

THE TROUBLE WITH KYLIE: STRUGGLING TO UNDERSTAND CLASS EXPERIENCE IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT Courses in the sociology of education are conventionally structured by a critical theory of reproduction structured by the demands of race, gender, and class advocacy. This approach, however, particularly in the context of teacher education programmes, may not provide the majority of students with useful knowledge in the practice of their profession. These conclusions are supported by a reflexive, professional, examination of assignments submitted by about 100 education students at a New Zealand university. The students were asked to provide a commentary, informed by what they had learned of the sociology of education, on a conversation with a year-10 student preparing for School Certificate. The article suggests that contradictions in the sociology of education must be considered as the source of systematic confusions exhibited by the students' analyses.

INTRODUCTION

The definitive problem of the sociology of education is posed by the existence of social differences in access to education for social groups. In New Zealand the level of inequality is much the same as in similar countries. To put the difference in broad terms, school leavers from the upper 10 percent of the family income distribution enjoy about 8 to 12 times the level of access to university education as the lowest 10 percent (Fergusson, 2000). The problem is widely recognised to be multivariate – for the causes of educational inequality can be listed by the dozen – and statistical analysis offers a powerful method to compare their relative weights and importance. Riordan's (1997) textbook indicates that the quantitative approach, with its definitive model established by Coleman's research (1990), remains the dominant paradigm in the US. The sociology of education, however, particularly in the once 'new' paradigm (Young, 1971) so influential in the development of our local work, is far from being dominated by statistical approaches. The majority of sociologists of education here regard their work as qualitative or theoretical, rather than as quantitative or applied. This theoretical leaning is reflected in the construction of courses in the sociology of education. In university colleges or faculties of education, the location of many sociologists of education, it would not be possible, in any event, to design a course that required an advanced level of statistical knowledge. If there *is* something sociologists of education know that is worth teaching to students of education, then ways must be found to convey that knowledge to those with little statistical expertise (Nash, 2000). The problem is usually solved by the provision of "race, gender, class" courses: this is now the conventional structure of introductory textbooks, which offer education students an advocacy-based radical critique of schooling and its reproductive effects (Coxon, Marshall & Massey, 1994; Jones, Marshall, Smith & Smith, 1990; Marshall, Coxon & Jones, 2000). As a result of this instruction, the

majority of students accept a standard thesis that constructs inequality of educational opportunity as a necessary consequence of the relations of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism that structure modern societies. Students of education also readily accept that these fundamental structures of domination, their efficiency sharpened since the mid-1980s by the reforms of the “new right”, have created especially challenging conditions for the teaching profession (Nash, 1997a).

The courses offered at Massey University in the sociology of education to second and third level students have a somewhat different organisation. The courses teach an integrated structure-disposition-practice scheme, adapted from Bourdieu (2000), in which emphasis is placed on obtaining a secure grasp of the causes of inequality/difference in education (Nash, 1997b). Students are encouraged to consider the causes of group differences in attainment by examining the distinct ontological levels of social structure, habituated disposition, and social practice (Nash, 2002a; 2002b). The scheme is demonstrated here in the model analysis of Kylie and further elaborated in the conclusion. As almost all students have completed a conventional introductory “education and society” course (although not necessarily at Massey University), it might be thought that few would experience any difficulty in working within this framework. The reality is rather different, as this article will demonstrate, and this has occasioned some self-critical pedagogical reflection on the limitations that may be inherent in the way the sociology of education is practiced and taught.

As a way of helping students to develop their analytical skills, particularly in the investigation of habituated dispositions, 200-level students were asked to write a commentary on a conversation with a year-10 pupil, Kylie, studying for the School Certificate examination.¹ School Certificate was abolished after 2001, but it was for many decades regarded as the minimum qualification for further study or, indeed, entry into anything beyond semi-skilled employment. The conversation with Kylie, and one or two of her friends, is appended to this article. The conversation is one of many held with upper secondary school pupils as part of the *Progress at School* research (Nash & Harker, 1998), and has been analysed previously in a discussion of education and social capital (Nash, 1999a). The students were provided with several model commentaries (Nash, 1997b), and the assignment came near the end of the course, but they were told no more about Kylie than can be learned from the transcript. Because teachers in New Zealand have a statutory responsibility to recognize barriers to learning, and establish conditions of equity and equality of opportunity for all pupils in their classes, the exercise was designed to strengthen their theoretical and practical powers of analysis. If education students are able to recognize the frames of mind of pupils who are failing to make progress, if they have some knowledge of the social conditions that give rise to those dispositions, and if they can understand the forms of practice they generate, then their efforts to work for equality of opportunity for those in one way or another excluded by the school might be that much more likely to succeed. This pedagogical conviction seems entirely justified, but the evidence of the analysis presented here suggests that the appropriate knowledge is surprisingly difficult for students to gain, and that those whose

¹ The usual term in New Zealand is “school student”, or simply “student”, but in order to avoid confusion in the context of this article, “pupil” has been used, except in quotations from university students’ writing.

preparatory studies have included a conventional introduction to the sociology of education often experience the most difficulty. Students are all too likely; (i) to do sociology backwards by mapping 'factors' on to individuals, rather than learn from classed individuals the forms of practice common to their group; (ii) to misrecognize the experience of injustice, despite acceptance of an abstract theory of class reproduction; and (iii) to adopt behaviourist models of intervention in the absence of any direct sociologically derived programme of action. These conclusions have been reached following many years of reflection on teaching the sociology of education in New Zealand. The discussion presented in this paper is a serious attempt to investigate what education students exposed to the sociology of education have learned from the material they have studied. The analysis draws largely on extracts from about 100 assignments, submitted over a two-year period, and on extensive and frequent pedagogical discussions with students. This was not a formal research exercise, and the illustrative evidence provided does not constitute a set of empirical findings with all the status of a scientific demonstration.² Although these students followed a course taught at Massey University, it should not be assumed that the immediate source of their confusions and difficulties is necessarily to be found in the education provided by that university. The majority of distance students had, in fact, completed their "social foundation" studies of education in other colleges and universities. It will help to read the conversation with Kylie (see Appendix A) before proceeding to the next section, which presents an analysis of the girl's adaptation to school within the structure-practice-disposition scheme.

KYLIE: STRUCTURE, DISPOSITION, AND PRACTICE

Kylie was unmistakably disaffected with school. Several conversations with her were recorded, and this one was held in the company of two of her friends, Mimi and Jimmo, a month or so before the School Certificate examinations when she was still 15 years old.³ Kylie told us that she was regarded as a good pupil at primary school and, as her test scores and academic attainments suggested she was a little above average ability, this recollection may well be trusted. There is no reason to believe that Kylie failed to conform to the demands of the institution in any major respect; she was clearly articulate, and she should have had little difficulty in completing secondary school. But at some point in her passage through secondary school Kylie began to encounter real difficulties. In the event,

² Academics have a professional responsibility to engage in critical reflection on their practice of exactly this kind, and the present study should be seen as a contribution to a well-established and necessary tradition (Solway, 1997). The intention – it should be needless to say – is not to criticize students' conceptual inadequacies for the sake of doing so, as if the idea were to compile a collection of howlers, but to expose contradictions in the way the sociology of education is characteristically presented, particularly in the context of teacher education programmes.

³ These names are the pseudonyms used in Nash & Major (1995; 1996a; 1996b), where full details of the *Progress at School* qualitative research may be found.

her School Certificate marks were within the range set by her third form test scores, and she was successful to that point, but there is no record of her returning to school for further study, and the trajectory hinted at in the conversation was in that respect fulfilled. Kylie lived with her mother, her stepfather, and her stepfather's son. She was communicative, open with the interviewer, and spoke frankly about the stresses she experienced in her attempts to manage the conflicting demands of her life. We knew just a little more about this girl than students were told.

What are the social structures that hinder Kylie's progress? First, Kylie was poor. This poverty made her suffer, and the consequences of that are evident in the transcript. Not only was she poor, she was affected as a result by a sense of distance and alienation from the school and its institutional sources of respect. Kylie felt that she could not expect her mother (still less her stepfather) to meet the costs of her schooling without herself feeling guilty, and it seems that her mother, who clearly preferred not to suffer the stigma of being a "charity case", was also hurt by the experience of poverty. The stress and frustration was, to some extent, turned within the family injuring the relations between Kylie and her mother. This young woman actually worked four evenings a week in a fish and chip shop, 15 or 16 hours a week in a hot and tiring job, but the transcript shows that she was disciplined enough to dedicate time to her homework. Second, there was the relative lack of educational knowledge within the family, and she speaks with a sigh of frustration at this absence. But there were many absences in Kylie's life. Her father lived in Australia and she tried to put aside a small sum from her wages each week so that one day she could join him. Her mother was under stress, her stepfather was pretty much a stranger, her brother was actually her stepfather's son (until recently just another face in the class), and on Saturday, the only day she had free, she took the opportunity to get out of the house. Like a number of young working-class women Kylie thought of becoming a flight attendant, a job still seen as touched with glamour, and spoke of entering a course to gain a recognised qualification for that position. A schoolgirl, Kylie was already a working woman, she smoked, she was used to drinking alcohol, she was familiar with the night-club scene, and she was in all respects at home in the classed and gendered sub-culture of her friends. Most of the girls in her group were sexually active and had been so for a year or more.

Kylie was conscious that the position she was in, struggling to pass School Certificate while working long hours, with little effective academic help at home, and under pressure to meet the costs of her education, was *unfair*. Several times she echoes this feeling; "it's horrible"; "it's really bad", and "it's so unfair". The obligation to help out with the household finances, or feel guilty if she did not, was recognised as a burden over and above the actual lack of money itself and as one imposed by her class location. The sense of grievance was derived in large part from a consciousness that *something* was wrong. But it was difficult for Kylie to find anyone to blame: when the school demanded examination fees (acting as an agency for the Qualifications Authority) she says, "it's not our fault if parents can't afford to pay for it" and then feels that she must concede that, "well it is in a way"; and when the school was unable to provide any form of assistance to one of her friends who had left home to live independently (for which the girl had very good reasons), she had to acknowledge that the state was responsible for the school's inability to act. Nevertheless, the fact that there seemed to be nothing and no one to hold responsible for the system that oppressed her – even the Social Welfare officials who administer the Independent Youth Benefit must personally be

blameless – actually added to her level of frustration, and saw it directed sometimes inwards to her family, and sometimes externally to the school where it was doubtless understood by most of her teachers as merely the expression of an alienated personal disposition. Those repeated comments that she felt, "very anti-school sometimes" need to be given their appropriate weight.

An extraordinary subtle process of negotiation takes place between the school and its students, and a once imperceptible distance steadily opened up as Kylie made her way through the institution. She was not seen as an "academic", she did not aspire to university, no teacher thought it worthwhile to "take her aside", as sometimes happens, and she manifestly failed to identify with the moral arbitrary – its essentially classed concept of appropriate conduct – of the institution.⁴ Kylie sensed that she was being pushed out of school. Its qualifications would be extended to her, if at all, reluctantly, leaving her with a sense of holding them without right. Once again, she was able to recognise something about the process that was not quite fair. Kylie would not have been identified as a pupil with the highest aspirations; her hand would not have shot up when the teacher asked those who hoped to enter university to identify themselves. The school, generally, did not think much of girls who want to be "air hostesses"; and it thought even less of the practices typically adopted by working-class girls, even though these are the common practices of the community, as they declare their status as independent adults (Nash, 2002c). In this context, therefore, Kylie struggled with her growing sense of alienation from school.

In the discourse used by Kylie, there is the tone of *ressentiment* (to use a French term) with a distinct class origin (Bourdieu, 1990). It is not envy: Kylie did not wish to see others worse off so that she might feel better (Elster, 1989), but her resentment did arise from the perception that the burdens imposed on her were the result of her class position, had not been *chosen* by her, and were unjust. The shortage of resources of every kind, of income, of cultural capital, and of social capital that held her back, (even in this mechanical form of analysis), should be interpreted as class limitations on her actions. Such *ressentiment* is not the only discursive response available to working-class pupils in Kylie's position, but it is not uncommon, and it has its origin in class injury that is above all a sense of injury due to the want of familial social capital (Sennett & Cobb, 1973). Kylie felt that the institutions of society had no place for her, that they did not recognise her, and it is in this sense that the lack of social capital should be recognised as being at the root of the sentiments that dominated her class formed habituated ways of being or, as Bourdieu says, of her *habitus* (Nash, 1999b; 2001a; 2002d; 2002e).

WHERE'S THE LABEL?

The forms of the model analysis given above are surprisingly difficult for students of the sociology of education to produce. Some students could find almost nothing

⁴ "Moral arbitrary" is a Bourdieusian term that refers to the set of normative regulations that govern conduct in school. Such regulations, being specific to cultures, are always "arbitrary" in an anthropological sense, and they may be doubly arbitrary in as much as their necessary relationship to the transmission of academic knowledge is often hard to discern.

to say until they had located Kylie's position in the race, gender, and class structure. But there was, at least, no difficulty about identifying her as a girl, and that presented a ready-made opportunity for many students to present what they knew about gender:

Some issues regarding gender that might apply to Kylie are the lack of confidence some girls may display in school, and the male student domination for attention of teachers, and male domination of technology resources such as computers.

Kylie's ethnic origin, however, is not given, and students found this omission – which was deliberate – particularly frustrating. For if they knew Kylie to be a member of an ethnic minority, particularly if she were Māori, they could legitimately access a standard narrative in which elements of colonization, institutional racism, and so on may all be mobilized to account for her oppressive experiences in the educational system:

Whilst no mention is made in the interview with Kylie about her ethnic or cultural background, if Kylie is Māori then her low educational achievement would be further explained. It is known that a disparity exists between Māori and Pakeha education achievements in New Zealand.

The writer apparently believes that as Māori pupils are less successful than Pakeha [European] pupils, Kylie's difficulties at school will be "further explained" if she is Māori. The *non-sequitur* involved in this argument will bear some analysis: the argument seems to reproduce the widely held student view that all differences are inequalities, all inequalities are unfair, and that their unfairness is demonstrated by the fact that there are differences. This student, one of several, actually overcame her apparent frustration by the simple device of assuming Kylie to be Māori (which she is not) and was, therefore, justified in submitting another well-presented essay on the oppression of the Māori since 1841. The majority of students, however, were able to recognize that the conversation is essentially concerned with the disadvantages of class. And yet, even then, many experienced some difficulty in locating her class position:

Although it is not revealed in the interview from what ethnic heritage Kylie belongs to, from her grammar and speech it is clear that she is not from an affluent background, not educationally motivated, and has an attitude that she (and her peers) are at the age where they can do as they please, including smoking.

I can only guess about her ethnicity and other personal data.

"Guessing" that Kylie is from a working-class family simply made it possible, in fact, for most students to explore the multitude of class-related causes linked to differential attainment. Moreover, although Kylie makes it clear that her family have no money to spare, some students nevertheless determined her class location by less defensible criteria. The allocation of Kylie to a class category, in fact, was sometimes made with a spectacular leap of the sociological imagination. Many older students (the course has a large distance education roll) seem to have been

introduced to Bernstein's (1995) socio-linguistic theory at some point in their career:

The evidence of poor language skills in Kylie's statements will also restrict her ability to acquire advanced education. In describing Compensatory Education, Bernstein explains the traditional approach of viewing poorly achieving students as of being from a deprived background.

Although it is not specifically stated what social class her Mother and Stepfather belong to, it is implied they are probably working class parents. [...] Due to the fact that she comes from a working class family, both biological parents have remarried and she is familiar with their spouse, her sentence structure is short and simple, her grammar is not eloquent, and her parents seem not concerned with her smoking habits at such a young age, suggests that her background is one of low economic status.

It might be noted, in passing, that the somewhat chaotic structure of the arguments presented in many of these extracts is entirely characteristic of student writing, and it is best to understand the problem as one caused by a specific limitation in the skills of constructing a written argument, rather than as a dramatic failure to maintain a logical train of thought (Solway, 1997). It cannot be supposed, in all charity, that the author of the last statement really does believe that Kylie's parents have remarried (which, in any case, goes beyond the evidence) because they are working-class, or that this has any connection with her mode of speech. Nevertheless, the writer offers no evidence for the view that Kylie's grammar and speech is classed, and it is supported in all likelihood by the presence in the transcript of one or two informal and perhaps dialectical usages in what was, after all, an informal conversation with a fieldworker.

Even those students who have made an effort to learn an unfamiliar sociological language, were more often than not tempted to do their sociology backwards. The analysis quite frequently draws nothing from Kylie's conversation other than what is assumed to be sufficient to identify her as a working-class girl, and not only as a member of a category about which things are already known, but as an individual about whom those things are therefore known with some degree of probability:

Although her family's socio-economic status is not stated, the dominance of discussion about the cost of school, about not being able to afford things and about having to work, indicate clearly that she emanates from a low economic background.

It seems reasonable to assume, from the interview statements, that Kylie lives in a family with a lower socio-economic base.

Because of the social class Kylie currently belongs to, importance is not given to her schoolwork and no one seems to focus on the time out of school on it, not even Kylie. Some children from lower socio-economic groups tend to work very hard at their schooling and do very well despite the resource differences but Kylie seems to lack the motivation

for school that would press her to get the necessary help.

Kylie is here positioned against “others”, perhaps from even more deprived backgrounds, who are nevertheless more motivated than her, with the unmistakable implication that her failure, thus not being demonstrated as necessary or inevitable for pupils in her class, must in some degree be chosen. This “lack of motivation” is actually hard to detect in the transcript, and few students offer any evidence for the assertion. Kylie speaks of “studying for ages and doing heaps of work”, and clearly *does* attempt to study at home, despite the fact that it is a frustrating experience. The very fact that she is troubled by the cost of the examination fees, and aggrieved by a teacher’s threat that she might be removed from the examination classes, is a clear indication of the strength of her desire to pass School Certificate. However, because she is working-class, and because working-class pupils are poorly motivated and hold low aspirations – or so these students of education believe they have been taught – then Kylie must, in all probability, share those characteristics.

This insistence on doing sociology backwards is more common than otherwise, and many students had genuine difficulty in understanding that their approach could be regarded as problematic. A few were distinctly annoyed when they were told that the point of the exercise was to reflect on what this girl had to say about her experience, rather than describe all the class-based textbook “factors” that could more or less plausibly be related to her situation. Kylie’s experiences are those of a working-class girl and through listening to her something about that experience can be learned. What most students actually did was relate what Kylie *should* experience on the assumption that what is known about working-class girls will apply to her. Of course, they could do this without a transcript at all, and for some it might as well not have been there, in as much as it served no more function than a template on which to project a stereotypical image.

What lies behind this student practice, in all likelihood, is the influence of ‘at risk’ positivism which persuades students of education that individuals within a given category carry a set of factors with precise weights. This bureaucratic model, apparently essential to institutional practice, is often maintained in a parallel discourse, notwithstanding the inherent tensions with an advocacy-based structural theory (Nash, 2001b). The image is that of a virtual handicap, as pupils with different social and cultural origins compete in the great educational stakes steeplechase. This is probably why many students of education appear to go through the transcript and try to identify as many ‘at risk’ categories as they can. If they know Kylie’s ethnic and class origin, in addition to her gender, then those factors can be discussed in the context of their appropriate theories, and the task of accounting for her experiences is by that process given an adequate sociological form. That, after all, is what a sociological explanation is. Some students, not being given adequate knowledge of the categories necessary to such a sociological analysis, and being aware, at least, that the level of disposition is the level of psychology, decided instead to offer a psychological analysis. This substantial group of students positioned Kylie as a ‘typical adolescent’ and proceeded to relate what they had learned about Erikson (1968). Being unsure of the social categories to which Kylie belonged, and unwilling to guess, it seems that they could say little else about her. The introductory sociology of education has not taught these students to listen: it has led them to apply a set of stereotypes. Students are instructed that working-class and ethnic minority pupils underachieve in the educational system, and it therefore seems reasonable that this identifying

information is vital to a sociological explanation, but it actually persuades most to practice sociology in reverse. Instead of deepening their ability to listen to a working-class girl, in order to learn what working-class experience is like, where there is little money, little effective educational capital, and little access to extended social capital, the most conscientious students actually worry, as they will make clear in conversation, that they might misconstrue her class location, and thus allocate to her the wrong set of at risk factors, or assign the wrong weights to them. Many others solve the problem either by guessing her relevant identity or by giving up on sociology altogether, safe in their knowledge that she is, at least, an adolescent girl.

WHERE IS THE INEQUITY?

The standard thesis of the sociology of education, in New Zealand and elsewhere, maintains that equality of educational opportunity is a myth. Several introductory textbooks used in New Zealand provide students with an apparently radical discourse of this kind. The myth of equality is a widely accepted thesis, one perhaps accepted by most students, and linked to a discourse more than acceptable to a profession that has experienced its full measure of administrative reform designed to increase accountability. This now conventional 'grand narrative' of the sociology of education was, not surprisingly, frequently presented by students who, nevertheless, were also often capable of maintaining positions strictly inconsistent with it:

In New Zealand the command of power [...] rests with the white middle-classed male. Critics argue that such a dominant structure is largely responsible for the reproduction of educational inequalities, where those of an elite birth right and the wealthy have the power to manipulate and take advantage of the educational system for their own benefit leaving the working-class at a disadvantage. [...] From reading the "interview with Kylie", it would appear that Kylie belongs to a working-class family. Therefore her ideals of schooling will reflect that of working-class lifestyles.

She shows no understanding of the class and poverty perpetuating processes in society that have helped to create this "really bad" situation for her family - and nor is she likely to, because any school following the examination-based curriculum is unlikely to teach such a concept.

This abstract knowledge, however, rarely helps students to recognise the injustice that shapes the experience of Kylie's everyday life. Her insistent protests that something is unfair about the struggles she endures to gain an education more often than not go unrecognised, if not absolutely unheard, and the responsibility for the situation she describes is sheeted home to her family. Even those students who have initially argued the abstract and general case for structural reproduction often 'forget' its implications and in their particular and individual dealings with Kylie quickly reposition her as a 'troubled adolescent', and so adopt the pathologized psychological model that energises their professional activity. The capacity of education students to shift in this postmodern style from discourse to discourse should be understood in the context of the often competitive intellectual and market-driven structure of the courses they are provided. A number of

students, indeed, effectively rejected the reality of Kylie's poverty and insisted that the ability to manage money depends on allocating priorities and acquiring the relevant skills:

Kylie says in the interview that "it's not really sort of free education any more" this belief has been brought on by her mother and stepfathers influences, where they have had to pay money for school fees as well as exam fees, but this is not their priority in paying out those fees. [...] Working class families, because of the limited income that they receive, may see that paying for education is not a great want, for their children and that although their child needs to be educated it is not a priority for them to pay for it.

Her parents need to understand that money is not the most important criteria in Kylie gaining an education. Helping her to find a quiet place to study and do her homework, along with setting aside time to discuss her school work, will show her that education is important to them and that they *care* whether she succeeds or fails.

Kylie says, "just because you can't pay we lose out", it appears from the interview that Kylie's family do not have an effective strategy and attitudes towards school are not very good.

Although the standard position maintains a structuralism designed to bypass deficit theory which essentially 'blames the victims' for the consequences of structural oppression, it is clear that students are often unable to resist critical comment on Kylie and her family. Such criticism, moreover, is often extended beyond all reasonable grounds. The text actually contains no mention of her aspirations and this oversight gave many students all the justification they needed to assume that she *had* no ambitions worth speaking of. Yet if this girl had no ambition why should she struggle so hard, suffer so much frustration, to gain School Certificate? It is clear from the text that she held *that* much ambition, at least. Nevertheless, in their anxiety to demonstrate that they have learned what working-class pupils are like, Kylie was positioned as 'typical', and in this way many students ended up denying the reality of her situation, and in effect thus denying themselves the possibility of a richer human understanding:

Kylie does not appear to understand that education equates to qualifications and credentials, which in turn can result in higher wages and more satisfying employment.

Kylie admits in her interview that her family is not intelligent enough to help her at home with her homework, so she is unable to carry on if she gets stuck. This view not only shows her immaturity, limited thought and invincible view, a stage quite predominate in adolescence but it also shows that Kylie has priorities which are not school related, rather social related.

She has no real belief that educational qualifications are within her reach or likely to yield what is promised by them.

Skills such as delayed gratification teaches the children the importance of working steadily for the entire year and then studying for examinations in order to gain qualifications that will contribute to their economic and social prosperity.

With her comments about her getting "stuck" with science because she cannot obtain help from outside the school environment she seems to accept the limitations placed upon her and in doing so accepts she is not intended for anything but the jobs available to the unskilled working class when she leaves school.

She sees herself as a non-achiever and becomes very frustrated. [...] Uniforms and smoking etc, in this part of the interview I feel we see that Kylie has not got very much interest in school.

Kylie has no educational aspirations or career goals to strive for, which may be a reflection of her lack of support and guidance from her peers as well as family. If parents have little value for education this is then portrayed to children. [...] Kylie has not acquired the intrinsic values of education, which attempt to guide people into decisions and shape their choices, attitudes, values and beliefs. Nor has Kylie developed an enquiring mind which reflects on the way we look at things. Kylie shows no positive attitude or interest in education and has no ambitions or career choices set for her future.

Barely a word contained in these seven extracts can be justified by reference to the text. The idea that Kylie does not "understand that education equates to qualifications and credentials, which in turn can result in higher wages and more satisfying employment" implies a misreading that shades into the absurd. If there is one thing the educational system teaches it is this; there cannot be a secondary school pupil in the land unaware that school qualifications are an almost essential key to well-paid and worthwhile employment. The serious question for sociologists of education, therefore, is what elements of our pedagogy lead so many students to suspend their common sense when they struggle to learn what we attempt to teach? The frequent charge that Kylie has little genuine or non-instrumental interest in education is, once again, made without any adequate supporting reference to the text. It would be hard to find one. Our students have got into the habit, in this area, of putting two and two together and making five. They believe, moreover, that this is the standard arithmetic of the non-quantitative sociology of education.

WHERE IS THE HELP TO COME FROM?

The level of disposition, as earlier mentioned, is the domain of psychology. The value of psychology becomes self-evident in an explanatory scheme that places disposition at the centre, where it acts to mediate between structure and agency. This should be, and sometimes is, accepted by students, who are thus able to integrate their sociological and psychological knowledge in a productive manner. The successful integration of psychological and sociological approaches, however, cannot be taken for granted. Many education students, particularly those preparing for a career in secondary education, are taught a 'psychology of

adolescence', of a specific and perhaps rather limited kind, that they are more than content to apply to Kylie. It is hard to know what this theory is actually worth. But as many students are willing to hear in Kylie's speech the sound of class deficit, so are they also often willing to see in her 'adolescent' behaviour all the evidence of an "identity crisis":

As Kylie is an adolescent, she is also going through a time of establishing an identity.

Role confusion at this stage of adolescence is normal.

It is obvious from the conversation that there is a bit of an identity confusion with Kylie and her peers ...

Kylie is obviously going through a period in adolescence where experimentation is typical, with things such as boy's, smoking, drugs etc.

The confusing time of still being controlled by adults but at the same time expected to be "adult like" and get serious about what she wants to do with her life. This is a natural phase for all teenagers to go through.

It seems to be that Kylie is facing an identity crisis described by Ericson.

It seems that Kylie may be slightly confused over her identity as a fifth former. This can be related to Erickson's psychosocial developmental tasks. There is a total of eight stages.

The final comment gives fair warning that this recognition of an "identity crisis" rarely, if ever, leads to a substantive discussion of the specific classed and gendered identities Kylie is constructing, or that are constructed for her, in that sense, by her interactions with her parents, her friends, and the school; rather it leads to a discussion of Erikson, whose eight stages can run to several pages in student exegesis. As far as educational practice is concerned, there seem to be no implications whatever, for the whole process is apparently seen by education students as an entirely normal maturational stage that adolescents can be expected to grow out of as they become adults.

The sociology of education may be a critical discipline, but it seems to provide no tools or recipes that students of education can learn and apply in their classroom practice, although there are practical guides to the field available (Nash & Munford, 2002). Educational psychology, on the other hand, does attempt to do this through skills courses, and students almost invariably turn to these professional routines when they consider how Kylie might be helped. Education students are often taught an approach to behaviour management that can be extremely manipulative. One text studied by these students contains the following illustration of a suggested technique for dealing with troublesome pupils.⁵

⁵ The second edition of this widely used text does not contain this particular chapter, but the students whose work is examined here had studied from the first edition, and in that context it does not seem irrelevant or unfair to provide this illustration.

Amanda, we are told, has been persistently off task and annoying the people in her group, and it takes the model teacher all of ten seconds to get Amanda into the necessary position from which her behaviour can be modified (Vaughan & Weed; 1994, p. 160):

T. Who were you helping in this way, Amanda?

A. No one.

T. What are you going to do about it?

A. Miss Moore, it wasn't my fault. I get bored and I have nothing to do.

T. Who is responsible for your behaviour, Amanda?

A. Well, I suppose I am.

T. Okay. I want to help you. What can we do to help you?

These routines require, as a necessary condition of effective pedagogic action, that pupils accept their position as flawed subjects in need of professional remediation. Education students doubtless soon learn by experience, despite the exhaustive role-play of their college years, that the approach has serious limitations in the classroom, but they almost invariably generate this discourse whenever they are asked to consider issues of behavioural control. When confronted with behaviour problems students can only fall back on this manipulative technique that demands, to a varying degree, the pathologizing of every circumstance deemed problematic in their pupils' lives. This is, indeed, a result of the way they are taught. And it is why, perhaps, so many are unable to accept that Kylie's family are poor, still less comprehend the structural reasons for it, for if only she would put her mind to paying the bills and developing a positive attitude her life would surely improve for the better:

Kylie complains a lot and resent the struggle she has to endure to get anywhere. This is called a negative attitude.

Kylie often refers to having problems revolving around money. Efficient handling of finances could be aided by young people and parents, being taught to budget their money. Kylie's parents could pay 5 or 10 dollars per week towards fees.

It is most important that pupils should take responsibility for their actions, so the argument runs, for otherwise they cannot initiate the changes they need to make. As it is, many students believe that Kylie is too inclined to shift the responsibility for her actions to others:

It seems to me that Kylie is trying from the out set, to move the blame or cause for low education success or attainment away from herself by putting it on external factors such as family or background. [...] I think she needs to focus her own self and what she can do to increase the chances of educational success, not just sit back and blame external factors that are in her life.

Education students, many of whom are actually experienced teachers upgrading to

a degree qualification, tend to be admirably loyal to the school as an institution. They are often reluctant to accept any criticism of their chosen profession, perhaps especially from a girl like Kylie:

I was quite surprised with Kylie's defeatist attitude, after reading the article and viewing her as more of a go getter than someone who is likely to stand off and blame others. I think the statement "yeah, there might be brighter people, but they've been over the years probably helped a lot more than a lot of people have" really highlights this mindset that Kylie has adopted. [...] I feel it is important for Kylie's sake that she manages to shake off the mindset that her family is to blame, and start achieving for herself. [...] Due to the socioeconomic status of Kylie's family, she seems to hold negative tendencies towards school and education in general.

When such students do accept her criticism, they invariably regarded the incident under consideration as a breakdown in policy, an aberration, whereas the actions of Kylie, her parents, and her friends, are positioned as *typical* of a class:

The success and failures sustain the structure, but certainly the education system is trying to address this inequality. I have not seen much progress or effort in society to address the problems. [...] I was quite disturbed when Kylie mentioned that she could not consult the teacher, this was hard to stomach from my trainee teacher perspective. After being out in the school recently I do see where this sort of talk comes from, but it is still disturbing.

Obviously the school has not contacted Kylie's mother and there has been a break down of the partnership policy that most schools have in place. It is necessary for parents to constantly be informed of issues regarding learning and their child's education. This is to encourage parents to be pro-active in their child's learning.

The interactions between these teenage pupils, touching mainly on smoking, provoke intense reactions from many education students. There is often an unmistakable hint that this behaviour, and Kylie's small fantasies of defiance, mark her as ineducable:

Teachers can only do so much. If parents' install values such as discipline and respect in their children, and practice these values regularly, these students will be easier to educate. Actions such as smoking could be seen by Kylie's peer group as shrugging off authority and making their own decisions as independent people. Kylie has an uneducated attitude on smoking.

As teachers can only do so much and as Kylie has shown herself to be under the influence of a "disaffected youth culture which she spells out at the end of the interview", and an "unhelpful" peer group, her fate is likely to be sealed:

Not surprisingly, Kylie and her friends are a group who enjoy bucking the system. [...] She will inevitably repeat the cycle of hardship and

disadvantage she has experienced.

Are the interactions between Kylie and her peer group positive in nature to the success of Kylie in school? I personally feel that the answer is no. They are a contributing disadvantage that do not value education and are indirectly imposing this belief through to Kylie.

It can be seen from the statements from Mimi that Kylie is very easily swayed and that pressure could easily get the better of her. All of these issues are standard and expected in the adolescent period.

Kylie is not completely willing to give the respect and conformity required of the school due to her family, her friend and her own experiences of life.

The recommended professional techniques for dealing with pupils like Kylie, who exhibit 'behaviour problems', have been mentioned. Some students who so positioned Kylie had little inhibition in offering a form of analysis almost breathtaking in its power to conjure castles out of thin air:

It would stack up then that Kylie's family problems stemming from divorce and including financial difficulty, lead her to certain behaviour problems. Kylie shows signs of anti-social behaviour indicated by "I just feel I'm out of place" and "we don't know where we bloody are". She feels like she doesn't fit in and can't relate to school anymore.

That statement, "I just feel I'm out of place", is really the key to understanding the whole conversation from which it is drawn, and it should incline students of education to reflect on how that sense of being has arisen, what the school does to give it substance, and what it might do to create a context which left her feeling included rather than excluded. Of course, should Kylie prove unresponsive to the manipulative techniques of professional caring, which her self-respect would almost certainly guarantee, then nothing remains but to relegate her to the category of those who have failed to accept the terms on which education is offered by the school and, therefore, to be uneducable, at least in that context. One student holding this position expressed a convenient opinion that several others left implicit:

It is possible that Kylie will feel more fulfilled if she were to get a job and contribute to the family economy, giving her too a sense of working class pride.

CONCLUSION

The structure-disposition-practice scheme should encourage students of the sociology of education to reflect on these distinct levels and to consider the links between them. The central term, disposition, allows for the incorporation of psychological knowledge and encourages students to move up to the level of social structures, which generates dispositions, and down to the level of practice, or actions within practice, that dispositions in turn generate. This three level model has the potential to unite a discipline fragmented by race, gender, and class, which

might be offered as substantive causes, at a certain level, of differential attainment but that cannot provide a coherent theoretical framework. This fragmentation leaves students with at least three distinct theoretical conceptual frameworks, which often seem to be in competition, and a pedagogical structure that implicitly seeks students' adherence rather than their critical, that is sceptical, interrogation. Our teaching in this area is almost invariably organised to reflect the advocacy structure that has been incorporated into the university. All this is underpinned by a 'big word' theory that, however, does not provide students with the capacity to recognize the concrete effects of 'colonization', 'patriarchy', and 'capitalism' when they encounter them in the acquired dispositions and practices of their pupils (Harré, 1997). Many of the most able students, particularly those who have learned statistical methods of analysis, have also been exposed to the "at risk" positivism that constitutes the common sense of bureaucratic functioning in this area. This sociology, of course, is acquired at the same time as the psychological theories and professional helping strategies that dominate their practical consciousness. A large number of students with this intellectual formation, thus completed the given assignment by arguing; (i) that the educational system is structured by relations of race, gender and class inequality; and (ii) that Kylie complains too much and should learn to take responsibility for her actions. This systemic incoherence is serious and has its origins in the way students are taught, and perhaps not only at Massey University. The conventional approach to the sociology of education tends to produce, in fact, a kind of list theory. The lists generated by multivariate statistical research may claim, at least, the authority of that exact method (Nash, 2002f). Non-statistical versions, however, produce lists in which the relative position of variables is determined by theoretical or political considerations. Students who have learned such a list then appear unable to 'do sociology' unless they are provided with a label to identify the type they are dealing with. All individuals are treated, in the manner required by at risk models, as typical members of a group. This makes the applied sociology of education more or less the intellectual equivalent of painting by numbers. Students are presented with narratives of race, gender, and class, without the tools to incorporate these into an overall theoretical framework, and in a context where the implicit invitation to deal with discursive inconsistencies by taking political sides is almost irresistible.

Kylie, like all of us, is embedded within social structures, constituted by actual relations between people, and with properties distinct to their nature (Archer, 1995). Her family possesses certain real properties: stability, income, knowledge, social networks, and so on, all of which have tangible effects on Kylie's adaptation to school. Many of these properties are, in fact, subsumable under the concept of social capital in its central Bourdieusian sense of social resources with the power to provide a return in a given field of practice. The importance of this last comment cannot be overestimated. The classed identities adopted by Kylie should be recognised as such and, while fundamentally derived from familial and age-peer resources – social capital – are mechanically associated with success and failure in an institution anything but neutral in its reaction to the social practices they generate. Kylie's sense of position, the concept she holds of her place in the social order and the affect that locks it into place, is a consequence – *the* consequence – of the social capital she has inherited and acquired. The class structure of society has indeed become, in that sense, part of the structure of her socialised being. Kylie has learned who she is in a set of social relations in which people act – in some instances with conscious design – in a manner that teaches them who they are (Charlesworth, 2000). It is social capital itself that is revealed by

this conversation as the resource most critical to the development of the sharply differentiated sense of position and possibility experienced by Kylie. Neither cultural capital, although important in developing and maintaining effective concepts of knowledge, nor financial capital, seem so vital as sources of identification as location in the class structure. We need to know what it means to feel “out of place”. If students of education can recognize the structures of feeling generated by social class, then they may be that much more able to find ways to help working-class pupils marked by class oppression. The *habitus* of education students, particularly those from middle-class families, may be so constructed that the experiences of working-class young people do not meet with their immediate empathy. It is certainly necessary to encourage these students to reflect on the nature of this difference and of their own responsibility to transcend it. However, the focus of this analysis has been on what might be called programme incoherence, and on our responsibility as university teachers to engage in the work of cross-disciplinary integration in which students are, as a result of our own divisions, left to make sense of for themselves.

No sociologist should be required to explain why it is a valuable human capacity – to say nothing of *professional* capacity – to be able to understand how people are feeling, why they do so, and how they are likely to act as a result. If Kylie’s suffering is understood, if its origins are recognized for what they are, then teachers responsible for her should be that much more able to assist her to find a workable solution. To show an understanding of experience is to share its burden. And to show that one understands is thereby to improve the possibility of communication, to demonstrate grounds for confidence and trust, and to reveal oneself as someone worth the effort of interacting with (May, 1999). But it will not be easy to help pupils like Kylie understand what is happening to them if we do not first acquire the habit of listening to their voices (Nash, 1997c). We have not yet, on the evidence of this reflexive investigation, constructed a sociology of education able to ensure the development of that elementary capacity.

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APPENDIX A: A CONVERSATION WITH KYLIE

Why do some people do better than others at school? Do you think some people are naturally bright, or?

Kylie: I think it really depends on, a lot, on your family life as well, yeah. There might be brighter people, but they've been over the years probably helped, a lot more than a lot of people have and ... I think that, you know, a lot of parents must spend a lot of time with their kids helping them and a lot of parents just can't, so they get stuck. And then when you're at home there's, there's nothing much you can do. You can't ask the teacher, so there's your parents, but if they're not home you're stuffed. You can't do anything. Like, if I get stuck on my science work, my Mum, or my step-dad, they don't know anything about science, so, I'm the only one, 'cus I've got a brother that's doing School C[ertificate] as well, but I can't ask him because he doesn't do science, so I'm sort sitting there going ... [sighs] So it's quite frustrating.

Very difficult, isn't it. So, do you have friends that talk about subjects?

Kylie: No, I think we sort of try to forget it mostly, out of school time.

Yeah.

Kylie: Oh, I get very anti-school sometimes. Like, if I've been studying for ages and doing heaps of work, I get very anti-school. [laughs]

Yes.

Kylie: It's real horrible. [tape turnover] If your parents can't afford things, and they can't afford to give you pocket money, well, all the time you do have to work. And not all the time it's for things that you want, it's for things that you need. I mean, they might have problems finding the school fees, you might have to help them out and, you know, I mean, it's really expensive, especially this year, and especially when I've got a brother the same level as me. My parents have got to pay exam fees, school fees, books, and uniforms, and things like that. It's really expensive, and, you know, I just feel I'm out of place. It makes you feel guilty, and, um, you know, you've really got to get yourself a job, or it's all sort of just dumped on them. It's not very fair. It's so expensive. It's not really sort of free education any more, you know? It's really expensive. Like, you have to pay over a \$100 nearly every year.

Right.

Kylie: Yeah, and that's not for - that's not for your exam, that's just for the school year, you know, you have to pay it. And then you've got to pay your exams on top of that, and I think that's about \$60 or \$70 or something. I mean it may sound not - not very much for a whole year, but a lot of the time it is for a lot of people. It's a lot of money. 'Cus they just can't afford to, you know, spend that much money. And then, you know, the school helps you out, but a lot of the time parents don't want them to help out because they feel like, it's charity and that, I just - It's horrible. [laughs]

Yeah. Do you find that's quite stressful for families?

Kylie: Yeah. I had a fight with my Mum the other day over it.

Did you?

Kylie: Yeah, 'cus one of my teachers kept on asking me if I hadn't paid my fees yet, and Mum thinks that the teacher has no right to do that, you know, if they've got any problems ring her. I had a big fight with her about it, 'cus she just got real stressed out and uptight about it. 'Cus the teachers were saying something about, you know, taking me out of classes and things like that. I don't know, but, you know, just because you can't pay we lose out. And it's

not our fault if parents can't afford to pay for it. Well, it is in a way, but it's really bad.

That's hard.

Kylie: It's like everything just has to be paid for by a certain date, otherwise you can't do it, and I don't think that's fair. [...]

Jackie's left.

Kylie: Jackie said that Mr. Rogers said they're not allowed to help her out any more. It's got nothing to do with the school. I feel it's, you know, it could have helped her out - and at school or anything.

Do you think her main problem was a financial one, because she left home?

Kylie: Yeah. She sort of really had to leave home, you know, and I think it had a lot to do with financial reasons, I mean she's not getting any money from anywhere. She's got to wait, you know, ages to get the Independent Youth [Benefit]. And then they're not very happy about giving it to you, anyway. So, I think it [*leaving school*] was basically a financial thing, because she has to, you know, to pay for a place to stay or, and things like that, and she said that - school doesn't pay you to stay at school, you've got to pay for that. She couldn't afford to stay anyway, I don't think. But Mr. Rogers says the school's not allowed to help her out even emotionally or anything like that. So I think that's really bad. [...]

Your parents are separated. I remember you telling me.

Kylie: Stepfathers are really horrible. I mean, a lot of the stepmothers I've met. My stepmum is really nice, but I don't suppose - I don't see her that much -- but my stepfather is really horrible.

Mimi: Especially when you've got stepbrothers and sisters, because you're trying to compete.

Kylie: Yeah, especially when they go to the same school. [...] You know that guy who was behind us in science? [...] He's my stepdad's son.

And does he actually live in the same house as you?

Kylie: It's frustrating. [...] Oh, I hate it. I hate it!

Does he do the same work as you?

Kylie: Oh, he's only in one of my classes [*English*], so that's okay. But I really hate him. Oh! No, he's okay. But, like, about once every month, you know, don't like him. Especially when you go into class. It's really annoying. Ooh, hate him! [*laughs*] [...]

What about school?

Kylie: It's like fifth form [*year-10*]. We're either juniors or seniors. We're classed as seniors, but we have to wear junior clothes. Junior clothes. We have to go to junior things. We have to go to junior things, but we also do senior things, so we - We don't know where we bloody are! [...]

Mimi: The only thing we're really allowed to do -

Kylie: [*interrupts*] It should be like that, eh? Once you hit that age, you could do whatever you want. You could do whatever -

Mimi: Yeah, legally! [*laughs*]

Kylie: What? Oh, yeah, sex and smoking. That's it. That's all you're allowed to do! [...] Yeah, 'cus smoking, like, basically bored me to eat. And then a couple of months later -

Mimi: [*interrupts, speech overlaps*] You've lost heaps more weight.

Kylie: - a couple of months later, that was smoking. So I tried it, and then I just sort of - I suppose it was kind of peer pr-, not peer *pressure*, but just, like, sort of -

Jimmo: You just get hooked into it, don't you?

Kylie: Yeah, you're just trying it out, and then it's on you. [...] I think you just start it, and then you just sort of think, oh, I like this, and then you just keep on going, and by the time you realise it's - [...] I think it's stupid we're not allowed to smoke at school either. I mean, when I leave school I just, you know, light up. [...] Yeah, if you're sixteen you should be allowed to smoke. Even if you have got a note from your parents.

Mimi: As long as we're not smoking inside, but –

Kylie: Yeah, even if you haven't got a smoking room. I mean, what's hurting people going out on the field and smoking? It's not hurting anybody else but ourselves, because it's no big deal having a smoke, and if they are that's their problem, I mean they're the ones that take the risks.