‘I Was Never Very Clever, but I Always Survived!’: Educational Experiences of Women in Britain’s Coalfield Communities, 1944–1990

Natalie Thomlinson

Introduction

The educational experiences of working-class women have often been overlooked, not only by policymakers and practitioners, but also in academic circles. Historically, much of the literature has focused on working-class boys (see, for example, Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970; Willis, 1977), and of socially mobile boys and girls in grammar schools (Hoggart, 1957; Jackson & Marsden, 1962). Whilst there has, of late, been more attention paid to the educational experiences of working-class women (Plummer, 2000; Spencer, 2005; Tisdall, 2019), there remains a lack of research on the experiences of those who went to secondary modern schools—institutions which educated the vast majority of working-class girls between the Butler Act and at least until the 1970s—and the experiences of working-class girls who left grammar

N. Thomlinson (✉)
University of Reading, Reading, UK
e-mail: n.thomlinson@reading.ac.uk

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school at the earliest possible moment. Much of the academic literature on the recent history of education in Britain has focused on the link between social mobility and schooling (Mandler, 2020). Whilst this is an important concern, questions such as pupils' everyday experience of school, and how experiences shaped the self, remain under researched, especially in relation to working-class women. This chapter draws on the experiences of nearly 100 women brought up in coalfield communities across Britain in the post-war period to address these questions. It examines their experiences between the 1944 Education Act (which introduced free secondary education for all and enshrined a system of selection at eleven) and 1990, when the youngest interviewee left school.

The women whose testimonies appear in this chapter were interviewed as part of an AHRC-funded project on the experiences of women during the 1984–1985 miners' strike in Britain. This project was undertaken by: myself; the principal investigator for the project, Florence Sutcliffe Braithwaite; and the project's postdoctoral researcher, Victoria Dawson. Interviewees were recruited through a variety of methods; adverts for participants were placed on social media and in local papers; flyers were sent round to community organisations in coalfield areas; and interviewees themselves recommended friends who would be happy to talk. The oral-histories were conducted as full-life history interviews, ranging from between 90 min to 7 h in length. This allowed material about a range of topics pertinent to the lives of working-class women in coalfield communities in post-war Britain, including education, to be gathered. Participants were born between 1934–1974, with the majority being classic 'baby boomers' born between the mid-1940s and late 1950s, and were drawn from coalfields across England, Scotland, and Wales (see Table 1). The sample was too small to be representative: our sample was more socially mobile than average, and drawn disproportionately from active supporters of the strike, despite our attempts to solicit interviewees from across the political spectrum.

The women had a range of educational experiences and attended a mix of single-sex and co-educational schools; attendance at single-sex institutions was more common in older interviewees, and amongst those who

Table 1 Overview of Interviewees Biographical Details

Interviewee	Year of birth	Location	School type
Christina Bell	1949	North East	Secondary Modern
Tracey Bell	1971	Nottinghamshire	Comprehensive
Joyce Boyes	1955	Yorkshire	Secondary Modern/comprehensive
Carol*	1968	South Wales	Comprehensive
Chloe*	1959	Yorkshire	Grammar
Sara C	1971	Yorkshire	Comprehensive
Kay Case	1948	South Wales	Grammar
Maureen Coates	1942	Yorkshire	Grammar
Betty Cook	1938	Yorkshire	Grammar
Kath Court	1943	Yorkshire	Secondary modern
Myra Dakin	1959	Yorkshire	Comprehensive
Elizabeth Ann*	1943	South Wales	Grammar
Liz French	1950	Kent	Secondary modern
Theresa Gratton*	1955	North East	Grammar
Christine Harvey	1950	South Wales	Grammar
Shelan Holden	1970	Yorkshire	Comprehensive
Margaret Holmes	1942	Kent	Secondary modern
Sian James	1959	South Wales	Secondary modern/comprehensive
Anne Kirby	1955	Fife	Comprehensive
Pippa Morgan*	1962	South Wales	Grammar/secondary modern
Poppy*	1968	North East	Comprehensive
Maxine Penkethman	1967	Staffordshire	Comprehensive
Marie Price	1935	Nottinghamshire	Secondary modern
Robyn*	1963	Yorkshire	Comprehensive
Angela Rees	1958	Kent	Secondary modern
Ann Rollett	1943	Yorkshire	Secondary modern
Alice Samuel	1958	Lanarkshire	Grammar
Jean Shadbolt	1948	Nottinghamshire	Grammar
Marjorie Simpson	1938	Yorkshire	Secondary modern
Kerry Smith	1972	Nottinghamshire	Comprehensive

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Interviewee	Year of birth	Location	School type
Rita Wakefield	1943	Nottinghamshire	Secondary modern
Jo-Anne Welsh	1967	Yorkshire	Comprehensive
Josie Warner*	1952	Staffordshire	Grammar
Anne Watts	1949	South Wales	Grammar
Carol Willis	1952	North East	Grammar

*Denotes a pseudonym

had passed their eleven plus.[1] Roughly a quarter attended a grammar school, though some transferred between secondary moderns and grammars and vice versa, and a number were in secondary moderns and grammar schools that became comprehensive during their time at the school. The younger interviewees tended to have gone to comprehensive schools due to the phasing out of the eleven plus in most local authorities from the mid-1960s onwards. The majority attended school in either their local community or the nearest town. Those who attended grammar schools were over-represented in the research; we should recognise here the tendency of volunteers for oral history projects to be drawn from those who feel they have a 'successful' life story to tell. However, given that the focus of the project was the miners' strike, rather than education, failing the eleven plus was not an obvious deterrent to taking part, and we therefore gathered useful accounts of education in secondary modern schools from many women.

Of course, the context in which these oral testimonies were produced needs to be considered. Encounters between university researchers and women who, in some cases, left school without qualifications, can be freighted with class and power imbalances. The fact that I grew up in a coalfield community, whilst sometimes useful in establishing a rapport with interviewees, could only go so far in ameliorating differences in life

[1] The eleven plus was an examination taken by all pupils across England and Wales until the 1960s (although it still exists in some areas). Pupils sat the eleven plus in the final year of primary school to determine which secondary schools they would attend thereafter (grammar, technical, or second modern). The eleven plus was (and still is) controversial and has been criticised as being biased against working-class children, and also against women, who were, in many cases, required to gain higher marks than boys to obtain a grammar school place.

experience. As such, the interview—as all oral histories are—were deeply shaped by the intersubjectivity of the encounter (Summerfield, 2004). Whilst the interviewees were no doubt faithful to the truth as they understood it, it would nevertheless be naïve to read these testimonies as simple empirical assertions of fact. Nevertheless, these interviews *are* useful for providing insight into how education was subjectively experienced and perceived by the women in our research, and the frameworks they used to make sense of their experiences at school.

It is impossible to give one single narrative of the experiences of almost 100 women. Many loved school, others hated it, and some were indifferent. Often a range of attitudes were present in the same interview. In some cases, happy memories of school jostled with a sense of resentment at the low expectations of working-class girls. For those who remembered more progressively inclined teachers, school was simultaneously the locus of class and gender oppression, and an arena for critique. Mandler (2020) points to the contradictions in a system that championed education as a means of social mobility whilst failing to provide the mass of the population with schooling that could actually make good on this promise; in his reading, Britain's shift to comprehensive education in the post-war period was driven by widespread public discontent with this failure. Importantly though, experiences of school shaped participants' sense of self in other important respects—as 'rebels', as women who 'loved to learn', as 'popular' sociable people—and this chapter also explores how school shaped their subjectivities, and the frameworks they used to interpret their educational experiences.

Class

That education in twentieth-century Britain worked to reproduce class inequalities is well-established in literature (see, Jackson & Marsden, 1962; Plummer, 2000; Reay, 2017; Willis, 1977). Many—though not all—of our interviewees recognised this. This may have been linked to the generally left-wing tendencies of our sample as access to various leftist discourses around education provided many of our interviewees with the intellectual tools through which to interpret their experiences.

It was notable that those who deemed themselves as 'socialist' were most likely to critique the schooling they had received in terms of its failure to promote social mobility. Unsurprisingly, recollections of taking the eleven plus were flash points for memories about social injustice. Margaret Holmes, for example, suspected that her headmaster at primary school in Deal, Kent, may have prevented her from attending grammar school in the 1950s as her mother was a cleaner. It is impossible to know the validity of this claim, but teachers often had significant power in determining the fate of 'borderline' candidates, with predictable class biases (Vernon, 1957). Kath Court passed her eleven plus in Altofts, West Yorkshire, in the early 1950s—one of only two to do so in her class—but was unable to take her place at grammar school. She remembered:

> I knew I was very much working class when it came to the eleven plus, because we had twins that were quite…the family was quite high ranking in the Catholic Church. One of the twins passed the eleven plus and so did I and there were two places but because they were twins, I didn't get the place but the twin that was dim did, and yes, I knew that was class division, yes, from being early and I always resented that.

Kath was then sent to the local secondary modern which did not offer formal qualifications. Unsurprisingly, the injustice of this still burned in Kath's memory. Now in her late seventies, Kath remembered "I was so disgusted, I was angry, because if I'd have gone to Notre Dame, in Leeds, I'd have had a different life altogether" even though as an adult, Kath re-entered education and retrained as a social worker.

The lower status of the secondary modern was felt keenly by some pupils and their parents. Sian James, said of the local secondary modern that she attended in South Wales in the early 1970s that "we knew that we were the lowest of the low". Others seemed to have taken less of a battering to their self-esteem by going to a secondary modern; it may well have been that passing the eleven plus was so rare in some communities that failing it was hardly worth of note (Plummer, 2000). Yet, despite the general keenness amongst some parents for their children to go to grammar school (Mandler, 2020), not all our interviewees wished themselves to go to grammar school. In Kent, in the early 1970s, for example,

Angela Rees remembered refusing to take her eleven plus (which it was expected she would pass) for fear of being seen as 'snobby' by her schoolmates. In one particularly vivid testimony, Christine Worth remembered the struggle she had with her mother over whether to attend the local grammar school in Derbyshire in the early 1960s:

> Oh, it was miserable…when I found out I was the only one [of the girls at the school] I said, 'I'm not going'…my mum was devastated. I'd passed mine and [mum said] we could afford the uniform—'I can afford the uniform you will go'. And after a summer of rows, I went. It was difficult being the only girl in that year. I remember in my early teens getting into fights and I'm not a fighter. But sometimes you've got to hit back, because of course we used to get bullied, we wore uniform, and they called us bucket bangers.

Fear of being the 'odd one out' drove Christine's resistance to attending the grammar school. She was not the only one bullied for going to grammar school. Theresa Gratton* from County Durham remembered of her experiences in the late 1960s that:

> Of course, it had a wonderful uniform, it was a convent, so I was dressed in a diarrhoea brown gabardine coat with a bowler hat, and you had to have a briefcase. You may as well have stuck a Belisha Beacon on my head and said, 'come and get me.' I don't think I ever forgave me mam and dad for letting me go there [laughs].

As these testimonies suggest, attending grammar school could make someone a target. The uniforms themselves, a 'Belisha Beacon', were markers of difference in communities where conforming to certain norms was often valued. For those who passed the eleven plus, grammar school could be a disorienting introduction to a different and more middle-class world with a different set of values and norms. Differences were felt across many arenas: some were everyday embodied modes of 'being', such as clothing, appearance, and accent: other differences centred around modes of cultural consumption in terms of choices made around leisure and entertainment. Again, this is unsurprising; the low-level class-warfare of the grammar school has been a theme of educational

sociology for the last sixty years at least (Jackson & Marsden, 1962; Plummer, 2000). Theresa Gratton remembered of the grammar school she attended in Hartlepool that:

> When I went to grammar school, it was like...'whoa'. When it was Christmas, we had to stay there to go to the Christmas party, we had to be invited to someone's home and they used to insist on somebody from Hartlepool inviting all of the colliery girls to go with them and I remember going to this house and it was a huge, semi-detached town-house and I thought, 'Jesus, I didn't know people lived like this' and they would say, 'what does your dad do?' and then you'd say, 'miner' and they would look at ya…and then the judgement would be made, so I used to be seethingly resentful of that, massively, but it did sort of make me realise, I think, for the first time that there was this other world out there that was different to the one I inhabited.

Here, we see that class was experienced through the concrete differences in material circumstances of pupils at the school. Theresa was made to realise the existence of 'this other world' for the first time, and of the value judgements made about working-class life. In a middle-class environment, she was made to feel her difference, to bear the 'hidden injuries' of class (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Perhaps the most extreme example of this can be seen in the experience of Pippa Morgan* who passed her eleven plus in South Wales in the early1970s but was so unhappy at her grammar school that after a few months she refused to go. Her unhappiness was such that she was referred to a child psychologist who recommended that she was transferred to the local secondary modern. In a testimony that once again highlights visible class markers of difference, such as clothing and appearance, she remembered that:

> I was just so unhappy there [starts crying]. I missed my friends. I missed just everything about the other school…That was like a class thing. You know, in the grammar school, like people were so, I don't know, snobby for want of a better word, and…they'd pick on everything you'd done, they'd pick on everything…I had my ears pierced twice and there was big fuss over that in the school 'oh, what do you want that for, what do you want that?'. And even you know different things, down to clothes, colour

> of your hair, things like that. And I just hated it…and then when I went to this school [the secondary modern], you know, it was…normal.

Here we can see how Pippa's habitus was different to that of the teachers and fellow pupils at her grammar school, resulting in a sense of deep alienation and unhappiness. Class was experienced here as not simply a lack of belief in the abilities of working-class pupils; it was written on the body of the working-class pupils themselves, designated as 'excessive' and 'vulgar', as 'other' to the norm of the well-regulated middle-class body (Skeggs, 1997). Like Bourdieu's (1990) famous fish that does not know it is swimming in water, as a working-class student, Pippa was only able to experience an instinctive grasp of the culture and social codes governing behaviour at the 'normal' secondary modern school.

Class snobbery was not, of course, limited to grammar schools. Remembering at her school which had recently changed from a grammar school into a comprehensive in the South Yorkshire coalfield in the 1970s, Jo-Anne Welsh said:

> [The school] still had affectations to be a grammar school, which was quite interesting. I think there was kind of quite a lot of snobbery in school. So, despite the fact that, y'know, it's sat in the middle of a mining area, and predominantly, y'know, served people who were, kind of, working classes, I think there was quite a bit of snobbery about what people's parents did and then what aspirations might be for those children.

Aggie Currie, in another memory that centred on clothes, remembered of her secondary modern school in Doncaster in the 1960s that:

> If your uniform came from Marks and Spencer, you were first choice for the teacher. If you were one of them kids whose uniform came from the market or jumble sale, they didn't want to know. And I was one of them kids.

Different patterns of cultural consumption could also occasion snobbery, and at her secondary modern, Sian James remembered talking

about reading the *Daily Mirror* only to be told it was a 'barmaids' paper' by her teacher. Sian remembered her teachers as 'embittered' and 'second-rate', and as Tisdall (2019) has suggested, it may have been that such teachers reinforced their own precarious sense of middle-class identity by putting down their students. Yet, it must also be said that for some interviewees, class was not a particularly salient point of division in their schooling lives. This was perhaps most typical within the secondary modern, where class was rarely brought up by our interviewees, apart from in the context of failing the eleven plus (Sian and Aggie were exceptions). This was likely because such schools in coalfield communities had an overwhelmingly working-class intake; but this was also the case for some of our grammar school pupils. Whilst nationally grammar schools were dominated by middle-class children, this was not always the case in overwhelmingly working-class areas. Those who went to grammar schools in the local or nearby village or small town where they had grown-up tended to be less likely to remember class antagonisms at school than those who had to travel further to go to school outside coalfield communities. Carol Willis from Ashington in Northumberland remembered that her grammar school wasn't 'posh', with most pupils being the children of miners, and having a broad North-East accent. Maureen Coates remembered the same of her experience at grammar school in the mining village of Adwick-le-Street, near Doncaster, as did Alice Samuel of her grammar school in Lanarkshire. This is not to say that class did not shape the education that they received; but some women did not always see it as a factor in the day-to-day experiences of school. This was less true of gender.

Gender

School has always been an arena for the reproduction of gender norms (Byrne, 1978; Griffin, 1985; Plummer, 2000; Sharpe, 1976). Undoubtedly, the education that boys and girls received in post-war Britain was different, both in terms of formal curriculum differences and the 'hidden curriculum', where wider social expectations of suitable behaviours and aspirations for girls shaped the education they received in the classroom

(Sharpe, 1994). Tisdall (2019) has argued that the allegedly 'progressive' ideologies of the post-war Britain worked to enshrine normative notions of gender, particularly for working-class girls. This was made obvious in the 1963 Newsom Report, and the heavily domestic curriculum it recommended for girls in secondary modern schools. The importance of preparation for life as a housewife was heavily underscored in the report's recommendations, with training in cooking and sewing emphasised. Many interviewees recognised these differences and understood them as a product of different gender norms; some also explicitly framed them as a product of a sexist society. Kath Court remembered that "school in my opinion prepared the girls to be wives and mothers". Similarly, Shelan Holden attending a school in South Elmsall, told us: "The girls were brought up that they were gonna be pit wives. That was the expectation".

Almost all who attended mixed schools remembered the segregation of lessons; this was unsurprising given that Benn and Simon (1970) found in the late 1960s that 50% of the comprehensives they surveyed limited some subjects to boys only, and 49 percent limited some subjects to girls. Such segregation was not limited to girls doing cooking and boys doing woodwork (something all our interviewees including those born in the 1970s, remembered), but also often included a divide between the physical sciences (often restricted to boys), and biology (more commonly offered to girls) (Byrne, 1978). It was not always clear in these interviews whether the segregation was 'official', or the result of pupils being given the 'choice' between studying various subjects which resulted in traditional splits, but the effects were much the same. Physical Education was also segregated for almost all of interviewees, with girls usually forbidden to play 'boys' sports such as football. This was resented by many. Shelan Holden, for example, said, "I used to be the one always arguing that I wanted to go and play football and rugby, and it was like 'you can't, 'cause you're a girl'. I'd be like 'but why?'". Marie Price was also told by a teacher that she would 'never be a lady' because of her love of playing the game. Given that the Football Association banned the women's game until 1971, it is unsurprising that schools were slow to provide opportunities for girls to play football; that this was often commented on perhaps points to the privileged place of football in the cultural life of the nation,

and a sense that being banned from football was emblematic of the wider ways in which some women suffered exclusion.

Yet, it would be incorrect to suggest that all interviewees were nascent schoolgirl feminists, chomping at the bit to critique the gendered nature of their education. Joanne and Christina Bell, for example, remembered warmly the play kitchen in their primary school classrooms. Anne Kirby also remembered cooking as her favourite lesson. The domestic was not necessarily viewed with disdain. Indeed, Giles (2004) has suggested that for many women in the post-war period, to be a 'housewife' was understood as a modern and desirable identity. As Bev Skeggs (1997) has argued, competence within the domestic sphere was one of the few cultural resources that working-class women could draw on for a successful performance of femininity. It is therefore unsurprising that many within our sample of working-class women were not particularly troubled by the gendered nature of the curriculum that they experienced. Their experiences were framed within a culturally hegemonic discourse that saw women's association with the domestic as 'natural' and 'right'. Marjorie Simpson noted with apparent approval, and a laugh, that at the secondary modern school in South Yorkshire in the early 1950s, 'girls were girls and boys were boys', saying (slightly tongue in cheek) "nobody had thought of all this nonsense that there is these days about it all!". As Marjorie's words suggest, women's association with the domestic could simply be thought of as 'the way things were', or even as training for the future; such understandings certainly reflected the traditional gendered divisions of labour that were seen to characterise coalfield communities in the early post-war period (see Dennis et al., 1956). It is important to note that despite the increasing participation of women in paid work in post-war Britain (McCarthy, 2020), only the youngest of our participants expected to have lives characterised by extensive participation in the paid labour force, still less a career. In the event, most of them participated extensively in the paid labour force, but these earlier assumptions inevitably informed their orientation towards school, and what both they and the authorities regarded as a suitable education for girls.

Some participants did, however, have memories of teachers explicitly challenging gender norms. Aberdare Grammar School, which five interviewees attended, invoked consistent memories of an old-fashioned

school that was nevertheless remembered for its ambition for the girls who went there. Elizabeth Ann* (1943), for example, remembered that the teachers at the school did not want them to learn shorthand because they feared their pupils getting 'stuck' in office work. In the 1980s, Shelan Holden was highly critical of the gender politics of her school in West Yorkshire. She remembered these teachers as adults who helped her develop her sense as an individual with valuable things to say and allowed her to challenge gendered norms. It is also worth noting that one interviewee, Myra Dakin, who attended the same school as Shelan but in the early 1970s, remembered that she did woodwork and welding there; yet Shelan described the school as 'totally segregated' in terms of the domestic science/woodwork gender divide. It is difficult to know whether one of the two misremembered here, or whether the school—which had been established as an experimental community college in 1969 by the West Riding when Myra attended—had a greater enthusiasm for such educational experiments in its early days than it did by the time Shelan was there in the 1980s. But it was clear that such experiments *were* happening in schools by the later 1960s. Joyce Boyes recalled an experiment at her secondary modern in Castleford in the late 1960s:

> [There was] a little project where, on a Tuesday afternoon you could all choose to do something else…I remember I went into the woodwork class, and you'd be amazed how many boys went into the cookery class…they'd got an old car and you could go and learn a bit about mechanics and things, so I think they were trying to branch out a little bit, and get away from 'the boy, and the girl', and not overlapping sort of thing.

Joyce remembered this experiment fondly, though her use of the term 'project' served to underline its novelty. Whilst Tisdall (2019) has pointed to the limits of progressivism in post-war Britain, both she and Carter (2016) have argued that secondary moderns could, nevertheless, be at the forefront of experiments in pedagogy that aimed not just to improve academic achievement, but make education 'more natural, practical and enjoyable' (Tisdall, 2019, p. 208). As Carter (2016) has suggested, the vagueness from policymakers about what precisely a secondary modern

education should consist of—as well as the relative absence of qualifications available for pupils to take until the introduction of the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) in the 1960s—left some room for teachers who were inclined to innovate. Many were not so inclined, but the progressive nature of some teaching in secondary moderns is hinted at in Joyce's memories around the experiment in letting students choose their own lessons. Yet, despite some of these experiments, as we shall see, aspirations for working-class girls were rarely high.

Imagined Futures

The sense that little was expected of many of our interviewees pervaded their reminiscences of school, particularly for older participants. Marie Price remembered of her secondary modern schooling in the late 1940s that "it was just get you through school and that was it". Rita Wakefield, eight years younger than Marie and from nearby Bulwell, remembered that "all the jobs were laid out for you" when she left her local secondary modern, the choice being either the Players cigarette factory, the hosiery factory, or—for the boys—the pit. A generation later, Maxine Penkethman, from Stoke-on-Trent, remembered that "even the teachers…they just set you up to fail, they told you, you were going to be—nothing, and, and we weren't". She remembered the school as 'churning out these kids', telling them "you're going to go and work in a factory", and not going to "do anything with your life". Perhaps it is unsurprising given such a context that a number of our interviewees recalled being persistent truants and unofficially leaving school early, particularly given the fact that there was little skilled work available in coalfields for women with qualifications.

But even those who went to grammar school had few memories of being encouraged to stay on beyond the end of compulsory education, reflecting what we know about the greater propensity of working-class girls to be 'early-leavers' at grammar school (Plummer, 2000). In the 1960s, Kay Case said she 'hated' her time at grammar school in Merthyr Tydfil, and that all she could think of was "leaving school, getting a job and saving up to get married". Betty Cook remembered of her time at

Pontefract District Girls' High in the early 1950s that she was "desperate to leave school. I had three very close friends at school who had left when they were fifteen". Betty left at the age of sixteen, at which point—despite the entreaties of her headmistress who wanted her to stay on so at school so she could go to gain teaching qualifications—she began nursing training. Betty did not speak of disliking school per se but talked of the 'tight reign' her 'possessive' father kept on her. Beginning residential nursing training at the age of sixteen was the only way in which Betty could gain what she called 'freedom'. For many working-class girls, leaving education early, either through marriage, work, or in Betty's case, further training, was the only way in which they could leave oppressive home lives—though such moves did not always result in the 'freedom' that were longed for.

This trajectory of early leaving was common for many who went to grammar schools in our sample. They were more likely to attain qualifications than those who went to secondary moderns, but often did not stay on into the sixth form. Grammar school was generally seen to be a route into white-collar employment, rather than as a prelude to university. This is unsurprising, given the extremely low numbers of working-class women attending university during this period (Byrne, 1978). As Jean Shadbolt remembered of her experience in 1960s Nottinghamshire:

> I wanted to do something arty…but…with my parents, neither of them ever said to me, 'Come on! You can do this!', you know. Once I reached fifteen, and could have left school legally, they didn't really mind whether I went to school or not. Even though I was doing my O-Levels, there was never any 'are you to revise? What exam have you got?' They didn't care…As long as I didn't go into a factory…Once I got an office job, in their eyes, I'd arrived.

Joyce Boyes also remembered aiming for clerical work at her secondary modern in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the desirability of which was noted by Byrne (1978) and Griffin (1985), and Sharpe (1976). This changed a little for younger participants, where increasing numbers of women in paid work meant interviewees grew up with a greater expectation that career-oriented qualifications might be useful for their

future working life. Deindustrialisation resulted in changing patterns of employment in coalfield areas (and indeed, across the country), with the economy shifting towards a service sector that was more likely to provide jobs for women than had previously been the case (McCarthy, 2020). The increasing availability of white-collar employment for women and decreasing availability of traditionally 'male' work in heavy industry, presumably also worked to subtly shift girls' thoughts about their possible futures. Sharpe (1994) observed that in the eighteen years between her 1976 and 1994 studies of teenage girls in West London schools, girls had become much more career orientated. Even so, career ambitions—or more accurately, their absence—tended to be shaped by the experience growing up in occupationally homogeneous coalfield communities. Tracey Bell remembered of her school in Nottinghamshire that in the 1980s, "we didn't really have access to people who were inspiring beyond the teachers we had", and that being a teacher was seen as the highest aspiration possible. Similarly, Robyn who attended a comprehensive school in Doncaster remembered that were "no aspirations, nothing…middle-class people were teachers and doctors, and I didn't know any teachers or doctors". On the other hand, Poppy, from the North East, recalled attaining good grades with relative ease at her comprehensive in the 1980s but, to the dismay of the head, was not interested in going to university:

> I was wanting to be out and about…And eventually I dropped out of school and when I did, the headmaster went mad. He wasn't happy, I was...I was doing A-levels 'cos I was one of the few candidates that they thought might make the Oxbridge, kind of, university...they didn't have many kids going to university at that time and I went…I went to Newcastle nursing instead. But he was like, 'You could be a doctor', but I was like, 'I don't want to be a doctor, I want to be nurse, and I've got me place, so there's no point me staying, 'cos I start before me A-levels...', he wasn't happy at all. He actually said to me that...he would bet his…he bet the rent or summat that I would end up on a council estate with, I think it was, three children to four different fathers.

Poppy's tale is interesting for the ambivalence demonstrated by the headmaster in the situation. In Poppy's telling, the head wanted her stay

on, holding aspirations for her as a working-class girl alongside an expression of deep class prejudice about the sort of life Poppy would lead if she did not follow his advice. The irony here is that by deliberately defying the power of the older, middle-class, male, Poppy also 'colluded in her own damnation', as Willis (1977) would have it. We may also want to read this vignette as a way of Poppy illustrating her intelligence to the interviewer, and her triumph against the odds—given the class prejudice she faced—in obtaining a degree later in life and following the career she wanted.

Experiences of School and the Making of the Self

To understand school within a crudely functionalist paradigm as a place where qualifications could be gained and 'converted' to jobs is to miss many other reasons it could be valued. It is true that many interviewees recalled negative experiences of school, but many still found value in their education despite the injustices faced. Whether their time at school was positive, negative, or a mixture, interviewees' experiences did much to shape their sense of self later in life.

Most obviously, amongst those who passed the eleven plus, there were hints of identification with the ethos of the grammar school as Jackson and Marsden (1962) also found in their famous study *Education and the Working Class*. Whilst patterns of working-class achievement as a whole were negatively impacted by selective education, a small number of working-class students were nevertheless able to negotiate the system successfully and to 'achieve' at school (indeed, the success of these pupils was used to confer legitimacy on the tripartite system). Some of our interviewees were part of this small number of academically successful working-class students, "I enjoyed school; I always enjoyed school", said Christine Harvey of her grammar school in Aberdare, remembering with happiness the encouragement given to pupils by their teachers. Christine, unusually for a working-class girl of her generation, went on to attend university in Sheffield to study maths. Anne Watts attended this school at a similar point in time, and equally recalled an atmosphere of

ambition for the girls, noting that she 'thrived' there. A grammar school education could be a source of pride, even a welcome source of difference to the other boys and girls they had gone to junior school with. Perhaps, this is unsurprising given the veneration of academic achievement within the grammar school, and the implicit message given to those who had passed the eleven plus that they were 'better' than their school-friends who failed. Josie Warner, remembered of her time at a Black Country grammar school in the 1960s:

> At school, I was clever…quite bossy, top of the class in most things. I enjoyed school immensely, I liked going to school, oddly, for a child. I particularly liked my secondary school. I did enjoy having a real mix of people to be friends with. I was not friends with people on my estate, I was only friends with people from school, so I guess, as a child, I was probably, fairly aspirational. I was pretty good at most things…I really enjoyed school as both the source of learning, 'cause we had some absolutely brilliant staff there. I mean I can still remember whole lessons from some of the secondary school teachers.

Clearly, being 'top of class in most things' was something that bolstered Josie's self-esteem and shaped her sense of self into adulthood. A number of those interviewed who hadn't attended grammar schools also talked of having loved school. Certain subjects and certain teachers were remembered with fondness, and there was no contradiction between having 'loved' school and not having achieved many academic qualifications. As Anne Kirby remembered, "[I]loved high school. Absolutely loved it…Don't think I was good at anything really, I just enjoyed it". Perhaps more pragmatically, Ann Rollett, said she 'enjoyed' her time at the school she attended in the 1950s, noting with a laugh that "I was never very clever, but I always survived!". And Joyce Boyes remembered the 'lovely little secondary school' she attended in Castleford, praising the 'good education' she received there.

We should also read these oft-repeated assertions about 'loving school' or 'loving-learning' within the context of claim-making about the self. Through making these claims, interviewees were not just simply stating a 'fact' about their younger selves; they were constructing a self for the present that allowed them 'composure'. 'Composure' is, in Summerfield's

(2004) words, the process within an oral history interview where the interviewee 'constructs a narrative about him or herself, in pursuit of psychic comfort and satisfaction, and in the hope of eliciting recognition and affirmation from his or her audience' (p. 69). Interviewees were therefore not just children who had loved learning; they wanted to be seen as people who 'loved learning', implicitly during the present as well as the past. To be someone who 'loved learning' was to be intelligent, thoughtful, and hardworking; to present oneself in this way was to attempt to access the forms of cultural capital associated with education. That these claims were made in the context of interviews with university researchers was perhaps significant and may have also spoken to a desire to be seen in a certain way by the interviewer, or to simply claim some common ground with them.

To be a person who 'loved learning' was not the only way through which we could see how school experiences had positively shaped participants' sense of self, however. Most obviously, school could be valued for the occasions for socialising it provided (see, Richards, 2018), and the sense of belonging and identity that being 'part of the group' could engender. This was commented on widely by our interviewees. In one interview passage, Kerry Smith recalled of the comprehensive she attended in Nottinghamshire in the 1980s that:

> I just didn't particularly enjoy school at all, I wasn't the most academic…I think I got four GCSE passes and then I went on to do a BTEC, I wanted to leave school as soon as possible, so I went to West Notts College and did a BTEC. But this sounds really strange saying it out loud, weirdly I was really popular. I had like loads and loads of friends, and I was the only person in the school who was like house captain, form captain, and prefect, so—there was some elements of it—and that kind of, that social side of it, and I knew everybody, and everybody knew me, and it was all very kind of...But the actual learning…

The hesitations in the testimony serve to underline the ambivalence of this passage, as Kerry tried to formulate what, precisely, she felt about her schooldays. In her juxtaposition of memories of social success alongside a perceived lack of academic achievement, she was not alone. As Sara C. remembered of her education in Barnsley in the 1980s, "I liked

school, I wouldn't say I was a good student, but I did like school. *I had lots of friends"* (italics mine). And Maxine Penkethman decried her 'terrible' teachers, but 'still enjoyed school 'cause we had a right laugh'. Many talked of the number of friends that they had at school, and about 'having a laugh', perhaps a way of constructing themselves as sociable, well-liked people.

A number of our interviewees talked also of their rebelliousness and independence at school, and it was notable that a number of those who became active in left-wing politics both during and after the strike emphasised this aspect of their personality. Aggie Currie, for example, talked of the trouble she regularly got into:

> I could walk in a classroom – 'cause I were a bit of a joker and all – 'You – out! That were my school day. 'You – out!' Every class. And my oldest sister Mary, she were dead quiet and timid, and if anybody picked on her, I used to go ge'rem…that's why my education was so – unbelievable. You know, I've bluffed my way through life a lot, really, you know, with jobs I've had, I got educated during 't miners' strike.

It is significant here that Aggie positioned herself as the protector of her sister in a way that seemed to foreshadow her later politics as a protector of her community, as suggested by the way that Aggie drew the miners' strike (in which she played a leading role in the support movement) into a part of her life story where it did not apparently fit. Similarly, her ability to 'bluff' her way through life is implicitly presented here as a result of her lack of education at school. Likewise, for Maxine Penkethman, there was an implicit connection made between the story she told of herself as a schoolchild, and the person she later became. Maxine was a teenager during the 1984–1985 strike, but later became involved in trade union activity. She recalled teachers being unfair to her due to the bad behaviour of her older brother, and explicitly connected this with her current values when she said, "I'm quite independent, if somebody picks on me, I'll stand up for myself and other people"; values she clearly saw as motivating her involvement in trade unions. Aggie and Maxine were not the only women to present themselves this way in our testimonies. Liz French described herself as a 'ringleader' amongst her

friends at school in Kent; Alice Samuel described herself as a 'wild child'; and Christine Worth described herself as a 'rebel'. All became involved in activist efforts to support the strike, and it was difficult not to feel that these experiences at school had contributed to a sense of their selves—and a story they wanted to tell of themselves—as women not afraid to challenge the establishment.

Conclusion

Class and gender profoundly shaped the educational experiences of interviewees. This was unsurprising and, in many ways, their stories work to richly illustrate, rather than to challenge, decades of sociological research that have established this. Like women from other working-class communities in post-war Britain, girls in coalfield schools often imagined their futures in terms of the norms of the communities around them, and the limited employment opportunities available to women. But the love of school expressed by many (though not all) should caution us against being too reductive about the educational experiences of working-class women in post-war Britain. Certain things could be valued about school even as the social injustices that the education system helped to perpetuate were recognised. The ambivalence of many interviewees towards school can be read in light of contradictions inherent within the school system, with both its emancipatory and oppressive aspects. Furthermore, the process of life-review inherent within the oral history process provides insights into how experiences at school shaped the self in powerful ways. Some women came to construct themselves as people with a 'love of learning'; others as individuals who liked a 'laugh' and could make friends easily; others as 'rebels' (of course, these categories were not mutually exclusive). Reflecting on experiences at school became a keyway through which interviewees understood how their adult selves came to be, and through linking the present self with the past self in a coherent fashion, composure in the interview could be generated. Schools in post-war Britain should be investigated by scholars not just as sites of social

reproduction—although they were undoubtedly that—but also as sites through which meanings about the self were generated, and in which the tools to create such meaning were shaped.

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