

Linguistic justice in schools: deficit thinking and anti-deficit resistance

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The slow policing of language

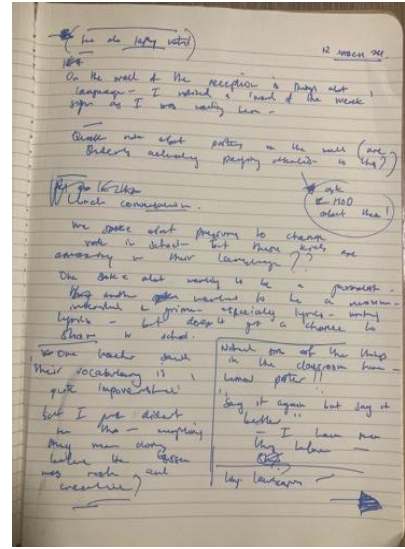
Between 2022-2024 I conducted fieldwork in a school in south Manchester, in one of the most economically deprived areas of the UK. I regularly spoke to a Black Caribbean boy, Benjamin, who was in his twelfth and final year of compulsory education. He was apathetic about school, expressing little interest about his upcoming examinations.

His teachers described his language in terms of what he allegedly lacked - as 'often unsuitable for school', as 'struggling with standard English'; as having 'gaps in his vocabulary', as 'lacking in academic language'. Yet my own conversations with Benjamin suggested something different about his linguistic abilities.

Outside of school, Benjamin's his linguistic dexterity was central to his identity. He had recently completed a TV script about the intergenerational lives of four Black families. This made heavy use of Black vernacular, and he meticulously researched shifting linguistic styles to represent decades of life in Britain.

Using YouTube tutorials, he was teaching himself Jamaican Creole in his efforts to forge linguistic connections with his ancestors and reclaim a core aspect of his heritage.

He had remarkable linguistic skills, but these went unrecognised in the formal structures of school.

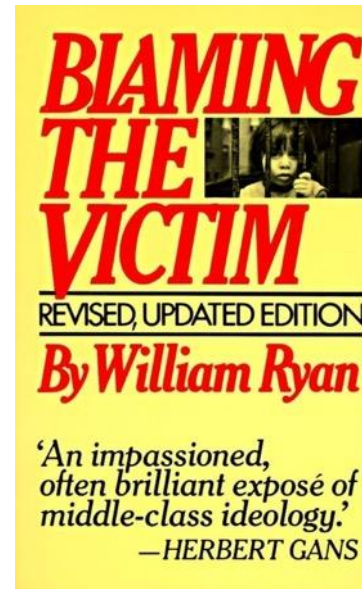
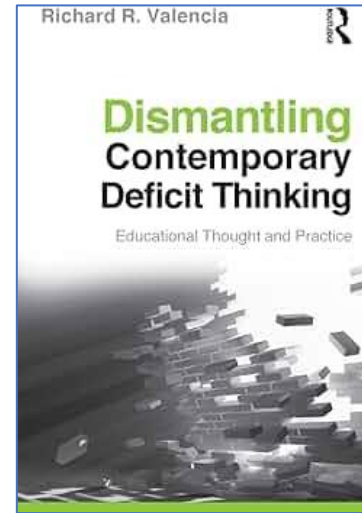


Fieldwork notes,
2024

This vignette represents the core argument in this talk: that schools are places built on linguistic injustice and the stigmatisation of marginalised children – but we can imagine and design linguistically just schools which reject dominant language ideologies.

Deficit thinking and anti-deficit resistance

- A **victim-blaming narrative** which frames working-class and racially marginalised communities as deficient and in need of remediation – especially in how they use language (Valencia 2010).
- Assumes that the root of social injustices lie in the **alleged linguistic deficiencies** of marginalised communities, rather than the structural barriers confronting them after generations of oppression.
- Is nothing new, but has **colonial roots**, in how European colonisers perceived and represented the language of Indigenous populations as deficient and symptomatic of their sub-humanness.
- Often appears under **benevolent guises**, where marginalised communities are told that the modification of their language is in their own interest and affords them a route of their oppression.
- Has always been met with **resistance** – critical sociolinguistic scholarship must not simply reproduce *damage-based* narratives about marginalized communities (Tuck 2009), but highlight their linguistic strengths and dexterity.
- Anti-deficit resistance is fundamental to **linguistic justice** efforts.



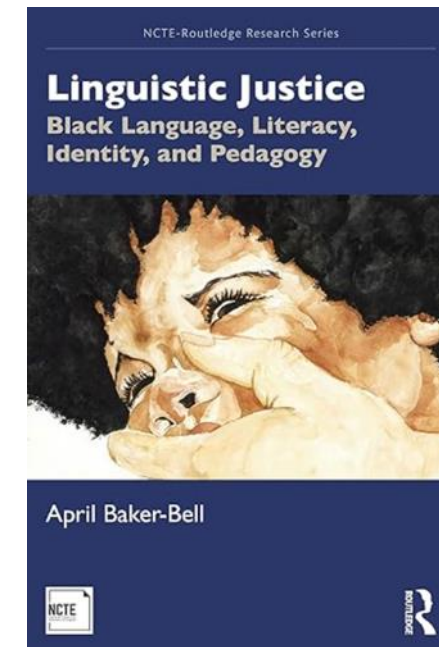
Linguistic in/justice

- Deficit thinking about language is a central force in the production and maintenance of **linguistic injustice**:

A **structural form of injustice** in which linguistic diversity is perceived as a threat, in which linguistic hierarchies are upheld, and in which the language practices of marginalised communities are devalued in the same ways that their lives are devalued in society more broadly (Song 2023).
- In schools, linguistic injustice materialises through explicit forms of language policing and verbal corrections, but that is not the default mode – it is **hard-wired** into the design of curricula, pedagogies, and policies which are built on dominant language ideologies and what constitutes il/legitimate language.

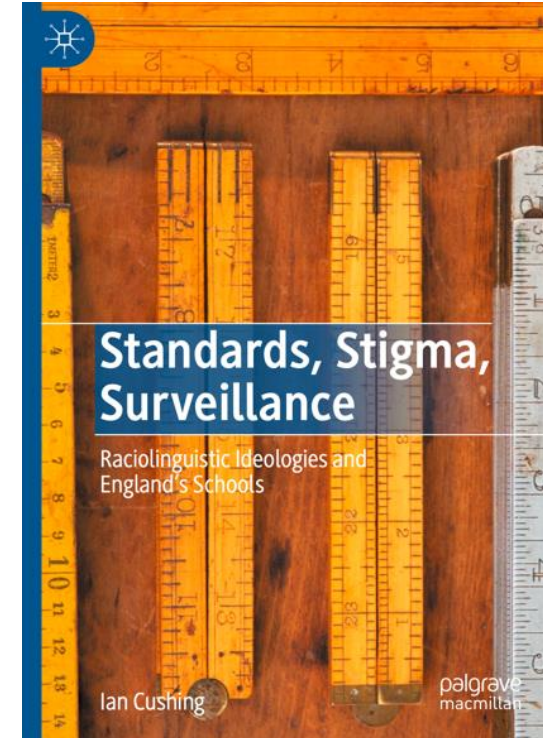
- Linguistic justice** is concerned with...

...building critical knowledge about language to challenge deficit thinking, make connections between linguistic stigmatisation and broader patterns of discrimination, and contribute to broader social justice efforts by pushing for the transformative change of unjust systems (Baker-Bell 2020; Cushing 2024).



England's schools and linguistic injustice

- Schools are designed to 'slot people into categories' (Piller 2017), and how 'a government maintains quality control on its people' (Scott 2021).
- They are spaces of **sonic surveillance** (Cushing 2022; Cushing & Snell 2023), where language is monitored, contained, and managed along with bodies, clothing, and behaviour more broadly.
- England's schools are characterised by high levels of de-professionalisation, performativity, authoritarianism, and cultures of fear (Reay 2017).
- In recent years, England's schools have seen a return to strict discipline policies, a curricula built on nationalistic narratives of idealised Britishness, and **a resurgence of deficit ideologies about language** which frame the language practices of marginalised children as unsuitable for school.
- **Language is planned and inequality is planned** (Tomlinson 2005; Shohamy 2006).
- For example...



Dominant discourses of linguistic deficit in England

Teacher must ... take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy **and the correct use of standard English.**

DfE (2011)



Department
for Education

These are the less fortunate children ... They may have been babysat by a television or **immersed in low language-ability backgrounds.** [...].

Bennett (2020)



You are the only second chance for some children to have a rich language experience. **If these children are not getting it at school, they are not getting it.**

Mercer (2021)



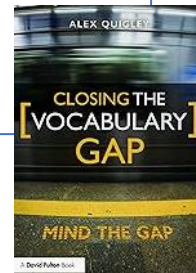
The **more able** pupils are mainly speaking Standard English in school, with sound pronunciation and good sense.

Ofsted (2019)



Consider that fact for a moment: these **'word poor'** children are left **unable to describe their world.**

Quigley (2018)



We have **high expectations of students using accurate Standard English** in and out of lessons. We expect students to **'Say it like a Scholar'.**

Manchester high school (2024)



...and into classrooms...

5. Spoken Literacy

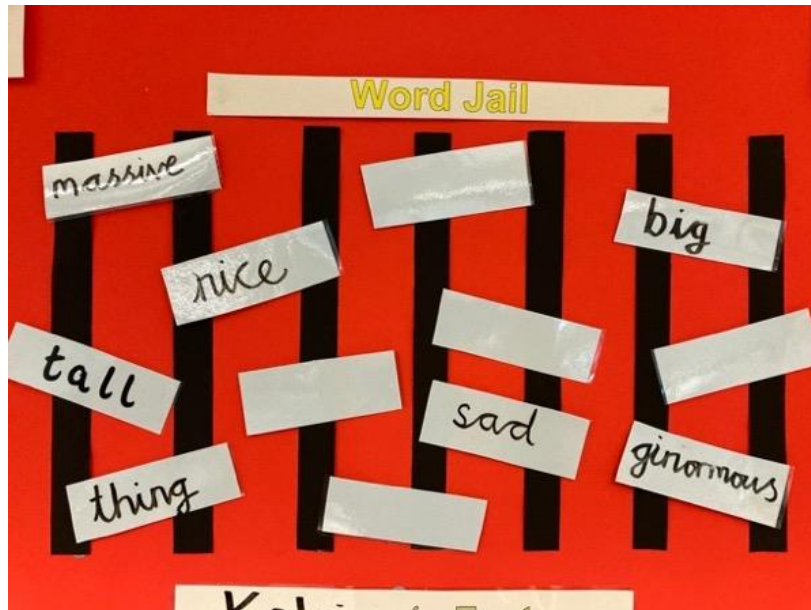
When you are engaging in classroom discussion you should always **SHAPE** your ideas:

- **S**peak in Standard English
- **H**ave your idea ready
- **A**rticulate
- **P**roject
- **E**ye contact

Harris Academy
Upper Norwood
Maths and Enterprise

Banned Words:

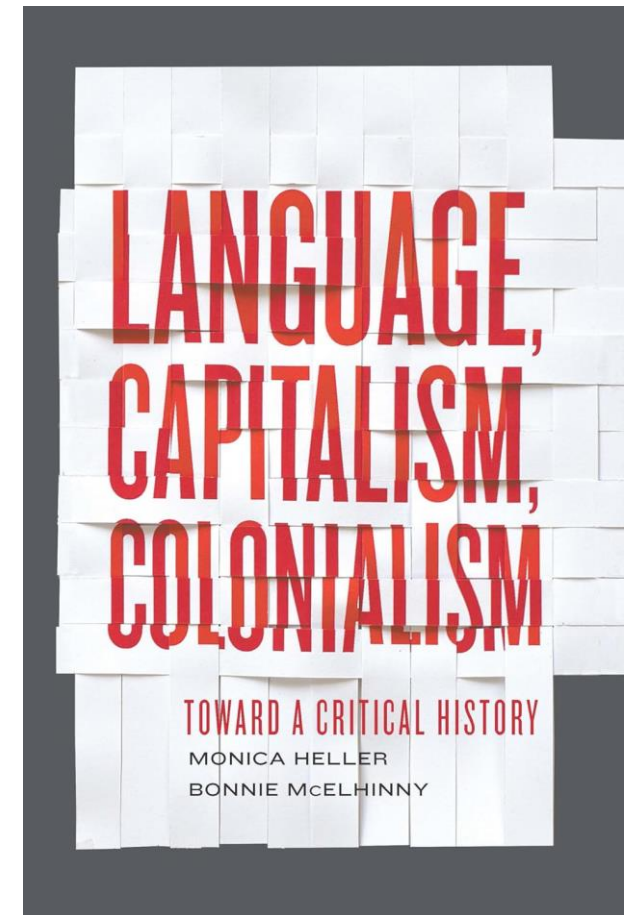
COZ AINT
LIKE BARE
EXTRA INNIT
YOU WOZ and WE WOZ
Beginning sentences with **BASICALLY**
Ending sentences with **YEAH**



The construction of the ideal of the whole, bounded, fixed language [...] creates deviation, which then has to be controlled.

One of the things that **schools do is try to socialize speakers out of such practices and into standardized ones**, or at least into the idea that variability is problematic even if behaviours remain unchanged.

Heller & McElhinny (2017: 105)

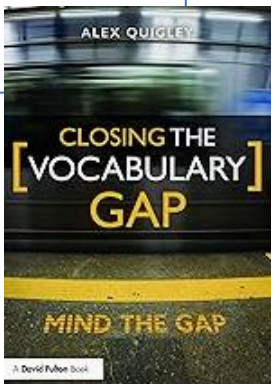


Flawed theories of social justice

- Deficit thinking about language often gets deployed under benevolent guises, relying on a theory of change which sees the solution to social injustice as about people modifying their language.
- Yet this interprets structural inequality as a ‘linguistic problem requiring linguistic solutions, rather than as a sociopolitical problem requiring sociopolitical solutions’ (Rosa 2016: 165).
- Resisting deficit thinking requires radical theories of change which are focused on the transformation of inherently unjust systems rather than the modification of marginalised individuals.

There are **thousands of small solutions** to the damaging inequalities that we observe in our society and in our classrooms, and **they can be found in the English dictionary.**

Quigley (2018: 2)



Rather than being seen as a means of perpetuating class hierarchies, Standard English is now widely regarded as an instrument of social justice.

Sean Harford, Ofsted, 2020



Theories of change for linguistic justice



Assimilation

Accommodation

Evolution

Transformation

Abolition

Changing individuals' language practices to fit in with dominant patterns and ways of communicating

Still prioritising dominant patterns but building in critical language awareness about power

Focused on dismantling and redesigning entire systems, and the undoing of dominant language ideologies

Undoing dominant language ideologies

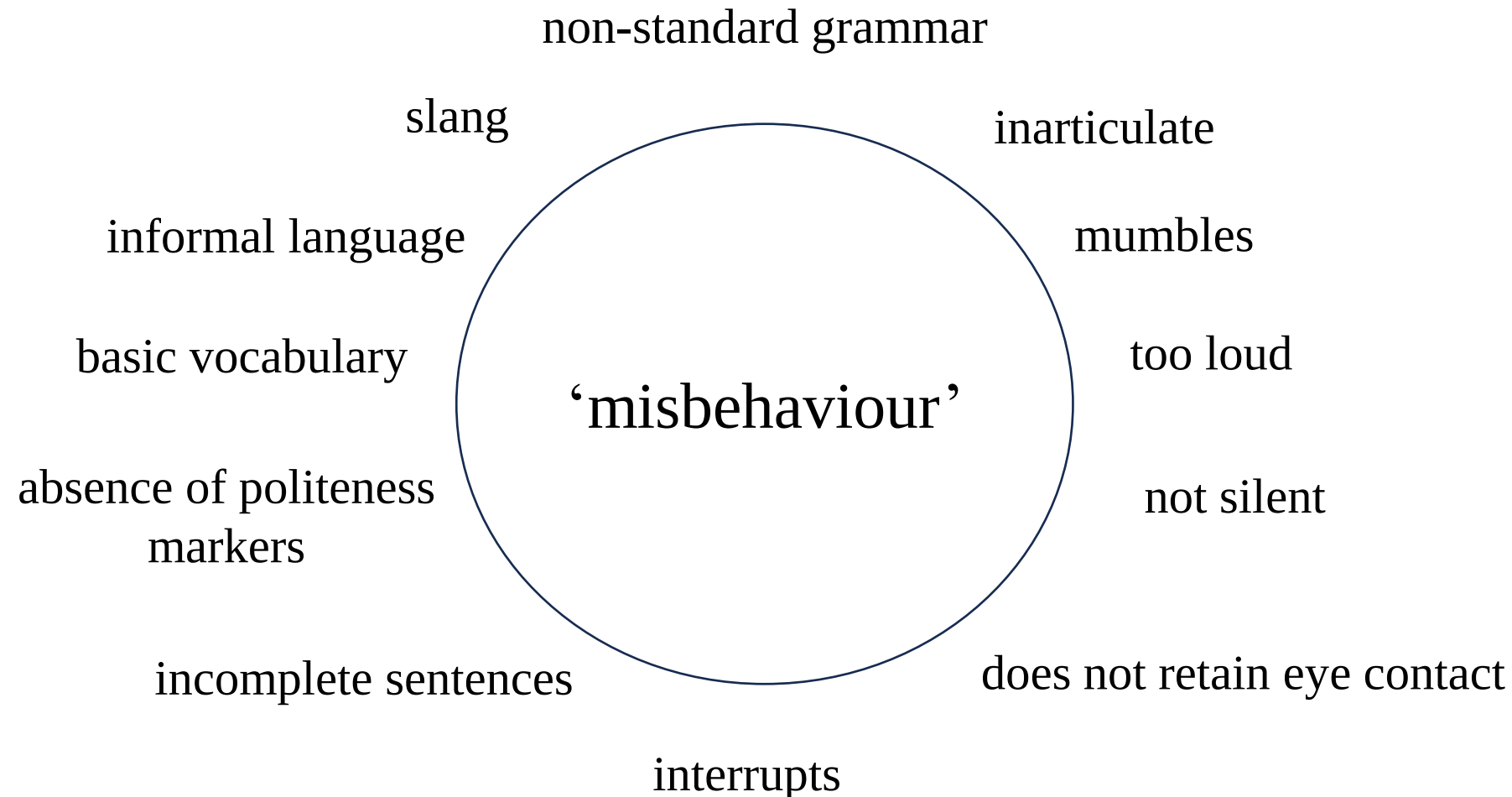
- At the core of deficit thinking and linguistic injustice are **language ideologies** - deeply held beliefs about language which circulate in society and schools (e.g. Woolard 2020)
- Language ideologies rely on linguistic categories which are not empirically observable - they are **products of perception rather than linguistic reality**, producing imagined signs of pedagogical and intellectual deficiency.
- For example, Cushing (2023) shows how racially marginalised teachers are framed through deficit perspectives for **their alleged inability to produce standard spoken English**, whilst white teachers' local vernaculars were seen as signs of coolness and relatability.
- **Raciolinguistic ideologies** (Rosa & Flores 2017) frame racialized communities as perpetually deficient regardless of what they do with their language – such as Benjamin, whose linguistic abilities were framed as deficient even though they actually surpassed those of his white peers.
- Language ideologies are **rarely, if ever, just about language**: they are co-constructed with other unrelated traits, such as intellectual ability and behaviour...

Across 560 school discipline policies... a constellation of linguistic features which are empirically distant but ideologically connected to signs of 'misbehaviour'.

Cushing (2025)

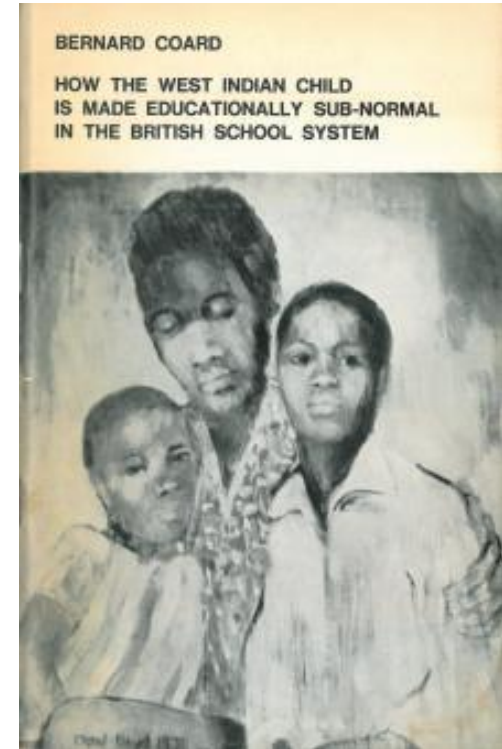
The sound of misbehaviour: deficit thinking and language policing in school discipline policies

Ian Cushing 



Long histories of deficit thinking – and resistance

- Deficit thinking about language has its **its roots in European colonialism** and the framing of Indigenous populations as sub-human who exhibited ‘simple’ and ‘animal-like’ forms of communication (e.g. Veronelli 2015).
- In the 1960s, Black children in Britain’s schools were systematically perceived as linguistically inferior and placed into ‘**Schools for the Educationally Subnormal**’ (Coard 1971).
- Their **alleged inability** to use standard English was perceived as a sign of their alleged intellectual capacities more broadly.
- But Black communities pushed back, engaging in **abolitionist efforts** which designed Black-led schools outside the structures of mainstream schools.
- They sought to dismantle the deficit thinking about language and **re-frame their children as linguistically dexterous**.



Dismantling deficit thinking

- Whilst deficit thinking is pervasive, it has always been met with resistance.
- Tuck (2009) urges us not to focus on *damage centred* work, but on *desire-based* work which highlights marginalised peoples' creativity, dexterity, and long histories of pushback against dominant ideologies.
- How might linguists contribute to efforts to dismantle deficit thinking in schools? Where are the 'cracks in the system'?

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Teachers Challenging Language Discrimination in England's Schools: A Typology of Resistance

Ian Cushing ^a and Dan Clayton^b

We see language discrimination not simply as about individual attitudes which manifest in individual, malicious acts of prejudice, but as a structural phenomenon underpinned by language ideologies which hierarchically organise language varieties and the communities associated with them.

Cushing & Clayton (2024)



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Negotiating sociolinguistic justice: turning spaces of inequality into spaces of conscientization

Luisa Martín Rojo , Joan Pujolar  and Estibaliz Amorrortu 

From the journal [International Journal of the Sociology of Language](#)

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2022-0114>

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“we advocate for research that **not only describes language-based inequalities but actively intervenes to address them** by engaging communities in participatory processes ... sociolinguistic research should not only analyse social injustices related to the management of languages in communities, but also actively address them by incorporating some form of activism.”

Martín Rojo et al (2025)

Linguist-teacher collaborations for linguistic justice

Critical language awareness collective

- A group of around ~50 teachers who meet regularly to discuss critical issues around language, power, and education
- Motivated by a collective desire to not just document deficit thinking about language, but dismantle it
- A co-produced manifesto and pedagogical principles for the creation of linguistically just schools

Summer school on linguistic justice

- An annual three-day summer school for teachers, held in Manchester with a core theme of linguistic in/justice
- Teachers reflect on how to incorporate theoretical notions into their practice, and adapt aspects of their teaching accordingly
- A mixture of theoretical and practical aspects – or *praxis* (Freire 1972)

In-depth case studies of teachers' work and classroom practice

A co-designed blueprint and framework for linguistically just schools



Speculative visions for linguistic justice

- Speculative methodologies offer ways of envisioning and designing intergenerationally just futures – to question the present, to imagine what is not yet, to redesign new worlds (Becker & Gutiérrez 2022; Garcia & Mirra 2023).
- Push us to question how we can bring imagined worlds into being, and how we can move from speculation to implementation.
- Our collective co-produced two core documents (a **manifesto** and a set of **pedagogical principles**) which were integral to the work we did in schools, and both of which were used to check in with ourselves as the project unfolded.
- Allowed us ‘something to work towards in struggles for social justice’ (Facer 2018).



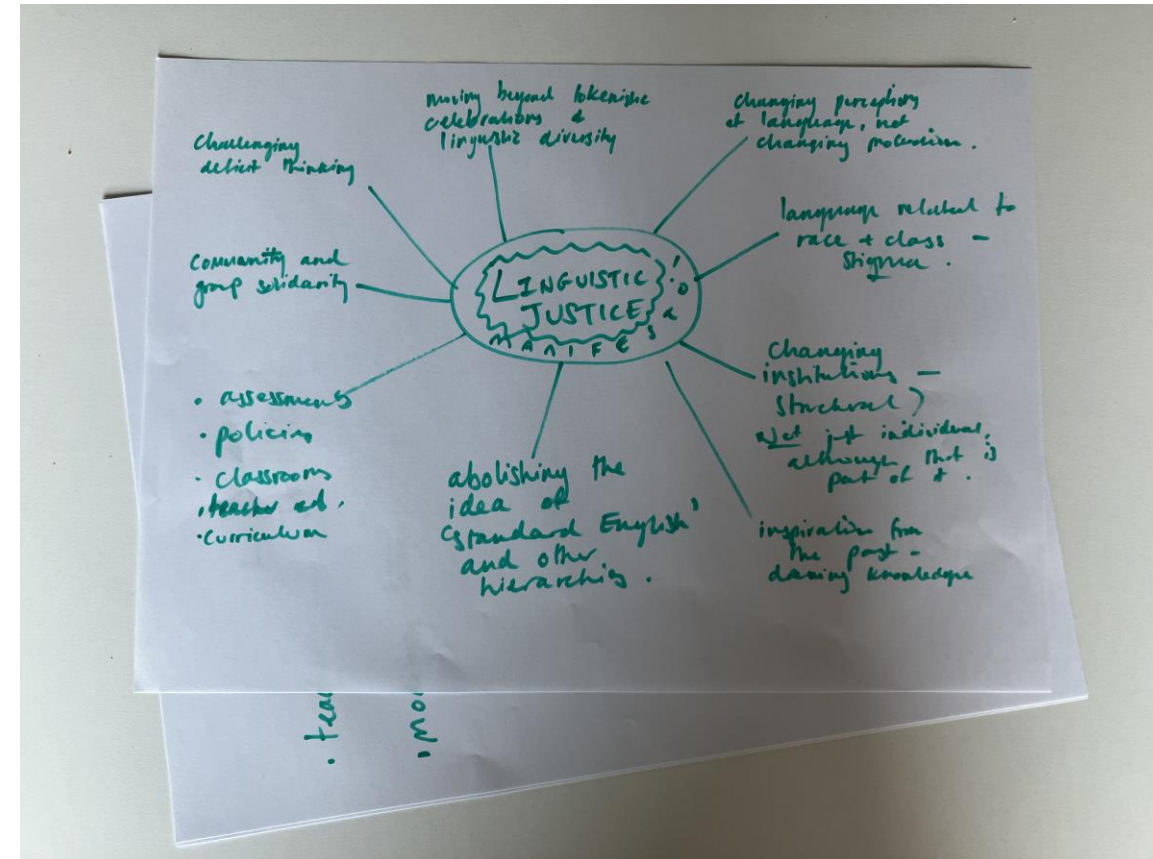
Manifesto for linguistic justice

Linguistic injustice is not just about individual attitudes, but is a structural and long-standing phenomenon.

It materialises in different ways, such as in curricula and assessments which prioritise dominant language varieties, or when non-dominant language varieties are framed as inferior.

Challenging deficit thinking and building futures of linguistic justice is not just about changing individual minds to be more accepting of linguistic variation, but is about reimagining new structures and dismantling dominant language ideologies.

We refuse to change the way people speak, and demand that people change the way they listen.



Building on the past

- Teachers took inspiration from previous linguistic justice efforts, locating their contemporary work within a long history of activism.
- We visited archives such as the George Padmore Institute, exploring materials where teachers were engaged in anti-deficit resistance.
- Of particular power were materials from Black supplementary schools, where children had been given opportunities to engage critically with the politics of language and race...
- ...and where teachers had engaged in the design of new structures of education outside of the constraints of mainstream schooling.

I took energy from knowing that people had been doing language and justice work for a long time... it reminded me that what we are doing is part of that and there is a kind of legacy that we are building on.

Mowahib



Activist identities

- Teachers expressed a strong importance to identifying as critical educators, which was fundamental to their anti-deficit efforts and activist dispositions (Combs & Penfield 2012; Gandolfi & Mills 2023).
- This was often shaped by their own intersectional identity and lived experience of linguistic stigma, such as Lucie, who had experienced anti-Black linguistic racism (Baker-Bell 2020).

I've definitely taken those memories of having my language judged into the classroom and that absolutely influences the work that I do with children, the children that I teach in my school, they speak in ways, that are quite traditionally looked down on ... so much of my teaching is focused on getting them to see the beauty in their own language, getting them to recognise that their language is just as valid as how white kids from richer neighborhoods speak, right?

Lucie

Language activism is... energetic action focused on language use in order to create, influence and change existing language policies ... language activists are individuals or groups who actively defend their right to freely use their languages in multiple domains. Language activism may develop as a reaction to larger, state-imposed efforts to suppress or discourage the use of non-dominant languages.

Combs & Penfield (2012)

Critical language awareness

- A **critical language awareness perspective** contends that teachers need to examine who the beneficiaries of language policies and practices are, and how these have the capacity to maintain hierarchies of power.
- Teachers aligned their pedagogies with critical language awareness as part of broader efforts to dismantle dominant language ideologies.
- Clare designed a unit on linguistic prejudice for 11-year olds which tackled the construction of dominant linguistic categories, ideologies, and hierarchies.

We insist on critical questions like who gets to decide what is correct or incorrect, or standard or non-standard, you know? And those questions would always be so productive because it's just getting students to think about how those categories are, well, socially constructed categories designed by people with the most power.

Clare



Artwork by Wendy Wong

But...

- Educating teachers and children to adopt a critical disposition on language and linguistic variation is important, but this **will never by itself dismantle broader systems of intersectional oppression**.
- Critical language awareness **rejects that the goal of education** is to simply add standard language practices into the existing repertoires of marginalised children and teach them to use these when 'appropriate' (Flores & Chaparro 2018).
- Marginalised communities face ascribed deficiency and stigmatisation **regardless of whether their language appears to correspond to standardised norms**.
- We must focus our efforts on developing new goals which allow marginalised children to bring their whole linguistic identities into school, whilst also **pushing for the transformation of inherently unjust systems and the dismantling of language ideologies**.
- Linguistic justice efforts must take place in dialogue and partnership with other struggles for justice – because there is **no linguistic justice without social justice more broadly** (Charity Hudley & Mallinson 2018).

Put simply...

Language stigma, marginalisation, and privilege emerge from broader, social structures of stigma, marginalisation, and privilege. We are not suggesting that a focus on language is unimportant, but simply that focusing on language alone is:

insufficient for addressing the root causes of the marginalisation of language-minoritised communities' given that "minoritised languages will always be devalued in school so long as the speakers of these languages are devalued members of society (Flores & Chaparro 2018: 381).

Put another way, anti-language discrimination efforts must always take place in dialogue with broader, anti-stigma campaigning and cross movement organising.

Cushing & Clayton (2024: 14)

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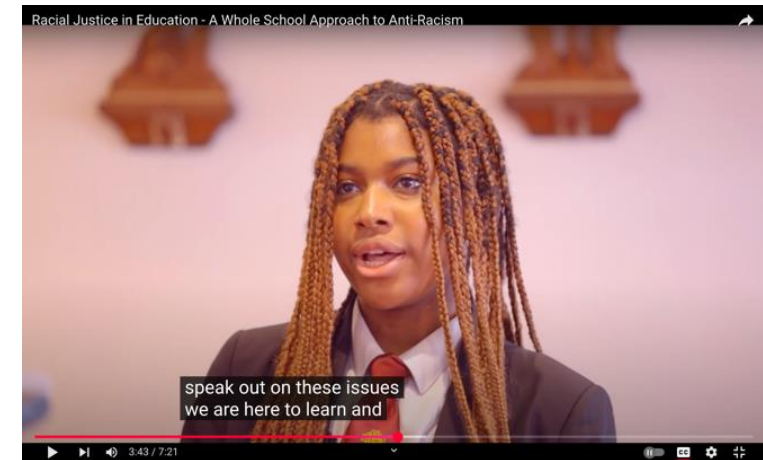
Ian Cushing ^a and Dan Clayton^b

Cross movement solidarity and institutional efforts

- Teachers saw their efforts as part of cross-movement solidarity efforts, making connections between aspects of linguistic injustice and, for example, racial justice and disability justice campaigns that were ongoing in unions and schools:

Our school has a big campaign around anti-racism at the moment so the language work we've been doing has been part of that ... that has helped people to see that language discrimination is often linked to race and anti-racism .. about multiple forms of discrimination. **(Clare)**

- The most efficient linguistic justice efforts took place at an institutional level, with support from management, and forged connections with other forms of injustice
- Teachers designed creative methods for getting children to examine and reject dominant language ideologies...



Using young adult fiction to interrogate raciolinguistic ideologies in schools

Ian Cushing ✉ Anthony Carter

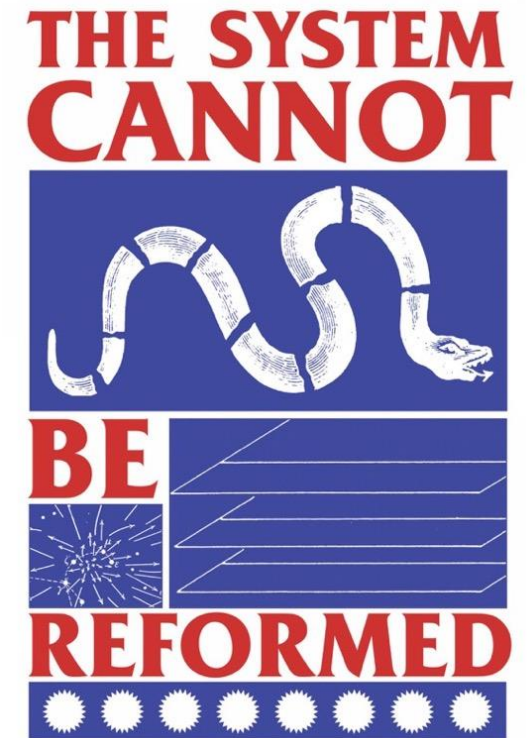
- In Cushing & Carter (2022), we worked with young readers to explore the use of fictional texts to interrogate raciolinguistic ideologies in schools and push for systemic change.



- Students read and responded to *Front Desk*, a 2018 novel by the Chinese writer Kelly Yang, which centres around a young immigrant girl who is the target of systemic language discrimination and anti-Asian racism.
- We showed how literary texts can serve as an entry point into examining and tackling language discrimination, including when experienced by participants.
- We created a *linguistic justice statement* which we took to school management and which pushed for the creation of new curricula, new policies, and new assessments which actively tackled deficit thinking about language across the entire school.

Abolition and transformative change

- Linguistic injustice does not materialise through individual sets of beliefs, biases, and prejudices – and so attempts to educate individual minds **will always leave structural barriers and unjust systems unaddressed and intact** (Rosa & Flores 2023).
- Unjust systems are not ‘broken’ – they are working exactly as they are designed, and **no amount of tweaking will ‘fix’ them**.
- Abolitionist theories of change in applied linguistics are a long-term, creative, hopeful project which focuses on the dismantling of oppressive ideologies and **the design of new forms of schooling from the ground up** (Cushing 2024; Winn 2018).
- Abolitionist organisations in England such as *No More Exclusions* and *Class 13* are showing us that this work is possible, **working closely with teachers to re-design schools** to be actively anti-deficit in their approach – including in language pedagogies, policies, and assessments.



Credit: Black Lodge Press



Teachers alone cannot dismantle structural inequalities, but – like many people before them – they do have a role to play in exposing how language is part of systemic injustices in their schools.

These efforts must go beyond simply validating and affirming stigmatised language practices but put issues of linguistic in/justice into dialogue with broader social justice efforts.

Language discrimination is a structural phenomenon—and the same perspective should be adopted for anti-language discrimination efforts.

If we take language discrimination as a design feature of schools, **then we can take it as something that can be designed out.**

Cushing & Clayton (2024: 15)

Designing out deficit thinking about language

- **Abolitionist methodologies** which focus not simply on changing individual minds to be more receptive about linguistic variation, but on radically dismantling and redesign new systems.
- **Academic-teacher collaborations** which enable grassroots activism and cross-movement solidarity across different social justice efforts.
- **Unconventional thinking about language** which unplans and rejects dominant language ideologies and dichotomies.
- Doing **slow linguistics** (Eckert & Moore 2025) to attend to the intricate, dexterous language practices of marginalised children and how schools often fail to recognise these.
- Building on the **past** and speculating about the **future** in order to critique the **present**.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transformative justice as a method in applied linguistics

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PENGUIN / MODERN : 23

AUDRE
LORDE

THE MASTER'S
TOOLS
WILL NEVER
DISMANTLE
THE MASTER'S
HOUSE



Audre Lorde (1984) told us clearly that the master's tools will never truly serve the oppressed. They were not designed to do that.

We must recognize that adherence to linguistic standards will not protect marginalised communities, and that theories of change which ask them to modify their language are deeply flawed.

Thank you for listening

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