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“IT’S JUST NOT A TOPIC:”
SOCIAL CLASS PERSPECTIVES OF FEMALE, WORKING CLASS STUDENTS OF COLOUR

by

Lenni Lomibao

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
Graduate Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

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"IT'S JUST NOT A TOPIC:"
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Master of Arts
1998
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Abstract

The aim of this study is to develop a framework that foregrounds class in the analysis of the racialized, gendered, and classed schooling experiences of working class females of colour. The findings suggest that the earlier theoretical approaches to class definitions that emphasize rigid socio-economic factors are inappropriate for the analysis of the schooling experiences of working class girls of colour. Instead, an understanding of the fluid aspects of the material, academic, attitudinal/behavioural, gendered and racial dimensions of class is a necessary prerequisite to understanding the material conditions needed for success. Students’ responses to the role of social class can be seen as strategies for success, and ultimately, strategies for social class transcendence. This class perspective sheds light on the role of class in the racialized, classed, and gendered lives of today’s marginalized youth, and provides insight into the conditions necessary for academic and social success in the contemporary context.
I would like to take a moment to express my sincere gratitude to all of those individuals that provided their support and encouragement as I completed this thesis.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that in a racialized, classed, and gendered society (Stasiulis, 1990: 269; Wexler, 1992: 8; Weis, 1995: 166), different students experience schooling differently. Studies as early as the 1920s illustrated that attendance and completion rates, curricular choice, pedagogical practices, achievement rates, academic tracking practices, career aspirations and opportunities, and discipline measures are all experienced differently depending upon one’s social position and social identity (Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin, 1995: 140). The research here is deeply rooted in my own personal experiences as a woman of colour struggling to achieve economic mobility through higher education. I grew up in an Ontario housing project in Toronto, the elder of two daughters. Raised by a single mother, I recognized from a very early age the differences between the kids that were privileged and those who were like myself. I carefully watched my middle class peers in school - the clothes they wore, the family outings they enjoyed, the comfortable homes they lived in - they could do things that my mother simply could not afford for us. I vowed to myself that I would achieve the lifestyle that the wealthier kids had, and I would do it through the only way I thought possible - excelling in school. Through part-time jobs and with student loans, I struggled to pay the rent, support my younger sister, and to achieve the education I have always believed to be the key to economic mobility. Within the context of my raced and
gendered experiences, class has provided a strong foundation for the way that I have understood, structured and lived out my life. The research here grows out of these experiences and represents an attempt to begin to understand - through integrating existing theory and other real-life perspectives - how working class girls of colour are affected by class in their lives.

During the mid 1970s, reproduction models dominated the research in sociology of education regarding the function of schools in shaping differential educational experiences. This theory emphasized the role of society’s class and labour structure in shaping schooling for students, and the school dynamics which reproduced social stratification in a capitalist society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976: 12; Giroux, 1983: 266; Weis, 1995: 158). Reproduction theory was supplanted by resistance models in the 1980s, which attempted to integrate the agency of teachers, students, and other individuals in shaping schooling experiences. Resistance theories pointed to the active role of human agents in the reproduction of and opposition to inequality in social relations within schools and society (Giroux, 1983: 259).

The more recent literature of the last decade rejects the primacy of class characterizing the reproduction/resistance models, and has pointed to the necessity of understanding and recognizing the impact of race, class, and gender as critical in shaping the ways in which schooling is experienced and lived out (for example, see Delpit, 1988; Fine, 1989, 1991; Mirza, 1992; Ogbu, 1992; Dei, Mazucca, McIsaac & Zine, 1997, Handa, 1997; Dei & James, 1998).
While acknowledging the complex relationships among race, class and gender, there is a general tendency in the recent studies to emphasize the salience of race and gender in structuring individuals' experiences in schooling, while paying less attention to class. Increasing attention has been paid to race and gender in the literature as central to analysis (Stasiulis, 1990: 279; Ogbu, 1992; Weis, 1995: 159; Dei et al., 1997: 223; Dei & James, 1998: 96). Put differently, race and gender are often used as the analytical lens through which classed schooling structures and experiences are examined, while class itself is not subjected to similar analysis. It is this perspective that I seek to shift in this research.

Using qualitative research methods, ethnographic studies have provided strategies for understanding how race, class and gender operate on and influence schooling experiences and outcomes. Despite this progress, Lois Weis (1995) has rightly pointed out that there is still a relative scarcity of research on the ways in which race, social class, and gender affect the schooling of marginalized students, particularly students of colour and female students (Weis, 1995: 166-7). Educational research tends to isolate or compartmentalize race, class and gender. In other words, inquiries on the role of class often exclude the impact of race and gender, and studies which consider the function of race and gender neglect the influence of social class on educational outcomes (Mirza, 1992: 167). Important theories have been developed in this area of research. At the same time, it is important to always be mindful of the ways in which these issues and analyses change over time and are relevant in different and distinct contexts, and to continue to push the limits of existing theory.
I set out to contribute to the work in this area, beginning with an examination of how female, working class students of colour view their school organization and community. It is my position that shifting the analytical lens to a class focus may contribute to a clearer understanding of how class "works", or how it shapes the racialized, gendered schooling processes and outcomes for working class female students of colour.

There are many diverse ways in which class has been measured or interpreted as a concept within sociology of education, which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4. Class categories are "artificial" in the sense that they are socially constructed classifications or groupings used in order to describe and analyze aspects of social life. Perhaps since the inception of class, the problem for sociologists has been how to define the criteria which places members of society in a given social class location. Sociologists have approached the measurement of class in two main interrelated ways (Morrow and Torres, 1995: 26). The most common approach to the social "reality" of class is to use objective, measurable criteria such as income, ownership of property, and degree of occupational skill, responsibility, and power (Porter, 1965: 9; Morrow and Torres, 1995: 27). These criteria are the most commonly used in defining class and ranking members of society accordingly. The second approach uses subjective criteria and methods, involving the individual and group beliefs opinions, and judgments of a community regarding the class status of others. These are used in order to develop "occupational prestige scales", which usually correspond to the level of education, responsibility, and earning power of a given occupation (Porter, 1965: 10-15).
I would like to point out in this introduction that I enter upon this research with my own understanding and interpretation of "class", informed by both the literature that I have read as well as my own experiences in society. This perspective begins with a general Marxist conception that class is a socially constructed category, with individual and group membership to a dominant or subordinate class category determined largely by economic structures and an individual's relationship to the system of production (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 49). In addition, I also understand class as a process shaped by historical, political, cultural, and ideological forces (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 50). As I hope it will become clear through this study, it is my view that class is a social construction that is continually being re-constructed by and through the interaction among individuals and larger social structures.

Using an elaborated concept of class as a foundation or starting point, I am interested in investigating how students understand class. This study seeks to build on the existing scholarship by investigating the ways in which class is defined and functions in the lives of those who occupy the margins within schools and within society. For the purposes of this study it is worth noting that although class is acknowledged as being a category which is socially constructed, it does not cause this research to be profitless. Despite its "artificial" nature, class is nonetheless present and experienced in everyday life. Porter discusses this point:

Even though they might not want to admit it or think about it very often, most people are aware of the differences in levels of living, ways of earning a living, and life chances. We make judgments about people's class on the basis of the clothes they wear, the place they live, the church they attend, the kind of jobs they have, or the size of their families.

Class becomes real as people experience it (Porter, 1965: 11-12).
Thus, it is important to establish early on that class is relevant whether individuals explicitly acknowledge it or not. As Sheila Riddell has argued, "sociologists may have access to interpretations which are not immediately accessible to the actors themselves" (Riddell, 1989: 79). My aim is to use objective and/or subjective dimensions of class as a descriptive and analytical tool to explore how class differences operate to shape the schooling and community lives of working class girls of colour.

It should be emphasized that my intention is not to privilege class over race and gender. Rather, through exploring student perspectives and using an integrative approach, this research represents a beginning. The purpose of this study is to use student narratives as a starting point in developing a framework for understanding the complex relationship between race, class and gender, from the perspective of class, and in the context of contemporary Canadian society.

Part I will focus on creating a foundation on which to build a class viewpoint on race, class and gender in schooling. In order to develop a framework for a class perspective on schooling experiences, it is first necessary to illustrate and analyze the progression of class analyses concerning the impact of class difference on educational experiences and outcomes. Chapter 2 is a literature review which traces this movement through the historical and current analyses in sociology of education during the 1970s and 1980s. This study looks at the literature in order to answer a central question: How has social class been theorized in the sociology of education literature, specifically concerning the schooling experiences of high school students?
In exploring student perspectives, it is first important to understand the lived conditions of their environment, from which the students draw to create their meanings. Chapter 3 will provide the context for student perspectives on race, class and gender. This chapter will create a composite of school and community life in a working class neighbourhood, using the perspectives of the community’s own female students of colour. Areas to be explored include the school’s daily regime, portraits of the school population (such as dominant student groups and teachers), and candid descriptions of the community.

Part II will focus on student understandings and explanations of the meaning and role of social class in their schooling experiences. Chapter 4 will first discuss the varied meaning of class in the sociology of education literature. Following that, the chapter will outline the main themes that emerged in student descriptions of the meaning of social class. Using these definitions as a background, Chapter 5 will discuss the role played by social class in shaping the schooling and community lives of working class, female students of colour.

By beginning with the student understandings of how class is defined and functions in a raced and gendered context, this study may shed some light on how class status is both shaped by and shapes the schooling and community experiences of today’s youth (such as academic achievement, curricular choice, career aspirations). An awareness of the material conditions and social structures that frame student understandings of social class may highlight the impact of class on the lives of
marginalized students, particularly working class girls of colour, in the context of contemporary society.

The Study

The main features of qualitative research make it the most appropriate approach in which to understand student perspectives on issues of social class. Qualitative research is descriptive and interpretive, and often uses open, unstructured interviews as the direct source of data. It is concerned with process rather than with outcomes or products, and with developing theories rather than with testing existing hypotheses. Finally, it is concerned with how people make sense of their lives (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 25; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998: 24-7).

The 27 participants in the study attended three public high schools in a working class community in Toronto. The students are young women of colour of various ethnic and racial backgrounds, who identified themselves as Jamaican, West Indian, Trinidadian, Somalian, Indian, Filipino, or Guyanese. Each of the girls in this study came from homes where the parent(s) or guardian held a position in working class occupations, in office work or in manual semi-skilled or unskilled factory work, or were receiving social assistance. The students taking part in the study live in the school community. Of the 27 students, twenty-five were 18 years of age, and two were 19. All of the students are in advanced OAC (Ontario Academic Credit) programs of study.

The girls participated in informal and semi-formal group and individual interviews. These interviews took place in the community, off school grounds.
Corresponding to the unstructured interview style often used in qualitative ethnographic research methods, the interviews\(^{10}\) were exploratory and followed the interests and direction of the student being interviewed (Peshkin, 1993: 23; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 152). However, I did attempt to guide the interviews toward a number of themes and areas that are consistent with the objective of outlining student perspectives on social class and schooling, using student descriptions of the school organization and the school community as a starting point. The specific themes explored included: daily regime of schooling, curricular activities, extracurricular activities, actors (friends and family), and school community (a more detailed list of these topics appears in Appendix I, Interview/Focus Group Guidelines). Of course, given time and space constraints, not all of the themes touched upon during interviews will be outlined here - only the most salient and common themes will be highlighted.

As a way of familiarizing myself with each school, I conducted informal preliminary interviews about school life\(^{11}\), following the broad themes of the school organization, the student population, and the school community. These were recorded in the form of descriptive notes. For these interviews, I relied only on note taking. Interviews took place over a period of four months during the latter half of the 1997-1998 school year.

It should be noted that this is a small-scale study which uses a specifically located student sample (Marshall & Rossman, 1995: 27). Data drawn from the study are obviously not representative of the marked population as a whole, and interpretations and analysis are linked only to those students investigated. In short, it is not my aim to make
reductive or essentialist generalizations about working class female students of colour. Rather, as it was indicated previously, this study represents a beginning; it is exploratory research intended as a starting point from which to make suggestions for how to approach issues of race, class and gender in the schooling experiences of today’s marginalized youth.

**Methodological and Ethical Issues**

Initially, I perceived the methodological and ethical issues that I encountered as potential blocks to the completion of my study. However, after anxiously considering how I could overcome these obstacles, and after reading much about how other researchers reconciled similar issues in their work, I realized that the problems I experienced were extremely useful in indicating the direction that my research should take. Throughout the research process, reflecting on these predicaments led to new ways to approach issues of race, class, and gender in schooling, in a way that speaks to the historical, political, economic, and social specificities of the students studied, and in a way that is relevant to and grounded in the material conditions that shape their lived experiences.

In beginning this research, I set out to create an equal power relationship between myself and the girls participating in the study, in order to ensure my access to the most honest data possible. In line with my objective of obtaining student views on their school and community, I wanted to avoid the influence and bias of my role as a researcher. I assumed that my race, social class background, and gender would ensure an
equal power relationship. I identified very closely with the students I was investigating. I am a relatively young female of colour, I grew up and still reside in a working class community, and I attended a school very similar to those I was studying. I believed that these aspects of my social identity would allow me to “fit in” with the students, and would create instant rapport during interviews. To facilitate this process, to make them see that we were equals in this study, and to ensure that I would obtain the most honest responses in interviews, I shared with the girls the facts of my background whenever possible (Riddell, 1989: 85). In addition, I had read other researchers’ accounts of the importance of appearance in establishing rapport with those being interviewed (Mirza, 1995: 170-171), and had purposely dressed like the students I was interviewing - jeans, sweatshirt, baseball cap, and running shoes. I believed that if I approached the study by emphasizing our equal role in it, and our equal social class positions, it would generate the most “truthful” data.

Despite my efforts, it became clear during the interviews that other differences regarding social class and educational background (which I naively assumed were less significant or obvious) actually contributed to their perception of me as an outsider, and that an unequal power relationship was inevitable. I was what Beoku-Betts has called an “outsider-within”:

To be an outsider within means that in spite of one’s involvement/identification as an insider, one can never be totally accepted by the community in question (Beoku-Betts, 1994: 419).

Although I am of colour, I am not Black, like most of the students I interviewed. Although I grew up and still live in a similar community, my education has placed me in
a position to transcend my working class status. Similar to the experiences of Mehreen Mirza (1995) during her doctoral research on South Asian women, I was relying on being “placed” as an equal in their social world via my superficial similarities of race, social class, and gender (Mirza, 1995: 173). In contrast, because of our differences, I was placed as the “Other”.

As a result, many of the interviews were awkward, and many of my questions about the community and student groups received guarded, stilted answers. I speculated that because I was placed as an outsider, I was a potential critic of their social world. I was a threat, and the students were defending themselves, defending their individual and collective identities. The students were unwilling to talk openly about or criticize their community or peers during interviews. I realize now the truth to Riddell’s argument that no interview situation is free from unequal power relations; the individuals involved are never truly equal (Riddell, 1989: 92). After all, I was interviewing them. I was asking the questions, I was going to analyze their answers, and I would earn a degree.

As I spent more and more time with the focus groups, the interviews became less uncomfortable. The dynamics between us transcended from an interviewer-subject relationship into a casual friendship. I found that when I shared information about myself that demonstrated attitudes, activity, and values similar to their own, I was “cool”. When I demonstrated my own “insider” knowledge of the community, or when I spoke of similar school experiences, they knew, to some degree, that I was not an “outsider” aiming to criticize their lives. Once my own social position was established and
understood by the girls, I found that I was more readily accepted into their circle of experience and knowledge, and the narratives seemed more open and honest.

Mirza and Beoku-Betts have both argued that the advantage of occupying the insider/outside or outsider-within position is that it leads to more innovative research. They indicate that it leads to more “objective” data, with interpretations less bound by assumptions. The authors argue that the insider/outside position also highlights the limitations of many traditional approaches in research which presume to be capable of disinterested inquiry (Beoku-Betts, 1994: 419; Mirza, 1995: 176). As such, the data that I collected are not to be dismissed as invalid or biased (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 129). Rather, the relationship between myself and the students must be incorporated into an analysis that is reflexive, to make clear how it influenced the research design and interpretation of the data (Riddell, 1989: 92-93). Reflexivity must always be a central aspect of future research that uses qualitative ethnographic methods to determine student perceptions and experiences related to their racialized, gendered, and classed schooling. In this study, it was clear that our unequal power relations shaped both their responses to me, as well as my relations to them. This understanding would prove critical in the analysis of the interview data, as demonstrated in subsequent chapters on the meaning and role of class from the perspective of students. Without going into too much detail in this introduction, it was important for me to take the dynamics between the girls and I as a point of analysis. It was the first indication that class is indeed recognized and understood by the students as a phenomenon that is “acted out” through behaviours,
words, mannerisms, and attitudes. Class “works” in daily interactions between individuals.

In summary, it is important to acknowledge from the outset the impact of my own social location and view of society on this analysis. Given that I am a resident of a community similar to that which is being studied here, it can be argued that bias may arise in the analysis of the research. It has been noted that as a relatively young woman of colour from a working class background (and one who has been upwardly mobile) I identify closely with the culture and social class position of the students participating in the study. Many social scientists would argue that in this situation, bias\textsuperscript{12} would affect my interpretations and render the research invalid. However, it is not possible to create a completely “objective” analysis of data - all data involve some aspect of partiality (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998: 34). This analysis, like all analyses, will be shaped by my own socio-historical location and lived experiences in school and in society. Hammersley and Atkinson describe this aspect of research:

What this represents is a rejection of the idea that social research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher, in such a way that its findings can be unaffected by social processes and personal characteristics.

In other words, there is no way in which we can escape the social world in order to study it (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 16, 17)
NOTES

Chapter 1

1 See for example, Willis, 1977; Corrigan, 1979; Griffin, 1985; Fine, 1991; Mirza, 1992; Altenbaugh, 1995; Dei et al, 1997; Handa, 1997.

2 While many of the girls interviewed are academically successful and have high career aspirations, I refer to “marginalized” students in the sense that female students of colour from working class backgrounds occupy a subordinate position in wider society, relative to the privileged and dominant positions of their White, male, middle class counterparts.

3 It should be noted that working class is a social construction that is subject to change and involves overlapping meanings, and is not necessarily the perception of individuals themselves. For the purposes of studying a focus group in this research, “working class” background or community is used to refer to a fixed class status that is determined by the socio economic status of the school community. This definition is based on the most recent statistics available on household income, employment, and education, compiled by the city’s Business Development Office, 1997. The point to be emphasized here is that working class should be read as if in quotation marks; it is a social construction based on an economic organization that defines the community, but nevertheless a construction which is subject to change, negotiation, subversion and/or reproduction, via the interaction between individuals and structures.

4 This study is limited to an analysis of the experiences of public high school students only.

5 Porter points out that occupational class categories defined by degrees of skill include professional, managerial, clerical, semiskilled, unskilled, manual, or non-manual, and correspond to the economic system (Porter, 1965: 10).

6 Again, the concept of class as developed in the earlier and current literature will be outlined in further detail in Chapter 4.

7 I will be using the terms “young women” and “girls” interchangeably. In using the term “girls” I do not intend to imply that those interviewed are children.

8 For this study, the term “school community” refers to the neighbourhood in which the school is located.

9 To protect the identity of the students, school and community studied in this research, all identifying names used throughout the paper, in relation to students, teachers, and the school, are fictitious.
The informal and semi-structured group and individual interviews took place in various locations, including in the local library, in restaurants, in local parks, and in the homes of the students themselves. The interviews were recorded and transcribed only where the student provided written consent for the interview to be tape recorded. Within this essay, when citing comments of the students, I have indicated in parentheses the date of the interview and the corresponding page number of the transcript.

Notes were taken at the time of the interviews, and I did not have to rely on short-term recall.

I use the term "bias" reluctantly, since it presumes that interest-free research is possible. All research is influenced by the author's social position and social, political, and economic interests, yet many social scientists argue otherwise.
PART I.

A Beginning: (Re)Framing Class in Research

This section will focus on building the foundation for a class perspective on racialized, classed and gendered schooling. Chapter 2 will first illustrate and analyze the theoretical context of analyses in the sociology of education concerning the impact of class difference on educational experiences and outcomes. This literature review traces the related historical and current analyses in sociology of education during the 70s and 80s. Using the narratives of working class, female students of colour, Chapter 3 will provide a composite or general profile of the context of school and community life.
CHAPTER 2

THE DIRECTION OF CLASS IN SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter will outline and critique the scholarship in the sociology of education concerning the role played by social class in influencing educational experiences and outcomes. Since World War II, the main issue in sociology of education has been inequality in schooling (Connell, 1982: 24; Davies, 1994: 83). It is important to note that this issue took different forms in different countries and over time. It is not my intention to detail the development of all of the relevant theories here - the focus of this chapter is the reproduction and resistance approaches that characterized the 1970s and 1980s. This focus on reproduction/resistance theory was chosen because it provides "a convenient synthetic reference point for comparing the full range of conceptions of the relation between society and education" (Morrow and Torres, 1995: 6). However, before outlining these influential frameworks, it is useful to briefly highlight some of the preceding research, in order to provide a context for sociology of education's interest in class and its connection to schooling.

During the 1940s in the United States, the dominant theoretical approach was Functionalism, and the leading contributor to this perspective was Talcott Parsons (Davies, 1994: 83). According to functional theory, students learn or are "socialized" by schools to develop skills and capacities to participate productively in the economy. In
through evaluating skills and abilities, schools assign students to their occupational position\(^1\) (Gaskell, 1992: 18). Sociologists in the United States viewed education as "largely a positive mediator between family and work":

The dominant paradigm for linking education and the economy was the status attainment approach, which sought to measure the relative effects on occupational attainment of variables such as family background (including socio-economic status, or ‘SES’) and educational attainments (Acker, 1994: 16).

The functional framework greatly influenced the scholarship in the United States as well as in Canada (Taylor, 1994: 33). For instance, during the 1950s and 1960s, the Cultural Deprivation Approach or Cultural Deficit theories were dominant. With regards to the issue of educational inequality, these approaches characterized schools as "neutral institutions". Deficit theory pointed to the classed characteristics of families in different "social strata", with different values, attitudes, and child rearing methods as problematic, and as the reason for the underachievement of the working class\(^2\) (Connell, 1982: 25; Davies, 1994: 83). Also influenced by the functional framework, John Porter provided the most prominent analysis of Canadian schooling during the 1960s and 1970s. His analysis emphasized the role of education in preparing students for work:

The content of education is affected by the emphasis in industrial societies on the marketability of skills. In terms of its social function, education should be thus affected, because an educational system fails when it does not train people in sufficient quality and quantity for occupational roles (Porter, 1965: 165).

The research in sociology of education in Britain can be traced to as early as the 1930s with the demographic studies at the London School of Economics. It became more fully developed in the 1950s and 1960s with the interest in the effects of home background on educational achievement. During the mid 1970s, the “new sociology of
education” emerged in Britain, influenced by the neo-Marxist and ethnographic work in the United States (Acker, 1994: 15; Morrow and Torres, 1995: 297). It was at this time that structural accounts of inequality in education flourished, particularly in Britain and Canada (Davies, 1994: 86-7).

Thus, we arrive at one of the most influential theoretical frameworks used to explain the function of schools in shaping differential educational experiences. Reproduction theory emphasized the role of society’s hierarchical capitalist economy and class structure in shaping schooling outcomes (Giroux, 1983, 1983: 266; Weis, 1995: 158). After it was criticized for its analytical overdeterminism, during the 1980s, reproduction theory witnessed a movement into resistance theories. Resistance theory attempted to integrate the agency of teachers, students, and other individuals in shaping schooling experiences. In a neo-Marxist framework, resistance theories pointed to the active role of human agents in the reproduction of and opposition to social conditions in schools and society (Giroux, 1983: 259; Davies, 1994: 89). The more recent literature of the last decade rejects the primacy of class characterizing the resistance/reproduction models, and has pointed to the necessity of recognizing the critical and interrelated functioning of race, class, and gender in shaping the ways in which schooling is experienced.

I would like to stress from the outset that my intention is not to privilege class over race and gender, but rather to generate a critical understanding of the impact of social class on the educational experiences of students who are (or are not) marginalized within our contemporary schools and society. This review seeks to understand and
identify how the function of class has been conceptualized in the debates on schooling, by tracing its movement through the historical and current analyses in sociology of education. This chapter will provide a chronological review of some of the most influential critiques and alternatives forwarded by scholars in the Unites States, Europe, and Canada.

It should be noted that this review of the literature is not a comprehensive one. Rather, using the reproduction/resistance models as a framework, it will be limited to three areas of research in sociology of education. The first section will review reproduction theories which examined social class reproduction through school structures and practices. The second section will explore the resistance theories that have attempted to investigate individuals' own activity in the reproduction and mediation of their social class identity. The third section will outline three examples of the current literature that have attempted to deal with the unilinear class focus in the reproduction/resistance models through integrating race, class and gender in the analysis of schooling experiences. Given time and space constraints, I chose examples of research in the sociology of education which illustrate the centrality of race and gender in the maintenance of social class divisions in schools and in society. Using these theoretical debates as a background, the conclusion will discuss the possibility of shifting the existing analysis to a different angle of vision, in order to begin to develop a clearer understanding of the schooling experiences of today's youth, and young women of colour, in particular.
Reproduction Theory: Class Reproduction in School Structures

Reproduction theory views schools and education as one of the main sites where the social division of labour is reproduced. It is based on the notion that the social relations of the workplace in a capitalist economy are mirrored in the social relations in schooling, making the school a site where social class differences are learned by students (Giroux, 1983: 266). In one of the most often cited and influential studies, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) used the “correspondence principle” to explain the relationship between work and school:

Specifically, the relationships of authority and control between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, students and students, and students and their work replicate the division of labour which dominates the workplace (Bowles and Gintis, 1976: 12).

Bowles and Gintis argue that the organization of power in the workplace is reflected in the dynamics of the classroom and school structures. For example, they point to a series of parallels: the lack of student control over curriculum and the lack of worker control over the content of the job; the use of grades and other reward systems and the use of wages; the division of academic subjects into fields of study and the division of work into job specializations; and competition between students and competition among labourers (Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin, 1995: 144; Dei et al., 1997: 21). Thus, schools reproduce the skills and rules of the workforce, and reproduce the relations of power in a capitalist society (Giroux, 1983: 263).

French social theorist Louis Althusser also posited that the school is a social organization where the hierarchical class structure and social division of labour is both reflected and reproduced (Giroux, 1983: 263; Dei et al., 1997: 22-23). The “hidden
The hidden curriculum in schools transmits the knowledge students require to reproduce the division of labour and hierarchical class structure, skills which are:

...directly useful in the different jobs in production (one instruction for manual workers, another for technicians, a third for engineers, a final one for high management)...Children also learn the rules of good behaviour, i.e., the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is “destined” for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which eventually means rules of respect for the socio-technical divisions of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination (Giroux, 1983: 263).

The economic reproduction models were characterized by an emphasis on the influence of schools and its relationship to the reproduction of class in the context of a capitalist economy.

Michael Apple, an American scholar, was a major figure in the critique of correspondence theory. He argued that:

...a correspondence theory can not do complete justice to the complexity of either school life, the actual and often contradictory conditions which tie education to an unequal society, or to the struggles and contradictions that exist in school, the workplace, and ...in the State (Apple, 1982: 8).

According to Apple, correspondence theory denies the agency of students, instead assuming that students are fully “determined”, that they passively accept the ideology presented by the school. Missing from these structural theories was an insight to the more complex interplay between the workplace, family, and schooling, specifically the role of
culture and human agency in shaping the social order (Giroux, 1983: 266). The emergence of cultural reproduction theory represented a move toward such a perspective.

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of cultural reproduction provides an additional dimension to the economic reproductive models such as those forwarded by Bowles and Gintis and Althusser. In his analysis, he focuses on the relationship between the dominant culture and school knowledge. Rejecting the notion that schools mirror the dominant social structures (Dei et al., 1997: 23), Bourdieu argues that schools do not overtly impose oppression. Instead, schools reproduce existing class divisions and power relations in a more subtle way - by organizing and transmitting the interests, values, and attitudes of the dominant culture, or that of the bourgeoisie (Dei et al., 1997: 23; Giroux, 1983: 267). The notion of “cultural capital” is central to Bourdieu’s analysis of how the cultural reproduction of class divisions works in schools. The cultural resources that are drawn upon, validated and normalized in the content and transmission of school knowledge are those of the dominant class, and become a form of cultural capital. In other words, cultural capital is defined as the general background, knowledge, disposition, and sets of meanings and skills that are utilized in school systems and that are passed from generation to generation (Bourdieu, 1977: 496; Lareau, 1987: 74; Altenbaugh, et al., 1995: 144). Giroux summarizes this process:

Schools play a particularly important role in legitimating and reproducing dominant cultural capital. They tend to legitimize certain forms of knowledge, ways of speaking, and ways of relating to the world that capitalize on the type of familiarity and skills that only certain students have received from their family backgrounds and class relations (Giroux, 1983: 268).
Through the organization, transmission and distribution of knowledge, privileged students who possess cultural capital are provided with an educational advantage over working class or poor students in schools. In short, cultural capital enables privileged students to achieve academic success, working class students are denied access to it, and the power imbalances within class relations are reproduced (Lareau, 1987: 74; Weis, 1995: 160; Dei et al., 1997: 23-24).

Bourdieu maintains that one of the ways in which schools legitimize the cultural capital of the dominant classes is through the hegemonic curriculum (Giroux, 1983: 268-269). The hegemonic curriculum can be defined as the organization of bodies of academic knowledge into a hierarchical structure, where dominant forms of knowledge compete with and are given priority over subordinate forms of knowledge. The hegemonic curriculum includes the knowledge that embodies the cultural capital of the dominant classes, and de-emphasizes or excludes the knowledge important to subordinate groups (such as women, the working class, and people of colour). The hegemonic curriculum works to reproduce social class stratification by providing the privileged classes greater access to the knowledge that is dominant and valued in schools and in wider society (Giroux, 1983: 269).3

Building on the notion of cultural capital and school knowledge in reproducing class stratification, Basil Bernstein examined the relationship between school structures and practices, social class and language use. He argued that through family socialization processes, social class influences different forms and patterns of speaking. In other words, because of the nature of socialization experiences in the home, children from
working class families use "restricted" linguistic codes - speech patterns with meanings that are implicit, concrete, and dependent on their context. Conversely, children from middle class backgrounds use "elaborated" linguistic codes, defined as language which is based on more sophisticated and abstract symbols. Bernstein argued that because the language used in schools is based on elaborated codes, poor and working class children are disadvantaged (Altenbaugh, et al., 1995: 145, citing Bernstein, 1975). As an integral part of cultural capital, linguistic codes are used to form the school knowledge that corresponds to the interests, experiences and skills of students of the dominant class. Again, as in Bourdieu's model, the subordinate position of working class students is reproduced in schools, while the privileged position of students from dominant classes is simultaneously maintained.

Jean Anyon's (1983) study provides empirical evidence which supports the theoretical positions of Bourdieu and Bernstein - that social class is reproduced through the distribution of knowledge in classrooms. Anyon looked at the curricular, pedagogical, and student evaluation processes in five elementary classrooms in American communities of different social classes (Anyon, 1983: 143). She concluded that through the knowledge, skills, and dispositions taught in schools, children develop their future relationship to the system of production. In essence, they were developing their social class status. For instance, Anyon found that the children in the working class schools received instruction focused on drill and rote learning and emphasizing mechanical skills. The classroom activities for these students were geared toward lower level thinking skills, and to retention of subject matter - skills suitable for occupations that are
mechanical and routine. In contrast, the curriculum in the schools of the more affluent communities fostered creativity, analytical thinking, decision making skills, and working independently - skills required for more professional careers with higher financial rewards (Anyon, 1983: 165). In this analysis, the school knowledge that is transmitted served to reproduce social class relations in society by preparing students for relating to the system of production in a specific way. The skills students learn in school determines to a large extent their future social class status (Anyon, 1983: 165).

A more recent study produced findings similar to that of Anyon. Valerie Polakow (1993) examined preschool and elementary classrooms in the United States which implemented remedial education programs for "at risk" children, specifically Head Start programs. The rationale of Head Start (and similar public school programs that later emerged) was to compensate for the assumed inadequate levels of cognitive stimulation that poor children received at home (Polakow, 1993: 103-106). Polakow found that the curriculum content and pedagogical practices for poor children were very rigid in structure, and focused on compliance, containment, order and control (Polakow, 1993: 129). She describes the essence of these classrooms:

In the majority of the preschool and elementary classrooms described in this book, there was a pervasive ethos of containment and regulation - drilling children to produce the correct responses, regulating their imagination, presenting them with tasks to be completed rather than learning encounters. Teachers, with the exception of three sensitive ones, saw obedience and compliance to the routinized tasks as indicating success....their remediation experience consists largely of phonics, decoding skills, and endless worksheets (Polakow, 1993: 150-1).

As argued by Polakow, these pedagogical practices damage the self esteem of the students, and limits their academic development and achievement. Effectively, these
pedagogical practices further marginalized students already in subordinate positions in schools and in wider society (Polakow, 1993: 152). Like the students in Anyon’s study, working class and poor children in these classrooms were being taught the skills and attitudes that would reproduce their location in the system of labour, and in turn maintain their subordinate class position.

In summary, cultural reproduction theory focuses on how dominant culture and its relationship to school knowledge works in maintaining the social class structure. The social knowledge that is organized and transmitted in schools is based on the culture of the dominant class, and serves to maintain the marginalized position of subordinate groups and the privileged position of the dominant class (Giroux, 1983: 269). However, critics identified three main theoretical flaws in cultural reproductive theory. First and foremost, the cultural approach to social reproduction is based on a fixed concept of culture, in which students are seen as passive conduits in the transmission of cultural capital. Annette Lareau’s study on the impact of cultural capital on parent-teacher relations highlights this point. Lareau, citing Connell et al., discusses this flaw:

[Cultural capital] practically obliterates the person who is actually the main constructor of the home/school relationship. The student is treated mainly as a bearer of cultural capital, a bundle of abilities, knowledges and attitudes furnished by parents (Lareau, 1987: 83).

The concept of cultural capital assumes that individuals fit neatly into categories based on their pre-determined relationship to the dominant culture, and based on their position in the existing social order. In turn, the fixed notion of cultural capital, with its lack of attention to human resistance or class conflict, provides no space for the transformation of social structures (Giroux, 1983: 272; Weis, 1995: 162; Dei et al., 1997: 228). Missing
from this theory is an understanding of how individuals perceive and respond to the
dominant structures and culture of the school. What is the role of administrators,
teachers, and students in actively negotiating the school structure?

Second, the cultural reproduction model did not take into consideration the
constraints of material economic forces on working class students, which also shape
their schooling experiences. An important question remained unanswered: What are the
material conditions, within as well as outside of schools, that constrain individuals, and
contribute to the reproduction of the social order? For instance, the behaviour and
schooling experiences of working class students are often constrained by family
responsibilities that require students to obtain employment as quickly as possible. Under
such pressures, students may necessarily opt for positions that do not require extensive
school training - manual and semi-skilled positions which are traditionally working class.

A related shortcoming of this theory is that it took a unilinear approach to
analyzing the experience of students in school. The discussion of cultural capital focuses
primarily on class differences, and does not account for the relationship between race,
class, sexuality, and gender in shaping schooling experiences (Giroux, 1983: 271-3; Dei
et al., 1997: 242). Cultural reproduction theory utilizes a static, homogenous notion of
culture which does not provide an adequate explanation for the impact of race, class, and
gender on schooling experiences and the maintenance of social class divisions. For
instance, the homogenous treatment of culture as linked to class inequality does not
consider the different experiences of Black female students compared to their White
male counterparts. The impact of social differences based on race and gender cannot be
subsumed under class. Beginning in the late 70s, researchers began to challenge the structural accounts of reproduction models by examining the interplay between structures of domination and the role of human agency and resistance.

**Resistance Theory: Social Class and Human Agency**

Resistance theories attempted to integrate the agency of teachers, students, and other individuals in shaping schooling experiences. It was the work of the resistance theorists that influenced Michael Apple’s critique of the correspondence theories of Bowles and Gintis, noted above. Apple argued that it was necessary to consider the complex “dynamics of working-class and gender resistances” both within and external to schools. He cites Marxist ethnographies of working-class students when discussing the challenges to reproduction theory:

Male and female students often expressly reject or contest the overt and covert messages of the institution. Reproduction and contestation go hand in hand...[The reproduction approach] has been challenged because of its overly deterministic outlook, its lack of examination of the internal qualities of schools, and its neglect of the cultural sphere and the lived responses of class and gender actors (Apple, 1982: 8-9).

The framework of resistance pointed to the active role of human agents in the reproduction and opposition to inequality in social relations within school and society (Giroux, 1983: 259).

One of the most influential resistance theorists who challenged the structuralist account in the reproduction frameworks was Paul Willis (1977). In his study titled *Learning to Labour*, he attempts to explain how social class inequality is maintained in society through investigating the role played by students in this process. Informed by
critical Marxist theory, his analysis of students in a British secondary school used the concept of “counter-school culture”, a culture of resistance to school authority (Willis, 1977: 11; Gaskell, 1992: 23; Mirza, 1992: 1). The counter-culture is tied to the working class world of work, sharing many traits of the shop-floor culture: an attempt to gain informal control over the work process, informal organization of its members, marking themselves off from “conformists”, and the use of language and intimidating humour. Central to the counter-culture is the rejection of school values and norms, particularly the notion that mental labour or theoretical knowledge is superior to practical knowledge and experience, and that respect for school authority is necessary for success in society (Willis, 1977: 57; Giroux, 1983: 283; Weis, 1995: 165). The students recognized the middle-class values, behaviours and knowledge emphasized and transmitted in school, and reinterpreted them according to their own objectives and lifestyles. Willis argues that in employing the counter-school culture and resisting the meanings and values that schooling represents, working class male students reproduce their working class position (Willis, 1977: 1-3; Mirza, 1992: 1). Willis suggests that working class boys choose working class careers for its congruence with their values, interests and lifestyles, in order to be able to continue the counter-culture ideology developed in school and reinforced in their experiences on the shop floor (Willis, 1977: 52-58). In short, the rejection by working class males of school authority effectively maintains their working class status and reproduces existing class relations.

As in Willis’ study, Paul Corrigan (1979) also examined the resistance of working class male students in a high school in England. He found that not all working class boys
experienced a conflictual relationship with school (Corrigan, 1979: 47, 49). He modifies Willis’ theory by arguing that student resistance to school is not due to differences in values and ideology. Instead, Corrigan posits that resistance is a product of the power differences students perceive to exist between themselves and the teachers and administrators representing authority in school (Corrigan, 1979: 58). Because working class students have a perspective of the world different from the middle class norms embedded within the school structures and practices, they view school rules as attempts to change or control their behaviour. In short, working class boys view school rules as mechanisms used to mold them according to the middle class norms of school (Corrigan, 1979: 61, 66-67). Similar to Willis’ study, through their resistance to being controlled or changed by the school authorities, these working class boys reproduce their social class status. Through their acts of truancy, delinquency, and disruptive classroom behaviour, the boys are limiting their ability to achieve academic success, which in turn limits their opportunities for future economic mobility and transcendence from their working class status.

The main criticism of the work done by resistance theorists such as Corrigan and Willis is its failure to account for the experiences of students who are marginalized by their race and their gender. In its overemphasis on class and the experiences of White male students, this work ignores the impact of racism, sexism, and homophobia in social institutions in the school and in wider society on the experiences of female students and students of colour (Mirza, 1992: 114; Dei et al., 1997: 239-240). While these theories of resistance begin to provide important insights into the role of student agency in mediating
school knowledge and responding to the dominant structures and culture of the school, the role of gender and race in the maintenance and reproduction of the social order is still not adequately explored here, nor are the experiences of girls and youths of colour figured in.

Willis' *Learning to Labour* contributed to the insights on class as well as gender in a 1982 study conducted by R.W. Connell, D.J. Ashenden, S. Kessler, and G.W. Dowsett. Investigating working class and elite private secondary schools in Australia, they argued that the resistance of students (in both working class and affluent schools; "good" students as well as "hoods") to school authority was a critique of the institution and it's arbitrary authority, poor teaching, inconsistent discipline, favouritism, and lack of respect for the kids (Connell et al., 1982: 85). The resistance of ruling class kids was characterized by adopting the styles of their working class counterparts; for the latter, it meant behaviour similar to that of Willis' lads - usually involving deviant or truant behaviour in school (Connell et al., 1982: 83). Significantly, while affluent students demonstrated resistance, it was more common among working class students. In addition, Connell et al. found that school resistance exists among young women as well. This took the form of violating stereotypical femininity, through swearing, smoking, yelling at adults, and skipping classes. According to Connell et al., the resistance of working class females was a struggle against the "fate they can see any day just by looking up and down the street" (Connell et al. 1982: 88). In summary:

...resistance is a relation to school that is generated on quite a wide scale (though in greatly varying intensity) by the interaction of the authority structure of the school with class and gender dynamics (Connell et al., 1982: 88).
In Canada, Jane Gaskell was influenced by the resistance approach to the schooling process, as it related to how class interacted with gender. In 1977 she conducted a study of White female students in three Canadian secondary schools located in working class neighbourhoods, kids moving from school directly into jobs (Gaskell, 1992: 33). Investigating the gendered and classed patterns in course enrollment choices, Gaskell found that that the young women chose to take a non-academic (high-status) direction, “an important step towards reproducing one’s class position” (Gaskell, 1992: 40). Similar to Willis’ lads, the young women in Gaskell’s study consciously chose a non-academic stream in order to “minimize the discomfort schools caused them” (Gaskell, 1992: 43).

Vocational courses were perceived as less regimented and less confining than academic courses...They wanted a break from regular schooling and saw practical job skills as more worthwhile than irrelevant academic information (Gaskell, 1992: 44).

It was through choosing “female” positions, such as secretarial and sales jobs, that the girls in her study “overwhelmingly rejected the value of the school and the school’s equation of academic performance with merit and deserved power” (Gaskell, 1992: 45).

Another factor affecting their choice to pursue non-academic courses involved domestic responsibilities. The young women felt that they would be responsible for child care and household responsibilities. Clerical work requires little training, is relatively available on the market and can be pursued part-time, and is flexible. Thus, given the girls’ perceptions and ideas about their own future domestic responsibilities, business courses and clerical jobs were attractive and reasonable choices (Gaskell, 1992: 50). Significantly, while this study demonstrated common themes highlighted by Willis,
Gaskell's study provides insights into how both class as well as gender divisions are reproduced.

In another response to the over-emphasis on the position of working class White men in educational theory, Christine Griffin studied a group of young White working class women in the transition from school to work in 1979 in Birmingham. She found that there were no female equivalents to Willis' male counter-school culture; the concept had no relevance in the girls' lives (Griffin, 1985: 15, 17, 187). For White working class girls, two factors most influenced their occupational status: their experience in part-time employment during school, and their use of informal job-finding networks. Griffin argued that it was because these mechanisms for obtaining full-time employment were most commonly linked to factory work and small family firms that social inequality across class and gender was perpetuated (Griffin, 1985: 186). In addition, Griffin points out that the models forwarded by Willis and Corrigan did not consider the impact of girls' domestic commitments, in terms of marriage and motherhood, on job choices. As such, these girls considered office work to be most appropriate and desirable because it provided for the opportunity to meet potential husbands (Griffin, 1985: 187, 189). It is also important to note that the racism and sexism inherent in Willis' male-dominated working class occupations marginalizes female students of colour. The different position females occupy in the workforce means that the relationship between schooling experiences and occupational choice cannot be analyzed using Willis' approach. Female students of colour are also subject to racism and sexism in schools, thus, their opposition
or resistance to school authority must be considered in a different context than that of White male students.

In an attempt to bring race and gender into the resistance model, Mary Fuller (1980) studied the experiences of Black female working class students in a London school. Finding that these students demonstrated a positive orientation to education and had high career aspirations, Fuller argued that this could be explained by a Black female subculture of resistance, a product of their acceptance of being Black and female (Mirza, 1992: 22, 31). Fuller explained that this resistance manifested itself in classroom behaviour that emphasized the girls' view that school was "trivial", "boring" and "childish". However, Fuller also points out that in order to resist the racist and sexist connotations associated with being Black and female, to gain control over their lives, and to establish their self-worth to the outside world, the girls employed strategies to achieve academic success and had high career goals (Mirza, 1992: 22, 106, 181).

In that Fuller's theory attempts to explain why Black female students tended to be academically successful and had high career aspirations, her use of the notion of subcultures of resistance contributes to the understanding of social class reproduction. In addition to bringing race and gender into the equation, the strength of this analysis is its contribution to a more dynamic notion of resistance; not all demonstrations of resistance are overt acts of defiance. The girls in Fuller's study demonstrate a more subtle rejection of the existing social order. Willis' male students' resistance results in academic failure and renders them unable to transcend their occupational and social class status. In contrast, the resistance of the Black female students in Fuller's study employs a strategy
of academic achievement, which gives them more potential power to change their existing class status. Framing Fuller's analysis against the theoretical frameworks discussed above, it can be argued that Black female working class students who are able to mediate the dominant structures, knowledge and practices in schools and achieve academic success are acquiring the necessary tools to obtain economic mobility and transcend their social class status.

However, as Mirza points out, this analysis fails to explain how the subculture of resistance works through the structural constraints inherent in a capitalist economy (Mirza, 1992: 23). In other words, despite the positive academic outcomes, racism and sexism still limit the occupational opportunities for these students; Black female students are still subject to social inequality in the schools and the workplace, and continue to be relegated to working class occupations. The analysis based on the subculture of resistance must go beyond discussions of the girls' experiences in schools at the level of their individual attitudes toward academic achievement and career aspirations. In the movement toward integrating the role of human agency, resistance theory must not neglect the relationship to the structural racism and sexism in schools and society which significantly influence a student's experiences. In short, in its consideration of human agency in the reproduction of the social order, Fuller's analysis tends to overlook the impact of structural determinants established in earlier models of reproduction theory.

In summary, resistance models provided important theoretical contributions to understanding the maintenance of the social class hierarchy. Resistance theory attempted to view domination in a more dynamic way and less as process "from above". It
represents a move away from the narrow focus on the structural and ideological constraints of a capitalist economy, and examines the complex interplay between and multi-dimensional aspects of human agency, power and culture (Giroux, 1983: 282-5). As such, one of the most significant contributions of resistance models is their highlighting of the potential for transformation of the social order. Resistance models also begin to investigate how tensions in race, social class, and gender are experienced or “lived out” by students (Weis, 1995: 164). However, as indicated above, these insights were underdeveloped. The most strongly criticized aspect of the resistance models has been its tendency to emphasize the role of class at the expense of race and gender (Dei et al., 1997: 221).

The more recent literature attempts to address these theoretical shortcomings, particularly through challenging the continuing overemphasis on class in resistance theory. The next section will consider three examples of such research. These current theoretical perspectives attempt to investigate further the impact of race and/or gender in shaping schooling experiences and the reproduction of the social class order. Again, it should be emphasized that this is not meant to be a comprehensive or exhaustive survey of all of the literature which can be viewed as responding to or modifying the reproduction/resistance theories. Rather, I will outline what I see as three key examples of research in sociology of education that have supplanted existing theoretical frameworks, and which have emphasized the centrality of race and/or gender in reproducing the social class structure.
It is interesting that there are similarities between the earlier research and the current examples noted here. For instance, it will become clear below that Delpit's "culture of power" builds upon the frameworks developed by Bourdieu and Bernstein; similarly, Dei et al.'s research on the disengagement of Black students from school is reminiscent of Fuller's study of Black female students. However, it should be remembered that the purpose of this chapter is to show the emphasis on race and/or gender in the more current research examples, and the possible implications of such an approach in generating a contemporary class perspective on schooling. I will attempt below to demonstrate how examining the race and/or gender perspective in these examples helps to form an argument for (re)shaping a class approach to the raced and gendered experiences of contemporary youth.

**Current Theoretical Approaches: A Focus on Race and/or Gender**

Moving away from class-based analysis of resistance, John Ogbu (1992) adds a dimension to the theory of resistance which highlights the influence of structures of racial inequality on the maintenance of social class divisions. Although Ogbu is a researcher in the field of anthropology of education, his work is also linked to the research in sociology of education in its examination of the social inequality among racialized groups in contemporary society (Dei et al., 1997: 252). Central to his analysis is the notion of "involuntary minorities", defined as people of colour who were brought to the United States through slavery, conquest, colonization, or forced labour. Involuntary minorities include Blacks, Mexican Americans, Native Hawaiians, Puerto
Ricans, and American Indians (Ogbu, 1992: 8). He emphasizes the impact of the pre-conditioned oppositional relationship between involuntary minorities and the dominant White culture on academic success of involuntary minority groups. His argument is based on the established notion that the school curriculum is a reflection of White culture, and that succeeding in school necessarily means adopting the attitudes, practices and behaviours of the "enemy". For involuntary minorities, to be successful in school means "acting White", or replacing their own cultural identity with White cultural identity. As Ogbu sees it, it is because of the social costs and psychological pressures against "acting White" that involuntary minority students resist adopting the dominant attitudes, practices and behaviours in schools. It is explained that involuntary minorities resist the dominant practices and ideology in schools in order to preserve the self-worth and community support central to their identity (Ogbu, 1992: 10). By this account, the resistance that characterizes the schooling experience of involuntary minority students prevents the academic success necessary for economic mobility and transcendence from subordinate class positions, particularly along racial lines.

In Ogbu's analysis the central factor in determining resistance and the reproduction of the social order is the racialized relationship between cultural groups. He identifies the structural racism inherent in the relationship among involuntary minorities and the dominant institution of schooling as hindering the ability of students of colour to achieve academic success. In other words, the oppositional cultures that emerge out of racist structures leave students powerless to transcend their existing social class position. Students are faced with two choices to negotiate their racialized schooling experience:
either complete acceptance (involving the denial and oppression of one's own cultural identity) or open rejection of the dominant culture in schooling (resulting in academic failure). This translates into limited opportunities in the capitalist labour market, and social class divisions along race lines are reinforced and maintained.

The ethnographic study of Black students' disengagement from school recently completed by George Dei, Josephine Mazzuca, Elizabeth McIssac, and Jasmin Zine (1997) also rejects the classist and structuralist explanations characterizing the reproduction/resistance models (Dei et al., 1997: 220). Given that academic success plays a large role in determining students' economic mobility and social class status, their study on why Black students' "drop out" of school is directly linked to the reproduction of the social class hierarchy. Using the perspectives of students, parents, and school personnel as a starting point, Dei et al. investigated the racialized, gendered, and classed structures of schooling and society which contribute to school leaving, paying particular attention to the impact of race (Dei et al., 1997: 222; Dei & James, 1998: 96). They asked students "how the dynamics of social difference (race/ethnicity, class, gender) affect their schooling experiences and what changes they would like implemented" (Dei & James, 1998: 97). The students in their study perceived the differential evaluation and treatment of Black students, manifested in attitudes, behaviours, and practices on the part of teachers, guidance counsellors, and administrators as contributing the most to the disengagement of Black students from school. For instance, students linked their disadvantage in education to being subject to subtle messages of inferiority, derogatory remarks, alienation within classrooms, violent pedagogy, physical expulsion, and damage
to their self esteem (Dei et al., 1997: 229-30; Dei & James, 1998: 104). Of particular relevance was the students’ perception that teachers and guidance counsellors had low academic expectations for Black students, especially Black male students. Academic streaming was recognized as a mechanism rooted in these low expectations, and one which restricted Black students from being able to transcend their social class status and achieving economic mobility. From the perspective of the Black students interviewed, this process effectively contributed to reproduction of existing social class inequalities, within school and wider society (Dei et al., 1997: 232).

Lisa Delpit’s (1988) notion of the “culture of power” is helpful in understanding the subordination and alienation experienced by the Black students in Dei et al.’s study (1997). In her research on process-oriented versus skills-oriented writing instruction, she argues that the linguistic forms, communicative strategies, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of interacting that characterize the dominant culture constitute codes for participating in a “culture of power”. She correctly points out that success in institutions - in schools and in society - is dependent upon acquiring knowledge of these codes. The students in Dei et al.’s study recognized that success in school was only possible if they were given access to this social knowledge, and taught the codes and rules of the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1988: 282-3). Yet students who were from subordinate class backgrounds were denied access to that social knowledge in schools - access to the “culture of power” was withheld from the working class students and students of colour (Altenbaugh, et al., 1995: 145; Dei et al., 1997: 233). Effectively, the boundaries of
social class inequality are reproduced and maintained, ensuring that the privileged students remain privileged, and that the subordinate students remain marginalized.

Rejecting the class based perspective of the traditional reproduction/resistance models for the Black experience, Dei and his colleagues argue that adding race to the analysis provides the "missing link" in existing resistance theory on the reproduction of the social order (Dei et al., 1997: 224-5, 239). Dei et al. move away from the unilinear, class-based approach to schooling experiences by looking at class and gender from the perspective of race. Dei and James' (1998) discussion of the ethnographic study illustrates this point:

In articulating the centrality of race [identity] and its "immediacy in everyday experience" of African-Canadian students, the [study] acknowledges the co-determinant status of race, class, gender and sexual identities. It is also conceded that "race-relations" in society are actually interactions between raced, classed, and gendered subjects...While it is important to always speak of multiple human experiences in a way that captures the intersections of diverse and myriad identities and oppressive relations, it is argued that from context to context, certain forms/systems of domination and oppression, like forms of identities, are more salient and visible than others....In the particular narration of school experiences for a group of African-Canadian youths, the primacy of race oppression is evident even when students’ lived reality demonstrates a 'simultaneity of social oppressions' (Dei & James, 1998: 97).

While Dei et al. acknowledge the need to consider the connections between race, class, and gender, they describes race as the central organizing principle for understanding the experiences of Black students (Dei et al., 1997: 223, 225-6). In other words, they argue that to understand how Black people living in predominantly non-Black societies are positioned in and resist the social order, it is necessary to view class and gender within the context of race (Dei et al., 1997: 239-40).
Heidi Mirza (1992) studied young Black female students in a London school. Mirza addresses the theoretical gaps within reproduction and resistance theory by focusing on the impact of race and gender on social class reproduction, in the context of student negotiation of dominant social structures. She asks the question: Why is it that young Black girls who achieve in school and have high career aspirations are still unable to obtain the economic mobility and social class status that they aspire to? In a critique of Willis’ theory, Mirza’s findings demonstrate that the “internal dynamics that lead the ‘lads’ to reproduce their class position are not applicable to the Black female context” (Mirza, 1992: 114). Mirza found that the quality of the information, advice, and educational preparation available in schools was poor and did not match the ability or aspirations of Black female students. Not only did the girls receive “custodial” education, but the girls spent the majority of their time employing strategies to challenge or avoid the racist and negative teacher attitudes, evaluations, and expectations. As a result, the girls’ career choices were limited to “gendered” and working class occupations, such as social work, nursing, and office work (Mirza, 1992: 191-2)

Using the narratives of Black female students themselves, Mirza moved beyond the debate of dominant ideology and cultures of resistance which emphasized the centrality of class. Her analysis accentuated instead the Black female students’ experiences within the racist and sexist institutions of school and the labour market as determining their occupational choice and class position (Mirza, 1992: 23, 192). Thus, in her study, the reproduction of the class structure is viewed from the perspective of race and gender. Similar to the approach taken by Ogbu and Dei et al., Mirza explains the
maintenance of the social class order by looking at racialized and gendered experiences in schooling. Her perspective provides an important contribution to the resistance theory by providing a framework for understanding the role of race and gender in reproducing the social class structure in the lives of Black girls.

In summary, it is clear that the work of Ogbu, Dei et al., and Mirza address the theoretical emphasis on class in resistance theory by examining schooling experiences from the perspective of race and/or gender. These researchers have attempted to understand social class reproduction by looking specifically at the racialized and gendered experiences of students of colour and female students. For example, as noted above, the racism and sexism experienced in schooling and society ranged from oppositional relationships between racial groups, differential and negative treatment of students of colour in pedagogical practices, denial of access to the “culture of power”, and a sexist labour market. As noted above, these racialized and gendered experiences determine to a large degree occupational choice, economic mobility, and class position of individuals. A look at the work of Ogbu, Dei et al., and Mirza against the framework of reproduction and resistance theories indicates that where class once assumed a primary position in the theoretical analysis on schooling experiences and the maintenance of the social order, the responses in recent analysis gives increased attention to race and gender. Having outlined the ways in which class has been conceptualized and reconceptualized over time in the debates on schooling experiences in sociology of education, the conclusion will discuss the implications of this movement for my own research here.
Conclusion: Towards a Class Perspective in a “Classless” Context

The purpose of this literature review was to understand and identify how class has been conceptualized as shaping schooling experiences and maintaining the social order, in terms of tracing its progression through the historical and current analyses within sociology of education. Reproduction theories focused on the influence of the social division of labour, and the relationship between dominant culture and school knowledge in reproducing social class divisions. Challenging the over-emphasis on the notion of domination of subordinate social groups in schooling practices and systems, resistance models emerged during the 1980s. Resistance theories attempted to integrate students’ own activity in the reproduction and mediation of their social class identity, pointing to the active role of individuals in mediating the social conditions within schooling and society. The final section of this discussion looked at three examples of recent literature which rejected the unilinear class focus in the reproduction/resistance models. It was illustrated that this contemporary research viewed and analyzed classed schooling experiences from the perspective of race and gender. The work of Ogbu, Dei et al., and Mirza, while acknowledging the interaction between and influence of race, class, and gender, point to the salience of race and gender in structuring an individuals’ experiences in schooling and reproducing social class divisions. In these examples, race and gender provide the analytical lens through which classed schooling structures and experiences are examined.

There are a number of factors which contributed to the movement toward the increasing centrality of race and gender in current educational debates on schooling
experiences and the reproduction of the social order. Firstly, as this discussion has indicated, the class-based approach that characterized the reproduction and resistance models was strongly criticized for its inability to adequately address the impact of race and gender in the schooling experience of students.

As indicated in this discussion, the work done in the recent literature indeed fills the theoretical gaps in the resistance and reproduction models. In addition to these examples, the theme of rejecting the primacy of class has been echoed in other sociological scholarship. Other authors have rejected the primacy of class for various reasons, and have highlighted the different political, social, and theoretical effects (see for example Solomos, 1986; Briskin, 1990; Stasiulis, 1990; Yuval-Davis, 1994; Caldwell, 1995; Dei, 1995; Grillo and Wildman, 1997).

Furthermore, the emphasis on race and gender in the work of Ogbu, Dei et al., and Mirza can also be seen as an expression of the move toward a post-industrial, "classless" society. Lois Weis argues that radical changes to the North American economy in the last two decades have rendered class distinctions in a post-industrial society as all but obsolete (Weis, 1990: 3; Weis, 1995: 167). The economic recession has eroded the security of the middle class as well as the working class, blurring class boundaries. The restructured economy which is increasingly segmented emphasizes high technology and service industries has meant a decline in the solidarity and strength of traditional, industrial "working class" occupations. As a byproduct of industrial restructuring, "This discourse is often associated with intimations of the decreasing social importance and political relevance of class" (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 48). Further
contributing to the notion of a “classless” society is the “common sense” idea that class is a less visible social difference.

Despite these developments, the fact remains that class is not obsolete. Rather than disappearing, class relations are changing. The type of employment, or the kind of work that one does provides one aspect of the class picture. While industrial occupations are diminishing, economic differences persist, and social distances are growing. Because of the changes occurring in the workforce, the marker of difference is no longer securely located in social production. In other words, in defining class, there is no longer as much of an emphasis on the type of work one does. It is one of the goals of this research to begin to uncover where the emphasis is placed in the class language of the 1990s.

Researchers and theorists do not deny that it is a critical component linked to race and gender categories, and class continues to be discussed in sociology of education research. It is undeniable that class continues to play a role in the lives of all students. It has been shown that race and gender are often the analytical lens through which classed schooling is examined. Yet, in the context of a “classless” society where race and gender are often given centre stage in theoretical discussions and “common sense” understandings, the impact of and role played by class in shaping schooling experiences and outcomes and in reproducing social divisions becomes more insidious. Moreover, the richness and diversity of the available literature has meant that contemporary debate must keep in mind that the analyses have applied to different contexts of time and place. Thus, the fact that the type of attention provided class is changing, both in the literature and in everyday experiences, raises significant questions for youth: First and foremost, is
class relevant in students' lives? How do students understand the meaning and role of class in this "classless" context? How does that understanding shape their racialized and gendered schooling experiences? In this context, what are the material and ideological conditions that allow students to have successful or unsuccessful schooling experiences?

Weis has implored researchers to keep pushing on issues related to gender and race and the way they intersect with social class, especially given the paucity of research on students of colour and female students (Weis, 1995: 166-7). Thus, a perspective which contributes to a fuller understanding of how class functions to shape the lives of those who occupy the margins of society is particularly important. At the risk of appearing to advocate a move back toward the unilinear approach characterizing some reproduction and resistance theories, I would argue that it would be useful to shift the analysis on schooling experiences and the social order to a class perspective. Again, it should be noted here that my intention is not to privilege class over race and gender. Nor am I suggesting that the insights made in the traditional and contemporary research be dismissed - the work of reproduction and resistance theorists clearly represents pathbreaking research that provided significant insights into the social order. Rather, I am proposing a beginning; building on, integrating, and contributing to the existing scholarship to generate a perspective that is mindful of specific historical and geographical contexts. A view of race and gender from the angle of class would contribute to developing a framework for understanding how class continues to "work" in the racialized, gendered schooling for students in the contemporary Canadian context. It is in using class as the lens through which to view the complex relationship between race and gender that we can begin to generate answers to the important questions posed
above.
NOTES

Chapter 2

1 For a more detailed examination of the functional approach, see Gaskell, 1992; Taylor, 1994; and Morrow and Torres, 1995 (Chapter 3).

2 For a more detailed examination of these theoretical approaches, see Davies, 1994.

3 The priority of a non-hegemonic curriculum would be to seek and bring to light the achievements and experiences of groups that are traditionally marginalized in society. It goes beyond the notions of "equity" or "neutrality" in the curriculum. Rather, a non-hegemonic curriculum actively questions and challenges existing systems of power that have and do exclude subordinate groups from "history". As George Dei and Irma Marcia James puts it, "it requires the questioning and critique of what has come to constitute 'valid knowledge' and how such knowledge is produced and disseminated internally and globally" (1998: 105).

4 Anyon defines social class as a series of relationships to the system of production in society: the relation to the system of ownership of capital, the relation to authority and control in work and in society, and the relationship between individuals and their own productive activity (the type of activity that constitutes an individual's work). It is a dynamic network of social relations that one develops over time, through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, abilities, traits, and opportunity in life experiences. For a more detailed discussion of her definition of social class, see Anyon's chapter titled "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work" in Giroux, H., Purpel, D., (Eds.). The Hidden Curriculum and Moral Education.

5 Similar trends have also been illustrated in more current studies of computer use in middle- and low-socioeconomic status schools.

6 The term "at risk" replaces earlier term "disadvantaged" to emphasize prevention, and that "at risk" students can be identified by certain characteristics (Our Children At Risk, 1995: 16). "High risk" was in use only between 1980 and 1987, and was replaced by "at risk". Coined by the Boston Coalition of Advocates for Students in their 1985 report A Nation At Risk, this term was being used to refer to school and academic behavior, potential school leavers, the educationally disadvantaged, and underachievement (Liontos, 1991: 5).

7 Hoods refers to the students who are perceived by students, parents and teachers as "troublemakers", and who "menace the peace of their streets" (Connell et al., 1982: 82, 171)

8 The related scholarship is vast and diverse. For a few examples, see Handa, 1997; Fine, 1989, 1991; Weis, 1990; Dei & James, 1998.
9 “Drop out” is placed in quotations to highlight the socially constructed nature of the term. George Dei and others have pointed out that “There are those who make a rational and pragmatic choice to leave school, while others are compelled to do so”, whether due to personal situations such as pregnancy or the need/desire to work, or whether because of negative and social conditions, such as racism, sexism, and classism, in schooling and society (Dei, Mazucca, McIsaac, and Zine, 1997: 222). To avoid the negative connotations of school leaving that traditionally blame the individual, and to recognize the impact of both personal and/or structural factors in the decision to leave school, the term “school leaver” (Altenbaugh et al, 1995: 18) is used to represent dropping out, pushing out, fading out, easing out, and/or combinations of these school leaving experiences.

10 Some British researchers use “Black” to refer to individuals originating from the Caribbean, Asia, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Mirza uses the term “Black” to refer to second-generation West Indian students, or students whose parents originated from the West Indies.
CHAPTER 3

THE CONTEXT: COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL LIFE

It is necessary to first understand the context of the school organization before exploring how race, class and gender organize the experiences of marginalized students. This chapter will attempt to create a general profile of school and community life in a working class community, from the perspective of female students of colour\(^1\). It should be noted that individual references, such as “the school” or “Woodgrove\(^2\) school”, are for methodological purposes only. In reality, I am synthesizing the most salient and recurrent themes that arose throughout the interviews with the students from the three schools investigated, to create a composite of school life in a working class community.

Three interrelated areas of the school organization will be highlighted. First, students’ perspective of the school organization, in terms of daily regime and school structures and practices are outlined. Second, I sought student understandings on individual actors within school - descriptions of teachers, students, and administrators. Finally, I investigated student perceptions of the school community.

**Student View: The School**

Two main themes emerged in the student narratives in relation to school organization: the schools’ reputation for violence in the community, and its focus on discipline and security.
Reputation in the Community

Woodgrove High School has a reputation in the community for being one of the most violent schools in the city. It is viewed by members of the community as a school in which students arrive bearing guns, knives and other weapons. The students maintain that many individuals in the community do carry guns and/or knives, and are involved in crime and drug dealing (Aisha, May 25: 4). Most of these individuals either currently attend Woodgrove or are former students (Jessica, March 23: 13-14).

Woodgrove is also viewed as a school in which there are frequently violent physical fights between students in the school. Substantiating these speculations are publicly reported incidences of violence. For instance, the local news recently reported that a Woodgrove student was charged with assaulting a student and a teacher from a neighbouring school with an illegal weapon. In another recent incident, the city news reported that a Woodgrove student was charged in a serious criminal offense.

Several students emphasized that the violent reputation was largely due to events that occurred in the distant past (Notes, April 22: 9; Pamela, May 21: 1). Others indicated that Woodgrove is no rougher than any other typical school, and thus did not deserve to be singled out or feared as the most violent school in the community:

...people usually think Woodgrove is a violent school but it is not, you have fights everywhere, you don’t have fights everyday at Woodgrove all the time...It’s not a violent, it’s not a violent school... you don’t have fights everyday, you don’t have police coming to school everyday... (Sarah: March 6: 2, 10)

This narrative begins to reveal an interesting pattern of defending the school and community against negative perception, and will be discussed and analyzed further in Chapter 5. For the purposes of this composite, it can be summarized that the school has a
reputation for violence and crime that is substantiated by specific events noted in the student narratives.

**Discipline & Security**

All of the students interviewed mentioned the strict discipline mechanisms in place as a distinct characteristic of Woodgrove’s organization (Sarah, March 6: 4; Aisha, May 25:1):

...they are really strict at Woodgrove....there are a lot of rules. I can understand why you need rules, you need to have rules. But it’s just that it’s too restricted! (Sarah, March 6: 4)

Woodbine’s rules are distributed at the beginning of the year in the school’s planner, which the students purchase for a small fee. The discipline focuses around three main areas: controlling student attendance, containment of students, and controlling violence among students.

A student may arrive in class up to fifteen minutes after the bell has sounded without being reprimanded. An attendance office is set up where students are required to pick up late slips, or to provide notes explaining their late arrival or their absence from class. If a student fails to arrive in class on time on five occasions, the Principal or Vice Principal will speak to the student about it. As well, a note is forwarded from the Principal or Vice Principal to the student’s parent(s) or guardian(s). After being late on 10 occasions, the student is suspended (Jessica, March 5: 2). Occasionally, the Vice Principal will call a student directly at home to find out why they are not in school (Jessica, March 5: 3). The same rules apply for students who are absent from class; five absences earn a note from the principal, and 10 absences results in suspension. In
addition, participation marks are deducted from the student's final grade of the class missed (Amy, March 10: 1). Students who are 18 years of age or older are permitted to leave school grounds at any time, as long as they first provide the office representatives with a reason for their absence, and sign a register before leaving school property.

Containment was a second theme underlying the discipline measures in place. Hall monitors are utilized to prevent loitering in the hallways (Jessica, March 5: 4; Aisha, May 25: 1). The hall monitor is not a student of the school, but rather is employed by the school. The hall monitor carries a walkie-talkie to communicate with other teachers also patrolling the hallways. Several teachers supervise the main hallways at all times of the school day. Together, the hall monitor and the teachers on duty work to ensure that students do not loiter in hallways during class time, and to prevent "intruders" from trespassing on school property (Pamela, May 21: 1). Students found lingering in hallways are quickly ushered into the cafeteria or library, where yet other teachers are on duty for supervision (Amy, March 10: 1-2).

Classroom doors are usually kept closed once the class has begun. Students are not allowed to exit without the express permission of the teacher, and must carry a hall pass (Pamela, May 21: 1). Once students are in class, many of the teachers lock the doors and, to students' dismay, do not allow students free movement:

...they lock the doors, lock you up, cuz that's some sort of rule here or something, they don't want people to come off the street and get in the classroom or whatever...You are in a class and the door's shut. The windows are shut. What's that? (Sarah, March 6, 9)
Sarah interprets the locking of classroom doors as not only an effort to contain students, but also as a manifestation of teachers’ fear of the violence in the school. She points to another example of this fear:

I think some of them are really scared. Mrs. H, she was really classy, she always had a whole bunch of stuff on her desk, she just leaves, she doesn’t care because she knows no one is going to go in her desk and take her stuff. Mrs. L, she had a little tattered bag and she could be just going across the hall or down the hallway, and she has her bag on her shoulder going outside (Sarah, March 6: 10)

School dress codes are also designed to prevent non-students from trespassing on school property. Students are forbidden to wear hats or jackets on school property, except when outdoors (Aisha, May 25: 1). Moreover, the school is planning to implement new rules that require students to wear specific colours. For instance, students would only be permitted to wear blue slacks and white shirts. It is believed by the school administration that this would further prevent “intruders” from trespassing on school property, and would ensure the safety of the student body (Pamela & Mary, May 21: 6; Heather & Irene, May 26:6).

It becomes clear that one of the most important issues in the school is shielding its students from outsiders, in the interest of safety and freedom from violence, either imagined or real.

In an effort to further curb violence and crime in the school, cameras are mounted in several locations - at every entrance, in the cafeteria, in the library, and in high-traffic hallways (Natalie, May 25: 5). In addition, once a week, uniformed security guards patrol the school (Jennifer, May 26: 1). These mechanisms were designed to prevent and control violence and crime among students in the school, and to ensure the safety of the
student body. Romy explained that because “there are broken windows every day”, she understands why cameras are in place - to reduce or prevent the recurring vandalism (Notes, April 27: 5).

Within these discussions, all of the students perceived the discipline measures to be used against Black students and other students of colour more so than non-Black students. Jessica critiques this aspect of school:

...the thing that I see is that, when a Black kid does something, like with them, a lot of the guys that used to come to Woodgrove, that don’t come here anymore, they got kicked out, they were just kicking them out, like any little thing, they are out. Like if they do something, like suppose there is a fight, like a Black girl and a White girl and stuff like that, sometime, you know, the Black girl gets suspended and the White girl doesn’t, you know, or they get suspended, but one [the Black student or student of colour] gets suspended for a longer period! (Jessica, March 23, 15)

In contrast, Amy suggested that it was because some Black students skipped classes and “push violence too much” that they were continually in the office being disciplined. It is because these students “think they are bad” and have “so much attitude” (Amy, March 26: 14) that some Black students and other students of colour are treated differently by teachers and administrators. Amy provided an example to illustrate her point:

...there is this one person, they are from the hallway crowd, and the teacher said something to her like “Could you sit down and do your work?” and go “Don’t talk to me like that, you are not my father” and you know? And he goes “I am glad I am not your father, because if I were your father...” you know? You try so hard, but then they have so much attitude, and aggression (Amy, March 26: 18).

This group of hallway students will be discussed in further detail below. The students view discipline as a key component of the schooling organization, and that the discipline measures are intricately linked to race issues. In addition, the girls interviewed in this
study also acknowledge the relationship between the strict discipline measures and the perceived and/or real violence of the school.

**Students' View: Teachers and Students**

Those most dominant in student descriptions of individual actors in school were teachers, “hallway”, “ghetto” or “gangster”5 students, and “normal” students.

**Teachers**

Overall, each of the students had positive feelings about the quality of teachers at Woodgrove. “Good” teachers made learning in their classes fun and relevant to their everyday experiences (Pamela, May 21: 2). One student says of her night school teacher:

Some teachers make it fun because they, like for instance at night school, I love night school, because even though chemistry is hard for me, they associate it with your everyday life, examples from your day to day life, so you understand, but when you go straight from the book it doesn’t make it fun so you don’t want to learn or whatever (Amy, March 10: 2).

Another teacher was praised by several students for being strict, in the sense of being concerned about the academic success of the students (Amy, March 10: 3). Jessica clearly admired and respected this teacher:

OK, she was like, **really** strict, and she can be **mean**! But at the same time she is like that to everyone, she pushes you, and she puts a problem and the board and yell at you, but you know why she is yelling at you, because she wants you to learn. And you really learn, you are like “Oh Mrs. Calvin7 was so mean” but then after, you know you finished that class and you say “You know, I really learned that!”. I thought she was a really good teacher (Jessica, March 5: 5).

Descriptions of the handful of teachers who were most liked and respected included teachers who are approachable - whom students can talk to about problems
Greatly valued in teachers was friendliness. Teachers who greet students in the hallways, and demonstrate an interest in their lives were very well-liked. A few teachers are at school early in the morning if students want or need to talk to them about personal issues (Sarah, March 6: 5).

Teachers who give students freedom in classrooms are also highly respected and liked among these students. Amy describes one such teacher:

I don’t know, he’s just, friendly, you just pass him in the hallway...he gives you freedom, like if you are in his class, he doesn’t pin you down, because he goes “You have to know how to handle your time”, you know, time management, you do whatever, as long as you give him your work, do your work, you can go in the morning to get a coffee, get your muffin, and get rid of your garbage, you just do whatever. And if you have a problem, he explains it to you. Like right now I have some stuff for bio, and he is going to photocopy it for me, free of cost. He does that sort of thing. As long as he knows you work hard (Amy, March 10: 4).

Sarah also commented that this teacher allows spare time to go to the library to do work. His classroom is always open, and students are free to do work there during non-class time.

A number of students talked about one teacher in particular as being a “bad” teacher. Mr. Oxford would routinely make sarcastic remarks towards students, whether in his classroom or as he passed them in the hallways. Jessica talks about this:

And there are some teachers that are really insulting, like they put you down in front of the class, like your writing, and they make you feel like...OK, for instance, Mr. Oxford. I mean, he’s OK, but not my type of teacher. I’ve had him twice, and the thing with him is, if you make one simple mistake, if you make one spelling mistake, he will tease you like say “You should go back to this class, you should go an learn” and he makes you feel like you don’t know what you are doing (Jessica, March 5: 14).
The same teacher was criticized by Amy for his pre-judgments and bias towards students. Mr. Oxford was recognized as demonstrating racist attitudes, as illustrated in an incident with Amy:

Well, I personally do not like him, 'cause you know like, he judges you from, how he marks in class are from the things you do outside the class... I'm from Jamaica, right, so I speak Patois... he goes to my mom, that I am too intelligent to speak Patois... He goes, "Once you come to Canada you are supposed to speak either English or French". Why should you drop your dialect or other language just... and I was so upset! (Amy, March 10: 3).

Amy explained that although this was a clear demonstration of a racist attitude, and that although other teachers and guidance counsellors were aware of his attitudes, his long career at the school meant that "...no matter how much you complain, he gets away with it" (Amy, March 10: 4).

In short, the handful of well liked and respected teachers in the school are friendly, care about the academic well-being of their students, and provide their students with a sense of freedom and responsibility. Teachers who are critical and demonstrate racist attitudes are strongly disliked.

Students: "Hallway", "Ghetto" and "Gangster" Kids

Each of the students recognized one specific student group as standing out from the rest. All of the students differentiated themselves from a group of students they called the "hallway", "ghetto" and "gangster" kids\(^8\) - a group of male and female kids who occupy or "hang out"\(^9\) in specific locations in school - the hallway, the back doors, and the parking lot. It is important to note here that these descriptions are predominantly from students who do not consider themselves to be members of the gangster crowd.
Only one student considers herself to be integrated with both normals and gangsters, all of the other girls interviewed consider themselves to be “normal” kids.

Those students belonging to the gangster crowd were classified as predominantly Black students (Shauna, May 19: 8) who reject the authority of the school and skip classes:

...they go to class, but not regularly. Sometimes I have them in my class and they don’t have spares [free period], but they are still in the hallway... Go home and do something, but they are just hanging out...(Amy: March 26: 14)

The students who are identified as gangster kids are differentiated from “normal” people, in terms of their poor socio-economic backgrounds. The girls say that gangster students are usually from the low income or local government housing projects:

[Gangster] is like, I don’t know, the lowest form of civilization. Like you know how normal people live, they have a house, picket fence and all that? [Gangster] is seen to be like, maybe Ontario housing, maybe like, those ghettos (Mary, May 21: 3).

I think they come from poor places, poor communities (Natalie, May 25: 6).

Within school, gangster students typically participate in sports or dancing and singing activities; they do not “concern themselves” with getting an education (Shauna, May 19: 8). Their time spent hanging out is viewed as a demonstration that they don’t really care about school, that it isn’t their top priority (Amy, March 10: 6-7). They not only hang around in the hallways, they hang out on school property once classes are over, such as on Friday nights and in the summertime (Sarah, March 6: 12; Amy, March 26: 14;). The gangster students are also characterized as rambunctious and rowdy:

Mr. Wilson always leaves his door open, and you are in there, and they are screaming at the top of their voice, and swearing, and stuff like that, you know? (Amy, March 26: 15)
...some of them, they are loud. You know, they are really loud. You always hear them in the hallway (Jessica, March 23: 9)

Corresponding to the labels, gangster students are also associated with being involved in gangs and gang activity, including violence, crime, and drugs (Stephanie, May 21: 6; Aisha: May 25: 4; Natalie & Fiona, May 25: 5, 6; Jennifer, May 26: 1). Because of this image, “You know, the bad type that will smoke and has their crew behind them”, many students are afraid of the gangster crowd (Jennifer, May 26: 2). Earlier it was noted that gangster students are viewed as always getting in trouble at school, and are routinely involved in conflicts with teachers and other students (Amy, March 26: 14). For instance, one of the students who was a part of this gangster group was arrested for violent criminal behaviour (Amy, March 26: 14).

Related to their involvement in crime, students note that gangster students have specific codes of appearance, and either wear designer label clothing or “gang colours”. The girls point out that because many of these gangster students come from working class or poor backgrounds, they get involved in selling drugs in order to get “fast cash” and the ability to purchase the necessary clothing. These statements are made with the knowledge of particular students who are involved in such activity, often witnessed by the girls themselves (Notes, April 22: 8; Jessica: March 23: 11). I asked Jessica how she “knew” about this kind of activity and behaviour, and the resulting conversation is worth noting in detail:

Jessica: ...Some of the guys that live down there, I know they are drug dealers, some of them, I know they have guns.
Lenni: How do you know?

Jessica: Because sometimes you be passing, and you hear them talking. You hear them talking about certain things, you hear them say “Oh I have a graham” or
stuff like that. Or you hear, by *** [local park] and I saw a couple of people, and I was talking to a guy there that I know, and this guy came up to him and I hear them talking and he's like, no I don't have anything, so you know, like you just pick up on certain stuff. And across where I live, where the *** [names a local business establishment], you know, the drug dealers, they hang over there.

Lenni: How do you know that?

Jessica: Because you see them pass stuff, you see stuff happening, you live in the area, you are gonna know, you know certain stuff is happening (Jessica, March 23: 14).

“Normal” Students

In contrast to their descriptions of who participates in the gangster crowd, “normal” students are those that are not involved in crime or drugs. The narratives both implicitly and explicitly suggest that the students interviewed identify themselves as normal students. In discussions comparing normal students with gangster students, the girls would situate their own activities, attitudes, and behaviours into the “normal” category. Jessica and Amy’s comments are illustrative of the ways that the girls distinguish themselves from the gangster students in their narratives. After outlining what gangster students are like, from their perspective, they asserted:

My friends, they are not like that (Jessica, March 23: 9).

That’s not me (Jessica, March 5: 6)

I am so much not like them [gangster students] (Amy, March 26: 14).

Like the gangster students, “normal” students are divided along ethnic lines, or in terms of their academic behaviour. For instance, Sarah describes the specific geographical school locations for student ethnic groups. Indian, Somali, Jamaican, West Indian, and Trinidadian students are frequently found to be socializing or hanging around
in specific hallways of the school (Sarah, March 6: 3; Mary, May 21: 2). These students usually speak to each other in their own language (Sarah, March 6: 12).

In addition to the geographical location of ethnic groups, each of the girls interpret student divisions as shaped by academic behaviour. The “nerds” or “intellects”, or the students spend the majority of their time studying in the library, and very little time socializing with other students (Amy, March 10: 7; Shauna, May 19: 5; Sharon, May 26: 4; Jennifer, May 26:1). Other normal students either are not involved in any extracurricular activities, or have a balance of both activity in school programs as well as academic work.

Overall, the student population is not viewed as being overly academic, but there are “a lot of talented students at Woodgrove” (Sarah, March 6: 2). For instance, many students are involved in sports, as already suggested above. They are also involved in music and singing and dancing (Sarah, March 6: 4). For example, during a recent school assembly, students put on a play about Black History Month, and performed African and Indian cultural dances.

**Students’ View: The School Community**

The students describe Woodgrove as a small low-income suburban community. Most families in Woodgrove are single-parent families. The highest level of education received by the majority of parents or adults in the community is between grades 9-12 without graduating. Over two-thirds of the population consists of people of color. Of this, the two most dominant groups are Black and South Asian Indian. At least half of the parents in this school community speak in a mother tongue other than English. The
girls' parents, as well as the majority of working adults in this community, are employed in office work, unskilled factory work or semi skilled manual labour. Other adults in the community are supported by social community services programs (Jessica, March 5: 7; Sarah, March 6:13; Amy, March 10: 7-8; Notes, April 22: 9, 11; Shauna, May 19: 9; Aisha, Gail, Karla & Roxanne, May 25: 3).

Similar to Woodgrove High School, the community has a reputation for being violent and plagued with crime (Amy, March 10: 7). Amy, Sarah and Jessica indicate that the government housing complexes located near the school are the main source of violence in the community. The students reason that the behaviour of some community members, which is similar to that of the gangster students, largely contributes to this reputation (Pamela, May 21: 5).

**Conclusion: School Life and the Relevance of Class**

Using student narratives of working class girls of colour, this chapter has drawn a composite of school and community life. The girls describe their school organization as being one that is plagued by violence and crime, both real and imagined. This general perception and reputation is reflected in the school structures which are heavily invested in discipline and safety. It is also manifested in the behaviour, attitudes, and interaction among individual actors in school (such as students, teachers, and administrators).

The students interviewed distinguish themselves from hallway, ghetto, and gangster students, who are depicted as academically unsuccessful. In addition, gangster students are also described as being involved in violence, crime, and drugs, both within
the school and in the community. Other "normal" student groups in the school are divided by ethnicity as well as academic performance and behaviour.

The foremost question in this study is whether or not class is relevant in the lives of working class female students of colour. For obvious reasons, it was not appropriate (nor feasible) to directly ask high school students to confirm or deny this notion. However, Hammersley and Atkinson assert that information about individual understandings, such as those related to class, does not always come out of direct questions from the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 126-127). This chapter has revealed examples in which the students positioned themselves and their peers in a social hierarchy, according to their values, rules and expectations. Going over the data in this light, I was able to find class systems in oppositional relationships and power structures, such as in the definition of the hallway, ghetto and gangster kids versus normal students. From the perspectives of the girls in the study, hallway, ghetto and gangster students are considered to be deviant, and to occupy the margins within school and community. In contrast, the normal students are relatively more focused on their academic success and achievement. In these descriptions, students often used the terms "higher than" or "lower than" to indicate the status or position of student groups. As time went on, it was clear that these social class hierarchies are present throughout the narratives, and will be explored further in following chapters.

In conclusion, the student portraits of the school and the community would indicate that class is indeed relevant in the lives of female students of colour from working class backgrounds. The girls' description of the student body clearly places
gangster students in a subordinate social class position relative to normal students. The composite drawn by the students also presents evidence to suggest that the community is also placed in a social class hierarchy, based on its negative reputation for violence, poverty and crime, and its relationship to gangster students. It is my position that this finding - that class is relevant in the lives of these students - is a necessary first step in developing a framework for understanding the meaning and role of social class in the racialized and gendered lives of female, working class students of colour. An awareness of the relevance of class in the lives of working class girls of colour is also essential if an analysis that is grounded in their historical, political, social and economic specificities is to be developed.

However, it is not possible nor desirable to end the inquiry here. The remaining questions must be investigated: How do students understand and explain social class in their school and community context? How does that understanding shape their racialized and gendered schooling experiences? What are the material conditions that are essential if success in school and society is to be achieved, and if social class is to be transcended? These questions will be considered in Part II.
NOTES

Chapter 3

1 This method of creating a composite of school life is utilized to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the schools and community investigated.

2 Fictional name.

3 To protect the identities of the individuals and the school involved, I will not identify the nature of the crime committed.

4 This citation refers to the notes taken during preliminary informal group interviews, conducted to get introductory information about school and community life. Following the method used for references to the taped interviews, these citations include the date of the interview and the corresponding transcript page number.

5 I place these student group labels in quotations to highlight the fact that “hallway”, “ghetto”, “gangster” and “normal” students are social constructions, a product of the understandings, lived experiences, relationships, and perspectives of the students of this study. Please note that for ease of reading I will not use quotation marks throughout the body of the thesis.

6 This night-school teacher is also a daytime teacher at Woodgrove.

7 Fictional name.

8 The terms hallway, ghetto, and gangster are used interchangeably in student narratives, and refer to one type of student. However, because “gangster” is used most commonly in student narratives, and for the purposes of this composite of school life, it is the term that will be used throughout the remainder of the study to refer to hallway, gangster and/or ghetto students.

9 Students using the term “hanging out” with reference to hallway, ghetto, or gangster students, used it in a negative, derogatory sense, intimating that these students were dawdling and/or loitering and being generally unproductive or deviant.

10 “Crew” is synonymous with “gang”, and refers to the other individuals in the group who participate in criminal or violent activities together.

11 These colours are used by gangster students to identify their membership to various gangs in the school and/or community.
PART II.

Student Perspectives: Meanings and Functions of Social Class

Part I has demonstrated that race and gender are often the analytical lens through which classed, racialized and gendered schooling is examined. The composite of school and community life drawn from student narratives has illustrated that class is indeed relevant in the lives of the working class female students of colour in this study.

Part II will focus on student understandings and explanations of the meaning and role of social class in their schooling experiences. First, Chapter 4 will use student narratives to answer the question previously posed: how do students understand the meaning of class in their context? In Chapter 5, these meanings form the basis for student discussions concerning the function of social class in shaping their schooling and community lives. Chapter 5 will attempt to answer the remaining question: In their lived context, what are the material and ideological conditions that allow students to have successful or unsuccessful schooling experiences? Reflecting on the findings, the concluding chapter will discuss the implications of this study for future research on the impact of class in the racialized, gendered schooling for working class, female students of colour.
CHAPTER 4

THE FLUID DIMENSIONS OF CLASS

The aim of this study is to build a class perspective on the racialized and gendered schooling experiences of marginalized students, within a framework that is mindful of specific historical, political, economic, social and geographical contexts. Learning how working class, female students of colour understand class within the context of their own school and community lives is essential if that goal is to be accomplished. Thus, this chapter will outline the ways in which the girls in this study understand and explain the meaning of social class.

The findings here suggest that theoretical approaches to class definitions that emphasize rigid socio-economic factors are inappropriate for the analysis of the schooling experiences of working class girls of colour. I wish to argue that in the context of the lives of the girls interviewed in this study, class cannot be limited to fixed socio-economic factors alone. For obvious reasons, economic factors are significant in conceptions of social class. However, an awareness of the fluid aspects of the material, academic, attitudinal/behavioural, gendered and racial dimensions of class, as understood by working class female students of colour, is a necessary prerequisite to understanding the material and ideological conditions required for success, in the context of their school and community lives.
Theoretical Approaches to Social Class

In order to assess the theoretical implications of student conceptions of social class, there is a need to first provide a framework of analysis concerning theoretical approaches to the definition of social class. There is no single general, comprehensive theory of class. Rather the concept of class has been taken up in sociology of education in many different ways. Present-day discussion of social class theory can be connected to classical sociological theory, particularly to the influential work of Karl Marx and Max Weber, who are among those who “first brought the notion to the forefront of social theory”, and whose insights are most often drawn upon and elaborated in contemporary theory (Giddens, 1981: 10; Morrow and Torres, 1995: 10).

Marxian theory is a dichotomous model based on objectively defined classes. According to Marx, there is a divide between two fundamental classes in society: owners and non-owners of the means of production. According to Marx, the inevitable conflict between labour and capital leads to social transformation (Porter, 1965: 18; Giddens, 1981: 28; Morrow and Torres, 1995: 13). In contrast to Marxian emphasis on property relations in the concept of class, Weber provides a more pluralistic perspective that includes classes “differentiated: on the one hand, according to the type of property that is usable for returns; and, on the other hand, according to the kind of services that can be offered on the market” (Weber, 1971: 1973; Giddens, 1981: 42). The objective characteristic of class influences the lifestyles of individuals. In other words, Weber distinguishes between class (relations of production) and status (life styles, or the “social
estimation of honour" received) which may cut across economic relations of production (Weber, 1971: 198; Giddens, 1981: 43-44)⁴.

Chapter 2 examined examples of both early and recent studies which have attempted to analyze the role of reproduction in maintaining of the social class structure in education. Like many other studies exploring race, class and gender in sociology of education, the examples of research provided here are largely based on an interpretation of social class that focuses mainly on an individual’s material relationship to the means of production. As it was suggested in Chapter 2, reproduction theory approaches class as a category, in which groups of individuals share attributes such as income level, type of occupation, and ownership (Connell et al., 1982: 33; Morrow and Torres, 1995: 5). Jean Anyon successfully summarized this most commonly utilized, categorical approach to the definition of social class⁵. In this perspective, occupation and income level are the predominant factors which indicate social class. Chiefly developed through one’s work, social class is more specifically defined as a series of relationships to the capitalist system of production: a relationship to the system of ownership of physical capital; a relationship to other people at work and in society (in terms of authority and control); and a relationship to the content and process of one’s own productive activity (the type of activity that makes up an individual’s work) (Anyon, 1983: 144-147). All three relationships combine to determine an individual’s social class.

J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996) points out that most Marxists use the term class to refer to members of a social group who share a specific location in the economy by virtue of their positions in the “relations of production”, a term which encompasses power over
labour processes, property ownership (particularly over the means of production), and whether individuals produce or appropriate surplus labour (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 49).

By this account, the underlying notion is that social class is measured by an individual's relationship to property, labour and production in society. Key to this definition are the education, training, and skill levels required for a given occupation. Annette Lareau's criteria in choosing a working class and professional middle class community for her research on cultural capital and parental involvement in schooling (1987) are illustrative here. The working class community in her study included one in which the majority of the parents were high school graduates or dropouts, employed in skilled or semi-skilled occupations, were paid an hourly wage, and were periodically unemployed. The professional middle-class community consisted of parents who were mostly college graduates or professionals who had strong career opportunities, and who were stronger financially (Lareau, 1987: 73).

Resistance theories, such as those that were highlighted in Chapter 2, were influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci, acknowledged as one of the most significant theoretical contributions to Marxist theory. While strongly influenced by Marx, Gramsci's work attempted to understand social reality as cultural hegemony, "that is, a system of power based on not only on coercion but also on the voluntary consent of the dominated, subaltern classes." Gramsci's view provided new insights on the nature of the social order and the potential for transformation, and "from this perspective, therefore, a crucial aspect of a revolutionary strategy had to be cultural" (Morrow and Torres, 1995: 249-250).
Other writers, such as J.K Gibson-Graham, Heidi Mirza, and Susan Willis, have expanded the economic foundation characterizing earlier conceptions of class, and have focused on the process of “class formation” involving political, cultural, ideological, and other forces. Of particular emphasis are political processes involving class struggle in the workplace or wider society (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 50). Interested in developing a class analysis that provides emancipatory potential, Gibson-Graham forwards an alternative conception of class that highlights the class process as “overdetermined, or constituted, by every other aspect of social life, at the intersection of all social dimensions or processes - economic, political, cultural, natural - and class processes themselves participate in constituting these other dimensions of social existence” (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 55). Within this process, the development of class identity is uneven and contradictory, and “individuals may participate in various class processes, holding multiple class positions at one moment and over time” (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 59). To illustrate the “multiple, fragmented and shifting” nature of class identity, she tells a story of a married couple, Sue and Bill.

With no formal training, and working as a coal miner, Bill is a waged labourer with no supervisory responsibilities. His income is $65,000 annually, and with his savings and investments, he owns rental units and stocks in Australia. He also runs a small business during his leisure time. He pays his wife Sue a monthly amount to manage household expenses. If focused on his relation to the system of production as a wage labourer, Bill could be considered to be a member of the working class. However, focusing on his small business dealings, where he has different relations to production,
would place him in a different class category. Sue was a nurse in the Philippines with a supervisory role. Prior to migrating to Australia, Sue was the daughter in a prominent, economically privileged Filipino family. Now being a full time carer for Bill and her children, she depends on Bill for financial support. Similar to Bill, Sue participates in several class processes. Her class identity changes over time and in different contexts; it is contradictory and shifting.

Heidi Mirza's recent (1992) research has also attempted to integrate factors beyond economic relations into definitions of class. Mirza draws attention to the fundamental flaw of viewing class only in terms of relations to the means of production. She argues that such a view is ethnocentric, and negates the interconnectedness of class and race in analyses of schooling experiences. Mirza calls for a "cultural reappraisal" of the definition that recognizes the racial context of class. She proposes a definition of social class that accounts for the substantial differences between the experiences of Black working-class and their White counterparts:

As a consequence of various historical, cultural, economic, and social factors, black working-class and middle-class families do have a fundamentally unique experience in the work place, at school and within the family, compared to their white counterparts who occupy “objectively” the same class position (Mirza, 1992: 166).

In short, Mirza maintains that analyses of the influence of social class on schooling experiences and outcomes for marginalized students must begin with a definition of class that accounts for the specific experiences of people of colour in their relations to the system of ownership. Moreover, the definition of class should consider the influence of
these experiences on the class identity and perspectives of people of colour (Mirza, 1992: 167).

Chapter 2 highlighted the decreasing emphasis on one’s relationship to labour and production in the class language of the 1990s. It is important to add here that the relation to consumption - the capacity of what and how much a person can consume by way of material things - is important to young people who are living in a consumer culture. In our consumer society

Success is the affirmation of the individual as a maximizer of consumption...The availability of mass-produced commodities made it possible for the expanding middle class to buy the accoutrements of class formerly associated with the elite (Willis, 1991: 175, 176).

Approaching class in terms of one’s ability to consume, Susan Willis argues that the lack of control that the middle class (and working class) have in their professional lives translates into the attempt to control social reproduction in daily life through consumption. She argues that in today’s commodity culture, relations of consumption are more important in people’s every day experiences than paid work and relations of production (Willis, 1991: 177).

Class then, can be viewed as an inconsistent and moving social process that individuals engage in; it is simultaneously transformative and transforming; it is both shaped by and shapes all aspects of social life. Conceptions of class extend beyond economic relations - this comprises only one aspect of the class picture. In the context of a commodity culture, another increasingly important aspect of class identity includes relations of consumption. As this chapter will show, this approach to class can be used to understand the perspectives of the girls in this study. The girls’ own understandings of
class are continually transforming and being transformed; they are multi-dimensional and are based on the specific experiences and perspectives of the females of colour in this study. Relations of consumption also emerged as dominant in their understandings and explanations of class. Using the above as a theoretical framework for analysis, the discussion now turns to the ways in which working class girls of colour understand and explain the meaning of social class.

**The Task: Asking Students to Define Class**

That class is relevant in students’ lives has been noted. However, it was difficult to “find” class in the interviews, and it seemed impossible to find an effective way to ask high school students to define what is, in a common-sense way, such a slippery, abstract concept. In contrast, I discovered that racialized experiences were obvious in student narratives. However, the existence of class structures were suggested both implicitly and explicitly during the interviews, although formal definitions of class were not as clearly visible in the language the students used to describe their experiences. In fact, the question I initially posed - “Does it make a difference to be rich or poor in school?” - was met with an immediate and emphatic “No!” or worse - with polite laughter - as though the question was completely irrelevant. Other responses indicated that socioeconomic status did not make a difference in the students’ lives, that it was not possible to tell if someone was rich or poor, and that people are not discriminated against because of class (Sarah, March 10: 2, Jessica, March 23: 16, Aisha, May 25: 4). Amy’s response summarizes this view:
I don’t know people at school who are rich or poor. It’s just not a topic. Like, everybody is practically on the same level (Amy, March 26: 12).

I identified strongly with Kay’s (1990) experience in her research on gender and ethnicity in a Chinese restaurant, and looked to her study for a resolution. While ethnic factors were obvious in her observations, she found gender-related situations more difficult to uncover. She had few direct “observations” that were clear and obvious manifestations of gender relations (Kay, 1990: 193). Similarly, where race was clear in the student comments on the schooling organization, class and gender were less obvious in my research.

In the same manner that students were placed in a social class hierarchy (Chapter 3), it is clear that the girls also placed the various schools in the city in oppositional or hierarchical classed categories. Student understandings of class are intricately linked to the perceived differences between schools, some of which are consistently described as being more affluent or “higher class” than others. Approaching definitions of class in this way, (i.e. asking students to discuss the differences or similarities between the schools) I was able to get the students to talk about the ways in which they understand the meaning of social class.

Five main dimensions of class emerged as most dominant in student narratives. These class categories are firmly embedded in the students’ lived experiences in school and community, and can be summarized as follows: material, academic, attitudes and behaviour, gender, and race. For methodological purposes, these dimensions are divided into separate categories. However, in reality, each of these dimensions are intricately related to the others, and cannot be considered in isolation.
**Class Dimensions: Material Differences**

Not surprisingly, one of the chief factors which students used to distinguish the social class of individuals and groups concerns material and financial status. In particular, the students placed neighbourhoods in the community in a hierarchy of class (Notes, April 22: 9). One student summarizes this system by saying "There are different levels of different areas" (Mary, May 21: 4). Descriptions of these levels are in line with earlier discussions of the school community. Poor neighbourhoods, such as Ontario Government housing projects, are at the bottom of this hierarchy, and are categorized as "ghetto" (Sharon, May 26: 4). In this dimension, the students explain social class according to the type of housing lived in. Ghetto neighbourhoods are those with low-rent, subsidized, crowded, low quality townhomes or high-rise buildings. Corresponding to earlier discussions about the school community, the dominant perception is that the students who live in these poor neighbourhoods ("ghetto" people) are predominantly Black or of colour, and are involved in drugs, gangs, violence and crime (Karla, Aisha, Gail, Roxanne, May 25: 2, 3, 6; Sharon, May 26: 4). In particular, this criminal behaviour is viewed to consist largely of gang related crime and violence, vandalism, and drug dealing (Natalie and Fiona, May 25: 5). In addition, there is a general perception that girls from these areas often become young single mothers with several children to support (Sharon, May 26: 5). Again, here and throughout the student narratives, it becomes clear that class cannot be thought about as a fixed category. It is understood by the girls in this study as a multi-dimensional, shifting concept that is intricately connected to their ideas and opinions around sexuality, gender and race.
In contrast to poor "ghetto" housing described above, at the top of the class hierarchy are White\(^8\) neighbourhoods which are perceived to be wealthy (recall Mary's earlier noted comment "they have a house, picket fence and all that?"), where individuals live in "nice" and "more expensive" detached homes or townhomes, and own cars (Shauna, May 19: 9; Karla, May 25: 4). Distinguishing one school community from another, Heather talks about this dimension of social class:

...we have like, it's not as classy as their area, you know what I mean, they don't have Ontario housing and stuff like that in their area, and that's where everybody is coming from, you know what I mean? And like the houses around there, like you could just walk down there and look (Heather, May 26: 7).

There is less crime in these neighbourhoods - they are safe places to live in (Karla, Gail, and Aisha, May 25: 4).

Consistently, the students explained that the area that surrounds a school greatly contributes to its positive or negative reputation (Notes, April 22: 8; Mary, May 21: 3). From this perspective, schools that are in wealthier communities are perceived (by students, teachers, and members of the community) to be "better" than the "bad" schools that are surrounded by Ontario housing projects:

A major part of this school's reputation is because of like [two nearby government housing complexes], or stuff like that, just being in this area. People say a lot of bad things happen here, and the school is right in the middle of it. So those people that live in those projects they all come to [this school] (Stephanie, May 21: 5).

In accordance with the material aspect of class, students explain that the people who live in those neighbourhoods have more money and material possessions (Notes, April 22: 8; Karla, May 25: 4; Jennifer, May 26: 3). This financial dimension is linked to the perceived snobbish attitudes of those who are wealthier, as Shauna explains:
Yeah, they think they are higher. They feel that their clothes are better, more expensive, that shows that they have more, they’re trying to show that they have more money, so that you know, you can’t top them or whatever (Shauna, May 19: 3).

...you see, their parents buy them whatever they want. Their parents, if they want a car, the parents will do anything to get their child, even if it’s a second hand car. They’ll buy it for them, so these kids, because of that, they think they are higher! Like you know, “I get what I want”, you know, “I don’t have to walk, you do”...

(Shauna, May 19: 7)

In short, one of the most dominant dimensions of social class is the physical environment that students live in. In other words, there is a geography of class, a spatial organization of class, which they recognize.

Clothes represent another material factor which the girls used to determine the social class of the individual, as suggested earlier in Chapter 3 (Gail, May 25: 4; Natalie, May 25: 6, 7). Students who are wealthier can afford to wear the more expensive clothing, consisting of the most popular brand names (Mary, May 21: 3; Karla, May 25: 2; Heather, May 26: 7). Class is also distinguished by the type of clothing worn. For instance, wealthier students dress “skater-like” or with the “hippie look”\(^9\). Less wealthy students typically adopt the “grungy”, “gangster”\(^10\) look (Shauna, May 19: 4; Jennifer, May 26: 2; Sharon, May 26: 5). Here again, the importance of consumption emerges: the “grunge” or “gangster” student maintains outward appearances and behaviour which correspond with the 1990s rap culture popularized and commodified in television, music, and movies. Many of the trend-setting rap groups take an “in-your-face” attitude to social authority in lyrics, position, and dress.

Significantly, however, the girls interviewed also point out that clothes are often not accurate indicators of one’s social class status. Pamela explained that it is not always
possible to determine the social class of an individual because “even if they are poor, they get their own jobs, and buy their own clothes, because of the peer pressure” (May 21: 5). Not dressing according to what is popular in the school results in being made fun of, or labelled a “freak” by other students (Shauna, May 19: 3). On that account, most of the girls made an important distinction here. While clothing could indicate class, both poor and wealthier students often wore the same brand name, expensive clothing, obtained either through parental support, money earned at part-time jobs, or through stealing and other illegal activity (Notes, April 22: 8, 9; Sarah, March 10: 20; Jessica, March 23: 11; Heather, May 26: 7; Sharon, May 26: 5). The fact that wealthier students often dress “grungy” also made class differentiations less visible. In effect, the students’ interpretation of the material dimension of class results in the creation of overlapping boundaries and shifting meanings of social class. This ability of the students to participate in the creation, negotiation, and disruption of class meanings is further demonstrated throughout the narratives below.

**Class Dimensions: Academic Differences**

Academic differences provide another key dimension of class for the students interviewed. They explain that “high class” schools all have enrichment or gifted programs for their students, and for that reason are viewed as being on a higher academic level (Karla, May 25: 3; Natalie, May 25: 6; Jennifer, May 26: 2). This awareness of the academic differences between schools corresponds in turn to Mary’s articulation of the “different levels” of schools, neighbourhoods, and students. The academic standing of
enriched or gifted schools places them in a higher position in the social class hierarchy. In turn, the students of the more affluent schools are viewed as more intelligent than the students from working class schools. For instance, when asked why she thought that some schools were considered to be "good schools" while others were "bad", Mary immediately responded "Their upbringing. Their smartness. Their intelligence." (Mary, May 21: 4) Pamela supported this idea, and further articulated the connection between academic standing and class:

Because [the affluent school] has that enrichment program. What kind of kids are in the enriched program? You know they are not the kind of kids that get in trouble or anything. They are the good little kids. When you look here, there is no enrichment program.

In summary, the students attending affluent schools are perceived as being "more advanced...academically" (Irene, May 26: 6). The more "high class students" that attend the affluent schools are defined as being "the more intellectual kind" (Jennifer, May 26: 2, 3) - "Mostly the smart people go there" (Karla, May 25: 3). These comments strongly suggest that academic standing is one of the main indicators defining social class status for these young women. In turn, many of the students recognized the future benefit for themselves of transferring to academically stronger schools (Notes, April 29: 11,12). There is a sense, then, that through transferring to "higher class" schools that the girls might gain access to some of the benefits of academic prestige available to the students belonging to the ruling class.
Class Dimensions: Attitudes and Behaviour

There is a cultural dimension to the student understandings of social class. Before discussing this dimension, it is necessary to outline how I use the term culture. There are many competing concepts of culture in sociology of education. The notion of culture referenced here is based on a combination of the definitions put forward by Avtar Brah and Peter Li. According to Li, culture represents "a way of life that a group of people develops in order to adapt to a set of external and pre-existing conditions" (Li, 1990: 8). It also represents language, religion, and social institutions such as the family. Significantly, culture is not fixed or static, but rather is a fluid process in which social meanings, values and attitudes are created, learned, and interrupted (Brah, 1994: 153).

A manifestation of the cultural dimension of class is illustrated in the girls’ descriptions of distinct student attitudes concerning extracurricular programs. Students point out that apart from sports, working class schools lack programs and events organized for their students, particularly students of colour, to enhance their schooling experience. The affluent schools run school events to foster school spirit, such as pep rallies, recreational activities, clubs, and school trips or outings, and athletic banquets. The students in the middle or upper class schools are depicted as being more motivated to organize, participate in, and carry out these programs. In contrast, the students in the working class schools are defined as being less interested in participating in or organizing such activity (Notes, April 27: 10; Sharon, May 26: 4).
In addition to attitude, there are particular behaviours associated with different levels of class. These behaviours include both ways of talking and specific school- or non-school related activities or pastimes of individuals.

The “high class” students are distinguished from working class students by the way that they speak as well as what they speak about. The concept of “Valley Girl” talk is also used by the girls in my study to explain the way the more affluent students talk. The kids in the working class schools, in contrast, are “loud”, and “use more slang”, including expressions like “hey, whassup, whas goin’ on”. In comparison, “theirs is the Valley kind, like proper English” (Jessica, March 5: 6; Aisha, Karla, and Gail, May 25: 4; Natalie, May 25: 7; Sharon, May 26: 5).

The higher class students talk about their material possessions, as well as their recreational activity. In general, the girls describe this talk as consisting of “showing off” or “bragging” about material wealth. For instance, this includes conversations about all of the clothes they have, or the expensive items they purchased at the most expensive malls, or about the places they have travelled to (Notes, April 27: 10; Sarah, March 10: 20; Shauna, May 19: 7; Jennifer, May 26: 3; Heather, May 26: 7; Sharon, May 26: 5). Shauna summarizes this cultural difference between working class and upper class students:

...they talk a certain way, like them “Valley Girls” like, girls who talk like the “Valley Girls” and everything, and you know, talk about “Oh, I went here, did you go to the mall, what did you get, what kind of clothes did you buy?”, and all that nonsense, you know...When I, me, I sit with some of them, and to listen, some of the clothes they talk about I never heard of! You know, and the material they be talkin’ ‘bout, I never heard of, and all I know is clothes is clothes, you buy it, it looks nice, you buy it, and you go, you know? (Shauna, May 19: 4-5)
In comparison, the talk of working class kids is centred around making jokes and having fun, or “talking nonsense”. Shauna equates this talk as being more relaxing, and interestingly, expresses pity toward the affluent students because their talk doesn’t allow for such fun. They are too concerned with impressing others with their wealth, while the “grunge” kids are able to just “loosen up and have fun” (Shauna, May 19: 7). What is striking here is the sense of ambivalence that characterizes the talk about individuals who occupy the ruling classes. The girls recognize and acknowledge the differences that separate themselves from those that are more privileged in terms of wealth, safer neighbourhoods, and material things. Yet, they have no desire to be like them. The narratives indicate that the girls desire the benefits available to “high class” students, such as academic prestige and material possessions, but this desire is tempered by their genuine affection and affinity towards the members of their own social class, and the values, attitudes, and beliefs that entails.

Significantly, the girls are actively involved in shaping their talk for specific reasons. They highlight the fact that the use of talk is selective, with working class girls of colour often structuring their talk according to the environment and circumstances. For instance, several of the girls mentioned that they choose to use Patois (a Jamaican dialect) to socialize with friends, but use “regular English” in more formal settings, or to talk to teachers or other students. Similarly, Jessica commented that she speaks in a quiet manner, unlike the “loud” hallway students (Jessica, March 5: 6; Amy, March 10: 3; Shauna, May 19: 5).
As it was already suggested, there are particular behaviours associated with class differences. The way in which a person "conducts themselves", the way they "act" are considered markers of social class status (Mary, May 21: 5; Natalie, May 25: 6). Affluent students spend their time shopping or hanging out at the expensive, "ritzy" malls, participating in school clubs or programs, travelling, and studying at the library or at home (Notes, April 27: 10; Shauna, May 19: 8). Working class students participate in sports, shop or hang out at the less expensive malls.

These class-specific activities translate into particular behaviours or ways of conducting oneself. Many of the behaviours and activities of working class students have already been illustrated in the descriptions of gangster students (Chapter 3). For instance, working class students are described as those who spend hours "hanging around", meeting with friends and lingering in their neighbourhood, often until the early morning hours, whereas the wealthier students "find their place to go". Working class students behave in a coarse and aggressive manner in school, play-fighting and rough-housing with each other (Shauna, May 19: 4, 7). Not surprisingly, these students are also viewed as "trouble-makers" who get involved in criminal activity and gangs, while affluent students are the "good" students, are "well-behaved", and are not involved in crime, gangs or violence (Pamela, May 21: 5; Natalie, May 25: 6). Interestingly, as noted in Chapter 3, all except one of the girls interviewed consider themselves to be "normal" students. Only one student located herself as integrated between both the normal and gangster crowd11.
One behaviour that is viewed as a manifestation of occupying a lower financial position is what the students have called “begging” or “asking for money”. Because they don’t always have extra money to spend, working class or poor students often ask other students for money, especially during lunchtime. Brianne, Michelle, Jocelyn and Franca explained this phenomenon. If a student asks another student for money, and that other student gives it freely, that is interpreted as an indication of wealth - they are “rich”, they can afford it. On the other hand, when a student begs for money, or when a student does not give money to friends freely, it is because they are not wealthy. As one student explained, they likely can’t afford it because they don’t know if their parent(s) will be out of a job tomorrow (Notes, April 22: 9). Further illustrating the notion of begging, Romy tells of a time that she and a friend were approached by another male during lunch hour. The gangster student demanded the food they had purchased for lunch, and threatened her friend physically (Notes, April 27: 10). Shauna explains how this behaviour of begging/asking others for money contributes to the snobbish attitudes of wealthy students:

...if a person come up and ask you for money, they look down on you...they call you a beggar, you know? So they look, they like, that makes a difference really! It does. They’ll call you a beggar and say they don’t have it, which they do, you know? ...it might be even fifty cents! And they call you a beggar (Shauna, May 20: 14)

As with the material and academic dimensions of class, the cultural meaning of class is not a fixed notion. It is a fluid dimension that simultaneously provides space for and relies on the active interpretation and engagement of the students themselves.
Class Dimensions: Gender

Gender was also present in the girls’ descriptions of the meanings of class. Gender emerged as a particularly prominent factor in students’ discussions about their ideal future, and how they would obtain their goals and aspirations concerning their education and career.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the analyses of young female students forwarded by Christine Griffin and Jane Gaskell revealed that the possible roles in marriage and family life shape working class girls’ career decisions and aspirations. Griffin’s analysis of White working class girls pointed to the need to consider the influence of domestic commitments, such as marriage and motherhood, on career choices. The pressure to “get a man” and future domestic responsibilities influenced their occupational choices (Griffin, 1985: 35, 51, 82; Gaskell, 1992: 50; Davies, 1994: 93). Those girls considered office work to be most appropriate and desirable because it provided for the opportunity to meet potential husbands, and was flexible enough to maintain domestic responsibilities (Griffin, 1985: 187, 189; Gaskell, 1992: 50).

In contrast, several of the girls who participated in this study have negative images of family and marriage to deal with that can be viewed as influencing the steps taken in pursuing domestic commitments in relation to their career. Within the narratives, there is a distinctly negative image attached to working class girls and their sexual behaviour. The girls articulated how working class females are perceived and/or labelled by others (by teachers, and more affluent or “middle class” students) as girls who “sleep around” (Shauna, May 20: 16; Heather, May 26: 7; Sharon, May 26: 5). Again, similar to
the perceived reputation of the school for violence, this image of promiscuity is both fueled and substantiated by the fact that a startling number of young girls in the community are indeed single mothers (Sharon, May 26: 5). In fact, day-care facilities are a normal feature of school life. These facilities were developed to cater to the young mothers that continue to attend classes. Several of the girls interviewed know of at least one girl who is pregnant or who recently gave birth. In Amy’s words,

...there is never a month that goes by that you don’t see someone pregnant (Amy, March 10: 9).

Sharon and Amy both explained that in their view, it was because of their childcare commitments that many of the single mothers are on student welfare and are not able to work or finish school (Amy, March 10: 8; Sharon, May 26: 5).

Significantly, the negative image associated with working class girls and single motherhood can be seen to influence the girls’ educational and career choices. For instance, Shauna talks about how a woman’s childcare commitments make a difference in whether or not she can achieve a successful education or career in society:

Cuz they [employers, college/university representatives] say “Oh, this woman breed [has many children] and everything, so she must look after her pitney [children] and everything” and so on, but if you’ve got, if you’re middle class, and everything, [they’d say] “Oh, we’ll help her”, you know? Me, I am not middle class (Shauna, May 20: 20).

What was most striking was that in discussions of future career and life goals, the girls interviewed here mentioned only very briefly the desire to marry and have a family. First and foremost in their narratives was the desire to achieve a career and economic mobility. All of the girls want to attend university or college, and plan to do so independent of external support, through obtaining student loans and/or working.
Several of the girls mentioned starting their own small business. If unable to secure the desired employment immediately, one student indicated she would go back to school to get more education (Jessica, March 23: 17).

The two students who did mention marriage and/or family did so in the context of first achieving their own economic success, on their own (Amy, March 26: 15; Shauna, May 19: 11). Unlike the girls in Griffin's study, having a family and/or a husband was merely incidental, rather than integral to reaching their goals. The girls see themselves as the income earner, rather than dependent upon a husband for economic support.

Here we see a dimension of class that emphasizes a different gender role as it relates to economic mobility and future careers. The narratives suggest a strong desire for economic independence as opposed to the more family- and marriage-oriented class imaginings characterizing Griffin's and Gaskell's analysis. In effect, their perception of the gender dimension of class allows the girls more power in (re)structuring their own social class position, as it relates to their educational and career choices.

**Class Dimensions: Race**

Throughout the narratives, it is clear that race is intricately related to class definitions. Students both implicitly and explicitly made the connection to race when discussing the material, academic, and cultural dimensions of class.

Race was particularly prominent in discussions regarding the differences between schools within and outside of the community. When asked to describe the differences between schools in the city, the immediate response of many of the girls was simply
"race". According to their narratives, working class schools are more "multicultural" and have much higher populations of new immigrants or ESL (English as a Second Language) students (Pamela, May 21: 5; Aisha, May 25: 3; Fiona, May 25: 6; Natalie, May 25: 5). In turn, the more affluent neighbourhoods and schools are described as consisting of mostly White individuals, as in Sharon's and Shauna's comments:

Yorkview\textsuperscript{12}, there's not that many Black people that live around there. I'm not trying to say that it's only Black people that make schools bad...but, let's be honest, around Yorkview, it's not really that bad (Sharon, May 26: 4)

I hardly ever see some White kids living in townhouses, they live in their nice houses...where you see Black kids, now I am seeing some Somalian kids living in townhouses, or they living in them [ghetto] places, that's why they label, classify people as no-good (Shauna, May 19: 9).

In turn, the students who are from White backgrounds are "well-behaved" and are not perceived as being involved in crime, violence or gangs (Natalie, May 25: 6).

The academic dimension of class described by the girls is also merged with issues of race. The students' comments often described the complex relationship between race and academic ability and outcomes. The students who attended the academically stronger schools were consistently described by the girls interviewed as being White. In a discussion about academic differences between those from working class and middle class backgrounds, Jasmine had this to say:

I think if I would live in a White neighbourhood, and I was around smart people, I would become smarter (Notes, April 29: 11).

In addition, the programs and recreational events that enhance the academic aspect of schooling ("prep or spirit things") are perceived to be organized by the White students, to benefit White students (Sharon, May 26: 4).
The labels used to describe working class students (gangster, ghetto, hallway) and middle or upper class students (skater, hippie) are both implicitly and explicitly characterized as being either predominantly individuals of colour or White (respectively). For instance, the way that middle or upper class students talk is described as “proper English” or “Valley Girl” talk is typically associated with White culture. In contrast, the slang and Patois used by working class students is directly linked to Black culture. Further emphasizing the relationship between race and cultural dimensions of social class, Jennifer makes an interesting observation. She points out that although there is a White population in her working class community, they are different from the Whites that live in the more affluent neighbourhoods:

...there is a lot of White people that go to those schools. And they are different from the White people that go here, because the White people that go here, they are like used to, they are like middle or lower class too, so they are used to being around people, so we act like the same. But I hear all the time that the students that go to Yorkview or Parkway, they are the snobs (Jennifer, May 26: 3).

As these comments illustrate, student understandings of the meaning of social class are intricately connected to race issues. In fact, none of these dimensions of social class can be considered in isolation from each other. The material, academic, cultural and racial aspects of social class are interrelated ingredients that together form a fluid definition of class that speaks to the lived experience of the girls in this study.

**Conclusion: The Shifting Meaning of Class**

In order to build a framework that foregrounds class in the analysis of racialized and gendered schooling experiences of marginalized students, this chapter sought to
explore the specific ways in which class is understood and explained by working class girls of colour.

With the varied approaches to the definition of social class providing a theoretical background, this chapter has revealed the importance of consumption as an aspect of class relations. The girls’ talk about the differences between youth groups, schools and communities suggests that observable markers of consumption, particularly the “levels” of clothing and housing that individuals have access to, play an integral role to their understanding. Corresponding to Susan Willis’ arguments about the pervasiveness of commodity culture, the notion of class that emerges in the girls’ talk is centred around the relations of consumption rather than paid work or relations of production.

Also significant is the sense of ambivalence in their views: the girls want the material possessions of the ruling classes, yet they do not want to be like them. The narratives suggest that the girls interviewed feel an affection towards and want to maintain their own class identity, and the values, beliefs and attitudes that represents, while at the same time have access to the material things and lifestyles of the middle class.

Finally, this chapter confirms the need to consider social class as consisting of multiple, interrelated dimensions. From the perspective of female and working class students of colour, social class is not limited to material or financial factors. Social class also contains academic, cultural, gender and racial dimensions. The multi-faceted character of the social class definitions suggests that these girls are involved in actively creating space for the negotiation of class systems.
The dimensions of class outlined by the students, involving material, academic, cultural, gendered and racial aspects - all share a common feature. The students' narratives indicate that these dimensions of class are not static, fixed conceptions. Rather, the class definitions described by the students indicate a fluidity, with class operating as a moving, sociocultural process. As mentioned above, Gibson-Graham has highlighted the concept of class as a process. Avtar Brah’s description of culture as a process is also illustrative here:

...culture is conceptualized as a process; a nexus of intersecting significations; a terrain on which social meanings are produced, appropriated, disrupted and contested. Cultural specificities remain important but they are construed as fluid modalities, as shifting boundaries that mediate structures and relations of power (Brah, 1994: 153).

The dimensions described by the students indicates that social class consists of several overlapping meanings that the students actively create, interrupt, and change over time and space. Within this process, the students create space to interpret and mediate systems of power, and to actively form their class identity in relation to these meanings. While structural, economic and racial factors continue to be significant, they are also subject to change and interpretation. It is worth citing again an earlier comment made by Jasmine regarding the connection between the classed notions of race and academic strength. In her interpretation of the connection between race and the academic aspect of class, the boundaries of social class are stretched, providing possible space for negotiating structures of power:

I think if I would live in a White neighbourhood, and I was around smart people, I would become smarter (Notes, April 29: 11).
By this account, the academic dimension of social class provides the space for the mediation or disruption of one's class status. Similar comments are made throughout the narratives, involving each dimension of social class. These range from the type of clothing worn, transferring to academically stronger schools, changing patterns of talk and behaviour, and reshaping traditional gender roles. In each dimension highlighted, the students' interpretation of the meaning of social class provides room for their own agency in responding to class systems and in turn, in structuring their own social class identity.

The fact that social class is not limited to fixed, socio-economic factors creates an opening for the active class transcendence of these girls. It is a definition that is based on the view that social class is a process that can be negotiated by the girls themselves. To the extent that these girls actively mediate, produce and disrupt their understandings of social class, these class categories allow space for the individual agency of the girls, to push the limits of and rise above rigid, traditional social class structures. Citing Giddens, Daniel Yon highlights this notion:

...the work of Giddens (1984) particularly that on structure and agency, is important. A concept of agency enables us to view students as active participants involved in producing and reproducing their daily structures, rather than passively having the structures and their identity determined for them (Yon, 1991: 315).

In other words, it can be argued that the way class is defined or understood determines both how class systems can be negotiated, as well as the social class position that is claimed by the individual.

The way in which the girls students understand and explain the meaning of social class has significant implications - these definitions are inextricably linked to the role
social class plays in their lived experiences. Each is rooted in and impacts the other. To illustrate this point, it is useful to cite Gibson-Graham in her comment about the implications on theory and politics of creating new ways of conceptualizing class:

Like class defined as a social grouping, class defined as a social process is associated with particular ways of theorizing both society and political subjectivity. Through their distinctive treatments of these theoretical objects, the two ways of defining class yield very different implications for the nature and viability of class politics (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 57).

Viewing the girls’ narratives in a similar manner, it can be argued that the ways in which the students define class (from within the boundaries of their own context and lived experience), has significant implications for the role that social class plays in the lives of the working class girls in this study. Their conceptions of class, which we have seen to be fluid and provide space for individual agency, have specific effects on how the students actively respond to and negotiate the class process. If social class definitions allow for such individual agency, it suggests that the influence of class differences on success in school and society can be actively negotiated, produced, or subverted by students. In turn, understanding that process may contribute to an understanding of the material and ideological conditions necessary for success in this context.

In order to reach a more fruitful analysis of the way in which their views on social class impact social class transcendence, the discussion must turn to a more detailed investigation of social class, in terms of the role of class in their schooling and community lives. The next chapter will consider how class, as understood and defined by the students themselves, shapes the racialized and gendered schooling experiences of working class girls of colour. The final question remaining is: Given their
understandings of the meaning and role of class, what are the material and ideological conditions that allow working class females of colour to have successful and/or unsuccessful schooling and community experiences?
NOTES

Chapter 4

1 This would be closer to some Marxist scholarship which views class as a social relationship rather than as a place in social hierarchy (later associated with stratification theories).

2 The work of Marx in the mid through later nineteenth century, and of Weber in Germany in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century.


4 There are a number of scholarly works that elaborate on the work of Marx and Weber; for a more detailed reading of this work, see Porter, 1965; Weber, 1971; Giddens, 1981; Morrow and Torres, 1995.

5 Anyon’s definition relies heavily on her interpretation of the work of E.O. Wright, 1978; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; and R. Williams, 1977. For a more detailed discussion of this theoretical approach to social class, see Anyon, 1980. Connell et al. (1982) adopted a modified version of E.O. Wright’s approach to class, in order to keep the complexity of their sample groups in mind.


7 These schools are located in areas of the city that are economically wealthier, and that are considered to be middle and upper class.

8 Within the narratives, the people who live in the “good” neighbourhoods are perceived to be White.

9 The terms “skater” and “hippie” refer to students who maintain outward appearances in line with the 1990’s skate-boarder culture, or the 1970’s hippie culture. Skaters and hippies are commonly White students from middle or upper class backgrounds.

10 Gangster students are commonly students of colour from lower class or poor backgrounds.
11 For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality, this student will not be identified in this study.

12 Fictional name of a school located in a more affluent community nearby. Yorkview is considered to be a “good” school.

13 Parkway is another fictional name for a “good” school in an affluent community.
CHAPTER 5

THE ROLE OF CLASS IN STUDENTS' LIVES

The ways in which working class female students of colour understand and explain the meaning of social class illuminate the foundation for how class differences operate in their lived experiences. When asked how class differences, as defined by the girls themselves, impacted on schooling and community experiences, the answers often came in the form of a story - a particular moment that summarized how class difference "worked" in their lives. Thus, to keep the analysis grounded in the specific lived contexts of the girls involved, I will use these stories throughout this chapter to capture the ways in which class is played out and experienced. Significantly, these stories not only reveal the role class plays, but also how the girls interpret and respond to these experiences. I will argue that their responses to the role of social class can be seen as strategies for success, and ultimately, as strategies to transcend their social class. These strategies are shaped by the material conditions of their schooling and community context. The first part of this chapter will outline the impact social class has on the lives of the girls interviewed. The second part will consider how students respond to the role class difference plays in their lives.
The Impact of Social Class

Within the narratives, the students articulated the ways in which social class affected or influenced schooling and community experiences. These can be summarized into four interrelated categories: the burden of negative images, differential treatment, pressures to secure upward mobility, and dealing with crime and violence in daily life. As with the diverse meanings of social class, the ways in which class differences operate cannot be considered in isolation. They are discussed separately here only for descriptive and analytical purposes.

Negative Image

Throughout the stories that the students told about the effects of social class difference, a recurring theme was the negative image attached to being from a low socioeconomic status background. Several of the girls made comments that teachers, students, and other members of the community “look down on” people who are from poor neighbourhoods, particularly those who live in government housing (Notes, April 29: 12; Shauna, May 20: 2, 14, 15, 18).

Jasmine grew up in such a neighbourhood, and her descriptions of her experiences in school illustrate how negative images work and are understood. For Jasmine, teachers tend to view those students from low income or poor housing as “trouble makers”, evidenced by the fact that they are “always looking at you in class, making sure they know what you are doing”. In addition, the poorer students in the class were the first to be accused of misbehaving (Mary, Pamela and Stephanie, May 21:4). Jasmine notes that “people think you are bad” (involved in crime and drugs), “scary”
(intimidating, aggressive), "lazy" and "dumb" (Notes, April 29: 11). Corresponding to
Jasmine's experiences of dealing with the burden of a negative image, Natalie offers an
explanation as to why some students from low income neighbourhoods do get involved in
crime:

They don't really have enough money to support themselves, they have to steal
and shoplift, and do other kinds of stuff to support themselves. They do what
they have to do to live, they don't have a choice (Natalie: May 25: 6).

In general, the students strongly believe that society looks down on people who occupy a
working class or poor social class position, especially those that come from government
housing projects or who are on government assistance (Shauna, May 20: 15, 16; Natalie,
May 25: 7). Linked to the burden of negative images faced by poorer students is the
differential treatment students are subjected to.

Differential Treatment

Shauna tells a story of her experiences with the differential treatment that resulted
from an individual's poorer class status. Shauna's younger cousin Danielle lives in an
Ontario housing complex with her aunt. The teacher was aware of their housing and
financial circumstances. Shauna explained that despite the fact that her cousin was
performing well academically, Danielle failed her grade and was held back by her
teacher. Shauna notes that Danielle was failed because of her race and her class, and the
concomitant differential treatment. She angrily commented that the teacher failed
Danielle

because they said the kid... was from [name of government housing project]! And
mostly all the kids from [name of government housing project] are dark, so she
failed all the kids that are dark because they are from [government housing
project] (Shauna, May 19: 2).
Other students often spoke of the negative differential treatment that students from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds are subjected to. Michelle tells a story concerning the differential treatment of working class and poor students which involved the school boards. Recently, the high school principal let go of several of its best teachers - all of whom went to teach at the “better” schools. For Michelle, this action spoke volumes about how the administrators, school boards, and teachers viewed the working class school she was attending: the principal was clearly not concerned about the quality of education the students received; the teachers left because they didn’t care about the students, and preferred to teach in a school attended by “good” students (in other words, those students from the higher classes). Michelle interpreted the event as a reflection of the working class status of the school (Notes, April 22: 8).

In another example of negative differential treatment, Franca, Jocelyn and Brianne tell a story about the events surrounding a recent school trip. The students in the school organized a field trip to a public entertainment facility, and hundreds of students from other schools would be in attendance. The students later discovered that the entertainment facility had “beefed up” its security staff. In addition, some of the students were called to the principal’s office to explain the nature of the trip. Franca comments that the principal was treating them as though they were “up to something” or that they would do something “bad”. Franca, Brianne and Jocelyn interpreted these responses by the school and the entertainment facility as a consequence of the lower socioeconomic position of the school - because students from a “bad” school would be attending, the security was augmented; because they are “bad” kids, they must have been “up to no-
good" (Notes, April 22: 8). From the students' perspective, because of the negative images attached to the low income school, the students received differential treatment. If it were a "good" school (read: more affluent) the principal would not have been so suspicious of their intentions, and the security at the entertainment facility would not have been expanded.

In a similar story, Mary also spoke of the differential treatment the students of working class schools face, as a result of the negative images held by the wider community. In her story, Mary explained that the students in her school were on a field trip³. Many other schools located within the city were also in attendance. When all of the schools were congregated together, some of the students began causing a scene. Because of the large number of high schools in attendance, it was not possible to identify the students who were responsible. However, it was assumed by the authorities that the students from the working class school were the culprits, and the entire student body was subsequently scolded and punished by their principal. Here again, Mary explains how students from working class schools face differential treatment that results from the negative image attached to working class or poor schools.

The effects of social class difference are not limited to the school community; they are also felt in choices made concerning university and college applications. The girls are well aware that wider society also "looks down on" poorer people, or people from working class backgrounds. When discussing future career opportunities and choices, the girls point out that college and university applications are affected by class difference. In short, applications from more affluent schools are treated favourably, and
the students from these schools are more likely to be accepted to their school of choice. Conversely, applications submitted from students graduating from working class or poor schools are more likely to be rejected by the college or university administrators from the more prestigious schools. Natalie, Jennifer, and Roxanne each noted that even if they had grades equivalent to the students from the ruling class school, the negative images attached to working class schools means that the more affluent student is more likely to gain acceptance into the desired college or university (Notes, April 29: 12; Natalie, May 25: 7; Jennifer, May 26: 3, 7).

Pressures to Secure Mobility

All of the students expressed a strong desire to achieve upward mobility. It has been noted previously that when asked to describe what it means to be successful, the answers were consistent: the students aspire to go to college or university, obtain a career in their desired field, earn a good living, and move out of the area. The girls want to live in their own homes, and own their own car. In order to secure such economic mobility, they are faced with the pressure of getting into a “good” university or college, in order to be able to get a “good” job. However, the girls also acknowledged the fact that they were lacking in the resources that may assist them in achieving such a goal. Their material circumstances act as barriers to achieving the economic mobility they aspire to.

In telling the story about her own background, Jasmine explains that the students in working class or poor backgrounds who are academically unsuccessful are not “dumb”; they just have other things to deal with in their struggle for success, in both
school and in society. She says that the main problem for “rich” students is that they have “maxed out their credit cards”, whereas the working class or poor student is worried about “where to get money to eat lunch” (Notes, April 29: 11).

Sharon’s story also reveals the pressures faced by working class students in their struggle to achieve economic mobility. Sharon lives in low income neighbourhood. Her mother is the sole supporter of Sharon’s family, which includes several other siblings. Because of their financial situation, it was necessary for Sharon to work at a part time job. In other words, because of the pressures for economic mobility, Sharon has to rely on her own abilities to achieving the upward mobility she desires. Unlike the more affluent students, she cannot rely on anyone to help her to achieve success and mobility in society. Comparing herself to more privileged students, she says:

Certain kids might be like “Oh, I have my mother, my father, my sister, my brother, they can take care of me”, this and that. But when I was younger, I had to learn to take care of myself. I had to do things on my own, be very independent and everything. I work and make my own money (Sharon, May 26: 5).

Thus, what the stories of Sharon and Jasmine reveal is that working class students face specific pressures for economic mobility. From their perspective, students from the middle class “have it easy” (Jennifer, May 26: 4). The students in the working class schools feel that the relative wealth of the more affluent students gives them a direct route to economic mobility. In contrast, the material circumstances of working class students means that in order to achieve their future aspirations and secure economic mobility, they must first negotiate and overcome significant obstacles.
Dealing With Crime and Violence

The fact that working class students are routinely faced with crime, violence, drugs, and gangs was first suggested in Chapter 3 in the student descriptions of school and community life. The school organization was indicated as being focused around containment and protection of its students from "intruders". In addition, Chapter 4 demonstrated that one of the most prominent aspects of the students' definition of working class involved crime, violence, and gang activity. This section will highlight in more detail the ways in which class differences impact schooling and community experiences, in relation to crime and violence.

The girls are subjected to the violent and assaulting behaviour of the boys and men in the community. Both within and outside of school, gangster students routinely make "silly" or harassing comments towards the girls. For example, they have angrily remarked to Amy that she thinks she is "better than them" (Amy, March 26: 14). Jessica explains that the "jokes" of the gangster crowd "go too far", and she finds it disrespectful:

...a lot of the guys, when you talk up to them, like you really talk up to them, they think they can disrespect you and they can call you a bitch, you know, stuff like that. You be playing up with them and they think they can talk to you any way, any how, you know, they don't respect you(Jessica, March 23: 12).

Male teenagers and older men loaf around the community, particularly in the front lobby of the nearby apartment buildings during afternoons and evenings. These individuals are also described as making rude, aggressive, and offensive comments to the girls as they walk past to get into their homes.
The students point out the unproductive behaviour and criminal activity of community members, many of whom are (or were formerly) students of Woodgrove High School. Within the student narratives, this behaviour is linked to the violent crime in the community and in the school:

...the people, a lot of guys, they just hang out, they don’t go look for jobs, they don’t do volunteer work or anything, they are just there, hanging out, and there was a shooting on my building and a guy got killed. A former student of Woodgrove (Amy, March 10: 8).

When speaking about violence in the community, Amy worries for her younger sister growing up in the neighbourhood (Amy, March 26: 16). She anxiously expresses her concern that “So many things are happening” in the area. For instance, one afternoon during their lunch hour, Amy and her and her younger sister witnessed an arrest of a young man at the front of Woodgrove school.

Jessica knows of people in Woodgrove school who carry guns, and explains that accessing guns is relatively easy. She talks about the violence in the community:

The building I live on, I moved [recently] but the building I used to live on, it was like, safer. Then I moved into the other building, and it’s like, I am scared there, even to go down the stairs, to the laundry, it’s like scary. The other day, too we heard that somebody got raped down there. So like, ever since, since then, it’s like, if we are going, it’s like two person. Some of the guys that live down there, I know they’re drug dealers, some of them, I know they have guns (Jessica, March 23: 15).

Students must deal with violence on a daily basis at Woodgrove. Students explained that conflicts could easily arise, even if seemingly unprovoked. For instance, violent fights could result between students from giving someone “the wrong look” or for “brushing past someone the wrong way”. Because of the recurring and spontaneous
violence between students, students have to “watch [their] back all the time” (Notes, April 22: 8; Shauna, March 20: 9).

Mary recounts a story that depicts the violence she encounters in her daily life. The low income neighbourhood in which she resides is “very rough”. Stabbings, drug deals, and random violence are daily events. She explains that “People get jumped if they don’t belong” and are loitering in the neighbourhood. In fact, she knows of a male individual who was walking through her neighbourhood one day to get to a friend’s house. Mary notes that it was clear by his clothing that he wasn’t from the area. He was “jumped”, and his expensive designer shoes were stolen from him (Mary, May 21: 5).

The stories that the students tell about dealing with the pressures of negative images, differential treatment, pressures for upward mobility, and routine crime and violence captures the way in which social class operates in the lives of working class female students of colour. In other words, these stories reveal clearly how social class difference “works” in their lives. Moreover, the stories told by the girls also reveal the ways that the students respond to the influence of class. Understanding the students’ counter-action may throw light on the processes involved and the material and ideological conditions necessary in overcoming or transcending their social class status. These responses are considered in the following section.

**Student Responses to the Impact of Class Differences**

Students employ three main responses to deal with class differences: defending their school and community, reinterpreting experiences of violence, and concealing class
status. In this discussion, it will become clear that these responses can be seen as strategies used by the girls in order that they may succeed in society, and transcend their social class status.

It should be remembered that these responses are intricately linked - students may rely exclusively on one strategy; alternatively, they may also employ a combination of the strategies. Moreover, the reactions are often overlapping and interconnected in nature.

**Defending Their School/Community**

The most striking theme that emerged in the narratives is the defense of their school and community against a negative reputation and/or negative perceptions. Despite their seemingly deserved reputation for violence, the students in the study persistently defended their schools.

The stories told often appeared contradictory, with students’ warnings and perceptions about school violence attached to defensive comments which dismissed negative perceptions of the school or community as unfounded. Moreover, these comments were consistently made alongside remarks that the students were not afraid, or that the violence did not affect them (Notes, April 22: 11).

Yeah, everywhere I go, “Oh, aren’t you scared, guns and knives” but I don’t see that, I don’t know where they get that information. Of course kids are gonna fight, but you are gonna have that in every school. But I am not afraid. It’s not a bad school (Amy, March 10: 2).

Like I talk to some people and they say “Oh you go to [name of school]? That’s so bad!”, but I don’t think so...like every school’s gonna have a problem [with violence] but overall I think it’s O.K. (Jennifer, May 26: 1)

The girls clearly acknowledged violence and crime in school, but at the same time reported feeling safe in their schools, and defend them as being as secure as any other
typical high school (Jessica, March 5: 4; Sarah, March 6: 2; Amy, March 10: 1-2; Karla, May 25: 3). Almost every student offset their remarks which acknowledged the violence in the school and/or community by firmly declaring that they felt safe, that it wasn’t that bad. These students “have been there for years”, do not think their school is a “bad” school, and reported feeling comfortable and safe there (Jessica, March 5: 3; Notes, April 22: 9; Pamela, May 21: 1).

These comments are also clear in the discussion of the community. Sarah recognizes that there is violence in the community, but again she defends the community using the same argument to defend the school: “You have people dying in the buildings, people getting shot, or whatever, but it’s not all the time. It’s all right” (Sarah, March 6: 13). Jessica’s descriptions of the violence in the area are dotted with comments to defend her community. For instance, she says “So far, I haven’t had any problems, it’s not like I am scared. I am not really scared to walk on the street”, and that she feels “safe, I mean, a lot of the guys, some of them look kind of scary, but I don’t feel any way, I feel safe” (Jessica, March 5: 7). When asked if Sarah liked the community, she answered “Even though they say it’s violent, or whatever, I am fine here, it’s OK” (Sarah, March 6: 13). Every student interviewed made similar remarks which served to emphasize their feeling of security and de-emphasize the violence in the community. Similarly, Mary and Stephanie defend the community in spite of the existence of violence. They explain that the perception of violence in the community is not valid, that it is a reputation that is undeserved. They point to the media as being instrumental in creating the negative image of their community:
Mary: ...But like, in the worst case scenarios, there have been like, bad things that happened, and I guess, society views it, like the news views it.

Lenni: But you don't see it that way?

Mary: Not really. I have lived here for 18 years. I don't think that much is wrong with it.

Stephanie: You know I think it's like, the media. Because if something bad happens they are on it. But not when [the community] does something good. Like they have a youth centre in the [local] mall, and you don't hear a lot about that. Like you hear about that now and then. But when someone gets shot, it's like, major (Mary and Stephanie, May 21: 4)

The narratives demonstrated that students clearly face violence and conflict in their daily schooling experiences. Yet the participants in the study would also describe the student body as friendly, as in these remarks:

The people here are really nice....It's a really friendly school (Fiona, May 25: 5).

Everyone just gets along in this school. Everyone is friendly, you can just go up to them and talk to them (Pamela, May 21: 2).

The people are not that bad (Karla, May 25: 3).

They are friendly. There are friendly people in this school, if you get to know them, they are nice people (Jennifer, May 26: 1).

Thus, while the students do acknowledge the violence that occurs on a daily basis between students, it is clearly important for them to also declare the friendly nature of the student body. In addition to these defensive reactions, it will become clear that the student responses to the role of class difference are integral components to a complex process of creating a specific image of individual and community identity.
Reinterpreting Violence as Positive

An interesting pattern emerged in the narratives when the students would actually confirm or acknowledge the perceived violence, crime and drugs in the community - the girls would reinterpret it in a positive light. In other words, rather than viewing the violence they encountered as having a negative impact on their lives (what "others" observe or assume), the girls spoke of the benefits that these experiences have on their futures. For instance, Mary commented that because she grew up and resides in the community, she feels perfectly comfortable travelling to any other "rough" neighbourhood in the city. In other words, the violence she deals with daily was reinterpreted as a positive aspect of her experience, in that she is fortunate to have friends to "watch her back". Mary explains that they will always be there for her:

To me, because I have lived here all my life, and like, there are a lot of good things. Because like everybody knows you, if something happens to you, you know that there is somebody who gots your back. You know that there is somebody there for you, in times of the worst of the worst, there is always somebody there for you (Mary, May 21: 4).

Similarly, Sharon comments that having grown up with violence has also taught her to "watch her back"; this street-wise knowledge contributes to her independence and to her ability to take care of herself (Sharon, May 26: 5).

In another example, Michelle reinterprets criminal activity, justifying it as "still a job" (Notes, April 22: 9). In a discussion around the crime that plagues the community, she explained that many of the kids and parents "don't have a choice", and that they get involved in theft or drugs in order to support themselves and to make a living. According to Michelle, "even if you are doing illegal stuff it is still work". These examples suggest
a process in which the girls re-work the negative perceptions and assumptions held by the outsiders, media, and school officials about their community. This process of reinterpretation is not simply a reflection of students' views and experiences in the community; it can be seen as a process which empowers the girls to take control of creating their own image.

Concealing Class Background

Students often react to the negative impact of class difference by concealing their class background. There are a number of ways in which this is accomplished, hinted at in earlier in Chapter 4. A most common means of hiding one's social class position is to not discuss housing or financial circumstances. Shauna does not reveal to her friends that she lives in government housing; nor does she discuss with her friends the fact that she receives financial assistance from the government. She poignantly explains her response to the negative image held by the middle and upper class people concerning those of low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and the concomitant differential treatment:

People look down on you like that. You know? I am a student, I can’t work now. You think I was happy going on student welfare? I knew what’s gonna happen! I was embarrassed about it. I couldn’t tell no one! Cuz I knew how people were gonna react on me. They gonna say “Yeah, she’s poor, she has nothin’, she’s just trying to use up people’s money” you know? That’s why I don’t tell people....Some things you have to keep to yourself sometimes. Because if people know, they treat you differently (Shauna, May 20: 12, 16).

Several students indicated that they also avoid discussing or revealing the negative aspects of their school (crime, gangs, violence, poverty) with people who are non-members of the community. Rather, the girls said that they would emphasize “the
positive things” (Notes, April 29: 12). In fact, this response was demonstrated in the initial meetings between myself and the girls, discussed briefly in the introduction of this study (Chapter 1). Until the girls knew that I too was a member of a similar community and shared their knowledge, perspectives and experiences to some degree, the narratives emphasized the positive aspects of school and community, and what the girls liked about it. Here we clearly see the overlapping relationship between the response of defending the community and concealing one’s class background. For instance, as noted above, introductory interviews featured student comments concerning such things as the “friendly” student body and the sense of belonging and comfort they felt in the multicultural community. All introductory interviews were marked by this stress on the positive features of school and community life.

Further manifesting the reaction of concealing their class background from “others”, the girls point out that they apply for admission to colleges or universities that would likely not be aware of the reputation of their school or community⁶. From their perspective, this would provide them with a fair chance at securing admission to the desired school. The following comments are illustrative (Notes, April 29: 12):

They [administrators] judge you from where you came from (Aisha).

Otherwise they [teachers] would bring their own kids here. How come none of the teachers bring their kids here? (Jasmine)

I would go somewhere where they don’t know about (this school). I wouldn’t tell people if I didn’t have to. Or I would apply to a school that didn’t know about it, about the bad reputation. I wouldn’t tell them where I come from (Roxanne).
According to the student narratives, applying to colleges and universities that were not familiar with the inferior image associated with the school and community would curb the differential treatment resulting from class differences and the negative perceptions of others.

Another method that is used to conceal one’s class background involves avoiding association with “gangster” students. Discussions of their own friends and social groupings were laced with intimations of the girls’ active disassociation with the gangster crowd. Several of the girls mentioned how they avoided these students, as Amy explains:

> You can keep yourself out of trouble, you just know who to choose as your friends, you just have a limited amount of friends. It doesn’t mean that you can’t acknowledge everyone, like you know, stuff that they do just doesn’t entice you, you don’t want to talk to them (Amy, March 10: 7).

The student’s comments suggest both implicitly and explicitly that they do not want to be associated with the behaviour and characteristics of the gangster students. Sharon and Aisha both advise that it is best to “just keep to yourself, try not to look at them [gangster students]” (Aisha: May 25: 3; Sharon, May 26: 4). Similarly, Jennifer also submits that gangster related violence or conflict can be avoided by “ignoring” the gangster crowd (Jennifer, May 26: 1).

As with the response of defending the community and reinterpreting violence, concealing class background indicates a process in which the girls actively negotiate their social class image. Rather than passively accept the images and markers of social class that are placed on them from external factors in wider society, the response of masking or obscuring the features of one’s socioeconomic status background can be understood as a means by which the girls are attempting to (re)form their social class position.
Conclusion: Strategies of Transcendence

This chapter has drawn attention to the ways in which the girls respond to the role of class in their lives. By now it should be clear that the girls indeed do recognize how tensions of class differences operate to create barriers to their success in school and in wider society. In spite of these pressures, the girls attempt to negotiate and overcome the obstacles to their own social class mobility by utilizing three primary and interrelated responses.

The students would continually defend the community and school in spite of a negative reputation and the real and/or imagined violent circumstances. They consistently defended their school and their community by pointing to several explanations - that violence and crime does not occur all the time, that the reputation is rooted in past events, and that the media exaggerates the crime and violence in the community and school. Related to this contradiction, it was noted that the students would commonly describe the routine violence and conflict among students, while almost simultaneously asserting that the student body is friendly. In addition, the students reinterpreted the violence, crime and drugs they faced in a positive light, emphasizing the benefits of street knowledge, and justifying criminal activities such as theft and drug dealing as “legitimate” work. Finally, several of the students interviewed reacted to the pressures of class difference by concealing their own class background. This was accomplished by evading discussion of their socioeconomic status with “others”, as well as through isolating themselves from those students in the gangster crowd.
In reviewing these responses, I situated myself in the analysis, as an individual who has always struggled to achieve upward mobility, and to transcend my social class status. Growing up, I remembered also sharing many of the behaviours of the students I interviewed. I defended my violent, crime ridden community, explaining continually to my middle class peers that “It’s not that bad”. I isolated myself from “bad” students. For me, this was a strategy. If I could convince people that where I came from was not poor or deviant, then I would be in a position to attain my aspirations for social mobility. I did not want my middle class peers to consider me to be “different” from them. This introspection led me to a tentative theory: It is my position that the students’ responses to the impact of social class can be seen as part of a strategy of transcendence, as a mechanism to subvert their social class position.

All of the responses to the impact of social class difference share a common feature: each works to create a positive school and community image, to which their identity and future aspirations for mobility are tied. Philip Wexler’s definition of “image” as it relates to self-identity is useful here. He explains that images

...may not capture the full reflexive biographical psychodynamics of a person’s self, but they make a difference for how the student defines herself and is reciprocally defined by and defining of friends, teachers and parents. These images of self are stereotypes, relatively unrefined, almost caricatured types of social identities (Wexler, 1992: 8-9).

Identity involves definitions of the individual self. The internal and external sense of self are linked, just as self identities are connected to group identities (Dei & James, 1998: 94). Furthermore, identities are relational, and always involve the self and others (Martin, 1995: 6). Individuals actively take on their identities (Gibson-Graham, 1996:}
59). In effect, this is equivalent to asserting what one is not, and creating a boundary between the self and the "other". Such images of self-identity can be seen to be emerging from the narratives.

For instance, in discussions about their future plans and aspirations, every student interviewed wanted to move from the area as soon as possible. Systematically, the girls expressed the desire to achieve social class mobility, and to move to a safer, quieter neighbourhood, where there is considerably less violence and crime. Through concealing their class background, the girls are actively disassociating themselves from membership to the social class status of hallway, ghetto, and/or gangster students. The girls are setting themselves apart from what they see as deviant or negative images relating to class status in their school and community lives. At the same time, through defending the community and reinterpreting daily violence and crime, the girls are also creating specific images of self-identity based on more positive, more socially accepted class images. This identification with positive images can be seen as part of a process whereby the students are aligning themselves toward upward mobility. In essence, the girls are defining their identity. Their responses to the pressures of social class differences, and their creation of positive self-identity images, can be seen as constituting a strategy of moving toward upward mobility.

The responses noted above (defensive comments, reinterpreting violence, concealing class background) effectively allowed the girls to place themselves and others in a social class hierarchy, and in the process, to create their self-identity. The students are actively involved in shaping and reshaping their identity by continually creating
specific images of what they are and what they are not. The students interviewed (re)structured their social class image or self-identity as it relates to their school and community context by suppressing or denying the negative images associated with lower social class status and instead emphasizing a positive self-image linked to success and social class mobility in school and society. I would argue that this assertion of a positive image identity can be seen as an indication of a desire to succeed, or to rise above their social class. The strategies employed by the students can be viewed as a manifestation of their desire to achieve at least a successful image in school and society, and ultimately, as an inclination toward transcending their social class status.
NOTES

Chapter 5

1 It is useful to remember that the girls interviewed in this study are academically aspiring ones (all are OAC students, as noted in the first chapter) - interviews with other students might very well have produced different results.

2 Although the girls may think it is within the power of a principal to let teachers go, the reality is that principals play a big role in hiring and retaining teachers. Moreover, the feelings, assumptions, and opinions of teachers regarding teaching in working class or middle class schools also play a role in both determining where they choose to teach and in creating a low status for certain working class schools.

3 The nature of the field trip will not be discussed to protect the identities of the students and schools involved.

4 For the girls, a “good” university is one which has a reputation for academic excellence; a “good” job is one that does not involve manual, unskilled labour or factory work.

5 Those who are not members of the community, and who do not share the knowledge and experience of the girls who live there.

6 For instance, post-secondary schools that are located outside of the city or in other provinces.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study has been to create a framework which foregrounds class in the analysis of racialized, classed, and gendered schooling for marginalized young women. The sample of female, working class students of colour used in this research is not a representative one; however, the consistency in the narratives allows some conclusions to be drawn.

This study first reviewed literature to find the development of class analyses within sociology of education. Class has been conceptualized in many diverse ways, by scholars in Canada, United States, and Europe. During the 1970s and 1980s, Reproduction and Resistance theories provided some of the most influential frameworks and insights to explain the impact of class difference on schooling. Reproduction theory emphasized both the influence of the division of labour and the relationship between dominant culture and school knowledge. Resistance theory attempted to integrate student agency in the reproduction of the social order.

Anti-racist and feminist scholars rejected the unilinear focus on class characterizing the Reproduction and Resistance models, and attempted to fill the theoretical gaps in the theories. Providing a few examples, the contemporary research of Ogbu, Dei et al., and Mirza demonstrated an emphasis on the salience of race and/or gender in structuring schooling experiences and reproducing social class divisions. In
these current studies, race and gender were at the forefront of the analysis. While it is important to emphasize race and gender, it cannot be denied that class continues to be relevant in social life. However, in the context of today’s “classless” society, where race and gender often provide the lens through which schooling is analyzed, it is essential to continue to examine and understand the changing role that class plays in reproducing social divisions. A number of interrelated questions are raised when attending to class, questions which this study has attempted to begin to answer. Is class relevant in the lives of working class female students of colour? How is it defined by these students? How do they understand the role of class in their school and community experiences?

The narratives provided a composite of school life in a working class community, from the perspective of girls of colour. School life, including the relationships and actors involved in daily routines, rules, activities, student groups, teachers, and administrators, together form the context from which the girls draw to form their meanings and understandings of social class. Such a portrait is essential in providing a foundation for the development of a contemporary class-focused analysis of school life. An awareness of the context of student perspectives allows for an analysis that is rooted in the students’ own historical, political, social, and economic realities.

The depiction of school and community experiences was revealing. Despite current discourse concerning the movement toward a “classless” society, and despite the prevalence and salience of race and gender in contemporary analyses of schooling, class is indeed relevant in the student’s lives. Students are categorized and positioned in a social hierarchy, according to characteristics, attitudes, expectations, and behaviours.
Class structures are expressed in the oppositional relationships and positions occupied by the dominant student groups. According to the student narratives, the deviant, academically unsuccessful "hallway", "ghetto" and "gangster" kids are "lower than" the "normal" kids - they occupy subordinate positions in the school and community relative to the "normal" students.

Having established the context of school and community life, it was important to investigate student defined conceptions of social class. Asking students to define such an abstract, sensitive notion seemed a daunting, unworkable task. However, the narratives indicated that class was a crucial marker dividing the different schools in the community. Thus, it was possible to approach issues of class using the social position of schools as a starting point. According to their descriptions, class is not limited to rigid socioeconomic factors which characterized earlier theoretical approaches to the concept. Rather, there are several dimensions to class: material, academic, cultural, gendered, and racial. Using both classical and contemporary class definitions as a theoretical background, an analysis of these dimensions confirms recent studies (Willis, 1991; Mirza, 1992; Gibson-Graham, 1996) which call for a reappraisal of class to emphasize it as a fluid, moving, sociocultural process. The girls' definitions of social class include overlapping meanings that are actively considered, negotiated and altered over time and space. I argued that this process allows the students the space to interpret and mediate systems of power. The break between static, fixed, economic-based conceptions of social class and the girls' own interpretations and negotiations of the concept provides an opening which allows the students the agency to (re)shape their own class identities, as well as that of others. The
ways in which the girls understand and explain social class, and the space provided in that sociocultural process, opens up room for class movement or transcendence. In short, student understandings of social class determines how it is negotiated, and determines the class identity claimed by the individual. Significantly, the student definitions are inextricably linked to the role played by social class in the girls' lived experiences in school and in the school community.

Chapter 5 attempted to answer the remaining interrelated questions: What is the role of social class difference in students' racialized and gendered experiences? What are the material and ideological conditions that allow working class female students of colour to have successful schooling experiences and/or transcend their social class status?

The girls captured and articulated the ways in which social class difference "worked" in their lives through stories about their daily experiences. The impact of social class was summarized into four interrelated areas: the burden of negative images, differential treatment, pressures to secure upward mobility, and dealing with crime and violence in daily life. In response, the girls utilize three principal strategies to deal with the impact of class difference in their lives. These included defending their school and community, reinterpreting experiences of violence in a positive light, and concealing the details of one's socioeconomic status or background. In reflecting on my own experiences growing up in a similar community, it is my position that these responses can be seen as part of a strategy for social class transcendence.

The common aspect of these strategies is that they seek to create a positive image as it relates to school and community, an image which is connected to the girls' own self-
identity and future aspirations. The students interviewed were structuring both who they are and who they are not. They actively detached themselves from deviant or negative images related to the school and community, and instead aligned themselves with positive, more socially accepted class images linked to success and social class mobility. This process of creating positive identity images can be seen as a strategy towards achieving upward mobility. According to the girls’ narratives, without these positive images, it would be much more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve their academic and social goals - to do well in school, to gain acceptance to prestigious colleges or universities, to get the "good jobs", and to move into more affluent, safe neighbourhoods.

In concluding this research, it is useful to demonstrate how this work may contribute to the ongoing task of securing educational and social change. In foregrounding class in the analysis of the experiences of working class female students of colour, this discussion has revealed the often elusive but important role played by social class in shaping racialized and gendered school and community lives. This study has highlighted the ways in which students are active in shaping their own educational success and social class mobility. It has demonstrated how students understand and explain class difference, and in turn the impact of that understanding on their own negotiations of social class systems. An awareness of these individual perspectives is integral to understanding what aspects of educational structures should be examined and transformed in order to provide students with opportunities for success and economic and social mobility.
This analysis has been grounded in the specific historical, political, economic and social context of the subjects being studied, and points to the direction that should be taken by further research. The students' perspectives indicate the structures in schooling that hinder economic and social mobility. From the girls' viewpoint, the class system that positions schools in a hierarchy of power ("good" affluent schools versus the "bad" working class or poor schools) affects student-teacher relationships, advancement to post-secondary institutions, and possibilities for future career goals. A deeper examination of the larger class structures which position different schools vis-à-vis status and power may provide more insight into the ways in which class operates in student's lives, and in turn, may throw light on how such structures can be transformed for emancipatory purposes.

This research has also highlighted the need to examine the perspectives of minority and/or working class students who attend middle class or affluent schools. It would be interesting to see how such students see themselves, as well as how they see other students of colour who attend the working class or poor high schools. Presumably, the role played by social class would be very different in that context, altering the strategies used to deal with the racialized, classed, and gendered schooling and community experiences. On the other hand, it would be important to note in what ways the social class understandings, explanations, and strategies are similar between the two groups. Nevertheless, investigating the perspectives of minority students in middle class schools would certainly provide further insight into how to approach class issues in schooling in order to formulate theory towards effecting educational and social change.
In summary, the implications of this study have been twofold. It has confirmed some aspects of existing theory on class and schooling. In addition, this study has provided new insight into how today’s working class female students of colour understand and explain social class and the role that it plays in their schooling and community lives. Foregrounding class in the analysis of racialized and gendered experiences in a way that is rooted in the historical, social, political, and economic realities of contemporary youth provides a direction for new research into class issues as it relates to schooling. This process of generating knowledge creates the potential to rejuvenate discussions of a class politics, to lead towards social class emancipation and transformation.
APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW/FOCUS GROUP GUIDELINE

These questions were designed to get an idea about how the student understands and explains social class status, within the context of their daily lived experiences in school and the school community. Not all of these questions were asked; the interview followed the direction of the student.

1. If I was a new student to the school, what sorts of things would I need to know to get through my day?

2. Describe the different student groups in your school.

3. Do you think you can tell if someone is “rich”? How?

4. Do you think you can tell if someone is “poor”? How?

5. Does it make a difference if you are rich or poor in school? Why or why not?

6. What do you like most about your friends? (example: appearance, thoughts, beliefs, actions, etc.)

7. How do people “gain respect” at your school?

8. Who are the most ‘unpopular’ kids in school? (No names, describe the type of student that is ‘unpopular’)

9. Do you think it makes a difference in the way you are treated in school depending upon which kids you hang out with? Why?

10. Do you think a student’s behaviour will have an effect on their futures? Why or why not?

11. What do you think society thinks is successful? What does it mean to be unsuccessful?
12. What are you going to do after high school? Why?
13. What do you like/dislike about your community?
References


