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

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## ABSTRACT

Recent media coverage and academic scholarship has repeatedly demonstrated that language discrimination is embedded and normalised in England's schools. We consider language discrimination as a structural phenomenon underpinned by language ideologies which frame the language practices of racialised and working-class communities as deficient. In this article we report on project where we worked closely with a group of teachers who identified as critical, activist educators who were seeking to challenge language discrimination in their classrooms and wider institutions. Our data stems from in-depth interviews and case studies with teachers, where we explored their anti-language discrimination efforts at individual, departmental, and institutional levels. We present a typology for anti-language discrimination efforts, capturing the importance of teacher positionality and stance; research informed practice; community organising; locating local issues of language stigma within broader geopolitical patterns of inequality; individual classroom efforts, and institutional support for critical language work.



## KEYWORDS

Language discrimination; language activism; England; schools; language education policy

## Cracks in the system

Teachers in England have long been at the centre of efforts to challenge language discrimination, but the prescriptive language policy assemblage that they currently work in can make these counter-hegemonic challenges increasingly difficult. In this article we present research where teachers sought to locate and widen *cracks in the system*, alluding to a metaphor of teacher-led resistance popularised by the U.S. educator Lillian Weber and her work in early childhood settings in low-income areas of New York City. Weber (1997) described these cracks in various ways, including those that “give room for beginning efforts” (p. 126), those in “an almost impenetrable wall of difficulties” (p. 47) and those which “sometimes allow seepage of more autonomous decision making; [being] quite wide where the immediate institutional power is sympathetic, but some are very narrow indeed” (p. 44). Weber's metaphor has resonances for the theory of change we are advocating for in this article given that it is focused on challenging and disrupting entire systems as opposed to making modest reforms and tweaks. At the same time, this recognises that teachers work in contexts where they undoubtedly negotiate a dense array of top-down policy initiatives which may well not align with their language ideological beliefs (Johnson & Johnson, 2015).

We are not just inspired by Weber's metaphor but by her rejection of racialised, classed, and hierarchically organised dichotomies in language (such as appropriate/inappropriate, academic/non-academic, and home/school) which inevitably give rise to the policing of language deemed to be in breach of institutionalised boundaries. These boundaries are shaped by language ideologies which are premised on the stigmatisation of racialised and classed communities and their purported linguistic

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deficiencies (Rosa & Flores, 2017). We understand 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 stratify, rank, and hierarchically organise language varieties and the communities associated with them (Lippi-Green, 2012). Schools are particularly key sites of language ideological production and the co-construction of racial, class, and linguistic stratification.

This article stems from a project funded by the British Association of Applied Linguistics where, over three years, we worked closely with a group of secondary school teachers in England who identified as critically-orientated and were seeking to challenge language discrimination in their schools. In the following section we elaborate on this, using insights from language ideology and critical language policy to contextualise the education policy architecture that teachers in England work in. We then locate their work within a long history of grassroots activism and anti-discrimination efforts in England's schools. We then outline our methodological approach before documenting some of the different ways that the teachers in our study sought to identify, challenge, and dismantle language discrimination. We draw on interviews, in-depth case studies, classroom materials and observations, and teachers' own personal reflections. This results in a typology of anti-language discrimination efforts, which we present in the final section, and offer some cautionary guidance on how this might be used in different contexts.

## The language education policy architecture in England

Whilst systemic and institutionalised language discrimination has long been part of the fabric of England's schools (see Cameron, 2012; Coard, 1971), ideologies of linguistic purism are particularly marked in the policy agenda of post-2010 reforms (see Cushing, 2023b). We here describe this policy architecture by adopting a language ideological perspective which is concerned with the uncovering of how different policy mechanisms, such as tests and curricula, are both shaped by and give rise to different assumptions about language and communities. This perspective connects language ideological processes to the broader socio-political and economic issues that language-marginalised communities experience (Flores & Chaparro, 2018). In short, we are insistent that language stigma, marginalisation, and privilege emerge directly from broader, social structures of stigma, marginalisation, and privilege.

Given this, our description of language education policy in post-2010 England pays attention to the broader sociopolitical and economic contexts that it emerged from. These policy reforms followed a programme of austerity which were framed by David Cameron's government as a necessary response to the 2008 financial crisis, but had devastating consequences in terms of cuts to public services and growing gaps between the privileged and the poor. Attempting to justify these structural deficits, the state produced a stigmatising narrative of strivers and scroungers which framed working-class and racialised minorities as responsible for their own hardships, and thus responsible for their own welfare by modifying their individual behaviours, including language (Tyler, 2018).

Austerity, public cuts, and the 2011 nationwide uprisings that followed created an ideological space in which educational reform was deemed by the state to be urgent and necessary, and where the most marginalised members of society could begin to experience upward social mobility and educational success simply by changing their language (see Nijjar, 2018). These logics formed the ideological foundations of post-2010 education policies, where the modification of the purportedly deficient language of stigmatised communities was framed as the panacea to structural and economic inequalities. We want to stress that these logics were not designed by the coalition government, but have been a mainstay of bipartisan political thinking more broadly, especially since Thatcher's Education Reform Act of 1988, in which the state absolves its own responsibilities through victim blaming and other such stigmatising narratives (Valencia, 2010).

Cushing (2023b) describes the contemporary language education policy architecture which emerged from these logics, showing how it represents a dense web of policy mechanisms underpinned by ideologies of language hierarchies and correctness. These mechanisms include new

national curricula, high-stakes standardised grammar tests for primary school students, high-stakes GCSE assessments for secondary school students, revised professional standards for teachers, and Ofsted, the schools inspectorate. These policy mechanisms place teachers into positions where they are encouraged (and rewarded) to perceive marginalised students' language as deficient, to engage in hostile language policing, and to reproduce ideologies of linguistic correctness which bolster language discrimination. At the same time, post-2010 curriculum changes stripped away units and assessments concerned with spoken language study, leaving little room for teachers to engage in critical debates about language variation, attitudes, and ideologies. These changes co-ordinated with a resurgence of deficit discourses in policy, such as those clustered around the so-called word gap and an increased focus on technical grammar and vocabulary—at the expense of critical and social aspects of language.

We argue then, that language discrimination is a structural design feature of contemporary policy in England's schools, creating environments where it is increasingly difficult for teachers to find spaces where they can engage students in critically oriented language work. This policy architecture is a product of the sociopolitical and economic context of England since the early 2010s, where language-based interventions continue to be posed as a viable solution to the broader inequalities that marginalised communities experience.

### Teachers as language activists

In this section we connect critical language policy scholarship with a tradition of language activism in England's schools. The purpose here is to show that despite the extent to which linguistic prescriptivism is embedded within current policy, teachers have long engaged in initiatives designed to counter oppressive ideologies about language. We continue to be inspired by, for example, activism and community organising between the 1960s-80s which pushed back against deficit perspectives on language which were intimately bound up with race and class-based stigma (e.g., Coard, 1971; Searle, 1983).

As former teachers and now teacher educators and academics in critical applied linguistics, this tradition of activism has long influenced our own work and resonated with our political and professional commitments. In 2020, this prompted us to establish a network of ~50 teachers who were committed to activist and anti-discriminatory efforts in their work, and who were interested in locating and widening cracks in the prescriptive system that we described above. We called this the *Critical Language Awareness* group (CLAW). The purposes of CLAW were to create an online community space where we discussed and critiqued a piece of language education policy, talked about new research in critical educational linguistics, and explored things that members were doing in their schools to engage in anti-discrimination work. Social solidarity amongst the participants was key to collective thinking and the sense of community activism that characterised the CLAW group, with members taking inspiration from each other.

These teachers identified as critical educators/activists who centred social justice in their work, saw their classrooms as deeply politicised spaces, and saw language as central to creating and disrupting unjust and unequal structures of education (see also Montañó et al., 2002; Seltzer, 2023). CLAW discussions allowed for a profound acknowledgement and awareness of how our own work was shaped and influenced by language activist efforts before us, and how it mirrored similar efforts elsewhere in the world (e.g., Hayes & Butterworth, 2001; Niesz, 2018; Picower, 2012; Quinn & Carl, 2015). For many of the members, this global and historical perspective was affirming and allowed us to imagine and glimpse into alternative ways of doing language work in schools, especially at a time when the UK Department for Education were calling for schools to “root out” activist teachers who were critical of the government and taught so-called politically impartial ideas about race, class and social injustices (DfE, 2022). Combs and Penfield (2012) see language activism as

energetic action focused on language use in order to create, influence and change existing language policies. In this sense, language activists are individuals or groups who, through various means, actively defend their right to venerate and freely use their languages in multiple, often public 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, p. 462)

This definition shaped our own thinking about challenging language discrimination in schools, where language activism is seen as a force for social change. Our conceptualisation of language activism emphasises the community-led, cross-movement solidarity, bottom-up nature of influencing policy change in a way which places teachers' agency and professional identities at its core. Given that language discrimination and oppression was integral to European colonialism (Rosa & Flores, 2017), we also see language activism as connected to broader anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-colonial efforts (Pennycook, 2021). This materialist approach to language activist efforts is ultimately concerned with the undoing of language ideologies, the radical transformation of social structures, and the intersections of race, class, and language in co-producing discourses of legitimacy and deficiency.

## Methods and approaches

Our methods took inspiration from Heller et al. (2018), whose principles for critical socio- and applied linguistic research place questions of power and social inequality at the centre of any inquiry about language. This involves drawing on ethnographic-orientated methods to provide in-depth, situated explorations about how perceptions and discourses about language produce and maintain power and inequality, resulting in representative cases which illustrate broader patterns. The data we generated for this project then, was varied and from across multiple schools and stemmed from multiple conversations—sometimes in a group, sometimes one-to-one, sometimes online, and sometimes in-person. All data came from members of the CLAW group that we described above.

Although we formed close relationships with CLAW members and came to know their work well, we conducted one-to-one interviews with 21 members to capture more detail about their anti-language discrimination efforts. All of these taught English at secondary (age 11–16) and/or college (age 16–18) level. Further relevant details about each participant are provided in Table 1. Interviews took place in the participants' institutions, in cafés, or online. Some were interviewed once; others were interviewed a second time if we required further clarification on a particular point made. Discussion points included how teachers conceptualised language discrimination; how their identities as educators shaped their critical language work; how they enacted critical language work in their classrooms and departments, and what kinds of obstacles they had encountered in doing so. These interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. We also flag here that at least two teachers were not permitted by their senior management to take part in our project due to Cushing's previous research which had critiqued Ofsted and its role in reproducing language discrimination (see Cushing & Snell, 2023) and that this was perceived as a risk to the reputation of the school.

From the sample of teachers we interviewed, 3 of these were involved in an in-depth case study of their work. These are indicated in Table 1. This involved visits to these institutions to carry out additional interviews, observe lessons, talk to wider colleagues and students, and collect various pedagogical and policy materials. These case studies allowed us to see first-hand the kind of anti-language discrimination efforts that teachers were engaged in. In the spirit of community and collaboration, we also led workshops and talks at these case study settings. For instance, in one school, we presented to students and staff about transformative linguistic justice; in another school, we worked with teachers on designing a new whole-school anti-racist literacy policy. To further centre teachers' voices, we organised and facilitated an online, public symposium where teachers who participated in the study led short presentations on the kind of anti-language discrimination efforts they were engaged in. Ethical clearance was provided by Cushing's institution. In the analysis that follows, we focus primarily on the interview data.

**Table 1.** Participating teachers.

Name	Ethnic group (self-defined)	Years teaching	Broad demographics of institution
Mandy (case study teacher)	White British	14	A large secondary school with sixth form in the North East. Students were mostly white British, but a growing community of south Asian and Filipino students.
Aaliyah (case study teacher)	Black British	5	A large secondary school in London. Most students were from Black African and Black Caribbean backgrounds, and from low-income backgrounds.
Ruby (case study teacher)	White British	20	A large further education college in Manchester with a very racially and economically diverse student community.
Sarah	White British	14	A large sixth form college on the South East coast in an area of high deprivation. Largely white working-class student population.
Chiara	White European	20	A large sixth form college in the South East with a large proportion of white, middle-class children.
Tabitha	White British	8	Medium size secondary school with sixth form in Bristol. A racially diverse student body, with large representation of Black African and South Asian students. Around half of the student population spoke English as an additional language.
Patrick	White British	20	Large sixth form college in the Midlands. A high proportion of working-class students, mostly white British.
Anjum	British Pakistani	5	Medium size secondary academy in outer London, with a large proportion of working-class students with British Indian and British Pakistani heritage, with most of these speaking English as an additional language.
Frazer	White British	15	Medium size secondary academy with sixth form in the North West. Almost all students were White British, with a very large number of these from low-income backgrounds.
Tim	White British	4	Secondary academy with sixth form in Leeds. A relatively equal mix of white, Black African and East Asian students from working class and middle class families.
Mirela	White Kosovan	13	Large academy with sixth form in East London, with a majority Indian Gujarati student population from working class families.
Martha	White British	4	Large secondary school in the North West, with a majority white, working class student population.
Nadia	British Pakistani	5	Secondary school in East London with a predominantly working class student community. A large population of south Asian, Black African, and eastern European students.
Justin	Black British	3	Secondary academy in south Manchester with a majority student community of Black African and Black Caribbean children, many of whom come from low-income families.
Rachael	White British	25	Larger than average secondary school with sixth form in the North East. Around half white working class students, and half working-class global majority students.
Nina	White British	4	A large secondary school in Birmingham, with a majority white working class student body.
Amina	British Indian	7	Average size secondary school in Manchester with a very racially diverse community and many students coming from working class backgrounds.
Kay	White British	22	A large secondary school with sixth form in the North West. Most students were white British, with around a quarter from low-income backgrounds.
Amir	Black British	5	A large secondary academy with sixth form in Birmingham, with a relatively even mixture of white, south Asian, and Black students.
Sally	White British	14	Medium size secondary school with sixth form in south London with a very racially and linguistically diverse student community.
Harriet	White British	17	Large further education college in outer London, with majority white, middle-class students.

All data was digitally prepared for deductive-inductive coding and analysis, using NVivo software. We began deductively by focusing on discourse related to language discrimination. From this we developed an inductive coding scheme which allowed us to categorise the varied ways in which teachers talked about language discrimination, the obstacles they came up against, and what they felt were the most productive means of challenging it. This coding scheme was refined iteratively with the assistance of teachers who had participated in interviews. We shared our initial scheme with these teachers during an online workshop, where they were given time and



space to add nuance to the scheme. The scheme was also shared and refined with teachers during visits to case study schools. Teacher involvement was crucial here and added a level of detail and accuracy which would not have been possible without their input. In the sections that follow, we examine four of the most prominent themes in detail, illustrating the realities of teachers challenging language discrimination in schools and then moving toward a typology of teacher-led resistance, which we present in the final section.

### Positionality, identity, and stance

One of the strongest themes we found in our data was the importance of teachers identifying as critical educators, a professional stance which they saw as fundamental to their anti-language discrimination efforts. Teachers held a clear vision for the central role that language plays in creating a socially in/just world, had a robust understanding of how educational systems in England held up inequalities, and knew that schools could be both liberatory and oppressive. An example from Amina begins to illustrate this:

Ever since my teacher training I've known how schools are places where inequalities and power, they are just part of everyday life ... and language is part of that so much, like the way you speak and how people make judgements about you because of your voice ... so yeah, I guess one thing that motivates me in teaching is a desire to change that. (Amina)

Here, Amina articulates a vision of an alternative world in which language discrimination can be challenged, giving emphasis to their own identity as a critical educator and as someone who feels confident in their own knowledge of critical applied linguistics. Indeed, subject knowledge was named by many participants as key to how they saw themselves as teachers, in terms of having the confidence, willingness, and perseverance to engage in anti-language discrimination work. As described by Chiara:

I feel pretty confident in my knowledge of linguistics, having had all the training I have had, and that just puts me a good position I think to talk openly and confidently about things like language and discrimination, about race, colonialism, standard language ideology, you know? (Chiara)

Many of our participants talked about reading journal articles and books related to language and social justice, and using these to develop their own subject knowledge and shape their practice. Mandy, one of our case study teachers, and the rest of her department had attended an online talk on anti-Black linguistic racism by April Baker-Bell (see Baker-Bell, 2020) and named this as a pivotal moment in a departmental shift towards embedding more critical language work into the curriculum, and ensuring this was informed by recent research in educational linguistics. Mirela and Ruby had also attended this talk, with Mirela describing how this had spurred on a departmental “belief in the social justice aspect of our job” whilst Ruby described how this had given her the kind of racial literacy to “bring in discussions of anti-Black linguistic racism into my teaching,” which for her students, many of whom were Black, “was met with this amazing sense of energy because they were suddenly talking about language and race, which mattered so much to them.”

We also stress here how identity as a critical language educator is intricately connected to race, class, and privilege, especially in how some teachers had experienced language discrimination themselves (as was the case for Amina above). It was clear that where teachers had lived experiences of linguistic injustice, this acted as an impetus for their own efforts (see also Gandolfi & Mills, 2023). These experiences formed the foundation on which many teachers saw critical discussions of language, class, and race as integral to their classrooms—as articulated by Anjum:

The fact I'm one of the only teachers who isn't white in my school ... who speaks with a pretty strong London accent ... teaching kids who look and sound like me, yeah, I want to talk to them about race and how language discrimination is just part of everyday kind of racism, right? (Anjum)

Kay, a white, working-class teacher who spoke with a marked regional accent described how her background and positionality had:



allowed me a little bit of understanding about how it must feel to be constantly stigmatised, so I feel like I'm able to talk from at least a position of some experience ... and me, as a teacher, my voice has constantly been judged as having some kind of deficit. (Kay)

Whilst Kay identified as working-class, she also named her whiteness as affording her privileges, and, like other teachers, recognised how her whiteness put her in a position of responsibility for challenging various forms of discrimination and injustices (Seltzer & de los Ríos, 2018). As Nina, another white teacher, put it:

You know, because [my school] is majority white, like a lot of people just don't even think that it's an issue. Like they think it doesn't affect them because they just think that language, and, language and race is an issue for kids who aren't white. (Nina)

Teachers also paid close attention to the relationship between language and social class, and how working-class children and teachers perceived their language practices as inferior and ideologically associated with class-based stigmatisation. Sarah, for example, described how working-class students had internalised these ideas, and how she used her classroom as a space to explore and challenge them:

They are definitely self-conscious of assumptions about their accent ... a lot of negative stuff in the press about their accent and how ugly and stupid people who use it are ... one of my big things is about empowerment of young people around here so I talk about that a lot and link that to perceptions of their accent and perceptions of themselves ... both in my classroom and across the institution ... so we critique how they have been previously been assessed in schools and how accents are often valued. (Sarah)

For Black teachers we spoke to, it was clear that race and anti-Blackness played a more immediately central role in their experiences of language discrimination. For instance, Aaliyah's work was shaped by her experiences of anti-Black linguistic racism—as a pre-service teacher who experienced accent policing (see Cushing, 2023a) and now as someone who reflected on those experiences to centre issues of race, class, and language in her own practice:

I've definitely taken those memories of having my language judged as a new teacher with me into the classroom and that absolutely influences the work that I do with children, mostly Black children who are living in poverty ... the children that I teach in my school, I guess they speak in ways, that are quite traditionally looked down on ... And you know, so much of my teaching and the work that I do with those kids, is getting them too to see the beauty in their own language, getting them to recognise that their language is just as like valid as how white kids from richer neighborhoods speak, right? (Aaliyah)

For Justin this was also true:

But for me like, being a person of colour is just so central to how I teach and think about the classroom, I'm always conscious of racial discrimination and me having direct experience of that. ... yeah I mean, my accent and things marks me out as different, and with my skin colour, people I think judge me a certain way, and they see and hear me a certain way. (Justin)

Justin here highlights how his own positionality as a Black teacher is key to challenging language discrimination in schools, through centring politicised discussions about race and language in his classroom with the largely Black community he teaches. He points to the pervasive anti-Blackness in England's schools and how an acute awareness of this system shapes his own pedagogical approaches. He points to how, as Baker-Bell (2020) shows, "people's language experiences are not separate from their racial experiences [and] the way a Black child's language is devalued in school reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world" (p. 2).

The refusal by many of our participants to separate out language from race, class, and other forms of social stratification ran central to much of the work that teachers described to us. Most held a clear stance that language ideologies were a proxy for other forms of stigma, as articulated, for example, by Patrick:

And if we talk about this person's language is bad and needs to be corrected, these people need to learn how to speak like this or write like this, actually we are making judgements about groups based on their class or race. The way you comment on someone's language is just the means through which you impose or prejudice about a group based on something else about them. (Patrick)

For Chiara, her anti-language discrimination efforts rejected liberal progress approaches which seek to modify individual attitudes and instead subscribed to radical anti-racist efforts which were located as part of broader moves to decolonise her department's curriculum:

So you know, my approach has always been how can you talk about world Englishes without talking about colonialism? I mean how can you talk about standard English without talking about colonialism? How can you talk about language and discrimination without talking about colonialism? I don't think you can teach any of those things if you don't teach about colonialism along with them. (Chiara)

Chiara centred language ideology as part of these anti-colonial efforts, pushing back against what she described as an education system built on an "ideology of empire, a monolingual ideology ... where ideologies of standards and raciolinguistic ideologies are so dominant." Chiara believed that the only viable anti-language discrimination efforts were those that were part of broader efforts to dismantle structural racism and capitalism, which helped students to become aware of how "language equality is just part of social equality." She actively rejected theories of change which assume that if marginalised children would use standardised English then they can readily access inclusion and upward social mobility, instead insisting that issues of language stigma must pay attention to the broader structural determinants of oppression. In sum, we see this strand of anti-language discrimination work as dovetailing with what Arneback and Jämte (2021) refer to as an emancipatory approach, where structural inequalities are the focus of teachers' efforts, and teachers show students how linguistic injustice is intimately connected to broader issues of race and class-based injustice.

## Contextual alignments

The second theme we discuss was where participants described how their efforts to challenge language discrimination paid attention and responded to the local contexts of the setting they worked in. This was a crucial dimension to their efforts because it ensured that work sought to educate children about the relationship between language ideologies and the socioeconomic, political, and racial contexts of the school community.

One illustrative example of this comes from Tabitha, whose school was in central Bristol and whose classroom window overlooked the site a statue of Edward Colston had once stood. In the 1600s, Colston was an executive of the Royal African Company, whose primary commodity was enslaved Black people. In 2020 during Black Lives Matter protests, Colston's statue was pulled down and rolled into the waters of Bristol harbour. There is an important link between enslavement and anti-Black linguistic racism that Tabitha wanted her students to become aware of, especially given the proximity of Colston's statue to their school and the history of Bristol's port in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Raciolinguistic ideologies played an integral part in how British slave traders justified their work and their dehumanisation of Black enslaved people. Cushing (2023c, p. 38) shows how British slave traders such as Colston perceived and represented Black enslaved people as having "broken," "plain," "limited" and "coarse" speech, and these supposed deficiencies in language were symptomatic of their racial and biological inferiority more broadly (see also Willis, 2023).

Foregrounding the relationship between language, enslavement, and colonialism got, in Tabitha's words, to "the absolute heart of things," reflecting her belief that anti-language discrimination work must take a historical perspective and must be seen as part of anti-racist efforts (see Motha, 2020). Tabitha had designed a unit of work for Year 9 students (age 13–14) geared around language and social justice in Bristol. This involved exploring the emergence of raciolinguistic ideologies in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and how those anti-Black logics still surface in the city. For example, Tabitha described how students compared depictions of Black enslaved people in the 1700s with contemporary

police witness appeals, which “uses that exact same language of Black people having broken and inarticulate speech.” The unit also covered abolitionist protest poetry, multilingualism in Bristol, histories of local migration, and, as Tabitha described, “conversations about standard English and whiteness, white privilege, and how mainstream ideas about language are set by white people.” Reflecting on this unit, it was clear that Tabitha was challenging language discrimination by locating local histories and struggles within broader, geopolitical contexts:

It’s about making sure that local things around race and power and colonialism, they enter into our classroom. And you know, the way that people use language is a big part of that, like, it’s all linked to discriminatory attitudes about race and language. But also really stressing that those are local things relevant to Bristol but they are part of the bigger world you know? (Tabitha)

Aaliyah, a Black teacher working in London took the same approach in seeking to make connections between local and global issues of class, race, in/justice and schooling. Aaliyah, who grew up in the same community that she now taught in, described how:

It was really important to me to work with the community that I grew up with and that’s always been a big part of my identity ... I’m a Black woman who teaches kids from Black Caribbean and Black African backgrounds ... poverty is a real issue for a lot of those kids. (Aaliyah)

Aaliyah’s school was located in the same part of London which, between the 1940s–70s, was the site of many so-called Schools for the Educationally Subnormal (ESN). Hundreds of Black children were categorised as cognitively inferior by teachers and sent to ESN schools, segregated away from mainstream society, and subjected to psychological, verbal, and physical abuse. As Coard’s (1971) work first exposed, anti-Black perceptions of language and literacy played a central role in how Black children were treated in the design of these schools. Aaliyah wanted to educate her students about these long histories of anti-Black linguistic racism, and developed a unit for Year 9 students called *Language and Power* (which she wanted to call *Language and Race*, but was prohibited from doing so by senior management because it was seen as “too risky and too political”). Importantly, Aaliyah described how she wanted to “make her students realise that they would have been at risk of being placed into those schools,” and that the anti-Black linguistic racism and raciolinguistic ideologies underpinning ESN schools continue today.

To put Coard’s exposé into dialogue with contemporary realities of anti-Black linguistic racism, Aaliyah showed a dramatisation of the ESN scandal, *Small Axe: Education* (McQueen, 2020). Students then completed various activities which showed how Black children continue to be framed as displaying linguistic deficiencies which require correction through compensatory methods of schooling. This included critiquing a spate of so-called slang bans implemented by various London schools, which Aaliyah described as being “about race because the schools were full of Black and Brown kids, so it was about the policing of their language.” However, Aaliyah did “not just want to focus on the oppression that Black communities face,” but their resistance. As such, Aaliyah explored Black activism and community organising, especially in terms of Black community education which centred on sustaining Black literacies. She drew inspiration from contemporary academic knowledge production produced by Black educational linguists, particularly those whose work has exposed the systematic misalignments between institutionally shaped ideologies about language and the natural language practices used in Black homes (e.g., Willis et al., 2022).

Whilst Tabitha and Aaliyah’s anti-language discrimination efforts focused on race, Frazer’s efforts centered social class. Frazer, in collaboration with an A-level English Language student and in response to guidance from other CLAW members, had designed a Year 8 unit called *Linguistic Justice* and a Year 9 unit called *Language and Power*. In Frazer’s words, these focused on how a focus on social class enabled him to “explore the influences on our language use and ... when we looked at prestige and attitudes to accent and dialect in the news.” As was the case for much of the other work reported on by our participants, Frazer’s efforts were specific to rural Cumbria, where the school was located, and paid attention to a long history of working-

class stigma in the local area. For example, Frazer described how he had used students' intimate knowledge of the local land to offset deficit perceptions about their regional accents, using local literature to do so:

We read this Cumbrian dialect poem and it's written from the point of view of a speaker who says that the teacher thinks he's thick ... and we have a conversation there about what do we mean about intelligence and is it fair that this teacher judges this student based on the way that he sounds ... and they were saying, well to know the names of different things in nature is just as intelligent as knowing how to speak in standard English. So we sow the seeds of language discrimination in that unit ... by showing how their local knowledge as a result of their class gives them superior knowledge over people who come from more privileged families. (Frazer)

Frazer spoke of how students had “loved looking at how and why their language got policed” and how the unit allowed students to see that “attitudes about their language were really just about their social class.” This kind of ideological awareness about language then led on to thinking critically about how working-class communities in the north of England have long been at the front of struggles for social justice, and how language has always been central to those efforts. Frazer's work, like the other work we have described in this section, provides a powerful example of how teachers can engage in anti-language discrimination efforts which are contextually-sensitive and pay close attention to the racial and class dynamics that shape the institutions they work in, and the communities that these serve.

## Departmental and institutional support

The previous sections focused primarily on how individual teachers were embedding critical language awareness work into their practice. Whilst we are clearly supportive of this work, we also want to point to the inherent limitations of individual efforts, and so in this section we focus on departmental and institutional push backs against language discrimination. We found less evidence of this in our dataset, suggesting that institutional resistance is met with more and higher obstacles.

Some of this institutional resistance took place by participants who were making connections between their classroom work and their broader work—such as Nadia, who was the equalities lead for her school, and spoke of how her anti-language discrimination efforts “overlapped” with these broader efforts. Similar ideas were provided by Amir, who was leading on whole-school initiatives around anti-racism, and had “used the opportunity to talk about the links between racism and language discrimination in whole-school assemblies.” Where teachers had broader institutional responsibilities then, some of them used this space to incorporate discussions about language, discrimination, and injustice.

One of the clearest examples of institutional resistance to language discrimination came from one of our case study schools, with Mandy being our main point of contact. Mandy was an active member of the CLAW group who would often share her work during group meetings. In her department, she had led on the design and implementation of units for Years 7, 8, and 9 on linguistic prejudice. Every teacher in the department taught these units, following input and dedicated training from Mandy on critical linguistics, where she drew on recent scholarship such as Baker-Bell (2020), Godley and Reaser (2018), and Heller and McElhinny (2017). Academics from local universities had also come to deliver bespoke sessions, as did one of the authors of this article. Crucially, the department had support from senior management, and the work was seen as part of the school's broader commitments to anti-racism. This involved in-school research on staff and students' experiences of racism and the creation of anti-racist policies. There was a strong union presence in the school—supported by the headteacher—and a structural awareness of class was evident in conversations we had with staff during fieldwork visits. Just as the broader school paid close attention to race and class, this was reflected in the design of the units on linguistic prejudice where Mandy rejected the term “knowledge about language” and chose “critical language awareness work”:

Knowledge about language feels too vague, and we wanted something which really highlighted you know, the politics of language, and how you can't talk about language without talking about power, class, race, injustice, and equality. (Mandy)

The units encouraged students to become language activists, and to see how perceptions and ideologies about language were used to further stigmatise working-class and racialised communities. As Mandy said:

Our focus has always been on how the kids we teach, their backgrounds, and we can equip them with that critical knowledge about language which will help them to know how inequality is so much to do with what people think about your language, and how those like, perceptions of language can get used to keep people in their place as such. (Mandy)

Mandy described how this materialised in classroom practices, where teachers:

insisted on critical questions about who gets to decide these things, like who gets to decide what is posh or not, 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, just categories, socially constructed categories designed by people with the most power. (Mandy)

These types of critical interrogations about socially constructed, normative categories about languages were on display during our classroom observations, where teachers facilitated conversations about the policing of language in schools and how this co-constructed class/race prejudices; English as a colonial language; accent-based discrimination; and deficit representations of working-class, Geordie communities. The strength in Mandy's school challenging language discrimination then, lied in the departmental approach and managerial support, which created a sense of collective efforts and group solidarity in their work. This institution-wide approach made anti-language discrimination efforts a visible part of school life.

## Obstacles and challenges

Whilst the initiatives described above provide strong examples of anti-language discrimination efforts, participants also spoke of the various obstacles and challenges they were confronted with. Some comments here were about other colleagues, such as from Anjum, who described how "some of the other teachers in her department just didn't have that subject knowledge in critical linguistics." But the majority of comments were those that directed their frustrations upwards, towards internal obstacles (in the form of management) and external obstacles (in the form of Ofsted, national curricula, assessments, and examination boards). Some participants described examples where management had actively sought to block their anti-language discrimination efforts, which we now turn to.

One of the clearest examples of this came from Ruby, who taught in a college in south Manchester with a large community of Black, working-class students and which had a troubling history of institutional racism. Ruby's anti-discrimination efforts focused on challenging a college-wide, managerial initiative on spoken language. These initiatives were centred on the so-called word gap—a deficit concept from mid-1990s academic scholarship which frames the vocabulary size of racialised and low-income children as limited and lower quality than their white, middle-class counterparts (Hart & Risley, 1995). As a result of Ruby's college subscribing to word gap ideologies, a disproportionate amount of Black students were placed into "vocabulary booster sessions" because they were perceived by management to lack academic language. Ruby described how she was "troubled" by the institutional alignments to the word gap, because, as she said, she "knew that those students did have these amazing linguistic abilities but were being wrongly categorised." Her students reported having to "self-censor" in lessons and she noticed a "shift in how they saw themselves ... like they had been accused of not having good enough language and not good enough for college." In solidarity with her students, Ruby talked to them about the word gap interventions were an example of anti-Black linguistic racism, and took her concerns to management, citing academic literature from critical educational linguistics which is pushing back against language gap discourses (e.g., Cushing, 2023c; Johnson & Johnson 2021). Ruby's concerns were met with institutional resistance—she was told by senior managers that "being able to speak well ... is about social justice," with the implication being that Black students spoke badly and that the route to racial justice

was rooted in accommodation-based theories of change which pinned the responsibility on marginalised speakers to modify their voice. Management told Ruby that the vocabulary intervention group was “grounded in evidence,” citing Ofsted and Department for Education policy, and she got a sense of “being told to go back to her place.” Whilst Ruby’s anti-deficit work was grounded in evidence and research then, it was not “the right kind” of evidence and research that management wanted to consider (see Thomas, 2023 for how “evidence” is used by the state to promote favoured policy agendas). Ruby was not the only participant whose concerns about language gap discourses had been met with resistance under the managerial narrative that they were “evidence-informed” and represented the “best available research.” For instance, Kay said:

You know, that work on the word gap is quite dangerous I guess in how it talks about people’s language and lack of words. But the headteacher is like, look, this is really new and important research and we want to be in line with that. So I want to look at kind of how we as a school can challenge those kinds of narratives. (Kay)

Kay’s concerns about the word gap were part of what she saw as broader efforts to “question representations of working-class kids and how those representations affect their experiences in school,” yet she expressed frustration with management for their “huge ignorance” in the way that “race and class just isn’t something that’s considered” and “something that gets dismissed all the time.” Similar frustrations were expressed by Mirela, who had tried to push back against new signs in the school rooted in punitive accountability and monolingual ideologies—which she described as reading “no Gujrati in this classroom, and if you speak Gujrati, there are negative behaviour points that are associated with that.”

What is important to stress here is that schools are under increasing pressure to demonstrate ideological fidelity to externally produced, state-produced education policy, themselves which are underpinned by academic scholarship subscribing to normative ideologies about language and discourses of deficit (Cushing, 2023c). For example, both Martha and Patrick alluded to the surveillance culture of England’s schools (see Kulz, 2017), with Martha saying “there is a lot of pressure for us to speak quote unquote properly and to police that our students are doing the same,” and Patrick describing the “pressure from outside agencies that might be observing us, who certainly promote a thing called standard English and what they call proper language.” Martha elaborated on these tensions:

it’s difficult to promote that critical framing of language in a school where Ofsted and exam boards and assessment objectives all kind of fight against you. And so you kind of, you feel disloyal to the standards that you’re forced to meet, but also then disloyal to your own beliefs. It’s really difficult. (Martha)

Patrick pointed directly to the policy reforms of post-2010, talking about how newly trained teachers were entering into a system awash with standard language ideologies and pressures to modify their voice:

... many of them will have had at least part of their own education in the what I might call the post-Gove era of education, the sort of post-2010 era of education, where I think that notion of standardised language being good language has been in their own educational experience ... they’ve been continually told that the language they must use is so-called good language, and that is standard English, so they come with this idea that they have to change their voice to be an acceptable teachers. (Patrick)

One of the most widely discussed obstacles to enacting anti-language discrimination work was the content of the Key Stage 4 national curriculum, which people felt, for example, to be “restrictive” (Nadia), “narrow” (Chris) and “has little room for critical work on language” (Aaliyah). Perceptions of the Key Stage 4 curriculum were often in contrast to the Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 5 curricula, which were generally felt to be spaces where critical language work could be “easily embedded” (Mandy). The content specification for A-level English Language was particularly noted as a space which “naturally lends itself to talking critically about language, power and inequalities in society” (Mandy), whilst the content specification and assessment criteria for GCSE<sup>1</sup> had the opposite effect, often positioning teachers to reproduce prescriptive language ideologies where they were “forced” to award marks to



students who conformed with problematic notions of standardised language and academic vocabulary:

GCSE is just so, so technical, so much emphasis given to correct grammar and using academic sounding language, and I'm like I, I'm forced to say to students that they have to use this certain type of language, this academic language that they just don't identify with, even though I know that those aspects of language are really contested. (Nina)

For Amir, GCSE classes were a space where he felt that he lost his very identity as a critical educator and that his critical efforts were “stifled” by the constraints imposed by examination boards and assessment rubrics:

I find in a GCSE lesson, I lose a bit of my identity as a critical teacher that I so easily can take when I'm teaching key stage three or A-level you know? ... Like I just revert to this kind of weird language police and just don't get any chance to talk about, like any of the things that are so important and interesting with language ... the exams, the rigid assessment, just so stifling. (Amir)

We see this strand of our data as contributing to a wider voice which is dissatisfied with the content of the GCSE curriculum in England and how this has simultaneously increased accountability pressures on teachers and curtailed pedagogical autonomy (e.g., Towers et al., 2022). Whilst Key Stages 3 and 5 represented cracks in the system which allowed for more critical efforts (Weber, 1997), this section has stressed that teachers undoubtedly work in a system where cracks are increasingly difficult to find, and that various obstacles pose significant challenges to counter-ing language discrimination in schools.

## Conclusions: A typology for anti-language discrimination efforts

Teachers have long been at the forefront of efforts to challenge language discrimination in schools. In this final section we present a typology for anti-language discrimination efforts, in the hope that this will inform future efforts across different educational settings. Our typology is organised around seven core characteristics:

1. **Building on the past.** Teachers saw their work as building on previous efforts and took inspiration from these in their own contemporary work. They paid attention to the long histories of language activist work in schools.
2. **Research informed.** Teachers grounded their work in a broad research base, including recent developments within critical applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and the sociology of education. They questioned mainstream narratives of “the evidence base” and drew on radical, critical scholarship.
3. **Identity and positionality.** Teachers held a clear identity and stance as a critical educator. They reflected on their own positionality in terms of intersectional privilege and marginalisation. These stances centred issues of power, race, and class at the forefront of how teachers made decisions.
4. **Cross movement solidarity.** Teachers saw linguistic justice as connected to broader social justice efforts, such as racial justice, disability justice, anti-stigma campaigning, and anti-colonial efforts.
5. **Community organising.** Teachers' efforts were not individual ones but flourished through their active involvement in a like-minded community. This fostered group solidarity and a sense of community organising in engaging in anti-language discrimination efforts.
6. **Institutional support.** Teachers being provided with departmental and institutional support meant that anti-language discrimination efforts became part of the fabric of school life, and were located within broader anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist efforts. This support was material in nature, with teachers provided with time, funding, school visibility, and managerial approval.



7. **Contextual alignment.** Teachers adapted critical work to the political economy, racial demographics, and historical struggles of the local community. This type of anti-language discrimination work paid close attention to the specific injustices that students in schools were experiencing more broadly, but also to the longer histories of discrimination, activism, and resistance efforts that had taken place within the local community.

With these conditions in mind, we stress that the strongest anti-language discrimination efforts were those that did not simply focus on language. As Flores and Chaparro (2018) note, however, 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” (p. 381). Put another way, anti-language discrimination efforts must always take place in dialogue with broader, anti-stigma campaigning and cross movement organising. We also want to stress that although our typology emerged from the work that English teachers were doing, *all* teachers and senior managers have a responsibility to engage in anti-language discrimination efforts. We also want to stress that although our typology emerged from work in England, we see it as being applicable to other settings. However, we want to warn against any application of the typology which fails to be sensitive to the specific geopolitical contexts in which it is used, and the racial/class dynamics which are particular to these contexts. Language stigma and discrimination take different shapes across different contexts and our typology is presented as flexible enough to attend to the specificities of these and avoid pitfalls of genericism.

Whilst we are not suggesting that teachers alone can or should hope to dismantle structural inequalities, we do suggest that teachers have a role to play in exposing how language in/difference is part of systemic injustices in their schools and classrooms. Indeed, England has a long history of teacher-activists, parents, and community organisations doing this very thing (Gerrard, 2014). In focusing in on these historical and structural processes, schools can interrogate their own complicity in reproducing racial and class hierarchies whilst also taking a critical stance on the top-down language policies they are under pressure to conform with. These efforts, as the teachers in this study showed us, must go beyond simply validating and legitimising 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.

## Notes

1. General Certificate of Secondary Education. GCSE qualifications in English (Language and Literature) are compulsory for all students in England.

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