

Class, Identity, and Teacher Education

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Abstract This paper explores the possibilities of working with White, working-class teacher education students to explore the “complex social trajectory” (Reay in *Women’s Stud Int Forum* 20(2):225–233, 1997a, p. 19) of class border crossing as they progress through college. Through analysis of a course that I have developed, *Education and the American Dream*, I explore political and pedagogical issues in teaching the thousands of teacher education students who are the first in their families to attend college about social class. Arguing that faculty in teacher education too often disregard the significance of deep class differences between themselves and many of their students, I propose that teacher education include coursework in which upwardly-mobile students (a) draw upon their distinctive perspectives as class border-crossers to elucidate their “complex social positioning as a complicated amalgam of current privilege interlaced with historic disadvantage” (Reay in *Women’s Stud Int Forum* 20(2):225–233, 1997a, p. 25) and (b) complicate what Adair and Dahlberg (*Pedagogy* 1:173–175, 2001, p. 174) have termed a cultural “impulse to frame class mobility as a narrative of moral progress”. Such coursework, I suggest, has implications for the development of teacher leaders in stratified schools. The paper draws upon the literatures on social class and educational attainment, on the construction of classed identities in spite of silence about class in public and academic discourse, and on pedagogies for teaching across class differences.

Keywords Social class · Teacher education · Social mobility

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Social Class, Identity, and Teacher Education

Diane Reay (2006, p. 290) has written that social class is “everywhere and nowhere, denied yet continually enacted”. The simultaneous enactment *and* denial of social class was powerfully illustrated in the lives of two students recently enrolled in the teacher education program in which I work.

Julie, a young White woman, was raised in a household in which choices were often made between paying the rent and buying food. One day, she came to my office to tell me that she’d have to drop out because she could not make ends meet in spite of working two jobs and being deeply in debt. I mentioned upcoming deadlines for scholarships. But Julie said “I didn’t think that those were for people like me. You have to demonstrate that you’re committed to teaching to get those, and everyone else in class is volunteering in schools. I cannot do that. I’m only getting 4 h of sleep a night now.”

Julie wanted to teach low-income children, to open opportunities for others. Yet in a culture that upholds belief that hard work will be rewarded, Julie had no way to positively frame her biography of tenacious poverty in spite of years of extremely hard work; nor, as she constructed a teacher identity, could she draw upon her distinctive experiences of beating the system to excel in school. She saw, instead, only how far she fell short of her normative referent of middle-class college student.

Dave, a White classmate of Julie’s, had never expected to find himself back in school. Ten years earlier, he’d worked hard to complete an Associates Degree, something that no one else in his working-class family had ever attempted. He’d excelled at his technical job. Education had, for a time, been his ticket out of the economic turmoil of his childhood. And then he was laid off.

For Dave, becoming a teacher was part of a deliberate strategy to finally attain economic security. He would soon be explaining to his own students the relationships between hard work, schooling and adult success. Central to Dave’s emerging teacher identity was his narrative of pulling himself up by his bootstraps through schooling—twice. In his teacher education program, he would learn about institutional racism and sexism in schools. But low-income White families like his would essentially be invisible in the discourse about equity and social justice¹ (Jones 2006b; Moss 2003; Kusserow 2004; Sacks 2007).

There are thousands of candidates like Julie and Dave in preservice teacher education programs across the country who are the first in their families to attend college,² whose parents performed routinized manual work, whose childhoods were marked by economic strain. These students occupy a distinctive social space: They are poised at the very point of crossing formidable class borders; they have methodically—if not consciously—constructed new social identities through school to enable their social mobility.

¹ For example, a popular book in foundations courses in teacher education is Oakes and Liptons’ *Teaching to Change the World*. In this book, class is consistently conflated with race.

² Indicative of how invisible social class is in teacher education, few programs collect data on the social class backgrounds of students, I draw here from Garger (1995) and Grant and Murray (1999).

Yet beyond a long tradition of work on the schooling of poor urban children of color, it is unlikely that they've encountered any systematic analysis of social class in their formal education (Lubienski 1997; Reay 2001, 2005; Savage 2003; Walkerdine 1990). As Sherry Linkon (1999, p. 2–3) has observed, “the principles of inclusion and recognition that have been so important in creating spaces for gender studies, black studies, queer studies, and ethnic studies [in educational settings] have generally not been extended to class”. Julie Bettie (2003, p. 195) writes that, “class is largely missing as a category of identity offered by popular culture and political discourse in the early twenty-first century United States. Class is not a central category of thought, making it difficult to have a cultural or political class identity.” While we want teacher education students to understand the effects of deep structural inequalities in public schooling, they are essentially left on their own to theorize about class and about their own experiences of social mobility. I believe that while teacher education has acknowledged the importance of coursework that positions students to critically examine their racial and gendered identities, it is vital that students—especially those who are positioned to be upwardly mobile through schooling—also come to more deeply understand how class has shaped their lives.

In this paper, I will describe a course that I have developed, *Education and the American Dream*, in which I invite students to closely interrogate the distinctive but unnamed social space within a trajectory of upward mobility that they occupy as college students. I believed that in naming the ways in which their own experiences in school were inexorably entwined with class, they might also come to better understand the many barriers that stand between marginalized students and adult success. Having traversed those same class boundaries myself as a young adult—years before I could understand the significance of what I had done—I felt a particular affinity for this work.

In designing this course, I wanted students to develop both deeper theoretical understanding of social class and autobiographical understanding of class mobility. As Michelle Fine and April Burns (2003, p. 850) have observed, we have yet to develop theoretical and empirical ways to talk about the complex processes of social mobility through schooling, in part because we understand so little about class. The meager literature that is available on individuals for whom success in school enabled movement across class borders (e.g., Dews and Law 1995; Muzatti and Samarco 2006; Welsch 2005) suggests that there is much to be learned about the construction of identity, ambition, and achievement. The thousands of first-generation students enrolled in teacher education in the US potentially have much to teach us about these things.

The odds were heavily stacked against first-generation students even making it to our courses: College enrollment and retention are much higher for the children of college educated parents than for the children of parents without college degrees, even among the highest achievers (Choy 2002; Flanagan 2001; Karen 2002; NCES 2005; Sacks 2007). Even as class is collectively denied in the US (Bettie 2003; Furman et al. 2005; Jones 2006a, b, 2007; Kelly 2007; Kusserow 2004; Sacks 2007) class has indeed been enacted in the schooling of the working-class students now in teacher education.

Yet few programs—even those that do an excellent job of analyzing race and gender in education—engage students in reflective critique of the myriad ways in

which social class has shaped their opportunities, ambition, and deeply internalized beliefs about what “people like me” can hope to attain³ (Brantlinger 1993, 2003; Brown 1998; Chafel 1997; Faulkner 1995; Grant and Sleeter 1996; Jones 2006b; O’Dair 1993; Van Galen 2000, 2004, 2007a, b; Weis 1990). Even scholarship on teaching is essentially silent about the class backgrounds of teachers represented in studies.⁴

Rather than interrogating the “complex social trajectory” (Reay 1997a, p. 19) of class border crossing as they progress through teacher education (or worse, dismissing upwardly-mobile students as “tokens”, who have been “allowed” to succeed to placate gullible others into faith in fairness), the classed identities of White working-class students are instead often seen merely as something to be “fixed” as a condition of academic success (MacKenzie 1998).

In creating the course, I envisioned a very different alternative: that of seeing White first-generation college students like Julie and Dave as occupants of the social space between opportunity and oppression, a space about which there is much to be learned (Fine and Burns 2003). As “outsiders within” (Collins 1986), I believed, these students could have a great deal to say about the complex processes of becoming educated from the margins of power and privilege (Jones 2007), knowledge that would be vital to their own education as teachers and that of their peers.

Such a course was particularly appropriate for the program in which I work: Most of the students are the first in their family to attend college. A good number were tracked out of advanced classes in high school. Still others were singled out early as “smart”, and were then expected, as children, to assume an identity as *better* than their parents and peers. Most simply drifted through school invisibly; many are adult students experiencing their first academic success. Most are White; most of the students of color are 1st or 2nd generation Asian or Latino/a immigrants.⁵

My challenge in creating the course was to both honor the experiences of the White, working-class students but also “to encourage students from working-class families to form new political relationships with that experience” (Lindquist 2004, p. 191).⁶ I understood that generating conversation about class could prove difficult in a culture in which most people assume that they are simply “middle class”. When

³ While it is common to lament that the teaching force in the United States is mostly White and middle class and thus very different from the population in many public schools, anecdotal shorthand cannot substitute for class analysis.

⁴ Two exceptions in the literature are Brantlinger’s (2003) study of differences in the perceptions of teachers from middle-class and working-class backgrounds to equity-based reforms in one district and Sloan’s (2006) hypothesis that the professional identity of one teacher as a hard-working but essentially uninspired teacher might be attributable to her working-class background.

⁵ Peter Sacks (2007) has demonstrated that with intensified competition for admission to private and flagship universities, low-income and first-generation students are increasingly segregated at regional public universities where, coincidentally, most teachers are educated. The effects on teacher education of campuses increasingly segregated by income and class would be a worthy topic of study.

⁶ Approximately a quarter of the students who take the course each year are from middle-class backgrounds, and they learn a great deal about class privilege and about the invisible struggles of many of the children in their own classrooms. The remainder of this paper, however, will focus particularly on upwardly mobile students from poor and working-class backgrounds.

upwardly mobile students have learned that their academic success requires “passing” as middle class, (Linkon 1999, p. 8; Payne-Bourcy and Chandler-Olcott 2003, p. 18) asking students to acknowledge their working class backgrounds may be read, by some, as unwanted pressure to realign themselves with all that they’ve been socialized to disdain (Linkon 1999, p. 8). Even if students were very open about their backgrounds, their understanding of their biographies within broader historical and social contexts of silence about class would likely be idiosyncratic, intuitive, and incomplete.

My decisions about this course, then, were grounded in two goals: (a) to draw upon the distinctive perspectives of these class border-crossers to elucidate their “complex social positioning as a complicated amalgam of current privilege interlaced with historic disadvantage” (Reay 1997a, b, p. 25) and (b) to complicate what Adair and Dahlberg (2001, p. 174) have termed a cultural “impulse to frame class mobility as a narrative of moral progress”.

Teachers, Class and Mobility

My own thinking about social class has been informed by recent work on the embodied experiences of class in daily life. Social class has historically been understood as the position of groups and individuals occupy within hierarchies of occupation, power, wealth, and status (Wright 1997, 2000; Zweig 2000). Yet in recent years, sociological analysis has turned to the processes by which individuals become classed via their day-to-day interactions. Grounded in the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., 1984, 1986, 1990), and spurred by feminist scholars writing about class at the intersections of gender and race (e.g., Adair 2002; Furman et al. 2005; Reay 1997a, b, 2004; Walkerdine 2003; Lucey et al. 2003; Skeggs 1997, 2005) class boundaries are now understood to be constructed and maintained not only in occupational hierarchies but also in the dailiness of social life. Sayer (2005, p. 1) elaborates:

Class matters to us not only because of differences in material wealth and economic security, but also because it affects our access to things, relationships, experiences and practices which we have reason to value, and hence our chances of living a fulfilling life. ... Condescension, deference, shame, guilt, envy, resentment, arrogance, contempt, fear and mistrust, or simply mutual incomprehension and avoidance typify relations between people of different classes.

Success in school has delivered first-generation college students to the contested social spaces at the very borderlands of class. As Renny Christopher (2004) notes, class borders are essentially invisible to upwardly-mobile students until they stand ready to step across them.

Likely, they have found that terrain to be unexpectedly rocky. Writing of their research on upwardly-mobile women, for example, Lucey et al. (2003, p. 293) note that mobility requires loss as well as gain, as individuals assume “hybrid” identities through which they police and navigate their disparate social worlds. They write:

Discourses on social mobility and social capital tend to hold denials: of the losses that are fundamental to and unavoidable in change, even when those changes are desired; of the enormous amount of psychological work involved in transformation; and of the costs of that work. ... By refusing to pay attention to them we are in danger of denying crucial aspects of our experience (p. 286).

This complicated identity work and the shame that it can engender (Lucey et al.) are part of the “human costs of class mobility” of which bell Hooks (2000, p. 156) writes. As Fine and Burns (2003, 850) observe, “So-called opportunities for mobility are rarely clean”. While working-class students may have been assured that doing well in school would be enough, little in formal education prepares the academically successful for the *social* borders of class that stand between them and their ambitions.

Toward a Pedagogy of Class

Given that they have succeeded in school against the odds, I believed that students’ lived experiences, critically examined, could represent a salient opportunity for generating rich conversations about schooling, constraint, and mobility. To tap their experiences, I understood, would require much more than reading sociological texts and writing analytical term papers. I would, instead, have to create pedagogical strategies within which dialogue and reflection about class, silenced elsewhere in formal education, might safely begin.

When designing the course, I began by supplementing conventional academic reading with texts from outside of academic discourse, by revamping writing assignments, and by inviting students to write and to publicly perform reconstructed narratives of their schooling.

Texts from the Margins: First Person Representations of Class

We open each class session with a piece of creative writing by an author whose roots are deep within the poor or working class. Students select and informally present a song, poem, short story, or essay that represents lives at the borders of class: of allegiance balanced between family and school, of longing for distant dreams, of isolation and invisibility, of the disorientation of straddling multiple identities.

Favorites in recent years have included narratives such as Christopher’s (1995) *A Carpenter’s Daughter*; poetry such as Dobler’s (1986) *What My Mother Wanted for Me*, Gilgun’s (1998) *Counting Tips*, or Levine’s (1999) *Among Schoolchildren*; essays such as Tillie Olson’s (1956) *I Stand Here Ironing* and Alexie Sherman’s (2001) *Indian Education*. Music has included Springsteen’s *The River* and *No Retreat, No Surrender*.

I open class sessions with these “first person” voices for two reasons: First are essential issues of representation. As Lynch and O’Neill (1994, p. 319) observe:

[Many groups] have begun to name their own world and to challenge the legitimacy of claims made on their behalf from within the framework of academic analysis itself. In so far as there has been a debate about what are legitimate and admissible cultural forms in education, it has been undertaken among professional educationalists and academics; working class people have not been partners to this debate. Professional educators speak about them and for them.

In the first class session, we talk about how educated people of color write as people of color and women as women, but academics from poor or working-class backgrounds must have been socialized to “pass” within middle-class forms of discourse to attain their status as academics⁷. We go, then, outside of academic writing for the voices to open our weekly class sessions.

The broad genres of these “first person” voices also evoke autobiographical reflection within our more formal studies of class. As Julie Lindquist (2004, p. 188) notes, “Story powerfully illuminates social theory in ways that intellectual argumentation and abstract analysis never can”. In these first-person representations, for example, we find metaphors that later enrich our deliberations. For example, on their night to represent “first person voices”, two students collaborated to juxtapose Langston Hughes’ “*Dream Deferred*” poem with Bruce Springsteen’s tale of psychological disintegration after a lay-off, *Johnny 99*. After a moment of stunned silence many students acknowledged that although they’d read the Hughes poem in many other classes, they realized only after hearing it along with *Johnny 99* (in which an attempted robbery of a convenience store goes wrong) that they had been sentimentalizing Hughes’ frustrations and anger. As we grappled throughout the class with how working-class people may scorn one another, especially across lines of race and ethnicity, many students began using the shared shorthand of “the convenience store clerk” within this complicated discourse.

These “first person” readings introduce us to the mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, teachers, physical spaces, dreams, and disappointments of poor and working class people. The “First Person” readings powerfully enable students to reframe what they’d assumed were their own very personal experiences as *common* experiences of class, even as they broaden their intellectual understanding of inequities in schools via the lived experiences of others.

Writing in Dialogue

A second step in creating this class was to reconstruct the ways in which students would write. I knew that students’ academic identities are inexorably tied to how they are perceived as writers; I expected, also that many of my students had not yet found their voices within formal, academic discourse (Grimm 1999; Payne-Bourcy and Chandler-Olcott 2003; Tea 2003) I believed that students would learn most

⁷ We also observe that while academic authors—particularly those writing within critical traditions—almost always disclose their race, gender, and sexuality, it is very rare for authors to disclose their own class backgrounds. I challenge students to identify the class background of any of the authors that they’ve read while in college. Few can.

deeply if they were to write in genres that would support authentic, first-person deliberation while also allowing experimentation across genres (Grimm 1999, p. 51–52).

Rather than writing summative assignments just for me, I also wanted the students to move frequently and fluidly between “private and shared worlds,... between critical reflection and discourse” (Garrison et al. 2001, p. 10). I wanted to create space in which working-class students could speak publicly, authoritatively and reflectively about the circumstances of their own lives, possibly for the first time in an academic setting (Christopher 2003; Mack 2006), particularly if they were uncomfortable talking about such things in class.

Thus, I moved much of the writing in the class into non-synchronous, on-line discussion forums. In these forums, I require students to generate multiple perspectives on course readings, to support and to challenge the learning of others, to demonstrate more complex thinking over time, and to subject their thinking to the critique of others.

I provide weekly prompts to begin the electronic discussions, but exert minimal control over the direction that they take. Within these prompts, students initiate multiple, intersecting discussion “threads”. Each week, they collectively generate the equivalent of approximately forty pages of text across multiple threads, creating conversational spaces far richer and deeper than could ever be possible were discussion limited to class time alone.⁸

As an example of the learning and meta-learning that happens on these discussion boards, I excerpt here at some length from a single thread (among many) of a discussion forum that ran early in the term in which Julie and Dave were both enrolled in the course. My intent in including these excerpts is not to demonstrate *what* students learn about the complexities of class in their dialogue; instead, I want to illustrate *how* they learn through multiple written exchanges with one another.

The students had read from Micheal Zweig’s (2000) *The Working Class Majority*, and as a class, had viewed the PBS documentary, *People Like Us*. My prompt for the week included the questions:

What are some of the particular pressures and obstacles an individual faces when s/he moves into a different social class? How can schools help individuals to anticipate and to overcome some of these obstacles? Which of these obstacles may be beyond the scope of formal education?

At this point, Dave, the laid-off technical worker, had not yet spoken up in class. He initiated a thread that he titled “Do You Believe in Luck?” He then answered his own question:

⁸ In addition to the whole-class forums, students also discuss a variety of books and films in small e-groups. Among the books I’ve assigned in recent years are Mike Rose’s (1989) *Lives on the Boundary*, Ellen Brantlinger’s (2003) *Dividing Classes*, Annette Lareau’s (2003) *Unequal Childhoods*, Meredith Maran’s (2000) *Class Dismissed*, Lyn Mikel Brown’s (1998) *Raising Their Voices*. Films that I’ve chosen for their representations of dilemmas of education, mobility, and identity have included *42 Up*, *Metropolitan*, *Real Women Have Curves*, *Rushmore*, *Educating Rita*, *Good Will Hunting*, and *Breaking Away*.

I don't. At least not the way Zweig describes it as a limiting factor of class mobility [...]. OK, I get his point that it is not easy to move up in class.... What I don't understand is his emphasis on luck being a significant part of upward mobility. I don't buy it.

Maybe the brainwashing has worked on me, but I truly believe that hard work and honest living is the way to get ahead. Luck has very little, if anything, to do with it. If luck is so very important I may as well just kick back and play the lottery (an extreme example, I know, but no more extreme than his use of fictional characters as legitimate cases).

Over the next few hours, Dave's posting prompted several other students to reconsider their own interpretations of this text. Susan, a young, White female posted next.

I am so glad you made this point. Even if Zweig is right about luck being a bigger factor than hard work, I would prefer to stay naive and believe otherwise. I would never want to sit a kid down and tell them that their future depends on good or bad luck. I think that this kind of mentality only leads to less personal responsibility.

If I thought this way, I don't think I would even want to try to help people better themselves. Why put energy towards it when it is all based on luck anyway?

Later that evening, Julie, the student who'd nearly left the program because of money, chimed in with a long post that gently challenged the dichotomous thinking that had framed the discussion so far. She concluded by saying:

It is also important to acknowledge that Zweig does not disclaim the factor of hard work. [quotes from the text]. Knowing and acknowledging that upward mobility requires more than hard work removes the stigma from being working or middle class, acknowledges that hard working individuals are not failures, and does not deter individuals from working towards their goals, but gives them a more complete and accurate picture of mobility and chance. I find "luck" comforting... I'll try my hardest to reach my goals... if I don't make it's not necessarily a reflection of me, my character, my work ethic, or my ability... it might have been luck...

This was merely the first round of this conversation, as these students and several others continued the discussion of the role of "luck" in social mobility over the next few days. Susan's ideas were complicated by Julie's thoughts, and in a later posting, she clearly holds several contradictory ideas in tension as she deepens her own thinking about the relative importance of luck and hard work in life chances:

I do agree with you ... that it is definitely not hard work that separates classes. I didn't mean that at all. I just meant that focusing on hard work as a means to better your life is not a bad thing. I was also pointing out the danger of displaced responsibility. Anyway, thanks for your thoughts.

Dave chimed back in an hour later with a more nuanced stance than that he'd first articulated:

First, in regards to Julie's reply: Hard work is more than just wearing your fingers to the bone, it is always working on yourself to improve who you are. It is when we continually do this that our momentum in life cannot be stopped. Sure, we might get knocked off course here and there, but our perseverance takes us through. Many times things seem to "just go our way" in life. This was not luck, it was all the previous hard work that we had done finally coming to fruition. Many times we don't even credit ourselves with how hard we work. ...

This all brings up the question: What is success? Do I have to own Microsoft to be a success? Nope. I decide what success is. No one or nothing else can do this, not even luck.

In dialogue, the students are beginning to complicate their ideas about class, even this early in the term. But as I press these issues even further, I've learned that I must listen very carefully to what the students are actually saying in the pages of text that they create. As Julie Lindquist (2004) argues, faculty can too easily miss layers of meaning within working-class students' engagement in issues of fairness, opportunity, and class. She writes that learning about class requires working-class students to engage the enormous psycho-social work of essentially relearning what they've come to understand about themselves and the meaning of their education. Specifically:

[P]edagogies informed by critical and cultural theory have treated class less as a complex affective experience than as a set of social issues to be addressed through systematic analysis. ... Even strategies designed to make students aware of their class positions have not always worked from a deep understanding of what is at stake for students accepting new ways of interpreting their lives....

We understand class as a problem of distribution of resources, but we experience it affectively, as an emotional process. (p. 190, 192, italics added)

It is certainly understandable, then, that students enter these discursive spaces cautiously. It is reasonable, then, that faculty would teach *to* those classed experiences that may foster such reticence.

For example, I could read Susan's statement "why put energy toward it when it is all based on luck anyway?" at multiple levels. On one level, Susan is performing conventional academic analysis as she tries to construct an intellectual understanding of social processes. Yet unlike her middle-class peers, this analysis is also inevitably about *her* as she weighs these new interpretations (to her) of life-chances as a student who works almost full-time while carrying a full-time course load. Positioned between her ambition to become a teacher and the economic precariousness of her daily life, questions of whether she'll be good enough, if her hard work will pay off or if, indeed, it will all come down to luck will never be merely intellectual questions. While formal sociological theory rightfully posits that hard work will never be enough to erode class barriers, students like Susan also know, at least tacitly, that whatever limited control they *do* have over their own lives is indeed grounded in their tenacity and willingness to work very hard.

There are certainly profound political and intellectual differences, then, between upper-middle-class students who insist that “hard work” rather than privilege explains their success (even while their tuition, cars, and condos have all been paid for by their parents) and the much more complicated resistance to critical perspectives of students like Dave, Julie, and Susan who have invested lifetimes of work in the hope of eventual success. Stephanie Jones (2007) has written of how middle-class academics may seriously underestimate the significance of deep class differences between themselves and those that they teach and study. One measure of those differences might be the extent to which professors see working-class students (who have largely navigated college on their own and have likely worked harder than anyone else that they know) as simply playing intellectual games when they sustain hope that individuals can work their way to a place where they no longer have to sweat paying the rent.

If class privilege is not acknowledged when responding to student work, the vital work on race privilege that is now common in many teacher education programs may ring hollow to working-class students (Jones 2007). It is not clear, for example, what political or pedagogical purposes have been served when Julie, who came home from high school one day to find her possessions on the curb, and whose efforts to enroll (and to stay) in college had often been thwarted by indifferent middle-class bureaucrats, had yet to be in a college course that acknowledged White poverty. As a post-graduate student, Julie was exceptionally articulate in her critique of systemic social inequalities. Simultaneously, though, she remained deeply ashamed of the circumstances of her own childhood, circumstances over which she obviously had no control. Such contradictions would seem to present exceptionally rich “teachable moments” in teacher education courses, if these courses became places where class differences could be openly acknowledged.

I am neither justifying nor romanticizing the economic and political views of the working-class students in their initial forays into thinking about social class. Instead, I press the pedagogical questions of what I, as their teacher, say and do next, knowing what I do about their class backgrounds.

I am reminded here of Julie Lindquist’s (2004, p. 193) admonitions that pedagogies with working-class students must enter “that experiential space where memory and ambition collide in the most potentially damaging, and potentially transformative, ways”. Nostalgia for earlier times of belonging, of dawning ambition and unfettered hope can powerfully collide with the realities of alienation, invisibility, and shame that can shape college experiences for first-generation college students. It is no small thing to reconcile the contradictory impulses to assert pride in what one *has* been while simultaneously embracing the work of becoming ever-more like the people mistrusted by loved ones left behind.

Andrew Sayer (2005, p. 160) elaborates:

The struggle of subordinated groups for self-respect is particularly likely to lead to contradictory dispositions and opinions. They may try to make a virtue out of their position and their toughness and fortitude in bearing burdens, at the same time as they feel shame about having to bear those burdens. These are simultaneously responses of resistance and compliance.

Lindquist (2004) makes the case that teaching about class and across class differences requires that we work through (and not simply fix) these exact contradictions. If Sayer is to be believed, we cannot address the contradictions and resistance while downplaying the antecedents of shame and denigration. To teach otherwise would essentially deny the existence of classism in the lives of first-generation teacher education students. In *Education and the American Dream*, we talk often about the shame that is engendered in a climate of silence about class.

From Virtual to Face to Face Discussions

After spending hours engaged in analysis of social class on-line, our weekly class meetings typically then *begin* with the ideas that students have found most vexing, intriguing, or contentious. The students come to class with their ideas already complicated by multiple and often competing perspectives on the texts, and with their attention deeply engaged.

In the class meeting following the “lucky” thread, for example, we talked in class for nearly an hour about the issues raised by those participating in this discussion, about what Zweig had written about social mobility, and about connections between all of these things and the new reading for that week. I no longer spend class time explaining ideas; instead, our class time is spent exploring the implications of those ideas, making connections, exploring competing perspectives and generating more questions. Students come to these discussions with their ideas already complicated and their attention already fixed. We always run out of time.

The discussion boards enable students to write fluidly, articulately, and authentically. Because their extensive writing weaves autobiography, analysis, and, problem-framing, my subsequent prompts and my work with them in class are squarely centered on *their* questions, *their* knowledge, and *their* strengths. For most, this is the first experience that they’ve had with curriculum grounded in the lived experiences of their own classed lives.

Narrating Classed Identities

In the end, the students write (and are invited to read) a first-person narrative in which they recount a significant experience in school in which they sensed what they now recognize as class differences, an assignment in which, I intended, memory and ambition would collide in powerfully educative ways (Lindquist 2004, p. 193). In Robillard’s (2003, p. 69) words, writing one’s narrative “presents the unique possibility of actively creating a revision of self-identity”. Grumet (1990, p. 324) speaks of the power of narrative writing for “develop[ing] ourselves in ways that transcend the identities that others have constructed for us”.

We work on these narratives throughout the term. I deliberately structure these assignments so that the students will revise not only their writing, but also their interpretations of their life stories as their understanding of the many dimensions of class deepens.

I invite each student to read his or her essay aloud in our closing class sessions. Most do. As they narrate their individual stories, their poignant collective voices complicate any rendition of schools as meritocracies. Even as they write in the most particular detail of specific moments in their schooling, they position themselves within newly-realized collective social identities as they narrate their classed experiences.

They write of deep pride in their parents within their homes and deep embarrassment of their parents in public. They write of being stunned by success in college courses after years of invisibility in high school, of moving frequently and being ridiculed by peers in every new place, of parenting confounded by alternating shame and rage. They speak of conversations with once-best friends who went straight to work after high school, marked now by awkward silences. They speak of dropping out, of substance abuse, of stepping into a library for the very first time as a college freshman and trying to read down the shelves, book by book, to make up for reading missed in childhood. Tears are common.

Yet while they do write of the many obstacles they've faced, they also craft narratives of agency and tenacity. Most eventually speak of school as containing their deliverance.

It is at *this* point that these narratives challenge me most deeply. For at least a generation, critical teacher educators have admonished their students to employ explicitly political critical pedagogies to open new possibilities for poor and working class students. Not a single student has ever mentioned such teaching in his or her narrative. The students in this class speak of lives changed by what appear, instead, to be apolitical acts: a teacher who introduced a young child to literature, a best friend who looked past shabby clothes to include one in a weekend adventure, a chance encounter with an entirely new field of study that suggests the possibility of a life other than what was known at home. All of these may well be manifestations of how very few token students become the exceptions to the formidable sorting functions of schooling, but as adults, my students have described these things as salvation.

These stories are powerful reminders of how little we do understand about mobility and education (Fine and Burns 2003), of how much there is to be learned about the possibilities of activism that is not overtly political (Collins 1986), of how as children, the political is commonly experienced within the relational.

Critical theories of reproduction will never account for the complex and contradictory ways in which our students have navigated school. These narratives suggest that there may, in fact, be a great deal to learn from exploring the “cracks” in the system that enable success against the odds (Apple 1995). As Dorothy Holland (1998, p. 5) and her colleagues remind us, “human agency may be frail, especially among those with little power, but it happens daily and mundanely, and it deserves our attention.” The students, themselves, stand to learn a great deal in complicating their thinking about the agency that they have already exercised within the institution of school.

As for the narratives of the students that I introduced at the beginning of this paper, Julie, for the first time in her academic career, told of her clothes being thrown to the curb and of the confluences sexism and classism that she'd stared

down to finish college.⁹ Dave, the student who had tenaciously discounted the importance of luck, opened his reading with a story of an amazing series of events that he experienced on his way to his very first day of school—events that were certainly a matter of chance, and which changed his entire perspective of school and leaving home on that significant day. Yet he reasserted himself again as he ended his essay:

You may say that I've gotten where I am because of luck, but then you would not be seeing who I am.

And I understand now that he is right. His life cannot be reduced to the relatively methodical parameters of academic theories of reproduction. As Mike Rose (1989, p. 429) observes, we lack “complex models of schools as institutions in which limiting *and* liberating forces contend”. Appropriately at the end of this class, Dave holds several ideas about luck, hard work, and schooling in tension. Appropriately, he has not yet fully abandoned his long-held understanding of himself and the social world. Appropriately, he insists that he be seen on his own terms, even as his understanding of himself has begun to shift.

Yet this single course cannot be enough if Dave is to become an informed and vocal advocate for other students like him. In writing this essay, I hope to encourage dialogue about how we might create teacher education programs in which students like Dave would have multiple opportunities to engage in critical analysis of the centrality of class in the journey of becoming educated.

Final Thoughts

My background is similar to that of many of my students. Yet my years of formal education had been about distancing myself from that background, even while much of my graduate work was about developing theoretical and empirical understanding of stratification and inequality in public schooling.

In graduate school, I never talked about my childhood or about the deep debt that I was incurring to stay in school. It would not have occurred to me that my colleagues stood to learn anything from *me* about lives very different from their own. It was clear to all of us that I was the naïve one in the group; I was grateful to just be among them. My silence, though, was not just about my intimidation at how much they'd all read, and how far they'd traveled. In reality, I sensed, but could not have articulated what Stephanie Lawler (2005, p. 436) recently explained so lucidly: that while “‘the working class’ in the abstract may have been admired by middle-class [intellectuals], working class people seem to have been a different matter”. I had no interest in being seen as one of “them”.

⁹ In the end, Julie was awarded two scholarships and finished the teacher education program. In her essays for the scholarship applications, she reframed conventional ways in which a “commitment to teaching” might be demonstrated to speak of her own schooling and the efforts that she was now making to stay in school.

I sense, now, possibly similar dynamics at work in teacher education, when numbers of our students perplex us with their obstinate refusal to negotiate the world on our terms.

In spite of our similar backgrounds, students like Dave had perplexed me deeply for much of my early career as a teacher educator. Then, I saw these students through the lenses that I'd been taught to employ—such students were “resistant”, they'd attended inferior schools, they were anti-intellectual, they brought “false consciousness” to their academic work. For years, I saw no irony in middle-class white faculty members from privileged backgrounds teaching working-class students as if they themselves held the only legitimate perspectives on class oppression.

I simply never saw, until I began reading more deeply about the psycho-social complexities of living as classed subjects, that students who were still struggling to beat the considerable odds against *them* would have anything to say about such things.

I'm learning now how the classed consciousness of upwardly mobile teachers might play a part in the construction of teacher identities (Maguire 2005, p. 428; Van Galen 2007a). I've learned, for example, that to simply encourage all teachers to become vocal and assertive advocates for social change (as I've done for years) ignores what thousands of teachers from working-class homes have learned through deep and intricate socialization: that some people grow up expecting to be listened to, respected, and deferred to, while others become attuned to being ignored, to feel shame, to defer (Sayer 2005, p. 24). As Dorothy Holland and her colleagues write, (1998) those who move into higher status positions later in life do so self-consciously and awkwardly, sensing as they do the “durability of silencing and acceptance”.

Such socialization cannot simply be negated by admonishing students to become “teacher leaders”, as if roles of influence were there for the taking. Teacher education could do much more to name the sources of embodied silence and the reasons for its durability; first however, we must name the class dynamics within which our students have been educated—and within which they continue to navigate teacher education itself.

As Diane Reay (1998) notes, education is, essentially, class work. In this course, we've begun naming this work for what it is, in no small part because of the multiple voices that have joined those of middle-class academics in the conversation.

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