

In the brave new world of competitive schools and postmodern research, how do we tell stories about class?

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Abstract

This paper discusses some issues arising from the 12 to 18 Project, a longitudinal qualitative study following students through each year of their secondary schooling. The study was designed to allow for comparisons of students from different backgrounds and in different schools. However, it is being undertaken in a research context which has undercut some traditional ways of representing inequalities in relation to school; and in a political context focussed on promoting success rather than dealing with disadvantage. Although what might loosely be called class differences remain a central feature of Australian education, there has been long-standing debate about just what this means; and the tendency of much qualitative work of the past decade has been to focus on 'difference' rather than 'inequality', and to take gender or ethnicity as central concerns and to show class differences within these, rather than the reverse. This paper discusses some ways this project is attempting to take account of these issues, in particular the problem of understanding patterns of inequalities in the context of a heightened attention to individual and multiple differences; and the problem of writing research reports about class inequalities in schools without contributing to the process.

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In the field of Education, reference to class - or even inequality - has fallen out of favour. For policy-makers and the press it has been overtaken by concerns about 'school effectiveness', 'competitive schools', 'schools of the future'. For researchers of a sociological or cultural studies bent, it has been replaced by stronger interests in gender, ethnicity, race and 'difference'. It is not, of course, that the widespread disparities in who gets what from schooling in Australia have disappeared or ceased to matter.¹ The research problem is how to understand today the patterning of what different groups of students now bring to school, the patterning of how schools variously interact with those differences, and the patterns of social inequality that are both drawn on and set in train in the process. The political problem is how to make any of this matter.

This paper is work in progress on these issues. It discusses some analytic problems in researching the issues of class and inequality in schooling today and relates these to the design of and some findings from an ongoing qualitative longitudinal project I am undertaking with Julie McLeod. The project being discussed is the 12 to 18 Project, which is following a number of girls and boys at four schools through each year of their secondary schooling. In the project, we wanted to find out more about how individual identity and aspirations as well as outcomes developed in the context of schooling, and, of course, to understand how social differences and inequalities were played out in this. These interests in fact throw up two somewhat distinct issues:

'what does "class" mean/ look like today, and is it a meaningful or useful concept?'

and

'how can we understand schooling's relationship to social inequalities?'

'7 Up' and 'Not Fourteen Again'

Our own research project was inspired not just by the research literature and the questions we had from that, but by a fascination with two documentary film series that have also followed young people longitudinally. The better known of these is the British 7 Up series, which has followed boys and girls from different class backgrounds from age 7 through 14, 21 and 35. 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: that it is quite difficult to distinguish family and school effects, in that we largely get glimpses of rich kids at rich schools; poor kids at poor schools (and, rather better than much ethnographic literature, it also does include one or two middle kids at middle schools).

Our other inspiration was the series of documentary films based on three working-class Adelaide schoolgirls which have been made by Gillian Armstrong.² 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 last year, these girls are now in their mid-30s, and two of them have fourteen year old daughters. This film includes a lot of footage from the earlier films, and I was struck by what it showed in the background about broad changes affecting what might be seen as the same 'class' of people two decades apart. In the 70s, the working class teenagers dressed and spoke 'roughly', dropped out of school early, had babies at 18. In the 90s, 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's 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. (Changes are also apparent here in terms of what is seen as a respectable way of studying and portraying others. In the most recent film, but not in the earlier ones, Gillian Armstrong shows herself in the story, alongside the other women, rather than acting as one who can preserve her own privacy while being a voyeur on others.)

Some Analytic Problems in investigating (qualitatively) 'class', inequality and schooling:

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.³ Here I want to outline four of the problems, and the way our longitudinal project was designed to have some regard for such issues.

1. The problem of empiricism: of ethnographies which 'read off' processes from an untheorized selection.

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 50s, 60s or 70s 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. Valerie Walkerdine's work (for example, Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; also see Reay, 1996) is one example of this tendency. Another is the recent work by Beverley Skeggs (1997) which challenges feminism for its lack of attention to class, and constructs a book entitled 'Formations of class and gender: becoming respectable' 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 19th century guise by sociologists and anthropologists going out to select samples who look like the ones they are familiar with.

To illustrate Watson's other point here - that there is a danger of simply reading off 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, 1997a) In both cases there has been an insufficiently theorized reading of the practices.

2. The problem of focussing on extremes:

As Watson has 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; and there is a tendency to leave the popular field of 'school effectiveness' studies (ie studies of the comparative possibilities of different schools or 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:

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' generally 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); and the rise of others (hospitality and the celebrity chefs, for example). 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 TER 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.)

To take another example, of changing contexts and their relevance for thinking about processes of 'reproduction', in a recent paper on a 'student pathways' project (Wyn, 1997), Johanna Wyn 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. 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, and girls 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?

In a recent overview of changing structures and processes of assessment, 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 Yates 1997b). Again this raises, I think, questions about what is 'class' in the contemporary economy. We can 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 etc are being produced and recast here.

The 12 to 18 Project⁴

The 12 to 18 Project was begun in 1993, and is investigating boys and girls at four different schools as they proceed through each year of their secondary schooling. We interview the students twice a year (and video-tape that), sometimes with friends, and are thus building up both a cross-sectional view of students at a particular age, as well as longitudinal evidence on how students with particular social characteristics and in particular schools change over time. There is no perfect study, and no one way to address the problems I've outlined above. In our study we do not observe the students in class or out of school; and we have information about their background and families only through what they tell us (see Yates and McLeod, 1996; McLeod and Yates, 1997). However, the study is set up to attempt to have some regard to the types of issues I have outlined.

1. The selection of four schools and the ongoing comparative focus.

In designing the study, we needed the scale to be sufficiently small for Julie and I to do all the interviews; but we were concerned about problems I have identified earlier: of focussing only on extremes; of conflating class and school; of taking a particular sub-group as archetypal of all. We therefore decided to base the ongoing study in four schools two of which do represent 'extremes' to some extent (an elite private school; and a technical school located in a poor area); but two of which are 'middle' high schools, which draw on students from a range of backgrounds, and which do not preclude some students at least from being conventionally successful. Moreover, in terms of the students in our study, not all the students at the elite school are from a highly advantaged background (one has a father who teaches there, and lives in a distant and poorer part of the city); nor all the students at the ex-technical school from high disadvantage (one has a father who is an engineer, and has travelled overseas). Two of the schools are located in Melbourne, and two in a provincial city, enabling some differentiation in our study of how particular occupational and family backgrounds (categories) are worked out in practice and in particular contexts. All four of the

school cohorts include at least one or two students who might potentially have gone to one of the other schools. Through our close exposure to individuals over time, we can think, heuristically at least, about what effects particular schools are having both generally and on particular types of students.

2. Having to theorize 'class' processes or categories from students' subjectivities.

Although a limitation of our study is that we are working only with what students tell us in interviews, this might also be seen as a virtue. Rather than having their 'class' pre-categorized, we have to try to understand what their particular location (economic, family, cultural capital, etc) actually means to them, and how it is working for them as they go through school. (Here, we are of course drawing on and in dialogue with the existing literature on these issues.)

Vignettes from work in progress:

Interactions of class and schooling:

What school does, compared with how it is positioned.

Students begin secondary school with different family-based knowledge and resources, and this was reflected in some of the answers students gave about what they might do in the future (be a 'barrister' as compared with 'get a job'), or how they spent their time out of school ('We used to have a computer, but it broke, so I just go down to my friend's house and play her Sega'); and they differ in how articulate they are, and how self-confident in their interactions with adults such as teachers and researchers (Yates and McLeod, 1996; McLeod and Yates, 1997). What do schools (and different schools) do in interaction with these differences? In year 7 we were interested in asking students about how they saw their school; what they thought it valued; what they thought of the opportunities it gave them. The answers certainly begin to undermine any crude 'school effectiveness' idea that school effects are simply an outcome of what the school does organisationally or pedagogically.

In terms of curriculum, for example, we found in year 7 that across all four schools the students tended to be rather bored with the academic subjects they had done before, and enthusiastic about new subjects which had a practical skills component. Of the schools in our study, the school that had the largest range of such subjects, and was best equipped here, was Blacktown Secondary5, the school that would generally be described as the most disadvantaged of the four in our study. When they were asked to talk about specific subjects, the students at this school were notably more enthusiastic than the students at the other schools, whereas the students at the private school took no technical subjects other than one period a week of computer studies which they all reported as being badly taught by an incompetent teacher. The following year too, we found the students at Blacktown Secondary talking enthusiastically about a well-constructed integrated humanities project they were doing. But the students' sense of their futures, especially of whether they would complete school, bore little relation to how bored or interested they were. Those whose families were more educated took for granted that they would stay there; those whose family experience was of limited and alienating schooling did not.

These unsurprising findings once again expose the shortcomings of the current policy rhetoric that assumes simply making parent and the local community the 'owner' of schools will have similar effects across all schools. But they also, once again, set up the questions about what alternative we as researchers have to offer. Blacktown Secondary was making some effort to offer an 'inclusive' and 'relevant' curriculum.

Our experience here brought to the fore the problem of just what else

would be needed to fulfil the hopes of that earlier important Australian study of schooling inequality, to make such a school 'organic' to its community (Connell et.al., 1982), and the problem of how to respond to Mac an Ghail's (1996) recent call for a new social democratic vision of schooling to set against the current vision of the new right

A second issue that became apparent was the importance and self-fulfilling effects of school 'reputation'. When we asked students in year 7 'what do you think this school thinks is important?', the most common answer given was 'uniform'. When we started the project, one of the schools in our study did not have a uniform - and indeed one of the reasons a number of 'middle-class' parents had chosen the school was its history of being more informal and 'arty'. However, the numbers of the school had dropped considerably in the face of outside pressures (the creation of a new public 'girls' college' - whose uniform included the straw boater usually associated with private schools), and its reputation for having a drug problem. In 1994, the first year of our project, there were only 8 girls in year 7, and there was a distinct possibility the school might not survive. That year, the school introduced a uniform and developed some public relations activity with primary schools near by. Now, four years later, it has a much larger population both in general, and of girls in the year of our cohort, with students having entered at all levels. Most of the students we interviewed were not in favour of the change to uniform; and most say that the school still has a considerable drug problem - but in the eyes of parents, it is now a more desirable option, and the actual student composition as well as the expectations of parents about the school have changed.

In the provincial city, this is even more of an issue. In our year 7 interviews, at Blacktown High, the secondary school which has a more 'academic' reputation, the issue of reputation seemed to be central in how students thought about their school. The students here talked at huge length about how their school measured up to the private schools; how it was like a private school (every interview answered the question about how the school compared to other schools, by mentioning that they had a boat shed, and took part in a rowing competition with private schools). The interviews alluded to ways the reputation issue affected what happened in this school. To be accepted as a pseudo-private school takes constant vigilance - much more work and effort than at the private school in our study, where there are generations of parents who affirm with little further effort the same story (that this is a 'good' school). Also, from the interviews in these early years, the impression we had was that the focus here was very much on being seen to have good discipline (there was certainly as much bullying here as at the other school in our study in the same town, and more complaints of unfairnesses by teachers). The pay-off for the attention to externals (and for having a certain history in the town) was a more selective population (that is, there was hot competition to get in this school as compared with the other one in our study), and a greater expectation by parents and students that homework would be done and good things achieved by being at this school.

The interview that follows (with students in year 7) is characteristic. It suggests the subjective yearning to be judged as like private school kids; the false (from our experience) rumour mongering that the other schools are distinguished by being dirtier or having more smoking or worse teachers (rather than simply having a different history); the problem that even getting a better set of year 12 results does not count as much as having a boat shed:

'what do you think the school thinks is important?' B: Um, I don't know. Probably our appearance and what the public thinks. They're always saying you've got to make a good impression on the public and that.

J: And a lot of people call in and complain about things, about the school, yeah. And I was surprised because I thought the school was pretty good and had a pretty good reputation.

L: They expect a lot from us, because they're saying the school has a good reputation.

[...]

'how do you think this school compared with other secondary schools?

J: It compares pretty well, like we raced in the boat race. L: I raced in a boat race this year, I was a cox. Well we came second in our finals, and I think we did pretty well to be up there with them, like it was...

B: ...all other colleges and stuff, because like..

J: Grammar.

L: Yeah, we raced against all private schools.

J: Yeah, and all the kids from other schools have opinions about the other kids from other schools. Like we'd call kids who go to like the expensive schools, like Grammar and College. And we'd call them posh, and they'd call us Westies. Even though we're not, they'd just call us like Free or something. Yeah, just cos like, they think that if we go to.. 'cos there were these kids and they were teasing me, they were saying that our parents didn't have enough money to send me to a private school. Like, I think Blacktown High School is just as good as they are.

L: I think Blacktown High School's better. Because our boat sheds are really good. Some of them college boat sheds aren't too good. And they'd say to us...

J: Yeah, the boat shed is really cool.

L: Yeah, it's got two storeys in it.

J: It has a really nice window and everything.

How do you think this school compares B?

B: Um, oh well the rest, like schools like College, like they're more strict...

J: So are we.

B: Oh, some of them, like from schools like Central, they're all a bit, you know, they swear and they're smoking, but people from College, you don't see them smoke as much as what you do from schools like Midlands and that.

How do you think school compares to the non-private schools?

B: Oh, I think they're all pretty much the same.

L: I think our school's got a better reputation, 'cos like South Tech...

J: They might have a higher VCE pass rate.

L: Yeah, they have a higher VCE, but they don't have like a too good a reputation. 'Cos all fights and stuff break out over there, and it's a dirty school. That's what a lot of people say and that. So I think we have a better reputation than a lot of other schools. J: I think probably some of the best high schools in Blacktown are probably Grammar and Blacktown High, and Chora College and all this. But I wouldn't want to go to Central or South Tech, because they haven't got very good grounds and buildings. Some of them, oh they have a few, but, and stuff. Oh, there's just a rumour that they haven't got very good teachers, and all of them smoke and dare other people to smoke, so they start smoking.

L: Yeah, it's just a dirty sort of school.

(BHL.94a)

By comparison, when we asked the students at the other school in this town (Blacktown Secondary) the same questions, we found a quite different set of answers. For one thing, their answers to the question about what the school thought was important consistently focussed on internal matters (particular subjects, for example) rather than how they appeared to the outside world; and the question about comparison with other schools did not engage them. Compared with the students at the first school, they did not see themselves as in the same race:

Would you prefer to be at a private school?

E: No way.

C: No

K: No.

Why wouldn't you, E?

E: Um, 'cos all the snobs. Um, no I wouldn't fit in. (BSE.94b) [They go on to tell about a cousin who was sent to a private school and rebelled and got expelled. They interpret this as being forced to do something you wouldn't like, and understandably then you wouldn't work:]

K: Like you wouldn't like it, because you don't want to get sent there and your parents make you. You know, you don't do any work, or you just start smokin' or something like that.

C: And then if it's like in an all girls school, you don't get to do the subjects like sheet metal work and all that. And they're some of my favourite subjects, so..

And so it would be boring? Because...

E: You don't have like [...] woodwork, sheetmetal and all that.

C: Like there's a whole tech work you wouldn't know. (BSE.94b)

Telling stories about class, schooling, inequality:

Both theoretically and politically, it seems to me important to be approaching inequality today not as the story of a simple binary about successful elites and always already losers.

Theoretically, we need to examine the criteria and themes around which such stories are told, and to take account, as I indicated earlier, of issues of economic and cultural change. Politically we need to undermine the commonsense idea that elite schools are successful because they are doing everything right, and the converse.

In our interviews across the four schools in the early years of secondary school, hearing of their schooling experiences through the voices of a range of students in each of the schools, it was apparent that good and poor teaching was occurring at each one of the schools.

At the elite school, for example, notwithstanding much talked about market relations and what they produce, students in a particular year (interviewed separately, and not part of the same friendship group) consistently talked about the poor teaching in two key subjects. In one case the teacher involved held a senior position in the school. A female student indicated at one stage that she was worried about being able to go on with subjects she needed in the senior years, because she had had the same maths teacher for a number of years, and was not being well taught, and her marks were getting worse - and she had just heard she would be having him again the following year. We asked whether she or her parents had raised this with the school. She said she had not because this teacher was someone with whom she was working a lot in her position as class captain and whom she otherwise liked, and I just find, I've had the same teacher twice in a row, and I'm finding him really hard to understand and um, he's the sort of person who could get a little bit offended if I went and asked for...'cause I can't, I know I've asked for help from him before and I just can't understand it. Like last year it was all right, 'cause I had all my knowledge from Year 7, but this year...yeah, this year it's a lot harder and it's like really hard to ask, asking for someone else's help, 'cause he might get a bit offended, so I'm struggling a bit in that. (Cli.96b)

Here both the encouraged close relation and identification between families and the school; and also the gender themes of being a middle-class 'good woman' were working against the student's own career interests (cf Gilligan et.al., 1990)

Another student, talking about their ethics class, said this:

... the teacher's not very good, but sometimes it's good when we just sit there the whole time having a discussion. Like once we got a list of the rights that people have in state schools. And they were really good rights. And we always say [to teachers], 'Oh, you're not allowed to do that', but then they say, 'This is a private school'. So bum! (CK.94b)

Interestingly, something of this theme was also reflected in the way students at all three state schools often talked about private schools: they associated them with strictness and discipline which they criticized (and gave as a reason why they would not like to go there) but also envied. At Blacktown Secondary, for example, a boy was talking about how he thought the teachers there didn't 'care' enough about the students, and gave as an example of this that you only got minor punishments for misdemeanours that would result in suspension at the private school.

And although the market relationship between parents and school in the 'independent' school may give parents some power, and though the theme that this is costing money may be one parents tell to students to encourage sacrifice and compliance on their part, this is not always the result.

I mean, like, we're the ones paying for it. See they don't let us... if we're late for school we get punished for that. It shouldn't be up to the teachers to punish you, it should be up to our parents, cos they're the ones paying for it. If you're late, it's like it's your fault. It's not the teacher's. You can't just hand out detentions for being late for school. That's pretty stupid. Like if you wag, I reckon you shouldn't get anything for that. [...] It's like it's a choice. If you don't want to go to a class and you don't go, how can they punish you? It's up to your parents to say, 'you shouldn't have done that'... (Year 9 student, CM.96a)

(In other words, this is an example which disrupts a story that the structural arrangements of elite schools are a homogenous model for the most effective schooling.)

Both directly, through the subjects they offer, and indirectly, schools do contribute to the values students hold: their sense of society, their sense of their own possibilities, their 'class consciousness', their 'gender identity', etc. For example, in year 7, Blacktown Secondary offered a large range of technical subjects: sheetmetal, woodwork, textiles, systems technology, information technology, home economics, 3D art. In year 7 they are doing spreadsheets and learning keyboarding. Many of the students are thinking about future jobs in related areas, and in questions about school comparisons they frequently comment favourably on these subjects and on how well-equipped the school is. And yet, in relation to the question on 'what does this school think is important?', one student says this:

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. (BSE.94a)

What the student is saying here of course may not be in a simple way a reflection of what this school 'thinks' or even practices - it may equally be the result of historical and contemporary broader discourses about what school is about, and what matters.

At the private school too, the students also 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 indeed the participation here was not optional). The students did only a single computing period per week, and none of the manual technical subjects - but no one commented on the latter as a lack. This is how one student interpreted the point of the breadth of activities they did take:

It's like introducing you to other sports so, in case you want to learn them later, or you go to a place where a lot of people play it and you want to join in. (CM.94b)

In Blacktown Secondary then, students are learning a wide range of subjects, which they themselves see as useful, but also in some cases having a sense that other things may be judged as more important; in the private school, students have a confidence that they are being offered a thought-out program of the things that will bring them benefit in their adult life, and that discounts as unimportant anything not offered.

The school effect on students' thinking is becoming more apparent in our recent interviews (at the end of their year 10). We have now been talking to the students over four years, and have a sense of their individual family values as well as material arrangements, and the ways that these vary considerably across the students we interview in each particular school. Given this, it is interesting how answers to certain questions now appear to be coming together by school. This was particularly apparent in relation to a question we asked about their views on long-term unemployment (whether they saw it as an issue for Australia; what they saw as its causes; whether they saw it as an issue for their own lives). To these questions, every one of the students at the private school accounted for unemployment in terms of motivation and effort; did not know long-term unemployed (though some did have parents who had lost jobs through recent redundancies and political changes), and did not expect it to be an issue in their own lives. At the urban high school, every one of the students in our study (again representing differences of gender, ethnicity, parental occupation) accounted for unemployment in structural rather than individual terms. Most, however, did not expect it to be an issue for their own life. In these two schools we might detect some effect of school values: the private school stressing individual effort and application; the particular high school promoting a rather left-wing vision of the world, which down-played individual responsibility.

In Blacktown however, the answers to this question were more common between the two schools I contrasted in an earlier section of this paper. Here the effect of students' more direct experience with work and unemployment patterns in the town was strong; as was the fact that both schools offer dual accreditation programs in the senior years, and often use work experience as a way to introduce students to employers and to apprenticeship opportunities. These students all knew unemployed people. However they did not give the left liberal answer of the Melbourne high school students. They talked concretely about the fact that some people were not trying to get work - for example by turning up to interviews with dirty clothes, and that unemployment might be the result of not having qualifications, or of not making an effort. But both directly and indirectly they conveyed a sense that this was not the whole story - that there was also some problem of not enough jobs to go around, and some worries in their own cases about what would happen to them.

Concluding comments on 'class'

At the beginning of the paper I talked about two different types of questions I am interested in, the question of what class looks like today and whether it is a useful concept; and the question of how schooling is implicated in processes of social inequality. Clearly the form of our study - small in numbers and interview-based - allows only one point of entry to answering these questions, and the vignettes I have presented above are more directly addressing the latter set of questions than the former. In this final section, I will simply signal some themes of relevance to the first of my questions.

'Cultural capital'

Our study offers a chance to look again at concepts from the literature. For example, in the brief quote offered earlier about the student with the broken computer, we can hear the combination of both [lack of] material and cultural capital as it impacts on schools. Many of the students when they come to this school do not have expensive computers, and their understanding of these resources is of the separate games units rather than seeing their parents using word-processors or spreadsheets or accessing email. Similarly, the familiar themes about this process are present in one of our 'middle' schools, where a student whose father is a psychologist, was able to compensate for his lack of intellectual skill by a tailored training course which is now setting him up as a landscape gardener.

But in another case at the same school, a student whose mother's family were all university graduates, and who wants to be a scientist or a doctor, is having a hard time because he is failing to understand what the school requires. In year 7, he was spending his recesses by himself, trying to memorize the distance to each of the planets, convinced that this was a step to becoming a successful scientist. In year 10, he is concerned that he submitted a very long project on nuclear energy, but only got a B because the teacher considered much of it irrelevant. The problem is that the boy in question came from Sri Lanka: what had been valued at his previous school, is not valued at this particular school. Here some of the processes Bourdieu described in terms of class are at work - but it makes little sense to describe them in terms of class. But it is a case where lack of know-how is strongly disadvantaging this student - not just because he has trouble 'reading' what is required by the school, but because his parents' 'choice' of schools (the supposed guarantor of quality in current lines of policy thinking) has sent him to a school whose formal and peer culture is most alien to the good behaviour and formal compliance he prefers.

Again at this school, another boy whose parents are professional shows examples of some strains engendered by 'new middle class' modes which are reminiscent of Basil Bernstein's work. He values what the school values: self-direction, flexibility, informality, mutual respect - but he is simultaneously concerned that these modes have led him to not doing enough work ('old middle-class, in Bernstein's terms), and getting into habits that he is finding very difficult to turn around.

Changing forms of gendered class identity

In the feminist literature in particular there has been an interest in understanding class as a gendered phenomenon, and also in examining some changes in the wake of the feminist movement of recent decades. Here the answers students give to open questions about how they think or daydream about the future are of interest, and ones we will be attempting to analyse more closely in future papers. In year 8, the middle class girls' answers were full of strong images of autonomy and adventure: travel, driving, bungy jumping, going into space. By contrast, some of the (rural and provincial) working class boys in our study returned again and again to their hopes of a successful family life⁷. A number of things are at work here - the effects of the campaigns of encouragement to girls to broaden their horizons - alongside the more personal dynamics of wishing to escape the tighter control of their mothers; and for the boys in question, the fact that their own families have been split up, as well as affected by unemployment.

Changes in the structure of jobs

At year 10, not one of the students in our study wants to be a teacher or a nurse, and few aspire to work in 'public service' jobs. A number are intent on jobs in 'the hospitality industry'; a number of students of middle-class background are talking about preferring not to have a full-time job, but a more limited and flexible one; and one of the female students at the

private school is intent on becoming a naturopath. In pathways terms, all students at the private school (and their friends) are likely to remain to complete year 12 (though one has transferred to a different private school to do this); at the urban high school, a couple are considering changing to a TAFE institution to do their final years; and in Blacktown some students are embarking on dual accreditation or training courses, and one or two may drop out altogether. The theorising of what all this means remains to be done...

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1 See, for example, Teese et.al. (1995), Connell (1995), Dwyer (1995).

2 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.)

3 I found particularly useful an article by Ian Watson (1993), reviewing and critiquing the Birmingham ethnographic tradition. In this article (and in some other important recent contributions by Mac an Ghail (1996), Skeggs (1997), Steedman, Walkerdine and others) alongside the critique of 60s and 70s sociology, there is, equally, a strong case being made for the significance of class/inequality as an issue that needs to be prominent but refined today. 4 The 12 to 18 Project was supported in its first year by funding from La Trobe University, and subsequently by the ARC. The research itself (all interviewing and analysis) is being carried out by the two principal researchers, Lyn Yates (La Trobe University) and Julie McLeod (Deakin University). This has been and is being supported by administrative and library assistance from Kathleen Orr, Karen Halasa, Geraldine Ditchburn and Esther Faye, and transcription typing by Terri Yates.

5 All names have been changed.

6 Across all four schools, though somewhat less frequently at Blacktown Secondary, whose uniform was a fairly minimal one of windcheater in the right colour and black shoes - but even here students complained about the emphasis put on this.

7 But these boys' daydreams about family do not have the same markers of patriarchy and extreme anti-feminism noted in some of the American literature (Weis, 1993).

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