Does education need the concept of class like a fish needs a bicycle, or is class more like water in the fish-in-water problem?

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In this paper I want to take up two aspects of the use of ‘class’ in education research and policy.² The first concerns class as a tool of policy analysis, where I will illustrate some problems of working without or with this concept, and argue for its continued use, but use alongside a dialogue about what is erased by it. The second concerns the relevance of class in understanding identity-making and trajectories through school, where I will talk about where and how some form of class self-consciousness becomes part of this process in Australia.

In the 1970s in Australia, a graffiti could be seen plastered over walls around the country: ‘a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle’. It was an assertion of independence from an emerging women’s movement³. And one academic form of this new movement was a wholesale reassessment and attack on the male-centred tools that had dominated analyses in different fields including in particular, the concept of social class. (Sargent, 1981; Spender, 1980) When researchers went back to this literature with an intent to start with women, they not only found that old neat classificatory hierarchies and binaries of labour no longer held up, but they began to turn new attention to the labour of non-paid work in the home, and, even more radically, to question whether labour as such was to remain as the lynchpin of understanding exploitation, alienation and inequalities. (Roberts, 1981; Ve Henricksen, 1981)

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² I have argued more broadly about class analysis and its problems and uses in earlier papers, see (Yates, 2000b, 2000c; Yates & McLeod, 2000d) and in a new book with Julie McLeod (McLeod & Yates, 2006). )
³ Though it mainly represented one particular separatist strand in that movement.
Australia’s feminist movement in the 1970s had strong roots in labour history\(^4\), so despite the evident theoretical problems in being able to pin down in an explicit way a gender-sensitive form of class analysis (and despite, the definite tensions involved in ‘the unhappy marriage of marxism and feminism’ (Sargent, 1981)), many of the feminists who worked in education still worked with some old categories, albeit, rather unexamined ones, in order to hang on to ways in which the experience of girls and boys from ‘working class’ or ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds was not the same as that of their middle class peers. That is, for many feminists who worked in education, the concept and analysis of class, was troubled by the initial encounter with feminism, but at the same time, for practical purposes, on this dimension at least (it was less good on race), there was a strong understanding that an essentialized attention to gender didn’t work either.

We need to think of gender and class not just as something we might study empirically, but as theoretical tools we draw on to decide who and how we study, and that also shape what we notice in our empirical work And we need also to consider how these concepts are used instrumentally in policies or reforming practices: used to mark out what matters, what needs to be done or changed, even what data needs to be collected.

In this first part of my paper, I want to consider the issue of gender/class specifically in relation to education policy and to the work that concepts do, and to make an argument (1) that we should not get rid of concepts simply because they are imperfect; and (2) that we should not be looking for a perfect template but looking to provide ways of seeing and also to keep ways of being critical of those ways of seeing in play.

First consider grand narratives and their productive effects (and ‘productive’ includes making some things invisible). In Australia, there is much central steering of schooling resources and practices, and this is underpinned by statistical data collection of various kinds. Over the past three decades, ‘class’ (in the more limited sense of ‘SES’, ‘poverty’ or ‘disadvantage’) and ‘gender’ have each experienced their moments in the sun in terms of

\(^4\) In my own PhD on *Curriculum theory and non-sexist education: a study of Victorian policy and practice 1975-1985*, I found that many of the women who were active in Victorian ‘equal opportunity’ work in the 1970s and 1980s had backgrounds in unions and union politics, and had been sensitized by their experiences as women in those circles (similar to stories included in Sargent’s introduction); without giving up their initial commitment to working class and disadvantaged groups which had brought them into union politics. In Australia, the biggest feminist conferences of the late 70s and early 80s were huge national ‘Women and Labour’ conferences.
policy perspectives, and their moments of erasure, but rarely simultaneously or in real combination of approach. But whatever approach is chosen, some interests will be taken up and others made less visible.

In Australia, from the late 1970s to the mid 1990s, I would argue that gender was a more acceptable public policy concern than class, partly because it was less of a threat to dominant interests. (Yates, 2000a). The form of the data collection and comparison, publicly at least, located the problem to be dealt with as one about minor variations in achievement among girls and boys at the top ranks of higher school achievement (in an earlier paper, I showed how the timing of the rise of the ‘boys’ problem’ in Australia directly reflected this emphasis on the top rather than inequality as such (Yates, 2000a)). The gross differences in achievement according to ‘SES’ were not tracked and made public. In one project I did on data-bases, we found that some states did not even collect statistics on schooling differentiated by SES, and we argued in that report that, whatever the anomalies in the criteria and mechanisms by which SES is counted, it is better counted than not counted (L Yates & Leder, 1996). More recently, the report by Collins, Kenway and McLeod (2000) has tried to respond to the ‘post-feminist’ discursive construction that girls no longer need attention in schools, and that all the resourcing must now be focused on boys, by an emphasis on the ‘Which girls? Which boys?’ reading which does put SES back into the picture.

More recently the Education Department in the state where I live (a Labor government which is explicitly concerned with disadvantage) is attempting to drive better practices and resourcing by adopting a ‘like school’ policy: a version of ‘effective schools’ that supposedly compares statistics outcomes for schools in similar bands, defined because they have similar demographics. But many of those schools are frustrated by the fact that, whatever indicators are chosen, these static indicators of things that can be numerically measured, can only get at some of the features and culture and history of a school set in a particular location (this is one of the things we have attempted to elucidate in our longitudinal study of four schools, (McLeod & Yates, 2006)). Even the ‘Which Girls? Which Boys?’ approach cannot avoid a similar limitation. So long as the policy tools are ‘hard data’ about results, participation rates, and subject choice, they assume that the mechanisms by

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5 This statement is made on the basis of comments made in essays by students around the state who have been selected to be involved in a Master of School Leadership program.
which school relates to post-school fates are encapsulated in such statistics. These are important to track, and they do matter; but the identities girls and boys of different backgrounds build up in schools; their sense of how the world works that they learn from the curriculum; the bullying and harassment that affects their later life require other types of studies and other types of research and discussion and approach to change.

In an earlier article, Julie McLeod and I illustrated from our longitudinal study of four schools, how two ‘middle’ high schools, with not dissimilar intakes or retention and achievement patterns, nevertheless were doing quite different things for their students relative to class and gender and Nancy Fraser’s arguments about ‘distribution’ and ‘recognition’ as concepts that matter in analysing class and gender.(Yates & McLeod, 2000d)

So in relationship to policy practices and instrumental uses, I would argue that class is not to education as a bicycle is to a fish. It’s possibly more like a tennis opponent is to a tennis player: you need that opponent for the game to effectively get under way, but you need to consider the opponent’s weaknesses too, and to avoid allowing the play to be only driven by their own strengths.

I’ve been talking above mainly about the ways concepts are translated into statistical indicators that generate particular policy mechanisms for reform. But the same point, about the value of retaining both ‘class’ and ‘gender’ as over-pure but useful tennis opponents can be made by considering the history of curriculum reform and reform of school practices in relation to girls. I’ve argued earlier (Yates, 1988, 1997, 1998) that successive iterations of policy-making on gender in Australia moved from treating it as a problem with a defined agenda (‘countering sexism’, ‘equal opportunity’), to one that had a clear sense of what being ‘sexually inclusive’ or ‘gender inclusive’ entailed, to a much broader concept of being ‘inclusive’ to all kinds of differences – but in the latter case, the removal of the conceptual agendas associated with the history of theoretical work on what gender discrimination or alienation involves; or on how working class children lose out; made it a quite meaningless injunction for change, one that translates to something like ‘try to be nice to everyone’ and, I would argue, was quite ineffective as a means of changing practices.
So we need to remember that concepts have instrumental uses, and that it is a chimera as well as not necessarily the most useful activity to try to build a perfect definition of ‘gender-class’ today. Research of that latter kind can assist our understandings of the kinds of young people we are dealing with in schools today; or the kinds of social formation schools link to. But those two things do not encompass all of the normative and allocation practices that schools are involved in and for which thinking about ‘class’ (and various ways of approaching this), ‘gender’ (and the conceptual/theoretical debates about this), and ‘class and gender today’ (as micro and macro empirical project) might all be useful.

the fish in and out of water...

Next I want to talk about identity-making and the work of schools. One of the features of ‘the new world’ and of contemporary times is that few people self-consciously identify in terms of class. In Australia, even the Australian Labor Party, that was formed in the 19th century to represent the interests of workers, no longer speaks the language of class difference or class conflict. But there has also been a very longstanding tradition, especially in UK and Australia, of studying schools ethnographically to show class difference at work. The second metaphor in my title, the ‘fish in water’, is taken from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and his work on ‘habitus’ and ‘distinction’. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992;) . In the case of schooling, this has been extensively used (and interrogated) in relation to the dispositions, ways of being, orientations, sensitivities that children from different backgrounds bring to school, and the ways that the school curriculum, culture and examinations meet these orientations. For those whose sensitivities and languages are homologous (those from professional and academic backgrounds) the ‘fish in water’ experience allows success with no need to spell out the rules of the game for those students. For those without the right codes (to draw on Bernstein (Bernstein, 1977)), the ‘fish out of water’ occurs: the experience is one of a hostile environment in which it is difficult to survive, far less flourish.

In this paper I want to concentrate on something different (but related), the self-conscious identities and identity-making that are developed in the context of school: how particular individuals, coming from particular types of habitus, encounter and develop or rework themselves in the context of particular schools. This is about class, gender, schooling and identity work: it is not just the experience of succeeding or failing, of being at home or out of place. It is about the ongoing self-narrative about who I am and who I am going to be. The
In the 12 to 18 Project we interviewed and re-interviewed young people from different backgrounds at four different schools over a seven-year period (McLeod & Yates, 2006), and we found none of that self-conscious class identification and solidarity that is so familiar from past UK studies of old working class mining and mill towns. A self-nomination in terms of class was never volunteered in answers to invitations to self-describe; and when we asked about group differences in the school or community, the young people might notice dress or sporting or cultural allegiances, but there was little sense of this connecting to any wider appreciation of economic or social relationships, power and distinctions. However, in some students, some awareness of class patterns and modes did over time become part of their thinking about themselves and the world, and these were the people who experienced some dissonance with their peers or with their school environment.

The participants who were most ready to discuss social differentiation and their own ambitions relative to that, were not those at the extremes (‘(upper) middle-class kids in (upper) middle-class schools’, ‘working-class kids in working-class schools’). They were instead those students from a background that was more ‘in the middle’ and attending one particular school in our study—Regional High— or were individuals who in some sense were aware of a dissonance between the dominant ‘class positioning’ of their school, and their own class position. ‘Class identification’ (that is, a positioning in terms of class in terms of one’s self-conscious identity) is not the same thing as ‘class subjectivity’ (the dispositions and ways of being one may have acquired as part of one’s class, whether or not one is conscious of those)\textsuperscript{6}, and both may have effects in terms of students’ progress through school.

We deliberately in this project were looking for the subjective identity resonances of class and gender and ethnicity, rather than designing these into the project by selecting our students to ‘represent’ these. So when we asked at the end of our project for students to confirm a few biographical details, we were surprised to realize at a provincial school

\textsuperscript{6} This useful distinction is borrowed from Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen’s similar distinction in relation to ‘gender identity’ and ‘gender subjectivity’ (Nielsen, 1996).
students whose self-narrative over six years had been full of the story of their social superiority and the problems they suffered as a result, that the occupations their parents were involved in would rank some considerable way down on the ways this is commonly measured: semi-skilled, small businesses.

This self-consciousness about distinction and class practices is by no means the whole of the class-formed dispositions or subjectivities we encountered; and it is not equally important to everyone’s identity-making. In some ways what we found has some similarity to Bettie’s discussion of positioning and performance in the school she studied in the USA. (Bettie, 2003), in that for the students we discuss here, the subjective experience of class is location specific and does have identity effects. Bettie analyses ‘performances’ available to Mexican and working class girls and the extent to which they might pass as ‘white’. In Beattie’s study, girls from Mexican-American backgrounds, and those who were gay were likely to be positioned as ‘other’ even if they drew on ‘middle-class’ backgrounds. Some girls from working-class background in an academic stream could more successfully ‘pass’ as middle-class because they could understand ‘the structures of exclusion at work in ways that vocational track students did not’ (Bettie 2003, 192). Our interest in our own longitudinal study was the way in which the self-consciousness about class positioning became part of the identity narratives over time.

In the four schools we studied, the ‘fish in water’ experience is not just a single story in which working class kids get alienated by the middle class sub-text of schooling (though this is one part of the story). At the poorest school in our study for example, some of the fish in water effect is the repeating of the parents’ experience of what school is – that is, being a ‘fish out of water’ in relation to academic knowledge is to be a ‘fish in water’ in relation to class location and schooling and identity. It does not bring with it any additional sense of ‘who I am’, or self-consciousness about class. The one student at that school who maintained an ongoing narrative related to class was Alan, a boy with a more cosmopolitan sense of the world because of his family travel to North America. For Alan, his ongoing sense of difference and superiority to his fellow school students in that particular school context led to a complacency about academic work, but at the same time, some taming of his sense of where he might go with his life.
At another school in our study, David’s subjective sense of his superior positioning in the social relativities of the town in which he lived contributed to some assurance that he would in fact reproduce this superiority in his post-school life. David repeatedly locates himself firmly as upper class, as wealthy and as morally superior in many ways. Yet his parents do not have high status professional jobs—his father manages a transport yard and his mother does part-time clerical work. But there is inherited money in the family (from farming at one stage) and this has enabled his family to purchase a home in a very visible and well-established desirable part of town. David’s powerful sense of his own class superiority derives from the politics of place/social geography of class, and not from professional occupation or the kinds of cultural capital associated with and which define ‘upper class’ for students at the elite and middle-class schools in the metropolitan areas. But for David this self-confidence effects an ability to not be shaken by the bullying he encounters, and carries through at least until the initial post-school phase we encounter at 18.

At the elite school, the students from privileged backgrounds had some inchoate (but occasionally explicit) strong sense of wanting to remain in that socially privileged stratum. Even if they didn’t want to be a ‘Mum Mum’ like their mothers, even if they were touched by the new possibilities of work and globalism, they imagined the world in their own image, and saw others (whether they be exchange students, or may be young people from poorer suburbs) as having different outcomes simply because of their personality, or failure to try hard enough. The students at that school who turned some scrutiny on themselves and their position (Gillian, Diana and Lee), were those who felt some dissonance with their environment – and particularly in relation to the suburbs in which they lived, even more than differences in occupational difference or even background of their parents. But their uncomfortableness with their first two years at the school did not lead to a greater sensitivity about class as much as a striving to find other ways to achieve the forms of distinction and individuality that the school and their parents favoured. For example, even at 18, three years after she had fled this particular school, Diana remains scathing about it:

Diana: If you go to City Academy, it’s really hard to not be a ‘City’ type person. It’s really different if you’ve got ‘City Academy-ish’ parents and go to that school and just live that life. It’s the same little groupie thing, but they just get older, and it just keeps going round... values are just pumped into your head. I think if I didn’t have to spend all my time trying to work out firstly what it was, and then trying to see through it like, maybe if I was at a different school. I could’ve spent more time, firstly learning and secondly, learning other things about life.
What do you see as the characteristics of City Academy people?

Diana: Rich, snobby, everything on show. The school heroes were the people who won all the events, got themselves in the brochure. Everything was all outward appearance; who they acknowledge at assembly; put things on blazer and you’d have these people walking around with these pockets full of these stupid things. I know so many people who have actually achieved, and this is just.. this is just a joke... they’d put in all the photos of all the glamorous people and I wasn’t in it once – and Mum said – look, this is just City’s view of achievement, it’s not yours... I think that is really one of the struggles at that sort of school, especially when you’re that young. Firstly you have no self-esteem anyway. And then when you’re sort of warped with these strange ideas, I don’t think it helps.

And yet, Diana has effectively managed by running away to rebuild the desirable outcome that City Academy and her parents would like. At 18 she is living in another state, and studying the high status university subject of law, and is making plans to go back to the state from which she began. When asked what she would choose for her own children, she finds herself surprisingly (to herself) somewhat ambivalent, and reluctant to say that she would not send her children to a similar school.

In one sense class as a short-hand for naming different kinds of family relationships, material conditions, and differential power in the world was something that affected all the students in our study, and, even more, all the schools in our study. For schooling, it is like the water the fish swims in: that issues of social distinction and their place in it define the histories of the school culture and positioning of all the schools we studied. The state high school that wanted social distinction had to earn it and constantly reiterate it in a way that the private school did not. The poor school in our study was socially denigrated as ‘tip tech’, by its relative physical location and student intake in its particular provincial city, in ways that constrained the perceptions of teachers, community as well as students about what was possible. But in terms of sensitivities, narratives, and experiences, class (not necessarily named as such) was an important touchstone for some of the young people in our study, and relatively unimportant for others. One particular school in our study (not coincidentally, a school that one of us had also attended in the past) nurtured a virtual obsession with class and distinction. This is the school that was trying to be ‘as good as’ the private schools, and to do that it had to keep on trying to be explicit about things that those at the private schools know tacitly – for example that having a nice boat shed might be more important than
getting good results. What this school produced was a greater attention to noticing class practices, but not a sophisticated political reading of these. As far as students here were concerned, working hard enough would get you into the envied positions. For some of these students, the superiority they felt in the context of their town was shaken when some of them moved to undertake university study in a major city. Both the interpersonal recognition they were used to, and the more multicultural environment, posed some destabilization of their sense of who they were and who they might be.

Class is not one thing but many. In relation to social distinction and its working in identity narratives, the relevance of social markers and distinctions begin to be seen by those who are ‘fish out of water’ but in limited ways. They may not notice the class-related priorities in which they have been raised (for example the middle class drive to be a distinctive individual), may mistake local hierarchies for more enduring ones, or may develop a lifelong academic interest in these questions out of keeping with their actual significance. At the same time, awareness of social distinction is not always about class – as we discuss elsewhere (McLeod & Yates 2003, 2006) it may relate to racial or gendered embodiment – and class is not only or even primarily about perceived social distinction. But if we are considering identity-making in the context of schooling, even in new world countries, it is one useful, albeit blurry, tool to work with.

References:

7 The writer of this paper went to the particular school that seems to hold these questions as a compelling interest!


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