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# **How does socio-economic status affect children's language learning?**

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## 1: Introduction

The relationship between children's language learning and socio-economic status (SES hereafter) is a major concern within the field of sociolinguistics, with proficiency in language acting as a crucial foundation for children within the education system. However, the language used at home, and the type of language used in schools do not always coincide. Consistent trends of disparity exist when examining language level and educational attainment between social classes, with those at the lower end of the SES spectrum more typically prone to a language deficiency. Therefore, it is essential to apply sociolinguistic methods to identify delays in language development, ensuring that children are supported accordingly, so their lack of proficiency in speech and language will not detriment their academic success and later life chances. With increasing globalisation, and societies becoming increasingly interconnected, it is important to note that this problem exists on an international scale, however, to provide greater depth, this investigation will focus on western, English language studies from the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada.

In terms of the UK governments use of SES, the Office for National Statistics (2021) defines one's socio-economic position by their occupation and other job characteristics. This includes whether they are employed, self-employed, or supervising other employees. This definition can be considered empirically constructed for governmental purposes, used here as a means of categorising people. Arguably, this is overly simplistic, and limited to a basic understanding of how one's social position can be classified. The term social class differs from SES and can be deemed a matter of greater complexity than looking solely at employment. The term considers a broader range of features which make up one's social position. For instance, Deutsch (2017) notes how social class is a marker of one's position in relation to SES, however, beyond SES, 'social class is often thought of as a culture that carries with it group membership, norms, and socialization' (712). Although more ambiguous than SES, this offers a broader definition, and if used within research, would provide a greater insight into the field. However, I will be following the referenced sociolinguistic research by using the terms SES and social class interchangeably. Although it is important to consider the distinction between such terms, due to the difficulty of measuring social class, SES is used as a proxy. Alongside this, it is imperative to note how within this field, SES cannot be considered in isolation. Thus, this study will analyse SES through an intersectional lens, taking a broad approach by considering race as another social disparity.

Studying the relationship between language and SES can be deemed of pivotal importance. Adequate language and communication levels provide children with the foundations for development, acting as a key premise for reading skills and later educational success. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists discovered that upon starting school, 'between 40% and 56% of children start school with language delay' (Speech and Language UK). Following this, they found direct links between long term speech, language, and communication needs with social disadvantage, which then go onto effect children's developmental and educational outcomes, health, and wellbeing. Their research shows that these educational inequalities in early childhood continue throughout a person's life, for instance, in terms of employability, '88% of long-term unemployed young men have been found to have long term speech, language, and communication needs' (Speech and Language UK). In addition, similar patterns of disparity affect entry into higher education, and lifetime earnings. Although a long-term concern, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant such inequalities have become more distinctive. As an issue expressed by the

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UK parliament, a preliminary analysis of assessments taken by year 2 pupils in autumn of 2020 in England was conducted. This revealed that children of this age group had fallen by approximately two months in their reading and maths levels, and that the disadvantage gap had widened (UK Parliament 2021). Experts on the effects of the pandemic have noted that with the digital divide, disparities in parental engagement with their children's education, and differences in home environment either advantaging or disadvantaging children, educational inequalities and the attainment gap are likely to increase.

This study will combine a sociolinguistic and sociological approach to the effects of SES on language acquisition and language level. It will begin by considering the history of language, education, and policy implications. This will provide useful background information to then consider the influential works of sociologist, Basil Bernstein, known for his contributions to the study of communication with his sociolinguistic theory of language codes. The paper will then discuss the effects of socialisation, and the crucial intersectional relationship between race and class, looking at both oppositional cultural theory, and the 'what works' agenda. Through applying sociolinguistic theory to the notion of language deprivation, this study aims to raise awareness among teachers, members of the community, and policy makers on language disparities between social socioeconomic groups. Without measures to close this gap, a cycle of disadvantage is likely to continue, ensuing this topic's worthiness of investigation. It is imperative the field moves away from blaming the individual for linguistic disparities to consider the issue within a broader framework.

### 2: Sociolinguistics and education

During the nineteenth century, educational inequality started to be acknowledged as a social problem. Despite this, continuing into the first half of the twentieth century, societal consensus held the view that intelligence was genetically determined, with the middle class obtaining a higher average intelligence level compared to their lower-class equivalents. However, when 'mass education was introduced in the early part of the twentieth century' (Grainger 2012: 99), along-side a building momentum of the psychological nature vs nurture debate, a framework used to examine how genetics and environmental factors influence human development, this notion of the heritability of intelligence soon came into question (Ahmed Zaky). Greater emphasis came to be placed on alternative factors, such as the role of one's environment, and the influence of home backgrounds. As asserted by Grainger (2013), the problem was now not understood as children speaking the 'wrong form of the language, but that the low morals, poor social behaviour, and even poor hygiene of their families' (99). This demonstrates a shift regarding the nature and origins of academic ability, away from the individual, to examine other influential factors.

This stimulated the proposals that there should be more direct intervention from educational institutions, fostering greater links between home and school life. For instance, the Newbolt report, commissioning the teaching of English in England stated, 'The great difficulty of teachers in elementary schools in many districts is that they have to fight against the powerful influences of evil habits of speech contracted in home and street' (Grainger 2013: 99). Similar concerns regarding children's speech and language deficit continued throughout the twentieth century into the 1960s, partly because of the under achievement of black and ethnic-minority children in both Britain and the US. Under this climate, Bernstein's works regarding the relationship between social class and language form gained in

momentum. His approach was used by psychologists to necessitate remedial education for black and working-class children. However, as suggested by Grainger (2013), 'recently, concern with deprivation, poverty and educational underachievement in post-Thatcher Britain has led some policymakers to suggest, yet again, that poor children's language use is the problem and, therefore, the main target of the solution' (100). This suggests the prevalence of the issue in our present day, indicating a perspective which blames the individual.

This notion can be evidenced in policy think-tank reports, for instance the 'Getting in Early' report, edited by Jean Gross and published in 2008 by The Smith Institute and The Centre for Social Justice. In addition, the 'Why Can't They Read?' report, written by Miriam Gross, and published in 2010. These reports can be deemed worrying on multiple levels. Grainger (2012) encapsulates this concern; 'first, in terms of scholarship and middle-class bias of their content, and second, in terms of the influence they may have on both public opinion and educational policy' (100), reflecting a dominant ideology of language, associated with the middle class. Within the 'Getting in Early' report, the chapter 'how speech, language and communication are linked to social disadvantage, states that 'Middle-class families tend actively to "cultivate" their children and to teach them language, reasoning, and negotiation skills, which other children may lack' (Grainger 2012: 105). Although not stated explicitly, through positioning working-class parents in a different realm to their middle-class equivalents, a clear contrast is created, reflecting the persistence of a middle-class bias within the education system in our present day.

### 3: Bernstein

As discussed, research into children's language use has shown a positive correlation between levels of language proficiency and SES. Since the 1960s, much of this research has been influenced by Bernstein's sociolinguistic theory of social learning. According to Bernstein (1960), within the organization of social groups, linguistic variation, other than different forms of dialect are present. Therefore, status groups can become distinguishable by their spoken language. This notion forms the foundations of his research. When considering what Bernstein (1964) uses to make such distinctions between status groups, he uses the tenets of SES to differentiate, 'defined in terms of occupation and education' (66).

Bernstein's works on the relationship between language proficiency and social class has been used by educational psychologists to explain working class linguistic deprivation. Within his theory, Bernstein proposes the existence of two distinct speech codes, the 'restricted code' and 'elaborated code'. The restricted code can be defined as the 'speech form which discourages the speaker from verbally elaborating subjective intent and progressively orients the user to descriptive, rather than abstract, concepts' (Bernstein 1960: 217). Bernstein (1964) postulates that the speech of the restricted code 'is epitomized by low level and limiting syntactic organization and there is little motivation or orientation toward increased vocabulary' (65). In contrast, the elaborated code can be defined as 'the difficulty of predicting the syntactic alternatives taken up to organize meaning across a representative range of speech' (Bernstein 1960: 63). Within this speech mode, 'speech becomes an object of special perceptual activity' (Bernstein 1960: 217), facilitating verbal elaboration and subjective intent. It is considered that the normative speech systems of the middle-class are associated with the elaborated code, whilst individuals of the working class are confined to a restricted code.

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Although influential, much of Bernstein's works' have been criticised for ignoring the influence social relationships have on linguistic choice. A linguist, undeniably associated with this reaction is that of William Labov. In his 1970 paper, *The logic of non-standard English*, Labov (1970) argues that Bernstein's works equate the restricted code to a linguistic deficit, asserting that 'the myth of verbal deprivation is particularly dangerous, because it diverts attention from real defects of the child' (22). From this, he accuses 'Bernstein of being biased against all forms of working-class behaviour and of seeing middle-class language as superior in every respect' (Bolander and Watts 2009: 165). However, appearing aware of Labov's criticisms, Bernstein re-contextualised his own theory within his later papers, making clear that the restricted code 'does not mean that working-class children do not have access to such expressions, but that the eliciting speech context did not provoke them' (Bernstein 1971: 179). This acknowledges the influence of the sociological constraints faced by the speaker, demonstrating Bernstein's theory may not have been fully developed when Labov wrote his paper. His re-contextualisation hints that limited range of lexical choices and syntactic options present stereotypically in the working-class, stem more from environmental barriers, which prevent the exploitation of knowledge. With Bernstein's views more adequately explained, rather than viewing the works of Bernstein and Labov as contradictory and incompatible, it may prove more beneficial to view them in accordance with one another. Both were united by their concerns with social stigmatisation within schools, their views against compensatory education, and the belief in the linguistic potential of working-class children. Therefore, through combining their research, we may acquire greater insight and a broader scope to tackle the issue, considering both the differences in language, and how the restricted code can be re-considered not as a deficit. The issue has persisted since the works of Bernstein and Labov in the twentieth century; therefore, it is beneficial to critically re-evaluate his theory and remove its associations with a linguistic deficit, considering it in the context of our current politico-economic climate.

There have been numerous studies of children aimed at measuring Bernstein's theory of speech codes. With Bernstein's concept forming the foundations of their research experiment, Jones, and Macmillan (1973) aimed to assess 'speech characteristics as a function of social class and situational factors' (117). Their sample consisted of 34 five-year-olds, 16 of which were selected from a school in a predominantly middle-class area in the city of Saint Johns, Canada. The remaining 18 attended a school in a lower-class area, neighbouring the city. To further categorise class, Jones and Macmillan used the family's occupational level, differing significantly between the two groups. The occupational level was measured using Blishen's (1968) index for occupations in Canada, 'whereby occupations listed in census publications could be ranked in terms of socio-economic status' (742), in which 'the middle-class group had a mean occupational level of 51.10 and the lower-class group had a mean level of 32.39' (Jones and MacMillan 1973: 117).

The conditions of the interviews conducted took place under three varied conditions, ranging from a highly structured, to a more natural linguistic setting. Within the first, each interviewee was presented with three coloured slides, then asked to describe everything they could about the picture to the examiner. The second condition proved alike to the former, however, the interviewer was replaced by the children's peer, aiming to create a less structured environment. Under the third condition, the sample of students were asked to tell a friend about an enjoyable experience, thus proving the least structured of the three.

When analysing the findings of this experiment, generally, the results support the conclusion that middle class students are more fluent than their lower-class equivalents. This can be supported by four of the speech variables assessed: total words, total communication units, total words in each communication unit, and average words per communication unit, all of which enhance the amount of speech, and supposedly the fluency. When examining the results in relation to the total volume of language and communication units, there were limited differences in the two groups regarding the use of mazes, defined as 'a series of words, initial parts of words, or unattached fragments of an utterance that do not contribute meaning to the ongoing flow of language' (Ramandeep Kaur et al 2011:197). Present however, were significant differences in class regarding the average length of mazes, with the middle-class subjects using longer mazes across all conditions, contributing to a greater mean phrase length. This, along with hesitation variables, pause duration, and articulation rate have been proposed as measures which would differentiate between elaborated and restricted speech codes. Across all three conditions, middle-class participants had a longer mean phrase length, proving indicative of less frequent pausing and a shorter mean pause duration. These findings may be taken as contradictory to those reported by Bernstein who postulates that longer, and more frequent pauses are characteristic of the elaborated style of speech. With the speech of the middle-class participants in this study both grammatically more complex and fluent in comparison to the lower-class subjects and greater pauses failing to elevate the complexity of language, the relevance of verbal planning is called into question. Jones explains these contradictory results, suggesting 'the more frequent pauses of lower-class subjects may reflect not verbal planning but emotional tension and inhibition resulting from their difficulty in expressing themselves' (Jones and MacMillan 1973: 120). Although this is a small-scale study, and cannot be deemed representative, these results can still be considered insightful. Not only is the concept of a working-class language deficit reinforced, but Jones and Macmillan examine the results in a broader context. By considering more personal factors, such as 'emotional tension', in what may cause subordinate language use, they recognise the issue as a matter of greater complexity.

#### **4: Socialization**

It is important to take note that this notion of 'emotional tension' may stem from external influences away from the individual and the education system, leading this study to look at the role of a child's home environment and the socialization process as possible explanations to what generates this working-class language deficit. Maccoby (2007) defines the term socialization as the 'processes whereby naïve individuals are taught the skills, behaviour patterns, values, and motivations needed for competent functioning in the culture in which the child is growing up' (13). Prior to children taking charge of their own experiences with peers, knowledge is acquired from the family to whom society has ascribed the task of socialization. When relating this process to SES, considerable evidence of disparity between social classes exists. For instance, in Zigler's (1970) research, he notes how these differences extend to broad dimensions of behaviour ranging from 'quality of family relationships, patterns of affection and authority, parents' conceptions of parenthood, and their expectations for their childhood' (89). In terms of education, he discovered that, for the middle class, greater emphasis on independence was present in early childhood, alongside higher expectations of performance in the education system, creating a greater belief in the possibility of success. If Zigler is correct, then disparities of socialization can either enhance children's linguistic capabilities, or alternatively, hinder them.

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The sociological research unit at the University of London conducted a closed schedule study of different forms of familial socialisation which may affect orientations towards language use. Designed by Bernstein and Henderson (1969), the aim of the study was to 'examine the effect of the social class position of the mothers on their perception of the role of language in the socializing process' (Bernstein and Henderson 1969: 3). This was based on the use of language in two areas of the socialization process prior to their child attending school: inter-person relationships and the acquisition of basic skills. The sample used consisted of 311 mothers from two areas: one typically middle-class, and one typically working class. Here, the index of social class was constructed by W. Brandis, based upon the terminal education and occupation of husband and wife, measured on a 0-9 scale, with the mean social class position of the middle-class group being 2.8, and the working-class group, 6.9 (Bernstein and Henderson 1969: 2).

To ensure greater detail when studying the results, the sample used for analysis consisted of 50 randomly selected mothers from both areas. The closed schedule of the experiment contained a list of eleven statements which covered principal aspects of socialization. Bernstein and Henderson (1969) asked the question, 'If parents could not speak, how much more difficult do you think it would be for them to do the following things with young children who had not yet started school?', in which they were asked to assess the difficulty they thought 'dumb parents would experience in dealing with each situation' (3). For example, these statements included 'teaching them everyday tasks like dressing, and using a knife and fork', to 'dealing with them when they are unhappy'. The results obtained demonstrated that for the middle-class mothers, it was more important to place emphasis upon the use of language within the person area of socialization. In contrast, the working class, relative to the middle class, placed greater emphasis upon the use of language in the transmission of skills.

Within their paper's discussion section, Bernstein and Henderson offer an explanation as to why these results emerged. They direct the results to the ways in which skills and personal relationships are transmitted. They suggest that the middle-class child may have greater exposure to 'varied and attractive stimuli' (Bernstein and Henderson 1969: 12). This is explained as the 'acquisition of motor, perceptual and manipulative skills' in which 'the child regulates his own learning in a carefully controlled environment' and explore their new knowledge independently, and on their own terms. They suggest the working-class mothers passively transmit knowledge, in comparison to their middle-class equivalents who are active participants. Another important feature of their results they explain is the one anomalous result in which the middle-class mothers placed greater emphasis upon language in response to the statement 'Showing them how things work', differing from their usual emphasis on the person area of socialization. Bernstein and Henderson (1969) explicate this result through suggesting that 'it is likely that this statement, for the middle class, raises questions of the transmission of principles, whereas the other three statements within the same area do not' (13). This means that for the middle-class child, they are not only socialized into the learning of skills through methods and relationships that emphasize autonomy, but also obtain access to principles. If this theory is correct, working-class children may only learn skills through the operation they entail, and thus will be unable to understand the fundamentals of the skill and apply it in different settings. Both trends discussed suggest that middle-class children are in an advantageous position when acquiring language, compared to their lower-class equivalents. Through their parents' active



socialization methods, they are in the position to learn more independently, acquiring knowledge regarding both the principles and operations of skills. All of which will enhance their ability to acquire a higher level of language and apply the language they have learnt to different circumstances, benefitting them within the education system.

Following on from Bernstein and Henderson's assessment, US child psychologists at the University of Kansas, Hart and Risley, looked more specifically at how socialization affects vocabulary level. To do this, they undertook an extended observation period for two and a half years, monitoring 42 families for an hour each month. This aimed to uncover what typically occurred within homes inhabited by 1 and 2-year-old children who were in the process of learning to talk. The objective of the longitudinal study was to 'record "everything" that went on in children's homes- everything that was done by the children, to them, and around them. This was conducted through observations, tape recordings, and transcriptions. Due to their lack of concrete knowledge of which aspects of children's cumulative experience contributed to the establishment of vocabulary growth, they concluded that the more they learned, the better. These observations began when the children were 7-9 months old, from a variety of demographics, and who were stable and willing to remain in the study for the duration. They defined class in terms of occupation and income group, 13 of the families were considered upper class, ten middle, and 13 lower, with 6 on welfare. Their paper also explicated the number of African American families in each SES category, with 3 in middle, 7 lower, and 6 on welfare.

When analysing the results of this study, significant variations in the children's language experience were present. Despite variation of lifestyle between social class, Hart and Risley noted similarities in parents' engagement with the fundamental task of raising a child, through discipline, manners, toys, and topics of communication. However, significant differences were noted. For instance, in terms of the average different words heard per hour, Hart and Risley recorded that for professional families, the parent spoke 382 words, whilst the child spoke 297. For the welfare families, the parent spoke on average 167 words, and the child 149 (3). In addition, not only did they consider the quantity of words, but the content and quality of the words through considering the children's hourly experience with parent affirmatives, words of encouragement, and prohibitions. For example, within the professional family, Hart and Risley asserted that the average child was 'accumulating 32 affirmatives and five prohibitions per hour, a ratio of 6 encouragements to 1 discouragement' (32). In contrast, 'the average child in a working-class family was accumulating 12 affirmatives and seven prohibitions per hour, a ratio of 2 encouragements to 1 discouragement' (5). In the welfare family, the child experienced 'five affirmations and 11 prohibitions per hour, a ratio of 1 encouragement to 2 discouragements' (5). These results reveal advantages and importance for children to hear a greater quantity of words, as shown with the greater number of words spoken by a parent, correlating with their child. In addition, although the explicit effect of parent affirmations are not considered, by noting the numerical differences, we can conclude that the middle-class parents foster greater levels of support and encouragement. This will ultimately benefit their children's self-esteem and confidence levels, and therefore, their performance with language and within the education system. As the trends in their data coincided with the children's later performance in school at the ages of 9-10, we can note the necessity of equalising children's early experiences.

## 5: Intersectionality

As mentioned previously in Hart and Risley's study of vocabulary level, class was not the only social category considered when analysing their data. They took into consideration other intersectional factors, particularly race. Hill Collins (2015) defines intersectionality as 'the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities' (2). When looking at social change more broadly, for successful intervention, such considerations can be deemed essential in our present climate. Intervention cannot focus exclusively on one social distinction; it is imperative to consider intersectional and overlapping social factors. In this instance, class cannot be studied exclusively, as other factors play an influential role in children's ability to acquire and sustain an adequate level of language. Therefore, overarching intersectional frameworks can be deemed a more adequate means for understanding inequalities, with the broad and unspecific nature of the framework accounting for the complexity of the issue. The notion of intersectionality came of age during the twentieth century. Following a period of drastic social change, and the emergence of globalisation fostering greater diversity, a new climate emerged, emphasizing greater equality and the end to traditional forms of hegemony. Hill Collins (2019) reinforces this idea, asserting that 'seeing the social problems caused by colonialism, racism, sexism, and nationalism as interconnected provided a new vantage on the possibilities for social change' (1), hinting at greater possibilities for change and a new view regarding social inequalities.

This intersectional lens was initially coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in her 1989 essay *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour*. Here, she highlighted an example of intersectionality, being the unique challenge faced by women of colour, identifying with two groups facing oppression historically: women, and people of colour. Such developments mean that, today, it is understood that 'social class, race, and ethnicity crosscut all groups of women. Working-class women represent a range of ethnicities, and middle-classness does not guarantee access to privilege for ethnicized or racialized women' (Cynthia Levine-Rasky 2009: 241). Applying this notion to the study of children's language level, working-class language deprivation cannot be viewed in isolation as an issue solely manifested by class inequality. It should be assessed by considering the intragroup differences operating within this classification. It is important to note how sexuality, religion, and gender can all act as marginalized identities and therefore overlapping oppressions within the study of class. However, this study will focus on the relationship between class and race, and the impact this has on language acquisition and in the education system.

### 5.1: Oppositional Cultural theory

There is a clear racial and ethnic hierarchy in educational achievement, evidenced in a variety of measures of the educational experience. Kao and Thompson (2003) pinpoint the main disparities as occurring between 'less advantaged groups such as African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans and more advantaged groups such as whites and Asian Americans' (417). This accounts for multiple forms of inequality, considering not only the ethnic group, but their economic position and level of advantage. Kao and Thompson (2003) go onto explain how, although a complex debate, most contemporary theories as to why such differences are present fall into two categories. 'The first is about how cultural orientations of certain ethnic groups promote/discourage academic achievement, and the

second is about how the structural position of ethnic groups affects the children's (parent, peer, and school) environments' (419). The second category examines the structural position of ethnic groups, for instance, their time of arrival, and the skills they need within the local economy. In line with this, Kao, and Thompson (2003) declare the most influential of these theorists to be anthropologist, Ogbu, who focuses on minority school performance. He has argued that because the black community is centred on the collective experiences of discrimination in opposition to the 'dominant group 'whites', African American youth create an oppositional identity, developing distinct cultural and language norms to maintain this group identity. He suggests that the experiences of children's parents with discrimination make them less trusting of society, causing doubt that education will enable socioeconomic mobility.

This has been described as 'oppositional cultural theory' (Blackard et al 2014: 75). This was put to the test by Ogbu and Fordham and applied to African American high school students in central Illinois, who attended a school which by 2011, had been on academic watch status for six years. Approximately 2,036 attended the school in 2010-2011, 73% of which were white, 11% African American, 12% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 0.1% American Indian, and 3% multi racial. 44% of the students were regarded as low-income, 2% were not proficient in English, and 14% were on individualised education plans (Blackard et al 2014: 78). The study comprised of six participants, between the ages of 15-18. Two of these students were high achievers, two were at a moderate level, and two had a low achievement level. The study used 12 hours of individual, audiotaped, qualitative interviews over a three-month period. This was designed to discover the participants beliefs and attitudes regarding the four main tenets of oppositional cultural theory. Firstly, the perceptions and opportunities associated with the benefits of education, such as the importance of grades, getting a job, plans after high school, and family background. Secondly, the level of engagement and resistance to schooling, thirdly, the relationships with peers regarding educational achievement, and finally, attitudes towards school and the achievement gap.

As the primary research question was the extent to which oppositional cultural theory was present in the school, the results should be considered in terms of the four tenets of Ogbu and Fordham's theory. For example, the first tenet stated that 'African Americans perceptions of fewer returns for education and educational opportunities impact students' academic achievement'. Within the interviews emerged some support for this tenet, with the three male participants asserting that they perceived their chances of finding employment as less than their white equivalents. Such concerns can be substantiated with quantitative evidence. In December 2012, the unemployment rate of African Americans was 14%, compared to 6.2% for white people. For African American 16–19-year-olds, the unemployment rate was 41% while for their white peers it was 22% (Blackard et al 2014: 86).

Through looking at more contemporary data, these patterns remain consistent. For example, many economists in the US find it promising that the unemployment rate fell from a high of 14.7% in April 2020 to 8.4% in August 2020. However, this decline has not occurred for everyone; the black unemployment rate peaked in May 2020 at 16.6%, and by August was still 13.2%. In contrast, the white unemployment rate fell from 12.8% in April to 6.9% in August, nearly half the black unemployment rate (Ajilore 2020). By looking at this data, one can assume that with persisting rates of unemployment, student attitudes towards employment and therefore the oppositional cultural theory remain. Such statistics are not

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specific to the US. For instance, in the UK, '4% of white people were unemployed in 2021, compared with 8% of people from all other ethnic groups combined', with people from the 'Bangladeshi and Pakistani (11%) mixed (10%) and black (9%) ethnic groups obtaining the highest unemployment rate out of all ethnic groups (Gov. UK, Ethnicity facts and figures).

However, this study is open to criticism. It is imperative to note that although substantiated by numerical evidence, the data obtained is not representative as only a small number of students were interviewed, thus generalisations cannot be drawn. Little information was gathered beyond student perceptions, as oppositional cultural theory may exist without the student's awareness, we are unable to understand the true picture. Further data collection is thus warranted. This should focus on the influence of intersecting categories and on forming more explicit links between parent, teacher, and student perceptions with the lower performance level of African American students. Additionally, when looking beyond this study and examining the tenets of oppositional cultural theory more broadly, sociologists dispute Ogbu, asserting that oppositional culture cannot be deemed a valid approach when considering black people's attitudes towards schooling. Mangino (2013) adopts this stance, asserting that oppositional culture is not to do with race, explaining that 'the failure to situate the current incarnation of opposition in this larger body of literature mistakenly makes opposition seem like "a Black thing". It is not.' (Mangino 2013: 2) He concurs that although some students may resist success in school, this behaviour is more likely to be the result of differences in material conditions and social class, rather than a racialized reaction proposed by Ogbu. By adding socio-economic elements into the equation, Mangino's approach ensures that any hostility towards education by non-whites can be accounted for by other factors, such as, socialisation and the family, family wealth and household structure, and urbanicity. This removes the stereotypic race gap in achievement and allows educational achievement among black people to be recognised. For instance, in the US, as noted by Mangino (2013), black Americans disproportionately make up the lower socioeconomic level of society, and 'because lower SES is the prime barrier, a spurious correlation exists in professional and popular discourse that mistakenly identifies black people as "opposed" to education' (3). Therefore, it is not their race which is the main issue, but where their race is generally positioned on the socio-economic spectrum. To rebalance such social inequalities, economic policy issues, such as residential segregation, jobs, and wages, need to be addressed. If such issues are not confronted on a political scale, then the education system is forced to act as if socio-economic status and poverty are less relevant to disparities within the education system and language level.

### 5.2: "What works" agenda

It is important to consider the relevance of the intersectional relationship between race and class to language policy, and how concerns, such as those expressed by Ogbu, are addressed. For instance, in 2013, the UK government launched the 'What works network', to design and construct the delivery of policies. This is based on 'the principle that good decision-making should be informed by the best available evidence' (Gov. UK, What Works Network). Therefore, policymaking is viewed as an objective practice and based on evidence, ensuring policies will be effective. However, the works of Ian Cushing (2023) exemplifies that this is not the case, he suggests that this research fails to notice the inequalities crafted by the state, socio-political conditions, and local contexts. Applying this to language and the education system, he claims that 'what-works-based education policy is not objective or neutral. It normalises white, middle-class language and can result in the use

of non-standard, non-academic language being disciplined in schools.’ Educational linguists have repeatedly suggested that such language hierarchies are not based on empirical evidence but result from institutional racism. For instance, sociologists, Joseph-Salisbury, and Wallace note that whilst demographic shifts mean that most Black Caribbean students are British born and are more likely to speak English fluently, ‘there is still evidence to suggest that speech codes and vernacular associated with Black youth are seen as oppositional to, and disruptive or academic orientations’ (Wallace and Joseph-Salisbury 2022: 1442).

Between 2021 and 2022, Cushing conducted research in two secondary schools in London, using methods of observation and interviews, along-side analysis of lesson materials and social policies. One of his case studies looks at the efforts of Mowahib, a teacher working in a secondary school situated in a deprived area of west London. The school community was largely made up of Black Caribbean children and mostly white teachers. Cushing (2023) describes how Mowahib’s school conformed to a word gap ideology, defined as ‘a raciolinguistic ideology underpinned by the myth that low-income and racialised families exhibit linguistic shortcomings due to their lack of adequate vocabulary [acting as the] root cause of struggles in schools they might experience’ (267). In an interview, Mowahib’s head of department stated how word-gap intervention was bought into the school because ‘a lot of the poorer students don’t have that language, the right kind of language, they have things that are missing’ (Cushing 2023: 268). However, Mowahib stressed her anxiety that word gap intervention was more of an attempt to police the vocabulary of Black children exclusively, in which they were segregated into ‘vocabulary booster’ sessions. Cushing (2023) describes how the Mowahib’s students felt the intervention methods were ‘weird’ and ‘pointless’, making the children feel as if their own language use was inadequate.

She introduced a policy draft as a means of tackling this issue. It stated, ‘If a gap does exist, it exists in the way that people perceive language, rather than how they use it. We seek to value and understand what all children do with their language, regardless of their race or social class... our focus is not on looking for what children cannot do with language, but what they can do’ (Cushing 2023: 13). This new effort acts to shift responsibility away from the marginalised speaker, towards the privileged listener and raciolinguistic ideologies. The works of Mowahib’s initiative demonstrates the ways educators should critically interrogate with their own teaching methods. Her methods sought to denaturalise the colonial histories and social structures which continue to shape what is deemed as legitimate and normative forms of language use. Through shifting the attention away from students stigmatised language and considering the broader political climate and oppressive language ideologies which operate, intervention which aims to eradicate the language practices which deviate from an idealised whiteness are problematised. It is thus crucial to draw connections between institutional racism and language stigmatisation to aid future planning of language programmes. Although this study is small-scale and cannot be considered representative, Cushing’s works can be deemed useful commentary on the importance of considering not only linguistic, but politico economic solutions. The stance which blames the individual should be eradicated, instead, language policy should be produced in relation to broader frameworks.

## 6: Discussion and Conclusion

## How does socio-economic status affect children's language learning?

When reflecting on this study, and the extent to which SES affects children's language acquisition, there is a clear linguistic deficit in the working class in comparison to their higher-class equivalents. Through considering the history of education and government think-tank reports, the prevalence and longevity of the issue is demonstrated. This creates a contextual framework to consider the rest of the study. Making significant contributions to the sociolinguistic field was Bernstein, using his theory of linguistic codes to explain social class disparities found in language use. Although Bernstein has been criticised for failing to recognise the influence of environmental barriers, and placing more emphasis on levels of knowledge, his research provides useful foundational principles for further investigation. The notion of environmental barriers relates to the socialisation process, which go onto affect educational attainment, and job opportunities; all of which interlink with both social and economic problems. Although it is important not to generalise socialisation disparities between different socio-economic groups, evidence suggests that significant differences exist, proving detrimental to lower class children from the onset.

Whilst it is imperative to consider class as an influential social category in children's language disparities, through considering the case studies discussed, it has been proven that this cannot be examined in isolation. Instead, numerous, intersecting variables need to be considered. As discussed, there is a clear racial and ethnic hierarchy in language level and children's education attainment. As social identities are complex and multifaceted, operating on multiple levels, oppression cannot be reduced to one part of a person's identity. An intersectional approach ensures movements for bettering society are inclusive, and no one movement combats social inequities at the expense of another. It is important this idea of intersectionality is engaged with, not just within this study, but for further research. An intersectional approach should be present within all future social research, placing emphasis on the interrelating elements to social identity. Although this study focuses on class and race, other social categories, such as gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability should also be accounted for.

With the notion of intersectionality foregrounded, to best tackle the effect of socio-linguistic status on children's language acquisition, and language level, it can be deemed valid to suggest that a team-based approach would be most adequate. Through combining the research of different fields such as sociolinguistics, sociology, economics, and politics, a broader, and more detailed insight could be obtained. Having reflected on the research within this study, the research question is complex and multi-dimensional, necessitating exploration and knowledge from numerous disciplines. Considering the methodology of the studies discussed, the small-scale and qualitative nature limits both the representativeness, and validity of the results obtained. Future research should place more emphasis on combining qualitative and quantitative data, alongside obtaining broader samples. As issues of language deprivation have not only persisted but worsened following the recent pandemic, more work is necessary to bridge the gap between socio-economic groups. With language and communication providing the foundation for children's development, without adequately addressing the problem, language deficit will continue to contribute to class disparities in educational attainment, developing then to affect employability and future capital. An intersectional, broader approach, incorporating works from a multitude of disciplines is necessary to end the cycle of language and communication deprivation.

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