

CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY FOR SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RENEWAL AROUND SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCES AFFECTING LEARNING

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Understanding and exploring complex and protracted social questions requires sophisticated investigative approaches. In this article we intend looking at a research approach capable of providing a better understanding of what is going on in schools, students and communities in “exceptionally challenging contexts” (Harris et al., 2006)—code for schools and communities that have as a result of wider social forces, been historically placed in situations of disadvantage. Ball (2006) summarized neatly the urgent necessity for research approaches that are theoretically tuned into being able to explore and explain what Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron (1991) describe as a world that is “complicated, confused, impure [and] uncertain” (p. 259). Ball’s (2006) claim is for a research approach with the “conceptual robustness” to move us beyond the moribund situation we currently find ourselves in. As he put it: “Much of what passes for educational research is hasty, presumptive, and immodest” (p.9). What is desperately needed are theoretically adroit research approaches capable of “challenging conservative orthodoxies and closure, parsimony, and simplicity”, that retain “some sense of the obduracy and complexity of the social”, and that don’t continually “overestimate our grasp on the social world and underestimate our role in its management” (p. 9). Our particular interest here is in research orientations that are up to the task of uncovering what we know to be something extremely complex and controversial going on in schools, namely how it is that schools work in ways in which “class is achieved and maintained and enacted rather than something that just is! (Ball, 2006, p. 8).

In this paper we want to do four things. First, we want to argue that in order to understand what is happening in so-called ‘disadvantaged’ schools, we need to reinvigorate class as an analytical construct. We want to argue for the restitution of class not in a crude or deterministic way, but as it is expressed

through and embodied in language, behaviour and relational practices, and for it to not be depicted as a completely homogenous group acting in a predictable or predetermined way. Second, we want to argue that we need a socially critical approach capable of unmasking how schools operate as “classed spaces” (Ball, 2006, p. 7). Third, in order to explore these imponderables in the way they deserve, we need a conception of critical ethnography that emphasizes “imagination” rather than a “method”, and in pursuit of such a robust perspective we want to revisit some of the key ideas of Paul Willis (1977; 2000; 2004). Finally, we want to conclude with some orienting ethnographic questions that have the investigative capacity to advance the two research projects referred to elsewhere in this issue of the journal.

1.26 “Class is a Relationship, and Not a Thing” (Thompson, 1980, p. 10)

While class is a controversial issue at the moment, we should try and clear the air a little as to where we stand. Although we will persist in using the somewhat convenient shorthand singular ‘class’, we go along with Ball (2003) when he says that we have to “live with a degree of fuzziness in the categorization of class” (p. 11) even though reality suggests something more akin to a cascading multiplicity of classes or classed fragments. The consequence is, Ball (2003) says, “class struggles are realized within the everyday interweaving of diverse tapestries of behaviour” (p. 177). Without going any deeper into it, suffice to say at this point, and Skeggs (2004) has gone into this as thoroughly as anyone in her work, that class is not something that is stamped out in some kind of mechanistic way, but rather is constituted, known, enacted and spoken about in a “myriad of different ways”—through as she says, inscription, institutionalization, perspective-taking, and exchange relationships.

To put these comments within some kind of contemporary Australian context. Persistent denials to the contrary, in Australia we are increasingly living divided lives, as Watson (2006) put it recently:

It appears there is not a single Australian mainstream but two streams broadly divided by people’s income-linked reliance on publicly or privately provided services. People in these two streams could quite possibly lead entirely separate lives, living in different suburbs, attending different

schools, going to different hospitals, moving in different circles at work and in society, and as a result having starkly different life experiences and opportunities. The crucial point is that this division is not just a matter of choice but increasingly of what people can afford to pay. . . People can be oblivious to both the divide and to how the other half lives (p. 5).

McAuley (2005) makes a similar point by describing Australia as increasingly an “opt out” society, one that comprises “. . . a collection of physical and metaphorical gated communities, where those with the means opt out of using public education and health services” (p. 1). This is not simply an issue because of what Gleeson (2006) labels “new sinkholes of urban poverty” (p. 184) developing in our major cities, but more importantly, because of the wider effects of “fortified camps of affluence that eschew the public sphere and which amount to open acts of secession” (p. 185), are having on civil society. What is seriously under threat here is social cohesion because of varying degrees of opting out of the public sphere, and while this is a matter Prime Minister John Howard is quick to identify as a major challenge facing Australia, he remains apparently blinded by and strenuously denies that he is assiduously pursuing policy regimes that manifestly exacerbate this yawning rift.

Appadurai (1996) put it that we are indeed living in times of “fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics that we have only begun to theorize” (p. 33). It is becoming increasingly clear that global restructuring is having a profound effect on who benefits and who loses from education (Berliner, 2006; Kozol, 1992; Kozol, 2005; Anyon, 1997; Anyon, 2005; Lipman, 2004). But even more worrying than the extent and depth of the disparity, is the way it is being willfully covered up and made invisible in a policy sense. As Schussler & Collins (2006) claim:

We exist in an era in which standards and accountability monopolize educational rhetoric, fueling policy decisions faster than one can say ‘No Child Left Behind’ (p. 1460).

When it comes to educational success there is little doubt that social class(es) makes a significant difference. What we suffer from as researchers and scholars is a dearth of understanding of how social

class matters when it comes to educational inequality in learning outcomes, and much of this stems from an official denial that there is any longer anything called ‘class’. As Lawrence Mishel, president of the U.S. Economic Policy Institute put it in the preface to Richard Rothstein’s (2004) book *Class and Schools*, inequality “. . . is to education the equivalent of AIDS or cancer in health care. It is a scourge that robs children of their futures. . . Children on the lower end of the achievement gap without adequate skills, knowledge and education have little chance for economic well-being. . .”

While the focus of educational reform is overwhelmingly on policies designed to improve learning, make teachers and schools more accountable through testing regimes, and implementing more rigorous approaches to standards—these well-meaning approaches may be completely missing the mark for disadvantaged students. Indeed, Berliner (2006) (see also: Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Nichols & Berliner, 2005; Nichols, Glass & Berliner, 2005) has demonstrated on several occasions that these measures are deeply damaging students from low income families, and further exacerbating educational inequalities. As Rothstein (2004) says, we know very little about how social class shapes learning outcomes in terms of effects, like: low income, inadequate housing, safety and security, poor health care, lack of access to early childhood education, differential child rearing styles, and even the different ways in which parents speak to their children and communicate expectations. Collectively, these non-cognitive aspects may be more important in redressing educational inequality than the current focus on “failing schools” and related approaches, common-sense though they may appear to be.

Arthur Levine, president of Teachers College, Columbia University, in another preface to Rothstein’s book, underscores the importance of social class by pointing directly to the implications of health on learning:

Lower-class children, on average, have poorer vision than middle-class children, partly because of prenatal conditions, partly because of how their eyes are trained as infants. They have poorer oral hygiene, or lead poisoning, more asthma, poorer nutrition, less adequate pediatric care, more exposure to smoke, and a host of other problems.

The social and economic effects of social class become magnified even further when we take account of the differential nature of work, and how this operates as a relay through parents:

. . . if upper-middle class parents have jobs where they are expected to collaborate with fellow employees, create new solutions to problems, or wonder how to improve their contributions they are more likely to talk to their children in ways that differ from the ways lower-class parents whose own jobs simply require them to follow instructions without question.

Levine points to the availability and affordability of housing as a crucial factor influencing children's learning: "Children whose families have difficulty finding stable housing are more likely to be mobile, and student mobility is an important cause of low achievement".

Finally, we know that there are huge social class gaps in non-cognitive skills accorded high value by employers—"character traits like perseverance, self-confidence, self-discipline, punctuality, communication skills, social responsibility, and the ability to work with others and resolve conflicts". Despite the fact that surveys continually rank the importance of being "good citizens" and "socially responsible adults" ahead of "academic proficiency", we pay precious little attention to how well schools attend to these "or whether schools are successfully narrowing the social class gap in these traits".

When the stakes are clearly as high as they are in communities that have been devastated by the ravages of economic restructuring and globalization, and the people in them systematically pathologized, rendered passive, and excluded from a voice in their own destiny, then we need a robust research approach that is up to the task of describing and explaining what is happening and with what effects. What is needed in these circumstances is an approach that enables analysis of schools and communities suffering the disfigurement of disadvantage, while on the other hand, we need ways of exploring a learning identity within what Freire (1995) refers to as "a pedagogy of hope"—in other words, what is needed is a critical ethnography of disadvantaged schools and their communities. Foley, Levinson & Hurtig (2000-2001), drawing on Bourdieu and Willis, argue that central to all of this is an understanding that academic failure among poor

students “has more to do with institutional bias or a *mismatch* between the culture of the school and the culture of the students than inherent cultural and linguistic deficiencies” (p. 45). Foley claims that individual or group cultural deficit explanations of school failure, “are nothing more than ideological, pseudo-scientific theories” (p.45), and that: “Deficit explanations obscure formidable institutional bias that works *against* working-class minorities and *for* middle-class students” (p. 45) (emphases added). More to the point, what is needed are ways of analyzing how class works through schooling as the deployment of individually given and acquired class resources and dispositions (agency) within ethnic, gendered and classed social relations (structure). Unpicking these complexities requires detailed up-close ethnographic study, endless analytical patience, and a well-honed theoretical toolkit with which to sculpt new theoretical and explanatory frameworks.

1.27 Beyond an “Impoverished View of Educational Research” (Berliner, 2006)

Tragically, more informed approaches to educational research are the very ones that are being denigrated, disparaged and marginalized to the point where as Frankham (2006) notes: “In the United Kingdom it is now unusual to read ethnographic studies in education” (p. 242). In large measure this is indicative of a context that has become completely dominated by the mentality of an “audit culture” (Power, 1994) in which the only educational practices that count are ones that can be “judged in terms of outcomes and accountability measures” (Frankham, 2006, p. 242). In research terms, this translates into “bypassing making judgements according to what you find” (p. 242) and instead engaging in what amounts to a backward mapping exercise. Strathern (2002), put the impoverishment in these terms:

The form in which the outcome is to be described is *known in advance*. The investigation—the research if you will—is in that sense retrospective; that is it works backwards from the bottom line up, from the categories by which accountability (say) can be ascertained to the evidence for it (cited in Frankham, 2006, p. 242).

Against the backdrop of the kind of belligerent research climate within which we are increasingly being forced to operate, it is not unreasonable, therefore, to “reiterate the value of ethnography itself as a political act” (Frankham, 2006, p. 242). In doing this we acknowledge the very extensive literature and legacy of critical ethnography that is well established and that has preceded what it is we are attempting here, and that powerfully frames our efforts to move educational research in another direction (see: Anderson, 1989; Angus, 1986a; Angus, 1986b; Bodemann, 1978; Brodkey, 1987; Dolby, Dimitriadis with Willis, 2004; Fine & Weis, 1996; Fine & Weis, 2005; Foley, 2002a; Foley, 2002b; Foley, 2005; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Jordan, 2003; Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Pignatelli, 1998; Robertson, 2005; Shacklock & Smyth, 1998; Trueba & McLaren, 2000; Villenas & Foley, 2003).

In answer to his own question “what does it mean to do ethnography in a critical way?”, Levinson (2001) provides a useful starting definition for our purposes here when he says:

. . . critical ethnography denotes a research method *informed* by a critical theory of some sort, *committed* to an analysis of domination and the search for an alternative project of social justice, and *enacted* through a constantly reflexive approach to the practice of gathering data and generating knowledge (p. xvi).

Simon & Dippo (1986) point to three fundamental conditions that have to be met if ethnography is to meet the warrant of being ‘critical’:

(1) the work must employ an organizing problematic that defines one's data and analytical procedures in a way consistent with the project; (2) the work must be situated, in part, within a public sphere that allows it to become the starting point for the critique and transformation of the conditions of oppressive and inequitable moral and social regulation; and (3) the work must address the limits of its own claims by a consideration of how, as a form of social practice, it too is constituted and regulated through historical relations of power and existing material conditions (p. 197).

While using some of the methods and strategies of more conventional ethnographic research, such as “prolonged, systematic fieldwork, key informant work, and extensive interviews, . . . critical ethnographers are less interested in producing holistic, universalizing portraits of entire cultures . . . [and] are more interested in producing focused, well-theorised ethnographies of societal institutions or subgroups” (Foley, Levinson & Hurtig, 2000-2001, p. 42). At its most fundamental, then, critical ethnography “aims to illuminate the workings of power” (Foley, Levinson & Hurtig, 2000-2001, p. 42) with the crucial additional agenda of enabling those whose lives are being studied, to see how they might act in ways that change the conditions that are disabling them. In other words, critical ethnography involves studying contexts with a view to knowledge production that has “a serious political intent to change people’s consciousness, if not their daily lives more generally” (p. 42). There is thus, no pretence to being “a detached, neutral observer” (p. 42), if such a fanciful thing were even possible.

One of the major defining features of critical ethnography is the manner in which it vigorously pursues and critiques deficit and victim blaming views, and through “subvert[ing] negative images” (Foley, Levinson & Hurtig, 2000-2001, p. 50), posits in their place less deterministic constructions of how people might act in their own interests. By exposing the ways in which schools “unwittingly create ‘barriers’” (p. 52) to success in school for some groups of students, this research approach enables a reframing of “the relation between student identity and academic achievement” (p. 53) in a way, as Davidson (1996) argues, that illuminates the “factors and practices that work to mold students as they go about making identities” (p. 2). These interferences can include the “history, subordination, and exploitation” (p. 3) of students’ raced, classed, gendered or ethnic backgrounds. Regarding an academic and learning identity as being formed interactively in this way, it becomes possible to better understand “the role of the school and classroom processes in nurturing, resisting or shaping the meaning students bring with them to school” (Davidson, 1996, p. 3) —and, as a consequence, how relations of power work through social categories of family and community in influencing student engagement in learning. Frankham (2006) alludes to the way in which ethnography cast in this light has the capacity to illuminate these increasingly obfuscated relationships,

while at the same time pointing to the beginning of a reclamation of what Geertz (1973) referred to as a lost “politics of meaning”. Frankham expressed it in these terms:

Ethnographic work which is constructed from the changing interactions of people, policy texts and ideas reinstates the notion of education as inevitably about values, as dynamic and not amenable to improvement via universalized recommendations (p. 243).

In other words, ethnographic approaches that have an overt agenda of changing the status quo, operate in ways that uncover perspectives and voices of those who are silenced or muted, and represent them as counter narratives. Put in these terms, critical ethnography becomes a ‘project’:

. . . recognized as having conscious political intentions that are oriented toward emancipatory and democratic goals. What is key to this approach is that for ethnography to be considered “critical” it should participate in a larger “critical” dialogue rather than follow any particular set of methods or research techniques (Quantz, 1992, pp. 448-449).

In pursuing this wider dialogue:

Critical ethnography’s contribution . . . lies principally in its ability to make concrete the particular manifestations of marginalized cultures located in a broader sociopolitical framework (Quantz, 1992, p. 462).

Pasco (2003) describes a critical orientation towards ethnography as encompassing three fundamental beliefs: “(a) knowledge is mediated by power relations that are socially constructed; (b) that certain groups in any society are privileged over others; and (c) research can and should be used as a form of social and cultural criticism” (p. 26). While these ideas may not come as news to researchers already committed to pursuing important ideas in complex ways, and while they are ideas that have been established by a strong tradition of critical ethnographic work over a long period of time (in addition to works already cited in this

paper see, for example: Brown & Dobbin, 2004; Burawoy, et al., 1991; Burawoy, et al., 2000; Dei, et al., 1997; Foley, 1990; Luykx, 1999; MacLeod, 1995; Spivey, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999; Wexler, 1992), they are nevertheless points that seemingly have to be continually fought over in an educational policy climate that insists on believing that the only kind of educational research that counts is that derived from randomized field trials (Erickson, 2005).

As a way of drawing some of these ideas together, we can say that the approach of critical ethnography is compelling for several reasons, in that it:

- Accesses viewpoints from groups who have been historically excluded and marginalized.
- Starts from the position that insiders have interesting things of value to say about their lives.
- Provides a way of re-framing the geography of perplexing social and policy issues.
- Theorizes issues in ways that move beyond victim blaming approaches like labeling some students as being 'at risk'.
- Enables an excavation of meaning from within the interstices and spaces of personal relationships.
- Interrupts and unsettles taken-for-granted naturalized explanations of why things are the way they are.
- Moves outside of quaint but damaging view that it is possible to view the world in detached, uncontaminated, neutral and value-free ways. To invoke Willis (1980): "there is no truly untheoretical way in which to 'see' an object (p. 90).
- Proffers explanations that go beyond conventional categories and that embrace more extensive and robust explanatory frameworks (Smyth, 1994).
- Has an avowedly and unapologetic political agenda of knowledge production *for* informants that equips them to gain ownership of the change process.

1.28 Not so much a Method as an "Imagination"

From an early preoccupation with the method aspects of critical ethnography, the approach has matured in some quarters to the point where Willis (2000) speaks, at least in his version of it, as an “ethnographic imagination” (a term he adapts from C. W. Mills’ *Sociological Imagination*) that brings into play “whole ways of life”. While shying away from defining exactly what he means by an ethnographic imagination, Willis (2000) invokes Blumer who says that the best we can hope for in the social sciences is “to develop ‘sensitising’ concepts about the social world, approximate conceptions which are rough and always provisional guides to a changing and complex reality” (p. xi). How Willis (2000) goes about the “method, theory and substance” of this process of what he calls “symbolic creativity” (p. x), is through two steps:

First step: use broad ethnographic techniques to generate observational data from real life, record with goodly inputs from subjects themselves . . .

Second step: experiment by bringing this into forcible contact with outside concepts, accidentally or inspirationally chosen, by trying to frame the whole with necessary complexity and to deliver analytic and illuminating points not wholly deliverable from the field but vital to conceptualizing its relationships (p. xi).

Just how and with what effects the second of these is brought into existence, Willis (2000) admits to a degree of uncertainty:

Of course the effect can be unpredictable when you throw concepts at things. You might just get shards, useless academic fragments in crazy piles (p. xi).

But on one thing, Willis (2000) is very clear—he believes passionately in the capacity of ethnography to produce wonderment, surprise and perplexity. In order to do that the ethnographer has to bring resources to the research:

I have long argued for a form of reflexivity, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a sense of the investigator's history, subjectivity and theoretical positioning as a vital resource for the understanding of, and respect for, those under study (p. 113).

In respect of this, the entry point into research is some kind of debate or deep puzzlement that brings with it what Willis (2000) calls a "theoretical confession" within which the puzzle is made meaningful. The point of doing ethnographic fieldwork according to Willis is to impel the researcher towards:

. . . the chance of being surprised, to have experiences that generate new knowledge not wholly prefigured in your starting position. But it is in many ways the 'theoretical confession' and the type of originating puzzle that set up this possibility. You cannot be surprised unless you thought you knew, or assumed, something already, which is then overturned, or perhaps strengthened, or possibly diverted, or fulfilled in unexpectedly elegant ways (p. 113).

Employing a hooven metaphor, Willis (2000) points to the tentative, always provisional and constantly being revised nature of ethnographic work, which he argues is one of its virtues:

Often implicit and 'on the hoof', the constant reformulation of ethnographic imaginings is the hallmark of effective fieldwork. . . [T]he original elements of a 'theoretical confession' are not tightly structured positions looking merely for exemplification (the hallmark of pointless fieldwork, merely the flip side of empiricism). They are the nagging issues which drive a curiosity within an overall theoretical sensibility (p. 114).

In clear reference to the need to entertain perplexity, ambiguity and uncertainty in order to create the kind of tension necessary to unsettle theoretical preoccupations that ethnographers bring to their fieldwork, Willis (2000) adds:

This 'rough ground' [on which research subjects stand] can be experienced and recorded only through a degree of sensuous immersion in the field, bringing aspects of the researcher's sensibility closer to, or clarified in relation to, those of agents (p. 114).

And to make sure his point about provisionally is fully grasped, Willis (2000) claims that the elements of this 'rough ground', as he calls it, "may yet have no name or attendant theoretical explanation" (p. 114), but they "twitch somewhere as relevant on the theoretical radar and offer fertile clues for advancing understanding and deepening [the] appreciation of the relation 'between elements' (p. 114).

Willis (2000) confesses that ethnographically, he is "a bit of an academic vandal, in the nicest possible and disciplined way" (p. x). In the way he relates his theoretical ideas to ethnographic data, Willis says:

I take or invent ideas (while immersed in the data) and throw them, in a 'what if?' kind of way, at the ethnographic data—the real world of the nitty gritty, the messiness of the everyday—to see what analytic points bounce out on the other side, pick them up again, refine them and throw them again (p. xi).

What is crucial here is the way in which "interesting" and "flat" data can be "connect[ed] with urgent issues", and on the other hand "big ideas" that are empty of people, feeling and experience" (p. xi), can be filled out, illuminated and brought to life. The intent, Willis (2000) argues, is to enable "well grounded and illuminating analytic points" to flow "from bringing concepts into a relationship with the messiness of ordinary life" (p. xi).

Rather than a scripted method or a recipe, what we have in Willis' approach to ethnography in general, and critical ethnography in particular, is an "ethnographic and theoretical sensibility" (Willis, 2004, p. 168)—if you will:

. . . a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and . . . richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly *in its own terms*, the irreducibility of human experience (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 5).

Willis' approach has considerable attraction in what we are attempting in our two research projects—his focus on the importance of “lived culture”, “worldly experiences” and “practical sense making” (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 5). Willis & Trondman's (2000) “Theoretically informed methodology for ethnography” (TIME)” amounts to a process in which fieldwork data and theoretical aspects are in continual conversation with each other as they are “conjoined to produce a concrete sense of the social as *internally sprung and dialectically produced*” (p. 6). In the process of writing itself into existence (Smyth, 2006, p. 37), ethnography is thus concerned with “mak[ing] culture rather than discovering or reflecting it”, all the while being “aware of its own location and relatedness to the world” (p. 6). Viewed in this way, there are four distinguishing features of ethnography that are relevant, according to Willis and Trondman (2000):

1. “*The recognition of the role of theory, as a pre-cursor, medium and outcome of ethnographic study and writing*” (p. 7). In other words, theory is not something that is insulated from or hermetically sealed away at the beginning of a study, nor is it wheeled out at the end like some kind of empty vessel to be filled up or to have data poured into it. Rather, there is a much more organic relationship in which data are informed by theory as patterns and texture are teased out, and theory in turn, is enriched and re-fashioned in light of the data. In this way, theory infuses, infiltrates and is insinuated in all aspects of the study. As Willis (1980) put it elsewhere: “Why are these things happening? Why has the subject behaved in this way? Why do certain things remain obscure to the researcher? What differences in orientation lie behind the failure to communicate?” (p. 92).

2. “*The centrality of culture*” (p. 8). The central argument here revolves around the claim that “no social relation can be understood without the mediations of culture” (p. 9)—at every turn, the burning question is “what does this mean (as consequence and outcome) for those affected?” (p. 9). Put most directly, how do

groups “make their own roots, routes and ‘lived’ meanings”” (p. 8). Willis and Trondman (2000) refer to this as “sensuous practices of ‘meaning making’” (p. 9), as emergent outlines are theorized and their wider significance to theoretical formulations are mapped and charted.

3. “*A critical focus in research and writing*” (p. 9). This is fundamental to our research, and in terms of Willis and Trondman’s ‘manifesto for ethnography’, it refers to how groups and individuals “embody, mediate and enact the operations and results of unequal power” (p. 10). In other words, “socially relevant ethnography” (Mills & Gibb with Willis, 2004, p. 215) that asks: how things came to be the way they are, what social forces are sustaining and maintaining the situation, and how people accommodate, resist, interrupt monopoly power, and reclaim agentic space. Put in Figueroas’s (2000) terms, if research is to be ethical, far from acceding to the frequently espoused mantra of value neutrality, research must be “value critical” (p. 88) in having a moral responsibility to continually challenge the entrenched status quo.

4. “*An interest in cultural policy and cultural politics*” (p. 10). Ethnography has a responsibility to not only connect to the wider “politics, interventions, [and] institutional practices. . . within ‘public spheres’” (p. 10), but to do this in ways that ensure that informed ethnographic work is connected to “larger social projects” (p. 11). In this respect, critical ethnographers have the awesome responsibility of acting as Alston (2005) says, as “temperate radicals” (ones who rock the boat while staying in the boat), by making “explicit embedded logics, so that social actors increasingly become . . . agents of their own will” (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 11). This must occur strategically within some kind of sociological frame so that the “limits of possibility” can be understood. The role of critical ethnographer here is one of “*procedural policy work*” (p. 11) in which social actors gain theoretically informed ethnographic knowledge so as “to understand their own position and the likely consequences of particular courses of action. . .” (p. 11). What is going on here is a process of what Gulson (2005) refers to as “renovating educational identities” in testing out “forms of possible or imagined worlds within the grain of actual human lives” (Willis & Trondman, 2000, p. 11).

A number of Australian doctoral studies have illustrated what is possible using critical ethnographic approaches in education (see; Shacklock, 1995; Dow, 1996; Prosser, 1999; McInerney, 2001; Munt, 2002; Garrett, 2002; Fisher, 2002; Sweeney, 2002; Naidu, 2003; Hewitson, 2004).

In these studies, together with the ones we are reporting on in the issue of this journal, a number of specific thematic ethnographic strategies and approaches become apparent, and these are not in any way exhaustive. We offer the caveat that we do not have space to trace the legacy of these notions, either; rather our intent is to make a brief statement about them, show where we have encountered them, how we have used them, and how they have become appropriated and embellished along the way. They are provisional, partial, and inevitably overlapping to some extent, and look like this:

- ***embedded interviews*** (Pollard, Broadfoot, Osborne & Abbott, 1994; Smyth & Angus, 2006): context and history are crucial in this kind of research, and not merely as background or context. The approach we employ is one in which we ‘interview’ (sic) informants after having had at least a limited opportunity through observation of experiencing at least a fragment of their lifeworld. We use that as a referent or starting point for an extended conversation about how they put meaning around their lives.
- ***purposeful conversations*** (Burgess, 1988; Smyth et al., 2000): this approach has its legacy in the seminal work of British sociologists Sidney and Beatrice Webb in their *Methods of Social Study* (1932), endorsed by Burgess (1988) that goes beyond a “static” or supposedly “detached” (p. 138) view of an interview and acknowledges that a more likely reality is that researchers and informants co-construct meaning in and through conversations that have a loosely defined but nevertheless negotiated intent. It seems to us that this approach also realistically acknowledges that power is shared in meaning construction, and that in such relationships the tenacity and veracity of what becomes known is infinitely more insightful and robust.

- **synchronous transcription** (Smyth & Angus, 2006): we cannot find examples of other researchers using this approach, although they may well exist. The approach entails using a highly skilled typist in situ with a laptop computer, who keys in what she hears, in much the fashion of a Hansard parliamentary reporter. We also use a digital recorder as a backup and download the recorded conversations as digital files onto our computers at the end of fieldwork. We cross-check the transcription for accuracy and annotate the record with embellishments or reflections. This is an extremely cost effective way of working and provides a virtually instant written record of the field conversations. It significantly reduces the cost (by a factor of 5-6) by obviating the need for audio-transcription. Because we have been using this approach for several years, we have been able to produce a high level of situational awareness in the typist as to what to selectively include.
- **dialectical theory building** (Mac an Ghail, 1993, p. 149; Lather, 1986; Smyth & Hattam et al., 2004): this is best understood as a process of generative theme construction, as researchers ‘listen’ to and ‘hear’ data speak, and of using emergent themes to interrogate and worry extant theory, and if necessary, modify and eventually supplant it. At the same time, existing theory is used to inform, frame up and begin to explain data.
- **multi-sitedness** (Marcus, 1998): we believe Marcus has much to offer in his notion that in order for ethnography to produce understandings of the local-in-the the context of the global, it is necessary to examine associations and connections among various sites. In other words, rather than the ethnographer trying to hide behind detachment, the role has to be acknowledged much more as one of “ethnographer-activist”—“renegotiating identities in different sites as one learns more about a slice of the world system” (p. 98). It brings with it “all sorts of cross-cutting and contradictory personal commitments” (p. 98) but these are better to be acknowledged and worked through in political ethical struggles.
- **voiced research ‘from below’** (Fine, 1991; Devine, 1996; Weis, 1990; Eckert, 1989; Smyth, 1999; Smyth & Hattam, et al, 2004, pp. 24-26): we agree with the view put by Fine and Rosenberg (1983)

that the views of ‘exiles’, those who have been excluded or marginalized, are valuable and need to be accessed and given prominence. Fully understanding social realities means accessing “subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1980, p. 82)—the perspectives of those who are suppressed, drowned out, or ignored.

- ***prolonged immersion in the settings being studied*** (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004): we agree with Jeffrey and Troman (2004) that “time in the field is needed to discern both the depth and complexity of social structures and relations” but we also concur that “a lengthy and sustained period in the field prior to writing” (p. 535) may not be the only possibility—it may be much more “contingent” than that, and the precise format may vary. Our preference has been for a series of linked “brief visits that extend over a long period of time” (p. 537) rather than unrealistic and uninterrupted prolonged periods in the field, or alternatively “fast ethnographies”. In other words, a partial ethnography in the sense of a “partial enculturation” (Massey, 1998)—sufficient to be able to tell the story.
- ***data representation through portraiture*** (Smyth & Hattam, et al, 2004; Smyth et al., 2000; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000): the more researchers edit, reduce or fracture the way informants represent themselves and their worlds, the more they run the risk of diminishing or ‘writing over’ their views. This tendency can never be eliminated in ethnographic research, but the imbalance can be re-dressed by trying to keep intact significant tracts of informant’s words through, for example, portraiture forms of portrayal.
- ***speaking data into existence*** (Smyth, 2006; Smyth, 1994; Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 404): if ethnographers are honest about what it is they do, then they are not so much involved in a detached process of “collecting data” as they are in engaging informants in complex conversations in which they reveal insights they may not have been that conscious of about their lives. The emphasis is quite different: in the former, a supposedly detached process of gathering data that already exists, and in the latter, being implicated in a joint process of construction and creating meaning.

- ***advocacy and politically oriented approach*** (Lather, 1992, p. 91): Weis & Fine (2004) capture the essence of what Lather is referring to but carry it even further by saying that as researchers we have a responsibility to not only write up the “institutional stories” of people’s lives but in addition we have to reveal “the webs of power that connect in institutional and individual lives to the larger social formations” (p. xxi). They make the point that if we don’t “make visible the strings that attach political and moral conditions with individual lives” (p. xxi), then nobody else will.
- ***preparedness to live with tension and uncertainty***: ethnographic research requires of researchers that they learn to live with a degree of unpredictability, to be prepared to be continually surprised, and regard inconclusiveness as a virtue rather than a shortcoming.
- ***editing the researchers into the research*** (Sultana, 1992, p. 21): we like Sultana’s notion that ethnographers need to ‘come clean’ (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998) and write themselves into their accounts with details about their own “expectations and presuppositions, or the surprises that were encountered in the field” (Sultana, 1992, p. 21). Erickson (1996) says it well: “As a researcher, I am part of the story I tell. And so who I am needs to be in the research report” (p. 9). There are other ways of expressing this such as the “researcher as instrument” (Mills & Gibb with Willis, 2004, p. 224) and “reflexive positioning” (Willis, 2000) that also capture the need for ethnographic researchers to step back and reflect and their own implication in the research.
- ***listening for silences*** (Weis & Fine, 1993; Weis & Fine, 2000): what is not spoken into existence or made explicit in ethnographic research may be as important as what is revealed or said. Ethnographic researchers need to become attuned to asking themselves “what are we not hearing, that we might have expected to hear?”, and then pursuing these structured silences.

- **“multiply positioned”** (Weis & Fine, 2004): this refers to a “rotating potion” of researchers/writers in which they are “grounded, engaged, reflective, well-versed in scholarly discourse, knowledgeable as to external circumstances, and able to move between theory and life ‘on the ground’” (p. xxi).

These constitute for us a kind of orienting ensemble, if you will, of methodological imaginings that help to frame how we think about and enact our research.

1.29 Concluding Remarks: Some Ethnographic Questions

Given the central importance of Paul Willis in this paper, and in light of the approach of the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of his seminal work *Learning to Labor* (Willis, 1977), it is appropriate that we finish with some middle-range tentative questions of the kind Willis tends to pose, that are currently puzzling us in our research. Again we wish to underscore the fluidity and provisional nature of these questions, which change frequently in light of conversations and observations with informants as they enlighten us to what might be worthwhile questions posing in these two projects. At the expense of appearing as somewhat of a ‘laundry list’, the kind of questions that are animating us as being increasingly urgent and in need of investigation, include:

- How do so-called ‘disadvantage’ schools and their communities understand and talk about the circumstances of their lives?
- How do these schools and communities respond to well meaning efforts by outsiders to ‘change’, ‘reform’ or ‘improve’ their lives?
- In what ways do these schools and communities see themselves as having pride, respect, skills, assets and resources?

- How do these schools and communities think about the aspirations they have for their children?
- What happens when outsiders attempt to interrupt inter-generational histories of low educational participation, engagement and success?
- What do communities such as these bring to processes of neighbourhood, community and school renewal?
- What forms do resistance, accommodation, entrapment and appropriation take?
- To what extent, and in what ways, do these schools and communities find offensive the terms and language used by outsiders to describe them?
- How do people inside these schools and communities think about themselves in relation to the wider community and their prospects for the future?
- What do indigenous forms of leadership and renewal look like in these schools and communities?
- How do schools and communities in these settings reinvent themselves?
- Why do working class kids disproportionately disengage from school?
- What form does this disengagement take?
- Why do working class kids get put into vocational education and training (VET) programs?
- How does participation in VET programs translate into meaningful labour force participation and economic rewards?

- Who benefits and who loses from having working class kids in VET programs?

While it might be tempting to want to tease these questions apart a little and to ruminate more on what they might mean, we have resisted the temptation to do that on the grounds that it is far too premature. Even up to a year into the fieldwork we are still going through the humbling process of being ‘educated’ by the informants as to what are worthwhile questions posing. At best, we have tried here to make the case that critical ethnography has the potential to enable these questions to be pursued and to hold out the possibility that some understanding of them might be made a little clearer, if not answered. What we have attempted in this paper is to explore a rationale and a research orientation committed to and capable of “understand[ing] issues systematically from below” (Mills & Gibb with Willis, 2004, p. 216). In doing that our central claim has been that while there has been a certain degree of “hollowing out” of the Australian legend of a ‘fair go’, social class is still very much alive in terms of educational consequences. While “the dogs bark and the caravan moves on” (McKnight, 2005, p. 113), the underlying factors that have given rise to poverty, injustice and inequality continue to do their grotesque work, and they are pressing in on us for more plausible explanation.

1.30 References

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