

Reduction of Socio-economic Diversity through Standardisation of Language: Reflections and Challenges

*By Kevin Norley**

Could the standardisation of language narrow disparities in achievement in education amongst people of different social class, and within and across ethnicities and genders, and could this have implications for injustices and inequities in wider society? In analysing socio-economic diversity through the lens of its correlation with language, this paper examines how the standardisation of language could be used as a means to reduce such diversity. It examines links between the standardisation of language, and the reduction of inequalities between socio-economic groups, in regard to achievement in education. It also examines the correlation between language and social class, and propensity towards being a perpetrator and/or victim of hostility and violence, as well as their relationship with health and life expectancy etc. The paper further examines the effect of the use of technology and teaching methods on the acquisition of knowledge, and how this impacts upon children of different social class within the learning environment. In order to help address some of these questions, an auto-ethnographic methodology is adopted with the aim of being able to explore, and reflect upon, personal experience, and to be able to weave greater understanding and connections between apparently disparate factors related to diversity, all through the lens of language and its relationship to aspects of culture relating to social class. Amongst its conclusions, the paper argues that the standardisation and enhancement of spoken language would narrow the disparities in academic achievement between socio-economic groups. The paper also argues that in order to challenge inequitable power structures which have arisen from historical injustices, then rather than concentrating on under-representation of groups of people within high status positions in society, the focus of diversity should be directed towards challenging the over representation, in a range of settings, of groups of people within low status positions in society.

Keywords: auto-ethnography, socio-economic diversity, language, Standard English, inequality

Introduction

Social class is arguably the biggest area of educational inequality in Britain, yet when we consider the continued differential in educational achievement between children of different socio-economic groups, reflecting quality of life indicators such as job opportunities, health and life expectancy etc., it is the one that has been least addressed. However, educational inequalities do not occur in isolation, they are linked with and reflect the prevalence of social inequalities (Reay, 2012). With research showing that the gap between rich and poor

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increasing, and social disparity becoming more and more entrenched (Oxfam 2016), what can the education system itself do to help address issues of inequalities and in so doing, help to readdress some of the inequities and injustices in society?

Could the standardisation of language help narrow disparities in achievement in education between children of different social class, and between and within different ethnic groups and genders, and could this have implications for injustices and inequities in wider society? In examining socio-economic diversity through the lens of its correlation with language, this paper examines how Standard English could be used as a means to reduce disparities in relation to educational achievement between different social groups in education. It also examines the correlation between language and social class, and propensity towards being a perpetrator and/or victim of hostility and violence. The correlation between socio-economic diversity and language is further examined in the context of the impact of different teaching methods and the use of technology on the acquisition of knowledge by children of different social class within the learning environment.

The paper briefly discusses socio-economic diversity within the UK in relation to life expectancy, health and occupation etc. and through drawing and reflecting upon reports and research studies, considers the impact of social class on schooling and education. Having expounded upon the correlation between social class and language, the paper draws on research in order to make links between the correlation, and educational achievement between and within ethnic groups and genders, and between the correlation, and propensity towards, and susceptibility to, violence.

Following the methodology, the paper is set out in three broad areas (Socio-economic diversity, education and language; the impact of social class on ethnicity and gender; and Teaching methods and technology) with a section discussion following each one. The paper draws conclusions from the themes explored in the three sections, which include reflections on the author's experiences over the past 30 years as a practitioner in education. It then moves on to a further discussion, in the form of some anecdotes which help to underpin and support some of the conclusions made, and finishes off through hypothesising over possible links between some of the conclusions made, and the influence of human nature and its relationship with power.

Whilst the focus of the paper has predominantly been on the UK and English speaking countries (e.g., the USA and Canada), the arguments made and conclusions drawn could, I believe, be applied to other countries and societies with other languages.

Methodology

In order to help address some of these questions, an auto-ethnographic methodology is adopted with the aim of being able to explore, and reflect upon personal experience, and to be able to weave greater understanding and connections between apparently disparate factors (Merrill & West, 2018) related to the correlation between social class and language, and academic achievement. Such

methodology allows for examination and reflection of research and reports related to such factors including socio-economic status, health, ethnicity, gender, multiculturalism, schooling, teaching methods and the use of technology etc. all through the lens of language and its relationship to aspects of culture relating to social class. The methodology also assists in bringing to the fore, causal and antagonistic relationships which may otherwise not be covered by other research methodologies.

Socio-economic Diversity, Education and Language

Despite comparable access to health care services, when the average life expectancy of people in wealthy and socially deprived areas within close proximity of some cities is compared, such as between Cathcart and Simshill in Glasgow, or North Kensington and South Kensington in London, it is found to be in the region of 15 years or so, whilst in many other cities and towns across the UK, it is found to be in the region of 10 years. The higher rates of premature mortality and illness are found to be within lower occupational socio-economic groups, reflecting differences in general health, diet and lifestyle choices etc. between the social classes. The correlation between health and poverty has been highlighted by Marmot (2004), who was also able to demonstrate, based on nearly 30 years of research, that such issues are exacerbated the lower people are in an organisational hierarchy and concluded that status is not a footnote to the causes of ill health, it is the cause.

In relation to income, disparity is also reflected in pay differential in the workplace where, for example, a report from the High Pay Centre (2018) found that over the past 20 years, the average pay for top executives had increased from 47 times that of their average employee to 130 times that of their average employee. Over those years, globalisation and fast-paced technical change have created an environment whereby those whose services are in competition have found their skills to have been devalued, whilst the demand for more highly educated workers has remained intense, leading to an increased gulf between workers of different socio-economic groups. In the 1950s and 60s, there was a more rigid class structure, but less inequality. According to Adonis and Pollard (1997), since the second world-war, existing class divisions have widened, and new class divisions, namely the Underclass and the Superclass, have been added on. Consequently, the class structure is now less rigid, yet at the same time, there is less social mobility and, according to Oxfam (2016), a much greater disparity between rich and poor. Standing (2021, p. 8) argues that as the world has moved towards a more “flexible, open labour market ... a more fragmented global class structure” has emerged in which inequalities have grown. The working class or proletariat, he argues (2021, p. 8), which used to be defined, “by the way they dressed, spoke and conducted themselves”, no longer had a work-based identity, but instead, he continues (2021, p. 14), had jobs “without traditions of social memory” which lacked, “a feeling they belong to an occupational community, steeped in stable practices, codes of ethics and norms of behaviour, reciprocity and

fraternity”.

Along with average life expectancy, general levels of health and professions, socio-economic status is reflected across people’s level of education, and the language and range of vocabulary they deploy in their everyday lives. The impact of the demise of traditional working class industries in post-industrial cities on the support for education within working class communities was highlighted by Ofsted (1993). The effects of parental social class origin on their children’s education have been well detailed in studies by Douglas (1964), who argued, for example, that working-class parents took less interest in school and education, and therefore pushed their children less and indeed often encouraged them to focus on goals outside school and education, and Hyman (1967), who argued that working-class families were less interested in social mobility than middle-class families and that their value system created a self-imposed barrier to an improved position.

Concerns in regard to the correlation between the failure of working class families in deprived areas to set boundaries for their children, and the lack of achievement of white working class boys, were highlighted by the head of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw (2012). He backed this up with evidence that white British boys from poor families who qualify for free school meals lag behind fellow pupils throughout the school system and achieve the worst results aged 16 of any ethnic group apart from gypsy and traveller children. Furthermore, research commissioned by Lambeth Council (2019) in South London, found that in inner-city schools, teachers had criticised a culture of low aspirations and a “small world” mentality among some poor white families, and had claimed that many parents spent hours with their children in front of the television, rather than visiting local areas of interest.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) reported that during “lockdown” in the COVID-19 pandemic, richer pupils spent on average six or seven hours a week more on their education than poorer pupils, exposing inequalities with the poorest falling further behind. Such studies have highlighted how social class differences, in particular, inform how parents engage with their children’s schooling and the different resources they are able to bring to bear in facilitating their children’s educational trajectories.

However, rather than approaching from the perspective of social deprivation (or a deficit model) of the working class, alternate viewpoints have been put forward by others such as Bourdieu (1977), who argues that as a result of particular attitudes and behaviours, the middle-class have a cultural advantage over the working class in the education system. He argues that as particular cultural norms are better represented in the middle class professions (including teaching), the knowledge, skills and experiences imbibed from a middle-class upbringing are better rewarded within the education system. As an example, a study by Stopforth, Gayle, and Boeren (2021) into social class inequalities within Scottish schools contended, on the basis that children from families in more disadvantaged social classes had poorer outcomes with regard to qualifications, that it was the family and home life of the more advantaged social classes that fostered a more conducive environment for obtaining a higher level of qualifications at school.

In regard to schooling, in the post war era, the right of an education and access to schooling became available for all and a tripartite system was introduced in England. The system provided different types of schooling (ranging from the more academic to the more vocational) for children dependent on their perceived abilities and strengths, based on an IQ test at the age of 11 through which they were judged to be suitable for grammar schools, secondary modern or secondary technical schools. Although described as meritocratic by some, due to differing levels of expectations on children, different curricula and different levels of support from the home environment etc. it had the effect of reinforcing the class system. In his study into working class boys in a secondary modern school, Willis (1978), gave an account of how schools contributed to the maintenance of a class based society, through preparing working class kids for working class jobs. However, he argues that it is the boys' own culture, including a resistance to an education system that they perceive to be for middle class children, which prepares them for the working class jobs and lifestyle that await them after finishing school. In the 1960s, comprehensive schools were introduced as part of an attempt to bring children of different social classes together, in order to help reduce the achievement gap, and compensate for the inequality between middle-class and working class children. However, in spite of such changes, Adonis and Pollard (1997) and McCulloch (1998) have highlighted the failure of the education system to narrow the achievement gap or reduce the inequality between people of different social class, arguing for example that as a school's intake reflects its area in regard to socio-economic status and house prices etc. the expansion of comprehensive schools had actually had the effect of creating further segregation between the social classes.

More recent research from, amongst others, Ball (2008), and Reay (2006), has shown how the diversification of state education (through academies and Free Schools etc.) in recent years has increased segregation and enabled the middle-class to maintain their privileged position in society.

Whether one perceives the differences in attitude towards, and achievement in, education between the social classes as the fault of the working class, or the inherent good fortune of the middle classes or, as a combination of both, culture plays an important part and as part of culture, language has a pivotal role. In his influential large scale sociolinguistic study into the pronunciation patterns of residents of the Lower East Side of New York City, Labov (1966) showed that there was a correlation between language use and socio-economic status, gender and age. The correlation between social class background and language, and educational achievement has been made by, amongst others, Purves (2012), Honey (1997), Phillips (2013), Entwistle (1978), Bernstein (1964), Wallace (1988) and Rose (2009) who have all argued that the working class have been held back in their education by their lack of access to Standard English.

In regard to the influence of language on educational achievement, Purves (2012), for example, has argued that those who come from homes where they are not exposed to Standard spoken and written English are often amongst the most vulnerable in society, and are disadvantaged as a result of not being able to distinguish between non-standard and Standard English. She argues (2012, p. 17)

that, "... one of the best ladders out of deprivation is an ability to write and speak clearly, pleasingly and with a confident command of language". She also makes it clear that focusing on Standard English and speaking clearly does not mean abandoning a regional accent.

Honey (1997) has argued that "to give access to Standard English to those members of society who have not acquired facility in it through their parents, is an important priority in any society concerned with social justice and the reduction of educational inequalities", whilst Phillips (2013) has argued that vast numbers of children were being discriminated against and severely disadvantaged in life as a result of teachers not being able to impose Standard English.

Entwhistle (1978) has argued that "Working-class children have traditionally had difficulties in schooling due to the inability of working-class speech to support academic discourse", whilst Bernstein (1964) has argued that the failure of children from working-class origins to profit from formal education was "crudely related to the control on types of learning induced by a restricted code."

According to Wallace (1988), there is a dialectic mismatch between speakers of non-standard English and their teachers, which holds them back in accessing the curriculum. In terms of the effect of spoken English on reading and writing skills, she also argues that non-standard speakers may have language related difficulties in developing such skills on the basis that: "While the English writing system does not directly represent speech ... the grammar of most varieties of written English is more closely related to standard English than to non-standard varieties of spoken English" (Wallace, 1988, p. 67).

Rose (2009), ex-head of OFSTED has argued that "word poverty" in young children impacts upon formal learning. He stated that, "A high percentage of children in some areas of the country start school with such poor language skills and such a limited vocabulary, that they aren't able to start reading". He attributed the lack of reading and writing skills amongst some school children to the fact that, "reading and writing feed off speaking and listening" and that "if they can't say it they can't write it."

The degree to which literacy skills can affect the society in which people live, as well as individual lives, is highlighted in a report by the National Literacy Trust (2009, p. 2) which argues that a lack of literacy skills "not only impacts upon an individual's personal success and happiness, but also affects their family, the community they live in, and society as a whole". The report, entitled *Manifesto for Literacy* (2009, pp. 2-4), also goes on to state that those with poor literacy skills "earned less, voted less, had lower aspirations, higher rates of family breakdown, and poorer mental and physical health" and that as a result, literacy problems "... cause acute social, economic and cultural problems that undermine and divide communities". However, as stated in the *Manifesto*, "Literacy difficulties are not spread evenly across the population; they are disproportionately focused amongst certain groups, in particular groups with lower socio-economic status".

Research has shown (e.g., Clark & Rumbold, 2006) that achievement in education, along with range of vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension and general knowledge etc. correlates with the amount of free reading done outside of School. A link between reading and educational achievement was also established

by Gayle and Stopforth (2022), whose research showed that pupils (or their parents) who participated in reading activities or highbrow cultural activities, obtained higher mean school GCSE results. Studies have also found (e.g., Clark & Douglas, 2011) that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds read less for enjoyment than children from more middle and upper class backgrounds, and that girls enjoy reading more than boys, whilst research from the DfE (2012, p. 19) highlights the fact that without adequate reading skills, children will not go on to “participate fully in society” and that they “... and their future families will have fewer opportunities to escape a cycle of poverty and deprivation”. Hirsch (1988) argues that in order to understand and participate fluently in a given culture, people need to know its language, colloquialisms, idiomatic expressions, entertainment, stories and myths, routines and rituals etc. and that without such, what he terms “cultural literacy”, they are unable to understand culturally-conditioned allusions, references to past events, places, names, jokes and idiomatic expressions etc.

In addition, it could be argued that those who are not culturally literate are likely to be disproportionately represented amongst those who share a “culture of poverty”, a term coined by Lewis (1971) to help explain why programs to reduce poverty in the USA had not succeeded. She argued that those lacking resources, and living in poverty, also developed an autonomous subculture whereby children were socialized into mindsets and outlooks such as not being able to engage in issues beyond their own conditions and concerns, neighborhood and way of life etc. and not having the knowledge, or concept, of the similarities between their problems and those of others like themselves elsewhere, that perpetuated their inability to escape the underclass.

Discussion (1)

In the UK, in spite of a range of Government policies that have been introduced over the years with the intention of mitigating the effects of material factors related to socio-economic status, they have not been able to compensate for the differences in outcomes arising as a result of the culture associated with social class, which is still probably the main predictor of educational achievement. Linked to, and a significant part of, these class divisions, I would argue, based on the aforementioned studies, is the spoken language with which children engage, along with their reading skills, and as such, I believe that it is important, as educators, to be able to compensate for their lack of opportunities to develop their spoken language and reading skills in their home environment, and for their lack of exposure to standard English.

Whilst language itself, including what people would regard as Standard English, has changed over these years, the differences between the language (in terms of grammatical structures, enunciation and choice of vocabulary etc.) used between different socio-economic groups still remains, reflecting divisions between those groups as well as their access to opportunities in society. I would argue this lack of access to Standard English, not only holds lower socio-economic groups back within education, and reduces opportunities to obtaining the skills and

culture required to support a more middle class lifestyle, but deprives them of the commonality needed to engage in the democratic process, as well as to engage with a wider variety of people and hence, opportunities to embrace diversity.

I have argued however (Norley 2013, p. 9) that to try and correct language can be "... seen as an attack on lower socio-economic groups rather than an attack on the injustices that create them", and I have also argued (Norley 2018, p. 28) that social class "... exists as a result of deep rooted historical injustices" and that to counter such injustices, "... we must challenge not only the causes of those injustices, but the consequences of the culture produced by those injustices ...". One of the consequences, I believe, is the language that becomes imbibed by many in lower socio-economic groups and that is not (or at least rarely) challenged or corrected within the home or school environment.

It should be borne in mind however, that children's home language is part of their identity, which they may value and not want to lose. As such, children should be taught how to adapt their language choices to suit their situation (i.e., encouraged to "code switch" accordingly from informal to formal language) and the rationale for doing so should be made explicit. In this way, error correction should not inhibit children's learning or have an impact upon their sense of identity.

Socio-economic Diversity, Ethnicity and Gender

Bourke (1993) argues that class identity is essentially a social and cultural, rather than an institutional or political, phenomenon and therefore cannot be understood without constant reference to gender and ethnicity. Issues related to social segregation of pupils in schools across the country on the basis of ethnicity, and the impact this has had on their future relationships, and outlooks and perspectives on life, have been highlighted by Burgess (2010) and the OECD (2011). Research from the latter, for example, concludes that the UK's school system is socially segregated, with immigrant children clustered in disadvantaged schools, whilst in the former, it is argued that children's future attitudes and perspectives on society are strongly influenced by their peer groups at school and that as such, children who mix predominantly with people of their own ethnic background at school will be less inclined later in life to engage with and embrace people of other backgrounds and alternative viewpoints.

Such segregation has occurred in spite of efforts to promote multicultural education within the UK. Furthermore, the afore-mentioned research commissioned by Lambeth Council (2019) found that in inner-city schools where lessons had been adapted to reflect the diversity of immigrant communities, white working class children were being marginalised, leading to a sense of them losing their identity. In addition, Philips (2010) has argued that multicultural policies have failed, and been very divisive, since they have made people identify with their own culture rather than being part of the broader goal of integrating into their community.

In terms of the correlation between progress within the education system and

ethnicity, research carried out by Dustmann, Machin, and Schönberg (2010, p. 273), concluded that “at the beginning of primary school ... ethnic minority pupils (with the exception of Chinese pupils) lag behind white British-born pupils”, but that “with the exception of black Caribbean pupils, ethnic minority pupils gain substantially relative to white British pupils throughout ... schooling”. Their research also showed that conditioning in English as a mother tongue, particularly early on in schooling, significantly reduced achievement gaps between ethnic minority groups. Through his research into the under-achievement of black males in school, Sewell (2009) concluded that it is issues such as peer pressure, interest and enjoyment of black culture, the lack of appropriate role models and absent fathers that are more responsible for educational disparities than institutional racism.

In terms of how migration history and social class have impacted upon different ethnic and linguistic communities in education, research from Hollingworth and Mansaray (2012, p. 4), which tries to identify communities which are most at a disadvantage in education, and where they are located, cites that, “many of the widest gaps” in education are “present in local authorities with substantial Pakistani ethnic minority groups ... who tend to speak Urdu, Punjabi or Mirpuri and experience economic disadvantage”. The report suggests, on the basis of increasing diversity, that more research is needed into the attainment and educational experiences of ethnic and linguistic groups.

In relation to the influence of gender on educational achievement, research by Voyer and Voyer (2014) from the University of New Brunswick in Canada, based on a review of 308 studies, which looked at data from 1914 to 2011 involving more than 1.1 million children across more than 30 countries, concluded that girls have been consistently outperforming boys over those years, in all academic areas, including maths and science. In relation to the impact of social class on gender though, it can also be concluded, that such achievement of girls, as with boys, varies depending on their socio-economic status.

The bearing of socio-economic diversity on ethnic and gender equality in wider society can be reflected upon in context if we consider the disproportionality of particular crimes that are committed by some social groups, along with the disproportionately of some groups that are represented amongst the victims of such crimes. An example that can be considered is the series of high profile cases over recent years concerning the grooming, sexual abuse, abduction, trafficking, rape and torture of predominantly white working class girls, many of whom were brought up in the care system, across several British towns, by groups of predominantly British Pakistani men. One such report on the issue, the Jay Report (2014), for example, highlights the scale of the problem in one town alone, Rotherham, by revealing that at least 1,400 children in the town had been sexually exploited between 1997 and 2010, and states that there was a “... perception that issues of ethnicity in child sexual exploitation were ‘played down’ by senior managers in child protection services and elected members”. The report also highlights the issue of “cultural sensitivities” having been a barrier to the aforementioned crimes being properly investigated.

In addition to the above, similar reports highlighting the abuse, coercion and

exploitation etc. of the most vulnerable in society have been produced over recent years from different parts of the world. One such report (Buller et al., 2019) following a three year national enquiry into allegations of abuse and violence against ethnic minority women and girls in Canada estimated that at least 1,200 indigenous women and girls were murdered or went missing between 1990 and 2012, and concluded that the police and the criminal justice system had historically failed indigenous women and girls by ignoring their concerns and viewing them “through a lens of pervasive racist and sexist stereotypes”.

The disproportionate amount of crime suffered by vulnerable groups can also be observed in the statistics from a report from the Metropolitan Police (2019) on knife crime on the streets of British towns and cities. The data shows that a disproportionate amount of the victims are males of Afro-Caribbean origin, with a disproportionate amount of perpetrators of knife crime being from such backgrounds also.

Discussion (2)

Within each ethnic and gender group, there is division across the social classes. There may also be cultural aspects pertinent to each group determining to what degree they will be represented in one social class or another and to what degree they will integrate with others. I have observed (Norley 2013) that the higher the level of achievement in education, the greater the degree to which people from different ethnic backgrounds are likely to mix together and integrate. When reflecting on the link between achievement in education and the use of Standard English, the role and importance of language in helping to break down barriers that might exist between different ethnic groups is highlighted.

Reflecting on the examples from the reports highlighted above, which are a small sample of many, it is clear that a disproportionate amount of both victims and perpetrators of particular crimes are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and, as such, that their language usage pertains more to non-standard English. It can be argued therefore, that people in general, but girls and women in particular, who lack sufficient language skills, also lack the ability to detect the hostility present in others’ language, and are therefore more vulnerable and susceptible to abuse and exploitation.

In addition therefore to the argument that there is a correlation between social class and language, and educational achievement, this paper puts forward the argument for consideration that there is a correlation between social class and language, and susceptibility to, and propensity towards, violence in general, but street and domestic violence in particular. The benefits of the promotion of the use of Standard English, I would argue, go beyond its use in reducing inequalities between socio-economic groups within education, and within and across ethnicities and genders, to being a factor in potentially transforming and empowering, and making safer, the lives of those most susceptible to hostility and violence.

Teaching Methods and Technology

Reflecting on education doctrine, multicultural education advocates student centred learning, whereby students' interests are placed first i.e. in an environment where learning is focused on each student's interests, abilities and learning styles, placing the teacher as a facilitator of learning. Student centred-learning requires students to be active, responsible participants in their own learning. This is in contrast to teacher-centred learning whereby teachers direct the learning process and students assume a more receptive role in their education.

A bias towards child-centred teaching methods, however, was highlighted by Peal (2014) who, in an examination of 130 Ofsted reports (Peal, 2014) concluded that, in spite of the head of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw, advocating that inspectors should not show preference to a certain style of teaching, and that those who did had been "rooted out", they were still favouring child centred teaching methods over tutor-led approaches, and showing an aversion to direct teacher instruction, preferring group work instead.

Additionally, Christodoulou (2014), in analysing a series of Ofsted subject reports, found that inspectors had frequently praised learning through discovery and yet methods where teachers were transmitting knowledge were either not mentioned or criticised as bad practice. As such, she argues that whilst teaching through discovery is needed to please Ofsted, it does little for the child. She has argued (2014) that students need facts in order to engage with learning and that those facts are best learned through teacher-led instruction. She argues that direct instruction is a highly effective method of teaching and that frequent practice is important in order to develop higher order skills and the development of long term memory. Drawing on the principles of modern cognitive science, she shows through a wide range of examples and case studies just how much classroom practice contradicts such basic scientific principles. Based on her own time in classrooms, she argues that a generation of school children has been let down by discovery learning, which places emphasis on students finding out for themselves, and that such an approach has left children with glaring gaps in their knowledge and understanding. In arguing that traditional fact-based lessons would serve children better, she challenges the notion that teacher led instruction is passive, that facts prevent understanding, that projects and activities are the best way to learn and that teaching knowledge is indoctrination.

Furthermore, Hirsch (1988) argues that in order to function in contemporary society, children need to have a given amount of knowledge, and a lot of practice in retrieving that knowledge in a lot of different contexts, but that in many schools in the USA, they were being deprived of that knowledge. In a study by Miao and Reynolds (2014) presented at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference, set up to compare methods for teaching maths in primary schools in China and England, in order to help explain the gap in results between the two countries, concluded "that 'whole class interactive' work, where the teacher uses questioning and demonstration to explore the subject with pupils as a whole group, is more effective as a teaching method than children working through exercises themselves with teacher support". The research also found that the

differential between the highest and lowest achievers was lower in math classes which adopted teacher-led methods.

In acknowledging and attempting to explain why South Eastern countries (such as Singapore, Japan and South Korea etc.) outperform western countries (such as the UK and USA) during cross-national PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) results, Jerrom and Vignoles (2015, p. 5) argue that differences can be attributed to the fact that, “There are significant cultural, economic and historic differences between countries ...” but that “... even if some East Asian teaching methods are potentially more effective than the status quo, one simply does not know whether they can be successfully implemented within the English (or, indeed, other) educational systems”.

The importance of structured teaching methods was also highlighted in a study by Gross (2010), which found a correlation between teaching methods and behaviour, through identifying that a child-led approach and mixed ability classes led to a lack of disciplined learning which in turn had had a negative impact upon the development of language skills. The report argued for example that school children were not informed of the differences between the use of street slang and Standard English in regard to spoken English, and that spelling, punctuation and grammar were often not corrected. Similarly, another report from the Policy Exchange (Williams, 2018) found that a child-centered approach to pedagogy both played down the importance of the teachers’ knowledge whilst simultaneously contributing to poor behaviour in the classroom, through reducing the basis for their authority.

In the afore-mentioned study by Hirsch (1988), links are made between teaching methods, schooling, social class and ethnicity etc. when he argues that unlike white and Asian children who often have more opportunities to develop cultural literacy at home, children of color growing up in low income families (Black, Hispanic and Native American students) in the USA often attend schools that fall short in building content knowledge, vocabulary and reading comprehension, a failure from which they rarely fully recover.

In relation to the impact of technology on learning, both currently and in the future, Briggs and Simons (2014) have argued that people who have a given amount of knowledge progress more quickly than those who do not have the knowledge i.e., that “knowledge begets knowledge”. They argue therefore that in order to benefit from the increased use of, and advances in, technology, that learners need sufficient knowledge and facts in order to exploit classroom technology, engage efficiently in the learning process and hence acquire further knowledge more readily. In regard to the impact of social class on technology use, research from Hollingworth, Mansaray, Allen, and Rose (2011, p. 354) found that compared with working class parents, middle class parents were able to “... display dispositions, which enabled them to more confidently navigate the risks and celebrate the positive elements of technology”. As such, McDonell (2011) has argued that new technology has produced class inequalities, i.e., “digital inequalities”, which did not exist before.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also further brought into focus how technology is utilised by people from different social class backgrounds. Research from the

Sutton Trust (2021), for example, found that students from middle class homes were about twice as likely as students from working class families to be engaging in on-line learning, and that (social class impacted upon learning at all stages of schooling). Furthermore, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) reported that during the “lockdown”, richer pupils spent on average six or seven hours a week more on their education than poorer pupils, exposing inequalities with the poorest falling further behind.

Discussion (3)

Reflecting on my own experiences, I have noticed that during teacher observations, more attention is paid, and praise given, to student-centred learning than teacher-centred learning and that during continuous professional development, there is frequently more focus given to issues related to student-centred learning, such as how to achieve differentiation in the classroom or peer learning etc.

In order to help reduce the disparity in academic achievement between British pupils and those from South-East Asian countries in general, and between different socio-economic groups within the UK in particular, conditions need to be created, that are both more conducive to learning, and more supportive for those delivering learning. Such an environment needs to allow for more balance in regard to the deployment of teaching methods, and greater awareness of the importance of the need for students to have sufficient knowledge in moving forward in their subject areas.

I would further argue that within such an environment, particularly in areas of social deprivation, cultural differences that arise as a result of a home environment in which children may not have been exposed to standard English, had their language corrected, or been read to etc. could be discreetly challenged and compensated for. I would argue that those from more middle class backgrounds are often able, through their home environment, to compensate for the lack of learning opportunities, whether it is as a result of a disruptive classroom environment, teaching methods, a lack of error correction of spoken and/or written English, or guidance in the use of technology.

Studies showing the impact of social class on technology use, such as those mentioned above, have highlighted how parents’ education and job status determine their children’s engagement and interest in digital technology, both at home and in school and as such, inform the way in which they are able to support their children’s education. I would argue therefore, that increasing the use of digital technology in schools is not the main issue in regard to reducing the digital divide between children of differing social classes, rather it is children’s disposition resulting from their social class that is responsible for engrained digital inequality. As technology becomes more and more integrated into people’s everyday lives, and its use is further developed and pushed forwards in education, the growing inequalities between social classes that it can produce needs to be reflected upon and addressed.

Conclusions

This paper has argued, through highlighting the connection between social class and language, that there is a link between this and educational achievement, and between the correlation, and the propensity and susceptibility towards types of violence. It has argued that ethnicity and gender impact upon these links, and that in spite of measures taken in regard to types of schooling or types of teaching methods etc. in order to reduce disparities in educational achievement of children of different socio-economic background, these links have been sustained. Conclusions have been elicited in the paper, through drawing on research, reports and studies and reflecting upon the author's experiences. These experiences have included consistently observing a correlation between students' language, levels of vocabulary and general knowledge, and academic ability and achievement in education.

In regard to type of schooling, it is clear that children who go to school in more affluent areas are at an advantage in that by and large, they come from homes where they receive a greater level of support and where expectations are higher. Schools which take students based on ability, rather than through parental income, catchment area or religion, are generally more meritocratic and hence fairer, in as much as they can provide opportunities for bright working class children. However, a greater proportion of less able children are then left for the schools which do not, or are not able to, base their intake on ability. Regardless of a school's catchment area though, or the social and ethnic make-up of its pupils, I believe that if a policy of streaming classes based on ability were more commonplace, then this would provide a more suitable environment whereby a greater balance between teacher-led instruction and child-centred learning could be implemented, as well as a more suitable environment for the expectation and implementation of the use of standard English through constant and consistent error correction of spoken and written English, within schools where it is most needed. These measures would, I believe, help to compensate for the lack of opportunity to develop cultural literacy at home and hence narrow the gap in educational achievement between different socio-economic groups.

I would argue therefore that the studies and issues so far raised in this paper, underpin the need for state schools to implement a policy of support for their teachers to be able to constantly and consistently correct their pupils' spoken errors in regard to grammar and enunciation etc. and written errors, in order to be able to compensate for language and learning support issues related to pupils' home environment. It is important, I believe, for the use of Standard English to be promoted throughout the education system, but particularly early on in children's schooling. The necessity for such a policy would vary, with the need being greater in areas of higher social deprivation i.e., where there are greater numbers of pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or from those ethnic backgrounds with a history of educational failure. As Zera and Jupp (2000) argue, in order to compensate for the lack of educational achievement of, and create better opportunities for, particular ethnic minority groups and those who have, historically, failed in education, then the opportunities for the middle classes need

to be created for all groups in society.

Standardisation and enhancement of spoken language should be viewed as an avenue towards improving educational achievement amongst those from lower socio-economic groups (and narrowing disparities between different socio-economic groups, as well as between, and within, different ethnic groups) on the one hand, and as an avenue towards developing people's awareness of, and sensitising them to, the correlation between, language and the propensity towards, and susceptibility to, violence, on the other.

Through reflecting upon the disparities that exist between people of different social classes, gender and ethnic group, this paper has argued that it is the failure to examine the influence of people's language and literacy skills on achievement in education, and its effect on accessing cultural literacy, along with the failure to engage with, and challenge, specific aspects of culture pertinent to socio-economic status and ethnicity, that are responsible for the disparities not being addressed. It has argued that potential issues relating to growing socio-economic diversity, can be reduced through placing greater emphasis on finding common ground within diverse groups, through the standardisation of language. Diversity, I would argue, needs to be viewed in the context of the ability of people to have sufficient language skills and knowledge to engage in each other's cultures. Instead of allowing the normalisation of poor language skills and poor behaviour etc. the education system should be normalising challenging the aspects of culture that prevent social mobility and engagement, such as language use and its correlation with social class, educational achievement, and propensity towards and susceptibility to violence.

I believe, based on the evidence presented in this paper, combined with my own reflections, that the correlations outlined are palpable (i.e., that there is a strong correlation between language use and educational achievement, and between language use and propensity towards conducting, and being a victim of, violence, and as such I recommend, due to the significance of the issues raised, that more specific research, both quantitative and qualitative, should be carried out in order to ascertain and confirm the correlations and the degree to which they are present in given contexts.

Further Discussion

In education, arguments tend to centre less around consideration of language use or how we can counteract the tendency towards social class and ethnic division in schools, discussed and reflected on, in the aforementioned research, but more around how we ensure compliance with equality and diversity policies. Recent research by Dover, Major, and Kaiser (2016) from the Harvard Business School, however, concluded that, "The most commonly used diversity programs do little to increase representation of minorities and women" and that organisations' "anti-discrimination policies often made them, "less accountable for discriminatory practices". Moreover, their research found that, "... pro-diversity messages signalled to ... white men that they might be undervalued and discriminated

against” regardless of their political ideology, or whether or not they supported the principles of diversity and inclusion. Whilst there has been much focus on the need to promote successful, diverse role models in a range of industries where they are underrepresented, the focus of diversity should, I believe, be more directed towards broadening the “pool” of people with the skills and abilities to be able to enter into professions where those skills are required i.e., through supporting those from lower socio- economic groups with less status and power in society. In other words, in order to challenge inequitable power structures which have arisen from historical injustices, there should be less of a focus on finding measures to address under- representation at the top in the higher echelons of society (e.g., the number of ethnic minorities in elite universities or women CEOs etc.), but more on measures to address over-representation of groups of people within low status positions in society (e.g., black Caribbean students are three times more likely to be excluded from schools than their white counterparts (DfES 2006)) on the basis that they are greater in number, and they could act as a measure to challenge and counteract inequalities and injustices that arise as a result of socio-economic division and its association with language.

To highlight the issue of inequalities and disparities arising as a result of differences in the use of language, the following anecdotes can be considered:

- Although at one time women and ethnic minorities were under-represented in TV broadcasting, people of different ethnic groups, age and gender are now regularly seen presenting the News on TV. The commonality amongst them is suitable qualifications and the speaking of Standard English reflecting a good education and middle class culture. However, within each ethnic group, gender and age range etc. there is a wide gamut of people from different social classes who, due to their lack of qualifications and access to sufficient language skills, are excluded from the application process in spite of the fact job adverts may state that applications from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic candidates are particularly welcome as they are currently under-represented. The same can be said for a number of other occupations and jobs, where relevant qualifications and a good command of the English language are expected.
- If we compare and contrast, for example, two teenagers (of whatever ethnic group or gender), one a university undergraduate and one a gang member, a stark contrast in relation to their language use (in terms of their grammatical structures, enunciation, vocabulary and use of “street” slang etc.), as well as qualifications, would be found, mirroring their future life chances, job opportunities, health, and propensity and susceptibility to violence etc. as well as their ability to engage with, and learn from, people of other cultures.
- If a group of vulnerable people, or a lone vulnerable person, were to come into contact with a group of youths on the street, then assuming the youths could not be seen (i.e., discarding ethnic group or gender), then from the perspective of the vulnerable (whether consciously or subconsciously), the youths’ language would be a factor in determining their propensity

towards possible violence, and in instilling, and justifying, a sense of fear within the vulnerable.

- During “lockdown” in the COVID-19 pandemic, phone calls reporting domestic violence were made every 30 seconds. I would argue that the vast majority of perpetrators and victims of domestic violence speak with non-standard English.

The above anecdotes are just a few examples of links between spoken language and education, employment, propensity and susceptibility to violence, and opportunities in, and quality of, life that could be further investigated. In reflecting upon each of the above anecdotes, and much of the research outlined so far in this paper, it is hard to ignore the role of human nature in regard to causes of such inequalities and injustices. A question needs to be asked as to whether or not the cruelty of denying through language, that which many take for granted, as described by Purves (2012), a cruelty reflected in human nature, simple political convenience or, in fact, an entwined, and interdependent mixture of both? According to Sheskin (2018), for example, deep rooted in human psychology is a propensity towards fair inequality (as opposed to unfair equality), the reasons for which include the belief that we could become one of the wealthier people ourselves, and the belief that it promotes industriousness and social mobility. As people become wealthier, or increase their status in society (along with accompanying health benefits and increased life expectancy etc.), others will feel “left behind”, creating greater economic disparity and social division between people. The accompanying lack of economic security and welfare, however, can induce a sense of cultural anxiety and erode a sense of belonging, making people anchor themselves more in a sense of place and tradition, the effect of which can be to create further social division.

People accepting and knowing their place and role in society, due to cultural poverty and/or their socio-economic status, due in part to their lack of language skills and concomitant lack of knowledge, it could be argued, has always been used and exploited by groups in power. It could be further argued that this has been enhanced by that which is in our nature, namely that we are stuck with a desire and need to see others in worse conditions than ourselves, an observation expressed, for example, by George Price (Harman, 2011) who, in attempting to define a mathematical, biological and evolutionary representation of altruism, concluded that it is not only being nice to others that benefits us, but that conversely, doing other people down also benefits us.

Has society irreversibly adjusted to accommodate for wide socio-economic diversity and its concomitant differential in people’s level of language and literacy skills, cultural capital, wealth, health and life opportunities that exist between people of different social class and ethnic groups, or could the standardisation of language, along with the trait of having the desire and will, interest and ability to engage with and to share knowledge, be the necessary ingredients that can help to counteract and dampen the antagonistic evolutionary drivers inside of ourselves? And, is it not these drivers that can not only give rise to, or are contributory factors towards, conflict between individuals and between groups of people, but which

can be exploited by those in power within organisations?

If the education system is to challenge the unfairness and inconsistencies brought about by socio-economic diversity and a lack of understanding over the impact of language on students' learning and future quality of life, and if there is to be an open and transparent discussion over educational doctrine and the consequences on students' learning, then it needs to adapt itself to tackle the more challenging issues of political expediency and aspects of human nature that promulgate socio-economic division and its consequences.

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