

# **Class Experiences: A Lifelong Educational Journey to Political Consciousness**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper features the first-hand ‘lived’ experiences of one current university researcher on how social class across his lifelong educational journey has impacted his political dispositions. Written in an autobiographical style, the paper examines four successive life phases, beginning with working-class life in East London in the 1950s, failure at the eleven-plus exam and experiences in a secondary modern school. Phase two examines the shift to middle-class educational milieu – attendance at a private school, a grammar school and then a teacher training college in the early 1970s. Phase three features the beginnings of class consciousness during secondary teaching in working-class schools in the UK and Australia, followed by post-graduate studies in radical education and teaching in prisons. The final phase features political dispositions in teaching and managing adult literacy programmes in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and then university research. The article indicates how, for this researcher, early life working-class experiences are embodied in later life political dispositions and how this is atypical of the life world of most university academics. The paper argues for the centrality of social class in educational research as the key to understanding power in society and redressing educational inequalities and inequities.*

**Keywords:** *social class, secondary modern schools, grammar schools, private schools, class consciousness*

## **Introduction**

Recently I began to document some of my early schooling experiences simply out of interest as I had passed the age of retirement from full time work and began to reflect on various aspects of my educational background. The inspiration to shift from documenting personal musings to writing this journal article followed my reading of Diane Reay's (2018) *A Life Lived in Class*. In her article, Reay draws on Bourdieu to indicate how her personal dispositions (habitus) throughout her life have emanated largely from her 'originary habitus' as a working-class girl from a Derbyshire coal mining family and community. As Reay (2018, p.10) explains: 'Bourdieu's concept of habitus is the theoretical tool he employs to explain how history becomes embodied in the individual in the form of dispositions that remain powerfully linked to economic and cultural background.' Using herself as a case study, Reay provides powerful anecdotes of her 'pitiless and harrowing' (p. 13) experiences attending schools and university, indicating variously her 'resisting habitus' to the ways in which she had been positioned by others on the basis of her working-class origins. My early schooling experiences in East London were much different to Reay's and my political awakening came much later in life, but they were nevertheless founded on social class differences which profoundly influenced my personal and social identity. While I claim no equivalence to Reay's account, either in my class experiences or in the quality and impact of my writing, my aim in this article is to provide qualitative insights into the successive eras of class-based education that formed my contemporary habitus as a university researcher in the field of education. My point is to highlight and reinforce the centrality of social class for educational inequality and how social class differences are deeply embedded in English (and Australian) educational systems past and present.

I refer to this article as autobiographical in style, featuring my personal reflections on key events and dispositions in my life history. In autobiographical research it is common to invoke the work of C. Wright Mills (1959) on ‘the sociological imagination’ which examines the interplay between biography and history. As Mills (1959, p. 3) argued, ‘neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.’ In this article, I attempt to link my ‘personal troubles’ (experiences and values) beginning with my working-class childhood in the 1950s with the broader ‘public issues’ of formal education structures and systems. In education research, life history and narrative accounts have illuminated what ‘troubles’ people and how it affects their identities and relations of power (e.g. Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010). Necessarily though, this article represents only my lived reality which may well differ from others who experienced a similar educational trajectory (see Brine, 2010).

In the interests of authenticity, I use the ‘real’ names of educational institutions, which is the norm in other autobiographical accounts of educators (e.g. Stephen Ball, 2016 and other academics featured in Sadovnic and Coughlan, 2016). I am also aware that over the decades every educational institution I have experienced as a student and a teacher up to the time I undertook post graduate studies in the 1980s has since been either demolished or reconfigured in terms of its naming and role. Thus, there is little likelihood of harm resulting from the naming of institutions.

For more than four decades I have lived and worked in Australia, and for the past decade I have worked at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) in a researcher capacity mainly in the field of adult literacy education. My present circumstances are far-removed in time, distance and class status from my early schooling experiences in East London where, in the late 1950s, I failed the

eleven-plus exam and then attended a secondary modern school. In this article, I outline four phases of my lifelong educational journey, beginning with working-class life in the 1950s and that eleven-plus failure. In each successive phase, I explain how social class has influenced my personal and professional identity, culminating in my contemporary habitus in the field of educational research. From my early childhood years, I lived in East Ham, a tough, working-class district of East London located not far from the Royal Docks (which today features London City Airport and a University of East London campus). But what made my educational journey and later career trajectory somewhat different to the majority of my primary school peers at the time was that following our almost universal failure at the eleven-plus exam and subsequent secondary modern school experience, I then attended a private school, followed by sixth form at a grammar school. Subsequently I attended a teacher training college and have been involved in education as a teacher and university researcher ever since. In each of the three secondary schools I attended, social class was represented and experienced by me quite differently.

### **Phase one: Experiencing working-class education**

#### East London, the 1950s and eleven-plus failure

East Ham (now within the London Borough of Newham) remains today a depressed area socially and economically. In post-war England, this was a bleak place to live, in part due to the destruction of the area in the war years given its close proximity to the London docks. Most of my school friends and most of the students at the local primary school lived on the ‘prefab estate’ in Beckton, not far from the defining feature of the area, the ‘gasworks’. In the 1950s when I attended the local primary school, East Ham was as working class as you could get. I lived in a rented terrace house and the primary school was at the end of the road. In some ways though I was quite privileged. I lived in a ‘proper’ brick terrace, unlike many of my peers who lived in small prefabs on the ‘estate’. I

also had aspirational parents. My mother, while lacking a formal education due to the war years, was the daughter of the shopkeepers of a local grocery store which included a post office managed by my grandfather. My father came from a traditional working-class family. His father (my other grandfather), at the time of his retirement from work in the late 1960s, was presented with an Omega watch which he subsequently gave to me. It was inscribed on the back with the words ‘with thanks for 48 years loyal service to Arthur Webb & Sons.’ He had worked as a builder’s labourer for the same building company for all of his working life. My father was resolved not to follow a similar path. He left school at thirteen, signed up for the RAF a few years later, and subsequently, post-war, managed to gain employment as a bookkeeping clerk. At one stage he even enrolled in night classes in bookkeeping at the local East Ham Tech. Later, in the mid-1960s, he became an export manager for a large seafood company in London and I think he was quietly proud that through his own efforts and against the odds he had broken free from his working-class roots and had acquired middle-class professional status. My parents thus displayed little of the oppositional, working-class value system and political consciousness manifested in Reay’s (2017, 2018) family background.

I have a vague memory of doing a test in my final year of primary school and coming across questions of the like I had never seen before, which in part required determining which symbols and shapes had some kind of meaning or relationship. It was the eleven-plus exam, a so-called intelligence test. I was ten at the time, the youngest in the class (having an August birthday). I have a recollection of a later school assembly where we all applauded the successful students who had passed the exam – just three or four students from the thirty or so in our class. They went to the grammar school, while the rest of us went to the local secondary modern where, in the main, we were all expected to go, with separate schools for boys and for girls. Autobiographical accounts from UK

educators of my own generation (e.g. Brine, 2004, 2006; Ball, 2016), indicate that in many primary schools, in particular those in higher SES areas and in schools that were academically streamed, students were prepared, coached even, to pass the eleven-plus. But not so in my school. As an eleven-plus failure I had a vague comprehension at the time that we were ‘the illiterates’, the ‘dim ones’, the ‘future teds’ (Jackson and Marsden, 1962, p.109). The tripartite schooling system in England and Wales following the 1944 Education Act had established three types of state funded secondary schools: grammar, technical (of which there were few) and secondary modern. Correspondingly they were perceived by policy makers at the time to meet the intellectual, technical and general worker needs of the post-war economy and the aptitudes of different types of students (see McCulloch, 2011). The eleven-plus exam taken by all students in their final year at primary school determined who would be successful in experiencing an academic curriculum at a grammar school, and who failed and would thus experience a more ‘practical’ curriculum at a secondary modern. In the late 1950s/early 1960s, grammar schools were failing to keep pace with the early baby boomer school population, and places in them, certainly in my East London community, were at a premium. Those who did succeed in attending them were predominantly from professional and managerial families (Secondary Education and Social Change, 2018). Autobiographical accounts of people who undertook the eleven-plus in this era almost invariably point to the exam representing a pivotal moment, a key ‘fulcrum’ in their lives (Gristy, Letherby and Watkins, 2020). For those who failed the exam, it presaged several years of largely negative secondary schooling experiences, and in many cases, a future of limited social mobility, underachievement and disappointment (Brine 2004, 2010; Williams and Rosen, 2017). Secondary modern schools were recognised to have failed the ‘ordinary’ working-class child (McCulloch, 1998a).

### Fear and brutality – the secondary modern experience

Central Park Secondary Modern for boys was a forbidding, several stories high building dating from the late Victorian era. As a Year 1 student I remember I was assigned to the B class. Not only had I failed the eleven-plus, but so badly that I didn't warrant being in the A class. It could have been worse – there was a C and a D class, though the A class was where you needed to be if you were to have any hope of doing well at school (and in life). I sat in the B class with another of my primary school friends, Graham, at the back of a class of thirty or more students and destined for obscurity. As Brine (2006) indicates, drawing on Bourdieu (1977), ability streaming is a 'classificatory practice' based largely on social class that for many students began in their primary schools. Through the 'explicit classificatory event', the eleven-plus, there was further classification into grammar, modern and technical schools, followed by classificatory practices within each of them, including streaming and the provision of an academically inferior curriculum for working-class students in secondary modern schools.

Years later in the early 1970s when I attended a teacher training college, I came across an academic text that resonated with my experiences in the secondary modern school. David Hargreaves's (1967) *Social Relations in a Secondary School* described how student behaviour in a secondary modern, and in particular the formation of delinquent subcultures, was influenced largely by streaming and its resultant labelling of students. And so it was with my school experiences in the early 1960s. The A class had a semblance of academic ethos where students were, by and large, compliant with school norms and they all wore their school blazers. The C and D classes by contrast were for the deviants – non-conforming, misbehaving students, invariably not wearing school uniform and often truanting from school. In sociology of education theory, students had been differentiated through the streaming process, and then

polarised according to their attitudes to the values of the school (Hammersley, 1985). The deviant C and D streams were given no hope. Their classes were ruled by the cane, but then again, every teacher wielded the cane, even in the A and B classes. It was the everyday norm. With class sizes often exceeding 40 students, and with teachers enjoying considerable autonomy in their classrooms, resorting to the cane was perceived as necessary to control student behaviour in a post-war era of fears about delinquent youth (see McCulloch, 1998b; Tisdall, 2015).

As a B class participant, I was also one of the no-hopers. It took the personal intervention of my father, lobbying the A class teacher on my behalf, that gave me the opportunity of joining the A class, where I then survived my first year much like the rest of the A class. Others in the B class, with just as much academic ability as me, remained where they were, including my friend Graham. They didn't have an aspirational parent to push for them, indeed, such an intervention in school education by a parent was extremely rare.

Fear and brutality were for me the defining features of my secondary modern school experience. I recall, for example, that during the 'playtime' breaks new Year 1 students like me would test our courage and gain valuable status with each other by managing to run from our small enclave next to the woodwork building, across to the other side of the playground, touch the wall, and then run back again. That is, without getting bashed on the way! I wasn't game to even attempt it. All too frequently during these 'playtimes' there would be a ruckus in the playground as a couple of older students became engaged in a fight, and there would be a cry of 'rumble', and quickly a crowd of seemingly hundreds of students would gather around to see and cheer on the action.

I remember little of the school curriculum except for a lot of woodwork, metalwork, technical drawing and art. Fear dominated my school life. I feared



other students picking on me, and I feared teachers. It affected my school life in many ways. For example, at one time I considered riding a bicycle to school because it was a long walk from home, but the bicycle sheds were next to the toilet block, and there lurked potential dangers with stories of students having their heads thrust down the toilet by older students and the chain flushed. It was enough to deter me from riding to school. In my dealings with teachers, my daily strategy was to lie low and try not to be noticed, but that wasn't always easy, and on two occasions I received the cane, both for minor transgressions. On one of these occasions, a friend of mine was singled out by a senior student for talking in the stairwell on the way to class, and as his companion at the time, I remained with him. I remember the caning clearly. The teacher responsible turned the event into an entertainment spectacle for all the students in his class. He pushed the front desks back, put two chalk crosses on the floor where each of us was to stand and bend over, and then caned us on the buttocks one at a time with much fanfare. There was at least half a dozen of us caned on that occasion, and it was a daily event. I can't even remember my second caning, except that I must have been speaking in class at a time when the teacher demanded silence, and I was sent on a mission to the staff room to locate a cane. Some students were remarkably courageous in my eyes as they stood defiant in the face of this brutality. I remember one student in my class, Lawrence I think was his name (his surname, we were only known by our surnames), and he was always being caned. On one occasion, he held his hand out, as ordered by the teacher, and the tips of his fingers were caned savagely with the now common whoosh sound of the cane. This was the aim of the teacher, to catch the ends of the fingers to inflict maximum pain (and presumably minimal evidence), and it was often achieved following several failed attempts and near misses as the cane whooshed in thin air. But then, following the caning of his one hand, which caused him to recoil in demonstrable pain, he had the nerve and effrontery to proffer his other hand for the same treatment as his means of

demonstrating to the teacher (and all of us) his refusal to be cowed into submission. This was an explicit demonstration of individual agency, alienation and resistance to school authority and norms (see resistance theory in Willis, 1977; Giroux, 1983), which was rare among A class participants, but more widespread in the so-called ‘delinquent subcultures’ of the C and D streams (Hargreaves, 1967). I am unsure how this teacher brutality can be explained. According to Tisdall (2015), male secondary modern teachers in the post-war era were largely working class themselves and anxious about their professional identity. In the popular ‘blackboard jungle’ narrative of the time with moral panics about delinquent youth, these teachers were asserting their ‘masculine’ professional identities in their classroom practices. Such an explanation, however, provided little comfort to the boys brutalised in these secondary schools.

At the end of my second year at Central Park I was failing badly. We took another exam, known as the thirteen-plus (though I was twelve), which determined who would carry on to study for exams in an academic stream (for the CSE - Certificate for Secondary Education, which was inferior to the GCE - General Certificate of Education undertaken by grammar school students), and who would continue with woodwork and metalwork, leave school early, and inevitably obtain unskilled/semi-skilled work in their life beyond school. I was in the latter category, following my second failure at a high-stakes exam. And for the second time, parental intervention saved me. My parents took me out of the secondary modern, and at considerable financial sacrifice, sent me to one of the few private schools around at the time, Clark’s College at Ilford. I never again saw a teacher wield the cane (though according to alumni memories, particular headmasters at Clark’s were not averse to using it, see <http://www.clarkcollege.co.uk/>).

My secondary modern school experience lasted for only two years of my life, but they were by far the worst two years and they remain etched in my memory. Secondary modern schools, especially in the area in which I lived in East London, were designed for working-class children with a largely restricted academic curriculum and a focus on manual dexterity skills involving wood and iron. In the case of girls' secondary moderns, the focus was on needlework and domestic science (see Brine, 2004, 2010). Almost all of my former friends from primary school experienced the same fate, boys and girls. By definition, eleven-plus failures, just as Cyril Burt, the intellectual architect of the eleven-plus envisaged, were the underperforming masses who were expected to add to the unskilled and semi-skilled post-war labour supply in factories and menial work more generally (e.g. Sanderson, 2007). For girls, this was expected to accompany domesticity, home-making (Brine, 2004). Only a small fraction of students made it to the grammar school where they were prepared for professional careers.

Occasionally I have read about contemporary UK professors from working-class backgrounds who were successful at the eleven-plus exam and thus experienced a grammar school education. They include Reay (2017, 2018), the editor of *JCEPS*, Dave Hill, and Stephen Ball (2016, p.14) who describes his 'ordinary child' primary schooling in a working-class community in the west of London. Rarely, however, have I read of eleven-plus failures attending secondary modern schools and then later in life succeeding in academia (Jacky Brine [2004, 2010] is one such example). With no experience of life beyond East Ham, I had little awareness in the early 1960s of class inequalities beyond that school life was fearful and brutal. It was many years later before I came to understand that secondary moderns were in the tradition of mass education (McCulloch 1998a/b) and in effect were designed to control unruly working-class children in preparation for lower skilled jobs. Through their structures,

cultures and values they served to reproduce the social relations of production and the hierarchical social class status quo (e.g. Bowles and Gintis, 1976). It was a Labour government in the mid-1960s, following years of internal debate, that finally abolished them in favour of comprehensive secondary schooling (McCulloch, 2016).

## **Phase two: Experiencing middle-class education**

### The private school experience

Clark's College was a very different social and cultural milieu for me at thirteen years of age. It was a small day school for boys with only a couple of hundred students, and with classes provided only to fifth form level (i.e. GCE 'O' level), it had no direct pathway to university. It drew its students mainly from within the Borough of Redbridge, traditionally conservative, and in the 1960s a relatively high SES area that was home to a large Jewish community in Ilford and Gants Hill. I generally kept quiet about my East Ham address. As a private school at the time, it was definitely lower tier; it had to be in order to be within reach of my parents' financial means. Resembling perhaps the 'respectable private' classification (as distinct from 'elite private' i.e. 'public' schools, see Power et al., 2003), it tried to maintain the appearances of private school traditions expected by middle-class parents. All the teaching staff wore academic gowns during the school day, though on reflection, I doubt that the physical training (PT) teachers at the time, who invariably had naval backgrounds, had been to university. Every student wore a school uniform which was more akin to a grey business suit with the addition of the school tie and cap, and dress rules, including sporting attire (cricket boots, whites etc), were rigidly enforced. I recall the headmaster doing a surprise uniform check at the school gates on students as they left school for the day, and non-regulation scarves and socks were confiscated on the spot. It was always mildly amusing for me later in the afternoon to see students walking the streets of Ilford in their

suits and ties but minus their socks. On another occasion, before the school day started, the headmaster stood next to a nearby pedestrian crossing to check that students were tipping their caps, actually raising them off their heads, as a courtesy to acknowledge motorists who stopped for them to cross the road! The headmaster's strong focus on maintaining standards of dress and gentlemanly manners helped to ensure the 'sense of distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984) of this private school within the local community, setting it apart from regular state schools, and appeasing the largely middle-class parents who sent their children to the school.

On my very first day at the school I was given 100 lines in the playground by a prefect exerting his power over a new boy: 'I should not have my hands in my pockets'. The prefect system had minor hints of senior student bullying, but I was never physically intimidated at this school. I had survived two years in a secondary modern school and no-one, including a toff with a prefect's badge, could intimidate me physically. Besides, there were plenty of delicate types for the bullies to focus on. Private schools of this type were often sought after by parents of sufficient means who thought their children would be unable to cope with the rough and tumble secondary moderns.

There was a military ethos which manifested in the school from the top down. The headmaster when I arrived at the school was referred to as 'squadron leader'. When he left after a couple of years, we had a 'colonel' as headmaster. When the headmaster or indeed any member of staff entered a classroom, all students would immediately stand to attention. There were also daily school rituals that were a possible nod to the pre-military training and 'cadet' traditions of some of the country's more elite private schools (see Walford, 2012). This included the routine that marked the end of every playtime and lunchtime in which the school's head boy would blow a whistle in the playground and

everyone would freeze still. On the second whistle, we would line up in rows according to our grade year classes, each under the supervision of one of the prefects. The head boy would then stand at the front and bark orders loudly as in a military parade: ‘Atten ... *tion*’, ‘stand at ... *ease*’, ‘right ... *turn*’. Often this was repeated again and again until the school population moved in rhythmic unison with the thud of their feet. This parade/charade was repeated every morning and lunch break before students moved off to their classes. There was also much military pomp and ceremony for events such as Armistice Day in a school assembly that included a bugle rendition of the Last Post by an invited member of the military, and then with much gravitas, the reading of the names of former Clark’s students who had lost their lives in the two world wars. Beyond the role of these former students, however, the origins of this military ethos were unclear. It appeared to have been due in large part to the two headmasters since 1950. They both had distinguished military careers and were educated in elite public schools (the colonel attended Wellington, followed by the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst). Their focus on strict order and discipline and a military ethos may be seen as imitation of their own habitus formed through elite schooling and military careers.

I was at this private school for four years. There was much I hated about it, including the petty rules and military symbolism, but for me academically it was a circuit breaker. It arrested the downward spiral I experienced in a secondary modern school, and it enabled me to be recognised as an individual with possibilities. I had access to an academic curriculum similar to the grammar schools with a focus on exam success at GCE ‘O’ levels. With small classes and generally earnest teachers, I ended up with a requisite number of ‘O’ levels that qualified me to take ‘A’ levels and gave me optimism for the future. I felt I had an obligation to succeed because my parents were making a heavy financial sacrifice, an investment in my future. I provided a return on that

investment not only by achieving good academic results, but in other ways. My abilities outside the school as an athlete brought me to the attention of the headmaster, and in an era when sporting achievement had status, especially in private schools, I was made head boy in my final year. Thus, it was me who, twice each day, would blow the whistle in the playground to bring the school population to a halt, and then bark out military parade orders, mimicking those head boys who had gone before me. I had been transformed from a timid thirteen-year-old secondary modern failure to a seventeen-year-old student leader who aligned himself fully with the middle-class ethos and traditions of the school, notwithstanding a lifetime aversion to military customs. This apparent ‘shift in class identity’ (Reay, 2003) seemed unproblematic to me at the time and I gave little thought to it. While always embarrassed about my East Ham address, I never felt disadvantaged by it in this school, in part because my sporting achievements were a compensation. I had played my role to ‘fit in’ with this private school’s norms, pleased my parents, and was now qualified to enter the lofty academic milieu of the grammar school. In social class terms I had been co-opted to the other side.

### The grammar school

My ‘O’ level results enabled me to re-join the mainstream state education system as a sixth form student in a selective grammar school. I was one of the rare few who had made the transition from the ‘different worlds’ of ‘modern’ to ‘grammar’ (Brine, 2006; Jones, 2016), albeit in my case with the intervention of several years of private schooling. I had lost a school year in the process and was now the oldest in my class, but I had made it. I don’t recall there being any discussion in my family at the time about me leaving school to go to work, and yet the research literature on ‘staying on’ beyond school leaving age indicates that the 1960s were a time when this could be quite problematic (Secondary Education and Social Change, 2017). Baby boom population pressures for

example, made university places hard to obtain. Regardless, my parents were prepared to continue to support my schooling in the belief that it would benefit me in the future. We had raised aspirations with the promise of career status that grammar schools provided (Secondary Education and Social Change, 2018) Barking Abbey Grammar School was for me a different social and cultural milieu again. For a start it was co-ed, which I hadn't experienced since primary school. And beyond a very colourful sixth form blazer that was embarrassing to wear in East Ham, but worn with pride in Barking, there was a general absence of pretences in everyday school life; no more ridiculous military parades and unnecessary disciplinary procedures. Prefects didn't give out lines! This was a serious academic institution. Not only had the school creamed off for itself the brightest local students at age eleven, but by sixth form the academic elite had been narrowed even more, and this in turn further exacerbated social class distinctions in favour of middle-class students (Secondary Education and Social Change, 2018). According to one historical account of grammar school experiences (Todd, 2014), many working-class students were dissuaded from staying on for sixth form.

For most sixth formers there was the expectation that they would go to university, and for some of them, to the most elite universities; Oxbridge and the 'red bricks' (older, traditional universities such as Birmingham, Bristol). The academic curriculum directly prepared students for higher education and later higher-status professional careers (Iannelli, 2013). Hargreaves (1978) termed this curriculum 'intellectual-cognitive' with its focus almost exclusively on public examinations – 'A' levels in the case of sixth formers. To some extent there was also a curriculum divide based on gender. Many of the girls studied English and music, many boys did maths, chemistry and physics, and those like me who didn't particularly excel in any of these subjects, opted for humanities such as history, geography and art. In an academic sense I found myself a



relative low achiever; there was no way I could match the subtleties of academic writing that I saw in some of my fellow students. Working-class students often struggled in grammar schools (Lacey, 1970) and my school learning up to this point was largely ‘mechanical’, memorizing facts with little real thinking and judgement (see Jackson and Marsden, 1962, p. 147). In the company of fellow grammar school peers, I became aware that I was a middle-class pretender with academic abilities that placed me towards the back of the pack. That ‘class shift’ was not so unproblematic after all.

Grammar school life was not just about academic achievement. There were the school drama productions and extracurricular activities in music that featured students with the most amazing array and depth of talents. All sixth formers were also introduced to another language - German as a curriculum extra to broaden our education. This was liberal education at its best. It was also a politically conservative education because, after all, grammar schools functioned to supply conservative-minded recruits to an expanded middle class (Jones, 2016). I gave no explicit thought to politics at the time, but reflecting back, 1968, my second year at the grammar school, was a time of momentous political and social events (including the assassination of Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Sorbonne riots, invasion of Czechoslovakia, the ‘Tet’ offensive) and yet these events passed us by as sixth formers almost without comment. I recall that we had a trainee history teacher for part of the year, and he mentioned to the class that he participated in the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations outside the US embassy in London. We thought he was quite mad and provided him with no support. In the formal curriculum we were taught to understand seventeenth century Cromwellian wars against King Charles 1, but there was no curriculum space, formal or hidden, for critique of twentieth century US imperialism in south-east Asia. Most of us were to become the next year’s university students, yet anti-establishment protests were

beyond our interest and comprehension. After all, the school was preparing us ultimately for establishment careers. As reproduction and correspondence theories in the 1970s were to indicate, schools served ideologically to represent dominant class interests through knowledge taught in the formal curriculum and through the transmission of values in the hidden curriculum (e.g. Althusser, 1972; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Young, 1971).

From a social perspective my best friend during those two years was one of the few other sixth form students from a working-class background. Ken lived in Dagenham where his father worked at the Ford Motor company, at the time the largest car plant in Europe. Unlike me, Ken had passed the eleven-plus. Socially there seemed to be a gravitational pull that made it more comfortable for me to be in the company of other students from working-class backgrounds.

My two years at Barking Abbey Grammar School were highly enjoyable, even if more socially than academically. I didn't quite fit in with the middle-class mores of many of my fellow students, but apart from not matching the best of them academically, I thrived on the experience. As a fairly accomplished athlete, as with my private school experiences, I gained some peer status based on my sporting achievements. But in line with Reay's (2003, p. 59) class identity reference to 'duality of the self' (a concept she draws from Bourdieu), I was always conscious of having the lived experiences of both a different post code and different previous schooling. I knew that the secondary modern that I and my school peers from primary school had experienced was brutal and vastly inferior to what I was now privileged to enjoy at a grammar school, and a key reason I was at the latter was because of the intervention and financial sacrifice of my parents. At the time I was too busy enjoying my grammar school life to articulate social class inequalities, but my working-class origins and knowledge of life at the alternative secondary moderns was subliminal and always a part of me.

In 1970, two years after I left Barking Abbey, the school merged with the local secondary modern school (Park Modern) following the Labour government's comprehensive schooling policy.

### Teacher training – the default option

Obtaining those two 'A' levels at grade B to gain university entrance was beyond me at the end of my two years at sixth form. In fact, I ended up with five A levels, following a further year of study at a technical college and a correspondence course, but still I did not achieve the grade Bs. Unable to enter university, I joined the workforce as a clerk in the Bills department of an international bank in London's Cornhill, but I had little aptitude for the work and left after less than a year. I followed this with another clerical job in the Greater London Council, but this wasn't for me either and I left after a couple of months.

By now, like many other 'aspirational' East Londoners, our family had left behind our terrace house and moved 50 kilometres east to the Essex Green Belt, to Hadleigh, a more genteel town (see Watt, 2008). My father, now a company manager, commuted daily by train into London. In his later years he took up golf (badly) and even joined the local Conservative Club (ostensibly to use their snooker tables). My mother, after working part time for a while at a local chemist shop, became a founding member of the choir at the local WI (Women's Institute), and later became a key office bearer. My family's transition to middle-class status thus appeared complete, even to the choice of daily newspapers – the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*.

As a 'drifter' (according to Jackson and Marsden, 1962, p. 161) with no firm university/vocational path, I defaulted to the seemingly common and 'safe' option for many former sixth form grammar students, of becoming a teacher. In

September 1970 I embarked on a teacher training course specialising in History at Borough Road College, Isleworth. I was at Borough Road for four years (three-year Teaching Certificate plus one-year B.Ed) and loved my time there. In a socio-political sense my four years at a college of education were a continuation of the conservative ethos of my sixth form grammar school. Beyond the boundaries of the college, the years 1970-74 were politically turbulent (including IRA bombings in London, miners' strikes in the north, the Vietnam war, Watergate, Meinhof Baader), but as with the grammar school, these events seemingly passed us by as students. There were no campus protests that I can recall, moreover, protests against militarism, racism and the diminution of workers' rights were seen to be the remit of the Student Left from institutions such as the LSE (London School of Economics). It was as though political protests were not for those training to become the next generation of teachers.

Educationally, this was the beginning of the conservative restoration (Shor, 1986), a reaction to the progressivism of the 1960s. A series of 'Black Papers' was published (e.g. Cox and Dyson, 1971) which presented schooling in the UK as being in crisis and derided all aspects of progressive and comprehensive education in favour of traditional social and political values (see Ball, 2006 chapter on 'discourses of derision'). Politically, the early 1970s saw the beginnings of the New Right. The Tories were in power, and Thatcher was Secretary of State for Education throughout my college years. It was perhaps unsurprising that during this time I received a conventional and uncritical teacher education. For example, the study of philosophy of education was compulsory and dominated by the traditionalist work of Peters (1966) and Hirst (Hirst and Peters, 1970). So uninspiring and indeed hated was the basic text *Ethics and Education* (Peters, 1966) that the end of each college year featured its ritualistic public burning as another cohort of students celebrated completing

their teacher training. According to a later critique by Harris (1979, p. 163) which I was unaware of for many years, this philosophy of education established the claim and ‘right’ to its own legitimacy over knowledge and produced ‘schooled people good for school.’ That is, teachers became well-fitting members of the status quo, unable to envisage alternatives. The only critical aspect of the college curriculum was sociology of education which I chose to study instead of psychology. I was introduced (albeit briefly) to phenomenology (e.g. Dale, 1973) and the influential work among others of Berger and Luckmann (1971) and Young (1971), and significant debates on language, class and culture (e.g. Bernstein, 1971; Keddie, 1973; Labov, 1970). The role of the ‘new’ sociology of education in teacher training courses was in fact highly contentious during this era, even including a call to remove the subject on the grounds that it didn’t match the practical needs of teachers trying to ‘survive’ in the classroom (see Barton and Walker, 1978 for an overview of the debates). At the time, however, while I understood the subject to be exciting and pioneering, I failed to fully appreciate its political significance in a conservative era that aimed for conformity and control.

My political awareness was minimal. I was more focused on obtaining my degree and spending time on the athletics track, where, as captain of the Borough Road team, we defeated Loughborough for the first time. In a social class sense, my college peers were often former grammar school students from middle-class families, but not predominantly. Colleges of education were lower in prestige than universities, and this was reflected in the less privileged class composition of college students (Egerton and Halsey, 1993). I had little trouble mixing socially, but as with my grammar school years, I gravitated towards friendships with students from working-class backgrounds. One of my friends, Stewart, a fellow athlete, hailed from a working-class area in the midlands. His father was a shop steward in a manufacturing company. To demonstrate my

complete political naivety at the time, and this is highly embarrassing to admit, I think I actually voted for the Tories in the first general election of 1974. I seem to remember countering my friend Stewart's vote for Labour, which was to be expected from the son of a shop steward. My father on the other hand was a manager and I think I voted the way he would have.

I gained my B.Ed degree in 1974 but I had little cause to celebrate. Completing the degree was based solely on passing a series of three-hour written exams, and in a couple of those exams I did very poorly. Subject content that I had diligently and stubbornly studied just did not appear as exam questions (in one British economic history exam I remember I studied canals, but the questions were on railways). I ended up with a third-class degree which I opted to have posted to my home because I was too ashamed to receive it in the company of my peers at the Royal Albert Hall graduation ceremony. Reay (2018) writes that even with her academic achievements and a Cambridge University professorship, she still felt at times that her views lacked legitimation with her academic peers. In another account of a former 'council estate' resident, Hanley (2016) writes about her personal experience of class and her disdain for obtaining only a lower-second class degree. Brook and Michell (2012) refer to autobiographical accounts of academics from working-class backgrounds who experienced doubts about their abilities, and Brine (2010, p. 142) cites literature on the life histories of working-class women who were 'ever-fearful of the hand on the shoulder challenging one's right to be.' The common theme is people from working-class backgrounds feeling they are not good enough. To which I can add my experiences as an eleven plus failure, my failure to transition directly from school to university, and then when I did finally make it to a second-tier form of higher education, to only receive a third-class degree. How could my voice ever have legitimacy in the academy?

### **Phase three: Engaging with working-class lives and the beginnings of class consciousness**

#### Teaching at the coalface

As it turned out, I needn't have worried about the level of my degree because no one since has ever asked me about it beyond that I possess a four-year London University accredited education degree. Many of the teachers in the schools I worked in during the 1970s did not have degrees, instead they had two or three-year teaching certificates. In 1974 following my graduation, teachers were in demand and I had a wide choice of schools in which to work. My first full time teaching position was at Chalvedon Comprehensive School in Basildon, Essex. Basildon was one of the 'New Towns' established in south-east England in the post-war period to accommodate working-class communities from areas of inner London ravaged during the war. Conveniently, Basildon was not far from where my parents now lived.

Teaching at Chalvedon was a reality check for me. It was my first direct engagement with working-class students at school since my secondary modern days, and in some respects, it took me back to those days. The Victorian era architecture was absent, there was no teacher brutality of the kind I had witnessed in the early 1960s, and some of the top students did flourish academically, but most students did not and left school with no qualifications and the prospect only of unskilled/semi-skilled work. As in the contemporary study at the time by Willis (1977), these students were learning to labour. Some of the boys compensated for poor academic achievement with counter-culture social lives that revolved around alternative dress codes, the fortunes of West Ham United and rocking to AC/DC. I only stayed at the school for one year, but in that time I began to connect the realities of the lives of many of the students I taught with the phenomenological studies of school deviance and class

reproduction that I had been introduced to briefly at college. It would be a few years yet before it really made sense.

My second stint of school teaching was at Albert Park High School in Melbourne, Australia. Ostensibly I travelled to Melbourne to train in the sun for the 1976 British Olympic team (unsuccessfully, another story). With a B.Ed and prior teaching experience, obtaining a secondary school position was not difficult. Albert Park was the first Melbourne high school that appeared in the telephone directory, and following my enquiry, they happily employed me. Again, teachers were in demand and I was at this school teaching history and geography for four years (1975-1979). Post war migration to Australia had established Melbourne as the third largest Greek-speaking city in the world (after Athens and Thessalonica) and Greek students dominated Albert Park High School. Most were from working-class families who had migrated to Australia for better job opportunities. I easily adapted to teaching in the school because, despite different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, in social class terms the students were little different from the students I had taught in Basildon. One significant difference in the school, however, was the political activism of the teachers. I recall that in my very first week of teaching, a school inspector entered the school, whereupon the majority of teachers left and went on strike, assembling together for a union meeting at the local pub. Australian unions were on the 'flood tide' in this era (Bramble, 2008). Many teachers were young, four-year trained graduates, with leftist politics honed during the massive moratorium rallies of the early 1970s to end conscription and the war in Vietnam, leading up to the federal election of Gough Whitlam and an era of social democratic politics. While I joined a militant teacher union (The VSTA - Victorian Secondary Teachers Association) I was unused to such militancy and felt conflicted. I joined some strikes but not others. I had never before marched against government policies in capital city streets chanting 'when do we want



it? Now'. But it was the beginning of my political consciousness, and it was further developed in 1978 when I went on an educational tour to Vietnam organised by a professor at La Trobe University. My eyes had been opened to alternative political systems and the destructive force of US hegemony in the world. I began to understand the political dissent of many of my Melbourne teaching colleagues who had demonstrated in the Vietnam moratorium campaigns.

After four years I left Albert Park feeling somewhat deflated, worn out and disillusioned by teaching. It had ceased to be enjoyable, but I could not fully articulate why. Plus, I still had that nagging third-class bachelor's degree that I hadn't dealt with.

#### A return to higher education, radical education and prison literacy

In early 1980 I enrolled full time in a Master of Education course at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney, and thanks to the Whitlam Labor government reforms, there were no course fees. Unlike all my previous studies, this course was based entirely on coursework, and with distinctions and high distinctions in virtually every subject I studied, I managed at last to extinguish the shame of my third-class bachelor's degree. The course also had a significant impact on my political thinking as I was introduced to radical Left education. One of my lecturers was Ted Trainer, who later published extensively in the field of environmental education, and in particular, capitalist exploitation of finite natural resources (e.g. Trainer 2010). He introduced me to the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) and a host of de-schoolers and critical educators including Freire (1972), Goodman (1971), Holt (1971), Illich (1971), Postman and Weingartner (1971) and Reimer (1971). These texts resonated with me and it was through them that I began to understand my disillusionment with high school teaching and to view education through a political lens. I began to

understand the ideologies that worked against the students I had taught in Basildon and Albert Park and prevented them from succeeding in education and employment beyond their class position in society. I now had an explanation for why school life was generally so uninspiring for them and for me as a teacher. Interestingly, one of the subjects I could have studied in the degree was Marxism and Education, taught by Kevin Harris (and others). I chose not to because I balked at my ability to comprehend Marxist writings; it was a decision I have always regretted. To complete my master's degree I undertook a long essay on the origins of mass public schooling in the United States, drawing extensively on Bowles and Gintis's correspondence theory and the work of other radical educators such as Kaestle (1973), Katz (1968, 1975), Lazerson (1971) and Spring (1971). While correspondence theory later became discredited as economistic and reductionist, its critical linkage of schooling to larger socio-political processes foregrounded much of my later teaching and research interests.

In addition to my post-graduate studies at UNSW I obtained part time employment as a 'remedial English' teacher at the Long Bay Prison Complex in Sydney. I had no qualifications to teach literacy to adults, but at this time there were few such qualifications anyway. I think I obtained the job because I was a young-ish teacher, enthusiastic, and as my work supervisor later commented, I was not a 'do-gooder' with an ulterior motive of trying to convert prisoners to a religion. The combined effects of working with prisoners and studying radical education had a powerful ideological impact on me. I had never before worked with adults, and prisoners were one of the most disadvantaged groups in society. Illiteracy had been identified as a problem in NSW prisons (Nagle, 1978), and there was heightened, if exaggerated, awareness at the time of illiteracy in society (e.g. Kozol, 1980). Freire (1972) provided the inspiration for an adult literacy pedagogy with oppressed people that included dialogue for liberation,

empowerment. These were revolutionary times for educators, and in particular in Sydney academia with the *Radical Education Dossier* (RED, see Harris, 2014). Literacy pedagogy was integral to the revolutionary effort (Mackie, 1980), and it was an exciting time to be engaged with the politics of adult literacy education which have dominated my professional life ever since.

#### **Phase four: adult literacy teaching and social class in the academy**

##### Parallel professional worlds in TAFE

While working in NSW prisons, firstly as a remedial teacher and then as a full-time education officer, I embarked on a second master's degree, this time with an honours thesis. My chosen thesis topic, linked with my work at the time, was the attitudes of prisoners to literacy and their participation in literacy programmes (Black, 1989). By the late 1980s, my growing expertise in adult literacy education enabled me to shift from prison education to TAFE (Technical and Further Education, the public vocational education provider equivalent to Further Education in the UK) as an adult literacy teacher. A few years later (from 1993) I became a head teacher of adult literacy and numeracy and remained so for the rest of my TAFE career, finally retiring in 2009. I also began a PhD part time in 1992 in the field of adult literacy education and intermittently lectured part time on graduate diploma courses in adult literacy at UTS.

In those early years in the 1980s, there was something inspiring about the field of adult literacy which I first experienced in the prison education context. In this social-democratic era, adult literacy pedagogy was based largely on jointly negotiating literacy needs with students with the aim of 'empowering' them as individual learners (in a mainly liberal-progressive sense as few teachers adopted Freirean methods, see Black and Bee, 2018). Later, from the mid-2000s, I worked with two university colleagues in the literacy/numeracy field to

combine my TAFE role with nationally funded research on the social capital outcomes of adult literacy courses (Balatti, Black and Falk, 2006, 2009). This was significant because it indicated adult literacy programmes could result in changes in students' social networks which in turn contributed to their increased socioeconomic wellbeing. The research indicated the importance of social capital for student empowerment in adult literacy courses.

Progressively over my TAFE career I experienced ideological dilemmas as I inhabited two parallel professional roles. On the one hand, I taught and managed adult literacy programmes in TAFE colleges from the dominant institutional perspective expected of me. Professionally it was a largely middle-class milieu in which the great majority of the (mainly female) literacy teachers were formerly qualified primary or secondary school teachers. Compared with many other teachers in TAFE, especially those in the traditional trade areas such as carpentry and plumbing, the adult literacy (and languages and numeracy) teachers were highly qualified and stood apart in terms of their formal education and class backgrounds. They generally held dominant views on their role as literacy teachers which was essentially about providing literacy education to mainly working-class students to compensate them for their educational disadvantage. Further, as neoliberal policies began to have an effect from the early 1990s, it seemed to make sense to teachers that unemployed people required improved literacy skills in order to obtain and keep jobs. Also, low-skilled workers in manufacturing industries would need improved literacy skills in order to keep them productive and employable in the changing world of technology and workplace practices.

My parallel professional world, however, based on my academic readings and political beliefs, provided an alternative ideological perspective. That is, public adult literacy education in TAFE was funded primarily in the interests of ruling

class groups. Literacy from the early 1990s was viewed increasingly by dominant groups as a key human capital skill that would enable competitive advantage and increased enterprise profits. Thus, government policy for adult literacy education was increasingly focused on economic priorities, and in terms of its impact on mainly working-class students, the issue was seen to be less about individual empowerment, including social capital, and more about controlling students to ensure compliance with the needs of industry (Black, 2018). This had been the focus of my doctoral thesis, a critical ethnographic account indicating how different groups of working-class people (prisoners, adult literacy students, local council workers) used and valued literacy practices in contrast to dominant ruling class discourses on literacy (Black, 2002). This alternative perspective however appeared little recognised by many adult literacy teachers who had never been exposed to, and through their class backgrounds, would not have been receptive to radical education ideas. I recall, for example, that during the mid-1990s the teachers I taught as a part time lecturer on UTS graduate diploma literacy courses had often never heard of Freire, and conscientization was not a concept they were likely to embrace. They were often already qualified and experienced school teachers and their interests were focused primarily on the pedagogical methods of transmitting literacy skills (in Freire's 'banking' sense), not the politics of critical literacy. Interestingly though, radical education was included on the agenda of other adult education courses at UTS during this time in the 1990s. Griff Foley (e.g. 1994, 1999, 2001), for example, lectured from a powerful social class perspective. He also founded the Centre for Popular Education and later became my PhD supervisor. Mike Newman (1994, 2006) also lectured from a similar critical socio-political context.

### Social class in the academy

Ideological dilemmas about my professional role were to some extent resolved when I retired from full time literacy work in TAFE in 2009, and for the past decade I have engaged mainly in adult literacy research at UTS. As an academic researcher I was no longer required to work within dominant understandings of literacy education, unless that is, I sought government research funding. I became acutely aware of this when, along with two colleagues from UTS, I was successful in obtaining national funding for a research project on workplace literacy and numeracy practices. Our project findings indicated that, based on the manufacturing companies we researched, literacy and numeracy were not the ‘problems’ in workplaces that the dominant discourse indicated. That is, there was no literacy and numeracy ‘crisis’ as workers were found to have the existing requisite skills needed to successfully undertake their job roles. If literacy or numeracy problems did arise, there were workplace strategies, such as peer mentoring, that could overcome them. These were not the research findings that our national funding agency expected or wanted, and I recall some concerns expressed, along with some critical reviews of our earlier drafts which even objected to our use of terms such as ‘dominant discourse’. While the project findings were later published (Black, Yasukawa and Brown, 2013, 2014, 2015), our ‘critical’ perspectives had been laid bare and national funding agencies keen to promote the dominant ‘crisis’ (i.e. deficit) perspective on literacy and numeracy favoured by governments and industry were unlikely to risk funding us again. Instead, they were more likely to fund the many private ‘policy entrepreneurs’ in the field who were ‘singing off the same hymn sheet’ with government and industry and who would provide the research findings they wanted (Black and Yasukawa, 2016). In a broader sense, this was an important message for educational researchers in the academy who promoted critical socio-political perspectives in education, including social class, that

governments in a neoliberal era were unlikely to fund research projects that might produce findings counter to capitalist bloc interests.

Academic arguments of dominant interests or ‘ruling class’ hegemony over ‘working-class’ populations in fields such as language and literacy education are not new in the academy (e.g. Lankshear, 1987), but they are not currently fashionable to promote (Black and Bee, 2018). Recently I asked a university colleague about the role of social class in the academy and she answered quite matter of factly, that there were plenty of 1980s publications I could refer to. In other words, the academy had moved on. The Centre for Popular Education at UTS for example, had long ceased to function. In the field of applied linguistics, David Block (2014) has written about the ‘erasure’ of social class as a construct in recent decades with the focus not on redistribution but on recognition and identity issues. This is apparent from a cursory look at some of the many theories and philosophical trends promoted by contemporary academics in the field of language and literacy education and other related fields. They include: activity theory, actor-network theory, practice theory, social semiotic theory, metrolingualism, translanguaging, plurilingualism and posthumanism. Social class is not necessarily absent, and in fact it often features in the mix of these theories and philosophies, but not prominently. As Pennycook (2015, p. 276) in a review of Block (2014) argues, strengthening a focus on social class is to be welcomed, but with the qualification that ‘we do so in all its complex relations to language, people, discourse, practices, place and change.’

In my own particular field of interest, literacy studies, sociomaterial approaches and actor-network theory have gained considerable currency in recent times (e.g. Hamilton, 2011, 2012, 2016). As Hamilton (2016, p.7) explains, ‘rather than seeing society as a set of structures within which individuals exert agency, ANT views it as a fluid space within which competing projects of social

ordering gather or lose influence.’ In relation to literacy policies, Hamilton (2012) explains the ‘process of translation’ that connects the global education policies of the OECD to national strategies and local practices in the UK. This involves mobilising many actants both human and non-human (i.e. sociomaterial). One recent account of actor-network theory in education viewed within broader STS (Science and Technology Studies) states quite explicitly that with its focus on how power operates in the day-to-day practices of actors, ‘big concepts’ like ‘neoliberalism’, ‘globalisation’, ‘class’, and ‘race’ are not used as a priori explanations (Gorur, Hamilton, Lundahl and Sundström Sjödin, 2019: 5). Hamilton (2011, p. 71) makes a similar point, stating that ‘unlike critical theory or feminist theory, it does not start from an assumption of unequal distribution of power and resources and set out to rectify this.’ In fact, in Hamilton’s (2011, 2012, 2016) ANT studies of literacy, just as Block (2014) indicates in relation to applied linguistics more generally, social class has been erased. There is no mention of social class as a construct (occasionally terms such as ‘marginalised’ or ‘underclass’ are used). The difficulty I have in identifying with research approaches such as actor-network theory is that I am unable to detach myself from social class as ‘a priori’ explanation for the unequal distribution of power and resources in society. While I am influenced in part by my critical education readings, the foundation for my political orientation is my own lived experience of social class going back to my working-class upbringing in the 1950s and my secondary schooling experiences, even while I experienced education designed for both working-class and middle-class students. As with Reay’s work cited at the very beginning of this article, my contemporary habitus as an educational researcher remains powerfully linked to my earlier life experiences of social class in East London. I cannot comprehend a socio-political/economic world view beyond these experiences, which makes it impossible for me not to start from an assumption of inequality based on class differences. My early working-class



background, however, is atypical of most of my university colleagues. Block (2014, p. 170), for example, in trying to explain the erasure of social class in the academy, suggests that the majority of academics live in largely middle-class worlds and this is reflected in their research orientations. That is, social class ‘is not a dimension of human existence that is immediately obvious to them.’

### Back to school – affirmation of social class

While much of my professional career and political awakening has been in the field of adult literacy education, in the past few years I have been fortunate to be part of a research team which examined the study of languages in primary and secondary schools in NSW cities (Cruickshank and Wright, 2016; Cruickshank et al., 2020). Very early in the research, which involved quantitative data (questionnaire surveys) and in-depth qualitative interviews and lesson observations in many schools, it became clear that social class was *the* primary factor responsible for unequal and inequitable access to languages for children at school (Wright, Cruickshank and Black, 2018; Black, Wright and Cruickshank, 2018). This was especially apparent in secondary schools where students from middle-class families enjoyed a wide range of high-status, quality languages provision in private schools and academically selective high schools. Languages were a ‘marker of distinction’ in the school market (e.g. Smala, Paz and Lingard, 2013). By contrast, working-class students from low SES comprehensive high schools were restricted mainly to the state-mandated minimum languages provision (usually just one language for 100 hours). In government-run secondary schools, the contrast in the extent and quality of languages provision between high performing academically selective high schools and low performing low SES comprehensive high schools was stark (Black, 2019; Cruickshank et al., 2020). For me, this was a powerful reminder of similar social class disparities between grammar schools and secondary moderns that I experienced in the 1960s, but here we were, more than half a

century later in another distant country, in a repeat scenario (though minus the fear and brutality of the secondary moderns). Instead of an eleven-plus exam for entry to grammar schools, it was a selective school placement test for entry to prestigious academically selective high schools. Overwhelmingly it was (and continues to be) middle-class students who succeeded in passing the placement test, often following extensive private tutoring (Ho and Bonnor, 2018; Sriprakash, Proctor and Hu, 2015). As with the promotion of grammar schools in the UK in recent years (May, 2016), it was often conservative governments in NSW that continued to promote and extend academically selective high schools (Black, 2019).

### Conclusion - a dispiriting end

My lengthy educational journey is coming to a close, and in a dispiriting way. While there are important networks for critical Left educational research (including this journal), there is limited opportunity for collaborative work with many contemporary academics who feel they have moved on from class-based research. This may be especially the case in my own language and literacy field, though there are some recent encouraging signs of change (e.g. Block 2014, 2018). But the most dispiriting aspect is that the stark social class inequalities in schooling that I experienced in East London in the early 1960s appear to be no better here in Sydney, Australia many decades later (and indeed in the UK, see Reay, 2017). In some respects, these class disparities may be even worse because currently nearly fifteen per cent of Australian school students attend private schools compared with just four per cent in 1970 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020; Independent Schools Council of Australia, 2019). The situation is further complicated in Australia with nearly twenty per cent of students attending private Catholic schools, some of which are highly elitist. Social class inequalities in Australian schooling have long been highlighted in research studies (e.g. Connell et al., 1982; Teese, 1998, 2013; Teese and Polesel, 2003),

but in practical terms there have been few improvements during recent decades as neoliberal reforms, including policies such as school choice and the promotion of selective schools, have served to exacerbate educational inequalities. Reay (2018, p. 22) concludes in relation to her own voice as an academic that: ‘no one with the power and resources to effect change is listening.’ This situation would appear to be universal, and most certainly applies to Australian schooling.

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