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# The knowledge-rich project, coloniality, and the preservation of whiteness in schools: a raciolinguistic perspective

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**Abstract:** Since the early 2010s, education policy in England has been shaped by so-called knowledge-rich ideologies of curriculum design, built around a purportedly essential body of knowledge which all children must be taught if they are to succeed in school and experience upward social mobility. The knowledge-rich project is underpinned by a colonial, missionary and conservative narrative that the homes of working class and racially marginalised families are illiterate, degenerate, and symptomatic of cultural, linguistic, and cognitive deficit – and these defects must be compensated for through Western-centric curricula. In this article I adopt a raciolinguistic perspective to trace the colonial histories of the knowledge-rich project and its emergence as a political and academic agenda in the 1980s. I argue that the knowledge-rich project is actively designed to sustain white supremacy through the systematic discrediting and annihilation of language practices of racially marginalised children, particularly those racialised as Black. I show how raciolinguistic ideologies are integral to the knowledge-rich project, circulating through racist perceptions about language and society which frame racialised children as displaying linguistic inadequacies which carry a threat to social and national cohesion.

**Keywords:** anti-Blackness; coloniality; knowledge-rich; raciolinguistic ideologies; schools; white supremacy

## 1 How people from London work in Tesco

In a classroom in an economically deprived area of south London, a group of three Black Caribbean teenagers are on their lunch break, waiting for the start of their next lesson. I am in the school on a fieldwork visit, where I am working with a teacher on a project about anti-Blackness and language ideology in schools. The boys are talking animatedly about race, social class, and their own relationships with language. Their

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discussion springs from a TikTok video they have just watched on one of their mobile phones. The video, 'How People from London Work in Tesco', features a young Black man who acts out caricatures of Black supermarket employees in different parts of the city. In the south London segment, the man talks aggressively toward the camera and refuses to help a customer, whilst in the west London example, the man is overly helpful and talkative. The boys watch the video a few times, talking about how language is central to the construction and perception of race, class and identity – for whilst the aggressive south London employee uses markedly non-standardised grammar and a distinctive London accent, the helpful west London employee uses markedly standardised grammar and speaks in ways which resemble Received Pronunciation.

All of the boys in the classroom use language in ways which very closely resemble the south London caricature on the video that they are so insightfully unpicking. According to mainstream ideologies and national policies about language in England, they speak incorrectly, use vocabulary which is poor quality and non-academic, and require various forms of linguistic and cultural remediation if they are to succeed in school. The boys talk about their own relationship with language, race, class, pathologisation, and the pressures they face in school to modify the way they speak to have others perceive them as legitimate. One of them describes how he consciously shifts his language to sound 'more standard' and 'more academic' because he is acutely aware of how normative white perceptions of language work against Black boys. Another disagrees with him, and says that no matter what he does with his language, he is always perceived to be of a lower intellect – citing examples from school where his own writing is consistently judged to be of a poorer quality than his white peers – including when a white student copied his work and received a higher mark. Another talks of the linguistic liberation he felt when visiting wider family in Jamaica but how his mother describes his own language style as 'bad talk' and 'ghetto speak'. The boys talk with intimate knowledge of institutional racism, colonialism, criminalisation, linguistic double standards and the intersections between race and class, exhibiting remarkable metalinguistic knowledge and creativity in collectively exploring issues that are very real to them.

This representation of low-income, Black teenagers is very different to mainstream narratives about schools in England, where deficit-driven and anti-Black ideologies about language are increasingly used to justify the so-called knowledge turn. This turn is characterised by curricula and pedagogies rooted in 'knowledge-rich' theories of education policy, where perceived gaps in linguistic and cultural knowledge are filled through Western-centric models of schooling, as part of a neocolonial and neoconservative narrative around social decay, forgotten traditions, declining standards and degenerate communities. The school serving the boys described above had subscribed to the knowledge-rich project in their own

curriculum design and staff professional development programme, using a commercially produced curriculum package marketed as knowledge-rich and re-writing school policies to be in accordance with knowledge-rich ideologies, under the belief that this would afford the most marginalised members of the school future success. The boys had all been placed into what the school called a 'Covid catch-up programme', where for three mornings a week they were removed from their normal timetable and received intensive sessions on academic vocabulary. The students who had been placed into this programme had been perceived by their teachers to be displaying linguistic shortcomings as a result of the pandemic, the missing of formal schooling and perceptions that their families were not talking to them enough during national lockdowns. I have shared this story with colleagues in the USA, many of whom report similar episodes from their own fieldwork in schools – such as those who have observed the language practices of Black children in Harlem, New York City, being framed as illegitimate by white teachers and used as a justification to implement new policies geared around the strict policing of their language.

In this article I argue that the knowledge-rich project is an extension of the European colonial project, in terms of coloniality (e.g. Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000). Coloniality naturalises European systems of domination and knowledge production, through the creation of racialised hierarchies which discredits and denies the knowledge created by non-European, Indigenous and pre-colonial societies. Language and language education is integral to coloniality, woven through schooling as a means to harbour white supremacy and anti-Blackness (Motha 2014). I also argue that the knowledge-rich project is a prime example of white ignorance (Mills 2007), where the histories, realities and legacies of European colonialism are systematically ignored in order to preserve white supremacy. White ignorance is not simply the passive, absence of knowledge, but an actively crafted system designed to erase epistemologies deemed to be a threat to the project of whiteness, especially in schools (Bain 2018). I document the rise of the knowledge-rich project in England, tracing its historical roots to the very same raciolinguistic ideologies deployed by early British colonisers to justify linguistic racism and the complete annihilation of local language practices. I show how these colonial logics were then recycled in 1980s England and north America by a dense network of academics and politicians as part of an anti-Black narrative concerned with purported social decay and declining linguistic standards. These same narratives continue today, as part of education policy making which operates under a guise of social and racial justice which requires marginalised children to display conformity with linguistic whiteness if they are to be perceived as knowledgeable.

Although I focus primarily on England and its policy borrowing activity from north America, knowledge-rich ideologies must be understood as part of a broader colonial project in education which is intricately linked to neoliberal and monolingual standards-based reform across the world (e.g. Flores and Schissel 2014; Menken 2008).

Whilst there are existing and useful critiques of the knowledge-rich project in England (e.g. Eaglestone 2020; Neumann et al. 2020; Nightingale 2020; Yandell 2017), these have overlooked issues of white supremacy and coloniality, and so in this article I centre discussions of these in the knowledge-rich project, adopting a raciolinguistic perspective to do so.

## 2 Raciolinguistic ideologies and the coloniality of knowledge

In England's schools, the preservation of whiteness and coloniality is increasingly in the form of knowledge-rich curricula, as a powerful and enduring force which casts those who question it as deviant (Sriprakash et al. 2022). The interlocking structures of white supremacy and coloniality are central to a raciolinguistic perspective (Rosa and Flores 2017), an analytical stance which seeks to uncover how racial and linguistic il/legitimacy are institutionalised hierarchies which emerged from the colonially produced distinctions between Europeanness and non-Europeanness. These raciolinguistic ideologies of il/legitimacy represent sets of beliefs about language which position idealised whiteness as the normative linguistic benchmark, and by extension, subjugate the language practices of racialised speakers based on their perceived linguistic deficiencies regardless of how these might correspond to standardised or academic forms (Flores and Rosa 2015). The labelling of racialised speakers' language practices as deficient has long been a discursive strategy by white supremacists and colonisers to justify the complete erasure of local languages and nonstandardised, language patterns by subjecting racialised speakers to different kinds of remedial interventions. These include screeners, tests, scripted vocabulary routines, accent modification programmes, and curricula which promotes certain kinds of knowledge over others.

'Knowledge' is not a politically or racially neutral term, but imbued with colonial notions of what society needs to know, what schools need to teach, and who gets to teach it. Sriprakash et al. (2022: 48–64) describe how knowledge in schools is part of the ongoing settler colonial project, focusing on the global reach of whiteness and its function in sustaining racial erasures and the active denial of colonial violence. On similar lines, the Peruvian scholar Aníbal Quijano documents this as the coloniality of knowledge, defined as the success in discrediting and eradicating the knowledge-forms of colonised communities. Quijano writes how European colonisers exercised operations which naturalised hegemonic relations between themselves and non-Europeans, in a violent process of epistemic suppression which continues today, especially in education. He describes how colonisers

repressed as much as possible the colonized forms of knowledge production, the models of the production of meaning, their symbolic universe, the model of expression and of objectification and subjectivity. [...] they forced the colonized to learn the dominant culture in any way that would be useful to the reproduction of domination [...]. All of those turbulent processes involved a long period of the colonization of cognitive perspectives, modes of producing and giving meaning, the results of material existence, the imaginary, the universe of intersubjective relations with the world: in short, the culture. (Quijano 2000: 541)

Coloniality of knowledge strips colonised communities of having any legitimate intellectual legacies whilst crafting racial classifications and hierarchies, firming up the distinctions between Europeanness and non-Europeanness. Perceptions of language have always been key to these colonial logics, with Mignolo (2000: 227) describing how European colonialism worked to 'invent a discourse about languages that places the languaging of colonial powers above other linguistic and cultural practices'. Mignolo shows how what has come to constitute 'global knowledge' and 'universal history' is what came out of the creation of Western civilisation between 1500 and 2000, maintained in contemporary society through an imperialist nostalgia for the 'past'. This colonial nostalgia is one of the ways in which education policy makers in England have sought to legitimise knowledge-rich curricula, such as in the discourse of Michael Gove and Nick Gibb<sup>1</sup> who both desired a curriculum rooted in 'proper British history', 'correct English grammar', 'traditional teaching' and a 'non-apologetic' narrative of the British Empire (Neumann et al. 2020). Whilst Gove and Gibb represent agents of neocolonialism and key architects of the knowledge-rich project then, it is important to locate their work within a long history of British colonial education policy which has actively devalued and denigrated the language practices of racialised speakers. How then, do knowledge-rich ideologies of curriculum building preserve these colonial logics? This is the key question I explore in the remainder of this article, where I trace the contemporary surfacing of knowledge-rich ideologies in England's schools.

### **3 Anti-Black, white supremacist, and colonial logics in the knowledge-rich project**

The Black boys in the episode this article opened with were at a school subscribing to a knowledge-rich curriculum, representing a theory of state-sponsored curricula building which has become increasingly common in England since the early 2010s. Vocal advocates of the knowledge-rich project (e.g. Bauckham 2018; Christodoulou

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Gove was the Secretary of State for Education between 2010 and 2014. Nick Gibb was the Minister for School Standards between 2014 and 2021, and reappointed in 2022.

2014; Sherrington 2018) suggest they are characterised by the hard delineation of subject disciplinary borders, in which exists an essential body of knowledge which all children must remember if they are to succeed in school and later life. This knowledge is to be taught explicitly by teachers, with teachers positioned as the single most knowledgeable authority in the classroom who have a licence to fix and correct students' shortcomings and inadequacies. These practices of fixing and correcting rely on finance metaphors, where the supposed poorness and poverty of marginalised children's knowledge requires 'enriching' through European forms of intellectual 'capital', 'wealth', and indeed, 'richness'.

The knowledge-rich project is ideologically aligned with over 40 years of cultural restorationism in UK and US education policy, concerned with the revalorisation of traditional schooling as espoused in the neocolonial policies of John Major, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and 1990s (see Ball 1993; Neumann et al. 2020). This is in a direct genealogy with north American academic knowledge production and the Core Knowledge Movement, a neocolonial and neoconservative project grounded in a racist narrative of social decay, declining standards, lost traditions, and degenerate communities which typified the kind of cultural deprivation theories which had become so prominent in the 1950s and 1960s (see Buras 1999). Although the Core Knowledge Movement and the knowledge-rich project must be understood as a structure and not just the work of a few individuals, there are key figures who spearheaded its development in the 1980s – in particular, a trio of men who all published influential work in 1987. These were the Republican politician William Bennett (1987), the philosopher Allan Bloom (1987) and the literary critic Eric Donald Hirsch (1987). Bennett, Bloom and Hirsch shared the view that cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity posed a threat to the stability of white, settler colonial north American society, and that the appropriate solution for this was the imposition of a common canon of knowledge that represented white, Western and middle-class interests (Moglen 1988). Such neocolonial ideologies were granted political support in the wake of the 1983 Reagan commissioned report *A Nation at Risk*, which claimed schools were producing 'functional illiteracy among minority youth' (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983: 11). Unsurprisingly, Hirsch offers praise for *A Nation at Risk* and its warning that 'mastery of language was not being effectively achieved' (Hirsch 2020: 77).

Austin's (2022) critique of *A Nation at Risk* shows how it maintained a narrative of anti-Blackness in which low-income, Black families were routinely stigmatised because of their perceived failures to produce language which resembled that of the white, middle-class. These same anti-Black logics continue to shape contemporary education policy making across the globe, where deficit-driven narratives about the language of Black, working-class children frame them as in need of remedial linguistic interventions (e.g. Austin 2022; Baker-Bell 2020; Cushing 2022; Willis et al. 2022). Although my focus here is on anti-Blackness due to the contexts in which

knowledge-rich ideologies emerged and their ongoing legacies, other marginalised communities such as those categorised as working class, disabled, immigrants, refugees and English language learners are also framed as displaying inadequacies under the white normativity of the knowledge-rich project.

E.D Hirsch's notion of cultural literacy quickly became the favoured curriculum template for the knowledge-rich project, developed by Hirsch under the premise that if marginalised children would display competency in what he calls 'core knowledge', then this would allow them to become more socially mobile and escape the cognitive confinement that he believed they were in. This core knowledge is laid out in *The List* (Hirsch 1987: 152–215) – an index of around 5000 dates, names, scientific terms, texts, idioms, places and structures. Almost all named individuals in *The List* are white men from Europe or the USA. *The List* is symbolic of patriarchal, white supremacist, anti-Black and colonial logics in education policy (see also Dumas 2016; Gillborn 2005; Rose 2019; Wynter 1992), and I subscribe to this conceptualisation in this article, locating the lineages of knowledge-rich ideologies not to Hirsch as an individual but to a broader structure of anti-Blackness, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. Put this way, *The List* is a form of colonial violence, setting boundaries around what counts as worth teaching and what counts as knowledge. Entries in *The List* concerned with language are all grammatical categories, reproducing ideologies of monoglossic standards, technicist conceptualisations of literacy, and notions of delineated, bounded languages (see Makoni and Pennycook 2005; Urciuoli 1995). In the USA, Hirsch's curriculum has institutional status in the form of the Core Knowledge Foundation, a set of classroom resources which has received numerous critiques, including on the grounds that it harbours colonial and monolingual ideologies of language (e.g. Souto-Manning et al. 2022). Such raciolinguistic ideologies play an integral part in the arguments espoused by knowledge-rich advocates – for example, as Hirsch (2016: 2) writes, 'the achievement gap is chiefly a knowledge gap and a language gap', which 'can be greatly ameliorated by knowledge-based schooling'. These discourses of gaps, absences and missing parts are a central part of knowledge-rich ideologies, given that they begin with the premise that working class and racialised children lack adequate knowledge and require remedial interventions to bring them up to speed.

Knowledge-rich curricula are energetically favoured by policy makers in England, as part of an educational policy architecture built on guises of social justice, scientific objectivity and political impartiality (Neumann et al. 2020). This is exemplified in a 2021 speech by Nick Gibb, the former Minister of State for School Standards. In this, Gibb argued that knowledge-rich curricula are an issue of social and racial justice, positioning teachers as having moral responsibility for subscribing to them, and that marginalised children are further disadvantaged if schools *fail* to deliver a knowledge-rich curriculum:

We cannot anymore ignore the evidence that shows that pupils from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely than their peers to access this ‘communal knowledge’ at home, who by contrast enjoy frequent guided reading with parents from a young age, as well as rich conversations at the family dinner table as they grow older. So, teaching a knowledge-rich curriculum is essential to the task of spreading opportunity and levelling up. (Gibb 2021)

‘Less advantaged’ is here a proxy for low-income and racialised children, with their home language and cultural practices framed as inferior when compared to their white, middle-class counterparts and thus in need of remediation through knowledge-rich curricula. Gibb reproduces deficit discourses which perpetuate a culture of poverty narrative, where marginalised children and their families are represented as being so dysfunctional that they cannot operate in mainstream schooling, and so require fixing through an architecture of education policy built on whiteness (see Ladson-Billings 2017; Lewis 1966).

The crude dichotomy between home and school that Gibb relies on is key to another influential theory of knowledge-rich curriculum building, that of so-called ‘powerful knowledge’ and the work of Michael Young and his colleagues David Lambert, Johan Muller and Carolyn Roberts (e.g. Young and Muller 2013; Young and Lambert 2014). Young and his colleagues argue that some knowledge is objectively better than others, and that an education system grounded in social justice is one which provides students – especially those that are racially marginalised – to such knowledge through the curriculum. This again reproduces the ideology that ‘home’ and ‘school’ are dichotomies which cause problems, and that the kind of knowledge that marginalised students bring to school with them is lower quality their whiter and wealthier peers. Powerful knowledge is, according to Young, ‘cognitively superior’ and ‘liberates children from their daily experience’ (Young 2013: 118).

Rudolph et al. (2018) show how powerful knowledge is deeply implicated in a hierarchical global economy of knowledge production and is in direct lineage with a colonial past in the form of domination, erasure, dispossession, coercion, appropriation and assimilation. This acts as a form of racial and epistemic violence which actively excludes and delegitimises knowledge produced by the marginalised and the colonised. Indeed, Young (2020: 26) dismisses criticisms of powerful knowledge from ‘left-wing, anti-racist and feminist thinkers’, claiming that they fail to offer any alternatives. This is, at best, ignorant to the multitude of left-wing, anti-racist and feminist thinkers who have offered alternatives to deficit language ideologies for decades, including abolitionist language pedagogies (e.g. Souto-Manning et al. 2022); anti-racist Black language pedagogies (Baker-Bell 2020); culturally sustaining pedagogies (e.g. Paris 2012) and translanguaging (Li and García 2022), to name but a few. Given this, and his notable silence on the ongoing role that coloniality plays in



shaping Western education, Young, like Hirsch, is complicit in epistemologies of white ignorance which asks teachers to be compliant with the white supremacist project of the colonial state (Bain 2018; Rudolph et al. 2018).

## 4 The knowledge-rich project in England's schools

This section explores in further detail how the knowledge-rich project in England was taken up by education policy makers in the early 2000s. I begin with Nick Gibb's tribute to Hirsch as he recalls being introduced to his work and handed a copy of *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*. Writing for the right-wing thinktank Policy Exchange in an edited collection on Hirsch's influence, Gibb romanticises this first encounter in vivid detail:

Like any book which becomes seminal in one's intellectual journey, I distinctly remember the first time I encountered Hirsch's work. I was appointed shadow Minister for Schools in 2005. My researcher at the time, Edward Hardman, recommended that I read Hirsch's *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, so I took it with me on my summer holiday to Savannah, Georgia. I began reading it on the beach and could not put it down. Back in my hotel room, I emailed Hirsch to explain my enthusiasm for his ideas. Ever since, Hirsch's books – filled with post-it notes providing access to my favourite passages – have come with me from opposition and into government. (Gibb 2015: 12)

Just as Gibb was heavily influenced by an individual man, so too, was Hirsch. Hodgson and Harris (2022) document how Hirsch took inspiration from the Scottish Enlightenment educator Hugh Blair – particularly his eighteenth-century writings on literacy in Britain and its colonies. Blair was participating in a quasi-colonial project to educate the Scots in English language and culture after the 1707 Treaty of Union, writing about the need for 'eloquence', 'correctness' and 'precision' in language and giving detailed accounts about what he deemed to be the most desirable patterns of pronunciation in speech. Raciolinguistic hierarchies were central to Blair's writing, contrasting the language of 'rude uncultivated tribes' with the 'polished nations of Europe (1783: 2–3) and insisting that people must 'unlearn false and corrupt habits' if they are to present themselves as worthy members of contemporary society (Blair 1783: 444). Blair then, proposed that language-based interventions acted as a solution for social inequalities, with these very same reductive logics found in the contemporary knowledge-rich project. For Blair and Hirsch, a national language and standardised grammar were key components not just in social justice, but in nation building and the preservation of colonial structures, geopolitical borders and racial hierarchies. As Hirsch writes:

Inside a national border, education helps to keep the national language stable by holding it to standards that are set in national dictionaries, spelling books, pronunciation guides, and grammars. In the modern world we therefore find linguistic diversity among the nations but, with a few exceptions, linguistic uniformity inside the nations. (Hirsch 1987: 71)

These colonial ideologies of border making, biological purity, standardisation and monolingualism run central to Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, opening a space where the policing of deviant speech in schools is seen as a legitimate practice and a sensible solution to the purportedly chaotic classrooms which Hirsch claims characterise north American schools. For example, he writes how 'widespread schooling in spelling and pronunciation keeps the sounds of the language from straying very far' (1987: 76), how 'fixing the vocabulary of a national culture is analogous to fixing a standard grammar, spelling and pronunciation' (1987: 84) and how multilingualism is 'contrary to our traditions' and that this poses a risk to the 'national literate culture' of the USA (1987: 93).

In Hirsch's model of curriculum and nation building, languages other than English pose threats to culture, social order, literacy, and economic stability. Multilingualism, he argues, 'enormously increases cultural fragmentation, civil antagonism, illiteracy and economic-technological ineffectualness' (1987: 92). Following the same logics that European missionaries and imperialists deployed to justify colonial rule and linguistic annihilation (Mignolo 2000; Rosa and Flores 2017), Hirsch's rhetoric of linguistic and biological purity are rooted in explicitly pro-European and anti-Black ideologies, seeing school as a space where racially marginalised children can be compensated for their supposed shortcomings through acts of linguistic violence which force them to accommodate whiteness. Hirsch suggests that non-European countries should 'follow the European pattern' in their own language planning regimes, giving the French Academy, the Spanish Academy and Samuel Johnson's dictionary project as the ideal models of language policy making (1987: 77–79). In later work which is marked by its jingoistic visions for contemporary America (Hirsch 2020), he pays extensive tribute to the eighteenth-century lexicographer Noah Webster and his visions for social unity in which every citizen spoke the same language. Under these logics, nonstandardised variants and languages other than English are framed as threats to social and educational cohesion, positioning the speakers of these languages as incapable of full participation in society unless they abandon their own ways of talking (see also Khan 2018; Searle 1983). The use of 'mature literacy' and standardised English, Hirsch argues, is literally a matter of life and death, as something which 'enables the tower to be built, the business to be well managed, and the airplane to fly without crashing' (Hirsch 1987: 2). 30 years later, Hirsch continues to recycle these monolingual and monocultural lines, positioning teachers as neo-missionaries who must teach 'shared knowledge' in order to fix a

purportedly broken society and threats to the so-called American Dream, itself a nationalistic ideology built on white supremacy and anti-Blackness (see Zangrando and Zangrando 1970):

The costs of a broken approach to schooling leave our children underprepared and erode the American Dream. But there's an even deeper cost. Without schooling that teaches shared knowledge, the spiritual bonds that hold our society together are loosened. (Hirsch 2020: 13)

These analogies of language and social collapse are well-trodden in England, regularly deployed by the UK Government in attempts to justify the need for standards-based curriculum reform. Such attempts have often followed civil unrest, such as the Brixton uprisings in 1981 and UK-wide uprisings in 2011, where largely Black, working-class communities protested against years of police racism and punitive welfare policies (see Shilliam 2018). Deficit and monolingual discourses about language have always formed a central part of governmental response to civil uprisings, with both Margaret Thatcher and David Cameron in 1981 and 2011 respectively pointing to a supposed lack of proper English amongst marginalised communities as one of the root causes of social inequalities. Following the uprisings in 1981 and 2011, racialised and low-income children were depicted by the state as lacking adequate vocabulary, and that this led them to suffer in school, experience social disenfranchisement and engage in anti-social behaviour (see Cushing 2022). Proper grammar, competence in English, linguistic standards, and Eurocentric knowledge-based curricula became the panacea for Conservative administrations who wished to deflect responsibility away from themselves and deny the existence of structural racism in schools and society.

Appointed as Schools Minister in 2010, Nick Gibb immediately initiated a project of curriculum reform rooted in knowledge-rich ideologies, repeatedly citing Hirsch as his main inspiration for a schooling which centres knowledge as 'the currency of a common culture' and 'a basic requirement of a civilised nation' (Gibb 2010). Standard language and monoglossic ideologies formed an integral part of the emerging education policy assemblage in England, with an assortment of mechanisms including grammar tests, new professional standards for teachers and additional powers granted to Ofsted, the schools inspectorate, positioning teachers as authoritative, standard language role models who were handed a liberatory licence to police the purportedly deficient language of marginalised children. Ten years later, this raciolinguistic policy assemblage is firmly established in schools and teacher education (see also Cushing 2023) as part of a broader political agenda which is attempting to derail anti-racist and anti-colonial efforts in schools across the world (see Shafi and Nagdee 2022; Sriprakash et al. 2022).

Like Blair and Hirsch before him, Gibb attempted to justify language education policy reforms through a social justice argument (see Buras 1999 for an extended critique of Hirsch's incoherent logics here). For instance, in his 2015 Policy Exchange essay, Gibb describes how Hirsch's ideologies:

[...] provided us with a compelling social justice case with which to argue for a knowledge-rich curriculum. Our reforms were based on a desire to equalise the unfair distribution of intellectual capital in British society and, unlike so many other inequalities, this is one that schools, if performing their function properly, have the power to address. (Gibb 2015: 14)

Ofsted, too, subscribe to this warped version of social justice where responsibility is placed on the most marginalised members of society to modify the way they speak if they are to experience upward social mobility. As documented in Cushing and Snell (2022), Ofsted have a long, colonial history, established as His Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools (HMI) in 1839. HMI's work involved campaigning for the annihilation of languages other than English as part of their school inspection regimes in the British colonial project (see Fletcher 1982), work which continues today under the same colonial logics (Cushing and Snell 2022). Ofsted have an explicit preference for knowledge-rich curricula, with recently leaked training materials for inspectors and official policy documents claiming that the most effective curricula are those that emphasise 'core knowledge' and 'cultural capital', especially for children who are intersectionally marginalised in terms of race, class and disability (e.g. Ofsted 2019). Ofsted's use of cultural capital is a recycling of verbal deprivation theories which dominated educational thinking in the 1950s and 1960s (e.g. Bereiter and Engelmann 1966), a racist set of ideas which construed marginalised families as displaying cultural deficits which required fixing (see Nightingale 2020). Wallace (2018) shows how cultural capital is synonymous with whiteness, and a curriculum mechanism used to further frame the knowledge and expertise of racialised and immigrant communities as degenerate. Ofsted's perceptions of language follow these same deficit logics – for instance, in 2020 Sean Harford, Ofsted's National Director and a vocal advocate of knowledge-rich curricula, wrote that:

Many children enter early years settings 'language impoverished'. It is a matter of social justice to give these pupils the best possible language and communication development to lay the foundations for a successful education [...]. Pupils are disadvantaged by not being able to write and speak standard English. Rather than being seen as a means of perpetuating class hierarchies, it is now widely regarded as an instrument of social justice. It should be modelled in early years and taught explicitly as pupils move through the curriculum. (Harford 2020: 2)

Harford's narrative is remarkably similar to Hirsch:

To be a disadvantaged child is to lack the modes of speech, the vocabulary, and the shared knowledge of the national print culture. Kids who come from circumstances in which the

language of the home is standard educated English possess both language and background knowledge that enables them to move forward in school. (Hirsch 2020: 80)

Harford argues that social justice is only achieved by 'tackling impoverished language through a structured, whole school approach with explicit teaching of curriculum content and terminology' (Hardford 2020: 4). For knowledge-rich proponents then, social justice is achieved through practices which ask marginalised children to assimilate towards the cultural and linguistic behaviours of idealised, middle-class whiteness. This is particularly evident in the content of the 2014 National Curriculum for England, explicitly built on knowledge-rich ideologies, but also under interventions seeking to the purportedly deficient vocabulary of racialised and low-income children. I discuss this further in the following section.

Whilst knowledge-rich ideologies have been championed by conservative education ministers since the early 2000s then, in the early 2020s they are very much part of the contemporary teacher education architecture in England. For instance, the Institute for Teaching, founded by the Department for Education at a cost of £121 million, claims to be England's flagship teacher education provider and involves the delivery of what Gavin Williamson, the then Education Secretary called a 'knowledge-based and ambitious curriculum' (DfE and Gibb 2021). Policy discourse surrounding the Institute for Teaching continues a long history of attempting to discredit the work of university-based teacher education providers, cartoonishly characterised by the state as leftist Marxists who are more interested in abstract educational theory than pedagogical practicalities (see Ellis et al. 2019). Whilst such narratives are particularly prominent in the 2020s, they must be thought of as in direct lineage with conservative voices in the 1980s and the initial formations of the knowledge-rich ideological project as led by Bennett, Bloom and Hirsch.

## 5 Punishing words

This section more closely examines ideologies about vocabulary as part of the knowledge-rich project, and the claim that low-income and racialised children can simply undo their disadvantage by using more and better words. Bennett, Bloom and Hirsch propose the improvement of vocabulary as a crucial cog for achieving social and racial justice, relying on reductive logics which pose linguistic solutions for structural inequalities (see Rosa 2016). In *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* for example, Hirsch deploys discourses of linguistic deficit to make a case for explicit vocabulary teaching and the development of what he calls 'intellectual capital'. Economic metaphors underpin much of Hirsch's work, such as a 2013 article *A Wealth of Words*, in which he repeats his claim that providing marginalised

children with a bigger and better vocabulary is the key to solving social inequalities (Hirsch 2013). This logic characterises *The Schools We Need*, where Hirsch suggests that children ‘with limited communication skills and a highly restricted vocabulary’ are bound to suffer from a ‘knowledge deficit’ (Hirsch 1996: 145–146). Assuming a stance where racially and economically disadvantaged children are lacking in their linguistic abilities, and once again subscribing to discourses of verbal deprivation reminiscent of the 1950s and 1960s, Hirsch writes.

If a young child’s speaking and listening skills have been so impoverished by growing up in a limited linguistic environment, no effort should be spared to enhance those foundational oral-aural skills as a prerequisite for further literacy skills. (Hirsch 1996: 147)

Just as Hirsch was an early proponent of cognitive science in education, a movement which is ideologically associated with the knowledge-rich project (see Buras 1999: 77–80), contemporary education policy has feverishly subscribed to cognitive models of teaching and learning as popularised by Western psychologists and policy influencers such as Daniel Willingham and Paul Kirschner. Willingham, a former colleague of Hirsch, claims that the purportedly limited vocabulary of marginalised children is one of the reasons they struggle in school, relying on the very same racist narratives of verbal deprivation which characterise the knowledge-rich project more broadly. Willingham (2009: 28) writes how ‘kids from privileged backgrounds have an edge’, and that this ‘edge’ is nothing to do with white privilege but everything to do with how ‘they come to school with a bigger vocabulary and more knowledge about the world than underprivileged kids’. Citing what he calls the ‘brilliant’ work of the nineteenth century eugenicist Francis Galton (Willingham 2009: 134), Willingham claims that one of the root causes of social inequalities is that low-income children of colour have a supposedly smaller vocabulary than their white, economically privileged counterparts. Such logics actively obscure the oppressive and interlocking structures of white supremacy and racial capitalism, recycling racist narratives concerning hereditary intelligence whilst posing that a bigger and better vocabulary is the solution to addressing social inequalities. Attempts to frame classrooms as depoliticised spaces are a long-chosen tactic by conservative voices, something which also characterises Hirsch’s work (Buras 1999: 77). As such, Hirsch and Willingham’s ideas are particularly appealing to governments who attempt to deny the existence of structural racism (see Shafi and Nagdee 2022; Tikly 2022). Their ideas are a prime example of white ignorance (Mills 2007; see also Bain 2018), acting as a shield to protect the racial injustices crafted by the state which are exacerbated through raciolinguistic ideologies and coloniality.

It is important to emphasise that such raciolinguistic ideologies about vocabulary were not invented by Hirsch or Willingham but were central to European

colonial projects which perceived and represented the language of the colonised as limited, lacking and symptomatic of subhuman qualities (e.g. Gilmour 2006; Smith 2009; Rose 2019). Ideologies about vocabulary in the knowledge-rich project are thus a simple recycling of colonial discourses in which the language practices of racialised communities are deemed to be impoverished – as espoused by Hirsch:

Children who arrive at school with less varied oral-aural language experience are usually also children who have received less home instruction in phonics and experience in listening to reading. In comparison with more fortunate students, they continue to be impoverished linguistically, with less rich language experiences at home, less comprehension of oral speech in school, and, because of deficiencies in decoding, less access to written speech. (Hirsch 1996: 148)

I do not have access to Nick Gibb's copy of *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, but it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that this might have been one of his favourite highlighted passages that he mentions in Gibb (2015). In his 2015 essay for the Policy Exchange, Gibb cites the following passage from Hirsch:

Those children who possess the intellectual capital when they first arrive at school have the mental scaffolding and Velcro to gain still more knowledge. But those children who arrive at school lacking the relevant experience and vocabulary – they see not, neither do they understand. (Hirsch 1996: 20)

And just as Gibb suggests that marginalised children lack linguistic competency because of their 'mental architecture' (Gibb 2015: 14), the passage from Hirsch continues with similarly eugenicist and ableist logics:

They fall further and further behind. The relentless humiliation they experience continues to deplete their energy and motivation to learn. Lack of stimulation has depressed their IQs. (Hirsch 1996: 20)

IQs and eugenics were a point of discussion at Hirsch's 2015 Policy Exchange lecture, in which it was argued by the eugenicist Toby Young that the only way social mobility might be achieved is to give parents with low IQs the tools to increase the intelligence of their children. Eugenics was one of the foundational structures of the rise of mass schooling in Britain (see Allen 2014) and continues to bear influence as part of the knowledge-rich project, perpetuated through figures such as Hirsch and Willingham who draw links between cognitive and linguistic (in)ability under new guises of scientific objectivity and liberatory forms of cognitive psychology.

Language has long been used as a proxy for hereditary intelligence, with academic knowledge production about the so-called word gap (Hart and Risley 1995) readily reproducing narratives in which low-income, Black families are perceived to display linguistic and cognitive deficiencies when compared against their white, middle-class counterparts. Hart and Risley's research has received multiple

rejections on the grounds that it is rooted in raciolinguistic ideologies of anti-Blackness (e.g. Aggarwal 2016; Baugh 2017; García and Otheguy 2017; Johnson and Johnson 2021). Word gap ideologies continue to form a central part of education policy making in England (see Cushing 2022 for a detailed discussion), heavily funded by the state and marketed to teachers through uncritical textbooks grounded in quick-fix solutions for social injustices (e.g. Quigley 2018). Ideologies of vocabulary deficit and the word gap then, fit neatly in the knowledge-rich project because they subscribe to the same reductive logics that social justice can be achieved through marginalised children modifying their language so that it appropriates that of the white middle-classes. As this section has shown, there are distinct traces of eugenics here too, with Hirsch and his contemporaries espousing associations between language use, racial/class hierarchies, and hereditary intelligence. These views are being newly propagated by the cognitive science movement in education policy, energetically supported and funded by a government who continue to absolve their own responsibilities in the crafting of structural inequalities.

## 6 The coloniality of the knowledge-rich project

This article has argued that the knowledge-rich project in schools is an extension of European colonialism, as a form of coloniality which is designed to systematically discredit and erase the linguistic knowledge of low-income and racialised communities. Deployed under a guise of racial and social justice, the knowledge-rich project only serves to sustain racial and class hierarchies because it demands that marginalised children must abandon their own natural language practices and assimilate towards the linguistic knowledge defined by idealised whiteness.

Knowledge-rich curricula pose that structural inequalities concerned with race and class can be addressed through linguistic solutions, such as explicit vocabulary teaching, word gap interventions, monolingual instruction and the centring of Western-centric knowledge in classrooms. But this stance simply overlooks broader sociopolitical and economic structures as the root cause of social inequalities, absolving the state of their own responsibilities and placing the burden on the most marginalised members of society to modify the way they use language. Put this way, the knowledge-rich project is a structure shaped by anti-Black violence (see Baker-Bell 2020; Johnson 2022), including the systematic denigration and erasure of Black speakers' language practices through pedagogies, assessments, curricula, and classroom interactions which demand that Black and other negatively racialised communities reject their language and culture if they are to avoid racial injustice. Just as knowledge-rich advocates refuse to recognise the root causes of inequality shaped by structural racism, Lewis (2018) argues that critical educational linguists



must focus their efforts on challenging these broader structures as opposed to simply repeating the call for teachers to develop greater critical awareness about language. Both Lewis (2018) and Flores et al. (2018) argue that the relative failure of educational linguists to bring about any tangible impact in rejecting oppressive language ideologies is due to the fact that most work has concentrated on modifying individual teacher attitudes as opposed to connecting language-based struggles to broader histories of colonialism, anti-Blackness and white supremacy. They argue that *only* a focus on socio-historical and political contexts will allow teachers to be positioned as activists, begin to interrogate raciolinguistic ideologies in institutional practices and bring about structural change. Flores et al. (2018) conclude that:

While continued work with teachers to change their individual attitudes is important, more concerted efforts should be placed on the institutional mechanisms that constrain teachers from taking on alternative institutional listening subject positions in their classrooms. [...] if we frame the problem as one of individual teacher language attitudes, then our solutions will focus on changing individual teacher attitudes, leaving intact the broader institutional listening subject position teachers inhabit. If we frame the problem as one of institutional racism, then our solutions can more readily focus on dismantling institutional racism. (Flores et al. 2018: 24)

Tempting as it might be then to label names in the knowledge-rich project such as Gibb, Hirsch and Willingham as malicious individuals, we must locate their work as part of a broader education architecture built on white supremacy (Gillborn 2005), coloniality (Mignolo 2000), and anti-Blackness (Dumas 2016). Put this way, educational linguists have a professional and moral responsibility to question ideologies about language and how these have the potential to perpetuate racial injustices at a structural, rather than individual level. This line of questioning involves grappling with the colonial genealogies of contemporary language education policy and exposing the shifting ways in which racialised communities are institutionally categorised as displaying linguistic inadequacies. As we saw in the example of the young Black boys discussed at the beginning of this article, knowledge-rich curricula risk miscategorising what marginalised children can do with their language, whilst missing opportunities for them to have their language and culture sustained and centred in classrooms. Questioning knowledge-rich curricula then, is part of a broader decolonial agenda in educational linguistics which, as Mignolo suggests, is integral to 'restoring the dignity that the Western idea of universal history took away from millions of people' and exposing how the modern/colonial world system is modelled on 'one supreme idea of life' (2000: x). As per the principles of a raciolinguistic perspective, this encourages teachers to take up positions where the focus is not on the purportedly deficient language practices of marginalised children, but on the ways that their own perceiving practices have the potential to be oppressive and imbued in the preservation of coloniality.

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