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## Representing class in qualitative research

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In 1993, with Julie McLeod, I began a seven-year qualitative, longitudinal study of young people in Australia. The *12 to 18 Project*<sup>1</sup> was intended as a longitudinal study to investigate (i) the development of young people's gendered identity in Australia now, and (ii) schooling's contribution to social inequalities: the way in which different schools interact with and produce differentiated outcomes for different types of young people. It was a project inspired by the fact that we had both spent many years studying education, gender formation, inequalities, changing cultural and policy discourse and wanting to design a new type of study to take us further with these interests. It was also a study whose design was influenced by two film series, both of them also concerned, in different ways, with representing social differences and development of individual identity and outcomes over time.

The better known of these film series is the British *7 Up* series, which has followed boys and girls from different class backgrounds from age 7 through 14, 21, 35 and 42. That project is exciting because the close focus on individuals over time allows the viewer to think about individuality but also class patterning. However, in relation to one of our key areas of interest, social inequality and schooling, it has a problem shared by many qualitative research studies. It is quite difficult to distinguish family and school effects in these films, in that we largely get glimpses of rich kids at rich schools; poor kids at poor schools (though, rather better than much ethnographic literature, it also does include one or two middle kids at middle schools). The films have been criticized (including by their maker) as being initially designed with too little attention to gender and race. Class was taken as the overwhelming issue of interest.

Our other inspiration was the series of documentary films based on three working-class Adelaide schoolgirls which have been made by Gillian Armstrong.<sup>2</sup> In the first of this series, made in the 1970s, the girls were fourteen. In the most recent film, *Not Fourteen Again*, which was released in cinemas in 1996, these girls have aged to their mid-30s, and two of them have fourteen year old daughters. This film includes a lot of footage from the earlier films, and it shows in the background some broad

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<sup>1</sup> The *12 to 18 Project* has been supported by funding by the Australian Research Council, with additional support from La Trobe University, University of Technology, Sydney, and Deakin University.

<sup>2</sup> These were *Smokes and Lollies* (when the girls were fourteen); *Fourteen's Good, Eighteen's Better* (at eighteen); *Bingo, Bridesmaids and Braces* (at 25); and *Not Fourteen Again* (when they were in their mid 30s, and two of them had fourteen year old daughters). This last film was released in 1996, when we were in year three of our project.

changes affecting what might be seen as the same “class” of people two decades apart. In the 1970s, the working class teenagers dressed and spoke “roughly”, dropped out of school early, had babies at 18. In the 1990s, both they and their daughters are less distinguishable by accent or dress as belonging to a particular class – there is the influence of television and of certain things being more widely available; and of different broad patterns of schooling, contraception, life events. It is not that “class” differences of some sort have ceased to exist, but their forms have changed, both at the level of the structure of jobs, and in terms of cultural forms. (Indeed one of these social and cultural shifts is apparent in the making of the film itself. In the most recent film, but not in the earlier ones, Gillian Armstrong shows herself in the story, alongside the other women, rather than as someone who preserves her own privacy while being a voyeur on others.)

Historically, “class” has been an important lens through which young people have been differentiated, studied, represented and explained by researchers, but today there is considerable uncertainty about whether that lens can continue to be used, and considerable ambiguity about what it would mean to do so. This chapter discusses why, today, researchers might want to continue to grapple with this issue; some analytical and methodological problems in doing so; and examples of some ways in which the design and the evidence from the *12 to 18 Project* are attempting to contribute to reflections about “class” in a time when much has changed and when many different ways of understanding young people, social inequalities, and educational processes have entered the interpretive literature.

### **Why bother with “class”?** [ *B level heading* ]

Because I will soon go on to discuss some of the slipperiness and difficulty of trying to focus on class, in Australia, on the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I want to begin by explaining why I think it is worth talking about; why I do not want to begin by assuming that a focus on gender or ethnicity will make such a discussion redundant, and why I am not wanting to treat qualitative research as something whose only agenda is to produce “rich descriptions” of a myriad different *individual cases*.

In Australia, the statistical picture shows that “socio economic status” (usually judged by a combination of factors such as parents’ occupation and education; locality; income level) is one of the strongest predictors of school retention rates, achievement at school, extent to which students continue to university or to further education, types of courses and careers and universities they go on to enter (Lamb, 1998; **Teese, 2000**). It is true that patterns can also be shown in terms of other categorizations, such as gender, ethnicity, rurality, disability and, most strongly of all, with Aboriginality<sup>3</sup>, but even with some of these patterns, many analyses continue to stress the way in which some form of consideration of class is important. For example, in the burgeoning debate about whether it is boys rather than girls who are “disadvantaged” at school, many commentators have noted that working class girls do considerably worse than middle class boys (MCEETYA, 1995, Teese et.al, 1995, Yates, 1997). In terms of education, especially university participation, the effect of class in who is there and how they behave is an observable experience as well as a statistical fact – at least for those coming from non “middle class” origins. And yet, when Gilah Leder and I a few years ago

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<sup>3</sup> All of these terms or categorization are highly problematic ones, see Yates and Leder, 1995, 1996

reviewed a number of major Australian data-bases on student pathways (Yates and Leder, 1996), we found that a number of state education authorities had made the decision not to collect evidence of SES in terms of analysing the outcomes data. Similarly, reviewing the policy funding of research on girls and education, I have often noted that it has been interesting how much attention has been devoted to this issue in the two decades from the mid-1970s, and how little to the issue of class and poverty (Yates, 1995, **1998a**). In the press too, while there is regular coverage of education as a competitive arena in gender terms (have the girls or the boys got the top results this year?) and in terms of supposed 'school' effects, rarely does a newspaper article even mention, far less discuss, the way in which results are heavily patterned by difference between the western and eastern parts of a city.

There is some political embarrassment in acknowledging social inequalities of this type, but there is also, for researchers, an analytical difficulty in what it is we are trying to study or 'represent', especially in qualitative research. At a common-sense level, and especially in terms of extremes, we believe we can identify 'working class boys', or 'middle class girls'. But if we construct studies around those we assume represent these, to what extent are we studying "class" rather than simply assuming it; and what sort of explanatory idea lies behind or arises from the attempt to deal with class/gender/ethnicity etc in combination?

Historically, the idea of "class" has been used in many ways and in many contexts. Sometimes it is used in the Marxist sense, as a relational concept, and as a means of understanding group interests which are structured in opposition to each other (that is, where the interests and outcomes of the groups are not simply different, unequal, but have a structured *relationship* to each other). In recent times, the work of Pierre Bourdieu has been particularly influential here, since it is work that is not only concerned with the contemporary forms of the structured relations of social groups to each other, but sees the workings of the education system as a central mechanism within this (for example, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, Bourdieu, 1998a, 1998b). This is a more powerful concept than the classificatory use which is more common today, where it is used simply as a means of classifying differences of economic and symbolic capital, and as a basis for tracing educational and life opportunities in terms of these. However any attempt to recapture a relational, structural sense of the differences must confront the shifts from industrial society (owners of the means of production versus factory workers) to the post-industrial, globalized, knowledge- and service- based economies of the present. They must also confront the problem of what "class" looks like once women and domestic life are more fully integrated into the picture (Birkelund et.al., 1999). For social theorists, attempting to understand changes in the economy, technology, culture, nationhood, the meaning of what "class" is as part of that pattern is posed as a question. In the literature on gender, ethnicity and race, "class" often comes in as a way of not "essentializing", or a way of trying to signal differences which are not reducible to a single one (Weis and Fine, 1993). And in the feminist literature on class (as well as in an earlier literature dominated by male sociologists of education), discussion of "class" can be a way of understanding the psychology of individuals from different backgrounds, as well as of attempting to recuperate the pain in the autobiographical experiences of the researcher whose origins were a long way from their

current social milieu (for example, Reay, 1996; Mahoney and Zmroczek, 1997; Skeggs, 1997; Steedman, 1993, Walkerdine, 1989, 1990).

For the *12 to 18 Project*, a project concerned about identity, biography, educational and social inequalities, any one of these discussions suggests “class” to be an issue which *may* be highly salient but which is also problematic. The issue of whether class is a relevant category of representation and analysis enters into consideration of:

- How do we represent the meanings, constructions, values, imperatives that each individual subject is working with?
- How do we understand their engagements with schooling and the schooling/biography effects over this time?
- How do we describe (analytically categorize) the processes and patterns of inequality, exclusion, power, social formation embedded in these young people’s understandings and experiences, and how, similarly, do we think about possibilities of change?

To sum up, both the statistical evidence and everyday experience suggest that the patterns and outcomes of young people’s relation to education is affected by their background in ways not simply accounted for by using categories like gender. The autobiographically-based literature on education also suggests that some elements of this type are a strong part of subjective and emotional experience/formation. But how to theorize/categorize/be more specific about what is being identified as “class” is an issue, given, on the one hand, the significant changes from industrial to post-industrial or knowledge forms of society, and, on the other, given the rise to prominence of other candidates for analytical primacy (gender, race, ethnicity).

### **Some analytic problems in setting up qualitative projects on “class”, inequality and schooling:**

*[B level heading]*

Since the 1970s, a lot of useful work has been done on the production of inequalities via the micro-processes of schooling: looking at knowledge and assessment and the creation of success and failure through these; looking at the development of identities and subjectivities; coining and making use of immensely powerful concepts like “cultural capital” and “resistance”. However, as a number of recent commentators have noted, some problems and gaps are evident in much of this body of work. Here I want to outline four of the major problems:

#### **1. The problem of empiricism: of ethnographies which “read off” processes from an untheorized selection.**

*[C level heading]*

A common approach (as Watson, 1993, notes) has been to focus on what are seen as a classic working-class group, and to read their practices for evidence of the processes of class, schooling and the reproduction of social inequality. Here the problem is the extent to which the experience of that group can be taken to represent processes occurring more broadly and to represent the experiences of other groups; and also the problem of imputing significance within what is observed.

The problem Watson identifies has actually been in some respects worsened by the recent fascination with autobiography as part of the research process. Both in their selection of “working class” groups to study, and in the stories they tell, there is a tendency to be trying to tell the story of the researcher's own pain as a working class girl or boy – a story located in the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s rather than today, and in which the central contrast tends to be a binary of “working class” to “middle class” rather than an attention to different forms and possibilities in both. Some tendencies of this kind are seen in work by Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; and Reay, 1996. Similarly, in a recent work entitled *Formations of class and gender: becoming respectable*, Beverley Skeggs (1997) challenges feminism for its lack of attention to class, and constructs a book based on a study of working-class women in the *north of England* undertaking *childcare* courses. From this she argues that respectability was a key issue in the processes of female working-class formation – but does not reflect on the extent to which this may be an artefact of the particular group she has decided to study. The point here is that *identification* of the group to be studied is as much an issue as what is imputed from the study, and we need to beware of practices of romantically recreating “the working class” in their 19<sup>th</sup> century guise by sociologists and anthropologists going out to select samples who look like the ones they are familiar with.

To illustrate Watson's second point, that there is a danger of simply reading off all of the practices of the group studied as *all* causally explaining inequality, we might consider the changing debate about gender inequality. In the heyday of the legitimacy of concerns about girls, virtually every feature of girls' practices in school (the way they applied themselves to their work; their rule-following; their quietness) was read as examples of their disadvantaging in the processes of education and life pathways. Articles assumed that how boys approached mathematics, or computing was advantageous, and was the model to be followed. Now, in the wake of a different public debate about feminism having gone too far, the same range of practices are being read in reverse ways, that is that boys' practices are deficit (Yates, 1997). In both cases there has been an insufficiently theorized reading of the practices.

## **2. The problem of focussing on extremes:** [C level heading]

As Watson (1993) has also pointed out, an adequate understanding of the processes and possibilities of schooling in interaction with social class is unlikely to come from only studying the extremes: how the most privileged succeed, and how the least privileged fail. There are two problems here. The very large group of students and families that are in the middle are left untheorized and under-researched. Secondly, this approach tends to leave the popular field of “school effectiveness” studies (that is, studies of the comparative *possibilities* of schools or of different approaches to schooling) to researchers who are sociologically naïve. Focussing on “the middle” is important for a number of reasons – the large number of schools and students in this group; the changing structure of jobs and the difficulty of classifying many of these (the problem of the new middle class for example); and because the “middle” group of schools and of students may offer insights about possibilities of

success and failure through schooling not available when the sample is the over-determined advantaged and disadvantaged.

**3. The problem of the rapidly changing form of the economy and labour force, and what this means for “class” analysis:** [C level heading]

Given that jobs and employment possibilities are changing rapidly, how adequately are studies tracking and theorizing what schooling is doing here? Again, the extremes are relatively clear-cut; but is “class” being “reproduced” now? For example, in the labour force we have seen the demise (in numbers and in conditions) of certain categories of jobs (public sector work; bank tellers; sales assistants, teachers); and the rise of others (hospitality and the celebrity chefs, for example; some jobs in e-industries and in finance). The significance and status and effects of completing year 12 now mean something different from what they did two decades ago (Yates and Leder, 1996).

It does not need subtle research to show that schools (or groups) with extreme drop-out rates are losing out, or that schools whose students go *en masse* to the most prestigious courses in the most prestigious universities are in some sense winning – but the bulk of the population are not in these two groups, and in looking within these for what schools are doing relative to social inequality, it may be misleading to focus only on the schools that produce the best tertiary entrance scores, or which have the highest retention rates. (In our study, for example, there are noticeable differences between the schools in terms of the opportunities they offer to enter training courses, and more broadly, in terms of the types of jobs and courses to which students are oriented.)

To take another example, of changing contexts and their relevance for thinking about processes of “reproduction”, in recent work on youth and “pathways” Johanna Wyn and Peter Dwyer have commented that it is more common to find young women taking a more flexible approach in their post-school education and pathways (while keeping an end goal in mind), whereas young men often focus intently on a particular qualification or pathway as the thing that must be gained (Wyn and Dwyer 2000; see too Wyn in this volume). Today, she argued, it is the former attitude that may be more strategic, given the rapidity and frequency of change. Now for some time, research has suggested that at school boys are more likely to be “strategic” in their choice of subjects (for example, in continuing with mathematics because of its utility to future work, regardless of whether they like the subject), whereas girls are seen as more likely to choose subjects they are interested in. It may be that the changing form of the economy alters the relative pay-off of these processes – that patterns repeated at school may not reproduce patterns beyond school.

**4. How do we analyze “class” relative to other social forms, such as gender, ethnicity?** [C level heading]

In an overview of changing structures and processes of assessment in schooling, Patricia Broadfoot argues that the changing forms continue to reproduce the same class outcomes. (Broadfoot, 1996) She entirely ignores the heated debate about gender and assessment, that has not only been a

significant public issue for policy-making, but where there is some evidence that *relative* outcomes of the groups have had some change (see MCEETYA, 1995, Yates 1997b, Arnot, David and Weiner, 1999). Again this raises questions about what is “class” in the contemporary economy. We might talk about class being gendered, or about gender taking classed forms, but we need to think about both the specificity of different groups, and also about what patterns and processes of power, privilege, disadvantage are being produced and recast here.

**The 12 to 18 Project: design issues** [B level heading]

We wanted to approach our own qualitative project with some sensitivity to the issues I have outlined. The study is one where we have followed twenty-six main students, located initially at four different secondary schools, from the beginning of this time to the first phase of post-school life (Yates and McLeod, 1996; McLeod and Yates, 1997, 1998). Twice each year we interview them, often with their friends, in lengthy and semi-structured interviews which we tape and videotape. In relation to the issues outlined above, important methodological features of the 12 to 18 Project as a way to explore “class” in some qualitative way are: (1) a recognition that the interpretive work must be close, open and ongoing in its interrogating of meaning and empirical observation against a range of broader theorizing of social forms and processes today; and (2) a structuring to enable but not foreclose comparative possibilities and judgements, and to give more attention than previously to groups and schools “in the middle”.

The project we designed was small-scale and qualitative. The type of contribution it might potentially make to the issues I have outlined is by offering some further *inductive* evidence as to the *meaning* (or, potentially, inappropriateness) of “class” in the subjectivity and biographies of young people in interaction with school. To talk of some “inductive” quality is, in some respects, disingenuous. As Lather (1991) has said, every research act, and especially “interpretation”, is an act of “inscription”, not merely “description”. To name something as “class” is to inscribe it in a particular way. But to acknowledge the constructing acts of the researcher should not be to assume that all research is equally inscribing rather than discovering the world. There is, certainly, an inescapable situatedness to one’s conceptual tools and empirical object of study, and a lack of finality to what one discovers – both because there are other stories to be told and because there is a reflexiveness in the culture itself to the interpretations initially made. But the design of a project may be better or worse in enabling some further insight to be gained as compared with the assumptions and knowledge from which the research begins:

*every act of research is simultaneously empirical (it confronts the world of observable phenomena) and theoretical (it necessarily engages hypotheses about the underlying structure of relations that observations are designed to capture)*

*(Wacquant, talking of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.35)*

An important design feature of the 12 to 18 Project was that *the interviewing, classification (including any coding), interpretations and writing would all be carried out by the two principal researchers*. Two issues matter here. Given heightened feminist and qualitative methodological interest in recent years in the constructing activity of the researcher, and in the relations of the research act, we believe it is important for us to be directly involved in and exposed at length to the act on which we need to reflect. For this project we (Julie McLeod and myself) have both participated in almost all of the 200 interviews. For half of these we have had an opportunity to listen and observe the other rather than be the interviewer; and in all cases we take audio and videotape records which we can revisit and mutually discuss. Using qualitative methods to try to discuss broader concepts such as class or gender or subjectivity necessarily involves an interpenetration of theory and the empirical experience. As Bourdieu and Wacquant argue (1992), this is as important a component of a “reflexive sociology” as is dwelling on the researcher’s autobiographical situatedness, yet the current conditions of academic life in Australia and of research funding regimes, work against the type of intensive work that is theoretically required, namely:

*the practical organization and carrying out of data collection – or, to be accurate, data production – are so intimately bound up with the theoretical construction of the object that they cannot be reduced to “technical” tasks left to hired underlings, survey bureaucracies, or research assistants .*  
(Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.29)

The second important design feature of the 12 to 18 Project was its *selection of sites and subjects for study*. The initial sites of the study were four schools: two provincial and two metropolitan schools; and including one elite private school, one ex-technical school in a poorer area, and two high schools. The selection of school sites was done with considerable care. We wanted an opportunity to be listening to students who might be classified (in ABS terms, for example) as having similar backgrounds, but who were attending different schools in our study; and students who were of different class, ethnic, gender situations but at the same school. We were wanting opportunities to “disaggregate” home and school; to avoid conflation of school and “habitus”; to not take one group in one locality and one school environment as a unitary embodiment of “working class” experience. On the other hand, in terms of selecting the students for ongoing study at the four schools, our methods were rather rough. We selected equal numbers of girls and boys, and other than that simply tried to include “a range”. We tried to include articulate and inarticulate, and hoped for some range of ethnicity, but our methods here were not precise. We did not ask questions about parent’s occupation or ethnicity before we began. This was deliberate. We were not setting out to “read off” what students already classified in a particular way looked like. We were not aiming simply to provide illustrative “rich” examples for already theorized processes. We were aiming to build from the students themselves a new sense of how they constructed subjectivity and school experience, and to take a fresh look at whether and/or how “class” was part of this.



Finally, in terms of the location of this study, we set out to include examples at the more familiar extremes of elite experience (elite home, elite school) and working class experience (poor homes, school in poor area); but also to have a large proportion of students and schools in the study who do not represent these extremes. Our interest here is not only the more familiar issue of what happens to someone from a less elite background attending an elite school; or from a middle-class background attending a “disadvantaged” school. Our interest is also whether some of the differentiations, processes of identity formation, and educational outcomes that can be seen in the schools in the middle, can be illuminated by the broader theories of class and education, or whether this is not such a salient concept there.

**Biographies, school processes and effects, and the question of “class” – some work in progress**      *[B level heading]*

We began the 12 to 18 Project in 1993, when the students involved were in grade 6, and are completing the interviewing in 2000 when almost all the students have left school. Neither the interviewing nor the analysis of the overall material from the project is complete, so in the remainder of this chapter, I will be only pulling out some aspects of the work to date to illustrate some ways we are trying to work on issues I have been discussing. What I am trying to illustrate is some ways we are trying to reflect on “class” by moving between close readings of individual transcripts, comparisons within and across schools, and reflections on debates in theory and the broader literature. Other examples of ways of drawing on the material from this project can be seen in the chapter by Julie McLeod in this volume, and in other publications from the project (McLeod and Yates, 1997, 1998, Yates and McLeod, 1996, Yates, 1999a, 1999b; McLeod 2000, 1998).

1.      **On “distinction” and relational effects**      *[C level heading]*

The most familiar part of previous work on class as it relates to education (eg Young, 1971, Bernstein, 1975, Bourdieu **and Passeron**, 1977; Connell et al, 1982) stresses the close fit between “middle class” modes, know-how, ways of speaking and what schools want and reward, and, conversely, the disjunction between what working-class kids bring to school and what schooling does. The 12 to 18 Project was not set up to directly observe educational interactions. Its focus was on the meanings students were giving to their experiences in school and the building of their sense of themselves and their future that was part of this.

One of the first things we could note, was how students were reading (that is, constructing) what their respective schools were doing.

*We cannot understand the symbolic violence of what were once hastily designated as the “ideological state apparatuses” unless we analyze in detail the relationship between the objective characteristics of the organizations that exercise it and the socially constituted dispositions of the agents upon whom it is exercised. (Bourdieu, 1998b, p.3)*

In our study the schools at the two extremes in our study, not only offered a different curriculum, but their respective curricula were being read by students in ways that exaggerated and reproduced certain differences. At the private school, students saw themselves as benefiting by having a well-equipped school (*“Like in a state school you probably wouldn’t have two really well kept ovals and a swimming pool and tennis courts, netball courts, basketball courts, stuff like that”*) and a wider than normal range of “options”, though the breadth in this case was in the arts and participation was not optional but compulsory. The students in year 7 did only a single computing period per week, and no other technical subjects. Students commented on how poor the teaching of computing was (*“that was shocking”, “it was like a free period”, “I don’t think he’s ever like used a computer before”*), but not one student commented generally about the lack of technical and manual studies. Here, what students brought to the school, what the school itself did, and how the school was located in its community and its history, all mutually constitute a way of making invisible what might otherwise be seen as a lack – the school’s relatively impoverished computer offerings.

At the technical school in our study, there was, by contrast, a plethora of impressive equipment, a large range of computing and technically-oriented studies, and some innovative teaching in those areas which the students enjoyed. In addition to English, mathematics, science, social education, languages, physical education and home group, students, in the course of their first year, studied textiles, home economics, systems technology, information technology, “keyboarding”, 3D art, sheetmetal and woodwork! Most of these technical-manual subjects were included in students’ nominations of their favourite subjects, and when they were asked their views of other schools, they nominated the lack of such subjects as a negative:

- Christine*            *and then if it’s like in an all girls school you don’t get to do the subject like sheetmetal work and all that. And they’re some of my favourite subjects, so...*
- Ellen*                *You don’t have like woodwork, sheetmetal and all that.*
- Christine*            *Like there’s a whole tech work you wouldn’t know.            (year 7 girls, 1994)*

However, despite this enthusiasm, school was constructed by these students (and their parents) as an institution with a clear hierarchy of valued knowledge:

- What do you think this school thinks is important?*  
*Keren:*                *Maths [...] kind of science, maths, social ed and English [...] They sort of think them subjects are the main ones, even though, you know, most people don’t like the main subjects. (year 7 girl, 1994)*

In these two examples, taken from the two extremes of the four schools in our study, we see differentiations being made which tend to reconstitute and constitute both the subjective identities and trajectories of the individual students and the social order (see also Teese, 1998).

By the fourth year of the study, the ways students talked about certain things had been shaped by their particular school in a way that would tend to reproduce further the relative positioning of the students who entered it. At the most elite school, every student responded to a question about unemployment by saying that it was basically due to people not trying hard enough to get work; while

at a high school in a suburb nearby, every student responded by saying unemployment was due to general economic conditions, or immigration, or things other than the individual's own efforts. In other words, the first students had learnt/had reinforced to some extent to "misrecognize" their own social advantages and to take up an unsympathetic stance to those who lacked these. The students in the second school had learnt/had reinforced a stance of progressive fatalism that had them competing less vigorously for school success.

In other words, in relation to some of the issues I raised in the first part of this chapter, we are seeing here some sense of what it means to talk of class as part of subjectivity, but also as a relational process that is not simply to do with what attributes and advantages an individual possesses but is part of a much broader network of relationships between individuals and between institutions. Schools and students are mutually part of this process.

But what of the further question: what relevance does this have to young people and schools "in the middle", and how do we take account of difference and non-conflation of what students bring to school and what emerges from their interaction with school?

Another school in the study is a high school, in the same town as the technical school mentioned above, a town with a very prominent range of private schools. The students here constantly tell us of ways in which this school measure up to the private schools. In every interview students respond to a question about how the school compares with other schools, by mentioning that the school has a boat shed, and takes part in a rowing competition with private schools. In the interviews with different students in our study (which there is not space to quote at length in this chapter), it is apparent that the values and the distinctions of the kind outlined enter into the definitions of self, the experiences of success and failure, the expectations about the future, whether the student is in the over-determined extreme (the students at the poorer school who see themselves as part of another world than students from the private schools, where they would never fit in); whether the student comes from a background somewhat higher or lower than the broad positioning of the school they enter (the student who enters the elite school from a less elite background and gradually takes on the value that unemployment is the result of lack of effort; the student who enters the same school and who feels his ethnicity implicitly places him as an "other" in that context, and who eventually changes schools); or the students in the high school which values rowing who must engage in constant disciplinary work to try to keep up with the "distinction" of students and private schools whose history and class positioning can take this for granted. The repeated comments of different students at this middle high school (*"they expect a lot from us, because they're saying the school has a good reputation"*) remind us of Diane Reay's comment

*My father always told his children, "you are just as good as anybody else". We all knew that encoded in that phrase was a subtext that we were not. (Reay, 1996, p.453).*

These are some examples of meanings being formed, meanings that contribute to identities, trajectories, outcomes – but in terms of thinking about "class" they are not the whole of the story. It

may, after all, matter (in terms of power, relative social positioning) if students do not acquire high facility with computer technology.

## **2. On “difference” and social change [C level heading]**

The discussion in the previous section illustrated one way of taking up the interview material from our study – looking for points of comparisons and difference between the students at different schools and from different kinds of backgrounds. To some extent, this was a discussion grounded in previous forms of class analysis in relation to schooling. An alternative way of using our material is to begin with a close reading of an individual story over time, to think about what sense “class” makes as an analytic category in explaining individual experiences, compared with such matters as gender and ethnicity, and to attempt “inductively” to be listening for themes that may be different from those of a previous period and a previous generation. Here I have space only for very brief summary indications of some work in progress.

When we first interviewed her, at age 12, Sue<sup>4</sup> is working hard helping her mother run a caravan park, cooking, looking after younger siblings, dealing with a stepfather who makes her uncomfortable, but whom she does not want to talk about. She wants to do well at school, ideally to become a kindergarten teacher or a chef, but she is uncertain about her ability, and talks about the future in terms of “taking it as it comes” – a common theme among the students from this school, and these issues grow stronger as she proceeds through school. Read in terms of the British feminist literature on working-class women, we would emphasize this fatalism, self-doubt, that thread through Sue’s story. Read through Bourdieu’s eyes, we could pick out the themes of her puzzlement about what school really wants of her. Over the years of interviews, she mentions hopes of particular jobs, but also retreats and expresses doubt that she will make it. She seems deeply unsure of her ability, especially academic ability. But, her way of talking about these things belies what seems like a strong determination to keep in there, to keep taking the next step. Unusually for this school, Sue is still there in year 12, and actually does complete school and enter a tertiary course.

Over the six years we have interviewed Sue, her home life also experiences changes. Her mother returns to the local technical college to study to become a youth worker. The family move from the caravan park, and the unwanted man is no longer in their life.

How should we interpret the dynamic that has produced Sue’s path through school? Is this just the story of this individual, or is this part of a pattern of change involving many working class women, at least in this part of Australia?

The British feminist work helps us to notice the psychology, emotions and family dynamics of the class experience. What it often tends to obscure is any generational changes in this class experience or

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<sup>4</sup> Sue’s interviews are discussed in another context in the chapter by McLeod in this volume.

location. In our study, we have been struck by the extent to which a number of girls from roughly ‘working class’ backgrounds are managing their lives through their teenage years: handling a boyfriend who may have left school, or be in trouble with the law, even seeing him every night, and yet not letting that stop them keeping their own studies afloat; filling their lives with a huge range of activities: paid work, sport, domestic chores, boyfriend, study, and yet handling all of these. In a number of cases, these girls seem to have recognized opportunities of the newly reconstituted labour market – the significance of the hospitality industry for example; in others they keep very traditional dreams of becoming a respectable teacher of young children.

In another paper (Yates, 1998b) I have taken up the stories of three boys from non-mainstream ethnic backgrounds in our study. Through those stories we are again able to see something of the shaping of subjectivity as well as broader social outcomes from the interactions of what students bring to school and what particular schools (and schooling overall) are doing. In one case, the boy comes from a culture which values formal academic work and displays of success, but is sent to a high school whose per culture values informality. The school is “culturally inclusive” in terms of having a very mixed student body and generally non-racist in the values students acquire, but there is a disjunction between the “habitus” of this boy, and the ways this particular school culture works. Yet another boy in our study, also from a different ethnic and religious group, gets on quite happily at the same school. At the elite school, a boy who is marked as racially different, despite his proficiency with the formal curriculum and “cultural capital” that the school values, is so unhappy with what he sees as its lack of tolerance of difference, that he leaves it.

In these stories, the question of what sense it makes to talk of “class” in representing them, is complex. In the case of the boy at the high school who is at sea with his peers and the expectations of school, there is certainly a mis-match of cultural “know-how”, but it is not one of class difference in any traditional sense of that term – this boy’s family were doctors in his own country. On the other hand, the parents’ lack of resources to assess different school options in this culture is related to their class as well as immigrant positioning in this country. At the elite school, the problem is not one of “dispositions” on the part of the boy of the type that class theorists write about, but of racism and bodily difference – though the inscription of these by the school and the mainstream student body may well be understood as part of their class formation. But in terms of educational pathways and outcomes, in his case the class location of his parents means that they are able to handle and diffuse the problem by finding another elite school that is more appropriate for him.

### **Concluding remarks** *[B level heading]*

Methodologically, the usefulness of considering “class” in terms of a qualitative, longitudinal study such as this one is that it forces us to keep on considering the relationship between the individual story (the individual psychology, subjectivity, choices, outcomes) and the broader patterns of social arrangements which constitute and are constituted by those individual stories. In terms of the problematic issues I set up at the beginning, the examples from the project that I have offered are not a neat pinning down of what class “means”, of how we should draw the lines, of whether key structures and oppositions can be identified. But working with the concepts and theories associated

with “class” does I think help to illuminate “individual” ways of being, and relationships between individuals and education, that are still important to consider in research on young people, in Australia, in this post-industrial world.

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