



## FEATURE

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## A socio-linguistic theory of closing the gap in Scottish schools

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### Synopsis

Inequality in achievement in Scottish schools is argued to be caused in part by the process through which learning may take place, for example the medium of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Literacy Outcomes. In practice, and perhaps by implication, standard, sequenced middle-class discourse, be it Scots or English, may be presumed to be the assessed process of learning and thus provide a barrier. Alternatives are considered: radical, extra-curricular political groupings, supplemented by social media dialects; direct instruction of information as a stage sequence towards open, group discourse; subversion of standard language through consciousness of a continuum between radical dialect and standard form.

**Keywords:** inequality, CfE, literacy outcomes, social class, closing the gap, Scotland

In *De-schooling Society* Illich provides an engaging metaphor of public access to highways to represent unequal access to apparently equal contexts. "Like highways," he writes, "schools, at first glance, give the impression of being equally open to newcomers" (Illich, 1971, p.60). However, motor companies manipulate public taste in such a way that the need for transportation is expressed "as a demand for private cars rather than public buses". The result is payment for corporate "advertising and sales expenses, fuel, maintenance and parts, interest on credit", as well as less tangible costs like "loss of time, temper, and breathable air". In other words, highways are an apparently equitable public utility but where richer drivers have access to bigger and more cars, increased availability to accessories, and thus cause disproportionate environmental and social damage. We see this, of course, also in the use of learning contexts, especially in course work: increased access by middle class students, even in mixed comprehensive schools, to more and better books / resources, standard dialogue and targeted support, including private tuition, in order to further self-interest (Reay, 2017).

In Scotland's schools the difficulty, importance and challenge in closing the achievement gap are well documented. Vocabulary in such a context is a key issue for Quigley (2018), who develops the same point as Illich – that access to language is so disproportionate between middle class and working class families that even a comprehensive school, based upon equal access, faces a challenge where "From birth to 48 months, parents in professional families spoke 32 million more words to their children than parents in welfare families" (Horowitz and Samuels, 2017, p.151) quoted in Quigley (2018, p.5). He develops his thesis that "a restricted vocabulary as a young child goes on to correlate with factors in later life such as employment, pay and even health and wellbeing as an adult" (p.22). Quigley rightly argues for targeted, specific and rigorous teaching of vocabulary, especially Latinate, academic diction

which is comparably restricted to middle-class discourse. But in doing so, will Scottish schools – even by a rigorous programme of Latinate vocabulary instruction – be able to mitigate unequal access by economically disadvantaged students to apparently equal comprehensive institutions, even though such schools provide more equal access than other models in the U.K.? What other methods might enable working class students to make more direct progress?

Indeed, to what extent are formal middle-class small group and whole group dialogue structures, as implied by the CfE Literacy Outcomes, a barrier? In a savage critique of the damage done by *middle class discourse* in Scotland's public services, McGarvey (2017) writes that it's no surprise that when lower class people interface with a mainstream culture, created predominantly by and for people "higher up the food chain", whether it be newspapers, television or radio, "they often feel they're viewing a parody of reality. The reality with which they are presented appears so jarringly disfigured that they are forced to scratch their heads and ask 'Who the hell comes up with this stuff?'" (p.142). McGarvey has no hesitation in vocalising the distance between his own original economic and social context and the middle-class educational context which he endured. He is equally critical of the prioritization of "disproportionate coverage" of the damage to Glasgow School of Art to give one middle class discourse example; argues that it is counterproductive to hold the view that anyone with concerns about immigration must be "misinformed, racist or stupid" to give another – and that "identity politics has become synonymous with a style of activism that many people across the political spectrum find illiberal, censorious and counter-productive" (p.173). Why is this relevant in a Scottish educational context, in terms of equality of attainment? Well, the above triad of concerns are all such, that open discourse by students, in a High School context, in which the teacher does not allow for the acknowledgement of any necessarily acceptable answer, and indeed form of dialogue, will lead in risky and transformative directions. Such an approach to divergent (as opposed to convergent) discourse will encourage vernacular voices to develop in unpredictable ways. And of course, we should try.

Illich's thesis is that polite, sequenced and by implication generally standard language is not just the medium through which, but also the barrier across which, learning takes place. For Illich, as a consequence, the core of inequality of educational access, even in state-run comprehensive schools, is the limitation placed in schools *on the nature of the discourse context itself*. Thus "roles are assigned by setting a curriculum of conditions which the candidate must meet...to make the grade", which is not reasonable "because it does not link relevant qualities to roles, but rather the process by which such qualities are supposed to be acquired" (p.14). Thus, the mode – "*process*" - of middle class group discourse could have the capacity to restrict the development of working class voice, which would otherwise enable working class students to understand own worlds in own important and rich languages. Could using the Literacy Experiences and Outcomes in Talking and Listening as process, and the implicit emphasis of almost wholly formal group and whole group dialogue therewith, even codified Scots, important though it is in some contexts, prove restrictive? Illich argues that such process inequality leads to further inequality in university education, where the survivors are generally middle-class, even though once again universities are generally perpetuated as equitable public utilities.

To mitigate such inequalities, Illich lists many creative ways in which working class students might learn better, rather than through formal middle-class small group and whole group dialogue. He proposes organic and non-curricular contexts for learning languages, for example learning a language directly in a working or non-institutionalized social context. Moreover he promotes direct memory work, to empower students through information, and practical direct instruction of skills for students who want and need to acquire skills for economic purposes, rather than necessarily learning using the medium of literacy outcomes as such, where assessment of generally standardized forms of group dialogue, presentation and listening are mostly implied.

Such discourse is not in itself problematic. Indeed, Illich argues specifically for students and indeed adult learners to organize themselves into distinct, independent learning groups, separate from language-normalized institutions, to further arts, philosophical and political learning. One emerging mirror for such groups is the Climate Emergency meetings, which young people have organized out-with the formal curriculum throughout Scotland through 2017-21, effectively deconstructing the curriculum. Some schools have tried to focus students, reductively, on developing *personal* ecological goals, or curricular debate, in opposition, it could be argued, to such structural attempts by students effectively to challenge the entire curriculum and structure, in order to meet and indeed solve such an emergency. Student voice-groups are thus organizing meetings out-with and even in place of the formal curriculum, in effect trying to change the curriculum from an external radical perspective (i.e. constructivist social change). Ironically, they are using and subverting the very linguistic group skills implied by the Outcomes themselves but developing new forms. Illich, himself a Marxist critic, furthers indeed the importance of linguistic collaboration itself, by predicting the importance of such radical meetings. Britton (1994, p.261) outlines how, according to Vygotsky, adult thought itself was and is constructed through such social inter-actions, citing the social babblings of children as early examples of thought-processes. Such social processes then fork into internal, meta- and sign-languages (they develop into our thought-languages) and concurrently into external, orthodox language systems. "Speech in infancy, Vygotsky claimed, is the direct antecedent of thinking at a later stage[...]We *think* by handling 'post-language symbols'". Therefore "*human consciousness is achieved by the internalisation of shared social behaviour*" (Britton, 1994, p.260). Such a statement underpins the sub-text of social inter-action embedded within the Literacy Outcomes – but also, more radically, provides the rationale for developing groupings or structures which challenge the orthodox use of such outcomes. In other words it is recognized that the Literacy Outcomes of the Curriculum for Excellence are constructed around group discourse, as central to identity and learning, but predicated on that is that, in truth, genuinely dynamic group dialogue will enable students to revolutionize such very structures they are using.

Pryor and Crossouard (2008, p.9) further elucidate this 'theoretical tradition of Vygotsky' by explaining that "we *become who we are* through participating in the communities around us". In fact, they explain that "learning and identity are therefore inseparable". It is this focus on community dialogue as creating identity which leads Pryor and Crossouard (2008, p.1) to define the key learning tool of *formative assessment* "as being a discursive social practice [...] in which learners' and teachers' identities are

implicated” and where issues of ‘power’ are brought into play. How, then, to support community classroom learning while deconstructing and challenging the power of formal middle-class discourse?

Pryor and Crossouard (2008, p.4) discern a ‘convergent’ model of formative feedback which concerns the standard ‘Initiation-Response-Feedback’ model, in which the teacher has a fixed idea of the knowledge to be acquired, stored and reproduced by students and uses questions and feedback as a kind of scaffolding to help the student to reach that point. As Pryor and Crossouard (2008, p.4) explains, “teachers orchestrated the construction of a lesson text, marking out a correct train of thought for the students to appropriate”. However, Pryor also points to ‘divergent’ feedback where the questions the teachers posed were different “in that often they did not know the answer” themselves! Importantly errors were “valued for insights they gave into how learners were thinking” and were actually used as valuable starting points for new thoughts or ideas. One feature of this divergent model is that “it was not only teachers who initiated, but also learners”. In this model the learners themselves take initiative. The divergent dialogue provides opportunities especially for ‘metasocial’ discussion in which the very nature of classroom power, socialization and speech can be discussed explicitly (involving the students) as part of and in addition to the main learning targets. Plainly in such dialogue the ambiguities and nuances of words themselves, what Pryor terms the “slipperiness” of words, become the focus, rather than assuming that words have direct, concrete meanings. Meanings of words in the classroom become “the subject of constant negotiation” (Pryor and Crossouard, 2008, p.8). Explicit discussion of the middle-class assumptions which are embedded in the use of standard language, and indeed in the Literacy Outcomes, allows such a barrier to become more visible to working class students. The invisibility of such a barrier is in fact a key technique used in middle-class discourse, i.e. the assumption (criticized by Illich) that there is only one language of power, i.e. the dominant, standard form. In truth we can teach the ability to preserve, respect, play with and develop dialectal voices; at the same time we can enable students to use, play with and subvert standard language, for example the Outcomes, in ways which also make standard language more purposeful. This can be achieved by greater consciousness of a continuum between both forms by students.

What is especially interesting, is that within the “play of identities in the educational setting”, (Pryor and Crossouard, 2008,10), that is to say the discovering of identities by both students and teacher as words and criteria are explored and constantly re-defined, the teacher is the “significant narrator”, who exploits and consciously uses the different power structures through her awareness of them. The lesson is a kind of text, with the teacher in it as the significant, but not only, lead character. Thus, the teacher can attempt to “shift between”, for example, convergent and divergent positions “more consciously and deliberately” – more explicitly, in fact (openly involving the students). By this means formative assessment “constituted in this way would make an explicit aim” of “raising students’ awareness” of the “discourses of the educational setting” itself and indeed how and why they are constructed. In other words, students will become more explicitly aware, enabled by the teacher, of the different kinds of dialogue that can and do happen in the classroom and of the reasons for them. There will also be explicit awareness indeed of the multiple identities that both the teacher and indeed the students can possess and develop in the course of such dialogue. In other words, perhaps the main role of such

meta-dialogue is to teach how power is maintained and can be subverted. Thus the teacher's aim might be to empower students in the concurrent use of both standard and non-standard language. The biggest lesson here - the biggest lesson of all - is to raise awareness of the power of language to subvert social norms, either through the direct use of dynamic dialect or by subverting standard forms by using them more consciously and theatrically. This is the kind of double-think which goes on all the time inside classrooms – the protection of the individual voice against the crushing power of standard forms, therefore share and make explicit the problem of how to translate between them.

Thus it is signalled that, while the Literacy Outcomes in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence can indeed prove a barrier to learning for working class students, acting or being enacted in convergent ways to prescribe the kind of dialogue which takes place, such an issue can be mitigated. In the first instance the judicious use of direct instruction as a stage sequence to richer, complex, divergent dialogue can be used. Kirschner's work (2006), on the role of direct instruction in short-term to long-term memory translation provides a powerful critique of open-ended experimental group-work, which has the possibility to overload the short-term memories of challenged students, arguing for the traditional instruction of knowledge and skills as a crucial sequence to enable open group dialogue to succeed. Another method is the autonomous creation of extra-curricular political and social groupings / meetings, as described above, no doubt supplemented increasingly by electronic / social media dialogue, as in the Climate Emergency meetings of 2017-21. Finally, there is the possibility of using the Talking and Listening Outcomes, as discussed above, while at the same time subverting them, *within the classroom setting itself*.

In their critique of the prescriptive nature of the Experiences and Outcomes in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, Priestley and Humes (2010) point indeed to "tensions between convergent and divergent modes of learning, between teleological and open-ended conceptions of education, which may be unhelpful to the process of enactment in the classroom", effectively questioning "the potentially assessment-driven nature of these outcomes", which may restrict the development of the autonomy and critical thinking implied in the four capacities. Indeed, in addressing the Literacy Outcomes specifically, Priestley and Humes do conclude that the outcomes are "interesting in that they take for granted cultural and educational assumptions", which is as much to suggest that divergent voices could be excluded structurally through these Literacy Outcomes. It is perhaps not co-incidental that, further up the curriculum, well over 90% of set Scottish texts remain authored by mono-culturally white writers. Nonetheless, in recognizing the very tension between such convergent and divergent structures, as described above, in the Curriculum for Excellence, it may indeed be allowed for the possibility of the subversion of the Outcomes within the class setting even through their orthodox use.

Thus, there needs to become both use, exploitation and ultimately subversion of the Literacy Outcomes, to allow young people to develop a real range of voices, including range of new working-class voices, amongst others. In this way students can begin to be able to imagine a world which becomes both beyond the current Literacy curriculum, both in terms of language and the geographical and political scope of such dialogue, and notably imagining and creating an environmental and social future which will ultimately challenge and leave behind some of the dominant middle class assumptions of those

Literacy Outcomes, *while still using them*. It is this sense that an approach to move most closely to radical and ephemeral speech itself can be made – to the kind of speech we cannot predict and may not even be able to remember. It is also in this sense that an approach to futuristic readings (which will translate as writings) can be made, which cannot now also currently be imagined – but which may, ultimately, be able to generate true transformative social equality, through radical dialogue, and indeed thus the possibility of transformation of both roads and flexible schooling.

And thus, to return to Illich's metaphor of public highways as a valid symbol for educational and environmental destruction, we must challenge the very concept of public highways as equitable, to re-organize the very structures through which such highways are used – and the same is manifestly true of the ways in which we challenge literacy use in the classroom – in order to seek actively new, unorthodox and experimental grammars.

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