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TITLE PAGE

Using linguistic ethnography to uncover the mechanisms through which underprivileged students are denied access to classroom dialogue

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Abstract

This article opens up the 'black box' of classroom interaction to investigate why opportunities to participate in academically productive (or 'dialogic') classroom discussion may be more readily available to some groups of students than others, creating educational inequities. Prior research has attributed disparities in classroom participation to perceived deficits in underprivileged students' communicative abilities. Drawing on linguistic ethnographic research in two socioeconomically differentiated primary schools, the article challenges this idea and shifts the focus to relational and contextual factors, situating classroom dynamics within the broader sociopolitical landscape.

Quantitative analysis reveals significant disparities in student talk time between the two participating schools, with students in the Higher Socioeconomic Status school contributing substantially more to whole-class discussions. Qualitative analysis identifies three mechanisms driving these disparities: differing assumptions about the purpose of classroom talk; competing approaches to managing classroom roles, routines and relationships; and the influence of neoliberal accountability logics. These mechanisms have relevance beyond the focal schools since they are underpinned by widespread beliefs about underprivileged students and systemic pressures that affect schools internationally.

The article underscores the importance of linguistic ethnographic research in challenging deficit thinking and providing an evidence base to better inform educational policy and decision making.

1. Introduction

The kind of talk children encounter at school has consequences for their learning and cognitive development. Children who contribute to academically productive (or 'dialogic') classroom discussions perform better on standardised tests than their peers who have not had this experience (e.g., Alexander 2018; Howe et al. 2019; Resnick, Asterhan and Clarke 2015). Under certain conditions, they may transfer the gains made across academic domains (Adey and Shayer 1993; O'Connor, Michaels and Chapin 2015), suggesting that dialogic discussion can support the growth not just of disciplinary knowkedge but broader capacities to reason, process and solve new problems (Resnick and Schantz 2015). A large-scale dialogic teaching intervention in England found that gains in mathematics achievement were greatest for students eligible for free school meals (used as a proxy measure of socioeconomic status [SES]) (Alexander 2018; see also O'Connor, Michaels and Chapin 2015), thereby underlining the potential for dialogue to have a significant impact in underprivileged communities. Yet, dialogic teaching and learning is rarely enacted in schools serving low-SES and racially minoritized populations (Applebee et al. 2003). Research further indicates that lower SES students participate less frequently in classroom discussion than higher SES students and are less likely to engage with the 'authentic questions' characteristic of dialogue (Kelly 2008). This raises questions about barriers to dialogic discussion in schools serving low SES communities.

Research on language and social reproduction at school has typically focused on the so-called 'language gap' between lower and higher socioeconomic strata (e.g., Hart and Risley 2003), echoing problematic deficit discourses that date back to the work of Bernstein (1964). While this article acknowledges that there are disparities in school attainment between higher and lower SES groups, it challenges deficit discourses that blame young people and their families for a purported 'lack' of linguistic ability and suggestions that this is the primary reason they struggle in school. 'Gap discourse' (McCarty 2015) absolves

schools and policymakers of responsibility and shuts down other ways of conceptualizing the problem. One alternative is to investigate how the relationship between language, SES, and school success is mediated by classroom dialogue. This process has received little academic attention. Drawing on linguistic ethnographic fieldwork and analyses, I open up the 'black box' of classroom interaction to investigate why opportunities to participate in academically productive dialogue may be more readily available to some groups of students than others.

The article draws primarily on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in two primary schools in northeast England between 2005 and 2006. During this period, the educational landscape in the UK was shaped by the policies and reforms introduced by the 'New Labour' government (1997 – 2010). I thus begin with a brief introduction to these reforms, highlighting how policy impacts classroom practice. Next, I introduce dialogic approaches to teaching and learning. Third, I discuss the study and methods for data collection and analysis. Finally, I present data and findings which illuminate three mechanisms through which the voices of underprivileged students are suppressed at school.

2. Sociopolitical reforms and classroom practice

Central to New Labour's educational policy was the introduction of standards-based reforms. Clear benchmarks were set for student achievement, giving schools targets to hit, which were measured through national standardised testing. The National Literacy and Numeracy strategies became a defining feature of primary education, focusing on intensively structured lessons aimed at 'raising standards' (a key neoliberal mantra). The national strategies emphasised the importance of students' active participation in whole class teaching. However, the ambition for 'high quality oral work' (DfEE 1998, 8) was hamstrung by a concurrent drive towards structure, standardisation and measurable outcomes. Teachers faced increasing accountability, with their performance directly tied to student achievement

metrics. Schools were subjected to more rigorous inspections by Ofsted, a non-ministerial department of the UK government that reports to Parliament. For many teachers, the increased scrutiny by government was demoralizing and led to a 'teach to the test' mentality, which encouraged teachers to ask students questions designed to elicit quick, correct answers that would 'keep things moving' in order to cover state-imposed curricular topics in time for the test (Bleicher, Tobin and McRobbie 2003, 333). Smith et al. (2004) found that traditional patterns of classrooms discourse, using Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) cycles, dominated primary schools across England during this time.

Labour's educational reforms sought to bring market efficiency and competition into the classroom in order to raise standards and attainment for all. However, the focus on quantifiable results set the stage for a model of teaching that was less about exploration and more about conformity, standardisation and the production of assessment data. This continued under subsequent governments. In response, teachers surveyed by the National Union of teachers reported feeling under pressure to forgo creative teaching, investigation, exploratory play and practical work in favour of lessons with a 'standard format' (Hutchings 2015). Teachers also highlighted how pressure to cover the curriculum and prepare students for tests negatively impacted their relationships with students (Hutchings 2015, 54).

3. Participation in classroom discussion and student characteristics

In response to widespread critique of IRE discourse patterns, educational researchers have advocated for dialogic approaches to teaching and learning, which reposition talk as a tool for thinking. In dialogic classrooms, teachers pose open questions that elicit a range of student ideas, including those that are only half-formed or emerging, and in doing so, they bring multiple (and potentially conflicting) perspectives into play. Teachers probe student responses, pushing students to extend and clarify their thinking. In turn, students listen carefully to the teacher and to each other, and with their teacher's support, they build on, challenge or clarify others' claims and offer alternative explanations (e.g. Resnick et al.

2018, 419-20; Lefstein and Snell 2014). Where a dialogic environment is cultivated in the classroom, virtually all students participate (O'Connor, Michaels and Chapin 2015; Alexander 2018). In doing so, students develop resources that support explanation and elaboration, bringing to the fore 'conceptual aspects of domains, rather than just [the] correct answers and procedures' that dominate IRE (Greeno 2015, 260).

Despite increasing evidence for the effectiveness of dialogic teaching and learning, dialogic talk is rarely enacted in schools, especially in those serving socially and economically disadvantaged student populations. In a US study, Applebee and colleagues (2003) found that all students benefited from discussion-based teaching but students in 'low track' classrooms were significantly less likely to experience this approach relative to their peers in 'high track' classrooms. Significantly, students from low SES backgrounds were concentrated in low-track classrooms while students from high SES backgrounds were concentrated in high-track classrooms. This study thus revealed a troubling interaction between SES, perceived ability and dialogue that disadvantaged some groups of students. Kelly (2008) found less talk in general among teachers and students in predominantly low SES classrooms in US middle schools. Within classrooms, low SES students asked and answered questions around 30% less frequently than their higher SES peers. Kelly highlighted dynamics within the family to explain these differences, suggesting that '[m]iddle class children may be more practiced at voicing their ideas, and have a greater inclination to talk in class' because '[m]iddle class parents … cultivate their children's verbal skills, teaching them to express their ideas, argue, and reach compromises, in their interactions with adults' (2008, 446).

In England, Harris and Williams (2012) explored variation in teacher-student interactions in primary schools categorised as either 'poor' or 'affluent'. Across 102 classrooms, the researchers found that teachers in more affluent areas asked more open questions and gave longer wait time, and their students were more likely to give an 'appropriate' response. Harris and Williams concluded that 'the quality of interaction offered

is related to the affluence of the school community in ways that might disadvantage learners from poorer communities' (386). Like Kelly, they turned to cultural differences to explain their findings, suggesting that 'teachers may find it more difficult to handle ideas given by children from poorer backgrounds, in the same way as perhaps these children find it more difficult to handle the ideas of their teachers' (395). However, this explanation sidesteps the fact that children in the less affluent schools were not given the same opportunities to participate as their more affluent peers, due to the nature of the questions their teachers asked, which were mostly closed. As Van der Veen and colleagues (2021) demonstrated, early childhood teachers in schools serving low- as well as high-income families can learn to orchestrate whole-class dialogic talk, and this is beneficial to all students.

Black (2004) found that students' social class background had an impact on the extent to which they participated in 'productive' versus 'unproductive' interactions in a primary classroom in northwest England. Students who participated most often in productive interactions were middle-class children who had inherited the 'right kind of cultural capital' (47). The teacher perceived this as evidence of high ability and formed high expectations of these students, affording them communicative rights that highlighted their role as legitimate participants in the classroom. Alternatively, the teacher had lower expectations of students who did not possess the same kind of cultural capital and perceived the need to take greater control in her interactions with them. This resulted in 'unproductive interactions' in which the student played a relatively passive role, offering at most monosyllabic contributions (see also Snell and Lefstein 2018).

These studies suggest that differences in learning outcomes across groups differentiated by SES may be explained (at least in part) by differential access to high quality classroom discussion. To understand this, we need to consider the educational contexts in which these students are immersed, including the kind of questions teachers ask and the extent to which (if at all) students' responses are taken up. This is where linguistic ethnographic work of the kind reported in this article is crucial. Such work problematises dominant ideas – e.g., that working class students participate less frequently in classroom

interaction because they come from homes that do not cultivate their verbal skills – and resists simple answers in favour of understanding the complex and intricate ways in which local classroom practices connect with the wider institutional and sociohistorical order.

Drawing on a comparative ethnography of two socioeconomically differentiated schools in northeast England, I address the following research questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences in whole-class discussion across the two schools?

2. What assumptions about classroom talk, participation and educational success emerge in interactions across the two schools? What impact do these have on teachers' decision making and students' opportunities to talk?

4. Data, context and participants

The article draws upon data collected in 2005-06 in two socioeconomically differentiated schools in northeast England. I refer to one school as Higher SES and the other as Lower SES while acknowledging that these designations are inadequate proxies for the diverse range of experiences lived by those who participated in this study. Government census data and indices of deprivation (2001) highlighted clear differences between the two school catchment areas, in which all students lived. For example, most people in the lower SES area were living in rented accommodation, primarily owned by the local authority. In contrast, many more residents in the higher SES area owned their own homes, which were worth on average three times more than houses in the lower SES area. The UK government's index of multiple deprivation places the area served by the Lower SES school in the top five percent most deprived areas in the country, while the area surrounding the Higher SES school falls in the middle of the scale. The percentage of children entitled to free school meals at the Lower SES school was over three times the national average, while entitlement at the Higher SES school was below the national average. In summary, while the two schools do not constitute opposite extremes of the socioeconomic continuum, there is

considerable social distance between them. Children in both schools were predominantly 'White British'.

To understand how demographic differences translated into actual experience, I spent one day per week in the Year 4 class (age 8 to 9 years) in both schools, then followed the same groups of children into Year 5 (age 9 to 10 years). There were 31 children in the Lower SES class and 28 in the Higher SES class. The teachers and teaching assistants in these classrooms were all experienced practitioners who had worked at the school for at least three years (and most, considerably more). Both schools were highly regarded by parents and by the Schools Inspectorate, Ofsted. The Higher SES school was rated 'good' by Ofsted and the Lower SES school was rated 'Outstanding', due to the exceptional results this school achieved with students whose academic skills upon entry were categorised as 'below expectation'. Teachers at this school were clearly conscious of the need to maintain the school's status. One told me, unprompted: 'We were third in the county again. We were first last year. We were third this year. (.) SATs [Standardised Assessment Task tests] results. We were third out of more than 40. We were top last year.' This fleeting reference to SATs illustrates the power that performance data has over teachers and schools. The same teacher told me about the class participating in the study:

'It is a nice class, this. But the trouble is, I'm full pelt, because I have to get through the stuff. I'd just love to be able to play a bit more with them, but you can't'.

Like the other teachers who participated in this study, she was a competent and caring professional, committed to her work, but we have to be clear that 'the parameters of that work have been established by *the system* that is organizing [teachers'] perception' (Goodwin, 1994, p. 609 my emphasis). Systemic pressures are felt most acutely in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage (Hutchings 2015).

I participated in each classroom initially as an informal helper. Later, I spent time with the children in the playground, chatting and playing games. I wrote up fieldnotes at the end of each visit. After seven months of participant observation, I began recording children's interactions in the classroom, dining hall and playground using a lapel radio-microphone worn by participating children. All children whose parents had returned a signed consent form were given the opportunity to wear the radio-microphone, resulting in recordings made by 14 students at the Higher SES school (8 girls, 6 boys), and 16 students at the Lower SES school (9 girls, 7 boys). The children were told that they could pause the recording at any time and were shown how to do so (through a button on the radio-microphone transmitter), but most did not take up this option. Each student wore the radio-microphone for half a day and recorded an average of 2.5 hours of audio data. These recordings captured the range of interactions students engaged in, including *sub rosa* commentary on lessons. I discounted data collected by two girls at the Lower SES school, whose recordings included whole-school events (e.g. assemblies) and thus captured few classroom interactions. This left approximately 35 hours of radio-microphone recordings from each school.

5. Methodological and Analytic Framework

The overall framework for this study is linguistic ethnography, an approach that seeks to integrate ethnography's commitment to understanding the perspectives of research participants with the insights and rigour of linguistics (Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 2015). Practically, this meant adopting an ethnographic perspective and using ethnographic tools to study aspects of school life, drawing upon the theories and practices of anthropology and sociology (Green and Bloome 1997, 183). Additionally, systematic linguistic analysis extended the ethnography into smaller and more focused spaces, drawing analytic attention to fine detail and shedding light on small (but consequential) aspects of social practice. In line with LE principles, I approached the data with 'rigorous eclecticism' (Lefstein and Snell 2014, 185), combining different methods and analytic resources in order to understand

classroom interaction in its socio-political context, including combining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

I used the open-source Behavioural Observation Research Interactive Software (BORIS) (Friard and Gamba, 2016) to code all teacher and student discourse moves within the whole-class teaching episodes in the data to identify differences in the quantity and quality of whole-class discussion across the two schools. See Appendix A for the full coding scheme. The episodes cut across 17 distinct lessons at the Higher SES school and 22 lessons at the Lower SES school. The initial coding scheme was based on previous work (Snell and Lefstein, 2011) with modifications derived through consideration of the ethnographic data as well as other studies of classroom discourse (e.g. Pimentel and McNeill, 2013). I used unpaired t-tests to determine significant differences between the schools (Table 1).

In addition to systematic coding of discourse moves, I conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) which allowed me to respond more openly and holistically to the full range of recorded interactions and better understand the patterns I uncovered through systematic coding, including how and why these patterns emerged. First, I immersed myself in the audio data, engaging in the extensive listening that Rampton (2006, p. 32) has described as 'a process of "mediated", repeated and repeatable, ethnographic observation'. Where relevant, I drew upon fieldnotes to contextualise the activities in the recordings. I then began the interpretative process of coding the data, which involved 'noticing potentially relevant meaning' (Braun and Clarke 2022, 236) in segments of data and labelling it with a code (e.g. 'Students should not challenge the teacher's authority', 'Keeping to time is more important than understanding'). I explored areas of similar meaning across codes, clustering these together into candidate themes that conveyed something important about the data in relation to the research questions. This analysis resulted in eleven themes, three of which occurred frequently across both schools, while the remaining eight were more prominent in one school over the other (Table 2). I clustered these eleven themes into three 'overarching themes' (Braun and Clarke 2022, 86). The overarching

themes represent mechanisms that either suppress or open up space for student voices. They are (1) ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF CLASSROOM TALK; (2) APPROACHES TO MANAGING CLASSROOM ROLES, ROUTINES AND RELATIONSHIPS; and (3) THE INFLUENCE OF NEOLIBERAL ACCOUNTABILITY LOGICS (see Table 2)

I probed the complexity of themes through linguistic ethnographic micro-analyses (Rampton 2006) of classroom discourse. These analyses were grounded in the view that meaning is co-constructed in interaction and that this involves not just the negotiation of propositional information but simultaneously also the negotiation of status and social position, the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, and the creation and recreation of knowledge, power and identities (Snell, Shaw and Copland 2015). Thus, rather than taking for granted labels attributed to students (such as 'low ability'), I sought to understand the 'emergent positions that are produced through social interaction and that are always open to change' (Flores and Lewis 2016, 110). This meant moving slowly through transcripts and audio-recordings to analyse interactions turn-by-turn, asking at each moment, e.g., "What is the speaker doing?" "Why that, now?" "What else might have been done here but wasn't?" (Rampton 2006). This approach drew insights from Conversation Analysis (e.g. sequential analysis) and sociolinguistics (e.g., language variation and stylisation), and combined these with ethnographic knowledge to make sense of classroom events.

I endeavoured to maintain a reflexive stance throughout the analysis, routinely reflecting on the role of my own personal subjectivity in the research process. When I collected the data, I was a PhD student who retained close ties to the working-class community in northeast England in which I grew up (which is close to both schools). I could thus relate to the experiences of many of my research participants. At the time of writing, I occupy a more privileged position as a professor working at a UK University and I am also mother to a child who is the same age as the students who participated in this research. The time that has lapsed since data collection and the different positions I now occupy pose a

combined risk that I might recontextualize the events in which I participated as ethnographer. This is where both repeated listening to the data and consulting fieldnotes and artefacts (e.g., a programme for the Lower SES school's production of *My Fair Lady*) was crucial. Through these I could call to mind my experiences as a regular participant in the schools, which were both welcoming environments made up of committed teachers and (mostly) happy students. This background is important in interpreting some of the teacher comments I report below.

6. Analysis and findings

6.1 Computerised systematic analysis

Table 1 shows that teachers in both schools dominated classroom talk through explanation and instruction. Most of their questions were closed and/or of a low cognitive level, designed to channel student responses towards the 'correct' answers (Smith et al. 2004, 408). Teachers judged the acceptability of student responses primarily through acknowledgement or evaluation. This form of instruction, which privileges the transmission of knowledge and allows little space for exploration of students' ideas, is characteristic of discourse in UK and US classrooms (Alexander 2020). Nonetheless, there are differences between the two schools which suggest greater space for exploration and student voice at the Higher SES school. Most importantly, in line with Kelly (2008), there are significantly higher levels of student participation in the Higher SES school: 28.8% of whole-class discussion compared to only 10.9% in the Lower SES school. This is consequential given that researchers have consistently highlighted total student talk time during interactive sequences as an indicator of dialogue and student success (Howe et al. 2019; Molinari and Mameli 2013). Student talk time at the Lower SES school stands out as low compared not only to the Higher SES school but also to a national sample of 72 English primary school lessons analysed by Smith and colleagues (2004), where average student talk accounted for 24% of whole-class interaction. In addition, teachers at the Higher SES school used more elaborated feedback,

probes and uptake questions, moves that incorporate student ideas into classroom discourse and extend student responses (Table 1). Contrariwise, teachers at the Lower SES school were significantly (p = 0.0051) more likely to give students the 'correct' answer, thus terminating the possibility of further thinking and discussion.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

6.2 Qualitative Analysis of Classroom Interaction

Computerised systematic discourse analysis situated the data within the wider research literature, demonstrating that the differences between the two schools reflected social class differences reported elsewhere. Qualitative analyses allowed me to contextualise these discourse patterns and understand how and why they emerged. Specifically, the analyses shed light on why there is so little student participation in whole-class discussion at the Lower SES school.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

6.2.1 How should students contribute to classroom interaction?

The first mechanism – ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF CLASSROOM TALK – encompasses three underlying themes (Table 2). The first, STUDENTS SHOULD LISTEN, was shared across both schools. The remaining two themes highlight a contrast between the schools. In the Higher SES school, there was a shared understanding that IT IS ACCEPTABLE FOR STUDENTS TO TALK IN SOME CIRCUMSTANCES. There were certain protocols to follow, such as 'no shouting out' and 'hands up', and certain times when talking was prohibited (e.g. *'Right, you've had your talking time, this is writing time. No more talking'*), but teachers acknowledged that children 'can't be quiet all the time'. Provided students were considerate of each other, talk between peers was permitted in class. In contrast, the dominant message in the Lower SES school was STUDENT TALK IS TRANSGRESSIVE unless explicitly sanctioned by the teacher. This was evident in repeated remonstrations to 'Just be quiet' or 'Just shut

up and get on'. Overall, students' talk at the Lower SES school was discouraged (e.g. 'No, don't talk to me. I don't want to know. I want to finish'). This extended beyond the classroom and into students' social spaces, such as the dining hall, where catering staff made clear that there are consequences for loquacity:

   'I want no talking now. You eat, right? You're on a timer because yous talk for too long.

   Yous don't eat. Or I'll separate every one of yous. Do your talking outside'.

   In the classroom, teachers at the Lower SES school positioned children's talk as problematic and liable to be punished. This is evident in Episode 1, which was recorded when Joanne[1] was wearing the radio-microphone. It begins with Joanne responding to her classmate's question, 'How do you spell taught?'. The teaching assistant had been disciplining another group of students for talking (in lines 2, 13), but turned her attention briefly to Joanne (lines 7 to 11):

Episode 1: How do you spell 'taught'?

1	Danielle:	how do you spell taught?
2	Joanne:	t-a-u-g-h-t
3	Mrs Trotter:*	BECAUSE YOU'RE TALKING *((continuing interaction with group of boys))*
4	Joanne:	t-a-
5	Danielle:	that says tart
6	Joanne:	no it doesn't
7	Mrs Trotter:	right their names are on as well
8	Joanne:	t-a-u-
9		(.)
10	Joanne:	miss I'm telling her how to spell taught
11	Mrs Trotter:	well she should <u>know</u>
12		(3)
13		horrible you are

14	Mrs Johnson:	who's being naughty?
15	Mrs Trotter:	they just won't shut up

Amidst her disciplining of a group of boys (characterised here as 'horrible'), Mrs Trotter puts Joanne's name on the board for speaking to her classmate. She interprets this as bad behaviour in the context of an independent writing activity, even though Joanne is talking about the task (see also Hanna 2021). Joanne's surprise is evident when she breaks away from spelling 'taught' mid-way through her explanation, and, after a short pause, moves to clarify her position (lines 8 to 10). I present this interaction in full because Mrs Trotter's reprimand had consequences that played out over the course of the school day and under the radar of the teaching staff. Six minutes after Episode 1, Joanne can be heard whispering to her neighbour: 'I'm telling my mam, me. (3) It's getting rubbed off, that' (referring to her name on the board). Two minutes later, Joanne speaks directly to me: 'Miss I'm on the board for telling Danielle how to spell taught'. After a four-minute pause, she continues, in Episode 2:

Episode 2: It's shocking

1	Joanne:	Miss it's shocking
2		(2)
3		it's shocking
4		I'm on the board
5	Danielle:	go and wipe it off
6	Joanne:	no::
7		I'll get caught man

Mrs Trotter's reprimand is keenly felt by Joanne. She repeats the word 'shocking' in isolation twice in the minutes that follow Episode 2, but on these occasions her utterances are 'stylised'; that is, they involve a degree of self-conscious performance that invites others to take notice and re-evaluate the situational norms at play (Rampton 2006; Snell 2018). She

places additional stress on word-initial / ʃ /, realises word-medial /k/ as a uvular fricative [χ], and ends with an elongated [n] and a distinct rising intonation. Such fleeting performances – or 'stylisations' – have become a focus of analytic attention in linguistic ethnographic work on inequalities of class and race because they often occur in moments of transition across social and interactional boundaries, and as a consequence, Rampton (2006) argues that they foreground speakers' critical reflexive awareness of the conditions shaping their lives. This is central to Madsen's (2016) work in multi-ethnic schools in Copenhagen, where adolescents used stylisations 'in contexts in which institutional inequalities were spotlighted' (Madsen 2016, 165). Likewise, Joanne's stylisations express her sense of injustice at her treatment at school and function as small acts of resistance. In a playground conversation after the lesson, Joanne made clear that she is usually aligned *with* the teachers ('usually Miss Trotter only has a joke with me'), hence why the realignment she has experienced is so hard to accept. At lunch time, the incident was still not forgotten, as Joanne told a member of catering staff about what had happened in class ('I'm on the board cos I told her how to spell a word'). At this point, Danielle offered to help Joanne ('I'll rub your name off you know') but Joanne declined ('No, don't Danielle. I'll get into trouble'). Joanne's challenges were performative only ('it's shocking') in order not to 'get into [further] trouble'.

When student voice is supressed, minor incidents like that represented in Episode 1 can trigger enduring effects. One immediate consequence for Joanne was a subsequent reluctance to help her classmates with their work. This became evident half an hour after Mrs Trotter's initial reprimand when Robert asked Joanne how to spell 'addicted' and she replied 'I'm not telling you. I'll get in trouble'. This is contrary to the peer co-operation that we know is important to literacy learning and achievement (OECD 2019, 120). There may be longer-lasting consequences too. Given the enduring effects of this incident throughout the school day, it is easy to imagine Joanne telling her parents about it, thus translating the impact of a fleeting interactional moment into wider parent-teacher and community-school relations.

In summary, there were different understandings about how students should participate in classroom talk in the two schools, which help explain why student talk as a percentage of whole-class discussion is abnormally low at the Lower SES school. In both schools, the importance of listening to the teacher was made clear to students, but while at the Higher SES school there was space for students to participate in classroom talk, student talk at the Lower SES school was actively discouraged and often met with reprimands and punishment, which had enduring effects on students.

6.2.2 How should classroom roles, routines and relationships be managed?

The second mechanism – APPROACHES TO MANAGING CLASSROOM ROLES, ROUTINES AND RELATIONSHIPS – encompasses a constellation of related themes. The dominant theme across both schools was SCHOOLS HAVE RULES THAT MUST BE FOLLOWED. Children in both schools were expected to work hard, behave sensibly, and respect the teacher. However, a major theme across the Lower SES school data – TEACHERS SHOULD HAVE POWER OVER STUDENTS AND STUDENTS SHOULD BE ORDERLY AND COMPLIANT – highlighted how expectations related to students' behaviour (including talk) sometimes went further, demanding that students submit entirely to teachers' authority:

'Just go away from me please, you're in my way'

'Right, you don't need your mouths. Right, do it one at a time. Don't DARE do it like that.

'I wasn't looking at you. When I want you to speak, I'll point to you or say your name'

Another prominent theme in the Lower SES school is that CHILDREN MUST BE MICROMANAGED. While this is related to the previous theme (with its focus on the power dynamic between teacher and student), the central concept around which this theme is

organised is that students' bodies and modes of expression (including talk) must be explicitly regulated:

'All you children need to look and point your knees to me […] If you're turning away, that shows you're not bothered'

'Get your head out of your hand. Don't talk to him. Put your hand on your paper.'

Teachers also carefully regulated students' written work, dictating procedural aspects of writing, such as where and how students should write the 'learning objective' or date and whether work should begin on a new page.

The data from the Higher SES school suggested alternatives for how teachers might relate to students and manage classroom routines. For example, teachers offered guidance while opening up opportunities for students to make their own choices and they took up students' ideas:

'I would do it this way, but if you want to do it that way and use the lines, that's fine'

'Everybody listening please. Hayley has suggested something that would be really good for everyone to do'

In this school, the dominant theme around behaviour management was BEHAVING WELL IS A MATTER OF GOOD MANNERS (E.G. 'You know, it's very rude that I'm here showing you something to help you and you're not prepared to listen'). Teachers often delivered reprimands using humour, showing how disciplining could be light-hearted yet effective (e.g. 'Do you know, I've never liked talking to myself Ben. I've always thought it was a sign of insanity; and I'm not insane').

In summary, while students in both schools were expected to follow school rules and show respect for the teacher, the boundaries between teacher and student were more clearly demarcated and enforced at the Lower SES school. Students at this school were

expected to defer to their teachers' authority in all cases, even when they felt unfairly singled out, as Joanne did in Episode 2 (see also Golann 2015, 112). Consequently, behaviour management took up significantly (p = 0.0005) more teacher time during whole-class discussion at the Lower SES school (Table 1). The tendency at this school to prioritise compliance and the rote following of rules and procedure meant that there was limited space for student voice or independent student thinking and decision making.

6.2.3 Who is accountable for the creation (or lack) of talk and learning opportunities?

The third mechanism – INFLUENCE OF NEOLIBERAL ACCOUNTABILITY LOGICS – highlights how deficit assumptions about underprivileged students, which hold them responsible for missed learning opportunities and educational failures, foreclose opportunities for students to participate in dialogue. The two key themes – CHILDREN ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THEIR OWN LEARNING AND SUCCESS/FAILURE OF THE LESSON and HIERARCHIES OF ABILITY ARE CLEAR – drew primarily on data from the Lower SES school.

In line with the neoliberal reframing of education, teachers at the Lower SES school regularly framed educational failures as the responsibility of individual students. Students were held accountable for not performing at age-related expectations (e.g. 'That's 2a work and we should be doing 3a work by now'), for their lack of understanding (e.g. 'Right, I don't know why you haven't understood what I've said. This is about six times we've done this now'), and even for their teachers' well-being (e.g. 'You're wearing me out children'). It was made clear to students that they had to act in the right ways in order to do well:

'Who's talking now? That's why everything has to be repeated 20 times in this class, because you don't listen'

'Another somebody else there. Not paying attention, not doing the right thing, mucking about most of the day, hasn't got a whiteboard pen. What does that tell you? What does that tell me about that person?'

'That's why he's getting good marks in things because he listens to what I say'

Yet, whatever students at the Lower SES school did, there was the sense that they were not trying hard enough or working fast enough (e.g. 'You're going to be Year 5 in a few weeks. Do you think Mrs Martin goes slow and repeats it 20 times?'). On occasions this was attributed to individual character failings (e.g. 'You've done nothing, you. You're a lazy bones'); but, overall, teachers identified two key problems in the student cohort: lack of maturity and lack of aptitude. Teachers regularly described the children to me as 'immature' and referred to them directly in the classroom as 'babies' or as belonging in nursery and infant classes lower down in the school (e.g. 'See this is why you can't do your homework, can't do your classwork, because you just play like babies'). This process of infantalising students has been documented in other studies, where it is linked to student characteristics such as class, race and ability (see e.g. Cushing 2022, 146; Golann 2015, 112; Hanna 2021).

The sense that students were infantile and inferior was reinforced by comments from teaching staff that linked maturity with attainment (e.g. 'Why are you in the baby group for reading?') or explicitly attributed students' lack of understanding to a lack of ability (e.g. 'Look it's on the board. I'm not asking rocket science; I'm asking you to read it off the board!'). There are overlaps here with another theme – HIERARCHIES OF ABILITY ARE CLEAR – which captured a shared understanding in the Lower SES school that some children are 'clever' while others are not (e.g. 'Because you're clever, that's why you're good at maths') and an implicit acceptance that it is natural to draw attention to ability hierarchies and use them to guide participation in classroom activities (e.g. 'Do you think you can do it? Are you a good reader? [No] Well I wouldn't try if you think you're going to fail'). As Tyson (2003, 334) points out, comments about ability are another means through which students' behaviour can be controlled.

Competing with the notion that individual students are responsible for educational success/failure was the idea that external factors (such as standardised testing, government policy and the schools' inspectorate) impact on what happens in classrooms. Teachers in both schools referred to these outside influences (e.g. 'The government says you have to do homework every night'), especially when under pressure to finish tasks or fit exploratory activities into the timetable. Despite the presence of outside forces, at the Lower SES school it was often the children who were blamed for unfinished tasks and missed learning opportunities. For example, in a science lesson on sound, the original plan was for students to experiment with a range of instruments in order to explore how to create differences in pitch and loudness. However, due to a lack of time, the lesson was condensed into a demonstration by the teacher, in which she played the instruments herself and tried to scaffold students' understanding through a mixture of explanation and test questions. The teacher told the students – 'If you'd been quicker in your history, we'd have all had a little go on these' – thus holding them accountable for the lack of time and consequent shift from exploratory learning to transmission of knowledge. Yet, it seemed that these children (and their teachers) were victims instead of the 'hurry along curriculum' in which teachers move children too quickly through curriculum material, knowing that understanding suffers in the process' (Dadds 2001, 49; Pimentel and McNeill 2013). There is evidence for this in the science lesson, which lasted less than 10 minutes and did not appear to enhance the children's understanding of the concepts the teacher had set out to teach. As a result, she ended the episode deflated and the school day hurtled on:

'We're going to have to do more work on that I think, don't you? I always think the easiest concepts (.) aren't. Perhaps it's me. Now what we need to do now children, is quick as a flash without any fuss […]'

In wrapping up the activity, the teacher makes clear that the children have failed to grasp concepts that should have been straightforward and there is an implicit assumption that *they*

– rather than the teaching approach or lack of time – are to blame. Consequently, the teacher's low expectations of their capabilities are reinforced.

Contrary to teachers' perceptions, on the periphery of official classroom activity, the children at the Lower SES school demonstrated serious engagement with lesson content and a propensity for dialogue. This was evidenced through the *sub rosa* classroom conversations picked up by the radio-microphone. Episode 3 began when David (who is wearing the radio-microphone) asked the other students on his table if they believe in God during a writing task in a Religious Education lesson.

Episode 3: Who believes in God?

1	David:	who believes in God
2		(3)
3		who believes in Jesus
4		(5)
5		Joanne
6		there's only you on this table who believes in God and Jesus
7	Joanne	(xxxxxxxxxxx)
8	David	yeah cos they never heard
9		they probably do
10		but I know I don't
11	Harry:	I have to see to believe
12	Joanne:	who made the world
13	David:	the world was always there
14		nobody created the world
15	Joanne:	there's a beginning
16		there was a beginning
17	David:	there's never been a beginning
18		there'll never be an end

19		(7)
20	Harry:	how <u>was</u> the world made
21	Joanne:	exactly
22	Harry:	that's (all I xxxxxx)
23		and how was <u>God</u> made
24		how was God made
25	David	yeah
26	Joanne	how was God made
27	David	so how can he be real if nobody knows how he's made
28		*((bell ringing))*
29	Joanne	if there was no people there before God
30		how was <u>he</u> made
31	David	he <u>can't</u> be real
32	Joanne	(xxxxxxxxxxx)
33	Mrs H:	finish the [sentence you are on
34	Harry:	[he might have just appeared mightn't he
35		[he might have just appeared
36	Mrs H:	[your RE books in the middle of the table
37		we may get [chance to finish this later
38	Harry:	[in Year one when the <u>Universe</u> was made
39		(by the God of Gods)
40	David:	yeah but Harry
41		how do you know that the bibles are real
42		do you think someone's just made them up
43	Joanne:	it's made up

Differences of opinion emerge in this interaction, and the children introduce different sources of evidence to support their claims. Joanne's reference to there being 'a beginning' (lines 15-16) evokes text from the bible ('In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth').

Harry, on the other hand, demands empirical evidence ('I have to see to believe'). The children pose authentic questions, like Harry's 'how was God made' (line 24), which is taken up by David and Joanne and prompts Joanne to reconsider her original assumptions. The children elaborate and build on previous contributions, and in doing so, they start to converge on an integrated line of inquiry. Conversations like these, captured by the radio-microphone, give an alternative view of the students at this school. These children were capable of dialogic discussion, but adults in the school seemed rarely to experience this kind of talk from students. Guided by their belief that students lacked the maturity or ability to engage in serious discussion, teachers did not typically ask authentic questions (like the one posed by David that initiated this discussion) or give students opportunities to share and build on each other's ideas.

To summarise, overall, the qualitative analyses reveal a perception at the Lower SES school that the children were immature, lacking in ability, and prone to disobedience if given too much freedom; thus, talk was actively discouraged and students' voices, bodies and behaviour were micromanaged. This meant that there were limited opportunities for students to develop their thinking through dialogue. The same deficit perspectives made it possible to blame the children (rather than educational approach) for missed learning opportunities or lack of educational success, thus obscuring the need for institutional and systemic change. These practices were observed across two class teachers, three teaching assistants, the head teacher and a regular substitute teacher, suggesting a shared understanding at this school of 'what [their] working class students need' (Tyson 2003, 329). Yet, on the margins of classroom activity, the students showed themselves to be independent thinkers with a propensity for dialogue. A different situation pertained in the Higher SES school where there was greater space for students to develop their thinking through talk and the boundaries between teachers and students were less rigid. Teachers at this school did not invoke student ability, maturity or character as an explanation for educational success or failure. The comparison with the Higher SES school reinforces the notion that perceptions of

children's social class background influenced the teachers' approaches and how they interacted with the students in their classrooms.

7. Discussion

The quantitative analysis revealed a marked difference between the two schools in the extent to which students contributed to whole-class discussion, in line with previously published research based on large-scale quantitative studies. However, rather than looking to students' social class backgrounds and perceived deficiencies in their communicative repertoire to explain these disparities (as published work has done), the qualitative analysis reported in this article demonstrated the need to attend more closely to the classroom context, including how this is shaped by the wider sociopolitical landscape. Specifically, the detailed case studies presented here have highlighted three mechanisms through which opportunities for dialogue are either opened up or closed down. First, different understandings about the purpose of classroom talk, especially how children should contribute, will either promote or suppress student participation. Second, different approaches to managing classroom roles, routines and relationships can either cultivate or quash student voice. Third, the tendency to hold students individually accountable for educational failings, in line with neoliberal logics, limits possibilities for dialogue. The beliefs, assumptions and expectations that teachers and educational leaders have in these three areas are no doubt largely unconscious. The crucial role of linguistic ethnography is to uncover this latent level of understanding and associated consequences, not least because these divide along social class lines and exacerbate inequalities. This point was evident in the comparative ethnography reported in this article and finds support in other school-based ethnographies in the UK and US.

The observations made by Anyon (1981) in her case study of five elementary schools in contrasting social class settings in New Jersey, USA, were remarkably similar to my observations in northeast England. In the working-class schools in Anyon's study,

teachers spoke of a need for 'the basics', '[t]he three Rs-simple skills' (7), and when asked why, one teacher responded 'They're lazy. I hate to categorize them, but they're lazy' (7), thus attributing educational failings to perceived student deficits. The working-class schools had low expectations of their students' abilities, emphasising the need for 'routine tasks' and 'regular patterns from day to day so that the students do not become confused or distracted' (8). In the middle-class school, Anyon found greater flexibility concerning procedures, and knowledge that was 'conceptual' rather than 'mechanical' (see also Keddie 1971; Wilcox, 1982). But it was only in the 'affluent profession school' that knowledge was regarded as open to discovery and meaning making, and where the teaching approach was more dialogic. Alongside other work (e.g. Bowles and Gintis 1976, Keddie 1971; Wilcox 1982), studies like this have shown how classroom interaction can inculcate a different sense of political and economic agency in different classes of students, preparing working-class students to follow rules and submit to authority while preparing more privileged students for futures in the professional and ruling classes (Saltman 2014). The study presented in this article has highlighted another means through which inequalities are reproduced in classrooms. I have shown how and why some groups of students are systematically excluded from academically productive classroom dialogue, and because dialogue is a means through which we can shape ourselves, our reality and futures, as well as our understandings (Kershner et al. 2020, 11), the disadvantage is compounded.

My focus has been on social class, but of course, class intersects with other student characteristics, such as race and gender, in arrangements of institutional power that work to privilege some students over others. In Tyson's (2003) ethnography in two all-black elementary schools, teachers and school leaders demanded exacting standards of behaviour, including silence and strict self-restraint. As in the Lower SES school, students were disciplined for minor infractions on the grounds that they 'cannot afford to come in here with bad behaviour' (Tyson 2003, 335, see also Morris 2005, 25). In the low-income school Tyson studied, teachers enforced behavioural norms by making comments about students'

lack of intelligence. Another strategy was to infer that bad behaviour at school would have stark consequences in adult life, like prison or unemployment. This approach pointed to a belief that economically disadvantaged students of colour require a stricter and more structured style of teaching to achieve middle class 'success'. Stahl (2020) argued that this belief dominates 'no-excuses' charter schools in the US. Kulz's (2017) ethnography in a celebrated secondary academy in England revealed the same belief system at work, with the headteacher emphasising that 'you can be a lot more relaxed and free and easy in a nice, leafy middle-class area' but you need 'more structure' when 'dealing with urban children' (20). Work on both sides of the Atlantic has highlighted the darker side of this 'hard structure' approach, which can have negative consequences for marginalised students, including increased stress, anxiety, self-doubt, and disengagement (Kulz 2017, 44; Ben-Porath 2013; Golann 2015; Sondel 2016).

This body of work highlights how beliefs about students, grounded in dominant and widespread ideologies of class and race, influence what happens in the classroom in a way that perpetuates inequalities. In addition, local classroom activities are constrained by political ideologies and reforms. Labour's educational reforms, which shaped the landscape in which the focal schools operated, were part of an international standards agenda[2] that continues today. Thus, schools in different regions/countries feel the shared pressure of frequent student testing, league tables and state sponsored inspection regimes. However, these processes do not work in a linear 'top-down' fashion and the outcomes are not inevitable; rather, there is negotiation in classrooms between bottom-up meaning making processes and broader institutional and socio-political processes, leaving room for change (Flores and Lewis 2016, 110; Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 2014). The fleeting interaction between Joanne and Mrs Trotter positioned Joanne as a disobedient and disaffected student. Yet, on other days, different positions emerged for Joanne (she was regularly identified as a model student). The problem is that when similar social interactions occur repeatedly over time, negative student identities – e.g. non-participant, immature boy, low

attaining girl – 'thicken' (Wortham 2004; see also Flores and Lewis 2016; Snell and Lefstein 2018) in a way that makes alternative positions appear unattainable and change inconceivable.

8. Conclusion

While other studies have pointed to continuing classroom inequalities, I have illuminated three specific mechanisms through which lower SES children are disadvantaged in the classroom compared with Higher SES children, thus making clear where interventions should be targeted. I identified these mechanisms through close analysis of data collected in just two schools, but the analyses presented in this article apply more broadly, because each mechanism is underpinned by dominant ideologies and neoliberal educational reforms that persist today, not only in the UK education system but in other education systems globally.

This article increases our understanding of barriers to participation in classroom discussion, especially in schools serving underprivileged communities, and where/how they might be lifted. It also broadens the research on classroom participation from the dominant narrow focus on remediation of perceived student deficits towards the relational contexts of whole class participation. These contributions are made possible through the methodological approach– linguistic ethnography – which rejects universalizing assumptions about students and instead seeks to understand why certain students are positioned as mature, competent and articulate on the one hand or immature, low attaining and inarticulate on the other. As Flores and Lewis (2016, 121) point out, this approach is challenging because it is 'easy to fall back into normative assumptions' about language and social class 'that we have been socialized into'. But it is crucial that we develop this approach in educational research and build an ethnographic evidence base that can challenge deficit thinking and better inform educational policy and decision making.

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[1] All names are pseudonyms

[2] For example, high-stakes standardized testing became a hallmark of the US education system during the same period. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) emphasized standardized testing and accountability for schools. This was later replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, giving states more flexibility in setting standards.