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Through the use of narrative portraits this paper discusses social class and identity, as working-class university students perceive them. With government policy encouraging wider participation rates from under-represented groups of people within the university sector, working-class students have found themselves to be the objects of much research. Working-class students are, for the most part, studied as though they are docile bodies, unable to participate in the construction of who they are, and working-class accounts of university experiences are quite often compared to the middle-class norms. This paper explores how working-class students see themselves within the university culture. Working-class students' voices and stories form the focus of this paper, in which the language of 'disadvantage' is dealt with and the ideologies of class identity explored.

Keywords

social class

higher education

communities

working-class students

non-traditional student

barriers to participation

In a postmodern and post-Marxist world, theories about class have become increasingly complex and conflicting, and there has been a shift away from using class as a theoretical framework for research (Calhoun, 1996; McGregor, 1997; Skeggs, 1997; Weedon, 1999). While social class has historically been a 'central theme within educational and sociological theorising, research and analysis' (Archer et al., 2003), writers such as Milner (1999, p. 7) suggest a shift away from class as a theoretical framework has occurred because of 'an increasing preoccupation with the cultural effects of other kinds of cultural difference--gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality'. As hooks (2000) says, class nowadays is the 'uncool subject'. In her view, 'It's the subject that makes us all tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand' (p. vii). In these circumstances, it should be hardly surprising that class analysis of our social and political institutions is often dismissed as 'dogmatic, ideological, or deluded' (Aronowitz, 2003, p. 18). Accordingly, matters of class power are 'sanitized and its powerful effects on the life chances of working-class students is denuded or made invisible' (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005a, p. 8).

In response, we share McGregor's (1997, p. 2) view that it is 'impossible to understand Australia or the lives of Australians without reference to class'. Throughout this study, the category of class resonated repeatedly for us as we spoke to students about their lives and experience. We acknowledge that issues associated with social class and access to education 'play an important

role in ensuring either the reproduction of (middle-class) privileges or (working-class) disadvantages' (Archer et al., 2003, p. 5). McGregor (1997, p. 39) sums this up:

Schools in working-class suburbs, attended largely by working-class children, tend to channel their pupils into working-class jobs; the proportion of children who leave school as soon as they can is high; expectations of going to university are low; as a consequence, few working-class boys, and even fewer working-class girls, complete a university education.

Thus, while class may have become a part of our cultural and political 'unconsciousness' (Aronowitz, 2003, p. 25) we want to argue that it remains a salient and powerful category in understanding the cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging of students in education. Skeggs (1997, p. 7) explains

[Class is] a major feature of subjectivity, a historical specificity and part of a struggle over access to resources and ways of being. Class ... is central to us all, even if we do not feel impeded by it or choose not to recognize it, or to avoid it through disidentifications and dissimulations.

In a modest way we want to contribute to this conversation by exploring the stories of a small group of working-class students on a regional university campus in Western Australia. Our purpose is to listen to and make sense of how working-class students understand and experience issues of class and identity formation in the context of a university setting. In this article we want to do three things. We want to provide a brief overview of the research and the context in which the stories are told. We want to outline some of the key theoretical ideas informing our views about class and education. Finally, we move on to examine a number of student stories in order to better understand how class is constituted 'not in a crude or deterministic way, but as it is expressed through and embodied in language, behaviour and relational practices' (Smyth et al., 2006, p. 122).

The study

The research study focused on the experiences of university students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Its purpose was to understand what set of conditions helped students to continue their education, remain at university and study successfully. Participants had all gained entry to university through an 'alternative' (non-traditional) entry route provided by one of the university's bridging programs. All students had survived the difficult first year, and all were into their second or third years of study.

There is a long history of inequality of access to university education in Australia. Figures suggest that when inequalities are defined simply in terms of access, there has been no reduction in social group inequalities in Australia over 20 years (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). The link between educational underachievement and social class has been made by Smith (2003) and Peck (2001), and is reflected in Australian Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) figures that suggest a strong link between low socio-economic status and low rates of participation in university (DEST, 2001). Our study was located within a community that is struggling with various aspects of disadvantage, including both low socio-economic status and low participation and retention rates at all levels of education. In the surrounding suburbs, the percentage of people who possess a degree qualification ranges from 1.8 per cent to 3.3 per cent of the population, compared with the Australian average of 8.2 per cent (DEST, 2001). Our intention was to look behind the statistics to develop a snapshot of some of the ways that students from working-class backgrounds experience university education so that we might begin to better understand the landscape of low educational achievement in areas of social and economic disadvantage.

Conscious of the exclusory nature of educational research and policy that objectifies and

pathologises working-class students, we believed that it was important to give students a voice through the research. Shacklock and Smyth (1997, p. 4) explain that 'in telling of stories of life, previously unheard, or silenced, voices open up the possibility for new, even radically different, narrations of life experiences'. We are mindful of the debilitating consequences of pathologising and individualising practices that view working-class students as 'disadvantaged', 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' (Shields et al., 2005, p. 9). The problem with this kind of labelling is that it shifts the focus from the 'larger sociopolitical contexts' in which students experience education (McLaren, 1995, p. 153). For us, critical ethnography is one research methodology that tackles some of these issues by focusing on the perspectives of insiders (the students) in the context of the broader social, political and economic circumstances shaping students' lives (Carspecken, 1996; Smyth et al., 2006). In the words of Quantz (1992, p. 462), 'critical ethnography's contribution ... lies principally in its ability to make concrete the particular manifestations of marginalized cultures located in a broader sociopolitical framework'. Our enquiry, therefore, invited students to share their stories of how they came to be at university, and what it was like for them once they got there.

The research was designed to be open ended and exploratory. We asked a number of conversational questions such as: How did you come to be at university? What's it like for you? What do you like and dislike? What about your friends? Did they come to university? If not, why not? What makes you different? What's different in your life now? We embarked on the project with no explicit expectations about what would emerge from students' stories, except that we were looking at elements in their experiences that led to their continued engagement. It turned out that social class emerged as a very strong theme in students' stories, with their past lives as working-class youngsters continuing to shape their present experiences of university. Experiences of schooling, interactions with teachers, and family expectations were consistent narrative threads.

Social class--some theoretical perspectives

We take as our starting point McLaren and Farahmandpur's (2005b, p. 74) observation that the issue of class has been 'overlooked' as a consequence of the turn to identity politics in contemporary social and economic analysis. Like McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005b), we are not interested in subordinating race, ethnicity and gender to class struggle. Rather, we are interested in understanding how capitalist social relations constitute these 'different yet equally important struggles' (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005b, p. 84). In short, we want to investigate the role of class in constructing different educational experiences for different classes of students. Althusser picks this up when he highlights that 'within capitalist society, education is an apparatus of the state, attempting to reproduce the conditions of capitalist production' (cited in Archer et al., 2003, p. 7). In this paper, we draw on Bourdieu's understanding of class to illuminate how the process of reproduction occurs through institutions such as education. Bourdieu describes the norms and practices of particular social classes using the concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; 1996). This focus allows for a highly nuanced analysis of the complexities of day-to-day experiences of social class: an analysis that is 'more subtle ... a kind of forensic, detective work, which involves tracing the print of class in areas where it is faintly written' (Savage, 2003, p. 536). As Ball (2006a) explains, it's all about how 'class is achieved and maintained and enacted rather than something that just is!' (p. 8). Of particular interest for our research are Bourdieu's concepts of institutional and cultural habitus that describe the norms and practices of institutions and of particular social classes.

Bourdieu suggests the interaction between objective structures (such as universities) and personal experiences or histories (such as those of students entering universities) that culminates in a person's acquired habitus. In other words, continuing interactions between objective structures and personal experiences continually shape and modify our habitus and continue to shape further experiences. Reay et al. (2001, p. 3) suggest that institutional habitus 'can be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation'. They highlight how in mainstream education the knowledges of the white middle class are valued over all other knowledges, and that therefore 'the education system is socially

and culturally biased, and this is played out in the relations between staff and students' (Reay et al., 2001, p. 5). Thus institutional habitus legitimises the dominant values and the prevailing cultural capital of society (Lareau, 2000).

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977; 1996) argue that people are cultural beings with different patterns of thought, beliefs and perceptions. We act, interact and respond to our particular world or class in the way that we understand its meaning; we are a product of our cultural habitus. For Bourdieu and Passeron (1996, p. 9), '[e]very society has some form of educational process of "pedagogic action" (PA) whereby this is achieved ... [through] symbolic violence'. Pedagogic action involves the use of a particular type of reward and punishment system in order to maintain power. All cultures have their own forms of pedagogic action and it is through this action that the dominant class stipulates, amongst other things, who is to be taught, by whom, and in what ways.

Of particular relevance to our research is how such processes perform both the inclusion and exclusion of students in universities. Specifically, we focus on 'the manner in which the ... middle classes colonise areas of economic and social life' (Preston, 2007, p. 61). Because universities tend to be middle-class institutions, orientated towards middle-class values (Green, 2003), those values become normalised and 'natural'. Class bias shapes pedagogies, so, for example, 'heated exchange' can be frowned upon in a classroom dominated by middle-class values, whereas 'those of us from working-class backgrounds may feel that discussion is deeper and richer if it arouses intense responses' (hooks, 1994, p. 187). Green (2003, p. 83) suggests that universities value such things as 'linear, argumentative, audienceless, academic prose' and a 'self-reflexive' middle-class voice, none of which is typical of interactions in working-class communities. Green (2003, p. 83) elaborates:

'[c]ommon sense' assumptions about the teaching of writing, like the assumption that clarity and conciseness are universal values and desirable goals across communities, may not be true for those from different social classes, ethnic groups, or a variety of communities.

This suggests how students from working-class backgrounds bring with them a different cultural habitus from the normalised middle-class habitus of the university, and so are more likely to feel (and be) excluded. This is where Bourdieu's (1977, p. 47) understanding of cultural capital helps us to explain

the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. This starting point implies a break with the presuppositions inherent both in the commonsense view, which sees academic success or failure as an effect of natural aptitudes, and in human capital theories (p. 47).

Furthermore, there is an assumption that working-class students will aspire to becoming more like their middle-class counterparts in regards to behaviour, attitudes, dress, language and lifestyle through university education. In other words, working-class students are expected to leave behind their class backgrounds and 'assimilate' into a new elite social class (Green, 2003, p. 84). On this count, MacKenzie (1998, p. 345) argues that there is a much greater need to understand the sense of 'alienation, embarrassment, self-doubt, intellectual excitement, struggle, compromise, and grieving' that informs the experiences of working-class students. To explore the habitus of the university is to uncover some of the mechanisms that 'educational systems employ to reproduce existing social relations in students' (Webb et al., 2002, p. 114). In other words, the objective structure of the university continually shapes and structures the educational experiences of students engaging with the institutional habitus (Robbins, 1993), and provides a mechanism for

ensuring that class order or position is maintained. The following discussion attempts to illuminate these processes, using narrative portraits created from research data. We draw on the stories of 20 working-class university students to show the interplay of cultural and institutional habitus.

Students' experience of social class

So far we have argued that through socialisation in a particular cultural habitus, young people learn and reproduce their own cultural habitus through practices that conform to the dominant cultural habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996). We see this process at work in the following narrative portrait of Brian (a pseudonym). Brian's story was particularly rich in detail and insight about the masculine nature of working-class culture.

Brian's narrative, Part One: school and work

I went to school in Tasmania. I left after Year 10. Year 11 and 12, that wasn't even a consideration. I knew even before I left school, my future was probably to spend a few years on unemployment and then I'd go work in the foundries where Dad worked, and then become a man. Going to uni just wasn't on the cards for us, the kids I went to school with. The bosses' kids went to uni but we didn't. They got the cars and we borrowed ours. I knew that once I turned 18 I could go to work in the foundry and earn good money. It's really mixed up with the identity of who you are as the man: part of the image of being a bloke. Most of the kids I knew started drinking from an early age because that's what you did, and then once you got old enough to work in the foundry then you tried to match the other guys who were the veterans.

The most interesting and disturbing feature of Brian's narrative is what it exposes about the limited life chances that result from his working-class male habitus. In the setting he describes, shaped by social class divisions and gender identities, education in the form of institutional habitus re-inscribes the demarcation between those with power and those without. Those with power, 'the bosses' kids', are in a position to retain power because they can go to university. For kids like Brian, university was just 'not on the cards' and they now face futures that are likely to be circumscribed by a lifetime of work in the foundry. We see how the habitus of the school and that of the broader working-class community have together resulted in a view of the world, and of Brian's own place in it, that is manifest in his own and the other kids' cultural behaviour (Dumais, 2002).

We saw similar evidence of the impact of institutional habitus on the behaviour of other students. This was apparent in the way they made decisions about their futures. Three strong patterns are seen in the narratives of these students: 'people like us don't go to university'; 'people like us don't fit in at school'; and 'people like us aren't good enough to sit the exams'.

Pauline, Marie, Nadine and Scott: people like us don't go to university

Pauline comes from a low socio-economic background. Her high school was not only low socio-economic but extremely rough so there was no push for further education; students just got in and got out. At her school, if you weren't in the top 10, you weren't encouraged to go on at all. There was no encouragement at all for her or students like her beyond getting her achievement certificate at the end of Year 10.

Marie's experience was slightly different, though the outcome: leaving early: was the same. Marie, also from a working-class background, wasn't encouraged at school even though she had straight A-grades. So rather than go on to further study she left with her girlfriends after third year (aged 15) and got a job.

Marie thinks if she had been a boy she would have stayed on, but nobody suggested that she should.

Again, in the area where Nadine grew up there was no thought of going on at school, everyone just got out and got a job. It took her a long time to realise that she could go to university.

Scott's experience was similar. The teachers at his school just wanted him to get out of there and to get a job.

These stories show how the students' social class backgrounds circumscribe their life chances, and how habitus is working to reproduce existing social relations. Each case illustrates the argument that educational processes employ a particular system of rewards and punishments that work to sustain the pre-existing power relations through 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996, p. 9). In some of these examples the reproduction of power relations relates not only to individuals but also to the whole institution. Thus working-class schools appear to restrict their practices so as to perform certain processes of socialisation for their pupils that lead to limited aspirations. As a consequence, according to Ball (2006b, p. 39), students and their families are constrained by 'the parameters of political possibility and acceptability'. This was the case for Pauline, where in her 'extremely rough school' only the top 10 students received any encouragement to go on after Year 10. In Marie's case, while her aspirations emulated those of her peers, her decision to leave was endorsed by the fact that no-one from school encouraged her to stay even though she was a top student. Nadine and Scott shared similar experiences of institutional practices, which served to limit their aspirations and exclude them from the benefits of university education. These practices reflect the meta-narratives of education that 'bind [students] even more tightly into systems of ... inequality' (Levinson & Holland, 1996, in Alexander et al., 2005, p. 3).

What is interesting for us is that inequality is brought about when students' futures are bound by their social class habitus, rather than shaped by their individual abilities or aspirations. When school failure is blamed on the individuals because of their class affiliations it contributes to a 'deficit' form of thinking that pathologises students and predisposes many students to disengage from schooling (Shields et al., 2005). Such practices are expressed in discourses that frame the experiences of students and teachers, and sustain the idea that existing power relations and associated educational inequities are natural and just (Shields et al., 2005). This process can be seen in the discourses at play in the narratives of Bec, Franci and Kath.

Bec, Franci and Kath: people like us don't fit in at school

Bec was a transient child. When she did turn up to school she often had no shoes, no lunch and no pencils. While she thinks the teachers should have been glad she was in their classroom, in fact they used to tell her off because she didn't look like the other students.

Franci also failed to fit in at school but for a different reason. She thinks it was because her mum was a single parent. She also failed every maths test in her life. The teachers finally just put her at the back of the class and told her not to disturb anybody else and just stay there. Because of this she thought she was too stupid to go to university, because of what happened at school.

Interestingly, Kath discovered that sometimes even if you do the 'right thing' you still get into trouble. She found that for students like her (she is Indigenous) it could sometimes be detrimental to know anything, because you ended up with a clip around the ear.

Here, not fitting in because of a 'deficit' attribute such as being a transient child, or the child of a single parent, or an Indigenous child who knows more than she ought to, has led to these students being pathologised as problems in the classroom and brought about their exclusion. Again, institutional habitus works to bring about exclusion from education. The challenge, according to Shields et al. (2005, p. 1) is to understand how

schooling creates and perpetuates images of children in ways that are destructive, in ways that predispose some children to be successful, confident, and engaged, and others to become lower achievers, timid, or aggressive, reluctant, and disengaged.

The following narratives further highlight how, through pedagogic action, working-class students have been denied the benefits of education. These are examples of the ways in which students have been prevented from sitting the Tertiary Entrance Examinations (TEE), which--in this particular state--form the standard entry route to tertiary study.

Megan, Jen, Scott and Dylan: people like us aren't good enough to sit the exams

Megan didn't do the TEE because she felt it would bring the school down, and she didn't want to be responsible for that. She was very aware that if she were to sit the exams and do badly, she would bring down both the school and herself because it would make the whole school look bad.

Jen was also worried about doing TEE, but in her case it was because on top of it being very hard, everyone told her how stressful it was going to be. Because she knew she would not cope well with the stress, she decided not to do it.

Scott was doing fine during Year 12, and was all set to take his exams, but when he did badly in his mocks that freaked him out so he didn't sit the TEE.

At Dylan's school, students had the idea drilled into them that if you don't do your TEE you might as well drop out. So Dylan, in an act of resistance, dropped himself out and went to TAFE.

These stories speak of how participants were excluded from the benefits of university education, and highlight the gatekeeping role of formal examinations in performing the exclusion. Students, first, appear to measure themselves against the 'gold standard' provided by the examination system that separates the learning 'failures' from the learning 'successes'. They then collude in the sorting process by taking matters into their own hands and making a decision to withdraw. Megan puts the school's reputation before her own future. Jen has been told how difficult and stressful exams are, and this frightens her so much that she decides to opt out. Scott was panicked by his experience of failure so did not sit for his exams. Even Dylan, though he frames his own script as one of resistance when he acts against advice and against the grain by dropping out, also effectively colludes in his own exclusion. These different narratives again show the significance of institutional habitus in shaping the students' educational experiences in such a way as to ensure that class order prevails through consent (Gramsci, 1971).

Each of these narratives illustrates aspects of the social and cultural biases of the education system, and shows how institutional habitus works to legitimise the dominant values of the school community (Reay et al., 2001). Here, institutional habitus results in a sorting process that effectively separates out those students who are expected to succeed from those who are not on the basis of their social class background. Students' narratives reveal the presence of naturalised assumptions about who should go to university, about the kinds of behaviours and social backgrounds that make children 'fit' for schooling, and about the effectiveness of examinations to differentiate those students who deserve to take out the prizes offered by a meritocratic education

system. All show how institutional habitus works to normalise middle-class cultural practices and sort people on the basis of their social and cultural habitus. As McLaren (2005, p. xvii) says, paraphrasing Marx, 'human beings act on and in the world in situations not entirely of their own making'. These narratives clearly signal the need to unpick and expose 'the innocence, the kind of unacknowledged normality of the middle class' (Savage, 2003, p. 537).

Rewriting working-class identities

Happily, these stories do not end here. Despite experiencing various forms of exclusion as students at school, all the students are now studying successfully at university. So what happened? Brian's narrative provides a starting point for understanding some of the processes that help individuals to work against the grain of institutional and cultural habitus.

Brian's narrative, Part Two: What made the difference?

I noticed it all through my school life, even with the peers I'd knocked around with, because I've always been an avid reader. I suppose I could put it down to Mum. I can remember going to the library a lot with her when I was younger and poking around the library and thinking, 'Oh when do I get to grow into the adult section?' So I've known in some sense that I've never fitted in. I could never comprehend why all these boys would want to try and memorise models of cars ... and I'm thinking, 'Why do you want to know that? It's just crazy stuff'. I knew what I needed to do to sort of mix in with everyone, but there was always a better part of me thinking you can only get drunk and get stoned X amount of times and then you've got to start saying, 'What's going on here?' But you gotta fit somewhere.

The idea of learning, I just knew ... I don't know ... it was something, well, a part of me. I had an understanding of myself that I like learning things. Working in foundries is basic labouring work and you learn certain things and that's it. I knew ... the things I saw happening around me but I wasn't able to articulate, how to speak about them, how to talk about them, and I thought well uni's the place to go to get a better understanding of what is happening. I knew I could do more. Even if I don't go on and teach, there is for me that part that wasn't being expressed before uni. It has touched me, it has brought something out that I knew was there and that I couldn't touch before.

Here we see the effects of competing cultural habitus. On one hand, Brian feels the pressure to conform to the masculine working-class culture in order to 'fit in,' while also knowing that he's 'never fitted in'. But the desire to bring out something in himself that wasn't being expressed before provides the motivation to step away from the constraints of his peer culture and take the risk of going to university. It is interesting that, like Brian, other participants spoke of having a long-held ambition to go to university and of resisting the expectations of teachers, peers and family. For Brian this decision is made possible by the interventions of his mother, whose behaviour towards him suggests a different reading of her son's potential from that of the school and the local working-class, masculine culture. There is a strong indication in students' stories that what they have done is mould breaking, in opposition to class, cultural and family habitus, and entailing one or another form of sacrifice. Elsewhere in his narrative Brian describes the sacrifices he has made to realise his ambition. His marriage collapsed, he lived alone in a small rented flat, he had no car, and worked doing night fill at the local supermarket in order to survive. As a foundry worker, he was much better off financially.

These experiences contradict Williamson's (1981) assertion that social classes have been constructed into categories whose participants or groups of people share particular characteristics

that distinguish them from other groups of people. Williamson (1981, p. 7) also suggests that once a person is constructed into a particular class they remain 'objectively definable and largely fixed/unchanging'. On the other hand, these stories also challenge the position taken by many sociologists since the 1980s that class identities have weakened. We contend that Savage (2003, p. 536) provides a more appropriate account when he suggests that while there have recently been 'fundamental social changes' these involve 'the re-working rather than the eradication of social class'. It seems that students are shaping rather fluid identities at the intersection of more traditional notions of 'working' and 'middle' class, as they engage in an institution that tends to be colonised by middle-class culture and values (Green, 2003; hooks, 1994; Preston, 2007). We see that students' desire to study is often embedded in the realities of their working-class identity. Three core threads weave through their narratives: transformation of life chances (not only for participants but often for their children too); the joy of discovering about themselves and the world; and a desire to work towards a fairer society.

The desire to work towards a 'fair go' for people like themselves seems to be a particularly strong motivating factor that helps students to pursue their studies. The following portraits show how participants' class backgrounds are at the heart of this motivation.

Dylan, Kath, Bec and Marie: Dreams of 'a fair go'

Dylan believes that university changes your life. Because of this, and because he loves teaching and informing people, he would just love to teach at university. He wants to teach people who are like him, those that should not be at university, people from the same background as him. More than anything else, this is what keeps him there.

Kath also believes that university is life changing, as it allows you to do and be whoever you want to be. She is now better able to understand the world from the perspective of people like her. She is studying human resources, and the experience of her present work as a casual clerical assistant makes her think that the human resource practices she sees in operation have nothing to do with humans at all. She is excited about being able to change this after she qualifies.

Bec, who was a transient child and went to at least 26 schools as a primary-aged student, now wants to be a teacher. She wants to know how to actually build children up and not destroy their lives, specifically children like her. She knows how hard it is for these children just getting to school on time, let alone not having any shoes or lunch. She is very disturbed to see children coming to school because they want to be there, because they've got the hunger for education, who--when they get there--just get told off. This to her is a big motivation to study, because she feels such an affinity with children like these. (Since she shared her dream with us, Bec has become a primary school teacher.)

Marie too gets quite passionate about people who are underprivileged. She thinks that, because she is from that background, she gets particularly irritated when people who have never been in that position think they know what it's like. She thinks you only have a really good sense of it when you have actually been there. Marie's degree course is in community development. She would love to work with young people in her local community. She wants to see the tables reversed a little. She says it's about equality. The gap is too wide, and she believes it can actually be bridged a lot more. It's a passion for her.

We earlier referred to the perception that working-class students are often expected to leave their class backgrounds behind and assimilate into a new middle-class milieu (Green, 2003). These stories suggest a slightly different analysis of aspiration and social mobility, with students from working-class backgrounds seeking the status and power afforded by middle-class occupations not for their own improved status but rather so they can work to improve the life chances of others from a similar class background. Participants do not see their futures in terms of becoming middle class but, rather, in terms of giving something back to the community to which they belong. These students, all from strong working-class backgrounds, still have a commitment to their working-class identities and to working-class issues. Their stories illustrate a continuing loyalty to their backgrounds, and a desire to use their 'middle-class' qualifications and professional status, not just as tickets to a better life for themselves, but also through newly acquired power as a means to offer a better life for others like them. In short, there is a strong sense of solidarity among these working-class students.

We have found throughout our research that students reposition themselves in relationship to the challenges of university education, and that there are parallel changes to their sense of identity. The educational journey for the students was interrupted either by rejecting school and dropping out before their final-year examinations, or by being rejected by the school system. Munns et al. (2000, p. 167) describe this as a 'cultural fracture', whereby schooling was rejected (for whatever reason) but, in our analysis, students who experience cultural fracture do not reject future education per se. Schooling rather becomes unfinished business and students actually see university education as a future possibility.

Melucci (1996, p. 49) suggests that even though formal education has been interrupted, identity continues and takes the form of a 'metamorphosis', being

a process involving constant negotiation among different parts of the self, among different times of the self, and among different settings or systems to which each of us belongs. In its various components, identity considered as negotiation involves the capacity to respond to the multiplicity and contradictoriness of the elements of which we are composed at any given moment.

In other words, just because formal education is interrupted it does not mean that people's identities do not continue to take shape and evolve. For instance, the students involved in our research are mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, employed and unemployed, married and divorced. As such, becoming a university student signals a change in identity that requires taking on and experiencing the metamorphosis that Melucci describes above.

Similarly, Munns et al. (2000, p. 4) imply that students who enter university through an alternative entry or 'second chance' program are 'reconnecting with education [which] coincides with wider processes of individuals defining and redefining their identities in the period between school and universities' (p. 4). Britton and Baxter (1999) reflect that it is not the university experience itself that creates changes in identity, but rather changes in the self and identity are the reasons for attending to the 'unfinished business' of schooling. It is changes in identity that result in entry into university. While defining identity is subjective, what we do know is that our students manage to negotiate between different social and cultural contexts, which allows a redefinition of the self and, as Melucci (1996, p. 51) suggests:

Conceptually, it is important to shift from a consideration of identity in terms of either/or to a non-linear perspective which includes the possibility of and/ and. The back-and-forth between these perspectives depends on who asks the question of identity and from which point of view.

Posited from this position, rather than having their cultural capital devalued, students are able to take control of their learning by articulating their experiences, their lives and their knowledge to

'others', thereby opening up the 'possibility of imagining themselves as agents of their own lives' (Brodkey, 1992, p. 312).

Conclusion

Our research leads us to the position that social class needs to be revisited as a theoretical category for understanding the cultural processes of (in)exclusion in education. In this case study, students' stories clearly show the detrimental effects of institutional and cultural habitus on the life chances of people from working-class schools and communities. As McGregor (1997, p. 186) explains:

[b]eing in the working-class is a synonym for underprivilege. Working-class people in general earn less than other groups, own less, have a poorer education, have less access to the goods of the society they live in, and have less opportunity for a good life: equal opportunity simply does not exist in Australia.

Significantly, the informants in this study demonstrated a capacity to push back against the odds without having to divest themselves of their working-class sensibilities. For them, education was not only about individual advancement but directly related to fairness for themselves, their families and communities. What makes these stories so powerful is not only the manner in which the students interrupted some strongly entrenched stereotypes and cultural biases in education but also renegotiated their own life trajectories and personal biographies. As we heard, this kind of identity work (Wexler, 1992) is not without risk, tension or struggle. In rewriting their own life stories and attending to 'unfinished business', these students courageously moved beyond the scripted 'parameters of political possibility and acceptability' (Ball, 2006b, p. 39) of working-class students.

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