Dialect, power and politics: standard English and adolescent identities

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Abstract

This paper examines the official requirement for the promotion of standard English using Bourdieu’s concepts of the production and reproduction of legitimate language. It explores the political drive behind the demand for this standard dialect in England and, through a survey on the views of fifty-two 14 and 15 year olds, analyses the impact that this is having on adolescent identities in an inner-city London school. The students perceive non-standard English as a vehicle through which they can express their ‘true’ selves and construct a collective teenage identity. They use language to construct a division between themselves as teenagers and the adult ‘others’. Although the students do not necessarily want to use non-standard English in the classroom, or with their teachers, educators need to consider how to afford pupils access to the ‘official language’, which grants privilege and power, without devaluing the identities which they may associate with other dialect forms. The final part of the paper explores the value of Cummin’s concept of ‘transformative pedagogy’ (2002) in relation to the study of dialect with adolescents.

Introduction

The Teaching Standards in England stipulate that educators must take responsibility for “promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English” (DfE, 2013a, p. 11). The matter of the value of non-standard dialects has become pertinent again as the recent coalition government has announced national curriculum reforms that promise grammar tests for primary school pupils and a “more rigorous” English curriculum (DfE, 2013b). This research strives, through the lens of Bourdieu’s (1991) theory on language, to examine the political motivations behind this standardisation of English and to address Maybin’s (2013a) concern about “how language varieties become enregistered and ascribed different social and cultural values” (p. 549). Through an examination of teenagers’ responses to these societal forces, I hope to interrogate the value placed on standard and non-standard language forms in the contemporary classroom to determine the ways in which the adolescents’ identities are shaped by language. Finally, pupils may benefit from an understanding of the complex power relations at work behind their language choices. In response to this, I explore proposals on ways in which transformative pedagogy (Cummins, 2000) could be employed within a high school setting to positively affirm learners’ identities.

Bourdieu, language and power

Language and social class are intricately linked in the UK’s socio-economic structure. The Teaching Standards in England stipulate that teachers must “promote the use of standard English” (DfE, 2013a, p. 4) to their pupils, thus endorsing this dialect as the authoritative language variety or as Bourdieu described ‘the official language’ (Bourdieu, 1991). The standardisation of this dialect is a class issue that can be traced back to the 18th century. At this time, the language variety that characterised upper-class speakers was chosen as the standard (Crystal, 2004), and in classifying this mode of communication as the ‘official’ or ‘legitimate’ language, power was re-conferring onto the privileged.

As the Teaching Standards (DfE, 2013a) demonstrate, the official language continues to exercise its discriminatory power within educational institutions. Bourdieu (1991) explains the link between educational success, social class and the ability to reproduce the official language:

“[T]he educational market is strictly dominated by the linguistic products of the dominant class and tends to sanction the pre-existing differences in capital. The combined effect of low cultural capital and the associated low propensity to increase it through educational investment condemns the least favoured classes to the negative sanctions of the scholastic market, i.e. exclusion or early self-exclusion induced by lack of success.” (p. 62).

To enter the ‘scholastic market’ in the United Kingdom, an educator requires a certain level of qualification that ensures that they have been inculcated with the ‘legitimate language’. By the time the teacher reaches the classroom, their teacher training may have taught them a variety of pedagogical approaches to ‘correct’ the language and grammar of their charges. Whether intentional or not, the pedagogical practices of teachers and the curriculum may serve not only to perpetuate the power of those who guard, sanction and thus legitimise language but also to disempower those who have reduced access to this language. If
Bourdieu (1991) is to be believed, education contributes to the cycles of poverty and social disenfranchisement, which it is purported to break.

In prescribing standard English as the variety which is appropriate to an educational setting, the power of the dialect is simultaneously produced and perpetuated. Bourdieu considers that the official language

“[is] known and recognised (more or less completely) through the whole jurisdiction of a certain political authority, it in turn helps to reinforce the authority which is the source of its dominance” (1991, p. 45).

In relation to an educational institution, in complying with the demand for the use of standard English, the pupils are re-conferring the teachers’ power, and in promoting the use of the ‘official language’, the teachers legitimise that variety as official. The state’s power and authority are continually reaffirmed through the acceptance and promotion of its authoritative dialect, and we observe again the cyclical operations of the institution whereby the privileged few and the unprivileged are continually re-empowered and disempowered, respectively.

It is, however, important to consider that the binary division between standard English speakers and non-standard English speakers is problematic. Snell (2013) explains that “non-standard dialects of English do not have a discreet system of grammar that is isolated from other varieties” (p. 111). She argues that speakers have a linguistic ‘repertoire’, which may include the features of standard and non-standard dialects. Her study of Teeside children demonstrates that as speakers of a language, we make complex context-dependent choices about which features of our repertoire to employ in verbal interactions. Therefore, rather than considering that educational institutions may disadvantage ‘non-standard speakers’, Snell (2013) helps us realise that it is those who prefer to use non-standard English or who have a limited knowledge of the standardised dialect who may be disadvantaged.

Constructing identity

Identities can be perceived as socially negotiated constructs. Donald E. Hall (2004) states that “an individual’s self-consciousness never exists in isolation... it exists in relation to an ‘other’ or ‘others’ who validate its existence” (p. 51). Through this perspective, Benwell and Stokoe (2006) explain that identity can be understood as a process that is formed through “a process of difference” (p. 25). Crucially, it is also important to understand that “identities are never unified” and that they “emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are the product of the marking of difference” (Hall, 2000, p. 17). Put simply, this suggests that identity can be understood as a process through which a group or individual establishes itself by perceiving the boundaries of otherness. This is not to suggest that the boundaries of identity are essentialised and fixed, rather that identities, in their fragmented multiplicity, can be perceived as processes of continual and ongoing negotiation and renegotiation, which are the products of interrelating power operations.

Before outlining the socio-economic context of the school where this study was conducted, I wish to acknowledge Benwell and Stokoe’s (2006) warning against taking collective identities (such as ‘adolescent’ or ‘working class’) to be “indisputable identity formations serving as social variables against which forms of social behaviour or linguistic usage could be measured” (p. 24). Such categories are not fixed or homogenous groups. Indeed, we should remember the multidimensional intersection of class, ethnicity, gender and age in the identity formation process (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 25). With this in mind, a tentative explanation of the focus school’s demographic may help contextualise the study and the types of collective identities that the students may wish to construct de facto.

Laundendale (a pseudonym for the school where this research was conducted) is located in what may be perceived as a working-class, inner-city area of London. The intake reflects the demographic of the borough. The majority of the students are from minority ethnic groups, the largest being of Black African heritage. Department for Education data indicate that a higher than average number of pupils are recipients of free school meals (47.3%) – a UK indicator suggesting economic deprivation. Despite the background of relative poverty, the school’s leavers achieve results that are consistently far above the national average and that place it in the top 20% of schools nationwide.

Within Laundendale’s borough and its neighbouring boroughs, there have been reports of schools ‘banning’ non-standard varieties of English. A local school, for example, has gained media attention for its decision to ban students “from using 10 informal phrases in school areas designated “formal language zones”, which includes all classrooms and corridors” (Fishwick, 2013). The ban provides a contemporary example of the attempt to hyper-standardise and hyper-control language. Such a ban accords with Bourdieu’s (1991) theory that one language (or in this case language variety) is always set to dominate over others. The ban constitutes an attempt to suppress language practices that may form a component of a collective working-class identity (Montgomery, 2008, p. 77).

The oppression of working-class identities through the derision of language has a history in the United Kingdom, whereby non-standard language practices have been associated with ‘bad’ morals. A myth arises
whereby bad language signifies bad people and this can be used to serve a political agenda that requires ‘reform’ of the old ways (Myhill et al., 2013). The National Curriculum has been subject to vast reforms under the UK’s recent coalition government, and English teaching and literacy have been central to this public discussion. Linguist Deborah Cameron (2012) (with reference to the United Kingdom in the 1980s) believes that a deep-seated conduit metaphor underpins the demand for improvement in school children’s English. She sees it as “the metaphorical expression of persistent conservative fears that we are losing the values that underpin civilisation and sliding into chaos” (2012, p. 97).

In Laudendale school, even though there is no whole school policy on the use of standard English, ‘correction’ of the non-standard forms can be heard in classrooms and seen in exercise books across the school. As Cox (1991) rightly notes, “if pupils do not have access to standard English then many opportunities are closed to them” (p. 481). Although it may be necessary to accept the need for some sort of standard, either to open opportunities to pupils or to provide a benchmark against which their attainment can be measured, the way in which the acts of ‘correction’ impact on pupils’ sense of identity remains pertinent, particularly against the current political backdrop.

Snell (2013) observed teachers correcting pupils’ non-standard regional grammar and the effect that this had on the pupils. Her study recorded instances of not only teachers correcting pupils but also of children deriding each other’s language during whole class discussions. The speech community she observed was self-moderating in a way that ‘works against’ non-standard varieties (p. 122). Ultimately, “if low value is accorded to working-class speech some pupils may become […] reluctant to contribute to whole class discussion” (p. 122). Snell’s (2013) study offers an insight into the manner in which pupils from the “least favoured classes” are subject to “exclusion or early self-exclusion” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 62) on account of their unwillingness or inability to emulate the prestigious language practices required by the curriculum.

Elements of a working-class identity appear to be under institutional attack from the contemporary power structures in operation in the United Kingdom. Indeed, Maybin (2013a) recognises that “deficit views of English are regaining currency in British educational policy”. This is exemplified in her study (Maybin, 2013b) in which she details the ways in which primary school-age girls employ complex reading strategies to decode the UK soap opera EastEnders (which is about working-class families in an imaginary district of East London). The pupils’ ‘reading skills’ are not formally identified as such, perhaps because the material they decipher (a soap opera) is what Althusser (1971) terms “working class knowledge”. Working-class students’ knowledge, skills and language are devalued as children’s abilities are only accepted if they assume a form acceptable to the implicitly middle class values of the system.

Unsurprisingly, such oppression and derision can result in rebellion and resentment towards school. Many of the children in studies by Mac Ruairc (2011a and 2011b) expressed strong anti-school sentiments, which in part derived from their anger at the school’s attempt to enforce a standardised language. Spencer et al. (2012) uncovered similar patterns in adolescent behaviour. The participants in their research rejected ‘posh talking’ as it was incompatible with their peer group identity. Dialect can thus be perceived as an active choice on the part of the speaker – one which is used to project or reject an identity.

Some pupils negotiate the language demands placed on them by constructing alternative identities that they can perform in different spheres of their lives. In Mac Ruairc’s study (2011a), the participants discussed having a ‘school mode’ that related to the hyper-polite way in which they communicated with teachers (p. 545). They perceived ‘school language’, however, to be an artefact whereby they were performing an identity that did not correspond to their seemingly essentialised perception of their ‘real’ self. As we head towards an analysis of the data, this concept of using dialect to construct or reject an identity is critical to understanding the results.

**Methodology**

The fifty-two 14- and 15-year-old pupils from Laudendale school were chosen to participate in this study because at the time, they were studying a ‘Spoken Language’ module for their General Certificate of Secondary Education course. As part of this module, they were required to “evaluate public attitudes towards spoken language” (AQA, 2012, p.40). As the students themselves were studying matters pertaining to dialect, the research could be conducted in classroom time as it complemented, rather than infringed upon, the required curriculum content. The data, once collated and presented in bar charts, were shared with all the participants; many of whom elected to use them in their General Certificate of Secondary Education assessments.

Unavoidably, there are difficulties in guaranteeing the ‘truthfulness’ of the questionnaire responses. Although numerous measures were taken to ensure the quality of the data, the small sample is vulnerable to the inherent problems of questionnaire reliability. Pupils, for example, may have approached the questionnaire with the motive of pleasing, or displeasing, their teachers. To reduce this threat, the class teachers distributing the questionnaires assured the students that anonymity would be preserved. Despite these reassurances, it
remains impossible to validate the reliability of every response.

An additional concern is that the pupils may not have understood the key terms upon which the completion of the questionnaire was contingent – ‘standard English’ and ‘non-standard English’. To ensure that all pupils could access the questionnaire, they were distributed two weeks into the ‘Spoken Language’ module. By this point, both class teachers assured me that they had covered the key terms and were confident in their classes’ understanding. Both teachers recapped the definitions of the terminology before distributing the questionnaires. The teachers were also available to help clarify anything that the students did not understand. However, it should be noted that the class teachers were asked not to ‘watch over’ the students filling in the questionnaires, as this could have skewed the pupils’ responses.

The questionnaire began with four questions that explored the participants’ use of non-standard and/or standard English. The questions asked respondents to identify if they spoke standard and/or non-standard English, and if so, to whom and where. These data allowed an insight into the value that the pupils place on each dialect, suggesting trends in relation to the contexts in which they prefer different language varieties.

Questions 5 and 6 asked pupils if they had seen teachers correcting the use of non-standard English in classrooms and if so, how. The questions may have seemed threatening to participants who could have feared “getting into trouble” or felt uncomfortable with the power reversal of reporting teacher behaviour. To reduce any perceived threat, the questionnaires were anonymous, and participants who had witnessed dialect correction were invited to select the method(s) that they had observed from a list. A list of suggestions was offered to students to help normalise the possibility that they had witnessed such behaviour.

The final question in this section of the questionnaire (question 7) was open ended:

“Some schools in London... have banned non-standard English from their classrooms and corridors. Do you think that this is a good idea or a bad idea? Explain your answer.”

This question was included to enable the respondents to express themselves in greater detail and to afford a richer insight into their attitudes and opinions (Burton et al., 2014, p.143). The reference to a local and current news story was intended to excite interest and prompt thoughtful responses.

The second, and final, section of the questionnaire was composed of a series of attitudinal statements to which pupils could respond using an ordinal scale. The attitudinal statements were designed to achieve insight into the worth that the adolescents afford to different dialects.

Before presenting the findings, it is worth noting that, whilst the questionnaire generated a broad overview of the students’ opinions and language uses, we should be aware that its ‘tick box’ nature may have encouraged respondents to perceive a divide between the contexts in which they speak standard and non-standard English. Snell’s (2013) work reminds us that speakers may employ different features of their repertoires within single conversations, or utterances. Future qualitative research in this field may allow more nuanced insights into adolescents’ understanding of language and identity.

Findings

Figures 1–6 and Table 1 display the results of the questionnaires. In the discussion that follows, I will discuss these results with reference to the students’ answers to the open-ended question (question 7) on banning non-standard English in school.

Repertoires

The vast majority (90%) of the pupils questioned claim that they use non-standard English. This is unsurprising given that the school is in what can be perceived as a predominantly working-class area. However, this is most notable alongside the observation that 90% of the pupils ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with the statement “I can switch between standard and non-standard English”. The pupils here demonstrate that standard dialect forms can “exist together with other forms in a speaker’s repertoire” (Snell, 2013, p. 114).

Interestingly, the pupils do not, on the whole, accept the degradation of non-standard forms. Only 21% agree or strongly agree that “people who speak non-standard English come across as not very intelligent”. However, 79% agree or strongly agree that “employers want people who can speak standard English”.

![Figure 1: Pupil responses to question 1](Image)
Initially, this may appear to be contradictory as the majority of the adolescents acknowledge the link between language and economic and/or professional success, but they do not consider non-standard dialects to be ‘lesser’. Accepting standard English as the legitimate language of employment perhaps indicates a partial absorption of conservative values. However, the standard form is not truly empowered because the students do not appear to have accepted a total devolution of other forms. For the speakers, the value of the dialect is determined by “the relationship that the speakers establish, consciously or unconsciously, between the linguistic product offered by a socially characterised speaker, and the other products offered simultaneously in a determined social space” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 38). What carries currency in the education or employment market may not carry currency in the playground.

Us vs them: dialect and collective identity

The pupils in this study, like the children in Mac Ruairc’s (2011b) study, perceive language as central to their sense of identity. Mac Ruairc (2011b, p. 545) records students discussing the ways in which they can operate in a ‘school mode’ – a mode of talking which is characterised by hyper-politeness. Likewise, the participants in this study consider that language can either be a performance or an expression of the ‘true’ self. One pupil wrote “Non-standard English is one of the ways teenagers can express themselves and who they are”. It is notable here that language and identity are firmly rooted in a conscious sense of being ‘teenage’ for this pupil. For her, dialect is a form of expression of her ‘real’ self. She may perceive non-standard English as a mode of expression for teenagers collectively and see her social group as bound together as a community via their speech. Language becomes one of the markers of difference that delineates the boundaries of this teenage state of being and that marks teenagers as different to the ‘other’ and to the imposing adult world.

Mac Ruairc’s (2011b, p. 545) study suggests that pupils who adopt ‘hyper-polite’ personas in class may feel that they need to adopt ‘posh’ language and behaviour to gain teachers’ esteem. However, in their peer sphere, ‘rough’ language carries value as it is used to generate a ‘macho’ identity (p. 551). The students in this study are equally aware that their non-standard forms do not carry ‘capital’ or prestige in the classroom. However, they express no desire for their non-standard dialects to become standardised, but rather, in the...
spirit of youthful rebellion, they appear to enjoy the sense of exclusivity afforded by an alternative mode of communication. This is evidenced by the comments the pupils made in response to the question about their opinion on schools banning non-standard English features. One pupil wrote that it would "[limit] the freedom of youth and [the] seclusion and uniqueness we have from adults". This pupil's view is in line with the 15 other pupils who express concerns that such a ban would infringe on their 'freedom'. The pupil's wording here suggests a world view that is similar to many of the other students' views: their language enables them to establish a group identity that is exclusive of adults.

The students perceive a divide between themselves and adults, and a corresponding separation in the mode of communication they use with adults and with peers. In fact, 96% of the pupils who claim to speak both standard and non-standard English identify that they speak standard English exclusively with adults. These data suggest that the pupils, as in Mac Ruairc's (2011b) study, believe that they are able to operate in two modes: peer mode and adult mode. This may, however, be misleading. Snell's (2013) study demonstrates that there is rarely a neat division and switch between the use of standard and non-standard language forms. The reasons for a switch must be studied at a highly localised level and with an understanding of the power relations in operation at the time of utterance. However, it remains significant that the respondents perceive that their language can be adapted to negotiate capital with peers or the adult 'other'.

It seems that many of the surveyed pupils lack the sense of class consciousness that underpins Bourdieu's (1991) world view. Contrary to Mac Ruairc's (2011b) findings, the majority of pupils in this study did not uphold traditional language and class stereotypes, with only 15% of the pupils agreeing or strongly agreeing that "people who speak standard English are posh". As 90% of the pupils state that they can "switch between standard English and non-standard English", it is likely that they do not identify themselves as 'posh', and therefore, the stereotype appears redundant. Alternatively, it could be that the pupils have not been initiated into a class discourse. Finn (2012) argues that in working-class schools, class consciousness is not taught. Instead, it is actively discouraged because of fears that the pupils might develop a sense of class awareness perhaps leading to a class movement that would threaten the status quo of power distribution (p. 60).

It is also possible that the pupils avoided making such judgements because they did not want to be perceived as stereotyping people. When completing the questionnaires, the pupils may have been operating in a 'hyper-polite' 'school mode' (Mac Ruairc, 2011b). They may have felt that it was unacceptable within the school environment to affirm stereotypes or to make sweeping statements about an entire speech community (especially one to which they may have fluctuating member status), as such attitudes are discouraged and challenged within the school.

**Silently accepting sanctions**

Teachers in this school, as Bourdieu (1991) would have predicted, are complicit in the standardisation of the standard dialect. Far from the expected silent condemnation (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 51), some of the pupils report a series of verbalised and actualised sanctions. Of the surveyed children, 90% claim to have observed a teacher 'correcting' the use of non-standard English in the classroom. Verbal warnings, explanations, fines, laughter and 'bad mentions' (a school sanction leading to a detention) are all cited as 'correctional' methods. Curiously, although the majority of pupils reject the idea of a non-standard English ban, many are willing to accept the legitimacy of the classroom sanctions. In fact, 60% of the pupils agree or strongly agree that "teachers should correct the use of non-standard English in the classroom". As the majority expect non-standard English to be corrected, they may have internalised the view that standard English is the dialect synonymous with academic success. Their understanding of language practices appears to be quite nuanced; they appear to appreciate that the learning and use of standard English enable them to negotiate capital in certain contexts. However, the 15% of pupils who do not agree with the correction of non-standard varieties should also be noted. These pupils are perhaps more in line with the children in Mac Ruairc's (2011a and 2011b) studies who disliked the school's efforts to promote the standard dialect.

The remaining 25% of respondents state that they "neither agree nor disagree" with the statement that "teachers should correct the use of non-standard English in the classroom". The limitations of a questionnaire mean that we can only speculate as to why
the students selected this response and what it reflects about their attitudes. Some respondents may have needed more contextual information to make a definite judgement. For example, they may feel differently about the teacher intervening to correct non-standard English when pupils are working in a group, or pair, but may consider it acceptable if the students are speaking directly to the teacher. Alternatively, these responses may reflect a deeper conflict within the pupils. Several respondents express conflicting views on the matter of a non-standard English ban. One pupil said that it was “a good and a bad thing. It is good because it will help us speak well so we can get good jobs, but it is also wrong because it stops our freedom of speech”. In this example, the respondent perceives how standard English can help him to achieve ‘capital’, but also that this ‘capital’ may be earned through an oppressive act. The seven pupils who made these kinds of ‘torn’ responses are arguably the most aware of the seemingly inescapable cycle of language and power, even if they cannot explicitly frame their experiences within a class discourse.

Paradoxically, neither standard English nor non-standard English can ever truly be standardised. Power is derived from the masses’ inability to reproduce the ideal (Bourdieu, 1991, p.60), so in revolt, many of the pupils create their own non-standard forms. For many of the respondents, language appears to be an expression of their youth, and so, youth becomes pivotal to their sense of identity. The majority accept the standards demanded of them in classroom because this protects their sense of ‘otherness’ and it provides a standard against which they can revolt in their teenage sphere.

Identify affirming pedagogy

Bearing in mind the limitations of this study, the results seem to indicate that the majority of students have accepted standard English as the ‘official’ language that they wish to be taught. The majority of learners, as explained earlier, perceive a distinction between classroom and peer modes of communication. However, this does not mean that teachers can unproblematically continue to promote and perpetuate the ‘capital’ of standard English, as this may lead to the exclusion or self-exclusion of the affected learners (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 62). Abandoning the teaching of standard English forms is unrealistic, particularly as denying access to the dialect could limit pupils’ opportunities (Cox, 1991) and further entrench existing social and economic inequalities. However, Mac Ruairc’s findings that teacher and peer correction of non-standard dialect features can lead to the alienation of working-class pupils also require consideration. The challenge is perhaps to find a way in which to facilitate access to the standard dialect whilst

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<th>Statement</th>
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empowering pupils to understand the complex hierarchies of power that support standard English as the ‘proper’ mode of communication.

It may be that the participants in this study lacked the class discourse necessary to interrogate the operative power structures. Cummins’ (2000) works on ‘transformative pedagogy’ may be an appropriate method through which to establish practices that allow students to identify, explore and challenge the operations of power within their school and wider society. Transformative pedagogies are aimed at encouraging learners to critically inquire into the world around them (Cummins, 2000, p. 246). It is “classroom instruction” that encourages students to explore “social issues that affect their lives” (Cummins, 2000, p. 246–247).

In order to allow pupils to explore their identities and relevant social issues, Anderson (2014) suggests the use of ‘contemporary materials’ or ‘stories’ that are relevant to pupils’ lives and invites them to “challenge static and essentialised notions of culture” (p. 124). Examples of such texts, which relate to the capital of different languages and dialects, can be found in the ILEA Afro-Carribbean Language and Literacy Project in Adult and Further Education’s Language and Power resource pack (ILEA, 1990). Anderson (2014) acknowledges that these stories can be used as ‘springboards’ to allow children create what Cummins (2006) terms ‘identity texts’. Such texts allow children to express their sense of self through the creation of stories, art, music, drama or another creative media.

Teachers may also aim to empower students through ‘critical framing’ (Cummins, 2006, p. 54). This “entails a focus on the historical, cultural, socio-political, and ideological roots of systems of knowledge and social practice” (p.54). Students, as part of their academic English Language studies, could, for example, investigate the contexts underpinning the positioning of standard English as a dialect that is superior to non-standard varieties.

Transformative practices are grounded in what Cummins (2000) terms as ‘collaborative’, rather than ‘coercive’ power relations. This means that the teacher and the pupils work together towards the ultimate goal of social justice. Collaboration on a classroom level may involve pupil-led learning, peer review, group discussion and project work. On a wider scale, it may involve inviting diverse communities to participate in pupils’ education (Cummins, 2000, p. 47)

The implementation of transformative practices may allow “students’ intelligence to be activated in ways that potentially challenge the societal status quo” (Cummins, 2000, p.247), and one of its primary benefits is that it enables learners to positively affirm their identities (Harrell-Levy and Kerpelman, 2010, p. 78). Transformative pedagogy cannot necessarily break the cyclic relations of language, privilege and power, but it may empower the students to enter the discourse and develop voices that can be heard in wider society (Delpit, 1988, p. 296).

Conclusions

Although the continued presentation of standard English as the ‘proper’ dialect may have the effect of fortifying the power of the upper and middle classes, it may be that class consciousness, with regard to standard English, is not prevalent in the minds of the surveyed adolescents. Authority is delineated by age, not social class for the teenagers. They construct a collective identity as ‘teenagers’, which is legitimated by the existence of the perceived oppositional other (the adult).

In an attempt to preserve the boundaries of ‘teenagers’ and the ‘other’, many of the adolescents prefer that their non-standard language practices should not achieve a status equal to standard English within the classroom. Such a situation would potentially pose a threat to the positioning of the teenagers as a collective, as the apparent linguistic marker of ‘difference’ would be less acute. The majority of the respondents wanted to construct clear boundaries between themselves and ‘adults’, or more specifically ‘teachers’. Of course, it is likely that on closer examination, the delineation would be much less clear cut – especially considering that several of the teachers grew up in the local area and also frequently use the same non-standard language features as the children. However, it is the teenagers’ desire to fix boundaries around their collective teenage territory, which is interesting.

It remains clear that to probe deeper into the language practices and beliefs of the teenagers, further study, which takes a qualitative approach, is required. Further research could also illuminate the role that class consciousness plays in adolescents’ identity formation. It would be interesting to investigate if pupils truly are lacking a class consciousness and to explore the extent and nature of any class discourse that pupils experience in school.

Finally, transformative pedagogy offers a practical method through which the adolescents can explore the social capital of different language choices without detriment to their sense of class, individual or collective identity. Ultimately, transformative practices aim to cultivate activism so that pupils are empowered to challenge and redress inequalities. Such an approach may at least destabilise the class-based notions of the superiority of standard English within the classroom; it may also legitimise the voices of the “least favoured classes” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 62) who are all too often marginalised and excluded.
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