

# **'I want there to be no glass ceiling:' Evangelicals' Engagements with Class, Education, and Urban Childhoods**

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## **Abstract**

While class has been an enduring focus for sociologists of education, there has been little focus on the interrelations between class, religion, and education, despite widespread public anxieties about faith schools potentially encouraging both social class segregation and religious separatism, which have become more pronounced as the expansion of free schools and academies in England has increased opportunities for religious bodies' engagement in educational provision. This article explores the importance of class in relation to the intersections of religion and education through examining how an 'open evangelical' church engages with children in schools linked with it, drawing on eighteen months' ethnographic fieldwork with the church, its linked schools, and other informal educational activities run by the church. Through analyzing the everyday practices through which evangelical leaders seek to affect children's lives and how they speak about their involvements with children, the article reveals the significance of class in this context, providing insight into how evangelicals' primary aspiration in this setting is for children's 'upward mobility', as their ambitions are shaped through middle-class, entrepreneurial norms, in which developing a neoliberal ethic of individual self-discipline and 'productivity' is privileged. Through focusing on the 'othering' of the urban poor in these discourses, the article adds to our knowledge of the complex interrelations between evangelicalism and class, and deepens understanding of how secular neoliberal norms become interwoven with an alternative evangelical moral project of forming the self.

**Key words:** class, childhood, academies, free schools, evangelicalism, emerging evangelical, open evangelical, cultural capital, churches, urban childhood

## **Introduction**

One sunny September Tuesday morning, the Year 7 and 8 students at Riverside Secondary Academy were filing into the school hall for assembly. Riverside

Secondary Academy is part of Riverside 'Hub', the term members of Riverside Church use to talk about the different services (including schools, toddlers' groups, youth groups, a food bank, debt advice) they provide in their local area in London, and which the church leaders describe as part of their vision for 'local community transformation'. The head teacher had told me over a cup of tea beforehand that the students were learning about news stories in their Tuesday assemblies, 'to grow in social and cultural capital', demonstrating the pervasiveness of these concepts beyond the sociological analysis of class. When the students had filed in and were seated in rows on the floor, their bags by their sides, Miss Brown, the Head of Languages, addressed them. In her late twenties, with shoulder length blonde hair, she began by emphasizing the importance of eye contact, telling the students that their eyes should be 'tracking the speaker'. She then encouraged them to reflect on the impressions they may have given through how they engaged with others over the past week: 'Think about your first week. Think about the interactions that you've had with the other students and the teachers. What impression do we, as teachers, have of you, as it's your first week? If you're in Year 8, could we be talking about you as somebody that's setting a fantastic example? If Year 7, have we been talking about you as somebody that we've already noticed is going to be a fantastic role model and a fantastic ambassador for the school?'

She moved on to the main theme of the assembly: 'this morning we will talk about why it's important to read and listen to the news, why it's important to look at newspapers, why it's important to go on BBC Online when you're walking to school instead of just constantly messaging people saying, "I can see you over the road."' She asked the students if they had any ideas about why they should read or watch the news. A few put their hands up. One answered, 'to find out about the weather', another: 'so you can be aware of dangerous people in your local area', another volunteered 'so you know what's going on around you', and another: 'so you can find out the football results'.

Miss Brown talked through a slide showing reasons why they should watch the news: 'it improves your understanding of Tier Two and Three words, so it gives you a bigger vocabulary, and ... it improves your cultural capital, or your cultural understanding.' She asked the students what 'cultural capital' meant. One put his hand up to answer, 'you're aware of the culture, what's going on around you'. Miss Brown asked Miss Evans, the deputy head, how she would define it. Miss Evans

explained ‘it’s the band of knowledge that you have in your head about the world, that you can bring out at dinner parties or in interviews or on the bus.’ Miss Brown continued, ‘it’s the band of knowledge you can bring out in conversation. Remember our discoveries improve our conversations, and that informs people for getting jobs’. She went on to talk about the news coverage of the then forthcoming Scottish referendum, and closed by suggesting that they should ‘read a little bit around the Scottish referendum, find out the positives and negatives ... so that on community lunch this Friday,<sup>1</sup> you can have a conversation with your guest about that’.

In this assembly, we see how the term ‘cultural capital’, which emerged from sociological theory,<sup>2</sup> has been popularly appropriated. Here the term gestures towards the significance of middle-class desires in shaping Riverside Secondary’s ethos, as we see an aspiration to develop in the students an ethic of reflexive responsibility for forming themselves as subjects possessing the requisite ‘cultural capital’ that they are perceived currently to lack, such that they should be aware not only of the impressions they make on others, but that what they look at on their phones might have implications for their future employability. As the expansion of free schools and academies has afforded new opportunities for religious organizations to run schools, public debates about religious engagements in education have often polarized around perceptions of the potential religious indoctrination of students or social segregation in terms of ethnicity, religion, or social class. Yet while Byrne and De Tona (2013) have described how some white working- and middle-class parents’ desires for schools to give cultural privilege to Christianity reflected discomfort with religious difference, there has been little analysis of the lived interrelations between religion and class in educational settings.

The fact that Riverside Secondary – which is a free-school – espoused an understanding of education in terms of forming a self-governing, entrepreneurial citizen is perhaps not surprising. Neoliberal practices in education include the marketization of educational provision (reflected in the drive towards academies and free schools), together with an increased focus on competition and accountability, processes which affect not only thinking about institutions, but also the formation of subjects – both students and teachers – who should likewise embody these neoliberal virtues (Gerrard 2014). Sociologists have frequently noted that this emphasis on choice in education policy tends to favour middle-class parents (Ball 2003; Butler and Robson 2003; Ball and Vincent 2007; Crozier et al. 2008), and this can be related to

the sense that, as James *et al.* note:

the middle classes ... provide the ideal individual for neoliberal times, the person for whom life is a conscious, reflexive project of the self and to whom it may seem plausible that, barring accidents, the individual is primarily the author of what befalls them' ... [C]apitalism continuously undermines equality, and those with relative advantage – with more capital (of any kind) – are always in the best position to gain. (2010: 631).

A side-effect of neoliberal policies promoting a marketplace model of choice for the parent as consumer has been the increased prominence of faith groups in educational provision (Dinham and Jackson 2012), with the market-model favouring a mixed economy of service providers.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, church-run schools have been criticized as elitist and encouraging social segregation along either religious or class-based lines of division.<sup>4</sup>

Empirical research examining religious involvement in educational provision has been dominated by quantitative studies, which have provided important data charting, for example, how the high performance of faith schools is related to their intake of pupils with lower levels of deprivation and special educational needs, and enrolling a larger proportion of high-attaining students compared with non-faith schools (e.g. Allen 2008, Andrews and Johnes 2016). There has, however, been little qualitative research into the cultural values mediated in schools linked with religious organizations, or the significance of class within these educational cultures. This article aims to open up understanding of how class remains a significant – if often unacknowledged – aspect of the relationship between religion and education. Through analyzing the relations between the 'open evangelical' Riverside Church and Riverside Academies and how class figures within these, the article reveals how ideas of social mobility are articulated in ways that implicitly reproduce class inequalities, and how this is interrelated with evangelical moral values.

Schooling figures prominently in contemporary public and policy debates as a key means for enabling social mobility. In these debates, it is often imagined that working-class social mobility is possible through the acquisition of 'sufficient dominant cultural capital in the form of middle-class-type attitudes and behaviours', rather than through increases in family income or parental education which have been

demonstrated to have more effect on children's educational outcomes (Reay 2013: 666). Urban schools are often constructed as particularly problematic within such understandings. In the specific context of London, this bears the trace of the historical figuring of urban schools as sites for 'the socialisation of the "unruly mob"' (Hollingworth and Archer 2010: 585) and the effects of London's increasing socio-economic polarization. Rising housing costs have largely driven out middle-income groups, resulting in a city of the rich and the poor, with the rich seeking out 'the best schools' and 'work[ing] the education system by choosing fee-paying schools, high status selective schools or high-achieving comprehensive schools where there is a critical mass of children like their own', feeding into 'the pathologisation of many inner London state schools ... which are often derided in the press as "sink schools" or "failing schools"' (p. 586).

Within the history of British Christianity, schooling was a key means through which middle-class evangelicals – likewise in highly socio-economically polarized urban settings – sought to 'save' the children of the poor, and thus to influence the future of the nation by 'civilizing' the masses.<sup>5</sup> These Victorian evangelicals however did not understand the schools they set up in terms of promoting social mobility so much as reinforcing a sense of knowing one's place in society and inculcating virtues of deference, hard work and sobriety. How does this history of class differentiation underpinning evangelicals' involvement in schooling relate to evangelicals' contemporary engagements? In wider public debates, organizations such as the National Secular Society generalize about evangelicals' involvement in schools,<sup>6</sup> suggesting that there is a coherent evangelical culture that poses a potentially indoctrinating threat to pupils. Looking at the work of Riverside through the lens of class however develops a more nuanced picture of the diversity of evangelicals' engagements with education, challenging simplistic stereotypes of evangelicals as reactionary fundamentalists fearful that their children are at risk from a hostile secular society. As an ethnographic case study, the findings presented here cannot be generalized to all evangelical organizations' involvement in education,<sup>7</sup> and it should be noted, for example, that in contrast with the majority of schools run by different churches (Allen and West 2009: 472), there are no admissions criteria at Riverside assessing pupils' religious or denominational commitment. Rather the analysis offered here opens up understanding of how class is interwoven in evangelicals' aspirations in relation to education, revealing how 'open' evangelicals' understanding

of ‘mission’ involves a particular desire for social ‘inclusion’.

This article focuses on the significance of class in how Riverside church members talked about their work with the Riverside Academies, and how this related to historical narratives of evangelicals’ engagements with children. I describe the place of class in the mundane practices of Riverside Secondary Academy and in holiday clubs run by the church, and argue that class played an important, although not consciously foregrounded, role in Riverside church members’ sense of ‘mission’, as they aspired to ‘transform community’. Although church leaders articulated a desire to ‘do things with people, rather than to or for them’, this was held simultaneously with a sense of the church as providing particular kinds of social and cultural capital to improve the lives of children from working-class backgrounds that ran in tension with this, a contradiction that I argue represents an intrinsic moral duality within contemporary neoliberalism.

### **The Study**

The material presented here is taken from a three year mixed-method qualitative study, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, examining how evangelicals in Britain understand childhood, as well as the processes by which they seek to form children across everyday home and family life, church, and school settings. This article draws particularly on ethnographic data from fieldwork carried out at the open evangelical Riverside Hub between February 2013 and October 2014. During this time, I carried out participant observation at church services and Sunday school classes run for the children at Riverside Church, lunchtime clubs at Riverside Secondary Academy, holiday clubs run by church members for children from Riverside Primary Academy, and observations in both Riverside Secondary and Riverside Primary Academies,<sup>8</sup> as well as fieldwork at other events and community activities organized by Riverside Church. This multi-sited ethnographic approach enabled me to observe children, young people, and adults moving between these settings, providing insight into how people spoke about the relationships between church and school in different spaces. Assemblies and collective and public events were recorded and transcribed, as were some of the sermons, but the primary source of data on which this analysis is based is ethnographic fieldnotes, taken either during or immediately after meetings and events, recording my observations of adults’ and children’s modes of practice and the interactions and conversations we had. Pseudonyms are used throughout (including

for the names of the church and schools).

It is worth noting that the term ‘evangelical’ is broad, and scholars – and evangelicals themselves – disagree about its definition. I use the term ‘evangelical’ here, following David Bebbington, to refer to the tradition existing in Britain since the 1730s, marked by the characteristics of ‘*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross’ (1989: 3). Here I focus specifically on the ‘open evangelical’ Riverside. While the meaning of the term ‘open evangelical’ is contested, this was how many members of Riverside described their church, to differentiate themselves from more conservative forms of evangelicalism and to express their sense of dissatisfaction with dominant evangelical understandings of faith and belief. Open evangelicals critique dominant evangelical culture’s focus on personal salvation and propositional beliefs, and distance themselves from conservative evangelical teachings on gender, sexuality, and the exclusivity of salvation in Christ, taking an active stance in promoting LGBT rights in the church, for example. They have close links with – and many described themselves as part of – the ‘emerging Church/emerging evangelical’ movement (Bielo 2011, Engelke 2013, Marti and Ganiel 2014). Many had moved away from conservative evangelical backgrounds, and this shaped their consciousness of their moral and spiritual sensibilities as at odds with traditional evangelical culture.

My position as a middle-class, white, female adult in the fieldwork sites of church, clubs, and informal activities run by Riverside is worth noting, as it contributed to the children’s interpreting my role as researcher as somewhat akin to their church children’s leaders. In the schools, the children perceived my role as more like a classroom assistant, and the desire of the younger children I got to know to include me in their games and discussions during lunch and play time suggested that they perceived my role there as different from their teachers. Across these different settings, I treated my own engagements with the children and their responses to me as data relevant for understanding the formation of their identities and their different modes of relationality with adults. I would also add that my own positionality made this analysis somewhat painful. Reay *et al.* describe their research on white, middle-class parents as ‘often like holding up a mirror to the self. We were confronted with our own culpability, failings, conceits, and self-deceptions’ (2011: 167). My own experience in developing my argument here has been likewise, and I would

emphasize that the educational dispositions I present in the context of Riverside Secondary closely mirror those inscribed within contemporary higher education, as it is shaped by the same broader political logics.

### **Ragged Schools and Riverside's Educational Ambitions**

In the study of North American evangelicalism, class has received renewed attention, with scholars showing its salience for understanding evangelicals' cultural and political engagements (Griffith 2004; Hendershot 2004; Luhr 2009; Elisha 2011). Yet, as anthropologist Omri Elisha notes, 'somewhat less attention has been paid to the fact that evangelicals who identify as "middle-class" wrestle self-consciously with the implications of class status in relation to religious faith' (2011: 121). Elisha highlights evangelicals' self-reflexive critiques as they both embrace promises of upward mobility while also 'fixated on the moral pitfalls of consumerism, self-indulgence, and complacency that they fear go along with the so-called middle-class lifestyle' (2011: 122). Riverside church leaders are likewise predominantly middle-class, yet at least as pronounced as their critique of middle-class lifestyles was a desire to challenge social inequality and a sense of their moral duty as to work to improve the social, economic and spiritual lives of less privileged others, both in the surrounding local area and in other global settings.

This impulse bears traces of how middle-class Victorian evangelicals felt it their philanthropic duty to improve the lives of those around them in the city, an aspiration which often specifically related to the lives of the children. As Hugh Cunningham argues, the story of the children of the poor, and specifically the urban poor, has often been shaped as a romance. This begins with a changeless preindustrial "once upon a time" when children lived with their parents and contributed to the family economy, helping around the house and looking after younger siblings. The industrial revolution 'erupted like a cataclysmic force to provoke the crisis of the story... Children were torn away from their families. They were sold or stolen to become climbing boys, they were transported as parish apprentices from workhouses to the isolated cotton mills, they were forced by impoverished or idle parents to endure the long hours and harsh discipline of the factories, and they were exposed to the dark immorality of the coal mines' (Cunningham 1991: 8). In this story, this was a crisis not just for the children, but for the nation – 'How would God judge a civilization which treated its children in this way, and destroyed the sanctioned pieties

of family life for the sake of profit? ... But in the story, light was at hand' (p.9), embodied in the evangelical Lord Shaftesbury, "the Moses who led the children of bondage into their Promised Land" (p.9). Shaftesbury campaigned on behalf of climbing boys, factory children and mineworkers, and 'his capacious sympathy and his guilt-driven energy widened out to include the poor street children who were welcomed into his ragged schools, and whose ultimate rescue would depend on an army of charities and philanthropists' (p. 9). Victorian evangelicals involved in the ragged school movement espoused a theology of mission, competing for funds in the growing charitable marketplace against overseas missionaries. For them, the 'exotic other' to be converted was constructed in terms of class, with the ragged child seen as both risky and morally at risk (Swain and Hillel 2010: 9). In the ragged school movement, the ultimate goal was religious conversion, 'fitting the child for a good Christian death' (Swain and Hillel 2010: 10). This was inseparable from ideals to reform children as clean, deferential, prepared for work in service, as a means to maintain social order while the rest of Europe erupted in revolution (Swain and Hillel 2010: 8).

Like these Victorian evangelicals, living in a society marked by heightened socio-economic polarization, so today Riverside is situated in a highly polarized area of London. Saskia Sassen (2001) has argued that the glamour of Western global cities such as London is increasingly supported by large populations of blue-collar immigrant workers, leading to a widening polarization between high-income and low-wage, menial workers. As world finance is dominated by London and New York, this has led to particularly excessive inequalities between those on the highest and lowest incomes in these cities, affecting life at every level, from living standards to health and life expectancy. As noted earlier, this has led to a polarization of schools, as the rich colonize private schools or 'work the system' to ensure a place at 'the best' schools, contributing to the pathologization of other inner city schools (Hollingworth and Archer 2010: 586).

This inner-city context decisively shapes the moral ambitions of Riverside. While the cultures of contemporary and Victorian evangelical churches in London are obviously at some remove from each other, for example, in terms of the growth of black majority and other ethnic minority churches (Goodhew 2012, Osgood 2012), the Riverside church leaders nevertheless draw on the narrative of the Victorian evangelical 'rescue' of the children of the poor as a way of contextualizing their sense

of mission today. Although schools run by churches (Anglican, Catholic, and nonconformist) were mostly originally set up for the education of the poor, in recent years, faith schools have included a higher percentage of students from more affluent backgrounds (Allen and West 2009, Theos 2013).<sup>9</sup> For the Riverside Academies, this was not however the case. The local education authority average for students eligible for free school meals in the borough was 34%; Riverside Secondary Academy had 42%, and Riverside Primary Academy had 34.2%.<sup>10</sup> When I interviewed Miss Morris, Riverside Secondary's principal, she also mentioned that 30% of students had SEN; 59% had the pupil premium; 20% of students had child protection issues. The students were from a variety of religious backgrounds, and there were no faith-based entrance criteria, as noted above. Miss Morris also addressed the students' ethnicity, telling me that 16% of students were white English, 30% black African, 'and the rest are a real combination, there's no other group that is strongly dominant... This mix is a great thing about being in London', she said.

Riverside runs numerous projects such as holiday clubs and toddlers' groups in the local area for children who do not go to the church, as well as a 'kids' church' for children who do go with their parents to church. The education trust associated with the church also runs Riverside Primary Academy, and set up Riverside Secondary as a new free school. These initiatives can be seen as having their origins in the expansion of neoliberal policies from the 1980s onwards leading to a mixed-economy of education provision. This was extended under the Labour and Coalition governments to encourage faith groups to provide education services, including the extension of the academies scheme and free schools policies (Dinham and Jackson, 2012). Although Riverside Church members articulated a critique in church of how the coalition government's austerity policies exacerbated social inequalities, they also accepted the opportunities these afforded for their involvement in education and welfare. When questioned about whether this ran the risk of returning to the paternalism of the pre-welfare state, while speaking at a theology conference, Andy, Riverside's senior minister, said that in the local area around the church, 'the welfare state hasn't worked for people... in the Swann Estate. People have been left out.' He said, 'we shouldn't just let the welfare state die', but 'there needs to be a new conversation with government about the role of organizations in providing services'.

The church leaders often described the building of Riverside Secondary Academy as part of a long-cherished dream for the church to be at 'the centre of the

local community,’ and linked this to the romanticized history of Victorian evangelicals. In one sermon, Andy talked about how the 18th century founders of the church felt a duty to found a school, and emphasized the importance of remembering this history: ‘if we don’t remember who we are, we won’t know who we should be’. In another sermon, he talked about how during the 18th century, ‘no poor kids went to school – only rich kids went to schools like Eton and Harrow’, and said that the first school the church members had founded was ‘called a free school, because it was free’. He said these evangelical forerunners had founded thirteen schools, which met on Sundays: ‘People think of Sunday schools as being about Bible stories and stuff, but these were on Sundays because the children were working during the week, being chimney sweeps and that kind of thing’, and that following this, they founded four ‘ragged schools’. He said that these 18th and 19th century evangelicals ‘had a passion to bring education to the people’, and linked this with Riverside’s new free school, aligning their contemporary aspirations with those of the Victorian evangelicals, saying: ‘it’s going to be great because of us .... We have to offer great wraparound care, a great education for these kids, a great coffee shop for their parents, a community bank, debt advice, community care, art clubs, football after school, ... time spent reading with the kids’.

Riverside’s aspirations to shape the lives of local children, and the continuities they described here with the ragged schools movement, were also evident in a Riverside Church Forum prior to the Secondary Academy’s opening. Matt, a white man in his thirties who was leading the Forum, began the meeting, which was in the main church space after the Sunday morning service. He spoke to the approximately fifty people who had stayed after church from a microphone at the front. He said that as his work was in communications, he liked neat formulas, and his first slide read ‘Riverside Church + Riverside Academy = ?’. The following slide articulated the ‘core values that the church stands for’, which included ‘inclusive’, ‘influential’, and ‘interdependent’, and he said, ‘I hope these are all familiar to you’. Underneath these on the slide were the phrases: ‘Love God and Love your Neighbour’ and ‘The Shalom Adventure’, which he said were ‘central to all we’re doing – bringing peace and well-being to others’. The next slide displayed a series of concentric circles, with ‘God’ in the centre. Matt said: ‘towards the centre here are people who are intimately connected with and who are trying to follow Jesus ... we might think of that in terms of people who are here on Sundays’, while the circles moving outwards referred to

those with ‘periodic connections’ to the church, to the outermost circle - those with ‘no connection’.

Matt said that they wanted to think about how these Riverside values might relate to what they would do in the new school, in terms of ‘connecting with those in the community who might otherwise have no connection with us’, but emphasized ‘not that we’re trying to convert them’. He then put up a slide showing a historical drawing of the church, and said ‘our church is on the site of where people did things that rocked’. Again aligning their contemporary moral ambitions with those of Victorian evangelicals, he said that in the nineteenth century, people in this church were very involved in the ragged schools movement from 1844 onwards, because ‘it was not good enough that the poor kids nearby didn’t have a good education. So what we’re doing with the school has a history behind it.’ His next slide included information about local schools, noting oversubscriptions for ‘good schools’ in the local area, and he mentioned a conversation with a mother from the church who had moved to a suburban area to get her son into a better school. He then put up a slide with some quotes from parents whose children had been accepted into Riverside Academy for the following year, one saying she was ‘absolutely ecstatic’ when she found out her child had been accepted, another saying ‘it sounds just like a private school’, and the final one, ‘it’s not just academic, but about caring for the whole child’.

Church members’ words about Riverside Academy index an aspiration to ‘transform’ the lives of those around them, with self-conscious affinities with Victorian evangelicals’ efforts to ‘save’ the children of the poor. Cunningham unravels different interlocking stories that shaped the historical story of the children of the poor, and he argues that ‘childhood’ became prioritized as a sphere of social action not just out a concern for children themselves, but driven by a desire for social betterment, with children perceived as the key to social advance and the future of the nation. This sensibility also underlies desires for Riverside Academy, for example, to provide a means of challenging a lack of political representation. In a tour of the new academy building for church members, Andy said, ‘today, members of our Cabinet only come from private and public schools, and that’s not right; we need to change that.’

The outworking of aspirations to change society through engaging with children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds has however shifted

somewhat from Victorian ambitions. Although there are continuities with Victorian philanthropic enterprises, the articulated emphasis on ‘inclusion’ suggests a change in how class shapes British evangelicals’ engagements with children and young people over the twentieth century. Although evangelical engagements with youth from the later 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards aimed at engaging with young people from a range of social backgrounds, within a comparatively short time frame, they became orientated towards upper-middle class children. Pete Ward argues that a concern to cater to the upper middle-classes shaped the development of evangelical youth work organizations, and special services, for example, were held in the upper-classes’ drawing rooms, ‘strictly for the invited, for it was felt that parents would object if they found their children sitting beside “the rough and the ragged” (Ward 1996: 28-9). Ward argues that this focus on the children of the educated and wealthy shaped not just the style of youth work, but the culture of modern-day British evangelicalism, with the result that its white, male, post-war leaders were mostly from public school backgrounds. Their experiences of youthwork at school and university Christian Unions shaped the cultural style they sought to recreate in their ministries, including an intense focus on trying to convert the children of the upper-classes (p. 45). In the 1950s, some evangelicals attempted youth work in inner urban areas, although they tended however ‘to retreat to places where they could see a richer harvest’, investing ‘in urban ministry only if they can be sure that young people will come to faith’ (p. 78-79). This was not often forthcoming.

Riverside’s work with children and young people today suggests alternative aspirations. While many evangelicals’ engagements with young people are still today shaped by a conversionist logic, and many focus primarily on middle-class children, there are also growing efforts across different evangelical constituencies to engage in different forms of ‘mission’, shaped by a consciousness of the exclusions perpetuated by evangelical culture’s dominant white middle-class culture (Elisha 2011; Strhan 2013, 2015). Open evangelicals self-consciously distinguish their urban engagements from historical and other contemporary evangelicals’ desires for the religious conversion of non-Christians. When I first met the children’s and families’ minister at Riverside, Rob, he told me that they were not trying to convert anyone, ‘so your research will be useful for us, to be able to show whether or not we still *secretly* do want to try to convert people’.

Given how evangelicals’ historical work with ‘the children of the poor’ was

shaped by class, how does this then relate to the practical realities of life at Riverside today?

### **Breaking the Class Ceiling?**

As already noted, one of the main values of Riverside Church is ‘inclusion’, and when church members talk about ‘inclusion’, they talk about the social inclusion of those ‘socially excluded’ through categories of identity such as race, sexuality, disability, or social class, with a particular focus on the inclusion of LGBT groups who have historically been excluded from evangelical churches.<sup>11</sup> They also talked about ‘holistic inclusion’ in their aspirations for both the church and the school, and repeatedly emphasized that their vision is to ‘build inclusive communities’, where ‘everyone has hope, feels they matter, and is given the opportunity to achieve their potential’.<sup>12</sup> The church located their links with Riverside Primary and Secondary Academies as central to achieving that aim. At Riverside Secondary, in practical terms however, ‘inclusion’ most often meant, as one of the church’s children’s workers said to me, ‘access to employment’.

Savage *et al.* (1992) have argued that middle-class formation involves a notion of the self in which the individual invests in storing up cultural assets for the future, and Skeggs argues that in the contemporary moment, the ability to propertize culture, as having particular exchange-values, becomes increasingly central to how class is made (2004b). Such logics pervade everyday life at Riverside Secondary. The school’s stated main aim for the children – in its promotional literature, and frequently articulated in assemblies – is that they will end up ‘in a great job of their choice, with great prospects’, and the teachers understand this to require building students’ ‘social and cultural capital’, as they tell the children. The school invites business leaders, from corporate accountancy and law firms, for example, to have weekly lunches with the children, while organizations such as the Royal Bank of Scotland and Intercontinental Hotels provide careers’ education every week from Year 7. In their lessons provided by Intercontinental Hotels, students were involved in a competition to market the hotel’s most expensive and difficult to sell suite (at £3000 per night), while in their lessons with RBS, they had to consider how they could get maximum profit from a £20 investment.<sup>13</sup>

At the school end-of-year awards evening, Miss Morris emphasized this sense of education as geared towards students’ employment:

We all know what the purpose is of being here: our dream job... Our youngsters of 12 years old, they must have a dream job... it's not a problem if it changes but they ... must have one. So I don't mind if the children, when they started with us in September, said, do you know what, I want to be a footballer, but by January they said, do you know what, I really want to be a lawyer within a Premier League football club, and then they go on and say, no do you know what, I want to go into designing aeroplanes. It doesn't matter if the dream job changes but what's really crucial is that there's always a dream job.

This focus on aspiring to achieve a 'dream job' reflects broader changes in the educational landscape. As Diane Reay comments, in the past, when education 'was about knowing your place in society, religion was the opium of the masses. Now that education has been reinvented as an aspirational project for the self, social mobility has taken its place and we are all supposed to aspire to becoming doctors and lawyers, or even princesses, footballers, celebrities and billionaire entrepreneurs' (2013: 665-666). In this aspirational society, achieving these 'dream jobs' is fiercely competitive, thus education requires fostering a competitive spirit and other 'values', which Riverside Academy seeks to develop, such as 'scholarship', 'resilience' and 'aspiration'. As Miss Morris put it at the awards evening:

Scholarship is about loving learning. Scholarship is also, frankly, about getting great GCSE results, getting those As and A stars. Scholarship is about getting great A levels, and ... about going to those universities when you're 18 that you've been to this year. Scholarship is about you starting your first day at Oxford University, which so many of you love, or choosing Cambridge University... Scholarship is about reaching that end goal.

The school aims to inculcate an ethic of individual self-discipline, hard work, and productivity that will enable students to reach this goal. As Jessica Gerrard describes pervasive contemporary norms of 'learning', to learn entails working 'on oneself, and to work on oneself is to accrue value, competitiveness and flexibility' (2014: 868). The school day runs from 8 a.m. – 5 p.m., with little break time. Children are not allowed to talk in corridors, or when entering or leaving the lunch hall, which

was decorated with quotes reinforcing this ethic of self-determination, for example, Shakespeare's 'It is not in the stars to hold our destinies but ourselves'. Cunningham describes how Protestants in the 18th century constructed the idleness of the poor as 'the Parent of most Disorders in Society' (1991: 24), motivating their establishment of working schools to give children some kind of industry. At Riverside, the legacies of Protestant attitudes towards work (Weber 2001) continue to shape a sensibility that children need to be formed as disciplined, productive, and industrious, but with an emphasis on unlimited personal ambition that was lacking in their historical predecessors' engagements in forming children.

Woven into this aspiration to affect these children's lives is not only an emphasis on economic achievement, but also a distinctively white middle-class, private school ethos. The school borrowed elements of public school institutional culture, with school houses, for example. Each day began with silent individual reading in house groups, and at lunch, students sat on 'house tables', where they served each other food, and were not allowed to start eating until everyone had been served. At the church one Sunday, Andy spoke of this as an achievement: 'some of the children didn't even know how to use a knife and fork when they arrived at the school'. Occasionally, the teachers had classical music playing quietly in the background and reminded students that they should be able to hear the music at all times. One lunchtime, Miss Morris reprimanded the whole dining hall because some students had been speaking to their friends on other tables. She said: 'I want to see you have grown-up conversations with those sitting opposite or next to you, rather than behaving like children'. The desire to improve students' cultural capital extended beyond learning about news stories, to their learning to cook dishes such as risotto in 'gastronomy' lessons, and their being given university-style tutorials by PhD students in subjects such as philosophy, and history of art.

There was also an emphasis on 'social responsibility' as one of the main values of the school, and when I spoke with students about what they thought the most important school value was, their most frequent reply was 'inclusion'. Yet the focus on cultivating a self-driven ethic of hard work and personal ambition – accumulating social and cultural capital within themselves as a means to achieving a self-chosen 'great career' – had the effect of privileging a neoliberal norm of personhood. This formation of self-reflexive, competitive, 'successful' students related more broadly to the effects of neoliberal practices in the marketization of

education, in which institutions are also judged against these logics. While the norm of ‘inclusion’ was emphasized by the teachers and the church, at both the school’s awards evening and in church services, the fact that the school was heavily oversubscribed was remarked on primarily as a mark of the school’s ‘success’, rather than a cause for sadness at those who would be ‘excluded’ by this.

Elisha (2011) describes how his conservative evangelical subjects’ critique of middle-class affluence reflected their internalized ambivalences about class. Riverside’s ambitions to transform the lives of children relates in a different way to the conflicting ways in which church members experience their classed identities. Occupying positions of relative cultural and political power themselves, they are also reflexively conscious of the social and spiritual injuries of class and this animated their moral ambitions. While the everyday practices of the school appeared to reify the cultural dominance of middle-class norms, as the metaphors of ‘social and cultural capital’ positioned the children’s own cultural knowledges as a ‘lack’ (Skeggs 2004a: 91), at the same time, the ultimate desire of church members and the teachers was to challenge social inequality through creating greater social mobility for these children. Miss Morris emphasized she wanted there to be ‘no glass ceiling for the kids at this school.’ As Riverside’s aspirations for ‘inclusion’ and ‘the transformation of the local community’ were translated in the setting of the school, they ended up looking very secular. While there were continuities with the emphasis on forming hard-working children in the ragged schools, the emphasis on personal success and aspiring to rise to pinnacles of political power and influence was a marked shift from the deferential attitudes the ragged schools aimed to inculcate.

These aspirations were also evident in the ‘Lift Off’ half-term holiday clubs run by the church’s children’s workers for selected children from Riverside Primary school on free school meals. At these clubs, the leaders gave short talks to the children in relation to moral and character education, for example, encouraging the children to think about what it meant to make fresh start at the beginning of the school year, and how they might carry on going after making mistakes. These talks were combined with activities aimed at expanding their cultural knowledge and experience, for example, trips to activity centres where the children engaged in activities such as climbing and ‘team-building games’. At times, there appeared – against the best intentions of the children’s workers and volunteers – to be an ‘othering’ in relation to class implicit here, with the children located as the urban poor in receipt of charity

from the bountiful church. One of the children's workers, for example, emphasized to the children that the church had spent a lot of money on both their food for the week, and on their trip to Madam Tussauds, and one of the church volunteers who brought her own children along said – articulating her sense of differentiation from the other children attending the club – 'it's good for them to come, so they can see how lucky they are compared with these kids'.

This sense of the church as having the resources to provide cultural services for others was evident in other activities with local families, for example, 'family kitchen', at which volunteers led cookery sessions for children and their parents. In one of the church meetings about this, the children's workers discussed putting the recipes online or on handouts. One of the volunteers suggested 'you could put the cost of each recipe on it, so people can see it doesn't cost a lot to cook healthily', demonstrating his perception that local families would cook healthy food if only they knew it was cheaper. Yet, regardless of this, the children who came to the clubs and other church activities mostly enjoyed them, and kept asking if they could stay longer at the end of the day rather than go home.

### **Conclusion: Class and the Contradictions of 'Moral Selving'**

The ethnographic analysis of the relation between evangelicalism and class presented here reveals how evangelicals' moral aspirations at Riverside lead them to seek to form children according to particular middle-class ideals, complicating stereotypical assumptions about evangelicals' engagements in education. Riverside church members' engagements with children can also be seen as practices that formed church members in specific ways. As Rebecca Allayari notes, people involved in charity work are engaged in 'moral selving', a process of 'creating oneself as a more virtuous, and often more spiritual, person' (cited in Elisha 2011: 132). For Riverside members, these aspirations were shaped through their reflexive awareness of the advantages afforded by their own situated, classed identities, and a sense of a duty to share these cultural resources with others. Although at times their practices appeared to 'other' the urban children around them, this was held simultaneously with their desire to challenge the stigmatized representation of the working class. Andy, for example, appeared in public debates condemning Channel Four's 'Benefits Street', and the church frequently reiterated that central to 'community transformation' is 'doing things with people, rather than to or for them'.

How might we understand these seeming contradictions? A number of scholars have argued that the liberal subject is fundamentally divided, animated by both rational, self-interested and utilitarian impulses *and* by ‘various forms of disinterested love – charity, motherly love, benevolence, compassion’ (Feher 2009: 35). We might conceptualize neoliberal subjectivities as similarly divided. Andrea Muehlebach (2012) notes that much recent scholarship on neoliberalism has placed itself firmly in the Weberian and Foucauldian traditions of studying forms of self-formation through rational means to accrue virtues of work, thrift, and productivity. She argues that neoliberal market rationalities however also contribute to specific corollary effects, such as modes of other-orientation and fellow-feeling that exist in productive tension with the dominant ethic of calculative rationality. We might therefore understand neoliberalism as ‘a force that can contain its negation – the vision of a decommodified, disinterested life and of a moral community of human relationality and solidarity that stands opposed to alienation’ (2012: 25). She argues that there is a morality that is intrinsic to what might appear as ‘immoral neoliberalism’, which although it appears to negate marketplace logics are emotionally integral to its functioning. Thus within the neoliberal public realm ‘circulates both an opulence of material wealth and an opulence of good virtue; this public hinges both on aggressive acquisition and clean conscience’ (p. 27).

Following Muehlebach, we might understand the privileging of middle-class norms of reflexive and productive self-formation at Riverside – which shaped their engagements with local children – as formed both by the classed background of Riverside church members and also by neoliberal logics of accountability and measurement that encourage faith-based organizations involved in welfare and education to be able to deliver clearly measurable outcomes (Dinham and Jackson 2012). The corollary of these entrepreneurial logics shaping their engagements in education is this simultaneous ‘opulence of virtue’ (Marx, cited in Muehlebach 2012: 23), a swelling of compassion and moral feeling for the urban poor, comparable to that animating the Victorian evangelicals whose stories they re-tell. Both contemporary and Victorian evangelicals might therefore be seen as exhibiting ‘an oscillation between and mirror imaging of markets and morals, “reason” and sentiments’ (ibid.: 30). The interrelations between class and evangelicalism here thus contribute to particular moral aspirations for education, which have continuities with historical evangelicals’ engagements, but are also distinctively shaped by

contemporary neoliberal policies in education. Further research on how religion and class are interwoven within educational cultures has the potential to deepen insight into the ways in which religious organizations' involvements in education is implicated in contesting or reproducing class inequalities.

### **Post-script: rethinking the language of capital?**

While Riverside Secondary Academy seems to perpetuate middle-class neoliberal norms, Riverside Primary Academy suggests an alternative way of thinking about social relationality that challenges the logic of 'capital'. Riverside Secondary Academy was from its conception bound up with the ethos of Riverside Church. Riverside Primary in contrast had a more ambivalent relationship with the church. When I interviewed the headteacher, Lou, she told me they were already a successful school when the church approached them about becoming part of Riverside Hub, and although they decided that it was worth their while, they retained a sense of the school's ethos as somewhat independent of Riverside. Although Riverside's 'core values' such as 'inclusion' were emphasized, these were expressed in terms of an ethic of democratic relationships to be embodied in the school's everyday life, rather than the future-directed socio-economic 'inclusion' of achieving a 'dream job'. This ethic was enacted in mundane interactions, such as the children addressing their teachers by their first names, or at the start of school assemblies, the children all saying 'good morning everybody', looking around at each others' faces, and offering their greeting in sign language to symbolize inclusion of people with disabilities.

At the end of the school year, to mark their leaving the school, the Year 6 children wrote an assembly. In this, the children acted out planning their 'Year 6 Prom', and talked about their different cultural backgrounds, speaking a variety of languages other than English, and singing songs, playing instruments and performing dances from their family backgrounds, including from countries such as Jamaica, Somalia, Poland, Albania, Cambodia, Ethiopia, India, and China. Parents and church members attended this assembly, which closed with the children talking about how their 'prom' would include things 'from each of our cultures, and it will be the best graduation prom ever', concluding with their dancing to the song 'Love Train'. Visibly moved by the assembly, Lou spoke to the students: 'you've made a utopian vision of a society where everyone can come together and learn from each other'. Schools with a high percentage of students for whom English is a second language are

often criticized with an anti-immigration tone.<sup>14</sup> In this assembly however, the children acknowledged their own and each others' cultural knowledges as enabling them to learn from each other, demonstrating their consciousness of and celebration of their different ethnicities.

The approach to social relationality embodied in this assembly can be contrasted with the assembly at Riverside Secondary discussed at the opening of this article, in which the children were encouraged to 'improve their cultural capital'. While Bourdieu's use of the language of 'cultural' and 'social capital' has already been the subject of extensive critique, this has yet to permeate analysis of class and religion, where the terms tend to be used without critique (e.g. McCloud 2007). Skeggs argues that while Bourdieu's approach to class explains perfectly the middle-class and aspects of working class inability to inhabit entitled dispositions (2004a: 90), it fails to account for what exceeds economic metaphorical models of capital in terms of exchange, investment and accumulation. The language of 'capital', in both class analysis and in its circulation beyond this, privileges a property-owning model of subjectivity that can accumulate different forms of capital to itself. However we need, Skeggs argues, a language to 'understand how those who cannot or do not want to make property out of their relations to others live and move through social space. It is not enough to represent them as lack or the negative experience of the dominant symbolic, for this always presents them in a zero sum game', with the lack of knowledge or refusal to participate in middle-class cultures pathologized in terms of individual moral fault, 'a failure to be enterprising or to be reflexive' (p. 90). Skeggs therefore proposes that as well as the notion of capital, we should acknowledge forms of affect that are beyond the abstraction of metaphoric models of exchange. While the logic of capital reproduces the moral hierarchies and degradations of class, the concept 'affect' is however perhaps an insufficient theoretical redress, as it leaves little room for the complexities of human subjectivities that we see in the conflicted moral ambitions of Riverside church leaders.

The limitations of the concepts of 'capital' and 'affect' raise questions about how we articulate the ontology of the social that shapes our thinking about class. As 'one of the major mechanisms of global and national inequality, one that determines how we know and evaluate ourselves and others' (Skeggs, 2004b: 44), class matters in understanding both education and religion in the contemporary world, and it is important that we find analytical vocabularies that do not themselves further

perpetuate these inequalities. The way in which the children in their assembly at Riverside Primary acknowledged each others' different linguistic abilities and embodied knowledges accords with Jacques Rancière's (1991) critique of Bourdieu. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière attacked Bourdieu for presuming the ignorance of his objects of study: 'in the realm of education, the militant instructors in *La Reproduction* who need the legitimacy of the system's authority to denounce the arbitrariness of that legitimacy; and the working-class students excluded from the bourgeois system of favors and privileges, who do not (and cannot) understand their exclusion' (Ross 1991: xi). Rancière argues that in conceptualizing the social, we should not start from an axiom of inequality – even if this is the empirical reality we face and wish to challenge – but rather from an axiom of equality, so that in thinking about education, we should begin with a principle of the equality of intelligences, recognizing both the value of the knowledges that others have, as well as our own conditions of ignorance.

This axiom of equality is also deeply rooted in nonconformist Christian traditions, underlying the sacralization of 'inclusion' and the moral drive to challenge social injustice that we see at Riverside, even if this is often expressed in neoliberal logics that are in tension with this ethic. Striving for a vocabulary with which to approach class that begins from an axiom of equality does not mean failing to recognize the injustices and inequalities caused by class, but rather acknowledges that the language we use to analyse class is not separate from the worlds that we study, and can play a part in perpetuating damaging social logics. Reflecting on the discussions of 'cultural and social capital' at Riverside Secondary, we might say, 'A simile that has been absorbed into the forms of our language produces a false appearance which disquiets us. "But *this* isn't how it is!"' (Wittgenstein 2009: 53). Responding to the alternative social imaginaries performed by the children at Riverside Primary encourages further research into the interrelations between class, religion, education, and ethnicity, but it also invites us to question how we might understand these relations in ways that both acknowledge and yet seek to move beyond the logic of capital and the privileging of the propertizing individual subject, attending more closely to alternative spaces of ethical agency and the knowledges of others.

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<sup>1</sup> Community lunches are when visitors from organizations and businesses in London have lunch with students on their house tables, every Friday.

<sup>2</sup> The term specifically emerged from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, e.g. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1986).

<sup>3</sup> Church of England published figures for 2015, for example, demonstrate that 1 in 4 primary schools and 1 in 16 secondary schools in England are Church of England secondary schools. See <https://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/facts-stats.aspx> (accessed 6 February 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See discussions in Halstead and McLaughlin 2005, Gardner *et al.* 2005, Cairns 2009, Allen and West 2009, Allen and West 2011, Dwyer and Parutis 2013, Andrews and Johnes 2016.

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of denominational differences in churches' sense of mission to educate the children of the poor, see Allen and West 2009: 473.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, <https://www.secularism.org.uk/evangelism-in-schools.html> (accessed 10 February 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Some evangelical schools, for example, those following the Accelerated Christian Education curriculum, in contrast with Riverside, seek to teach ideas such as male headship and that LGBT people are inferior. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/accelerated-christian-education-europe-ofsted-dfe-inspection-report-a7502616.html> (accessed 5 February 2017).

<sup>8</sup> While there are very close links between Riverside Church and Riverside Primary and Secondary Academy, as detailed throughout this article and in the fact that Riverside Church's Children's and Family's Worker was also the chaplain to both Academies as part of his role in the church, it is worth noting that these schools have no legally designated religious character.

<sup>9</sup> Different churches have different missions in relation to this idea of educating the poor, with the Catholic Education Service, for example, stating that Catholic schools have 'a particular duty to care for the poor and disadvantaged' (Catholic Education Service 2003, cited in Allen and West 2009: 489).

<sup>10</sup> The national average for England is 21%. See [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/266339/DFE-RR319.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266339/DFE-RR319.pdf) (accessed 10 February 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Skeggs notes that the concept 'social exclusion' is a relatively new term in Britain, though used more regularly in the European Union, so that the use of 'social inclusion' discourse brings 'Britain into an established continental European discourse, and an especially French focus on marginalization as detachment from the moral order of society, as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon liberal view of marginalization as redistribution, of not commanding sufficient resources to survive in the market' (Skeggs 2004b: 86). The use of the terms 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' at Riverside tie in with this broader political rhetoric of class.

<sup>12</sup> In contrast with some evangelical schools, e.g. those following the Accelerated Christian Education curriculum, Riverside Academy self-consciously promoted equality in terms of gender, LGBT issues, and different religions through assemblies and Religious Education lessons.

<sup>13</sup> Some members of Riverside Church were explicitly critical of 'global corporates' that they perceived as unethical, for example, when it was announced in one service that the church was involved in a charity-partnership with Starbucks, one member of the congregation shouted out that they should not be associated with them, and stated loudly, 'they should pay their taxes.' I did not observe such critiques in the context of Riverside Secondary.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example <http://www.express.co.uk/comment/columnists/peter-hill/380177/This-is-what-s-gone-wrong-with-Britain> (accessed 11 February 2015).