Foucauldian Critique of Positive Education and Related Self-technologies: Some problems and new directions

JAMES REVELEY
School of Management, Operations and Marketing, Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong

Abstract
By focusing on positive education, this article draws out the educational implications of Binkley’s Foucauldian critique of neoliberal subjects being pressured to learn how to manage their emotions. From the latter author’s perspective, positive education self-technologies such as school-based mindfulness training can be construed as functioning to relay systemic neoliberal imperatives down to individuals. What this interpretation overlooks, however, is that young people are not automatically and unambiguously disempowered by the emotion management strategies they are taught at school. Arguably, positive education contributes to the formation of resistant educational subjects with an emotional toolkit that equips them to mount oppositional action against neoliberalism. Foucault’s work can be interpreted in a way that is not inconsistent with seeing positive education as having such liberatory potential.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, review, Philosophy of Education, critical theory

Introduction
At the root of each apparatus lies an all-too-human desire for happiness. The capture and subjectification of this desire in a separate sphere constitutes the specific power of the apparatus. (Agamben, 2009, p. 17)

In an essay that clarifies Foucault’s use of the term apparatus (‘dispositif’ in French), Giorgio Agamben extends its meaning to include ‘anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living human beings’ (Agamben, 2009, p. 14). Schools are central to Agamben’s list of apparatuses; equally the school is a bounded spatial locale (or sphere) where transformative work on the emotions is undertaken.
This article focuses on a particular set of school-based, happiness-targeting educational techniques that have their taproot in an influential—and comparatively recent—‘psy’ discourse: positive psychology.

Academic literature in this field stresses the cultivation of positive emotional states—happiness, joy, optimism, hope and so on—which are purported to enhance individual wellbeing (Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011; Seligman, 2011). According to Ilona Boniwell, one of the leading European academic advocates and practitioners of positive psychology, the emotional awareness that the self-elicitation of positive emotions presupposes can be taught and learnt (Boniwell, 2012). Positive psychology’s educational corollary, positive education, takes up this pedagogical challenge at the school level (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Unsurprisingly, Boniwell co-wrote a practical workbook for use by schoolteachers (Boniwell & Ryan, 2012). The author also promoted positive education at a recent TEDx talk titled ‘Educating for Happiness and Resilience.’ This is just the tip of the positive education iceberg; it is not uncommon these days for primary and secondary schoolteachers alike to have on their desks books with positive emotion watchwords in the title.

At the forefront of this new frontier of the so-called ‘affective domain of education’ are practices such as school-based training in mindfulness meditation (Hyland, 2014). Arising from the consciousness disciplines but now repackaged as a therapeutic tool for teaching self-control and wellbeing enhancing strategies, including emotional management, mindfulness training has been implemented in schools in England, Australia, Hong Kong and the United States (Huppert & Johnson, 2010; Joyce, Etty-Leal, Zazryn, & Hamilton, 2010; Lau & Hue, 2011; Flook et al., 2010). In previous work I argued that there is a fine balance to be struck when implementing positive education-derived emotional self-regulation techniques—such as mindfulness training—within schools (Reveley, 2013, 2014). In terms of their effects on schoolchildren, these techniques are one part empowering and one part disempowering. By engaging with Foucauldian studies, in this article I seek to put another layer of theory beneath the philosophico-theoretical critique of positive education that I have provided elsewhere. My goal is to find out how much light recent Foucauldian accounts of the contemporary neoliberal context shed on the socially oppressive versus the liberatory effects of teaching schoolchildren to become emotion self-regulators.

While there are a growing number of Foucault-inspired critiques of positive psychology and its practical applications (McDonald & O’Callaghan, 2008; Denison & Avner, 2011), I will concentrate on a recent book-length treatment by Binkley (2014). My reasons for doing so are twofold. First, Binkley directly links self-transformation and emotional regulation to neoliberalism. Second, he makes scant reference to positive education, yet his work has implications for this educational approach that are worth teasing out. In particular, I seek to test whether Binkley provides the basis for a balanced critique of exposing schoolchildren to training in positive psychology’s affect-based self-technologies.

My key point is this: pathbreaking as his analysis is, Binkley paints himself into a Foucauldian corner regarding the possibilities for resisting neoliberalism. In the following discussion I draw on McNay (2009) to show that the problem stems, in part, from inherent tensions in Foucault’s own work between the entrepreneur of the self as the key figure of neoliberalism, on the one hand, and his analysis of the ethics of self-care and self-transformation on the other. Ultimately, my article attempts to (a) get the Foucauldian
critique of positive education out of a bind and (b) identify the potential of positive—emotional—education to support resistance to neoliberalism, rather than just functioning as neoliberalism’s educational handmaiden.

Binkley on Emotion Management under Neoliberalism

Right at the outset, in the first chapter of *Happiness as Enterprise*, Binkley (2014) identifies a new discourse of happiness—grounded in positive psychology—that breaks down the hierarchy of knowledge between ‘psy’ professionals and the general public. It is a promissory discourse which deems happiness to be within the reach of everyone, irrespective of their genetic makeup, dispositions, past experiences, life chances or material circumstances. The discourse, Binkley argues, puts the individual on the horns of a dilemma: they feel a moral and biological responsibility to be happy. He aptly labels this ‘the blackmail of happiness: to choose not to be happy is to choose against oneself and against the mandate of biological life’ (Binkley, 2014, p. 18).

Binkley is not the first to suggest that the new happiness ethos dovetails neatly with neoliberalism. The writer Barbara Ehrenreich argues in *Bright-Sided* that positive psychology and its attendant happiness movement in the United States has swung to the right, with strong links to neoliberalism (Ehrenreich, 2009). What distinguishes Binkley’s (2014) analysis from the preceding commentary is his Foucauldian take on the issue. Extrapolating from Foucault’s (2010) *Birth of Biopolitics*, Binkley contrasts neoliberal governmentality with post-World War II welfarism or ‘social government’, suggesting that the *sine qua non* of neoliberalism is the attempt ‘to dispel social dependencies in the hope of activating an agentive, entrepreneurial, and enterprising spirit among its subjects’ (Binkley, 2014, p. 21). What follows is a breakthrough in the use of Foucault’s later work to disclose the link between emotional self-regulation and neoliberalism. It is worth quoting at length:

> To pursue happiness is ... both to be governed, but also to govern oneself, or to govern oneself as one is governed by others. And as such, happiness serves as a hinge of this function of power: a point of transfer or a relay ... between a strategy for the government of large groups, populations, institutions, societies, and economies, and an art of governing one’s self, one’s own subjectivity and emotional life through one’s freely chosen practices. Neoliberalism, that constellation of economic, cultural and social rationalities that lionizes the entrepreneurial capacities of organizations and individuals, becomes governmentality, the conduct of conduct, in the figure of happiness as enterprise. (Binkley, 2014, p. 5)

Though the preceding statement reifies happiness, the point about the complementarity between neoliberalism and the subject’s capacity to self-regulate their emotions is well-made.

Under neoliberalism, the discourse of happiness (as manifest in self-help manuals, academic literature, and the talk of life-coaches and counsellors) presents itself ‘as a task of self-transformation, and as a form of work one undertakes on some obdurate feature within oneself’ (Binkley, 2014, p. 120). The feature in question is the tendency towards
negative thinking and negative emotions. Helpfully disclosing the mentalistic focus of positive psychology, Binkley says that ‘everyday thoughts are understood to determine emotional states’ (2014, p. 30). The idea is that ‘through repetitive intervention in one’s own patterns of daily thought, a new emotional and cognitive disposition is slowly cultivated’ (Binkley, 2014, pp. 42–43). The idea of purposefully intervening in one’s own pattern of thoughts to produce an affective change has a long history; as evidence he juxtaposes excerpts from self-help manuals across three centuries (Binkley, 2014, pp. 126–127). But there is a more fundamental philosophical foundation to positive psychology that Binkley neglects—a position within the philosophy of mind according to which the mind can effect changes in brain states. The psychiatrist and neuropsychologist Jeffrey M. Schwartz is a well-known exponent of this view (Schwartz & Begley, 2002).²

As to the social conditions that the joyful and ‘happy’ subject fits with, Binkley (2014) cleverly makes a connection between Foucault’s analysis of neoliberalism and positive psychology’s desire to inculcate in subjects the capacity for affect-based self-regulation. I will briefly discuss Foucault on neoliberalism before disclosing how Binkley joins the dots with emotional self-regulation.

Almost in passing, in a lecture he gave at the Collège De France in the late 1970s (and now available in The Birth of Biopolitics), Foucault insightfully observes that neoliberal governmentality—generalizing from the American variant of neoliberalism through the work of human capital theorist Gary Becker—positions the economic subject as ‘an entrepreneur of himself’ (Foucault, 2010, p. 226). Neoliberal homo economicus is impelled by an imperative for personal investment—from skills formation and labour market credentials, to providing a nurturing home environment for children. Simply put, it is ‘investment that forms an abilities-machine’ (Foucault, 2010, p. 229). This has been described as investment logic; the net result are ‘entrepreneurs of the self, engaged in self-interested conduct as personal investment’ (Dilts, 2011, p. 139).

The upshot of this logic, Binkley argues, is that neoliberal subjects are simultaneously pressured to become ‘emotional entrepreneurs’ (2014, p. 133). Why? Well, to insulate themselves from the uncertainty and letdowns associated with capitalism’s cyclical that inevitably create a gap between rhetoric and reality of ‘enterprise’. Without the welfare state safety net, uncertainty and risk is the flipside of the creative entrepreneurialism that neoliberalism prizes. The enterprising subject is shaped by a responsibilizing impulse, an exhortation to protect themselves from the emotional consequences of failure by investing in their own ability to cope with emotional turmoil. Whether the failure is due to one’s own choices or systemic factors (such as economic downturns) is immaterial. Here is what Binkley says:

> Where events that might bring on a state of sadness or depression loom unpredictably in the future, it is the responsibility of the happy subject not just to plan for their possibility, but to become proactive in positively producing the capacities within oneself to deal with emotional liabilities, to assess and plan for the exigencies of future emotional states by enriching and fortifying one’s happiness in the present[.] (Binkley, 2014, p. 68)

The discourse of positive psychology thus does not merely accord with, but helps fulfil neoliberalism’s imperatives. The responsibilization that emotional entrepreneurship
entails systemically functions in the service of neoliberalism by producing subjects who are useful to this social system because they are infused with the entrepreneurial spirit—to look after themselves and not to rely on the state—but who are simultaneously insulated from neoliberalism’s emotional effects. They are primed to deal with failure, hardship and loss. This is why under neoliberalism there is pressure to see that ‘emotional life is taken up and practiced as an open-ended enterprise’ (Binkley, 2014, p. 123) such that ‘emotional subjects become strategists of emotional opportunity’ (p. 153). In short, the subject learns emotional self-regulation so as to promote resilience and future-proofing against neoliberal uncertainties.

Educational Implications of Binkley’s Foucauldian Analysis

To recapitulate, Binkley (2014) barely mentions positive education; the topic appears just three times, at less than two of nearly 200 pages. This is perhaps to be expected; his book is about the systemic functions of, and life-world colonization by, positive psychology—rather than positive education per se. What it does mean, however, is that he misses the opportunity to consider the need for a relay (as in a switch-type connector) or a hinge between system and agent on the one hand, and positive education as fulfilling such a function on the other hand. In this section, I will do just that.

Binkley—correctly in my view—maintains that Foucauldian ‘governmentalities assume a relay that circulates from public and institutional policies to the personal awareness of self and practices of private self-monitoring, or from the government of others to the government of oneself’ (2014, p. 46). He identifies ‘a certain gap’ between ‘institutional rationalities’ and processes of subjectivation that shape ‘the subjectivities of real individuals’ that ‘a certain relay, or hinge’ functions to narrow (Binkley, 2014, p. 47). What fills the gap between the enterprising institutional rationality of neoliberalism and the neoliberal emotional entrepreneur? Well, in essence, the subject’s own attempts to become self-regulating, with emotions as their key target.

It is through this gap that the effects of power are relayed from the institutional to the intimate, or from the discourse of experts to the private thoughts and affective states of individuals, as necessarily free actions. It is through the encounter with an object (a bad habit), and through the work that this encounter imposes, that government governs at a distance, that the subject truly becomes the free subject of a certain governmental rationality [...] (Binkley, 2014, p. 48, original emphasis)

But the earlier statement begs the following question: How does the subject learn to focus on transforming negative emotions into positive ones? How do they acquire the necessary orientation to self-examination, introspection and so forth? In his introductory chapter, Binkley (2014) stresses that positive psychology has proliferated in a mediatized society such that this discourse permeates contemporary Western popular culture. Likewise, as another author points out, the proliferation of professional “self-help” experts’ interventions—and we can number positive psychology interventions among these—are symptomatic of the veritable ‘explosion of “care of the self” techniques in society’ that are implicated in ‘the shaping of subjectivity’ (Lazzarato, 2012, p. 95). There is no doubt
that the circulation of positive psychological discourse within society, and its insinuation into popular culture, contributes to the contemporary culture of self-examination and self-care. Institutionally, however, subjectification commences within the education system. Regarding the constitution of the ‘happy’ emotional self-regulating subject, Binkley (2014) fails to identify positive psychology’s institutionalization through positive education within schools, and its impact on the curriculum, preferring instead to remain at the level of the subject’s engagement with this discourse in everyday life. Yet, one of the principal points of the subject’s colonization by this discourse is within school settings.

Education scholars have in fact shown that the culture of the self has deep roots in educational institutions. Drawing on Nicholas Rose, one of Foucault’s sociologist interlocutors, Tina Besley and Michael Peters write of secularized ‘new techniques for normalization and individualization’ stemming from twentieth century psychology, under which ‘we are “obliged to be free”’: self-inspection replaces the confessional as new forms of self-regulation become manifest (Besley & Peters, 2007, p. 16). They continue: ‘Foucault alerts us to the way that modern pedagogies are secular technologies of the self in which self-regulation and self-examination comes to occupy center ground’ (Besley & Peters, 2007, p. 17). The point is well made, for Foucault’s later writings on care of the self and techniques of the self provide new understandings of positive psychology-inflected pedagogies.

One of Foucault’s key insights is that, from the classical era to the present day, self-technologies sink deep cultural hooks into individuals, encouraging them to constitute themselves as subjects. These socially supplied techniques range from ancient Greek practices of self-examination to Christian confession to contemporary therapeutic practices such as mindfulness meditation. The common thread is that they ‘permit individuals to effect … operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom’ and so forth (Foucault, 2000, p. 225). Positive psychology puts an array of technologies of the self at people’s everyday disposal. A prime example is the values inventory, which encourages the individual to clarify their deep-seated personal values (see Kashdan, 2010, pp. 97–99). The inventory functions as an empirical scaffold for a practice with an Ancient Greek cultural taproot, aptly described by Foucault (2000, p. 236) as ‘looking and listening to the self for the truth within’.

In a recent text directed at schoolteachers, Patty O’Grady spells out the connection between self-inspection and emotions in an explanation of positive education:

Positive psychology mobilizes mindfulness of emotion as the starting point and personal control over the emotion as the endpoint. In between, children learn a repertoire of positive psychology strategies … that increase self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-regulation, self-motivation, self-direction, and self-mastery.

(O’Grady, 2013, p. 5)

Prime among the self-technologies that are central to positive (affective) education is the emotion-regulating regimen that I previously mentioned: mindfulness practice. The aim of school-based interventions is to inculcate mindfulness in the schoolchild. Huppert and Johnson offer the following definition:
With mindfulness, we deliberately observe and accept what is happening right now, in our bodies, minds and the world around us, with an attitude of gentle curiosity. (Huppert & Johnson, 2010, p. 265)

A key source for the incorporation of mindfulness training into positive education is Jon Kabat-Zinn’s (1990, 2005) self-help manuals promoting mindfulness meditation—common forms of which include sitting, standing, walking, body-scanning, and hatha yoga variants—and the method of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) that he pioneered. Considerable translational work has been done to render MBSR-style meditative techniques into a pre-packaged modular format amenable to implementation within school settings. A good example is the highly popular nine-week ‘b’ (‘Stop, Breathe and Be’) program developed by the British proponent of mindfulness in education and schoolteacher, Richard Burnett, which he recently aired through a TEDx forum.4

A recent meta-analytic review finds that mindfulness training increases school students’ capacity for ‘emotional self-regulation’ (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 298). To use Besley and Peters’ (2007) words from earlier, mindfulness practice has all of the hallmarks of a secular technology of the self—it is an emotion-regulating self-technology. If Binkley (2014) is correct, the emotional self-transformation this technology allows for accords with neoliberal imperatives.

Cashing out Binkley’s argument this way has its pluses and minuses. The advantage is that it fulfils the need for a ‘relay’ that transmits the neoliberal impulse for emotional self-regulation down to the level of the individual. Positive education—and mindfulness practice in particular—can be construed as just such ‘a hinge, or a point of transfer between governmental strategies and techniques of the self’ (Binkley, 2014, p. 101). The implication is clear: mindfulness practice is a technology of the self that, at least in some regards, serves neoliberalism by producing emotion self-regulating subjects. From this standpoint, positive education dovetails with neoliberalism to produce an educational subject that is susceptible to the imperatives of self-managing, by encouraging schoolchildren to ‘become strategists of emotional opportunity’ (Binkley, 2014, p. 153).

I want to stress that Binkley (2014) does not explicitly state that positive education has relay-like or hinging functions with respect to neoliberalism. Nonetheless, this implication follows directly from his line of argument. There is, however, a significant disadvantage to Binkley’s relay metaphor as it might be applied to the function of schools and education more broadly. His particular take on Foucault—with the accent on control rather than resistance—risks throwing the positive education baby out with the neoliberal bathwater. It risks this because, in my view, learning emotion management strategies at school does not automatically and unambiguously disempower young people (cf. Ecclestone, 2011). Recently I invoked the Platonic notion of pharmakon, being both poison and cure, to argue for the fundamental ambivalence of mindfulness training (Reveley, 2014). Pushing the point further, mindfulness training can contribute—albeit indirectly—to building the capacity to resist neoliberalism through collective action that harnesses the emotions. The affect-based techniques of positive education are not, I will subsequently argue, irretrievably enmeshed in neoliberal governance. Yet, it is hard to reconcile this argument with Binkley’s (2014) account of neoliberalism precisely because the latter provides little space for resistance. This deficiency is due, in part, to the fact that he glosses...
over a fundamental tension—between neoliberal entrepreneurialism and the ethics of self-care—within Foucault’s body of published work. When Binkley does talk about resistance, he mines a non-obvious vein of Foucauldian thought—and one that does not satisfactorily anchor resistance in the bedrock of collective political action. Moreover, he strikes an ironic pose suggestive of the scholar who is more interested in whimsical applications of Foucault than mining his work to provide insight into the interplay between contemporary forms of subjectivity and acts of resistance against neoliberalism. By expanding on each of these points, the next section provides the basis for a reading of Foucault which is not inconsistent with my contention that inculcating mindfulness in schools can provide a platform for the creation of resistant subjectivities that challenge neoliberalism.

**Between Governmentality and the Ethics of Self-care**

By the early 1980s Foucault’s principal focus, in his study of governmentality, had shifted from technologies of power *per se* to self-technologies. In an insightful commentary on the context of the lectures that Foucault gave at the Collège De France (1981–1982) and later published as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Frédéric Gros explains that Foucault ‘complicates’ the study of governmentalities through the exploration of the care of the self (Gros, 2005, p. 512, original emphasis). The theme that comes to the fore in Foucault’s later writings is the constitution of:

the subject itself by means of techniques of the self, rather than being constituted by techniques of domination (Power) or discursive techniques (Knowledge).

(Gros, 2005, p. 512)

Undoing the straightjacket of power, Foucault’s analysis of techniques of the self in Classical Greece, the pre-Christian Roman world, and in the early Christian milieu marks his shift from subjection to subjectivation (Gros, 2005, p. 511). Foucault transposes the concern with subjectivation to the time of his writing, identifying especially in classical Greek ‘practices of the self’ the basis for a new ethics of self-care and, in turn, a resistant form of subjectivity (Gros, 2005, p. 544).

This watershed moment in Foucault’s thinking has led scholars to identify an inherent tension between a subject constituted by technologies of power and knowledge, and an agential self-creating subject. Such concerns were evident even prior to the publication of the Foucault’s Collège de France lecture series in French and then in English. In a path-breaking book titled *Foucault’s Critical Project*, the original French edition of which came out in 1998, Béatrice Han identifies within Foucault’s corpus:

a very strong tension between two interpretations of subjectivation that are inherently conflictual. On the one hand, the subject appears as autonomous, as the source of the problematizations of what he is and as a free actor in the practices through which he transforms himself. On the other, he is shown by the genealogical analyses to be inserted into a set of relations of power and practices that are subjecting to various degrees, and that define the very conditions of possibility for the constitution of self. Foucault’s analysis of the subject is affected by this fundamental ambivalence insofar as it is very difficult to say if,
for him, the subject is constituting or constituted—an ambivalence perhaps symbolized by the lack of any Foucauldian analysis of the difference between subjectivation and subjection. (Han, 2002, p. 172)

The problem of the self-constituting subject versus the constituted subject, and indeed whether the self-constituting subject is simply another type of constituted subject, comes to a head in Foucault’s later Collège De France lectures. Specifically: does Foucault’s Hermeneutics of the Self complement his analysis of the conditions of possibility for, and characteristics of, the neoliberal (biopolitical) subject as outlined in The Birth of Biopolitics? Is the former an extension and elaboration of the latter; or are they at odds with one another? What is the relationship between resistance and self-care? Such questions have occupied Foucauldian scholars with no consensus emerging (Oksala, 2005; Revel, 2014).

Binkley’s (2014) position on these matters is in line with Dilts (2011) who finds complementarity between Foucault’s analysis of neoliberalism and his later work on the ethics of the self. Dilts does not regard these separate strands in Foucault’s work as negating the possibility of resistance. By contrast, I follow McNay (2009) who detects an inconsistency, and a real problem for oppositional politics directed towards challenging neoliberalism. To put it in a nutshell:

there is a troubling political quietism in the idea of ethics of the self which considerably weakens its counter-hegemonic potential vis-à-vis the disruption of neoliberal governance of the self. (McNay, 2009, p. 68)

The crux of the matter is what might be described as responsible autonomy. This flexible concept can be generalized to social life under neoliberalism because it nicely captures the idea of the neoliberal subject’s empowerment to make life-choices as bringing with it the responsibility to self-manage. This responsibility is consonant with the neoliberal figure of the self-reliant entrepreneurial individual who sinks or swims in a marketized society without the institutional bulwarks of the welfare state. Responsible autonomy carries with it a significant inversion: ‘Individual autonomy becomes not the opposite of, or limit to, neoliberal governance, rather it lies at the heart of disciplinary control’ (McNay, 2009, p. 62). Responsible autonomy as a characteristic of the neoliberal subject renders political action to resist control in neoliberalism problematical, because such action presupposes a subject with some measure of autonomy (McNay, 2009, p. 65). To summarize:

The possibilities for challenging neoliberal governance of the self seem inevitably to be diminished by a power that elicits a capacity for responsible self-management in the context of a proliferation of social practices. (McNay, 2009, p. 65)

Drawing on Myers (2008), McNay then comes up with a masterstroke, finding within Foucault’s writings a theoretico-practical foundation not just for individual resistance, but also oppositional collective political action directed against neoliberalism.

A brief overview of Myers’ argument is worthwhile. Seeking to circumscribe ‘the limits of self-care as a strategy of resistance’ (Myers, 2008, p. 135), the author argues that
Foucault supplies ultimately an ‘individualized account of freedom as the care of the self’ (p. 139), which is a recipe for ‘atomization and isolation’ (p. 140). Putting it succinctly:

while the [Foucauldian] individual is located within a particular social context that cannot be abstracted away, the practice of freedom as Foucault theorizes it in these late texts is identified with a reflexive relationship of that situated self to itself. There is little sense of freedom as a collaborative practice undertaken with others. (Myers, 2008, p. 139)

Myers seeks to redirect Foucauldian theorizing towards a relational setting for developing and sustaining ‘associative practices of freedom’ (2008, p. 140, emphasis omitted). The associated form of ethics is not an individualized ethics of self-care, but rather ‘a solidaristic ethics’ (Myers, 2008, p. 142).

McNay anchors this collectivism in an aspect of Foucault’s work quite apart from his work on care of the self: rights discourse. Reviewing what Foucault wrote about rights, including the gay rights movement, the following summary is offered. To the extent that they catalyse action and legitimate otherwise socially marginalized or spoiled identities, ‘rights have a temporary, pragmatic utility for political struggle’ (McNay, 2009, p. 71). That rights discourse is an expendable organizing resource is not the point. As is explained:

The significance of Foucault’s view on rights is that they implicitly contain an account of oppositional agency which perhaps offers a more compelling alternative to the one he outlines in ethics of the self. Whereas, in the latter, opposition to the government of individualization resides in a process of experimental ethical self-formation, in the former, it operates through collective political action and through the strategic appropriation of determinate political forms such as rights discourse. (McNay, 2009, p. 72)

McNay thus provides a Foucauldian associational anchor for a politics of opposition that Myers finds lacking in Foucault. Moreover, McNay maintains that the key was lying right there in Foucault’s writings:

Foucault alludes to this power of collective action and thereby offers a glimpse of a more compelling view of opposition to neoliberal governance of individuals than the solipsistic ethics of the self. (McNay, 2009, p. 72)

I want to now briefly compare the McNay–Myers Foucauldian approach to resistance, in the form of collective political action, to Binkley on resistance.

When, in the last—brief and strikingly titled—chapter ‘Against Asphyxiation’, Binkley finally turns his attention to resisting neoliberalism’s emotional imperatives, the discussion dwindles down a short treatment shot through with irony. Clearly, Binkley does not see his own work as having any element of practical political theory. Instead, he adopts a Rortian ironist stance (albeit without invoking Richard Rorty), styling himself as working in a particular ‘literary mode’ such that his textual strategy is one of ‘provocation and critique’ and what he says about strategies of resistance is merely a ‘ploy’ (Binkley, 2014, p. 175). It is therefore no surprise that resistance to neoliberalism is not a strong theme in Happiness as Enterprise. Moreover, apparently neoliberal governmentality is in any case so strong that:
we are all complicit in our own asphyxiation everyday. We do the work of asphyxiation, we call it our freedom, our enterprise, and our happiness. And we should stop. (Binkley, 2014, p. 175)

Yet, if the habitus is colonized by neoliberal emotion-hooking initiatives, this begs the question: how do we stop? Given that we are ensnared in a trap sunk very deep within ourselves at the emotional level, is stopping even possible? In an attempt to address this question, Binkley (2014, p. 177) presses into service an ill-suited Foucauldian concept: ‘subjugated knowledges’. It is drawn from one of Foucault’s mid-1970s Collège De France lectures published in Society Must Be Defended (Foucault, 2003). Foucault’s main purpose in the lecture (Lecture One) is to propose a genealogical method to challenge scientism, which legitimates certain forms of conceptual knowledge. Foucault’s main targets are proponents of Marxism and psychoanalysis as scientific endeavours, the point being that this scientizing contributes to the subjugation of ‘local knowledges’ (Foucault, 2003, p. 10). Taking one step too far, in what in my view amounts to catachresis, Binkley likens these knowledges to ‘residual temporalities of social conduct’ in the form of ‘the sedimented memory of social time’ (2014, p. 177). This collective memory arguably constitutes a different temporal ordering than the emphasis on personal time management, personal project planning and so forth found in positive psychology. On the last page of his book, Binkley talks of ‘mobilizing and cultivating the entropic, docile temporalities of social time, by seeking a new art of boredom and a new ethics of duration’ (2014, p. 177). This is unelaborated but perhaps he has in mind something approximating the autonomist Marxist strategy of refusal (Berardi, 2009). The difference, of course, is that autonomists upscale refusal to the collective level (Peters & Reveley, 2014). No such upscaling occurs in Binkley’s book. Add to this his unabashed ironist stance, and the net result is a work of politically emasculated sociology, with the sociologist—Binkley—cast in a role akin to an aloof literary critic.

I do not intend to unpick Binkley’s argument about neoliberal temporality by rehearsing the debates about whether neoliberalism constitutes subjects who have a strong future orientation (as Binkley claims) or, conversely, a strong present orientation—as a bracing new study by Hardin (2014) suggests. Rather, I will finish this section with one final critical observation. For Binkley (2014), it is temporality and not emotion that forms the basis for resisting neoliberalism’s colonization of emotional life. Resistance, to the extent he considers it, is not envisaged or theorized as occurring at the collective level. Moreover, Binkley sees neoliberalism’s emotional self-regulation imperatives as producing a wholly negative, disempowering form of strangulating self-entrapment. What this ignores is the centrality of emotion to agential oppositional politics. While McNay (2009) does not recover any of the power of emotion as a political force, she does, as this section has shown, provide the link in Foucault to collective politics. In the next section, I add the final piece of the jigsaw in my analysis of positive education, namely affective education as a resource for political action that opposes neoliberalism.

**Emotional Education, Mindfulness Training and Political Action**

In the wake of the Global Financial Crisis and responses by social protests through groups such as the Occupy movement, educational philosophers have re-emphasized the
importance of people’s emotions to achieving peaceful but framebreaking social transformation. Two notable examples are as follows. Peters (2012, p. 239, emphasis omitted) cogently puts the case for ‘the positive rehabilitation of anger’ that involves marshalling anger into non-violent political action. This suggests there is a need for activists to manage their emotions. A similar conclusion can be drawn from Jackson’s (2014) discussion of emotions and social justice education. The problem with emotional education, Jackson maintains, is that young people can slip into sentimentality in their responses to injustice and inequality under neoliberal globalization. Commenting specifically on reactions to child poverty, but in a way that can be generalized beyond this social problem, Jackson argues that school-based emotional education must be complemented by the sustenance of ‘an a priori rational orientation’ because ‘favoring affect over reason’ is risky (Jackson, 2014, p. 1070). A prime reason is that emotions such as ‘compassion and caring’ are friable; they ‘can be difficult to directly develop, regulate, and sustain’ (Jackson, 2014, p. 1070). Seeking to find a middle ground between inculcating a ‘rational’ (i.e. non-emotional) basis for altruism and (emotional) affect-based moral education, she proceeds to ‘illustrate how moral judgement should precede sympathetic or compassion-based emotional motivations to action, if both can be present at the same time’ (Jackson, 2014, p. 1075). If one accepts that both can be present, channelling Zembylas (2008), the question that then arises is one of:

how, through dialogue, emotional education can be transferred into appropriate moral being and behavioral dispositions, rather than dramatic sentimentality and resentment, or desensitization[.] (Jackson, 2014, p. 1074)

The concern with emotion’s friability and the need for harnessing emotion draws us back to positive education’s emotion management strategies. This is the point at which school-based mindfulness training can be factored back into the equation. It is conceivable that this training can nurture and sustain the type of emotional self-awareness that supports political action to effect transformational social change.

In a discussion of the importance to political activists of emotional training in general, and mindfulness training in particular, Barker, Martin, and Zournazi (2008) bring the matter to a head. Acknowledging that plenty of activists are well aware of the importance of emotions and take steps to deal with them’, does not alter the fact that ‘there seems to be little theory, formal practice, or training in emotions’ (Barker et al., 2008, p. 433). Mindfulness training supplies just such a repertoire. It is particularly useful for helping with ‘the management of difficult emotions’, such as anger and fear, and guards against an emotional downward spiral ‘as forms of sadness and depression can take over the management of emotions and lead to more retroactive states of despair and disillusionment’ (Barker et al., 2008, p. 429). Moreover, there is a link to collective action, because through these techniques the ‘skillful management’ of emotions influences:

the very practice and reality of the situations that face individual members within a group, and how this translates in connection and relationship with broader social and political actions. (Barker et al., 2008, p. 433)

Interestingly, the authors derive a set of emotional self-regulation actions and skills that bears a striking resemblance to Foucauldian self-technologies: keeping an emotion
diary, caring for the body, doing at least one pleasurable thing a day, introspecting and reflecting on emotions (Barker et al., 2008, p. 428). Their position is that these self-technologies should be used to transform anger ‘into a tactically appropriate compassionate action’ (Barker et al., 2008, p. 425). It is not my intention to debate the finer points of negative emotions and positive emotions, of anger versus compassion, in radical politics. Rather, their work is important because it provides a steppingstone to seeing school-based mindfulness training as having liberatory potential. In sum, teaching techniques of emotional self-awareness in schools can help to foster the development of an emotionally aware, resistant subjectivity that carries beyond the school gates and is eminently congruent with collective efforts to challenge neoliberalism.

Concluding Remarks

The Myers–McNay reading of Foucault helps extricate the Binkley-type analysis of contemporary emotional life from the dead-end conclusion that learning to emotionally self-manage is always in the service of neoliberalism. If Foucault’s writings yield the materials for theorizing collective political action, the next step is to identify the embedded personal and shared resources on which such action depends. The learnt capacity to manage and channel emotions is part of that repertoire. From this standpoint, methods of positive education such as school-based mindfulness training can be reframed as not being irremediably negative. Of course, there is always a risk when an enlightenment-seeking technique—such as mindfulness meditation—is scientized and pressed into service within educational settings. The risk under neoliberal governmentality is that:

the passion for self-discovery is translated into a tedious pedagogy, in which one’s desire for the natural and the authentic is mobilised in the most unnatural rituals of indoctrination. (Prozorov, 2007, p. 58)

To the extent that school-based mindfulness meditation is not merely an individualized pursuit but rather a resource that can support collective resistance to neoliberalism, positive education ceases to be a tedious pedagogy.

Anyone engaged in Foucault-inspired critique must be careful not to tar all positive education self-technologies with the same brush. If through mindfulness training schoolchildren are introduced to techniques of emotional self-management that spill over to political activism outside of school, this aspect of positive education is not merely preparing them for life under neoliberalism. Rather, it is providing them with the emotional skillset to resist this governance regime. In critical-theoretic terms, school-based mindfulness training ramifies beyond the boundaries of the school to release the resistant potential of the educational subject as a creative, socially transformative force. Research is now required to find out the extent to which this effect occurs not just in theory but in practice.

Notes

1. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbC18wFkHNI
2. Schwartz insists that ‘matter is but a uniquely objective and substantial form of mind’ (Schwartz & Begley, 2002, p. 35). Using Searle’s (2004) terminology, Schwartz is an idealist and hence can
be pigeonholed within a singular philosophy of mind camp: monism. To the extent that Schwartz used mindfulness therapy to treat obsessive-compulsive disorder, he is a key medicalizing vector by which Buddhist mindfulness was transposed down to the ‘psy’ disciplines including positive psychology.

3. On the relevance to education of Foucault’s analysis of truth-telling in the context of the Ancient Greek practice of parrhesia, see Besley and Peters (2007).

4. See Burnett’s talk at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mlk6xD_xAQ

5. Responsible autonomy derives from humanistic systems thinking developed in England at the Tavistock Institute. After appearing in Trist and Bamforth (1951, p. 6), the term then entered labour process theory. This was through a modification by Friedman (1986) who depicts responsible autonomy as a labour control strategy.

6. On irony, see Rorty (1999).

7. For a discussion of neoliberalism, time and schooling, see Kontopodis (2012).

References

Agamben, G. (2009). What is an apparatus? (D. Kishik and S. Pedatella, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Barker, C., Martin, B., & Zournazi, M. (2008). Emotional self-management for activists. Reflective Practice, 9, 423–435.

Berardi, F. (2009). The soul at work: From alienation to autonomy. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Besley, T., & Peters, M. A. (2007). Subjectivity and truth: Foucault, education, and the culture of self. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Binkley, S. (2014). Happiness as enterprise: An essay on neoliberal life. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Boniwell, I. (2012). Positive psychology in a nutshell: The science of happiness. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Boniwell, I., & Ryan, L. (2012). Personal well-being lessons for secondary schools: Positive psychology in action for 11 to 14 year olds. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Denison, J., & Avner, Z. (2011). Positive coaching: Ethical practices for athlete development. Quest, 63, 209–227.

Dilts, A. (2011). From ‘entrepreneur of the self’ to ‘care of the self’: Neo-liberal governmentality and Foucault’s ethics. Foucault Studies, 12, 130–146.

Ecclestone, K. (2011). Emotionally-vulnerable subjects and new inequalities: The educational implications of an ‘epistemology of the emotions’. International Studies in Sociology of Education, 21, 91–113.

Ehrenreich, B. (2009). Bright-sided: How the relentless promotion of positive thinking has undermined America. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company.

Flook, L., Smalley, S. L., Kitil, M. J., Galla, B. M., Kaiser-Greenland, S., Locke, J. ... Kasari, C. (2010). Effects of mindful awareness practices on executive functions in elementary school children. Journal of Applied School Psychology, 26, 70–95.

Foucault, M. (2000). Technologies of the self. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), Ethics: Subjectivity and truth – essential works of Foucault 1954–1984. London: Penguin Books.

Foucault, M. (2003). “Society must be defended”: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975–76. (D. Macey, Trans.). New York, NY: Picador.

Foucault, M. (2010). The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978–79. (G. Burchell, Trans.). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Friedman, A. (1986). Developing the managerial strategies approach to the labour process. Capital and Class, 10, 97–124.

Gros, F. (2005). Course context. In M. Foucault (Ed.), The hermeneutics of the subject: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1981–1982. (G. Burchell, Trans.). New York, NY: Picador.
Han, B. (2002). Foucault’s critical project: Between the transcendental and the historical. (E. Pile, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hardin, C. (2014). Neoliberal temporality: Time-sense and the shift from pensions to 401(k)s. American Quarterly, 66, 95–118.

Huppert, F. A., & Johnson, D. M. (2010). A controlled trial of mindfulness training in schools: The importance of practice for an impact on well-being. The Journal of Positive Psychology, 5, 264–274.

Hyland, T. (2014). Mindfulness-based interventions and the affective domain of education. Educational Studies, 40, 277–291.

Jackson, L. (2014). ‘Won’t somebody think of the children?’ Emotions, child poverty, and post-humanitarian possibilities for social justice education. Educational Philosophy and Theory, 46, 1069–1081.

Joyce, A., Etty-Leal, J., Zazryn, T., & Hamilton, A. (2010). Exploring a mindfulness meditation program on the mental health of upper primary children: A pilot study. Advances in School Mental Health Promotion, 3, 17–25.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of our body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness. New York, NY: Bantam Dell.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005). Coming to our senses: Healing ourselves and the world through mindfulness. New York, NY: Hyperion.

Kashdan, T. (2010). Curious? Discover the missing ingredient to a fulfilling life. New York, NY: Harper.

Kontopodis, M. (2012). Neoliberalism, pedagogy and human development: Exploring time, mediation and collectivity in contemporary schools. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lau, N., & Hue, M. (2011). Preliminary outcomes of a mindfulness-based programme for Hong Kong adolescents in schools: Well-being, stress and depressive symptoms. International Journal of Children’s Spirituality, 16, 315–330.

Lazzarato, M. (2012). The making of the indebted man. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

McDonald, M., & O’Callaghan, J. (2008). Positive psychology: A Foucauldian critique. The Humanistic Psychologist, 36, 127–142.

McNay, L. (2009). Self as enterprise: Dilemmas of control and resistance in Foucault’s The Birth of Biopolitics. Theory, Culture & Society, 26, 55–77.

Meiklejohn, J., Phillips, C., Freedman, M. L., Griffin, M. L., Biegel, G., Roach, A., … Saltzman, A. (2012). Integrating mindfulness training into K-12 education: Fostering the resilience of teachers and students. Mindfulness, 3, 291–307.

Myers, E. (2008). Resisting Foucauldian ethics: Associative politics and the limits of the care of the self. Contemporary Political Theory, 7, 125–146.

O’Grady, P. (2013). Positive psychology in the elementary school classroom. New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company.

Oksala, J. (2005). Foucault on freedom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Peters, M. (2012). Looking forward in anger. Educational Philosophy and Theory, 44, 238–244.

Peters, M., & Reveley, J. (2014). Retrofitting Drucker: Knowledge work under cognitive capitalism. Culture and Organization, 20, 135–151.

Prozorov, S. (2007). Foucault, freedom and sovereignty. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Revel, J. (2014). Identity, nature, life: Three biopolitical deconstructions. In V. Lemm & M. Vatter (Eds), The government of life: Foucault, biopolitics, and neoliberalism. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.

Reveley, J. (2013). Enhancing the educational subject: Cognitive capitalism, positive psychology and well-being training in schools. Policy Futures in Education, 11, 538–548.

Reveley, J. (2014). School-based mindfulness training and the economisation of attention: A Stieglerian view. Educational Philosophy and Theory. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/00131857.2014.914880

Rorty, R. (1999). Contingency, irony, and solidarity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schwartz, J. M., & Begley, S. (2002). The mind and the brain: Neuroplasticity and the power of mental force. New York, NY: Regan Books.
Searle, J. (2004). *Mind: A brief introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York, NY: Free Press.
Seligman, M. E. P., Ernst, R. M., Gillham, J., Reivich, K., & Linkins, M. (2009). Positive education: Positive psychology and classroom interventions. *Oxford Review of Education*, 35, 293–311.
Sheldon, K. M., Kashdan, T. B., & Steger, M. F. (2011). *Designing positive psychology: Taking stock and moving forward*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Trist, E. L., & Bamforth, K. W. (1951). Some social and psychological consequences of the longwall method of coal-getting. *Human Relations*, 4, 3–38.
Zembylas, M. (2008). Trauma, justice and the politics of emotion: The violence of sentimentality in education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 29, 1–17.

**Note on Contributor**

James Reveley is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Business at the University of Wollongong (NSW, Australia). His research interests include the changing nature of education, work and organization in financialized capitalism. He is currently developing a Foucauldian critique of positive education. His work has been published in journals such as *Educational Philosophy and Theory, Human Relations, Organization: The Critical Journal, Science and Society*, and *Policy Futures in Education*. Email: jreveley@uow.edu.au