White Trash Vocationalism? Formations of Class and Race in an Essex Further Education College

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ABSTRACT *This article examines the role of vocational curricular in the formation of class and 'whiteness' and its implications for educational progression. Using the concept of racialisation I discuss how the formation of white racialisation has often been linked to processes of class formation, crisis and development of the welfare state. However, within this framework there needs to be some sensitivity to locality and how forms of whiteness are deployed as 'class strategy'. Based on an ethnographic study in an Essex further education (FE) college, I show how vocational students are regulated in ways that correspond to working class 'differently white' identities as compared to notions of 'respectable whiteness' attached to students on academic tracks. In Bourdieu's terms the cultural capital of white, working class, students is valued differently by the college. Negative ascriptions also cut across those of non-white ethnicity, delineating on the basis of class and serving to discriminate further against ethnic minorities. The article concludes by assessing the ways in which colleges selectively accommodate cultural forms of resistance employed by working class vocational students. I additionally discuss the limitations of an approach based on 'new ethnicities' and 'discourse' alone in constructing a practical project for educators interested in access or widening participation. The realization of social justice aims, such as those implicit in widening participation strategies, requires a re-engagement with class and racialisation as materially and historically-based phenomena.*

Introduction: Whiteness Visible

Much of the early sociological literature on vocational further, or post-secondary, education was concerned with the reproduction of class alone, or how class interacts with race and gender (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980; Taylor, 1984; Avis, 1984; Skeggs, 1988; Banks, 1992, Riseborough, 1992). In this literature, whiteness as a racial category is implicit, but rarely commented upon in terms of its interaction with social class - '..the slippery tendency for whiteness to go unidentified' (Nayak, 1997 : 57). Conversely, relatively few studies examine the specificity of white working class responses to vocationalism (Pye, Haywood and Mac An Ghail, 1996 being a notable exception). There is simultaneously, then, a large literature on white, working class students in further education (which caters for mainly 16-19 year olds) but little which examines the interactions of race and class, namely how whiteness(es) are implicated in class formation.

The response to this paradox should not be that there is a need for more studies on whiteness in FE. This runs the risk of further fetishising whiteness as the essential object of research. However, there is a need to recognize the interactions of class and whiteness and the ways in which racialisation is employed as an activity within educational institutions (Nayak, 1997). This explains not only how discrimination against minority ethnic students results from the active employment of racist strategies by schools (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) but also might explain differentiation between different social classes of white (and minority ethnic) students. Indeed, in most recent research on vocational students in FE the emphasis on race, class and gender jointly on the process of transition to higher education (usually at ages 18-19) or the labour market is more explicit (Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 1998, 2000; Ball, 2003; Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003; Preston, 2001).

The aim of this article is to examine the interactions between whiteness and class for students in an Essex FE college. Rather than examine the white working class or middle class as separate cultural enclaves, I emphasise the ways in which whiteness is deployed (Nayak, 1997, 1999) as an instrument of class or 'class strategy' (Ball, 2003). My starting point is that whiteness can be best understood as not only a past, but also a continuing, process of racialisation. Specifically that it can be related to historical and material developments, particularly in relation to the development of capitalism, social class and the welfare state. I argue that in understanding how this process operates in particular sites, such as an FE college, we gain an understanding of the contingent nature of processes of class and racial formation and how they relate to locality. I then explain my methodology and the particular context of the FE college (Thameside) used as a case study. In detailing the ethnographic findings I show how vocational students are associated with a 'backward' form of whiteness by the college as opposed to the 'respectable' form of whiteness associated with middle class students. In my conclusion I detail the consequences of this research for practice in the areas of access and widening participation.

Whiteness as Social Formation

"I'm tired of being white trash, broke and always poor"
(*I'm Tired*, Eminem, 1998)

"Americans love to hate the poor…The term white trash helps solidify for the middle and upper classes a sense of cultural and intellectual superiority"
(Newitz and Wray, 1997:2)

There is no doubt that, despite Eminem's protests regarding his previous poor employment, 'whiteness' brings with it economic privilege in the labour market – he is now the highest earning rap artist in a predominantly black genre. However, this does not mean that we should assume that whiteness has any agency of its own. The advantages associated with white ethnicity were gained through past and continuing economic subordination of other ethnic groups (Cox, 1971). In addition, 'whiteness' itself is a contested, socially constructed and heterogeneous identity as is the case with other ethnic classifications (Frankenberg, 1993). Despite the 'neutrality' attached to white ethnicity in much educational research, whiteness is not an essentialist category – like other ethnicities it arises '…as a result of socially and historically contingent processes of racialisation constituted through and embodied in a wide variety of discourses and practices rather than as a biologically determined product of genes and DNA' (Newitz and Wray, 1997 : 3). In moving away from essentialist and fetishistic conceptions of whiteness, we may gain a clearer understanding of the symbolic formation of white identity and the role of this identity in manifestations of economic power (Fine, Powell, Weis and Wong, 1997).

In examining how any racial formation has developed in relation to social class, the Neo-Marxist concept of racialisation as a *process* provides purchase on the modalities of class, race *and* gender. It is not that racial categorization arises purely as a function of capitalist development. Rather it arises through the '…complex interplay of different modes of production and, in particular, of the social relations necessarily established in the course of material production' (Miles, 1987:7, quoted in Cole, 2003) as well as through contestation between social classes. For example, the acquisition of 'whiteness' by Irish immigrants into United States (US) labour markets is a salient case of the way in which white identity is socially constructed through the labour process, hetrogenous, and contested by native US workers (Ignatiev, 1995). Roedigger (1991, 2002) also sees the acquisition of white identity as contested. This resulted partly through the 'divide and rule' strategies employed by capitalists in increasing profits by pitting racially divided work teams against each other in the early stages of US capitalism (Roedigger, 1991 : 176-181, 2002 : 151). Additionally, racial divisions are employed as a strategy of maintaining real wage differentials (and non-pecuniary, psychological, distinctions) between native white workers and immigrants.

Although this US work, largely by labour historians, does indicate the contested nature of whiteness and

its important link with social class we should not assume that the process of white racialisation is on any kind of ultimate historical trajectory but rather consider it to be a dynamic (but not arbitrary) process. Hence, we might see whiteness develop as a fragmented, contested and increasingly *classed* identity. Again, in the US context, a collection of writings (Wray and Newitz, 1997) articulate the many ways in which whiteness is increasingly becoming a classed identity and shorthand for describing the differences between the white working class (and particularly what might be called the 'underclass') and other social classes. Using the term from popular culture "white trash" they discuss the ways in which the supposed consumption patterns, sexuality and ability of the white working class are utilized by the media, government and corporations to devalue their cultural and labour market power.

There are limits to how far the processes articulated by Roedigger (1991, 2002) and Ignatief (1995) and terms such as 'white trash' (Wray and Newitz, 1997) or 'whiteness as trailer park' (Squire, 1997) can be transferred to the UK context. Early US labour market history is dominated by the legacy of slavery and the processes by which capitalism (and education systems) were established in the US are very different to those in the UK (Green, 1990). Moreover, the term 'white trash' relates to a specific US context and is used in a particular sense in US popular culture, although the term is gaining increasing currency in the UK. Despite these reservations, I would argue that there are some parallels between current articulations of whiteness and class in both countries. With regard to the historical development of whiteness and social class in the UK, Bonnett (2000) shows how Victorian notions of 'respectable whiteness' excluded the working class from being accepted as 'white' in the same manner as the upper and middle classes (see also Marriott, 1999 for further elaboration). The argument is illustrated through Victorian ethnographies of journeying into working class communities in which the areas are described as 'dark' and 'alien'.

> "… (there exists) a dark continent that is
> within walking distance of the General Post

Office…the wild races who inhabit it will, I trust, gain public sympathy as easily as other savage tribes."
(Sims, 1976, first published in 1883. Quoted in Bonnet, 2000:33)

From the Sunday Review of 1864:
> "The Bethnal Green poor…are a caste apart,
> a race of whom we know nothing, whose lives
> are of quite different complexion from
> ours…distinctions and separations, like those
> of the English classes which always endure,
> which last from the cradle to the grave…offer
> a very fair parallel to the separation of the
> slaves from the whites."
(Malik, 1996 : 93, quoted in Bonnet 2000 : 34)

Of course, the language used by these ethnographers was indicative of the forms of racism of the time, and one may argue that this choice of metaphor was inevitable in conveying difference. However, these quotes illustrate the use of race as prime depiction of class rather than other, material, descriptors.

According to Bonnett (2000), the conferring of 'whiteness' on the English working class resulted from both imperialism in the late nineteenth century and welfarism in the late twentieth century. Imperialism constructed a discourse of the English against 'other' nations and a sense of social solidarity around a concept of white Englishness, although Bonnett ignores popular resistance to imperial expansion from within England itself. The re-configuration of the welfare state since the breakdown of the Keynesian consensus of the 1970s leads Bonett to speculatively suggest that hegemonic conceptions of whiteness may show a '…potential for movement' (Bonnett, 2000: 44) to a Victorian conception of the working class as 'differently white'. As examples of this he cites media accounts of white working class areas such as 'darkest Blackburn' (Bonnett, 2000: 44). Such accounts not only equate 'darkness' with crime in a racist manner, but also seek to distance working class whiteness from 'respectable whiteness'.

In drawing a link between crisis in capitalism (the decline of the welfare state) and changing

representations of race, there are parallels between the work of Bonnett and earlier writers on race from the relative autonomy school (Hall, 1978; CCCS, 1982). For Bonnett and the relative autonomy school the (Gramscian) notion of hegemony as ruling class ideology is particularly important. Hence both racialisation and racism are seen as manifestations of ruling class ideology rather than as arising through conflict between competing working class racial groups for wages, or other benefits. Crisis in capital are hence also crisis in hegemony. For example, the response to the crisis in the 1970s was for the New Right to attempt to construct a new sense of nationhood and white, racial identity. For Hall (1978) and the CCCS (1982) this was manifested in terms of a moral panic concerning Black street crime (particularly mugging). For Bonnett, additionally this has manifested itself in the problematisation of part of the white, working class.

The work of the relative autonomy school does help us to consider the relations between capitalism, class and race, but there is perhaps too much emphasis on the role of hegemony and its contestation rather than the ways in which race is 'deployed and understood' at various levels in society (Rowe, 1998:30). In constructing the relation between whiteness and class, it is perhaps more helpful to consider various racialisations (and racisms: Cole, 2003) of whiteness as hetrogenous and contested, rather than over-determined and absolute. However, this does not mean abandoning attempts to understand race and class as materially and historically determined.

Although racialisation appears to be a macro phenomena, there is some relevance in studying particular local manifestations of the formation of race and class – of particular racialisations (Rowe, 1998:48). These enable us both to examine the contingent nature of these processes and to examine the ways in which they relate to other phenomena such as nation, region and locality. The focus of this research in Essex meant that there were particular assumptions of the nature of whiteness in the area. The stereotypes 'Essex Man' and 'Essex Girl' are loaded with particular assumptions concerning the nature of consumption, politics and class (Hayes and

Hudson, 2001). These have not only become shorthand in the media for referring to a particular type of dis-respectable whiteness but also are used in a reflexive manner by Essex people.

It may also be argued that there is something significantly different about the way in which certain types of whiteness are pathologised in the current welfare regime under 'New Labour'. Bonnett's general suggestion concerning the re-specification of whiteness in a post-welfarist, and increasingly neo-imperialist state are arguably different in 'Third Way' policy than 'New Right' policy contexts. Whilst the latter attempted to build consensus around neo-liberalism and strong national identity, the former similarly extends neo-liberal market forms whilst emphasizing the concept of community within an equally strong, but pluralist, sense of nation.

In this policy context, social capital has become central to 'Third Way' discourses on community development (Gamarnikow. and Green, 1999). Although social capital is itself a contested concept, there is an emphasis on the building of networks, associations and trust between individuals (Putnam, 1995: 66) as a basis for community development, although theorists have claimed that social capital can lead to faster rates of economic growth, increased government efficacy, improved health and reduced crime (Putnam, 2000). Perhaps in an attempt to mollify some of the extravagant claims made for social capital which at its most crass aims to reduce social theory to a singularity (Fine and Green, 2000), theorists refer to it's 'dark side' (Putnam, 2000:350-367). The dark side of social capital comprises the tendency for individuals to form exclusive associations, or use social capital for malign purposes. Interestingly, rather than business cartels, the Freemasons or middle class housing associations which discriminate against black residents (hooks, 2000), the examples often chosen are the actions of right wing extremist white, working class groups (Putnam, 2000: 1-22) or black street gangs (Putnam, 2000:312-313). The implicit assumption is that the 'dark side' of social capital lies in poor-whites or blacks 'gone bad' rather than in the hierarchical associations or groupings of the white middle or upper classes. Hence it is pathological cases, rather than

systemic inequities which are responsible for the 'dark side' of social capital. This pathologising of community is central to current policy discourses on crime, community and education.

In terms of crime and disorder, the UK, the recent Home Office (Cantle) report (Home Office, 2002) into the riots which occurred in various Northern towns makes explicit reference to the importance of social capital in community cohesion (Home Office, 2002: 13). Whilst the report refers to the role of economic disadvantage in fuelling conflict, the types of social capital existing in both white and Asian ethnic communities are problematised in the report rather than institutionalized inequalities. In particular, both white and minority ethnic communities are accused of possessing too much 'bonding' rather than 'bridging' social capital. Therefore the problem of racial tension is located in the actions of the individuals in the community rather than in institutions or social structures.

Moreover, this discourse of pathologising white (and minority ethnic) working class communities is also apparent in recent policy on education. For example, in the DfES White Paper on HE *The Future of Higher Education* (DFES, 2003) aspirations are cited as the key reason behind lack of participation for this group of 'non-traditional' students. Aspirations are 'low' (p69) in 'disadvantaged areas' (p70) and 'young people and their families need to be encouraged to raise their aspirations' (p68) and success in widening participation is dependent upon 'building aspirations' (p68). The work for building these aspirations for HE seems to rely on missionary work by educational institutions in terms of pastoral and teaching support, outreach and student support (pg.68). Therefore the causes of educational progression are not only individuated but localized in families and communities.

In current policy debate then, something is 'wrong' with the white working class which makes them educationally different from the white middle class (Gerwitz, 2001). The tension is not just one of class, but one of 'whiteness' – there is a distinction between a respectable, cosmopolitan, middle class whiteness and a retrogressive, static, working class whiteness

(Skeggs, 2002), one which is insular, disordered and with low aspirations. I have argued that this manifestation can be best understood in terms of the historical process of racialisation of the white working class, and other racial groups. This process of racialisation, and its practices, informs this study on the progression of white, working class students through an FE college.

Methodology and Context

The current study is part of a larger research project involving a longitudinal study of routes into HE and employment of young people (aged 16-19 years old) in three FE colleges in Essex. In this study I examine the role of a particular vocational curricular (the General National Vocational Qualification, GNVQ, in Business which is now known as the AVCE – Advanced Vocational Certificate of Education. These are broad, competence based, vocational qualifications taught mainly in classrooms) in the positioning of student class and whiteness within one of these FE College in Essex – 'Thameside'. Thameside was sited in a predominantly white, working class area. The study is based upon ethnographic research I collected as a white, working class lecturer, in the College over two years (1999-2000) and is derived from field notes, observations and interviews made with students and lecturers during that time. As an ethnographic work, it attempts to take '…political economy seriously in the cultural realm' (Willis, 2000 : 122) by examining class and race formations through everyday interactions between managers, students and lecturers.

The aims of the study were to investigate both the micro and the macro social factors implicated in student transitions to HE, or alternative, destinations. It is situated on the cusp of one of the important transition points for the middle classes which is progression to university. This is particularly the case in an institutional framework where progression to a 'good' university is increasingly important (Power, 2000; Ball, 2003). A key conceptual framework utilized in the study was Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, and capitals more generally, in maintaining classed (and racialised) distinctions between social groups (Bourdieu, 2003). Bourdieu's framework has the

conceptual strength of relating micro-social processes to structural phenomena such as class. According to Bourdieu, the role of the educational institution is in legitimizing the exchange of arbitary forms of cultural distinction (cultural capital) for educational qualifications (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). However, this process is probabilistic rather than totalizing. The uses and strategies which individuals make in the deployment of their various capitals is important and has been emphasized in contemporary works on FE and progression (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 1997; Skeggs, 1997; Ball, 2003). Additionally, although Bourdieu has little to say concerning race, rather than class, strategies as a rationale for distinction there has been recent interest in the ways in which whiteness is deployed in education (Nayak, 1997) and the community (Nayak, 1999) as an *active and continuous* strategy of individuals in creating racial distinction.

This study therefore contextualises Bourdieu's work in terms of both class and racial distinction. Additionally, it is also helpful to understand the institutional framework within which such activities take place which is much neglected in his work on education (Ball, 2003 : 8). Indeed, there were various pressures on Thameside which served to maintain distinctions of class and race.

Firstly, like many other FE colleges, Thameside utilised a technique known as community profiling (Barwuah and McCallum, 1999) in determining the curriculum offered to students. Community profiling is imported directly from commercial market research whereby businesses base the products and services sold in an area on the socio-demographic characteristics of its residents. As Thameside was located in a predominantly white working class area, senior managers had used community profiling information to shift the curriculum offered towards vocational provision. This was justified informally as being more suitable for 'our type of students'. However, there were also new local housing developments which had brought an influx of more middle class students into the area who were targeted with an academic course offering. Both formally and informally, the spatial characteristics of the community were both raced

(Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 1998) and classed. In this context, choice of qualification would be a misnomer, rather academic qualifications were 'rationed' (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) and students with fewer than five GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) passes at C or above at age 16 were not able to access the academic route. Therefore, a classed distinction was made between those students capable of taking academic and those capable of taking vocational qualifications. As I will argue, this was also a racialised distinction. Secondly, the class position of lecturers in the college was both tenuous and required strategies of maintenance. A significant number of lecturers would not live, or visit for purposes other than work, the area in which Thameside was based citing lack of culture, or even crime, as reasons. Many lecturers considered themselves to be middle class, which was constantly conflicted with the proletarianization of their jobs as conditions in FE worsened. Indeed, for some the shift in curriculum offering to increased vocationalisation was a cause for resentment as being a further downgrading of their employment. However, this was not a sentiment shared by all lecturers and for many months of the ethnographic study the college was embroiled in an industrial dispute part of the purpose of which was to protect contact time for vocational students.

Therefore the role of both college marketing strategies and the class position of lecturers can be seen as part of the institutional context which frame the everyday practices of maintaining racial and class distinction within Thameside. I will show how from induction, lecturer 'talk' about students and through the working practices of GNVQ such distinctions were worked and maintained.

Everyday Constitutions of Class and Whiteness at Thameside

From arrival, GNVQ students were frequently depicted by lecturers and managers in terms of their *consumption patterns*. Like the white working class of the American South, white vocational students at Thameside were often positioned as '…vulgar, hot, sensual, overeating, overweight, lazy, poor, backwards.

We can assume that the message from the dominant powers is: those who have little consume much – indeed, much more than they deserve!' (Sweeney, 1997: 255).

As examples of what Bourdieu (1973) might call *divulgation* I will examine the ways in which GNVQ students use of their mobile phones and their consumption of fast food was regulated by lecturers and the college. There are a number of other examples of the stereotyping of student cultural resources such as their clothing, their interest in cars and leisure activities, but the examples chosen serve to illustrate divulgation and the interaction between divulgation and the naming of students cultural capital as being 'white, but differently so'.

The use of mobile 'phones was perceived to be a problem in all classes, but it was particularly perceived to be a problem in GNVQ. Early on in the term, lecturers were quick to associate the vulgar use of mobile phones with GNVQ students:

> "If they're called Ryan or Glen, or if they wear a cap, then they must be doing G.N.V.Q. I'm sick of hearing their mobile phones going off in the corridor."
> (Graham, GNVQ Teacher)

There were a number of incidents in GNVQ and 'A' (Advanced) level classes when students' mobile phones would emit ringtones, but the reactions of lecturers in GNVQ and A level classes differed. In 'A' level classes, there was often shared humour between the lecturer and the class regarding the ringing of the mobile, although the phone was also an area of irritation for some lecturers. However, in GNVQ classes, the use of mobile phones was problematised as a particular area for control and regulation. Notices were placed in GNVQ classes forbidding the use of mobile phones. In addition, there was a system in place for the confiscation of the mobile phones of GNVQ students whereby students would have their 'phones taken from them until collection at the end of the day. For students, the subversive use of mobile phones in class by text messaging or the explicit use of them in order to test

the boundaries of behaviour or to indicate resistance became more common.

This may seem a trivial issue on which to discuss the valuation of student cultural capital and it could be argued that student mobiles tended to ring more, or were of greater intensity in GNVQ lessons. However, the salient point is the institutional response to students' consumption. The use of mobile phones became associated with GNVQ students, and regimes of control and regulation were imposed upon GNVQ classes to forbid their use. In A level classes, the use of mobile phones was not forbidden, but rather negotiated between teacher and student, although this still obviously involved (less formal) mechanisms of control. Perceptions that the use of mobile phones by GNVQ students was both 'vulgar' and in need of 'control' served to position their cultural resources differently to A level students. This served the marketing strategy of Thameside as being a site for 'adult' academic study whilst imposing controls on the 'unruly' vocational students.

Divulgation also intersected with perceptions of the students' appearances in terms of their consumption of fast food. Many of the students possessed part-time jobs in fast-food outlets, although it was more common for GNVQ than A level students to hold these positions. This was partly connected with the necessity of part-time work for these students, given their relatively poorer familial resources and the manner in which even the allocation of part-time jobs were allocated according to class position. For middle class students, the option of not working, working for a friend of the family or for a 'prestigious' retailer such as The Gap were potential routes away from the low-pay, poor conditions fast food sector. However, for working class students there were a large number of positions open at these outlets providing a steady source of potential income. As well as (accurate) perceptions that students filled these labour market positions, there was an assumption that students were avid consumers of fast food. For example, in an assessment of GNVQ student coursework, two students were discussed as follows:

Alice (GNVQ Lecturer):
>   "Those students…(GNVQ)…are like animals, they flop about like walruses eating McDonalds."

Sandra (Middle manager) :
>   "They'd probably be proud to be compared to walruses."

This exchange illustrates not only divulgation, but also the way in which the hexis (cultural capital held in the body, Bourdieu, 1977:93-94) of some students was perceived by lecturers. The identification of obesity with over-consumption was based in a belief that their bodies were in some ways out of control, pathological and in need of regulation – '….the working class body is always read as excessive' (Sweeney, 1997: 255). As with the case of mobile phones, GNVQ students were particularly identified as eating fast, junk, food which was banned from GNVQ, but not A level, classrooms.

Subtle interactions between gender, ethnicity and class were also apparent. Girls studying GNVQ were classified by many teachers and managers as being preoccupied with their appearance and relationships and were over-sexualised. For example, when comparing an A level and GNVQ student, the reason for the vocational students lack of ambition was blamed on her failure to meet the expected behaviour of the academic, Asian girl:

>   "She's got no chance of going to university, she seems to spend most of her time doing her fingernails. She wasn't even in college today – probably with her boyfriend or doing her hair."
>   (Chris, GNVQ Lecturer)

This comment shows how different ascriptions of whiteness not only position the cultural resources of the white working class in terms of their respectability (Skeggs, 1997), but also serve to devalue the cultural resources of ethnic minorities. Jaswinder, the Asian student was believed by the lecturer to be adopting the practices of other, white, girls in her vocational class. Hence the re-positioning of the white working

class also serves as a racial epithet for minority ethnic students.

For 'A' level students, these types of ascriptions were uncommon. 'A' level courses were the normative, comparison category with which other courses and students were judged. Conversely, cultural capital of GNVQ students, defined in terms of their appearance and bodily characteristics and through disgust at their 'vulgar' patterns of consumption or divulgation (Bourdieu, 1973) was not legitimized. Behaviour was pathologised as out of control, over-consuming and over-sexualised with resulting responses of control and regulation. Equally, the value of the GNVQ certificate for either labour market or HE progression was not established within the college.

Roads to Nowhere : GNVQ and Progression

The notion that GNVQ courses were an adequate preparation either for the labour market or for HE was stressed to vocational students both in college marketing materials and through their courses. In particular, the homologies between the nature of the GNVQ course and the labour market were constantly stressed through visits to local employers, partnerships with local firms and use of business materials in the course assignments.

At one level of interpretation, the correspondences between the activities which students undertook on their GNVQ course and the low pay, low skill jobs of the service sector were clear. Lakeside, being a large retail shopping centre in Essex, provided both a metaphorical, and in many cases actual, occupational destination for many of the vocational students at Thameside with associated poor wages, conditions and lack of autonomy. For example, the GNVQ student induction involved a process of orientation, touring the college in groups to find out the names of senior people within the college, constructing an organisation chart of the college management, locating the fire exits and answering questions regarding college rules and procedures. This process had obvious parallels with the procedures that many students undertook as part of their part-time jobs where workers are given an

orientation exercise to perform focusing on the responsibilities of the worker. In addition, the emphasis on self-monitoring (through completing action plans and self-evaluations), team work (also identified by Meagher, 1997 and an important feature of work in the service sector – see Klein, 2000; Schlosser, 2002) in completing assignments and even the trading of assignments was evident. One could even enlist the evidence that lecturers were concerned with students' appearance and consumption cited above as pointing towards a wider conception of labour as embodied, *aesthetic labour*. Indeed, the importance of individual appearance in service sector employment has been noted on in current organization research (Witz, Warhurst and Nickson, 2003). There are obvious parallels between this and the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) who identify school routines that encourage punctuality and conformity in the formation of the working class in the 1970s.

On the other hand, it is difficult to see how business would have such as pernicious influence on the GNVQ course especially given the autonomy of the educational sphere (Whitty, 1985) and teachers and lecturers (Dale, 1989). In particular, the college seemed to be serving largely its own needs in that the ultimate goal of the GNVQ course from the perspective of management seemed to be the declaration of funding units to the FEFC (Further Education Funding Council – the body which was responsible for providing FE colleges with funding allocations). There were many incidences of management putting pressure on lecturers to pass students at any cost and of artificially inflating grades. As Thameside's Principal said on addressing staff as to the purposes of the college (with feeling): "The college would be so much better without all of these students".

Whether colleges were producing skills, attitudes, funding units or 'labour power' in the abstract (Rikowski, 2002) there was evidence that the positioning of GNVQ as neither academic, nor fully vocational qualification of uncertain value had repercussions for further participation in education. There was a general cooling off of expectations (Banks, 1992) amongst GNVQ students regarding progression to university in favour of other routes. In a poignant example of this, one of the GNVQ students indicates the futility of paying for more of the same vocational education as opposed to a more aspirational – and more expensive – career route:

> Jane: "I know that you have to pay debts or fees to go to university. No, I'm not influenced by that at all. It is just a waste of money – can you imagine paying for this (gestures to GNVQ classroom). I want to go abroad and see the world. I would go to Tenerife, work behind a bar and become a DJ or…a promoter…or something. I'll just put it on the credit card…I've got a loan at the moment. It doesn't bother me. It's something that I've always wanted to do from about a year ago. I don't like England, it's boring."

'Larging It': Essex-ness as Resistance?

Of course, working class students were not passive victims of these processes. They were able to make use of certain cultural aspects of their position to subvert some aspects of their courses. In particular, students would take pleasure in sensuous acts of consumption in lessons such as eating fast-food, texting and talking on mobile phones and use the time afforded them within the FOFO (Fuck Off and Find Out) non-structure of their courses to work in part-time jobs or in entertaining themselves around the college and town. Sweeney (1997: 254) refers to Bakhtin's metaphor of the 'carnivalesque' in subverting dominant hegemonies through 'vulgar pleasures': 'Carnival is the place of laughter, bad taste, loud and irreverent music, parody, free speech, bodily functions, eating and feasting, a place where excess is glorified. Carnival is a world not without rank, but one where rank is allowed to be reversed, showing the potential of a society without hierarchy' (Sweeney, 1997: 254). Indeed, students took pleasure in language, humour, play and what the male students referred to as 'larging it'. By playing with, parodying and inflating their ascribed identity, the students may have achieved a partial demystification of the irrelevance of the qualification to their working lives (Willis, 1977; 2000). They were using the nature of 'Essex-ness' with all of its negative (and positive) connotations in a reflexive

manner. Indeed, there is considerable strength in this identity and in 're-capturing' certain working class, white, identities for cultural work (Wray and Newitz, 1997) including social justice of which educational participation is undoubtedly a part (Ball, 2003 ; Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003).

However, these acts in themselves cannot necessarily be considered to be successful forms of resistance. These behaviours, and other forms of subversion, were as common in the academic track – it was their enhanced visibility through surveillance of vocational students which problematised them. Indeed, many students complied with the demands of GNVQ. Moreover, following Lynch's (1988) concept of counter-resistance, the college and related agencies were able to *counter-accommodate* many varied forms of student resistance. Due to the dislocation between student effort, qualification and subsequent labour market status within GNVQ (Preston, 2001) the college was able to accommodate, and put pressure on their staff to accommodate, various forms of student resistance. As a corporation (albeit a public sector one) the college was essentially interested in the production of paper returns to the funding council in order to maximise profits. Subsequently, student retention and the awarding of certificates were always placed above behavioural concerns despite the effort placed on the surveillance and control of the latter. For the management of Thameside, the irresistible desire to maintain funding took priority over local student resistances.

Conclusion

In this study I have shown how white-racialisation as fundamentally a classed process occurs within the everyday practices of an FE college through its marketing strategies and in everyday interactions between lecturers and students. I have shown that the exercise of whiteness is an active process within a local site, as well as relating this to historical circumstance. Whiteness as classed practice critically does not benefit all white students equally and the exercise of whiteness can be used as a mechanism of further discrimination against minority-ethnic students (as in the case of Jaswinder). What, then, are the conclusions for practice?

I consider that a valid practical project would be to return to examine some of the material factors and historical processes underlying racialisation. Even within post-modernist and post-structuralist writing on this subject there is concern that in discourses concerning new-ethnicities or sub-cultural resistance without reference to social class (the dangers of which are made explicit by Hall, 1992) much has been lost. Particularly there has been a lack of engagement with these process in texts which '…downplay or erase such issues as that of state power, social class divisions, institutional structures or hegemonic cultural capital' (Brah, Hickman and Mac an Ghail, 1999: 3). For those who are saddled with an 'old' and increasingly pathologised as anti-cosmopolitan ethnicity such as white or Black working class (Skeggs, 2002) there are few alternative discourses or real opportunities open to them (Cohen, 1999). Whilst new stories about what it means to be white, working class and from Essex may empower some educational trajectories (and potentially disadvantage those of ethnic minorities as well as other working class whites) a re-engagement with class (Gerwitz, 2001), and race, as materially and historically based is also necessary.

Note

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Student Services Report:
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and

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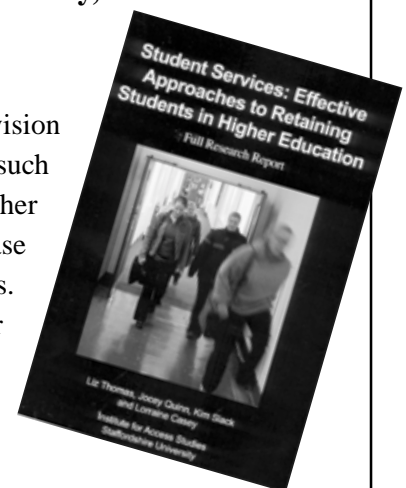
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