Chapter 7: Conclusion

How do youngsters\(^1\) experience life and find their selves in a rapidly liberalising and globalised, urban economy that envisages particular roles and responsibilities for them? How do education, and other developmental projects related to childhood, fit them into this context and impact their lives? How does ‘childhood’ come to be imagined within this context and what structural limitations do these developmental networks and projects place on children’s lives? How do youngsters negotiate these structural conditions of ‘risk’, insecurity and rapid change, in ‘staying relevant’ and making sense of their lives? What are the ‘skills’ that are considered to be relevant to manage these conditions, and whose lives do they matter to? These are some of the questions that the thesis has attempted to answer. While it may not have been able to fully address all of these questions, the prime concern was to explore this process of contestations and negotiations made by youth, and present an understanding of the new forms of subjectivities and social conditions that emerge in this process.

At its crux, the thesis has sought to explore the discourses of self-help and training that frame the life of young adults and children today, and the responses they make to these changed structural conditions, in order to stay relevant. It has tried to show how, far from being progressive and benevolent interventions and guarantors of educational or economic mobility, skills intervention such as LSE entail active self-work on the

\(^1\) I use the term ‘youngster’ here in reference to the entire group of individuals in my study – both middle class and non-middle class, including the high school going adolescents, and the young adult facilitators and managers of the LSPs – all of whom seemed to be commonly grappling with the challenge of establishing identities, livelihoods and social roles and positions for themselves.
part of these youth identified to be ‘at-risk’, to produce and fit themselves in line with the ideas of ‘normal’, ‘successful’, ‘educated’ or ‘employable’ circulated by these discursive practices.

The attempt has been to show how, as ‘technologies of government’, LSE contributes to the establishment of a universal idea of childhood and development. Within such forms of governmental thinking, childhood comes to be considered only in relation to the future possibilities it offers to prepare youngsters in the forms of economic participation and citizenship desired by authorities (Burman, 2007; Finn et al., 2010; Rose, 1999). Thus, ‘normal’ childhood itself comes to be established in relation to the ‘life skills’ of self-regulation, responsibility and adaptability considered important for socio-economic participation under conditions of globalisation and neoliberalism. Being ‘successful’ and ‘educated’ are also thus defined in relation to this, and LSPs become the determiners of whether the appropriate educational and developmental status have been attained.

Paradoxically, it is also this very intervention, meant to buffer youngsters against the post-modern conditions of ‘risk’ that put them ‘at-risk’, by defining certain social outcomes, such as education or employment as a matter of individual skills, and further placing certain expectations for behaviour that may be contextually inappropriate. Further, while all the world’s children are seen to be at a potential ‘risk’ for failing to achieve these supposedly normal developmental tasks of school completion and employment, it is some children who come under the gaze of authorities, based on the ways in which ‘normal development’ and ‘success’ get defined. As shown in the previous chapters, with normal development equated with middle class trajectories of socialisation, educational attainment, employment, and socio-cultural capital that helps
them ‘succeed’ as prescribed by developmental thinking, it is the non-middle class children, who face structural disadvantages and possess an alternative set of cultural capital, that are seen to be ‘at-risk’ for failure.

LSPs therefore become the tools by which this group is sought to be trained and reshaped in middle class ways of being. Ultimately, what this amounts to is a disregard for the multiplicities of childhood, and an establishment of a universal norm, based on some Western, white, middle class norms for behaviour. Thus, it results in a homogenisation of children’s experiences without recognition of their differing lifeworlds, despite the rhetoric cultural contextualisation of the programmes.

Thus, in critically reading the practice of LSE, the thesis attempts to present an alternative account of these psycho-educational interventions, as governmental projects of calculation and regulation, in the place of dominant discourses that view it as programmes for ‘empowerment’. That is, it tries to show how there is a new development within governmental thinking by which class differences come to be conceptualised, discursively, as ‘psychological risks’, by equating non-psychological, structurally-determined life conditions such as poverty and unemployment with other ‘risks’ such as impulsiveness or other personal qualities such as sociability. All of these conditions are also positioned as equally addressable through skills training. Further, the thesis also tries to show how there is an extension of the ‘psychological gaze’, through its reconceptualisation as education and training. Extended to a population (i.e., working class or lower class) that would have previously been considered ‘normal’ (due to a lack of any specific form of clinical disorder), LSE allows this population to be placed under the scrutiny and regulation of various developmental, clinical and educational authorities in order to be corrected and ‘cured’.
However, this critique of the programmes is not to deny the importance of the actual skills (of being aware of oneself, critically thinking, decision making and so on) for personal growth and development, or the need for social stability and order. It is in order to raise further our understanding of critical practice that I have sought to undertake this critique, examining how such changes in the personal self contribute to, or have relevance for, the lives of children such as Sonia and Valli (ex-students of IP’s LSP, who currently work as tele-callers with Vodafone), or others in a government schools like them; and to the lives of facilitators such as Sonu and Bharath who aspire to a middle class life. Examining these programmes critically, I have sought to examine how far do these skills and programmes succeed in ‘empowering’ these groups, and where do they fail.

Thus, in critically examining the ‘skills’ supposedly offered to these children, and what it contributes to their lives, I try to show how ‘skills’ become a euphemism for certain attitudes and mannerisms of individual responsibility, adaptability and flexibility, in the face of growing socio-economic insecurity that characterises this era of advanced and expanding capitalism, and the intensified development of global service economies in the peripheries. That is, I attempt to show how they neither resemble any conventional training in ‘skills’, such as learning to ride a bike, or more unconventional ones, such as learning to compose an argument, that may offer possibilities for being taught as ‘steps’, and for acquisition through practice. Rather, what the training in these skills amounts to is a prior ‘scripting’ of life’s responses to contingent circumstances that cannot be planned.

Thus, a related observation the thesis makes is on how these programmes are no different in their underlying rationalities from earlier
forms of behaviouristic models for learning that sought to shape individuals through a regimen of stimulus-response conditioning and practice (i.e., through the repeated elicitation of a response desired and designated as appropriate by authorities, to a specific stimulus). However, behavioural disciplining here does not take on an overt character of forced compliance with rules and regulations, or physical and corporal forms of punishment, but subtle and discursive forms of regulation and ‘self-work’ (i.e., as practices such as participation and self-introspection through which individuals are led to identify problems with their own selves and knowledge, and work upon it).

Thus, the thesis tries to show how progressive pedagogies of participation and experiential learning also offer possibilities for the establishment of relation of power and control, when translated on field. This observation, on the nature of self-directed and participative learning as also power-laden, contrary to the general understanding of such models as progressive and liberal, has also been made by other scholars such as Coe and Natasi (2006) Fendler (1998), Peters (2001), and others. However, in this study I have attempted to go beyond a conceptual and theoretical account of the circulation of power through these forms of learning, to illustrate the mechanisms of its operation. That is, through rich empirical descriptions that break down each component of its practice (i.e., by examining individually, the curriculum, the design, the language, features of its pedagogy, such as the creation of a safe environment for practice, activity and reflection), the attempt has been to explain how each of these components embed relations of power and control. Further, drawing on observation of its classroom transactions with the context of the larger, traditional school system, I try to show how
these techniques get incorporated into the conventional structures of power within the classroom.

With stability, economic growth and development in the current global neoliberal context being equated with values of individual enterprise, self-regulation and active participation to ensure ‘success’ in life, these are the ‘skills’ that LSPs train youth in, even in a context such as India. Here, despite the reproduction of traditional authoritarian pedagogic relationships within the life skills classes, and the traditional goals of socialisation in ‘obedience’ and ‘respect’, what students are actually prepared for is to take on greater responsibility for one’s own life, and for one’s own outcomes of schooling. Further, what I try to show is how these ‘skills’ are those that seek to do away with the pain, anger, stress, desire and other emotions that may emerge in the face of adversity (e.g., poverty, discrimination, unfair conditions of work, insecurity of life conditions, etc., that in turn may lead to associated behavioural expressions such as violence, drop-out from school, poor performance at work). Thus constructing these conditions as a problem of individual deficits in skills, programmes such a LSE continue to enforce certain traditional socialisation goals of conformity, and even certain patriarchal norms, in order to ensure the stability of the state, economy, society and family.

Thus, even with traditional practices and orientation to education that does not envisage the active, self-directing learner, the underlying rationales of programmes remain one of responsibilising the individual to take greater onus for oneself. While scholars such as Arthi Sriprakash (2010), Nita Kumar (2007), and Padma Sarangapani (2003) have made a note of the mismatch between modern pedagogies of self-directed learning, and the Indian rural and provincial contexts of education, which
is characterised by traditional expectation for discipline and adult control over knowledge, I have attempted to highlight how the neoliberal values of enterprise and responsibility still find space within this context. Through a close examination of the underlying rationalities of teachers and facilitators, I have tried to show how these new values seep into these new contexts by inserting itself into older routines and practices of schooling and pedagogy.

Further, I have also tried to extend this analysis to explain why and how such modern practices and pedagogies of learning ‘fail’\(^2\) within the Indian context, as has been noted already by these other scholars. That is, I have tried to present the middle class sensibilities and techniques of socialisation embedded within these programmes that are contributing factors for this failure of translation. Based on practices such as specific usages of language and reason, and demanding agency and active effort on the part of the learner in making one’s self and establishing a definitive identity for oneself (Laureau, 2000; 2002; Vincent and Ball, 2007), these were cultural practices that were unfamiliar and unavailable to children and teachers within government schools, and therefore created obstacles for practice.

However, I point to the ‘failure’ of the programmes in a different sense as well. That is, despite the rhetoric on training children and other disadvantaged young adults in a middle class set of cultural practices and ways of being that will ensure ‘success’, what gets actually transacted is a narrow set of ‘skills’ for a new class of workers within the new, expanding, urban, service economy. Thus, I try to highlight how it is this

\(^2\) By which I mean, do not attain their desired goals of developing responsibilised individuals. Here I agree with Kipnis (2008) who argues that neoliberalism may be seen as a “failed set of ideologies” that create the individuated, disciplined subject, or ensure the realisation of fully functional market-society and growth.
narrow band of ‘skills’ that are considered as ‘life skills’ (which, despite its expansive title as ‘skills for all of life’, does not in fact cater to many practical kinds of knowledge required for life). An example of this was Devesh’s programme. While arguing that only some of the 12-14 million graduates every year become engineers, he pointed out that others required skills for jobs such as plumbers and drivers. Yet, his programme did not cater to this need for domain specific knowledges and technical skills required by many students, and instead focused on soft skills, such as effective communication and conflict resolution. Two points are significant to note here: first, operating their programmes within government and aided schools for disadvantaged groups, arguments put forth by managers such as Devesh reveal the class-lines along which children are sought to be reproduced and trained for the economy.

Second, despite the emphasis on technical jobs such as plumbing or driving, the focus in on a narrow set of training in ‘soft skills’ of polite communication and personal etiquette that caters to the increasing need for low-end service sector workers in the urban economy, such as shop-floor workers, sales and customer support executives, BPO workers, and tele-callers. In fact, with the growth of newer service-sector industries within the urban economy in response to middle class consumer demands (with India closely following international trends), even older technical-professional/salaried jobs, of drivers and plumbers, have now been redesigned as services requiring soft skills. New business models, from on-demand taxi services (e.g., Uber, TaxiForSure, Ola, etc.) to plumbing services (e.g., Handyman), that have professionalised these spaces to suit middle class tastes, have become the nodal agencies taking the bulk of

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3 The CEO of IP
these orders within the urban space, thereby, forcing individual drivers and plumbers to comply with its codes for personal conduct.

Thus, soft skills and life skills training have a specific role to play within cosmopolitan cities and towns, like Bangalore, with a large middle class population. Targeted at group of youth with just enough ‘basic education’ (i.e., tenth or twelfth class education – the educational standards that are also considered adequate for ‘development’ by international developmental movements such as EFA and the Millennium Development Goals [MDG]), they appear to be preparing them for these new roles within the service sector. With these workers being the ones who primarily come in contact with the choosy middle class consumer and ‘clients’ of big service sector multi-national firms (like Vodafone and Shell), personal etiquettes of communication and conflict management thus become a significant managerial issues for such firms. (In fact, an examination of the National Skills Development Corporation’s [NSDC] reports on the need for skills development in India, in the various sectors also shows a similar kind of trend with respect to job profiles ‘soft skills’ and education. The report identifies those who have completed just basic education as low-end service sector workers, requiring this particular training in ‘soft skills’, while those higher up the order in technical-managerial roles are identified as requiring training, mostly, only in technical-managerial knowledges).

Investments in ‘life skills’ training, therefore, finds interest not just with international development agencies, and national governments, but also with large multinational corporations (e.g., GMR; DLF ) that offer these skills as an investment in a potential future workforce. What they offer, however, to these new class of workers (who neither belong to the informal or traditional sectors such as petty trade or agriculture, like their
parents, nor to fully professional white-collar jobs, like the managers of these life skills organisations), is a glimpse of the ‘new middle class’ life to which these groups may aspire to. For as seen in the case of the children, but more evidently, in the case of the facilitators, they bring these subaltern groups, no doubt, in contact with the elite sections of the middle class, and expose them to their lifestyles and consumptive practices, personal accessories and social media knowledge. However, they remain inadequate in transferring the tacit attitudes, mannerisms and behaviours that mark one as ‘middle class’, itself. While they develop ‘how to’ knowledge of these skills (i.e., as algorithms or ‘scripts’), what they essentially fail to transfer is the ways in which the middle class ‘own’ these skills, having a phronetic understanding of how to apply them in situationally-appropriate ways that come from a deep familiarity of these cultural contexts, such as middle class homes, schools, and workplaces.

Thus, while, trained in the ‘how to’ knowledge of these skills, what the non-middle class facilitators and children receive instead, is a narrow understanding of specific behaviours expected of them for their future job roles. Further, they also fail to respond to the needs of the children and facilitators from these non-middle class backgrounds itself - that is, by training them with the right kinds of knowledges and skills required to pursue their own dreams of becoming IAS officers, or completing a PhD. While they present a picture of individual effort, goal setting and personal skills as the route to these middle class spaces, they fail to provide the actual forms of cultural knowledges and training required to access and succeed within these spaces.

Thus, while this creates a sense of aspiration, hope and illusion of entry into middle class spaces, it also limits and slots them into specific roles, with too little cultural knowledge for upward mobility, and too
much exposure to urban, middle class lifestyles, and a lack of skills for alternate livelihoods or return to their rural homes. For some (facilitators), at best, it offered a space to occupy the long period of wait that marks the lives of these young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds before they could obtain certain other secure jobs such as government school teachers, jobs at hospitals, or could apply for further studies.4

Finally, in addition to laying out these insights drawn from certain empirical observations made on field, the thesis also tries to present a possible theoretical account of the nature of power and its circulation through such psycho-educational interventions. Using data from the field I try to make a conceptual argument for how these programmes open up possibilities for social reproduction or subjectification, and also to social transformation and change. That is, in trying to postulate an explanation for how actors strategise in situating themselves within the frames of reference provided by the dominant discourses of neoliberalism, I also try to show how they creatively appropriate, modify and contest these discourses. Thus, I try to make a case for how these efforts prevent a straightforward reproduction of their class identities and positions.

While under these conditions of neoliberalism, all of life is constructed as a matter of individual choices or deficits in skills, and even adults find themselves ‘at-risk’ of failing to responsibly and reflexively remake their lives, I try to show neoliberalism’s effects itself are uneven and heterogenous, as local actors modify its cultural discourses and practices. Thus, the attempt in presenting a theoretical account of ‘strategic opportunism’ has been both, to go beyond theories of resistance

4 This period of ‘wait’ for secure jobs has also been discussed by other scholars such as has been discussed also by Jeffrey [2010] and Vasavi [2013-2014] who have noted other strategies adopted by these groups to ‘pass time’.
and reproduction that pay insufficient attention to how social actors are constantly producing possibilities for change. However, it has also been to argue, unlike critical theory, for the real, material limitations for emancipation. Arguing that actors ‘opportunistically’ act, in some sense ‘blind’ to what their efforts will lead them to in the long run, while attempting to strategically position themselves within the dominant discourses that frame their understanding of their own lives, I have tried to show how they may contribute to the validation of the dominant discourses themselves, and thus also to processes of social reproduction.

On the other hand, in showing how, in this process of responding to dominant discourses, they also modify it partly (e.g., the discourses that construct them itself), I argue that they also create the material possibilities for transformation by bringing certain shifts within the dominant discourse and its discursive practices. Based on this observation, I also try to put forth an argument on how the field (e.g., of LSE; of neoliberalism; etc.) itself gets formed out of such responses of various actors, agents and institutions, in the long run, made in staying ‘relevant’. (For example, I see the reconceptualisation of psychotherapeutic practices, and the emergence of educational and skills-based interventions such as LSE, as a response that emerged from the local conditions of unrest in countries such as the USA. As shown earlier, people’s actions and movements against the powerful models of medicalisation and pathologisation seemed to have evoked a response at an institutional level, forcing a shift in discourse from that of pathology to skills deficits, in characterising social problems such as unemployment and poverty. Similarly, with reference to my study, I see actors’ efforts, at appropriation of programmes such as LSE to meet local ends, as an indication of how neoliberal ideologies and discourses get modified and
contextualised to local conditions. This, I argue, is what leads to the multiplicities of neoliberalism’s effects and multiplicities in its modes of governance [Kašcák and Pupala, 2011]).

In presenting this argument, I also try to show how all lives are at ‘risk’ of becoming ‘irrelevant’ within the current context, from that of the middle class managers to the children in government schools. Thus, instead of just problematising the lives of the poor and disadvantaged, as is the case with much social research, I also try to show how privileged groups such as the middle class managers must also strategise to stay relevant, by carving out the life skills project as a niche identity for themselves (within the context of an expanding middle class). As ‘socially conscious entrepreneurs’ with right expertise to guide others, I show how they use the life skills project to mark themselves out both from other salaried, non-socially conscious colleagues and friends from the middle class, who are yet to reinvent themselves as ‘social entrepreneurs’; as well as from those aspiring to reach a middle class status, such as the facilitators.

Similarly, children and facilitators from the non-middle class, also seek to position themselves through these programmes and their discourses in ways that will allow them to become ‘relevant’ within the current economy and culture, within which they are otherwise considered as ‘lacking skills and education’. Thus, while the skills discourse has become ubiquitous and much-debated within literature, the thesis also tries to bring a more nuanced discussion on this phenomenon noting how these discourses affect various groups of youngsters differently, and how

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5 Such an explanation for neoliberalism differs from those such as Kipnis (2008; who I draw on above), who see it as a diminishing ideology, and posit alternative explanations for developments of audit cultures in diverse contexts such as China and the USA.
they appropriate these discourses in different ways to make sense of their lives.

Yet, while I have been able to highlight the nature of the skills emphasised in the present economy and their relevance to the lives of individuals, more from a macro-level analysis of the programmes, through observations made of organisational perspectives and practices and their linkages to larger policies and discourses, an in depth examination of the lives and aspirations of these young actors and life trajectories has however not been possible. While, some bit of this was attempted by speaking to students and the facilitators, the focus on unpacking the discourses of LSE itself, did not allow room for me to track the lives of these young adults in more depth, in order to understand the linkages between skill development, identities, aspirations and community change. This requires further exploration.

A further exploration of the caste and gender dynamics of the new class sought to be formed, and of the caste and gender dynamics of the organisations themselves, also need to be taken, which can also help shed some light on the demographics and social experiences of youth who get targeted for the low-end service sector economy. An analysis of these social dimensions of the programmes, particularly in relation to caste, class, educational and social networks through which certain groups of youth get identified for training, while other young adult professionals find access to influential global networks of funding and entrepreneurial training can also help shed light on the ways in which these programmes enter contexts such as India.

Another important question to track would be to understand the long term effects of such programmes by observing the ‘graduates’ of these programmes after school, in workplaces, and as they negotiate a
series of temporary jobs or roles (as seen with some of the facilitators) through a life-history approach. In addition, the linkages they maintain with the temporal, insecure, new service economy and their homes back in the rural economy as a buffer against the insecurities of these risks also needs to be explored in the light of these new skills and training they receive, and its impacts on the transformation of the rural. As several of the facilitators also pointed out to me, there were also personal plans to take back these new forms of skilling and training to the small towns and rural villages that they come from. Exploring how these new avenues for skills development and training open up new possibilities within these provincial spaces and bring these distant populations in connection with global practices and discourses can provide further interesting insights on the nature of social transformation and reproduction; as will the understanding of the rural-urban linkages sustained by these new groups of workers, and their community relations back home, following the exposure to ‘modernity’ and new forms of personal and social knowledges.

Finally, while the thesis started with the aim of understanding the psychological impact of the programmes on the lives children, this has not been possible here, due to the nature of the field and the programmes. However, this is a significant point to explore, in order to understand the impact of these new forms of training and skills in relating to the self and its impact of mental health and well-being of individuals. Ultimately, it is also important to give thought to the nature of training and education that can offer possibilities for critical practice. How can a critical awareness of self be developed that might address cultural differences, and yet not seek to homogenise the ends to which is it applied? What is the nature of these forms of critical knowledge that engage one in an enhanced
understanding of one’s relation with oneself and the world, and how can we transact these knowledges without falling prey to the dominant discourses that shape our understanding itself?

While these questions are significant and will need further research and analysis, the thesis has tried to contribute to the governmentality studies and critical literature on childhood and education, and on the outcomes of participative and experiential learning programmes within the Indian context by,

a. providing an empirically rich description of the mechanisms and practices of disciplining through participative learning;
b. empirically identifying the gaps in how participative and experiential learning programmes such as LSE ‘fail’ to transfer the desired knowledges within provincial contexts of Indian schools;
c. empirically showing how new values of enterprise and responsibility are circulated even despite the modifications to pedagogy in the Indian context;
d. attempting to posit an alternative account of social change and reproduction through the concept of ‘strategic opportunism’;
e. and finally, by examining how even privileged groups such as the middle class are ‘at-risk’ within the current context, and are also forced to ‘strategically opportunise to stay relevant.’