schools, various community groups and private tuition. They had projects running in remote areas of RNSW to reach young people and engage in musical projects through telecommunications. Levi was very passionate about using music to help young people labelled 'at-risk' He held a strong belief that music was pivotal in opening up spaces for positive identities to succeed.				<b>Length of YAP</b>	<b>Participants</b>
				They conduct a number of musical programs over the year locally and for remote rural regions.	Programs for ages 8-adults.	

## Appendix D

### *Demographics of Young People*

Table 4: Detailed demographics of The Young People

Youth at-risk Community-based (arts/sports) programs Young People Summary				
YAP	Young person	M/F	Age	Notes
1	Yasmine	F	14	Yasmine identifies as being Indigenous. She warmed to me sometime through the first session, looking over for eye contact like looking for approval of her musical skills in the music session. Yasmine afterwards explained she was on anger management medication. Yasmine is the nurturer of the group, she is so sweet and motherly, she really takes care to make sure nobody's feelings are hurt. I look at her and try to engage in humorous banter but she takes me very seriously and thinks I am being mean and pulls me up on it
	Melinda	F	15	Melinda was almost over the top friendly straight away divulging she was on medication and was wearing colours today which was the first time in ages so she must be feeling a bit happy. She declared herself a musician and she had been writing music and songs (which she sang for me). Melinda was caught out lying numerous times in the sessions (that her parents died in a car crash, she lived in foster care, and that she and her brother had been split up and she could not find him but was searching – Shirley informed me she lived at home with both parents and her brother). She self-harms and visits a psychologist regularly. Melinda was constantly looking for attention and appeared most happiest when centre stage.
	Kath	F	15	A quiet girl, who had very little contact with me and sat with a group of young girls, two who identified as Indigenous and two as Sudanese. This group were only present for a few sessions and kept to themselves. They had very little contact with me. Kate identifies as Indigenous. Kate would talk about how she used to be a bad girl that she didn't respect herself, was shameless and didn't care for or respect her body but now she has changed.
	Lisa	F	13	Lisa was a slight built girl who looked cranky all the time. She clearly was constantly focused on me in each session though acted not interested, as each time I asked a question to someone and they couldn't hear ( because of the music, etc.)

				she could relay the exact question to them. I felt like I was being checked out constantly. Lisa did not seem to fit into the group. When they talked about sex or beating people up she would just sit there quietly. When she did say something the other girls did not respond really, they just looked at her as if she was weird (a term one girl had used about her). She has a mild diagnosed disability of some sort however I was informed of what that was – as the Youth worker did not remember at the time of the conversation. I can only describe her as having a very small identity that gets lost amongst the big identities of the other girls. Lost to such an extent that she was almost left behind on a lunch excursion because she had gone to the loo, and no one had realised she was missing on the bus until I had questioned where she was.
	Sarah	F	15	Sarah had a very strong personality and seemed to sit at the top of the pecking order when she was present. Most of the conversations with Sarah revolved around sex, drinking and fighting. She seemed to lead the pack through boasts of beating people up and cheating on partners. No one challenged her.
	Donny	M	15	Donny and Robbie are step brothers. They constantly debate then defend each other. A lot of their talk is about drugs and other illegal activities however they are not treated as ‘top dogs’ like the dynamics observed by the YAP 2 boys, as explained below.
	Robbie	M	14	Robbie is quieter than Donny and seems less involved in drugs, even condoning Harley’s behaviour in some of the stories that unravel. He became the ‘class clown’ throughout the sessions.
	Paul	M	14	Very sporty, Shirley describes him as not ‘fitting the stereotype of a youth at-risk’ - both parents live at home and dad works. The whole family plays sport and he has supportive grandparents He is given extra attention and affordances by the youth workers’ (loaning money, paying for sports lessons outside of the program, more one on one time after the sessions while waiting for his lift)
YAP 2	Jeff	M	14	Jeff has 13 people living at home with him, Dad and his girlfriend, 5 sisters, 3 brothers and a nephew. He is the second oldest. He is basically a quiet boy but because of his solid size and age he sits on the top end of the pecking order. He really enjoyed playing football and wanted to play in one of the big teams one day on a national level. Jeff had negative feelings towards police as he explained he used to get into trouble a lot with the by them.

	MC	M	15	MC identified as being Indigenous. He was the leader of the pack. Larger and older than most of the boys he controlled the dynamics when he was present. I had contact with him outside the program as he was an acquaintance of my son's. It is almost like he played a game with the adults by acting reflective and suggested the other young boys in the group should learn from his mistakes (activities I knew he continued to engage in though pretending he did not), then acting tough and revealing his engagement in criminal activities to the boys. He would stir trouble between the boys without the police youth workers' (PYW's) knowing and then solve it to gain respect from the PYW's. Despite the boys and myself seeing this game play, no one confronted or challenged his control. He had some disdain for the police but only to the ones who would catch him drinking and make him tip out his alcohol onto the ground or the ones who would constantly pull him over to check his bags for drugs. MC has had a lot of contact with courts and the police. One PYW expressed her belief that he should be in the young offenders not the youth at risk group as he needed to be broken and built back up again. MC wants to be famous and play football for Melbourne Storm. MC felt a degree of familiarity around me as we had prior knowledge of each other. MC had obvious learning difficulties and refused to engage in any activity where he needed to read or write. I know MC has a turbulent family life however he never mentions it in the program.
	John	M	14	John identifies as being Maori. He is a smaller boy with a huge personality. His sister was dating my son although he had not met me before. His initial reactions towards me was negative and for the first two sessions he would try and insult me. Something changed on a bus trip when someone said something offensive to me and he jumped to my defence and from then on acted like we were the best of friends – to a point where he pushed the boundaries and would snatch the camera off me, etc. He had strong beliefs about being treated in a racist way by teachers. John was witty and sharp tongued in his conversations with most of the boys (besides MC) and was always initiating arguments.
	Blake	M	14	Blake is extremely quiet and says very little – just giggles a lot. He sits in a neutral position within the group. He took a while to warm to me but after the first session he would approach me more. Of all the boys he provided the least amount of dialogue in formal and informal interviews. He was also the only boy who did not boast about illegal activities or partying. He just appeared to go with the flow in each session.

	Chris	M	13	Chris is the youngest in the group and he had not been involved in any drugs or theft. He received the most attention inside and outside of the program by the PYWs and was the mediator between the boys when tension arose. They seem to almost protect him. He revealed his feelings to me early in the program about being unable to understand content in his classes at school. Chris admitted to me that he was confused why he was at the program as he understood the other boys did 'bad things', whereas he just played up in school. Chris has no animosity towards the police in general.
	Ben	M	13	Ben identifies as being Maori. His pale complexion however was the topic of many heated discussions between Ben and John. The group refused to accept he was Maori because of his skin colour. He played the role of a very tough kid which was taken very lightly by the others. He was a loud personality yet never really was heard. He disliked the police in general. He believed teachers are racist as they 'do not like Kiwi people'. It was for this reason that he believed he was singled out and ostracized by teachers. Ben is the only one in the group who professes his hatred of drugs and refusal to take them.
	Scott	M	14	Scott identifies as being Indigenous. He likes to be the centre of attention. He warmed to me immediately and was very open to discussing anything I asked about in great depth. As with MC he is very reflective but not hypocritical, he accepts that he perhaps should not engage in illicit activities and tells the boys not to, but admits he continues to do so. He has some disdain for the police in general and discusses being pulled over and searched for drugs constantly or questioned in regard to break and entries. He openly speaks of corruption in the police force and a specific policeman (whom MC mentions as well) – who interestingly was dealt with at some time after the program for being corrupt. He is really the only boy in YAP 1 that discussed his family to a small extent and how rough his life was. He understands he finds it hard to learn but says there is no hope for him at school as he has been labelled as trouble. He sat up the top in the pecking order just beneath MC but never really had any power. Scott talked proudly of his job as a 'trolley boy' despite the other boys teasing him for it and seemed to enjoy telling stories about his life of crime.