

**WestminsterResearch**

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**Tiny happy people? Brain building and the ‘word gap’**

**Green, Lorette**

This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article published in the Families, Relationships and Societies DOI:10.1332/204674322x16690225350137.

The final definitive version is available online at:

<https://doi.org/10.1332/204674322x16690225350137>

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Author Accepted Manuscript  
Accepted by FRS 21 November 2022  
Published Online 2 January 2023

**Title:**

**Tiny Happy People? Brain-building and the 'word gap'.**

**Author name(s) and affiliation(s):**

Lorette Green  
University of Westminster, UK

**Abstract:**

Presently and historically, working-class mothers have been positioned as problematic. Their children's low attainment is blamed on perceived deficiencies in their parenting. Tied to this, the concept of the word gap has been used to demonstrate a language deficit which it is claimed leads to working-class children starting school behind their middle-class peers. These concepts are central tenets to the BBC's *Tiny Happy People* website which was analysed to ascertain current 'good' mothering discourses. This critical discourse analysis considers the authorship of the website and the BBC's status as commissioning editor, alongside its key concept: addressing the word gap. Tiny Happy People's target audience are parents from lower socio-economic groups. Together with the content of the website, this framing will be used to consider Tiny Happy People's approach to the perceived problem and how that may impact on working-class mothers.

**Key words/short phrases:**

'good' mother; social class; word gap

**Introduction**

A critical discourse analysis of BBC's Tiny Happy People ("THP") was undertaken to ascertain current 'good' mothering discourses. This is the first research, to my knowledge, undertaken on THP. Critical discourse analysis is interested in power and how it is reproduced through dominant discourses. As such, it is grounded in a Foucauldian approach to knowledge and power, whereby 'technologies of power' are used by the ruling class to consolidate power through regulating, demarcating and arbitrating the everyday life of citizens (Foucault, 2012 p141). These 'technologies of power' work to regulate and reproduce, making populations self-governing and self-disciplining, creating norms which are institutionalised thereby becoming every day and commonplace (Foucault, 1980). Instead of governments gaining order through punishment and control, increasingly people become self-governing as they absorb social norms. Discourse analysis serves to 'reveal the bases of these common assumptions and to show how they are related to different interests in society', (Burnham et al, 2008 p250). Whose interests are being promoted explains who is driving those messages and why; 'truths' being established can be mapped using a combination of 'language use, verbal interaction, conversation, texts, multimodal messages and communicative events', (van Dijk, 2011 p2). In undertaking a critical discourse

analysis of THP, the social practice of mothering, and who informs it, can be understood. Mothers, rather than parents, are the focus of this analysis since despite increased use of the gender-neutral term 'parent', mothers remain the ones expected to undertake the majority of the reproductive work involved in raising children, (Gillies, Edwards and Horsley 2017). Gender equality is framed such that women are increasingly being viewed in terms of their paid work rather than their reproductive work, thus further reducing and concealing the importance and hidden cost of that work, basing equality on a male norm (Fraser, 2013). Mothers carry the burden of reproductive labour as well as responsibility for its perceived success or failure so must take on the unpaid and devalued work of reproduction and receive approbation for failure to adhere to current 'good' mothering ideals. This paper begins by discussing the production of the website by the BBC and why that is relevant. Next, I will look at its main focus: the word gap. Then the target audience of the website will be examined. After which, the messages being given about 'good' mothering by the website will be discussed. Finally, I will describe how these connect to broader understandings of working-class mothering as deficient and how these discourses perpetuate inequalities and promote middle-class values.

### **BBC as producer**

Prior to looking at the website itself, I will consider the BBC's position as the creator and producer of the site. The BBC holds a unique position as national broadcaster, deeply enmeshed in the British establishment and closely linked to government who set their parameters of operation (Leighton, 2005). It has a long history of providing educational content as part of its services; even before the advent of the internet, or indeed television, their radio broadcasts of the 1920s and 30s sought to bring education into the homes of the masses. During this time, it was under the management of Lord Reith who 'placed great emphasis on using radio, and later television, to educate and inform the public, and his legacy is still felt at the BBC', (Cody et al, 2004 p244). Mathew Thomson (2013) argues that children's television was part of the post-war settlement which created a separate space for children away from the dangers of the adult world. The BBC was central to this offering of a space for children and 'the vision behind early BBC children's programming and its aim of providing a special developmental landscape for the child', (Thomson, 2013 p108). Despite successfully presenting itself as a social good, BBC children's output was described throughout the post-war period as 'condescending, paternalistic and middle-class', (Thomson, 2013 p130). As will be explored within this article, despite describing the situation over sixty years ago, those descriptors could readily be applied to THP. The BBC's wider educational content has been described as attempting to 'curricularize' television (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003), is widely used in schools and is the UK's most viewed news broadcaster (Lewis and Cushion, 2019). The BBC claims impartiality despite being an integral part of the British establishment whose content is influenced by those in power (Mills, 2020). In occupying a 'traditionally and institutionally guaranteed position' as educators (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977 p21), through their status and reputation for delivering

educational content, the information being transmitted by the BBC is held in high esteem and technical competence presumed. It is this technical competence, conferring authority upon its content, which lends THP a higher degree of status than other parenting websites. Content is validated by the BBC name, and its establishment position, represented as impartial, correct and of high quality. Paid for by licence fee, there is no advertising on the site and content is freely accessible. The next section will consider the focus of the website: the word gap.

## **Word gap**

It is worth considering in more depth the concept of the word gap, since THP was designed with the intention of addressing this perceived gap and ‘hopes to pay [Sic] a key role in halving the UK’s word gap’, (Institute of Health Visiting, 2020). The concept of a word gap originated in the US, arising from a study by Hart and Risley (1995) who claim children from low-income households are exposed to 30 million fewer words than those from affluent households. The study involved recording the quantity of words spoken from parent to child in 42 households to prove their theory of a gap in language between children from low-income households which has been used to explain the attainment gap (whereby those children have poorer educational outcomes). Despite the original study’s ‘considerable methodological shortcomings’, (Allen and Spencer, 2022, p7), and subsequent research contradicting its findings (Sperry et al, 2019), it has been cited over 670 times (Anders et al, 2016) and the word gap adopted in England as an explicit policy target (Cushing, 2022). Conceptually the word gap is criticised for its reductive interpretation of language acquisition, mono-cultural approach, and its role in perpetuating oppressive power structures along raced and classed lines (Rosa, 2016). Each of these will be expanded upon and contextualised within the current political system.

Counting individual words, and using that as a proxy for quantifying language acquisition, decontextualises language (Blum, 2015), disconnecting it from those who use or create it (Franklin, 2021). As demonstrated on THP, mothers are expected to ‘act as the child’s in-home teacher from before birth’, (Blum, 2015 p75); programmes aimed at improving children’s language rely upon mothers speaking directly to their babies and toddlers despite this not being the norm in much of the world. THP states that a quarter of children are starting school behind in literacy development. Connecting children’s early language with future school success, is ‘fundamentally misconceived’, (Hackett et al, 2021, p913) resulting in unsuccessful interventions. The focus on word gaps and vocabulary in early years environments leads to language being decontextualised from the usual environmental, sensory or spatial supports which prompt it (Hackett et al, 2021) meaning counting words is not an accurate measure of a child’s language learning or comprehension. Instead, there should be an understanding ‘that language involves more than words, syntax and meaning – that something mobile, dynamic, relational and multi-sensory moves, and moves in, language’, (Hackett et al, 2021 p925). Those aspects are not readily quantifiable, so instead word gap metrics are

favoured since they allow comparisons to be drawn. THP promotes replication of the early years teaching environment within the family home, but this could have the opposite effect to its intention, potentially removing the aspects of home which make it distinct from educational establishments: informality, family relationships and lack of inhibitions (Hackett et al, 2021). Use of the quantity of words spoken as a measure of language development is an overly simplistic interpretation of language which disregards the multi-faceted nature of language.

In spite of the flawed nature of the concept and Hart and Risley's findings being contested, claims of a 30-million-word gap continue and are used to justify policy remedies which ignore underlying issues (Cushing, 2022). Word gap ideology persists because it promotes individual responsibility, aligning with neoliberal ideals, and is strengthened by 'claims of scientific objectivity', (Cushing, 2022, p20) thereby increasing its supposed reliability. In doing so, it reinforces existing power structures, preserving and concealing 'structural issues of poverty, racism, ableism and classism', (Cushing, 2022, p15). Those issues are instead interpreted 'as a linguistic problem requiring linguistic solutions, rather than as a politico-economic problem requiring politico-economic solutions', (Rosa, 2016, p165). Consequently, children from those families are deemed lacking in language and low attainment connected to deficient parenting (Anders et al, 2016). Focus on the word gap as an explanation for poor school performance rests on a belief of 'a cultural, cognitive and linguistic deficit located within the speakers, their families, and their communities', (Cushing, 2022, p5) rather than the impact of structural barriers. Remedies aimed at addressing a perceived word gap serve to blame the 'victims' for not taking the 'correct' action and ignore all the positive aspects which take place in working-class homes, devaluing any non-normative ways of thinking and communicating which occur (Johnson, 2015). Instead, their 'language practices are perceived as deficient, incomplete, and indeed, full of gaps when compared against the language practices of the idealized white middle-classes', (Cushing, 2022, p2). Ultimately, word gap ideologies work to fortify and uphold existing power structures: increasing mothers' responsibility for their children's future outcomes; and reinforcing deficit narratives around marginalised groups. In England, word gap discourses 'have subscribed to this logic under a guise of scientific objectivity, social justice and 'research-led' policy making, with Ofsted and Oxford University Press in particular occupying a position of institutionalized power which coerces schools and teachers into reproducing word gap ideologies in their own settings', (Cushing, 2022, p21). In this way, institutionalised power is wielded by the BBC, using THP as a vehicle to promote word gap ideology, and compounded by conflating it with social mobility.

Emphasising an improvement in social mobility highlights that they believe that working-class people should be aiming to move out of their social class as if there is something inherently wrong with being working-class. What social mobility does not address is that mobility works in both directions and there will always be working-class people. Viewing social mobility according to attainment at age five is an extremely simplistic view since it entirely ignores social and structural causes of disadvantage and inequality, instead personalising attainment to focus on individual behaviour. Social mobility

does not work on either a collective or individual level since it does nothing to remove oppressive power structures (Reay, 2017). Even assuming social mobility is desirable, tying it to 'personal drive and the will to succeed', (Blandford, 2017 p24) although popular with governments, is a simplification of the issue – shifting responsibility onto the individual who is often not in a position to effect change. Attainment at five is measured through the baseline assessments undertaken by reception class teachers which are informed by assessments undertaken in preschool settings. Teacher assessments have stronger demographic effects than those obtained through objective measures (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2020), suggesting teachers are influenced by family background when conducting assessments. Confirming this, Simpson et al's (2019 p25) research in early years education found 'practitioners are unlikely to be immune to the negative constructions evident in policy'. This research revealed practitioners blamed 'poor parenting' for children's low attainment and poverty (Simpson et al, 2019). Despite claiming parents were difficult to engage, practitioners were negative in their approach towards attempting to engage with them (Simpson et al, 2019) which is similar to the THP view of their target audience being 'hostile' (discussed further in the following section). It is unsurprising that addressing parents in a patronising manner may result in hostility. Judgements about mothers whose children do not have the expected language skills when starting school creates a reliable governance method since they are often made indirectly, so are less likely to be defended (Allen and Spencer, 2022). In looking at who THP are targeting, its emphasis on the word gap (used as a proxy to connect working-class parenting to children's attainment), and the behaviour change approach to promote social mobility, the purpose of THP is exposed. The next section will explore in more detail how parents are framed by the production team behind THP.

## **Target audience**

An online search about THP returned several commissioning documents allowing insight into the intentions of THP, their target audience and the processes behind filming of clips and creation of animations. The function of the briefs is to commission people to create content for the website, including: creating content alongside health and childcare professionals; content aimed at specific groups (eg those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds; or for parents of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. Some of the briefings addressed specific types of content, for example, animation or live action. The briefs claim that until very recently, early years settings and the home learning environment have not been government priorities (BBC, 2019a). Thirteen early years policy changes were made between 1998 and 2018 (Akhal, 2019) which would seem to dispute that claim. The Education Policy Institute's report into government policies and their impact on early years provision concludes that, through policy change, the government has effected reformation of the early years sector (Akhal, 2019). For the BBC to state that early years and the home learning environment have not been prioritised by governments until very recently suggests that they do not have much knowledge of this area of policy or wishes to represent the issues the website addresses as ignored by, rather than very closely aligned with, government policy.

The stated intention of THP is to initiate 'a simple behaviour change – getting parents to talk to their children from a very early age' (BBC, 2022a). Its target audience is identified as 'young parents and carers' (BBC, 2022a) and those 'in areas of social deprivation' (ibid) of which 42% do not meet literacy standards at school entry. In constantly reinforcing their message of encouraging parental talk towards young children *and* that they are targeting parents from less advantaged backgrounds, it is compounding the view that parental behaviour, rather than material circumstances or the prejudice faced from educational professionals, is the cause of their children's low attainment. THP is actively constructing their target audience (through their commissioning briefs) as hostile, young, dysfunctional, less advantaged adults whose children are prone to neglect. This has echoes of the culture of poverty described by Oscar Lewis (1963) and the narratives surrounding teenage pregnancy of the New Labour years.

Within the briefs, it is stipulated locations used are 'relatable' and to avoid those which could be viewed as 'aspirational' or 'out of reach'. 'Relatable' to whom? Presumably their target audience of parents from 'less advantaged' backgrounds. However, the clips provide an acceptable, uncluttered, sanitised version of working-class homes with no sign of the problems evident in many homes of those living in poverty: damp, poor state of repair, lack of furnishing. Videos depict the suggested range of inner city, rural and coastal, although, again, there is no evidence of the realities of deprived neighbourhoods: fly-tipping, vandalism, drug use or violence. All social problems are neatly removed so focus (and blame) is upon parents' behaviour rather than the reality of life in poverty. With working-class mothering situated as deficient in relation to middle-class mothering. It is poverty through a middle-class lens, whereby the difference between the social classes is behavioural thereby removing any responsibility from society at large (including themselves). This moves classed concepts away from material resources, focussing instead on character traits and qualities (Reay, 2017) and framing poverty as a parenting problem, to be managed at an individual level. Their missionary zeal means that they believe educating parents is the solution rather than pushing for an improvement in material conditions. The briefs require activities to use ordinary household objects rather than requiring costly or special equipment. In specifying this, they are giving the impression that this removes any obstacles to participation and the activities are therefore accessible to all, meaning lack of money is no excuse for failing to engage with the content.

THP is described as providing advice and activities 'modelling best practice' (BBC, 2022a) while informing parents 'how simple play and chat benefits children's development' (ibid). This seems to suggest that were it not for THP then parents would forget to speak to their children. As well as being targeted at younger parents with preschool children, THP (as part of the wider BBC education strategy) is aimed at young parents from lower socioeconomic groups (BBC, 2018b, p5), implying these groups are the ones who do not speak to their children. It is unclear whether they mean these parents are seldom heard and easily ignored by the BBC or wider society. Reminiscent of New Labour's socially excluded or the residuum (Alexander, 2013), it is a patronising portrayal of working-

class people who require middle-class saviours to rescue them. Once again, social mobility and the negative impact of the word/attainment gap producing a 'significant barrier' is referenced. Barriers to social mobility are based solely on the word or attainment gap rather than the negative impacts of poverty itself.

The briefs were interrogated to understand how parents are being constructed by the THP production team. THP is described as one of the BBC's education campaigns which are 'large scale, impactful initiatives that aim to tackle a societal or cultural deficit', (BBC, 2022b p2). In targeting 'societal or cultural deficits', the BBC are aiming their content at parents they deem 'deficient'. Content is sought which portrays parents 'from less advantaged backgrounds' who are 'no older than the top end of the target audience age range, i.e. 30 years old, but ideally in the 18-28-age range' with the requirement that some films include regional accents. In England, civility, social class and Standard English are conflated, so that regional accents are 'stigmatised as ignorant, sloppy, and impure through their association with lower class speakers' (Cushing and Snell, 2022, p3). Regional accents are shorthand for working-class.

### **Video clips and animations**

Having explored how the initiative was developed, some of the aims behind it and its target audience, the section examines the discourses evident within the website itself, drawing out key themes. THP consists of a sophisticated multimedia website with links to hundreds of videos, animations and text-based advice. It is supported by social media platforms on Facebook and Instagram which in turn link back to the website to promote engagement with its content. The format of the website is a purple background with Tiny Happy People logo which is written in white text with the 'happy' in yellow with sun rays. The strap line below reads: 'Your **words** build their **world**' (their bold) so the emphasis is on what parents do or can do just by using their vocabulary. This metaphor of building is one of construction of knowledge (Goatly, 2002) implying a need for it to be worked on explicitly. The site is very clearly part of the wider BBC content, with links to other parts of the BBC web-based content and iPlayer which carries their television content. All pages of THP carry the BBC logo prominently and authoritatively. On the home page, the page name and subtitle are followed by a brief description:

Tiny Happy People is here to help you develop your child's communication skills. Explore our simple activities and play ideas and find out about their amazing early development.

The use of just two sentences is representative of the rest of the website which is low on written text and predominantly audio-visual. These two sentences introduce the main themes which arise out of the other clips: parent responsibility; ease of application; and importance of research/expert advice.

Beneath these explanatory sentences, there are links to the three areas of: activities, advice and development. Each of these includes a photograph of parent playing or talking with their child.



Diversity is actively demonstrated in the choice of parents featured: family groupings (mothers, fathers and grandparents), ethnic backgrounds and parents with visible physical disabilities. Despite very visibly and performatively doing 'diversity', THP promotes one form of parenting: White, English, middle-class and able-bodied, so although people of different backgrounds and with visible disabilities are shown, no other cultural practices are referred to. Use of a high degree of audio-visual material over written text suggests the content is targeted towards younger people, who are more likely to use TikTok and Instagram which rely on short video clips, and created for those who may not have a high level of literacy.

Simple in format, the site has just five tabs: Home; About; Activities; Tips and Advice; and Child Development. Each of those pages has one or two sentences of description followed by video stills, which may be selected to watch the clip. With the exception of the 'Child Development' section, all the clips are videos of 'real' families filmed in and around their homes. The child development section consists of animations, split into baby, toddler and preschooler sections. Some of which feature a voice-over while others have the characters speaking – voices used feature the regional accents, as required by the commissioning briefs. Strong regional accents, particularly northern accents are apparent. Regional accents are often seen as a social indicator (Wotschke, 2014) so, stronger or more distinct accents are associated with working-class people. Introducing the website, the 'About' section shares its purpose and aims, beginning with an emotional plea to parents:

When children start school they should be able to speak to their new friends in full sentences, ask teachers simple questions and understand what they're told to do. When they have these skills they'll feel more confident and they'll be happier.

But children starting school all across the UK today are unable to do these things.

Going on to state that one in four children are behind in literacy development when starting primary school. THP's focus on parents working on their child's development infers that children starting school behind in language development have parents who have not worked sufficiently hard. If the headline figure of one in four children starting school without the required language learning is not enough, this page states that it rises to one in three in some areas. Although it does not explicitly state which areas, it is implied this relates to their parents' lack of work on developing their language skills. Discourses become dominant when they are backed up by social and economic forces (Bourdieu, 1991) for example: the word or attainment gap, lack of school-readiness or child poverty are highlighted to demonstrate how important 'good' mothering is in order to overcome those problems instead of viewing them as direct and indirect consequences of poverty.

The homes and outdoor locations featured within the video clips meet the stipulation of not being 'aspirational'. However, they do not portray their target audience's reality; none of the homes are overcrowded or depict the deprivation faced by many families. What is shown within photos or video

clips has been deliberately selected and some homes seem to have been 'curated', not reflecting the situation for many families. In each instance the parent is engaged one-on-one with the child, obscuring other aspects to their role and identity which include combining parenting (of multiple children) with paid and unpaid work. There is little evidence of poverty and its attendant scarcity of furnishings and resources, or chaos of rooms being used for multiple purposes, both features of many working-class homes (including my own).

In terms of the simplified instructional tone and illustration style, animation content is similar to other BBC material, such as *Bitesize* (online educational resources aimed at school-aged children). Within the animations, many classed stereotypes are used, such as mothers with huge, hooped earrings and fathers wearing hoodies and baseball caps. Characters' body language suggests a lack of energy, engagement or enthusiasm since most are looking down, moving slowly and have unsmiling faces. Despite the voice-overs describing 'good' parenting behaviours, it looks as though the parents are not demonstrating these. Class markers which allow social class to be implied rather than explicitly named (Bourdieu, 1992) are used within these animations, such as jewellery, clothing, hairstyles and tattoos. Several themes are apparent on THP; a discussion of how these feed into 'good' mothering discourse follows.

Within the child development section, animations and live action clips are included, organised according to stage: baby development; toddler development; and preschooler development. The six animation clips in the Preschooler section contributed to my analysis, allowing me to identify five key themes: children's language acquisition needs to be worked at; parents are responsible for 'teaching' children to talk; parents' behaviour builds the child's brain; parents require instruction in how to behave; and following the advice of THP is easy and cheap to build into your routine. The next sections will expand upon each of these aspects.

### **Language acquisition requires work**

As described above, the supposed word gap is a result of parents not interacting enough with their babies or children. The assumption is that only words spoken directly from parent to child contribute towards language acquisition, explicitly stating: 'They don't just automatically pick it all up, though'; 'They need feeding with words as much as they need feeding with food' (from the clip 'How little ones learn from repetition'). Parents are told it is not enough for children to absorb language through everyday interactions which occur naturally in the home. Instead, the target audience of THP is required to learn the correct method of developing language in their children and then apply it daily, replicating the suggested conversations and interactions. This forms part of a method of parenting often referred to as intensive parenting (Hays, 1996). It is inferred this parenting method is essential to ensure children acquire the expected level of language learning to meet school readiness requirements. Since the concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003) of intensive mothering is more usual in

middle-class families, it is assumed that it is the mothering those children receive which give them an educational advantage rather than economic resources or educational capital. THP's model ignores theories of natural language acquisition and instead focusses on the need to work at it. The cultural setting is key to children's mastery of language since language is culturally situated (Bruner, 1983); 'before language proper comes on the scene, the child has "natural" ways of embedding his gestures and vocalizations into contexts of action and interaction', (Bruner, 1983 p131). The one-size-fits-all mode of delivery of language promoted by THP means 'all the positive socializing practices supportive of linguistic and cognitive development that take place in non-affluent homes are ignored, and any non-normative but constructive forms of thinking and communicating that exist in non-affluent communities are devalued', (Johnson, 2015 p47). Placing an expectation on parents to adjust their behaviour and learn 'correct' ways of communicating with their children, THP promotes the idea that children's language acquisition requires explicit parental instruction. Emphasis on parents working at their children's language acquisition is connected to brain building, which again is regarded as something to be worked at.

### **Brain building**

Neuroscientific terms relating to 'brain building' are used throughout to support the notion that learning is something which has to be done with and to the child rather than something which happens naturally. Use of THP's activities is linked to brain development, which is framed in terms of brain building, such that the brain requires specific activities in order for it to grow and without which it will remain small (see Gillies, Edwards and Horsley, 2017, for a detailed critique of the flawed research this claim is based upon). References to brain building are framed in terms of the parents' influence on that growth: 'Play, doesn't just keep them busy, it's essential for brain development'; 'Those amazing little brains are brilliant at making connections'; 'Scientists have found that children between four and five use an area of the brain called the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex when they hear rhyming words'; 'Children love learning new words and their brains are constantly thinking about them.' It is notable here that, in describing children's love of learning new words, they say *their brains* are constantly thinking about them rather than *they* are constantly thinking about them. Detachment of the brain from the child is a feature of the way in which neuroscience has been co-opted to emphasise the importance of parental behaviour over external factors (Gillies, Edwards and Horsley, 2017).

References such as these create an expectation that mothers ought to be actively engaged in building their child's brain, creating a 'good' mothering ideal of constantly working at improving their child's prospects. In THP, the videos continuously describe what parents should do for their children, creating an ideal of a selfless parent as caring for others (Skeggs, 1997). Parents are expected to actively cultivate their children's brains and structural inequalities are entirely ignored. These ideas all link to the notion that parents are responsible for actively working to grow their babies' brain.

Since parents must be working at their children's language acquisition and building their brain, they are framed by THP as teachers.

### **Parents as 'teachers'**

Parents are required to 'teach' their children to talk through following the tips and advice on THP. It is not enough to assume children will absorb language through everyday life; instead, planned interventions are necessary to ensure your child does not form one of the quarter of children who start school behind their peers. Throughout the clips, modals and imperatives are used to emphasise parental responsibility: 'you can' or 'you will need'. The importance and power of parents is stressed: 'the most important person to help your child's language toolkit grow is... you!', 'there's no-one more powerful than you!'; 'Just keep talking to them!'. In using this language, it is clear that parents must undertake these types of activities to ensure their children grow up into 'Tiny Happy People': Their happiness rests upon parents' compliance with the advice of the website. At one point parents are asked, 'if you want to help your child's language learning' (as though there are parents who may not), with the recommendation that 'all you have to do is answer their questions!' In tying language learning simply to parents answering questions, it suggests that those children who do not meet the required standard have parents who *do not* want to help their child's language learning and have *failed to* answer their questions. Increasingly, parents are expected to actively engage in children's education, from before they begin school and even during pregnancy. Goatly (2002) provides a list of education metaphors deployed with reference to acquisition of knowledge and skills, commodifying education and ignoring any social aspects: give, have, possess – which all appear within the transcripts in this section. Using this type of language strengthens the idea that education is something that can be owned and that, simply by following THP's advice, children will possess that knowledge. It feeds into ideas related to what counts as knowledge and who owns. Middle class educational success is entirely detached from parents' considerable social capital and instead linked to them exhibiting behaviour which bestows knowledge on their children. That behaviour is then taught to working-class parents through THP.

### **Parents as learners (or children)**

THP is framed as though parents do not know how to behave towards their children. Videos are very prescriptive, even giving sentences parents can use to speak to their children. It is part of the BBC online education content and is aimed at educating parents. Since the commissioning documents refer explicitly to the age-range and socio-economic groups being targeted, it suggests that the producers of THP view young working-class parents as lacking the knowledge to raise their children. Each aspect is broken down into activities, many of which are highlighted as being easily integrated into a family's daily routine, so that parents have a script for household tasks, including doing the washing up, going shopping and sorting laundry. In the commissioning documents, teaching

techniques and modelling behaviours were referenced, suggesting that their target audience is technically lacking and may not exhibit 'correct' behaviours. It is a patronising and insulting idea that parents do not know what they should be doing since it assumes there is a single method of parenting and that any problems which young working-class parents have are a result of them lacking knowledge or the will to talk to their children rather than lacking resources. This assumes that parents should make everything into a learning experience rather than doing things because they are necessary, enjoyable or fun. In assuming that everything should be a learning point, a value judgement is being made and human relationships are instrumentalised. This invalidates alternative value systems and imposes a single acceptable model, based on middle-class ideals. To translate those ideals to a working-class audience, THP highlights how easy this is and that money is no barrier to their application.

### **Ease of application and low cost**

THP negates barriers to participation for its target audience (of lack of time or money) by stressing how easy integration of the activities into everyday life is and that even routine household tasks can be made into learning opportunities. THP has made the case that it is necessary for parents to work at their children's language learning to avoid them starting school behind their peers. It has attached these ideas to research and 'science' thus increasing the power of those messages. Key terms of reference attach powerful inferences and assumptions producing the objects of discourse (Fraser, 2013). It is difficult to argue against messages to build a child's brain. The power of discourses lies in the taken-for-grantedness of them and by the mechanisms at work within them being concealed or misinterpreted (Bourdieu 1993). Alongside this is the gendered nature of the site which, despite being aimed more generally at parents to give the superficial impression of treating parents equally, is aimed more specifically at mothers as evidenced by how many more mothers are depicted on the website than fathers. Activities are demonstrated with their ease and low or no cost highlighted to show that anyone can participate in them since large financial outlay is unnecessary, but the activities do take time and space which is not something all have equal access to. Implicit is a suggestion that in replicating this type of parenting, working-class parents may break the cycle, if only they choose to mimic middle-class 'good' parenting (Simpson, 2020). It rests entirely on the fallacy that middle-class children do well at school because of their parents' behaviour rather than the privileges which come with access to secure, stable accommodation, food and enrichment activities. Remedies to address poverty and the attainment gap focus entirely on parental behaviour, rather than eradication of poverty. It is inconceivable that there could be any other solution than to change behaviour which is a feature of discourses, configured historically and culturally, making some ways of thinking possible while others are impossible (Foucault, 1980). These ideas build on the notion of meritocracy where anyone can succeed regardless of background. In this way, functioning in a pedagogic and disciplinary mode, popular culture propagates dominant discourses, 'both drawing from and exceeding policy', (Mendick et al, 2015 p167). These themes work together

to produce THP's 'good' mother figure whose careful management, of resources and self, allows her to create educational activities for her children, unquestioningly undertaking the unpaid labour of social reproduction entirely. Mothering in a time of austerity, hard work and frugality is important since 'cultural representations coincide and collude with political and economic imperatives', (Allen et al, 2015 p920). Classed and raced discourses feed into 'good' mothering norms, which have been heightened by austerity, with the expectation that mothers face the joint impacts of neoliberalism and welfare cuts privately and individually by becoming 'more enterprising and self-sufficient', (Allen et al, 2015 p920). Not only must they work, flexibly, to meet the demands of their employers, but must also be working at home – above and beyond previous requirements of social reproduction – to educate their child and ensure their future success.

## **Conclusion**

Where once middle-class women turned to the magazine advice column (McRobbie, 2013), then the TV shows of the early noughties or websites such as Mumsnet, now it is social media which dominates this arena – with THP making use of these platforms to disseminate their video clips and direct parents to their website where women may learn to be 'good' mothers. Targeted at young, working-class mothers who through following the advice on THP will be able to maximise their interactions with their children, building their brain and their word count to ensure they are school-ready. Parents are constructed by the website as lacking in knowledge and needing to learn how to best parent their children. Focus is entirely behavioural, detaching parents from their material and economic circumstances. THP constructs a model parent for its users to emulate in order to avoid their children's failure. That mother seeks out, listens to and follows the advice of professionals rather than relying on instinct or the support of friends and family. She knows her children's language acquisition will not occur naturally and requires her explicit input. Positioned as her child's first teacher, she follows the advice of THP seamlessly building it into her routine. Interactions with her child are planned to provide maximum brain building and she is ever ready to salvage empty cereal packets or toilet roll tubes in order to provide a brain building activity for her child.

A 'good' mother is produced by THP, one who is hard working, frugal and attentive to her child's needs by actively working to build their brain by talking to them in the prescribed mode. She listens to and follows expert advice since her child's happiness rests on this. It is easy to do; only a bad mother would not strive to incorporate these tips into her family's daily life or would fail to attend to developing her child's language skills at every opportunity. Learning is not viewed as a natural process but one which must be worked upon and constructed by parents since it is their responsibility to ensure their child does not begin school deficient in language skills. Her parenting 'aligns with the core values of neoliberalism: ready for change, improving performance, being successful', (Ledin and Machin, 2015 p8) and she is actively engaged in those processes to ensure her child's success. Construction of 'new entrepreneurial identities and re-engineering the bourgeois subject' is key to

neoliberalism (Hall et al, 2013 p19) with these subtle forms of power impacting social attitudes, creating and compounding 'good' mothering discourses. These discourses allow us 'to position ourselves and to judge others and their hopes and dreams', (Mendick et al, 2015 p164).

It is clear why this discourse exists, since it fills the gaps left by austerity cuts to services for children and families by placing the onus on parents by offering them guidance on how to build their child's language skills. The social problem of poverty and its associated attainment gap is used to apply normative values to parenting, since 'discourses develop around social problems', (Reisigl, 2018 p52). Female success rests on what Angela McRobbie terms a 'visual media governmentality' where failure is 'symbolised in the abject body of the "single mother" and in the bodies of her untidy children or "brood' (McRobbie, 2013 p122). Building on Foucault's theory, the idea of 'visual media governmentality' falls within the 'specific dimension of gender and media', (McRobbie, 2013 p132). Through THP, it is not simply a televisual medium which is used to govern mothers' behaviour but social media and digital technology, governance occurs within the private domestic realm (McRobbie, 2013).

### **Funding details**

The critical discourse analysis on which this paper is based was conducted as part of a broader PhD study, funded by the University of Westminster.

### **Conflict of interest**

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful to the peer reviewers of this article for their comments and suggestions.

### **References**

Akhal, A. (2019) The impact of recent government policies on early years provision, London: Education Policy Institute [https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Early-years-take-up\\_-EPI.pdf#:~:text=Early%20years%20policies%20In%20September%202017%2C%20the%20government,building%20on%20the%20existing%2015%20hours%20free%20entitlement](https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Early-years-take-up_-EPI.pdf#:~:text=Early%20years%20policies%20In%20September%202017%2C%20the%20government,building%20on%20the%20existing%2015%20hours%20free%20entitlement)

Alexander, S.C. (2013) 'The residuum, Victorian naturalism and the entropic narrative', *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, 35(2): 99-120.

Allen, A. and Spencer, S. (2022) Regimes of motherhood: Social class, the word gap and the optimisation of mothers' talk, *The Sociological Review*, First published 24 June, 1-18.

Allen, K., Mendick, H., Harvey, L. and Ahmad, A. (2015) 'Welfare queens, thrifty housewives, and do-it-all mums', *Feminist Media Studies*, 15(6): 907-925.

Anders, P.L., Yaden, D.B., Da Silva Iddings, A.C., Katz, L. and Rogers, T. (2016) 'Editorial: more words for the poor? Problematizing the "language gap"', *Journal of Literacy Research*, 48(2): 131-133.

BBC (2018) BBC's new Education Strategy to encourage social mobility in the UK, BBC, 8 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2018/education-strategy>

BBC (2022a) Partner with Us, Tiny Happy People, accessed 28 December 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/partners-page/zjwmwty>

BBC (2022b) Content Brief, 'Moodbusters' for 5 to 11-Year-Olds (July 2022), <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/site/education-brief-moodboosters-july-2022.pdf>

Blandford, S. (2017) *Born to fail? Social mobility: a working class view*, Woodbridge: John Catt Educational Ltd.

Blum, S.D. "'Wordism': Is there a teacher in the house?" in Avineri, N., Johnson, E., Brice-Heath, S., McCarthy, T., Ochs, E., Kremer-Sadlik, T., Blum, S., Zantella, A.C., Rosa, J., Flores, N., Alim, S.H., Paris, D. (Eds.) (2015) *Invited forum: bridging the 'language gap'*, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 25(1): 66–86.

Bourdieu, P. (1991) *Language and symbolic power*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology with Lorïc Wacquant*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press and Polity.

Bourdieu, P. (1993) *Sociology in question*, London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. (1977) *Reproduction in education, society and culture*, London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Bruner, J. (1983) *Child's talk: learning to use language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Buckingham, D. and Scanlon, M. (2003) *Education, entertainment and learning in the home*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Burnham, P., Gilland Lutz, W. and Layton-Henry, Z. (2008) *Research methods in politics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.



Cody, M.J., Fernandes, S. And Wilkin, H. (2004) 'Entertainment-education programs of the BBC and BBC world service trust' in Singhal, A., Cody, M.J., Rogers, E.M. and Sabido, M. (Eds.) *Entertainment-education and social change: history, research and practice*, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc. pp. 243-260.

Cushing, I. (2022) Word rich or word poor? Deficit discourses, raciolinguistic ideologies and the resurgence of the 'word gap' in England's education policy, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, first published 25 July, p1-28.

Cushing, I. and Snell, J. (2022) The (white) ears of Ofsted: a raciolinguistic perspective on the listening practices of the schools inspectorate, *Language in Society*, first published 18 March, p1-24.

van Dijk, T.A. (2011) Introduction: the study of discourse. In: van Dijk T.A. (Ed.) *Discourse studies: a multidisciplinary introduction*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1-7.

Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, Brighton: Harvester Press.

Foucault, M. (2012) *Discipline and punish*. New York: Penguin.

Franklin, S. (2021) *Vygotsky, education and revolution*, London: Bookmarks.

Fraser, N. (2013) *Fortunes of feminism: from state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*, London: Verso.

Gillies, V., Edwards, R. and Horsley N. (2017) *Challenging the politics of early intervention: who's 'saving' children and why?*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Goatly, A. (2002) 'Conflicting metaphors in the Hong Kong special administrative region educational reform proposals', *Metaphor and Symbol*, 17(4): 263-294.

Hackett, A., MacLure, M. and McMahon, S (2021) 'Reconceptualising early language development: matter, sensation and the more-than-human', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 42(6): 913-929.

Hall, S., Massey, D. and Rustin, M. (2013) *After neoliberalism? The Kilburn manifesto*, <https://lwbooks.co.uk/product/after-neoliberalism-the-kilburn-manifesto-free-e-book>

Hart, B. and Risley, T.R. (1995) *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*, Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

- Hays, S. (1996) *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*, London: Yale University Press.
- Institute of Health Visiting (2020) Launch of BBC Tiny Happy People, Institute of Health Visiting, <https://ihv.org.uk/news-and-views/voices/launch-of-bbc-tiny-happy-people/>
- Johnson, E.J. (2015) 'Debunking the "language gap"', *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 9(1): 42-50.
- Lareau, A. (2003) *Unequal childhoods: class, race and family life*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ledin, P. and Machin, D. (2015) 'A discourse–design approach to multimodality: the visual communication of neoliberal management discourse', *Social Semiotics*, first published 5 October.
- Leighton, A. (2005) 'A UK case: lobbying for a new BBC charter' in Harris, P. And Fleisher, C.S. (Eds.) *The Handbook of Public Affairs*, London: SAGE Publications Limited. pp. 247-268.
- Lewis, J. and Cushion, S. (2019) 'Think tanks, television news and impartiality: the ideological balance of sources in BBC programming', *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 20(4): 480-499.
- Lewis, O. (1963) 'The culture of poverty', *Society*, 35 (Jan/Feb 1998): 7-9.
- McRobbie, A. (2013) 'Feminism, the family and the new "mediated" maternalism', *New Formations*, 80(80-81): 119-137.
- Melhuish, E. and Gardiner, J. (2020) Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): impact study on early education use and child outcomes up to age five years research report, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/867140/SEED\\_AGE\\_5\\_REPORT\\_FEB.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/867140/SEED_AGE_5_REPORT_FEB.pdf)
- Mendick, H., Allen, K. and Harvey, L. (2015) 'We can get everything we want if we try hard: young people, celebrity, hard work', *British Journal of Education Studies*, 63(2): 161-178.
- Mills, T. (2020) *The BBC: myth of a public service*, London: Verso.
- Reay, D. (2017) *Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Reisigl, M. (2018) 'The discourse-historical approach' in Flowerdew, J. And Richardson, J.E. (Eds.) *The Routledge handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon. pp. 44-59.
- Rosa, J.D. (2016) 'Standardization, racialization, languagelessness: raciolinguistic ideologies across communicative contexts', *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 26(2), p162–183.

Simpson, D., Mazzocco, P., Loughran, S., Lumsden, E., McDowall Clark, R. and Winterbottom, C. (2019) 'Parent-practitioner engagement in early education and the threat of negative thinking about the poor across England and the USA', *Research in Education*, 109(1): 20-36.

Simpson, D. (2020) 'Parenting high achieving boys in poverty – critiquing “active cultivation” as an explanation for 'beating the odds' in the early years', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 29(2): 211-224.

Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formations of class and gender: becoming respectable*, London: SAGE Publications.

Sperry, D.E., Sperry, L.L. and Miller, P.J. (2019) 'Reexamining the verbal environments of children from different socioeconomic backgrounds', *Child Development*, 90(4): 1303-1318.

Thomson, M. (2013) *Lost freedom: the landscape of the child and the British post-war settlement*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Wotschke, I. (2014) *How educated English speak English: pronunciation as social behaviour*, Berlin: Frank & Timme GmbH.