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Follow the Word Gap: The Social Life of a Deficit Concept

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ABSTRACT

This article uses a 'follow the thing' methodology to trace the trajectory of the so-called word gap from its original conception in 1990s US academic knowledge production through to a teacher education programme and three schools in the north of England, in the mid-2020s. It focuses on one teacher's first encounters, reproduction, and ultimately rejection of the word gap. Far from an individual narrative, I use this example to tell a broader story of how global ideologies of linguistic deficit come to materialize in classrooms and restrict pedagogical autonomy. My methodological approach in this paper is purposefully diverse—a methodological mash up which draws from critical geographies, ethnography of language policy, critical applied linguistics, and the critical sociology of education. I show how a single named linguistic concept invented 30 years ago in the US continues to have a powerful influence in contemporary classrooms over 4000 miles away, whilst generating economic profit for its inventors, supporters, exporters, and suppliers. Put another way, I document the social life of the word gap as a concept which has far spatiotemporal reaches and is a core part of the globalized industry of deficit thinking more broadly.

1 | Welcome to the Word Gap

On the 31 July 1995, the so-called word gap formally entered the world. Its creators, two white US-based psychologists, Betty Hart and Todd Risley, first presented it in *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*—a book that has gone on to achieve canonical status, with researchers, policy makers, and US presidents[1] citing its core claim that children from socioeconomically deprived families hear and produce language that is both lower in quality and quantity than children from more privileged backgrounds. Over 2 years in the 1980s, Hart and Risley made monthly 1 h observations and recordings of 42 families from four different socioeconomic backgrounds, tracking children as they grew from 1 to 3 years of age. They calculated the average number of words spoken by the primary caregiver to a focal child in each socioeconomic group and then extrapolated from this average to estimate that by the age of four, children in the least privileged socioeconomic conditions will hear 30-million fewer words than those in the most affluent

conditions. This statistically constructed 30-million figure is, they claim, the "word gap".

The alleged word gap is about both class and race. In the 42 families from Hart & Risley's study, all six in the lowest socioeconomic category were African American, whilst all but one of the families in the most privileged group were white. Hart and Risley (1995: 120) claimed that whilst children from privileged families hear language that is "enriched", poor children hear language that is "impoverished". These claims were, and continue to be, used to justify early and urgent intervention in addressing these purported deficiencies to "close the gap". To do so, Hart & Risley hypothesized that the average working-class child would require 41 h per week of "out-of-home experience as rich in words addressed to the child as that in an average professional home" (ibid., 201) in order to "change the developmental trajectory" (ibid,12) and socialize families out of these allegedly linguistically impoverished environments. As per classic deficit thinking, Hart & Risley pay

scant attention to any structural determinants of injustice, reproducing a victim blaming narrative which frames irresponsible parenting as the root cause of educational struggles (Ryan 1971; Valencia 2010).

Multiple critiques of the word gap have focused on its narrow conceptualisation of language, its methodological biases, its flawed theories of social justice, its stigmatization of marginalized families, and its powerful ability to influence educational practice (e.g., Aggarwal 2016; Allen and Spencer 2022; Avineri et al. 2015; Baugh 2017; Blum 2017; Burnett et al. 2025; Cushing 2023; Dudley-Marling and Lucas 2009; Figueora 2024; Garćia and Otheguy 2017; Johnson and Johnson 2021). In their life story of the word gap, Miller et al. (2024) track its movement over time and space, exposing it as a stubborn ideology with a "fixation on the language defects of marginalised families" (ibid., 1222). They describe it as "the most prominent deficit discourse of the contemporary era", which.

> Stigmatizes marginalized young children and operates at multiple interconnected levels of context (child development research, educational policy, popular media, and schools) to erase their voices and perpetuate inequalities of class and race.
>
> (Miller et al. 2024: 1219).

Sperry et al.'s (2019) failed replication of Hart & Risley's study showed not just an absence of any vocabulary deficiency in working-class homes, but that some lower-income children hear *more* words than in economically privileged families, and that there is substantial variation across different groups. This nuanced, context-sensitive, and asset-based approach to linguistic usage in working-class families is characteristic of ethnographic work which has consistently challenged discourses of deficit by demonstrating the linguistic proficiencies of children who have been written off by word gap narratives (e.g., Adair et al. 2017; Dyson 2021).

Despite robust critiques of the word gap, its academic and political muscle perseveres. In England, which I focus on in this article, word gap ideologies and narratives of linguistic deficit continue to be uncritically reproduced by academics and policy makers alike (e.g., Department for Education 2023; Hulme et al. 2025; Ofsted 2022). Cushing (2023) presents a genealogy of how the word gap came to be embedded into England's education policy system. This locates its ideological roots within white European colonial framings of language and then traces it through to the first major wave of deficit thinking in the 1960s and into the 2010s, where it became popularized by bipartisan policy makers as a means to deflect attention away from the harms of austerity. The word gap was aggressively imported into England's education system around 2017, at the center of a cluster of government initiatives which sought to tackle social inequality by modifying the linguistic behaviors of marginalized parents and their young children (see also Lewis and Hogan 2016). In 2018, both Alex Quigley's *Closing the Vocabulary Gap* (Quigley 2018) and a report from Oxford University Press *Why Closing the Word Gap Matters* further propelled and normalized the word gap into schools, nurseries, and teacher education programs. Around the same time, it became an increasingly central component of

Ofsted[2] policy, being named in its inspection methodologies, school inspection reports, and underpinning research (e.g., Ofsted 2019, 2022).

The story of the word gap in Cushing (2023) focused on its trajectory into England's political discourse, policy documents, and teacher textbooks. Here I pick up that narrative and follow the word gap into classrooms, in both teacher education programs and schools.

2 | Following Things

Follow the thing is a methodology originally developed within critical geographies to trace the physical and temporal journey of a product (especially food) across global flows, trajectories, paths, and borders. Requiring detective-like work, it renders visible often unseen journeys, roots, and destinations, and the different actors and institutions who determine complex directions of travel. Follow the thing methodologies have traced the global movements of everyday objects, such as papayas (Cook et al. 2004), t-shirts (Rivoli 2006), flip-flops (Knowles 2014), hot pepper sauce (Cook and Harrison 2007), grain (Pereira 2021), donated blood (Sodero 2018), bargain store products (Hulme 2015), data (Akbari 2020), and money (Christophers 2011). This scholarship has revealed the socio-spatial biographies of unremarkable objects and highlighted their social lives, especially when they become commodified and exchanged (Appadurai 1986). Ultimately, follow the thing methodologies seek to expose often unethical, unjust practices concerned with the global movement of objects, in the pursuit of more socially just trade.

Follow the thing methodologies share some parallels with follow the policy methodologies (e.g., Ball 2016; Peck and Theodore 2012), in terms of tracing how educational policies circulate and move across geographical borders, and which people and institutions play an active role in the routes they take. Critical policy mobilities research more broadly (e.g., Savage et al. 2021) seeks to map, understand, and assess the activities of policy designers and their influence over educational reforms. For example, Burnett et al. (2025) deploy a policy mobilities methodology to trace the momentum of literacy initiatives framed by policy makers as "evidence-informed"— including the word gap—which they argue is a catchy and "tweetable phrase that can carry easily to time poor, policy hungry government advisers and educational leaders" (ibid., 48). Burnett et al.'s work shows the resilience of the word gap as it is circulated across time and space (especially the digital space of social media), acquiring a persuasive presence and projecting an "unassailable truth" about the home language practices of marginalized families which casts them as deficient and in need of intervention. In short, the word gap gets taken up by policy makers and schools because it presents a seemingly simple solution to a complex problem under a guise of objectivity, science, research, and evidence. Mobilities methodologies can thus help to reveal the often-hidden connections and trajectories by which academic concepts come to shape decisions made by schools, even when those very same academic concepts—such as the word gap—have been repeatedly debunked.

3 | Following the Word Gap

Here I use a follow the thing methodology to follow the abstract yet pervasive concept of the word gap—an idea invented in 1990s academic knowledge production—and trace its social life from academic theorizing through to classrooms. As per conventionalised follow the thing methodologies, I use a multi-sited ethnographic approach to do so, moving rapidly between my own observations, fieldnotes, recordings of conversations, photographs, and screenshots. This took place over 3 years, between October 2021 and May 2024. I focused primarily on a single teacher's encounters with the word gap, Jamie, who I will introduce shortly. This builds on ethnographic scholarship which traces teachers' practice from teacher education into classrooms, especially in how they grapple with issues of social in/justice (e.g., Aronson 2020), and in tracing connections across micro-level classroom practices with macro-level language policies and ideologies (Johnson 2009).

Year 1 focused on Jamie's experiences of a university-based teacher education programme in England, including a school experience placement. Year 2 focused on Jamie's first job as a teacher. Year 3 focused on Jamie's second job, in a different school. What follows then, is a detailed case study of how the word gap surfaces and shifts in the life of one teacher's early career. Far from just an individual narrative, Jamie's experiences are reflective of a much broader, international story about a "deficit concept in motion" (Miller et al. 2024; see also Innes 2024 for how the word gap comes alive in schools). In subsequent pages, I follow the word gap through time and space: ideas shipped across transatlantic internet networks, university reading lists, Twitter/X algorithms, the education publishing industry, school policies, boardrooms, staffrooms, and ultimately, classroom decisions. The point here is to give a sense of the journey that the word gap takes through multiple physical and digital spaces, to paint a narrative of how it contacts and affects teachers' lives, and changes their practices and politics. As I will show, the protagonist teacher of this story *did* have their practices and politics radically changed about the word gap, in how they developed a critical awareness of the concept itself, and how their working conditions changed from those of compliance and surveillance towards agency and choice.

The project received ethical approval from my university, and all names and names of schools are anonymised. Throughout this fieldwork, I took extensive notes based on multiple visits to each focal school, 15 in-depth conversations with Jamie lasting an average of 40 min each, and 9 observations of Jamie teaching (3 in each school). Jamie declined to be a co-author on this article, although he read and approved a draft copy of the manuscript, where I asked him to check that it properly represented his experiences. He is the "et al" on this article.

Finally, a note on following an abstract concept, given that the bulk of follow the thing methodologies have focused on the tracing of material objects, especially food. Yet abstract concepts also have social lives. And whilst the word gap is quite clearly not an item of food, it is often presented as a substitute for food. For example, in the UK, the *Hungry Little Minds* public health programme draws on a words-as-nutrition metaphor to frame an alleged lack of vocabulary as a physical detriment and

a public health issue (see also Johnson 2021, 90–92; Karrabæk et al. 2018). State discourse in the US frames the alleged lack of exposure to enough words as putting children at risk of "not getting the nourishment they need" (e.g., Clinton Foundation 2013). I argue that at a time when food poverty and food banks in schools are increasingly normalized (Bradbury and Vince 2025), the words-as-nutrition metaphor is no accident, but a discursive strategy mobilized by the state to shift attention away from the systems that create food poverty. Running with this metaphor in order to critique it, in the sections that follow I present a focused exploration of an individual "consumer" who had to navigate various word gap "products". This consumer is Jamie, who I now introduce as the main character in this story.

4 | Jamie

I first met Jamie when I taught him on a university-based initial teacher education (ITE) programme. In England, ITE programmes last around 9 months and include a mix of university seminars and two school experience placements. As will become clear, England's ITE is "the most tightly regulated and centrally controlled system of initial teacher education anywhere in the world" (Ellis and Childs 2023: 2), with teacher education providers having to demonstrate complicity with a host of government prescribed curricula, inspection regimes, and professional standards.

A 20-year-old, white, gay, male, Jamie was the first of his family to go to university. He grew up not far from the university that I taught him at. His father ran a window cleaning business, and his mother worked in a post office. Jamie was training to be a secondary English teacher, motivated to do so because of a general interest in literature, but also because he "didn't know what else to do" (fieldnotes, Nov 21). He worked hard, had received good grades throughout school, took copious notes during seminars, always did the assigned reading, and often stayed behind to ask further questions, long after his peers had left. He was curious, not particularly political, and often talked about content he had seen on social media, particularly #EduTwitter—a large online community of teachers and consultants, often marked by its heated debates, a dominance of white male voices, and tendencies for populist thinking (Watson 2021). At times, the influence of #EduTwitter conversations on his thinking—including about the word gap—arrived into our seminar rooms. Like many of his peers, Jamie often bought into and reproduced deficit ideologies about language, believing that a core part of his job as an English teacher was to compensate working-class children for what he described as "limited language at home" (fieldnotes, Oct 21).

Whilst I asked all students in Jamie's cohort to be on the lookout for encounters with the word gap, I focus on Jamie's experiences because he represents a teacher whose views significantly changed over time, from socially reproductive to socially transformative. His story represents two things: a teacher's absorption of deficit thinking and their ability to push back. Put another way, following the word gap involves following not just its embeddedness into classrooms, but its rejection. Although my focus is on a single teacher, Jamie's experiences are indicative of a much larger, global system of teachers and their complex relationships with deficit thinking, its consumption, and its resistance.

5 | First Encounters

One of the first modules that Jamie took during his teacher education programme was a general pedagogy module, which brought together students from different subject specialisms. In this same semester, he also took a specialist module on language and education, which I led. At the end of week three of that unit, I briefly introduced students to the notion of deficit thinking, focusing particularly on the word gap, in preparation for a dedicated class on it in week four. But students told me that they had already covered this in their general module and that they already knew all about it. Intrigued, I asked what they knew about the word gap. Jamie and others told me it was to do with how children from disadvantaged backgrounds lacked depth and breadth of vocabulary, typically due to poor parenting skills, little interest in reading, and too much time looking at screens. I asked what this meant for their role as teachers, to which they replied that filling vocabulary gaps was part of their professional responsibilities, to make up for what they had been told was absent from home (fieldwork notes, Oct 21). I asked them whether they had been taught about the methodological and conceptual issues with Hart & Risley's study. They shook their heads. Some looked intrigued. Some looked bored. Some shifted uncomfortably and appeared embarrassed that they had not thought to question what they had been taught.

In short, pre-service teachers' first encounters with the word gap were part of a broader deficit narrative about working-class families, and these narratives were eagerly reproduced by most (but not all), in a way which primed them to listen out for and intervene in perceived linguistic deficiencies. Deficit perspectives encourage teachers to listen with filters of correctness (Winn 2018: 221), socializing new teachers into the belief that there are linguistic shortcomings which warrant urgent attention. Jamie was one of those teachers. In our seminars, he was often quick to defend the idea that a core part of an English teacher's role was to provide children with the language they allegedly lacked, as part of wider efforts to tackle barriers in opportunities (fieldwork notes, Nov 21). He often expressed frustration at discussions around long-term goals for linguistic justice, seeming to prefer solutions that were immediate and pragmatic, but ultimately would not address the root cause of educational inequity.

Jamie told me that these views had been largely shaped by his reading about the word gap, particularly Alex Quigley's (2018) book *Closing the Vocabulary Gap*. This had been assigned as essential reading in his general pedagogy unit. Quigley's book continues to be a dominant force in the mobilization of the word gap into schools, achieving high sales and ongoing promotion from its publisher, Routledge. It is commonly named on school literacy policies as underpinning "research". This was the case for one of the settings that Jamie completed a 6-month school placement in, which I return to shortly. I have critiqued Quigley's work elsewhere (Cushing 2023), for its misleading representation of Hart and Risley's (1995) study, its reproduction of deficit thinking, its guises of benevolence, and its reliance on flawed theories of social justice which frame the acquisition of more words as a panacea for structural inequalities. For example, Quigley (2018: 2) claims that "there are then thousands of small solutions to the damaging inequalities that we observe in our society and in our classrooms, and they can be found in the English dictionary". In different words but subscribing to the same logic, Jamie felt the same—he told me

that "giving better vocabulary to poorer children was an important way for them to succeed in life" (fieldwork notes, Nov 21). Later in the academic year, some students heard Quigley present his ideas about the word gap at a popular teacher conference, *ResearchED* (see Gillborn et al. 2022 for a critique of the *ResearchED* organization and its dense network of policy influencers). The lecturer who had assigned *Closing the Vocabulary Gap* had first encountered it through Twitter/X, itself an important conduit through which teachers and academics discover ideas and readings about literacy initiatives (see Burnett et al. 2025). Without a doubt, Quigley's book is a core mechanism by which word gap narratives come to take grip in classrooms and teacher education programmes.

The point here is that Jamie's first encounters with the word gap were uncritical and shaped by a dominant narrative of linguistic deficit—consistent with how deficit thinking "renders individuals and communities as the problem—deficient or dysfunctional—rather than addressing the relevant pressing social or educational problems" (Gutiérrez et al. 2017: 32). His story is not uncommon, but is the norm, and individual lecturers are by no means to blame for how such ideologies get transmitted. My argument here is not to point fingers at colleagues, but to question how discriminatory and deficit-based linguistic concepts come to be taken up uncritically in universities.

My role in week four of my unit then was to provide a counternarrative, to present a more critical perspective on the word gap and try to undo some of the ideologies that Jamie and his class had been first exposed to. Put differently, the following of the word gap became more complex as it began to take on different meanings, interpretations, and conceptual paths. Through accessible critiques (e.g., Flores 2018), we talked through the origins of the word gap as a named concept, its flawed methodologies, and the deficit assumptions it makes of marginalized communities. At the end of that week and knowing that students had now received different versions of the word gap story, I asked them to write a short reflection and upload it to our class forum. Jamie's entry revealed how he was struggling to work out which word gap narrative to buy into, whilst also being confused at how the word gap had become such a powerful presence given its inherent biases and flaws:

> I now know the word gap isn't as innocent as we were first told, but I don't understand how if this is the case, it has got to be such an influential thing in schools. Surely vocab teaching is a good thing?
>
> (Jamie's reflection log; Nov 21)

The word gap showed up in other parts of the university, far beyond individual seminar rooms. It was named as part of the teacher education programme's curriculum documents, which were being re-written in preparation for an imminent Ofsted inspection. Since around 2017, Ofsted's policies have become increasingly aligned with word gap narratives, with regular references to Hart & Risley's study as "evidence" for what Ofsted calls its "underpinning research" (e.g., Ofsted 2019, 2022). As part of its inspections of teacher education programmes, Ofsted assess the extent to which an institution is demonstrating "fidelity" with the Core Content Framework (CCF) (DfE 2019), the government mandated content for all teacher education programmes in England. The

CCF makes no explicit reference to the word gap, but does place an overt focus on "high-utility" vocabulary and "high-quality" language, as part of its deficit stances on language more broadly (see Cushing 2023). Staff including me, and students including Jamie, had been prepped by management to talk positively about how their university programme was aligned to the CCF should they be interviewed during an Ofsted inspection. This is common practice across many teacher education programmes, as academics are put under pressure to exhibit institutional complicity with state ideologies, even when those ideologies are at odds with what teacher educators genuinely believe (see Mutton and Burn 2024).

Whilst I am critical of teacher education programmes and academics who actively reproduce deficit thinking in their curriculum materials, my larger critique is towards state power and how the state possesses the ability to coerce universities into pedagogical conformity. The word gap is simply one example of how these processes take place, amidst a broader environment of a highly prescriptive and authoritarian teacher education system which is eradicating professional agency under the guise of raising standards (Ellis and Childs 2023). The next part of the story begins to examine how schools feature in these processes, especially those which are characterized by high levels of teacher compliance, standardization, and surveillance.

6 | Pressures to Reproduce Word Gap Narratives

A couple of months into his teacher education program, Jamie began a school experience placement, spending 4 days a week in a local school, Park High. The school had a racially and linguistically diverse community, with around 30% of students categorized as eligible for Free School Meals.

Prior to starting placement, students did some online investigative work about their allocated schools, including looking at key documents such as the literary policy, curricula plans, and recent Ofsted inspection reports. Jamie focused his searches on the word gap, building a picture of a school who were placing an intense focus on vocabulary. For example, the literacy policy stated that "we are committed to closing the word gap [...] a child cannot engage in school if they have limited language [...] we should all support our students by modelling academic vocabulary and ensuring that students do the same". This was "supported" by a reference to Hart & Risley, and their central claim that by the age of four, racially marginalized children who live in poverty will hear 30-million fewer words than white, middle-class children.

The school's most recent Ofsted report praised teachers for "modelling key vocabulary", and the English curriculum overviews included dedicated sections on specific vocabulary items to be taught and tested each term. Whilst Jamie reported that the focus on vocabulary "felt a bit much", he also praised the school in "tackling issues of vocabulary head-on" (fieldwork notes, Nov 21). Jamie made these comments before he had met any students from the school, and appeared primed to spot and close "vocabulary issues" and word gaps that he did not even know existed. To be clear: I am not suggesting that teachers should not bother teaching vocabulary. But, as was the case in Jamie's placement school, a policy agenda driven by alleged word gaps has encouraged school leaders to place a disproportionate focus on vocabulary under pretenses of "evidence" and social justice.

Upon starting his placement, Jamie found that the school's intense focus on vocabulary in curriculum and policy documents did indeed play out in practice. All[3] teachers in his department were required to begin lessons with a sequence of explicit vocabulary instruction, teaching words to 11-year-olds which included "incredulous", "surreptitious", "naïve", "exasperated", and "transaction". Jamie told me that his head of department wanted to teach ten new words a week, but it was unclear where this arbitrary number had come from or what the point of this was (fieldwork notes, Nov 21). These words were taught out of context, focused on dictionary meanings, and exemplified with invented sentences such as "The boy was incredulous that his team would ever win the championship". Although Jamie was skeptical that this kind of teaching was having any value, practice like this was praised by both Jamie's mentor and his university tutor who came to visit him on placement, with lesson feedback including comments such as "developing excellent teaching in relation to vocabulary and addressing vocabulary deficits" (fieldwork notes, Dec 21).

At the time, Jamie had no idea how these weekly words were selected for teaching. He discovered the answer to this towards the end of his placement, sending me an email with the subject "thought you might be interested in this", and an attached image, which I show here (Figure 1).
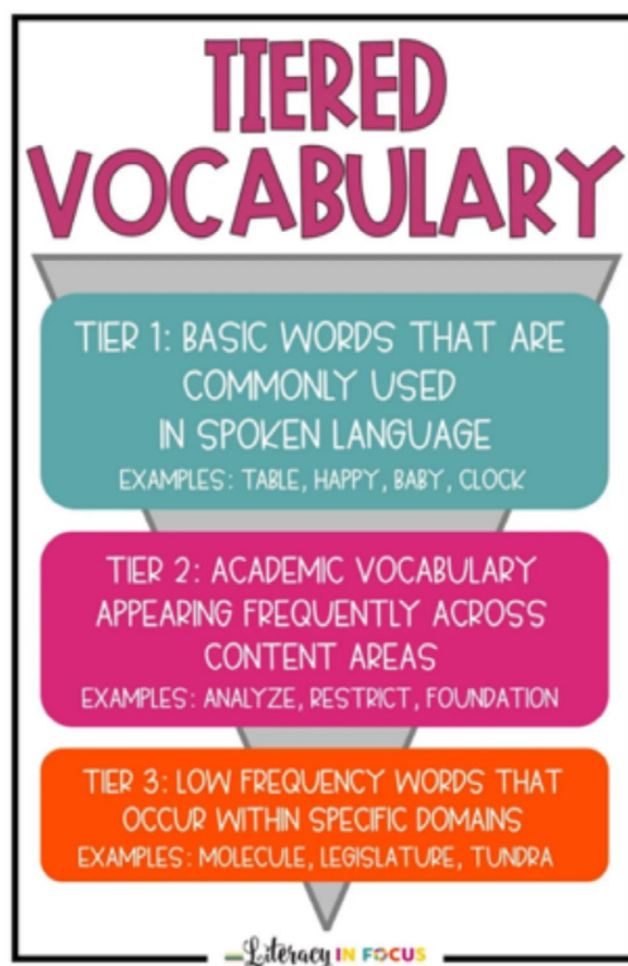

FIGURE 1 | Tiered vocabulary.

Jamie had taken this image, originally from the educational resource website *Literacy in Focus*, from an all-staff email sent by the school's Research Lead[4], as part of a series on "bitesize research". I asked Jamie if he knew where the concept of "tiered vocabulary" came from. He had no idea, and had not been told by his school's Research Lead. In previous work (Cushing 2024) I showed how the notion of vocabulary tiers, much like the word gap, has its roots in academic work from the 1980s and emerged from deficit, anti-Black ideologies and methodologies about low-income African American families' language (Beck and McKeown 1985). In that work, I also critiqued the central thesis of the vocabulary tiers framework, namely the claim that individual words can be organized into neat categories based on allegedly objective qualities such as simplicity, complexity, use-fulness, size, and importance. But much like their subscriptions to the word gap, Jamie's school were seemingly not interested in how the literacy frameworks they were so reliant on emerged from deficit thinking about working-class families. Indeed, Jamie was told by senior leaders that the word gap and vocabulary tiers represented the "best evidence we have" for whole-school literacy practices (fieldwork notes, February 22).

So, during his placement, Jamie was repeatedly instructed to focus on "tier two" words due to their "academic importance" and that "tier one" words should be discouraged from the classroom because they were "often basic" and "lacked usefulness." His mentor told him this was in line with best practice and current thinking in vocabulary teaching (fieldwork notes, March 22). Yet to the best of his knowledge, not a single student had used "incredulous" "surreptitious" "naïve" exasperated and "transaction" since he had been asked to teach them. None of these words appeared to be "useful" or "important" in the lives of the children who Jamie was teaching.

Whilst Jamie expressed growing discomfort around the idea of vocabulary tiers and the suggestion from his school that he should police so-called "non-academic language" (see Flores 2020), he was under intense amounts of pressure to exhibit pedagogical conformity to the school. This pressure came most immediately from his mentor, who observed every lesson he taught and checked the copious amounts of paperwork he had to produce. But this mentorship was itself shaped by broader school initiatives, which were themselves shaped by broader policy movements and the politics of teacher education. Jamie was fearful of being seen to provoke leadership by questioning their policies, but also fearful of not passing his teacher education programme by failing to meet state standards (fieldwork notes, March 22; see Roberts and Graham (2008) for a broader discussion on conformity in teacher education).

The word gap arrived into a teacher education programme in complex ways—Jamie's encounters with it were shaped by a layered arrangement of local and national initiatives, which he had little power to resist given the oft-subordinated status of pre-service teachers in relation to their mentors (Edwards and Protheroe 2004). By the end of his teacher education programme, Jamie's views on the word gap remained conflicted. Exposed to different versions of the word gap story, he had encountered firsthand institutional pressures to subscribe to a deficit narrative of marginalized children's linguistic abilities.

These pressures only increased once he got his first teaching job.

7 | Scripting the Word Gap

Jamie's first paid teaching role was an 11-month maternity cover post in an academy school, Grasslands Academy, on the opposite side of the city to where his placement school had been, but serving a similar demographic of working-class and racially diverse children. Academies are state-funded schools that are independent from local authorities, typically overseen by boards of trustees, and typically part of multi-academy trusts (MAT). A body of work (e.g., Pennington et al. 2024; Reay 2025) has critiqued academies for their neoliberal policy making, the standardization of pedagogies, punitive discipline policies, and their reproduction of deficit thinking through individualistic narratives of grit and resilience. Whilst academies are by no means the only type of school where word gap trajectories are accelerated, in this section I show how they are particularly important sites of its journey into classrooms.

Over 11 months, Jamie's encounters with the word gap intensified as he was put under increasing amounts of institutional pressure to reproduce its logics in his own classroom. In the first few weeks of his new job, he told me that "he thought his placement had been obsessed with vocabulary, but his new school was on another level" (fieldwork notes, Sept 22). This obsession with vocabulary was not just confined to the individual academy but was part of broader MAT literacy initiatives. Concerned by what MAT leaders had described as "the startlingly low levels of language that some children in our community have, particularly those from language-poor homes" (fieldwork notes, Oct 22), in recent years the MAT had installed various new policies which further positioned teachers as fillers of word gaps. One of the most influential of these had been standardized curricula, which were produced at the level of the MAT and rolled out across specific academies within this. These curricula were captured in printed booklets, given to every student, and followed meticulously during lessons.

The standardized curricula that Jamie had to use placed an intense focus on what it called "academic vocabulary". Similar to his placement school, most lessons began with a section on decontextualised vocabulary instruction, relying exclusively on a book *Building Brilliant Vocabulary*: *60 Lessons to Close the Word Gap in Key Stage 3* (Ashford 2020). Like Quigley (2018), Ashford's book subscribes heavily to Hart & Risley, along with a theory of change which sees the acquisition of more and "better" words as a core tool in enabling social justice. She states:

> Time and time again, we have seen that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to grow up in language-rich environments [...]. The famous and oft-cited Hart and Risley study suggested that children from professional families heard 32 million words more than their disadvantaged peers before the age of four, and that this gap—more than anything else—predicted

differences in achievement in later life. Without a strong foundational vocabulary, young people struggle to succeed in life. This is tragic.

(Ashford 2020: 4).

By this time, Jamie had started to feel deeply uncomfortable about this narrative, developing a more structural view of injustice that focused not on alleged linguistic deficiencies located in individuals, but on the systemic conditions of oppression that many of his students were experiencing (see also Aronson 2020). He was beginning to shift his position away from the linguistic remediator that he had been encouraged to take up by school, yet the pedagogical decisions he had available to him continued to be controlled and managed by others.

We met for a coffee. Jamie told me how he felt "embarrassed to be using materials which peddled ideas about vocabulary and social justice... that if his students were to see this they would be like yeah right, so all I need to do to get rich is just use more words?" (fieldwork notes, Jan 23). This felt like a very different Jamie to the one I first met. He described this shift in perspective as primarily shaped through the way that he listened to children use language—he noticed their linguistic creativity, their ability to use "complex" vocabulary, their rhetorical strategies. Put simply, he noticed that the children he taught could do all the things with language that the school had decided they could not (see Dyson 2021).

But despite his discomfort with the standardized materials and the word gap narratives they promoted, he had little choice but to conform and follow. There were few, if any, opportunities to resist. The word gap remained intact, stubborn, and thrived as part of a managerial narrative that there existed a "school wide endemic of poor vocabulary" propelled by a "lack of verbal stimulation in many homes" (fieldwork notes, Jan 23), that students benefitted from consistency, and that teachers needed help to deliver a demanding national curriculum. Jamie's academy policed the use of standardized curricula in ways which "felt like you were being watched and checked on all the time" (fieldwork notes, Jan 23). For example, Jamie had to regularly report (often every day) to his head of department and early career mentor that he was "on track" with the standardized curricula. He felt

that much of the feedback he received on his teaching focused primarily on how precise his alignment with the standardized lessons was. As the year went on, Jamie reported increasing levels of frustration as he felt his pedagogical expertise, creativity, and agency being eroded (fieldwork notes, March 23). Jamie's experience is very similar to those reported in Trainanou et al. (2025), who critique the increasing prevalence of standardized curricula, particularly in MATs. Although often justified by school leaders as a means to reduce workload and ensure consistency, Traianou et al. show how the use of standardized curricula does not in fact alleviate workload, but certainly does reduce pedagogical autonomy and sense of professional identity.

Halfway through the school year, all staff took part in a compulsory professional development session on spoken language. I was also given permission to attend, but politely asked by a senior leader to not ask any questions[5]. This was, in part, in response to a renewed attention on spoken language in national policy. Letters went home to parents, informing them of the school's commitment to "developing our staff on pressing educational issues using the latest available research". The session was led by an educational consultant, and included a section called "closing the vocabulary gap through talk". The consultant framed this section in reference to various studies and reports—including Hart & Risley—but also an ongoing campaign led produced by Oxford University Press on the word gap. This was described through a language of "research", "evidence-led", and "science", presenting the word gap as a credible, robust, and objective concept grounded in sound academic scholarship.

The consultant's introductory slide had the title "Let this sink in...", followed by the proclamation that "by the age of 3, there is a 30-million word gap between children from the wealthiest and poorest families". A reference to Hart & Risley followed, and then, in large red text, "without the right words, the most disadvantaged children in our schools are at risk of getting left behind". Word gap narratives were here presented as part of a moral panic to address "at risk" children—a race and class evasive codeword which reproduces discourses of cultural deficit (Ladson-Billings 2021). Under this text was a large image, taken from an Oxford University Press report on the word gap. It is reproduced in Figure 2, where vocabulary

FIGURE 2 | Falling down the word gap.

knowledge is located as the sole reason for educational struggles and progress.

Marginalized children are framed here as victims who lack the adequate language needed for school—written off before they have even had a chance to open their mouths. The training paid no attention to the systemic injustices that shape marginalized families' lives, and instead, located faults within inadequate parenting skills and home environments which were allegedly devoid of linguistic stimulation (Allen and Spencer 2022). These victim blaming narratives and demonization of working-class parents are a common trope of word gap ideologies, in framing language as the primary challenge that marginalized communities face, and thus posing linguistic solutions as the remedy for social injustices (Cushing 2023; Johnson and Johnson 2021). Yet the word gap is big business for educational consultants (see for example Gross 2021), who capitalize on a global industry built on broader ideologies of linguistic deficit. Money gets exchanged between schools, multi-academy trusts, and educational consultants. The word gap gets commodified, packaged, sold, and consumed as part of a trade route through which deficit thinking gets bought into classrooms (see also Holborow 2018).

By now, Jamie felt deeply troubled at how word gap initiatives were positioning him not as a teacher, but as a remediator whose role was to intervene on arbitrary and mythical linguistic shortcomings. But powerless to speak back given his subordinated status as a precariously employed, early career teacher[6], he had little choice but to continue with the school's favored pedagogy, curriculum packages, scripted resources, and pre-printed booklets. He turned down the offer of a contract extension, desperate to escape what he described as a "controlling and toxic environment" (fieldwork notes, May 23). His next job offered something radically different.

8 | Derailing the Word Gap

At the end of his maternity cover post, Jamie secured a job in a new school, Meadows High School, a few miles north of the city centre. A "proper comprehensive," he called it. The school was diverse in its truest sense—over 40 languages spoken, a roughly equal mixture of white, Asian, and Black children, coming from homes including Edwardian semis on leafy streets and a large tower block which dominated the local skyline. The school organized classes into mixed ability grouping, refusing to use ability-based "sets" or "tracks" because of how these reproduce existing racial and class-based injustices (Wallace 2023). Unlike Jamie's first two schools, management believed in the importance of professional autonomy, with teachers given freedom to engage in their preferred pedagogical style and to design their own curricula. For the first time in his career, Jamie worked alongside Black colleagues, including his head of department. The department enjoyed a productive and long-standing relationship with various subject associations, known for their critical approaches to English studies. Teachers in the department regularly attended subject association events and sometimes offered workshops. Two teachers were completing a part-time MA in Education and were focusing on issues of critical literacies and anti-racist English education. Bolstered by subject-specific

expertise and critical leadership, the department took an explicitly anti-deficit stance to language which sought to sustain the linguistic skills that all children naturally possessed (fieldwork notes, Oct 23; see for example Alim et al. 2020). Crucially, this anti-deficit perspective was actively supported and legitimized by school management—especially the headteacher, who had been in post for 15 years, was from the local area, and was deeply skeptical of policy reforms which paid little attention to structural injustices and the enduring effects of austerity on the school community (fieldwork notes, Nov 23).

Whilst the department's anti-deficit work materialized in different ways, here I focus on how they were resisting narratives of the word gap as part of this. The point here is to demonstrate that the trajectory of the word gap is not pre-determined, and here I follow the word gap to oblivion, at least in one school. In December 2023, I sat with Jamie and his head of department, Esther, who told me that "they were trying to eradicate the very idea of the word gap from the entire school", to "focus on the linguistic strengths of children rather than focusing on their apparent weaknesses", and to "reject teaching styles which placed an unnecessary importance on vocabulary alone". Esther had run whole-school training on asset-based pedagogies, which included a sharp critique and rejection of dominant word gap narratives. Jamie described to me how the very core of his teaching identity was being renewed, how he was now in a school doing things he'd always imagined English teaching to be, and crucially, how he felt that he could bring critical perspectives into discussions without fear of being silenced or sacked.

So in the lessons of Jamie's that I observed, they began not with a decontextualised list of so-called tier two vocabulary items to learn, but by students talking openly about language and literature, with Jamie offering prompts and follow-up questions where necessary. These discussions were lively and enthusiastic, with students encouraged to reflect on how their readings of texts were shaped by their own unique positionalities. For example, in one lesson with students aged 13–14, Jamie shared a recent news story about a school banning the use of local dialect. Students were critical of this, using complex vocabulary, translingual repertoires, multi-clause constructions, and rhetorical skills to convincingly argue that the dialect ban was not just about language but about power, stigma, race, class, and the reproduction of social norms. Jamie facilitated the discussion, gently introducing vocabulary into the discussion where necessary, in ways which built on the existing linguistic strengths of his students rather than seeing them as displaying gaps which needed closing. Jamie had no reason to pre-teach a list of vocabulary items to his class because many of them arrived at that class already possessing knowledge about the politics and policing of language due to their own lifeworlds and language socialization (Miller et al. 2024). One student, who was bilingual in Igbo and English, described the dialect ban policy as *mmegbu* (roughly translating as "oppression" or "repressive measures"), which she said reminded her of attempts to eradicate Indigenous languages in Nigeria during British colonialism (fieldwork notes, Jan 2024).

Instead of being positioned as a teacher who was primed to spot and fill alleged word gaps Jamie was positioned as a facilitator of classroom discussion who was primed to notice and build on existing linguistic strengths. This did not mean he

never taught vocabulary items—far from it. When required, Jamie taught the meaning of words, but in a way that emphasized their contested meanings and their power, and always contextualized within a text that his class was already looking at. There was no word gap to fill because there was no word gap.

9 | Where Next for the Word Gap?

This article has focused on the trajectory and supply chain of the word gap, but I encourage readers to see it as a critique of something much bigger: of neoliberal schooling, academisation, scripted curricula, standardized pedagogies, teacher surveillance, and the global industry of deficit thinking. In the first two schools that Jamie worked in, he was met with conditions that curtailed his autonomy and positioned him to reproduce word gap ideologies, with little choice to resist. In his third school—where he is still employed—he experiences conditions which allow him to develop his own pedagogical signature and engage in anti-deficit practices which sustain the linguistic abilities that children arrive at school with. Whilst I have focused on an individual teacher's encounters and negotiations with the word gap, the broader argument is that different environmental conditions of schools can either support or suppress the trajectory of deficit concepts (Burnett et al. 2025).

Scholarship in critical geographies which uses follow the thing methodologies has tended to focus on food products, tracing the global flows of growers, stockpiles, distributors, merchants, and consumers (Hulme 2017). I have shown how such methodologies allow for a holistic understanding of the global flows, sociospatial geographies, and social life of the so-called word gap. Whilst the word gap is clearly not an item of food, in this final section I use a food metaphor to both offer some discussion and make an intertextual connection to critical geographies scholarship, whilst also drawing further critical attention to the words-as-nutrition metaphor which often accompanies word gap discourses (Johnson and Johnson 2021).

The seed of the word gap lies in mid-90s academic knowledge production, from where it was grown and cultivated by educational psychologists, applied linguists, and policy makers. The word gap was allowed to blossom because of ideal environmental conditions—it appealed to policy makers because of how it shifted blame onto marginalized individuals and absolved state responsibility; it offered digestible headlines for journalists invested in moral panic narratives; it seemingly offered school leaders a perennial solution for educational injustices on a plate. Academics, journalists, policy makers, consultants, and teachers gave it the oxygen and fertilization it needed to reproduce and thrive.

Since the early 2020s at least, teacher education programmes in England's universities and schools have functioned as distribution centres that import and export the word gap through seminars, reading lists, and curricula. Some of these distributions offer critical perspectives that seek to stem the growth of the word gap, whilst some offer ways to support its propagation. Jamie's encounters with the word gap represent both sides of this story. He witnessed the marketisation of the word gap, in how it was packaged by corporations into off-the-shelf scripts and curricula, ready to be consumed and digested by teachers under a narrative that they lacked the time to properly prepare lessons, and that children were hungry for words. Like a ready meal. But he also encountered spaces that had developed an intolerance to the word gap, discarded and left to rot in favor of more organic and natural language pedagogies and policies.

Follow the thing methodologies help to expose often unjust practices concerned with the global movement of objects (and in the case of this article, ideas), allowing for a social understanding of how things end up where they do (Cook et al. 2004). In contemporary schooling and teacher education in England, the idea of the word gap is impossible to avoid. It is woven into the very fabric of education policy and classroom practices, to the extent that it can appear like an immovable object whose presence is held in place by multiple people, policies, texts, and ideologies. But its trajectory is not linear, nor is its presence fixed. Many teachers, now including Jamie, are doing what they can to reject a pervasive narrative that communities experiencing systemic inequality are simply in need of more words and better words. Whilst the word gap will eventually disappear from mainstream educational discourse and stop being the dominant deficit ideology of our time (Johnson and Johnson 2021), history reminds us that the shifting nature of deficit thinking means it will be replaced by something else. Whilst the labels might change, the underlying logics of deficit thinking have remained stubbornly consistent for centuries (Valencia 2010). When the word gap disappears, something else will fill the gap it leaves. To be continued…

Disclosure

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Ethics Statement

Ethics approval was obtained from the lead author's University's ethics committee. In-text statement: "The project received ethical approval from my university".

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

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Endnotes

[1] President Obama; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gu5P5NbGxEY.

[2] Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. Ofsted carry out regular inspections of all schools, nurseries and teacher education programmes in England. Given the material implications of inspection outcomes, Ofsted possess significant power in shaping what happens in schools, producing toxic and controlling environments for teachers (e.g., Calvert et al. 2025). My own collaborations (Cushing and Snell 2023) have shown how deficit thinking about language is a systemic and institutional design feature of Ofsted.

[3] All teachers were required to do it, but not all of them did. Jamie recalled how he saw more senior teachers ignore the requirement, whilst pre-service and early career teachers had their pedagogies policed by mentors and managers.

[4] Research Leads are increasingly common roles in schools, especially in the wake of the so-called "what works" or "evidence-led" movement for educational policy making, buttressed by organizations such as the Education Endowment Foundation. But "what works" is not of course an objective measurement of educational progress and often a proxy for benchmarks and standards built on normative whiteness (Cowen 2019).

[5] I was told the reason for this was because the session was aimed at staff, which I was not part of. But I suspect that management were also worried I might ask a "difficult question" and make things uncomfortable for the consultant. Around this time I also offered to lead a staff session on anti-deficit approaches to language education, but my offer was never taken up.

[6] Jamie did of course inhabit positions of power due to his whiteness. We discussed this a lot, including how he could use his racial privilege to speak out, especially given that his racially marginalized peers had talked about holding particular fears of speaking out about issues of race. But throughout his first job, Jamie felt uncomfortable in speaking out against institutional cultures and leadership because he was worried that the school might give him a bad reference when he came to apply for a new position.

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