Reduction of socio-economic diversity through standardisation of language: reflections and challenges

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Introduction

This paper examines how the standardisation of language throughout the education system could be used as a tool to reduce socio-economic diversity within and across ethnicities and genders.

Introduction

As well as within the education system, issues and concerns relating to multiculturalism and diversity in wider society are reflected upon, as are the conditions in which teachers work, the use of educational technology and the effectiveness of specific teaching methods deployed in schools.

Introduction

Whilst some of the issues discussed are specific to a UK context, many of those raised and debated in the paper are generic to many countries, such as the impact of globalisation and technology on those from lower socio-economic groups who feel 'left behind', the correlation between language, socio-economic group and educational achievement, and the susceptibility of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society to violence.

Methodology

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 and West: 2018) related to multiculturalism and diversity, including socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, health, position within an organisation's hierarchy, the working conditions of teachers, and teaching methods and achievement in education, all through the lens of language and its relationship to aspects of culture relating to social class.

Multicultural education and diversity

- Multicultural education argues that inequalities and injustices in education, including the lack of social mobility, are symptomatic of the stranglehold that influential and privileged groups of people have within education and society (Gorski 2010).

Multicultural education and diversity

- Diversity means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies.

- Through recognising and celebrating the normality of diversity in all areas of human life, people are sensitised to the idea that people have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life enriches all of us. (Allan: 2003)

Socio-economic diversity

- Comparison of life expectancy between people in wealthy and socially deprived areas.

- Other statistics related to socio-economic diversity can be measured, including people's professions and their status within such professions, their health and level of education, and the language and range of vocabulary they deploy in their everyday lives.

Socio-economic diversity

- 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 (High Pay Centre: 2018).

- A much greater disparity between rich and poor (Oxfam: 2016)

Socio-economic diversity

The impact of the demise of traditional working class industries in post-industrial cities on the support for education within working class communities has been highlighted by Ofsted (1993) whilst 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).

Socio-economic diversity and schooling

- Adonis (1997) and McCulloch (1998) have highlighted the failure of the education system to narrow the gap or reduce the inequality between the social classes, arguing for example that the expansion of comprehensive schools had actually had the effect of creating further segregation between social classes.

Socio-economic diversity and language

The correlation between the failure of the working class in education and spoken English has been well documented:

- Purves (2012); Honey (1997)
- Phillips (2013); Entwhistle (1978)
- Bernstein (1964); Wallace (1988)
- Sir Jim Rose, ex-head of OFSTED (2010)

Socio-economic diversity and language

- 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.

  Purves (2012)

- One of the worst blights on British society is poor social mobility. One of the best ladders out of deprivation is an ability to write and speak clearly, pleasingly and with a confident command of language.

  Purves (2012)

Socio-economic diversity and language

"... 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."

Honey 1997: 5

Socio-economic diversity and language

Working-class children have traditionally had difficulties in schooling due to "the inability of working-class speech to support academic discourse."

Entwhistle (1978: 32)

Socio-economic diversity and language

In terms of the effect of spoken English on reading and writing skills, it should be considered 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: 67)

Socio-economic diversity and language

"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."

Sir Jim Rose, ex-head of OFSTED (2010)

Socio-economic diversity and language

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.'

Manifesto for Literacy (2009: 2, 3 and 4)

Socio-economic diversity and language

People's language skills reflect and are, to a large degree, a determinant of people's socio-economic status and occupation within society, and indicate a propensity towards poverty, ill health and exposure to, and commitment of, violence.

Norley (2018)

Socio-economic diversity and 'cultural literacy'

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 'cultural literacy', they are unable to understand culturally-conditioned allusions, references to past events, places, names, jokes and idiomatic expressions etc.

Hirsch (1988)

Socio-economic diversity and a 'culture of poverty'

- 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, neighbourhood 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.

Socio-economic diversity

I have argued that social class is a social construct 'that 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 ... and not, through policies, educational or otherwise, which don't address the issues, consolidate them or be in denial of them'.

Norley (2018: 28)

The impact of social class on ethnicity and gender

- In spite of efforts to promote multicultural education within the UK, issues relating to the social segregation of pupils in schools across the country based on ethnicity, and the impact this has had on their future relationships, and outlooks and perspectives on life have been highlighted in Burgess et al (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.

The impact of social class on ethnicity and gender

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.

Lambeth Council (2019)

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.

Gender and educational achievement

A review of 308 studies involving more than 1.1 million children across more than 30 countries, concluded that girls have been consistently outperforming boys over the past 100 years, in all academic areas, including maths and science.

Voyer and Voyer (2014)

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.

Socio-economic diversity, gender and ethnicity, and, in wider society

- Jay Report (2014)
- A disproportionate amount of both victims and perpetrators of particular crimes are from lower socio-economic backgrounds and, as such, their language usage pertains more to non-standard English, meaning that they have (2013: 114), '... poorly developed verbal skills which can make reasoning with others difficult.'

Socio-economic diversity, gender and ethnicity, and, in wider society

In order to compensate for the lack of educational achievement of, and create better opportunities for, particular ethnic minority or socio-economic groups in education, then the established norms of the middle classes need to be created.

Zera and Jupp (2000)

Socio-economic diversity, gender and ethnicity, and, in wider society

- Another high profile case in point is the report based on the treatment of ethnic minority women and girls in Canada (2019), following allegations of abuse and violence etc. which 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'.

Section Summary

- 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.

- I would also argue that the studies and issues so far raised in this paper, reinforce the need for state schools to include a policy of constant and consistent correction of grammar and enunciation, in order to promote the use of standard English throughout, but particularly early on in, children's schooling.

Section Summary

- This should be done in order to compensate for children's lack of exposure to Standard English in their home environment and on the basis that, according to Wallace (1988), there is a dialectic mismatch between speakers of non-standard English and their teachers, which holds them back in their learning (accessing the curriculum). 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.

Conditions of teachers

- Education Support Partnership (2018)
- National Education Union (2019)
- Ofsted (2019)

All reports site teachers either leaving the profession, or considering leaving the profession, due to rising workloads, excessive accountability and low level, but persistent, disruption in the classroom.

Teaching methods

- Hirsch (1988)
- Christodoulou (2014)
- Miao and Reynolds (BERA 2014)

Teaching methods

'Learners need facts in order to engage with learning and those facts are best learned through teacher-led instruction. It is a highly effective method of teaching and frequent practice is important in order to develop higher order skills and the development of long term memory.'

Christodoulou (2014)

Teaching methods

- OFSTED are still favouring child-centred teaching methods over tutor-led approaches and showing an aversion to direct teacher instruction, preferring group work instead.
- Peal (2014)

The impact of technology on learning

- In relation to the impact of technology on learning, both currently and in the future, Simons J and Briggs A (2014) have argued that people who have a given amount of knowledge progress more quickly than those who don't 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.

Conclusions, discussion and recommendations

- Links have been made in this paper between language and social class, achievement in education, being a perpetrator and victim of violence, ethnicity, gender, teaching methods, use of technology and human nature etc.

- 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 the differential between different socio-economic groups) on the one hand, and as an avenue towards developing an awareness of, and sensitising people towards, the correlation between, language and susceptibility to violence, on the other.

Conclusions, discussion and recommendations

- Whilst I believe, based on the evidence and research presented in this paper, combined with my own reflections, 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, I recommend, due to the significance of the issues raised, that further research, both quantitative and qualitative, should be carried out in order to ascertain and confirm that correlation and the degree to which it is present.

Conclusions, discussion and recommendations

The focus for change should be literacy standards, including an understanding that, regardless of a school's location, or the social and ethnic make-up of its pupils, standard English use will be expected, along with a substantial challenge, particularly in areas of social deprivation and segregation, to the culture of low expectations of teachers and pupils alike, and proponents of the goals of multicultural should embrace this change. Without such changes, along with an understanding of how and why such changes need to occur, and the tempering of political ideologies in such a direction, their goals cannot be realized.

Conclusions, discussion and recommendations

- Language can provide the equity needed to level the playing field in regard to social and educational inequalities. It needs to be mobilized and sent into battle!

Thank you for listening!

Any questions?