

Defining the ‘*working class child*’ in secondary school through the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC)

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This is an overview of my presentation, given at the ‘*The Child*’ and ‘*Childhood*’ in Theory and Policy Conference at the University of Leeds, 15 September 2010. What follows is not a paper in the conventional sense but neither is it a verbatim transcript of the talk I gave with the slides. At the conference I spoke informally to the slides but here, in writing and with the benefit of time and hindsight, I am able to include a bit more background and explanation for each. In this more text-based version I hope to be better able to link slides than the visual presentation allowed.

1. Background

I am a part-time PhD student in the Department of Geography at Kings College London working with Prof Tim Butler who, together with Prof Richard Webber, has previously used the National Pupil Datasets (of which PLASC is a component) to classify different schools’ pupil intakes on the basis of where pupils live¹. This resulted in alternative maps of advantaged and disadvantaged schools and therefore the pupils within them, across the country.

My own background is in education rather than geography – first as a secondary mathematics teacher and, more recently, as an educational researcher. I had the opportunity to work with the National Pupil Datasets some years ago on a project (for the Department for Education and Skills, DfES) evaluating the extent of school improvement measures in a number of ‘*schools facing exceptionally challenging circumstances*’.² This project showed that young people’s school experiences vary greatly and often depend not only on their own family circumstances but also that of other families round about them.

The PhD will investigate the influences of school and neighbourhood on secondary age young people living in ‘disadvantaged’ areas in a particular location and therefore will (hopefully) combine the disciplines of education, geography and sociology in the tools and approaches that it uses. This presentation has come out of my initial thinking as to which children are currently ‘disadvantaged’ in society in general and how this disadvantage manifests itself. Social class is a contested concept yet the categories of ‘upper class’, ‘middle class’ and ‘working class’ are still widely used today. Who then is the current-day ‘*working class child*’, particularly in the context of schooling and how might he or she be defined and identified?

2. The working class child in the past

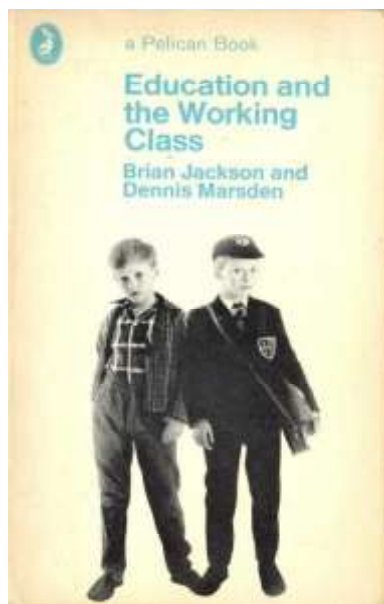
A key text for me at the beginning of my PhD was Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden’s book ‘*Education and the Working Class*’³ – first published in 1962 and based on their study of

¹ Webber, R. and T. Butler (2007). "Classifying Pupils by Where They Live: How Well Does this Predict Variations in their GCSE Results?" *Urban Studies* 44(7): 1229-53.

² MacBeath, J., J. Gray, J. Cullen, D. Frost, S. Steward and S. Swaffield (2007). *Schools on the Edge: Responding to Challenging Circumstances*. London, Sage.

³ Jackson, B. and D. Marsden (1966). *Education and the Working Class*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

working class children attending grammar schools in Huddersfield in the 1950s. At that time children, in England, took the 11-plus, an examination to determine which type of secondary school they should attend. The top-performing children (roughly 20%) were selected for grammar schools where the emphasis was on academic study and the taking of national examinations whereas the overwhelming majority went to 'secondary moderns' for a shorter period of time and were prepared for work.



To identify working class children in Huddersfield's grammar schools Jackson and Marsden obtained all school records that, at that time, recorded each child's name, address and father's occupation; from these paper records they identified all working class children by categorising the father's occupation using the Register-General's classification of occupations. In the 1950s and 1960s 'social class' was perhaps an easier concept – a person was defined by his work and a child by his or her father's work, this definition is less workable today.

However, in considering Jackson and Marsden's methods perhaps what is most astonishing is the type and detail of the data recorded at that time in every grammar school (as elite institutions) and the ease of access that the researchers had to that data. The researchers not only had access to the names and addresses of each young person but they also could contact each one directly to ask him or her to participate in

their study (and it is not clear that anyone did actually decline).

Today, not only is there a problem of defining social class by an individual's occupation but even if we wanted to classify children in this way it would not be possible to do so as no such data on parental occupations are collected (for all children). If now we want to analyse children in schools by social class do we actually want parents' occupations (fathers and mothers?) or are there other data items that better define 'class' today? Is social class still a helpful classification of anyone, let alone children and young people?

3. What of Jackson and Marsden's study can be replicated today?

Jackson and Marsden asked:

Why is it that so many middle-class children successfully complete the total grammar school course?

and

Why is it that relatively few working class children do so?

Present day questions might include:

Which groups of children are winning and which groups are losing out in the secondary school system today?

Who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged in this system? And by what?

4. Current discourse around ‘working class’ children in schools

The issue of ‘working class children’ in schools and how they are performing in national examinations is regularly reported in the media. But who are these children and how do we know how they are doing? One such report is reproduced below (edited) and includes a number of different definitions of ‘working class children’ and the issues they face. Recent reports about other ‘failing’ groups in schools have extended concern to ‘white working class boys’ as very few of this group are achieving the government benchmark of 5 ‘good’ GCSEs including maths and English.

An example of how the discourse around ‘disadvantage’ and ‘social class’ has been confused is given below. A closer reading of this report indicates that a number of different definitions of ‘working class’ pupils have been used: “rich and poor children” as well as “deprived young people”; “bright children” who are the “poorest”; those on “free school meals” as the indicator of poverty. In addition the concept of ‘social mobility’ is introduced to complicate the debates even further. However, are all these terms actually synonymous? And perhaps more importantly what data do we have to measure these characteristics and what definitions are actually being used?

“White working class boys failing”

Government figures show **only 15% of white working class boys in England** got five good GCSEs including maths and English last year. Among white boys from more affluent homes - 45% achieved that level of qualification. Ministers say they are narrowing the gap between affluent and poorer pupils.

Liberal Democrat spokesman David Laws said: "We should be ashamed to live in a country where there is such a **huge gap between rich and poor children**.

The government has failed to tackle the chasm that exists between the opportunities of most of the poorest and the richest in our society. We need a massive targeted increase in funding for **deprived young people**, to allow more catch-up classes and additional support to give every child a chance."

Shadow children’s secretary Michael Gove said: “The government’s failure to improve standards in education has hit the poorest hardest. **We need a school system that allows bright children to succeed** regardless of their economic background.

Jim Knight, Schools minister:

“Closing the attainment gap in education remains a top priority, and we have made encouraging recent progress. GCSE performance data released by the government in November did not include details of **pupils receiving free school meals - an indicator of poverty**. There has been good news on **our efforts to address social mobility**, with pupils eligible for free school meals improving faster than average.

taken from BBC NEWS 31Jan 2008 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7220683.stm>

5. Defining the ‘disadvantaged child’ in the school system

We appear to be moving away from the use of the term ‘working class’ to define disadvantaged children in the school with the use of alternative terms such as ‘poor’, ‘deprived’, ‘underachieving (in examinations)’; in some cases some pupils are just referred to as ‘the disadvantaged’ and the nature of that disadvantage is not specified. Yet as the previous

media report shows many of these terms are used interchangeably to describe what is thought to be the same group of children and young people but in reality may not actually be.

In England we collect data on children, young people and their families at the individual level and at the group level. The table presented below shows which data items can be used as proxies for each indicator: for example the traditional definition of social class is derived from parents' occupations however other indicators that could be used might include 'type of housing lived in' (socially or privately owned), parents' educational levels, family 'lifestyle' choices, etc;. Family wealth (or poverty) is usually derived from the take-up of free school meals but can also be attributed to families by the nature of the area that they live in. Perhaps, most contentiously, is the idea that a child or young person is disadvantaged by the nature of the school that they attend i.e. if the school is low attaining in national examination league tables. If we decide on a definition of 'disadvantage' using a particular variable we need to know that there is accurate data collected on children and young people for that variable and where this can be found.

Indicator of Disadvantage	Data Needed	Where found
Being "working class"	Father's occupation	Not available
"poor"	Free School Meals (FSM)	PLASC
"deprived"	residential area characteristics	SOA/OA in census
"family lifestyle"	Family home postcode	PLASC then MOSAIC
Living in social housing / council house	Local council register / area characteristics	?? SOA/OA in Census
"not so bright" / academic under-achieving	KS2 SATs levels GCSE grades	NPD
Going to a 'bad' school	% 5+ A*-C GCSE grades	NPD

where

PLASC = Pupil Level Annual School Census, NPD = National Pupil Dataset
MOSAIC = geo-demographic postcode classification system, (S)OA = (Super) Output Area

6. Data on children, young people and their families

The two main data sources that can be used to classify children and young people are the National Pupil Datasets (NPD) which include the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) and the 10 yearly National Census which allows researchers access to derived statistics at small area level (usually Super Output Areas). The real potential of the NPDs is that they contain personal information and national test results for **every** child in a state school in England – in effect this is a nearly complete census that offers researchers huge opportunities. By comparison census data, including indicators of multiple deprivation, are only available to researchers at an area or **aggregate** level. Issues of confidentiality are very important, as individual children can be identified by their postcode, so researchers (e.g. Tim Butler and myself) are required to produce a 'business case' to the DCSF (as was in 2009) who own the data to gain access to these more sensitive PLASC data items. Census data that is usually only available to researchers at area level present methodological issues for researchers in that individuals are being categorised not by their own characteristics but by an average of those

living around them. For social surveys the areas given can be too big for smaller characteristics to be discerned.

Data on children, young people and their families

- Data in the National Pupil Datasets (**NPD**) are collected on ALL pupils in state schools in England: these include test and examination scores
- NPD includes **PLASC** - Pupil Level Annual School Census (now termly!)
individual pupil data includes: school attended and date of entry, UPN, gender, dob, ethnicity, FSM, SEN, postcode (restricted), SOA, IDACI (Income Deprivation affecting Children Index)
- 10 yearly national **Census** - individual and household data (restricted to aggregated area data)
- Small area characteristics from ONS including the '**Index of Deprivation**'
- an aggregate measure of the combination of Income, Employment, Health, Education, Barriers to housing & services, Living environment, Crime
- **MOSAIC** - based on analysis of the latest trends in UK society and consumer market research
-155 Mosaic person types aggregate into 67 household types and 15 groups, to create a 3 tier classification that can be used at the individual, household or postcode level.
- **School performance tables** - attainment at key stages
GCSE 5+A*-C, 5+A*-G, average point score, contextual value added, pupils with SEN, etc.

The box above indicates the main sources of data on children and young people as previously discussed. Alternative descriptions of the circumstances of children and young people contained within existing datasets are MOSAIC (discussed below) and the school that the young person attends.

The rationale behind the setting up of the NPDs was the recording of the attainment of every individual child and some of their personal characteristics so that a complete school record could be held. Aggregate data for the attainment of all other pupils in the school that an individual child attends can therefore be derived. It is perhaps worth researchers remembering that these are national **pupil** datasets that place children and young people in the context of school and therefore research into the wider social issues of their lives were not initially intended.

A consideration when using the NPDs is are these really up to the job being demanded of them? If individual pupil level data is being collected on its current scale is it the data that we need to really investigate what is going on in the school system today – should we be collecting more data, different data or less data? What is this pupil data really needed for?

7. MOSAIC – an alternative definition of ‘social class’?

A recent new development being developed by Richard Webber and colleagues in the Geography Department at Kings is an alternative definition of social class by household based on their consumer spending habits. The rationale for developing this approach follows:

...we are undergoing a process of the 'spatialization of class' whereby location is the single most telling indicator of social position and identity. We tend to live alongside 'people like us' and postcode clusters are a useful means of identifying how social categories are formed as people locate [...] at particular addresses.

(Webber, 2009 p 171⁴)

Households are categorised by postcode into 13 broad categories with 60+ subgroups. For example my own family are placed in the broad category of “*Liberal opinions*” and sub-category “*Anti-materialist*” and my mother (in her 80s) is in “*Active retirement*”, sub-category “*Bungalow quietude*”; while these categories can also be used to derive the more traditional definition of social class by occupation (in our cases both C2s implying no social mobility for me!) the real potential of this approach is that it offers a more relational and descriptive approach to social categorisation rather than one based on a hierarchical notion of occupation and earnings (i.e. one that fits the more recent theoretical developments in sociology e.g. Bourdieu, Savage, Bottero⁵)

Combining MOSAIC codes with pupil postcodes from the PLASC datasets reveals alternative versions of school intakes and, it has been argued, indicators of nature of social background of a school intake that better predict final GCSE scores:

..other than the performance of the pupil at an earlier key stage test the type of neighbourhood in which a pupil lives is a more reliable predictor of a pupil's GCSE performance than any other information held about that pupil on the PLASC database. (abstract)

(Webber, R. & Butler, T, 2005, abstract⁶)

(see also Education Guardian article by John Crace “Hidden Triumphs” 07.11.06).

⁴ Webber, R. (2009). "Response to 'The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology': An Outline of the Research Potential of Administrative and Transactional Data." *Sociology* **43**(1): 169-177

⁵ Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.

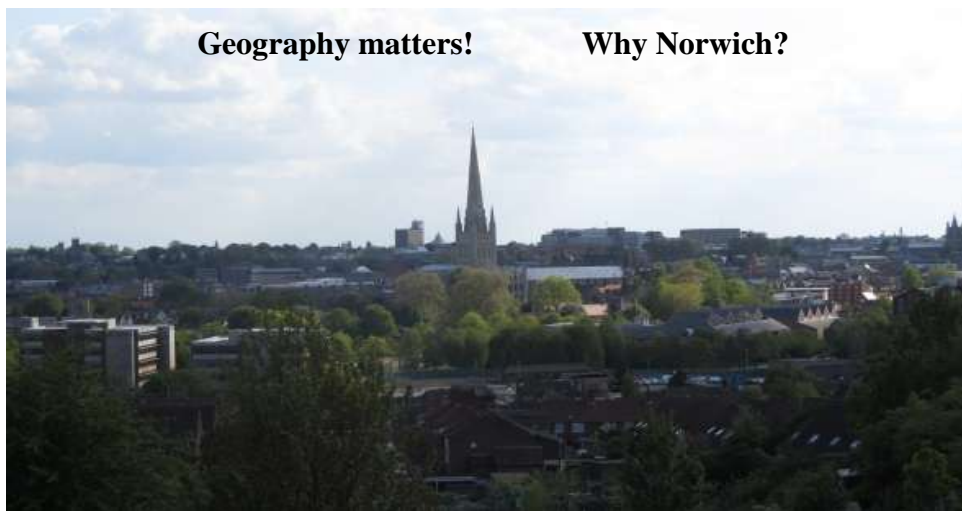
Savage, M. (2000). *Class analysis and social transformation*. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Bottero, W. (2004). "Class Identities and the Identity of Class." *Sociology* **38**(5): 985 - 1003.

⁶ Webber, R. & Butler, T, (2005) *Classifying pupils by where they live: how well does this predict variations in their GCSE results?* London, UCL Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis.

8. My own study: identifying the "working class child" in Norwich

The National Pupil Datasets contain a lot of data! While the NPDs are invaluable for investigating national trends for different groups of pupils their potential for looking at the local situation has been less used. My previous work with 8 schools in “extremely challenging circumstances” (see previous ref) has convinced me that researchers need to understand the data they are using as well as the location and local conditions of the children in the data. While the 8 schools in that study had been chosen because their challenges were similar, a closer investigation of these schools’ particular issues showed that they were actually very different – for example in terms of their histories, their local authorities, the wealth and jobs in the local area and, perhaps most importantly, other schools competing for pupils in their area.



My own study will be a case-study of disadvantaged young people in Norwich. The choice of Norwich has come about because I live there now, have secondary-age children of my own and I grew up there. While this may lead to the criticism that I am ‘in’ the data and therefore too close to what will initially be a quantitative study is perhaps valid although I would argue that this closeness gives me an historical perspective that allows me to better understand the data.

Tim Butler and myself have been granted access to the NPDs for all pupils in state schools in Norfolk (including their postcodes as recorded in PLASC) for the period 2002 to 2006. Norwich is under the authority of Norfolk and recently applied for unitary status (i.e. to control its own children’s and other services). It was initially granted this by the outgoing Labour Government only to be repealed by the incoming Coalition (2010). A reason for granting Unitary Status was the apparent under-performance of Norwich school children at all Key Stage tests compared with their peers in Greater Norwich and most of Norfolk. The following slides aim to show that deprivation in Norwich is high compared to the rest of the county as well as the Eastern region. Norwich City Council has no control over its own schools but does allocate social housing and is expected to promote neighbourhood regeneration policies.

9. Deprivation in Norwich

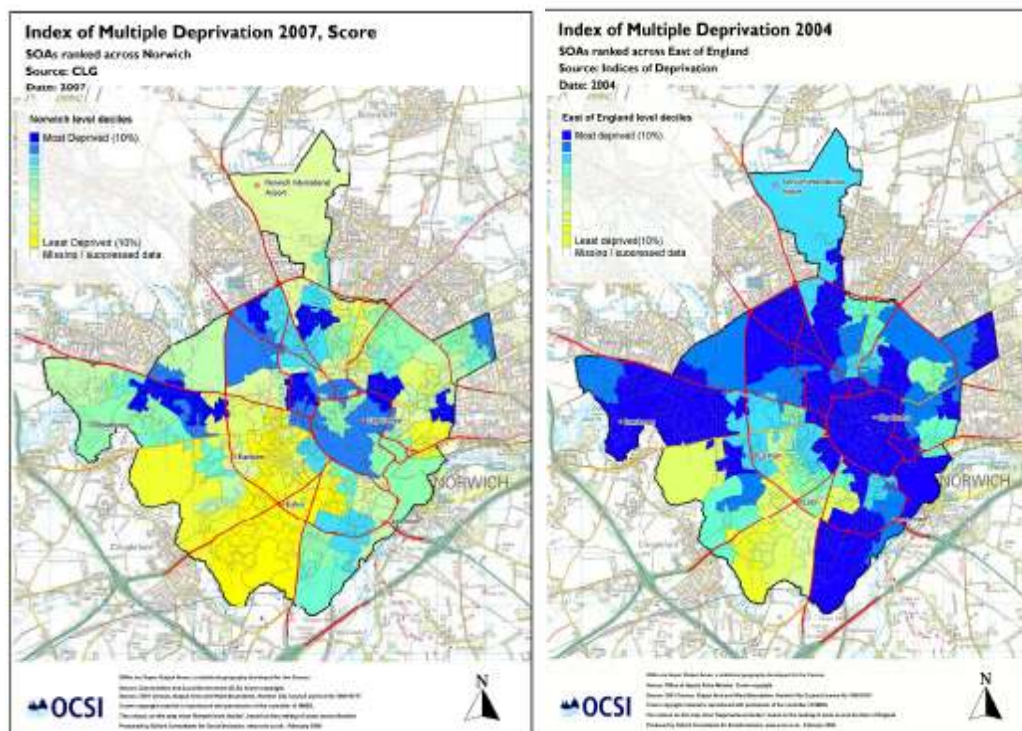
While Norwich is not above the line that divides north and south in Britain in terms of many indicators many of its citizens appear ‘disadvantaged’ or even ‘deprived.

- e.g. out of 456 districts Norwich ranks 62 in terms of deprivation,
- 18.7% of its population are considered ‘income deprived’
- 32% of children are in ‘income deprived households (highest in the region)

of Norwich's housing 34% is council rented or from other social landlord – 3rd highest nationally after London and Manchester

Norwich has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in the Eastern region at 58.6 per 1,000 15-17 year olds. The rate for England is 41.6 (source of statistics and maps taken from Norwich Needs report prepared by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, OCSI⁷)

The maps alongside compare relative and absolute deprivation in Norwich. Blue areas represent the most deprived neighbourhoods and yellow the least.



The left-hand map shows how different neighbourhoods in the City compare to each other i.e. how very deprived households (blue) live alongside relatively well-off ones (yellow).

The right-hand map shows absolute deprivation in Norwich as compared to other areas in the Eastern region – here most areas are blue with only the south western part of Norwich not showing deprivation.

Sociologists have noted that social class is ‘relational’ – i.e. people measure themselves in comparison with those around them. People feel ‘class’ or are aware of others’ circumstances if they are in contact with them – therefore, it is argued, in homogeneous residential areas everyone feels the same whereas in those areas where very different types of people live side by side people will be more aware of the deprivation, poverty and ‘class’ that they experience.

The maps also show how Norwich is under-bounded with outlying suburbs outside the city but clearly contiguous with it. Defining the boundaries of the study is another methodological issue are to be resolved: not only where Norwich starts and finishes but also neighbourhoods that may be defined administratively but not experienced socially.

⁷ Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion (2008). Norwich Needs: Report for the Local Area Agreement. Phase 1: Deprivation in Norwich.

10. Secondary schools in Norwich

Within its current boundaries there are few secondary schools in Norwich itself (though more if the boundaries of “Greater Norwich” are included). Competition for secondary school places is not as fierce as in other cities in the country although School C (see below) is always over-subscribed. Schools E and Hs are both now academies but for the period of our data they were both LA controlled comprehensives. School A is a faith school that recruits from all over Norfolk as do the two independent schools (for which we have no PLASC data).

The data given in the table is taken from the DfE performance tables for schools in Norwich in 2007 and some initial analysis of the PLASC datasets from 2006 is alongside.

	GCSE data 2007				PLASC data for pupils in Norfolk 2006	
	5+ A*-C incl E&M	At least 1 qual	Av point score	Context value-added	FSM	Mean IDACI rank
National (England)	46.8%	98.9%	378.2	(1000)		1-32482
Norfolk LA (secondary)	45.2%	97.6%	359.9	1002.2	10.1%	17007
Norfolk School A (faith)	60%	99%	392.8	1007.1	9%	15879
Norwich School B	23%	92%	303.0	1006.8	21%	9672
Norwich School C	48%	98%	386.2	1004.9	10%	17899
Norwich School E	6%	86%	222.5	956.2	28%	5267
Norwich School Hs	20%	96%	309.7	1014.5	27%	8820
Norwich School Hw	41%	95%	395.3	1011.0	14%	9921
Independent Girls School	(100%)	100%	479.7	NA	NA	NA
Independent Cathedral School	(100%)	100%	498.4	NA	NA	NA

Immediately it can be seen that the relative positions of each school on the different criteria of absolute GCSE results, value-added, % of FSM and IDACI score do not correlate. It is not at all easy to decide which school’s pupils are most ‘disadvantaged’ as a result of using the different criteria given.

It is intended that pupils living in different areas of Norwich are compared – not only in terms of which schools they attend but in terms of poverty (take-up of FSM) deprivation, and lifestyle as defined by MOSAIC categories attached to individual postcodes. In this way it is hoped that alternative maps of school intakes and pupil ‘disadvantage’ can be produced for Norwich (that will also include schools in the outlying suburbs for comparison).

11. Is social class a useful categorisation for children and young people?

The final slide asks a number of questions to which I do not offer many answers.

- *Should we define children and young people by their parents and home backgrounds? Which other groups of people are defined by others and not by their own characteristics?*

- *Would young people want to describe themselves as 'working class'?*
- *How should this descriptor be understood by young people themselves?*

- *Who would want to describe themselves as 'disadvantaged', 'poor', 'deprived' or 'socially excluded'?*

Social class is still contentious with some social theorists saying it has outlived its usefulness. However do we have anything better? In describing themselves what terms would young people use? “*deprived*”, “*poor*” and even “*disadvantaged*” are hardly positive attributes and few people would want to claim them for themselves.

“*[t]he meaning of 'class', in academic and popular usage, is notoriously slippery....*”⁸

Wendy Bottero, 2004

The quote above seems to sum up where we currently are - we seem to think that we know who we are talking about when we refer to the ‘middle classes’ and even the ‘working classes’ but as I have tried to show here, these meanings are particularly ‘slippery’ to properly define and pin down in the modern world. Does ‘working class’ refer to all those who are ‘working’, those just in unskilled, manual jobs or can it also include those ‘not working’? Is ‘social class’ passed on through the generations? Am I working class because my father was? Or ‘middle class’ because of who I now am in terms of work and education? Should we confer social class onto children and young people by their parents’ or guardians’ occupations or lifestyle choices (as children and young people do not ‘work’) or do we need better definitions?. Unlike the more fixed categories of sex and ethnicity social class appears much more problematic however that does not necessarily imply that it is now without meaning.

Therefore in my prospective study I will reluctantly use the term ‘disadvantaged’ rather than ‘working class’ to describe the young people at its focus; this seems a more accurate description of these young people’s own and family circumstances yet I am also uneasy about doing so.

⁸ Bottero, W. (2004). "Class Identities and the Identity of Class." *Sociology* **38**(5): 985 – 1003, here from page 999