

Class Reproduction by Four Year Olds

Jessi Streib

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Abstract While scholars know that young children are active if inadvertent participants in social reproduction, little has been said about how young children engage in *class* reproduction. Through observing in a preschool classroom with a class diverse student body, I show that preschoolers are already class actors, performing class through their linguistic styles. Upper-middle-class children speak, interrupt, ask for help, and argue more often than working-class children. Upper-middle-class children's classed linguistic style effectively silences working-class students, gives them less power, and allows them fewer opportunities to develop their language skills. The children's linguistic class performances have immediate consequences and potential future implications for class reproduction.

Keywords Social class · Education · Social reproduction

Politicians, policy makers, and scholars often suggest that quality preschools can level the social playing field (Barnett and Bellfield 2006; Dillon 2008). In these conversations, the focus centers around what adults can do to engender greater equality while overlooking the fact that preschool children themselves may be active if inadvertent agents in reproducing social inequality (Corsaro 1993; Barnett and Bellfield 2006). For instance, scholarship shows that young children use race as a basis of power and exclusion (Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996) and preschoolers perform gender in ways that may have later consequences for gender inequality (Cahill 1989; Danby 1998; Danby and Baker 1998; Lowe 1998; Martin 1998). Through observing at a preschool I expand on this literature by explaining one more way in which preschoolers unknowingly contribute to the continuance of inequality.

The focus of this paper is on one type of inequality: social class inequality. Research shows that nine and ten year olds perform class in ways taught to them by their parents

J. Streib (✉)
University of Michigan, 3101 LSA Building, 500 State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA
e-mail: jessis@umich.edu

(Lareau 2003). I demonstrate that children perform class at half the age of Lareau's respondents. Following the philosophy of the new sociology of childhood, I argue that preschoolers should not be viewed only as recipients of adults' socialization (Corsaro 1993; Johnson 2001) or only as future class actors. Four-year-old preschoolers are involved in the "interpretive reproduction" (Corsaro 1993) of class through acting in and on their social world to perform their class position. Furthermore, preschoolers not only learn their class performances from the institutions of education and family, but also from each other. Preschoolers are "always already" performing class (Althusser 1971) and in ways that makes them unintentional but active agents in the reproduction of class inequality. The key way in which they do so is through their class-based linguistic styles.

Children Performing Class

Research indicates that young children are aware of class. Preschoolers are adept at differentiating between rich and poor and often have an easier time finding class-based differences than similarities (Ramsey 1991). Middle-class children are likely to view children from their own class as normal, pick friends from their own class, and think of poor children as lazy, dirty, and mean (Weinger 2000; Ramsey 1991). Class stereotypes and beliefs about the causes of class differences become cemented in children's minds by the time they are adolescence, as they come to associate class with not just the resources one has, but what type of person one is (Chafel 1996; Leahy 1983; Tudor 1971). Clearly, children are aware of class.

Yet, it is not understood if preschool aged children do not just know about class, but are class actors. The cultural turn has reframed class analysis, so that class is now conceptualized as being more than structural and material (though it very much is these things) but also as part of whom one *is* and what one *does* (Lawler 2005; Bottero 2004; Bourdieu 1984). In this view, class is unconsciously *performed* in mundane everyday practices (Bettie 2003; Bourdieu 1984). These performances are not freely chosen, but are determined by one's class location (Bourdieu 1980, 1984; Skeggs 1997). As they arise from structural conditions, those in the same class position perform class in similar ways. These class performances contribute to class reproduction (Bourdieu 1984).

Bourdieu (1980, 1984) suggests that class performances are primarily learned in two settings: at home and in school. At home, two ideal types of parenting practices guide how children learn to perform class (Lareau 2003). Middle-class parents practice "concerted cultivation." They talk to their children as conversational equals—asking them questions, speaking to them often, asking them to summarize their days, and urging them to argue for what they want. They also keep their children's days packed with structured activities and demand that institutions cater to them. Working-class parents, on the other hand, tend to take a more hands-off approach to parenting. In the "accomplishment of natural growth" parenting style parents talk to their children less, let their children fill their own time, and treat authority figures deferentially (Lareau 2003). Additionally, parents mete out punishment according to different standards (Kohn 1969). Working-class parents, who are (perhaps unconsciously) preparing their children for working-class jobs punish their children for not obeying orders. Middle-class parents, however, punish their children for the reasoning behind the child's indiscretion (Kohn 1969). Moreover, parents differentially expose their children to class specific types of art, music, theater, sports, food, and fashion, thereby teaching their children to harbor classed tastes and appreciations (Bourdieu 1984; Vincent and Ball 2007). These different parenting practices produce children who will

perform class differently as adults. However, the previously mentioned studies focus more on parenting practices than on how children are performing class. We know little about how children, especially very young children, internalize and perform their class position.

Furthermore, there is a dearth of knowledge about if and how children perform class in schools. Children spend much of their time in schools, and schools are thought to be an institution which instills class performances into children (Bourdieu 1980). Some research offers insight into how this process occurs. Like parents, preschool teachers follow logics of concerted cultivation or the accomplishment of natural growth (Nelson and Schutz 2007). Additionally, ethnographic work reveals that high school students perform class and that high schools are active in shaping these performances. High school students perform class through their clothing choices, makeup, treatment of teachers, engagement in school events, and aspirations (Bettie 2003; Willis 1977). Schools teach class performances by asking working-class children to follow orders, middle-class children to make decisions, and upper-class children to create their own rules and manage others (Anyon 1980). Subtle lessons prepare students for the class performances demanded by the jobs which match their class of origin.

These theories and evidence fall short of offering a robust explanation of how class performances are lived when young children are in their first institutionalized setting: preschool. This paper addresses this gap by demonstrating two points. First, preschoolers are apt class actors. Second, contrary to Bourdieu's account, it is not just parents and adults in schools who shape children's class performances. Peers also play an influential role. Overall, I emphasize that young children do perform class. I show that the primary way they do so is through their class-based linguistic styles.

Data and Methods

Data were collected from September 2008 through April 2009 in a Midwestern preschool that I call Community Preschool. The preschool is in a small, unimposing building, situated across the street from a public library and next door to a senior center. Within Community Preschool, there are approximately 90 children ranging from infants to five year olds. For this project, I collected data exclusively in the four-year-olds'¹ one-room classroom, which contained 16 students whom I observed. The classroom is designed for children: shelves line the outer walls and are packed with crayons, markers, paint, clay, glitter, and glue. A blue carpet sits in one corner of the spacious classroom, where children race toy cars and build with an abundant supply of blocks. A second corner is home to the overflowing "dress up area," containing costumes such as princess dresses and tiger sweat suits. A third corner is crammed with kitchen supplies: a toy oven, stovetop, pots, pans, and plastic food. The last main area of the room is the loft, which provides a private reading area for the children, while the space under the loft neatly houses a crib, bed, and dolls. This child-friendly preschool is clean, comfortable, and well-stocked for a wide range of children's activities. The preschool is licensed by the state and accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Community Preschool was also selected as a case site because in one way it is not typical of many preschools: It has a class diverse student body (Magnuson et al. 2007). I use three methods to identify the children's class position, all of which are based on the parents' social class. First, I distributed surveys to parents, asking for their occupations and

¹ All of the children were 4 years old at some point in the year.

highest education levels. There were sixteen participating children, and ten of the sixteen sets of parents returned this survey after distributing it twice. Second, as the parents were dropping off or picking up their children, I engaged them in conversation and discovered three of their occupations this way.

Using these two approaches left three children for whom I did not know their parents' occupations or educations. For these three cases, I used the child's grant status to determine the children's class position. Community Preschool accepts grants from the state, which allows eligible students to attend for free. To qualify for the grants, students must come from families who earn less than 300% of the poverty line and meet two of twenty-five risk factors. Risk factors include low family income, having a parent without a high school education, homelessness, if the child lives in a high poverty area, and having an illiterate, incarcerated, abusive, neglectful, or teen parent. Recipients of the grants were easily identifiable; their funding covered only four days of school per week so they did not attend Community Preschool on Fridays. I placed students who received state grants and for whom the preschool was free in the "working-class" group. I grouped students whose families paid full tuition, \$12,000 annually, with the upper-middle-class students.

Using these three identification strategies – surveys of parents' occupations and educations, asking parents about their occupations, and observing students' scholarship status – I determined the class position of all 16 of the participating students in the four-year-olds' classroom. Six students were working-class, having parents who were cosmetologists, construction workers, short order cooks, or were temporarily unemployed. Ten of the students were upper-middle-class, having parents who were upper level managers, doctors, engineers, and professors. Overall, of the 16 students in the study, there was an even split of girls and boys. There were two Black, two Hispanic, two mixed race, three Asian, and seven White children. There was one additional student in the classroom, but his parents did not consent to his participation in the study.

The working-class and upper-middle-class children of Community Preschool participated in very structured days. Students typically arrived between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m. and left between 4:00 and 5:15 p.m. Each part of the day was scheduled and children learned the routine: free play time as students wandered in, greeting time at 9:20, educational activities in small groups next, and then a snack at 10:15. Large group time followed, consisting of the children individually planning their activities (i.e. "I'll play in the kitchen today"), doing the activity, and then reviewing it ("Today I played in the kitchen"). After large group time was outside recess, lunch, and another session of large group time. The students would then nap until 2 or 2:30, wake up for snack, and go outside again for more recess. At all times there were at least two teachers leading these exercises, usually Susan and Liza. Both of these teachers had degrees in Early Childhood Education – a Master's for Susan and a Bachelors for Liza. Substitutes Warren and Caroline also have Bachelor's degrees. All teachers were white.

While at Community Preschool, I took the role of a reactive observer. This is due to the teachers' wishes that I stay out of the way, the Internal Review Board's (IRB) restrictions that I not talk to children unless they first spoke to me, and my desire to follow the methodological lead of other sociologists who conducted studies with children (Moore 2001; Van Ausdale and Feagin 1996; Lareau 1989). So twice a week, for about two hours each period and for 84 hours in all, I sat out of the way in the Community Preschool classroom, refusing to discipline the children, initiate play, or settle disputes. Of course, despite my role as a reactive observer, students did approach me and ask me who I was and what I was doing. I told them that I was an old student learning about how they played and what happened in preschool. They seemed satisfied with this answer, but still initially

confused about who I was. A few of them called me a teacher, some called me a friend, but most just called me Jessi.

Despite the preschoolers approaching me, I did follow the intent of the IRB and the teachers' wishes to not interview the children. Because of this restriction, I could not understand how the preschoolers consciously made sense of class. Instead, I could observe the role class played in the preschool classroom, regardless of preschoolers' comprehension of it. In researching how class was manifested at Community Preschool, I took field notes on my laptop² of the official events in the classroom, the formal and informal classroom lessons, who played with whom, the games initiated by children, conflictual situations, my own and the children's interactions with teachers, disciplinary procedures, students' and teachers' talk of status symbols, the children's clothes, and what they discussed doing outside of school. I focused on ordinary events, and tried to watch each student for equal amounts of time, no matter how quiet or loud they were. I found that regardless of the children's awareness of class, class was very present in the preschoolers' classroom.

Results

At Community Preschool children were already class actors, performing class through their different linguistic styles. Scholars have found that linguistic styles vary by class: upper-middle-class children use more words (Heath 1983; Hart and Risley 1995; Farkas and Berton 2004); are asked more questions by their parents and ask more in return (Hart and Risley 1995; Lareau 2003); interrupt more often (Lareau 2003); use an elaborated language code, explaining detail that their listener may not know rather than assuming the listener has all the relevant background information (Bernstein 1971); and are treated by their parents as conversational equals (Lareau 2003). Bourdieu (1991) reminds us that these differences are not neutral: schools reward middle-class speech and this reward aids middle-class reproduction. Language is intimately tied to class and power.

Bourdieu and others, however, do not fully explain *how* schools reward upper-middle-class language. Missing from this analysis is also how upper-middle-class children, even young ones, use language as a source of power in their own right. The new sociology of childhood (see Johnson 2001 for an overview) suggests that it might not just be teachers and adults that reinforce class-based disparities, but students as well. I show that this is true at Community Preschool. Here, preschoolers enter school with different classed linguistic styles which are likely learned at home. In preschool, the children themselves compound these differences, creating distinctions that are consequential for class reproduction. Their linguistic class performances appear in two main arenas: taking the floor and taking a stand.

² The use of a laptop to take field notes is perhaps unconventional. I believe this method has advantages as well as drawbacks. The main advantage is that I could take more accurate and detailed notes as I could record events while they were happening. It minimized my need to rely upon my memory. However, using a laptop also meant that I was less mobile than I would have been without a laptop. As the teachers preferred I stay out of the way, that I limit my interactions with the children, and be relatively immobile anyway, the addition of the laptop was only a minimal constraint on my mobility. Lastly, my use of a laptop likely shaped how others saw me. It made me obviously different than anyone else in the room, and marked me as a researcher to parents. As will be shown in the results section, the use of a laptop also changed how differently classed children reacted to me. While I have no data on which children had laptops at home, the students' interactions with me may have differed by their familiarity with, access to, and meaning given to computers. Each of these aspects of computer use and meaning may be influenced by class. In sum, using my laptop had minimal effects on my movement, and increased my ability to understand the class dynamics in the classroom.

Taking the Floor

Complementing prior research, the upper-middle-class children at Community Preschool have larger vocabularies, speak more often, interrupt more, and feel more entitled to speak to teachers than their working-class counterparts. Their language style distinguishes them from the working-class children and confers them with the power both to direct classroom events and to further improve their own language skills. They “take the floor” while inadvertently silencing working-class children. This regularly happens at greeting time.

Greeting time occurs every morning. It consists of all of the children sitting in a circle. One teacher leads the children in going over the “Message Board” which features written announcements and lessons. A typical day has four announcements, often including the weather, counting the boys and girls, an announcement about an upcoming event, and a song to sing. Lessons are often included in the messages: “T is for Tuesday. What else starts with T?” During the daily greeting times, the upper-middle-class children often interrupt the teachers: answering teachers’ questions, asking their own questions, interjecting related and unrelated stories, and complaining about other children blocking their view. The combination of these interruptions means that the upper-middle-class children often effectively silence the working-class children. Greeting time, which is meant for everyone, becomes an exercise in upper-middle-class dominance. Here is a typical example:

Susan, a teacher, starts greeting time by reading a book about fire drills. Catherine, a white upper-middle-class girl, sits on a highly contested pink mat. She interrupts the story to point out where they should go for a fire drill. Aaron, a talkative white upper-middle-class boy, says he remembers the last fire drill and how loud it was. Sam, an Asian working-class boy, raises his hand to answer Susan’s question about where to go if there’s a tornado but Catherine yells the wrong answer: To the jungle gym. Susan leads her to the right answer: “If the tornado is *outside* where should we go?” Catherine guesses some more and then Susan resumes the story. A minute later Catherine interrupts the story to say that the fire bell hurts her ears when she’s at her brother’s and sister’s school. Adrienne, an Asian upper-middle-class girl, makes a bell ringing sound. Derrick, an Asian upper-middle-class boy, says he likes the fire bell sound. Catherine and Erica, both white and upper-middle-class, say they like it too. “When we all talk at the same time we’re loud like the fire bell,” Susan says. “And we need to be quiet now.” She asks them to raise their hand if they like the sound of the fire bell. It’s quiet for a minute while Susan resumes the story until Catherine interrupts again: “We go to the fence. Where do they go?” pointing to the kindergarteners’ classroom. Susan answers Catherine’s question.

This representative example shows that at first the upper-middle-class children’s interruptions are rewarded. The teacher leads them to the correct answers and follows their lead in discussing their interests. After the tangent has gone on for too long, she tries to quiet the upper-middle-class children, but the attempt only succeeds momentarily. For the most part, their interruptions are taken as a sign of their interest in the topic. The working-class children, who are sitting quietly and listening or raising their hands to answer a question, are neglected by the teacher who is focusing on answering the questions of the more talkative upper-middle-class children. There is a subtle division made between those with advanced vocabulary skills, the confidence to speak up, and the cultural idea that interrupting adults is expected or at least acceptable. Because of their linguistic style, upper-middle-class children may be seen as more engaged, smarter, and better able to make connections between the story and real life. The working-class children did not have a

chance to talk, since the upper-middle-class children so completely took the floor. The teachers unintentionally allow this pattern to continue.

Another example shows how the upper-middle-class children co-opt greeting time through their language style:

Liza, a teacher, begins going over the message board by announcing that the Music Man is coming. On the white board there is a clock next to the Music Man, indicating he is coming at 10:30. Erica (white, upper-middle-class) holds up her wrist and shows everyone her watch. Jared (Hispanic, upper-middle-class) gets up to see Erica's watch. Liza (a teacher) asks him to listen now and look at Erica's watch later.

Liza then shows them the next picture, a thermometer. She says that it's nice out now but it was foggy this morning. Adrienne (Asian, upper-middle-class) yells out that there was fog at her house this morning. Erica (upper-middle-class) shouts that there was fog at her house too. Liza (the teacher) asks them to raise their hand if there was fog at their house.

Erica (upper-middle-class) then spots a string from a dress on the floor and holds it up. "Which dress is it from?" Liza asks. Erica says she knows which dress it is from and she'll show Liza. Erica leaves the greeting time area, goes to the dress-up area, and rummages through the dresses. She brings one back. "Let's see if it matches," Liza says. Liza holds up the string next to the dress. It doesn't match. Jared (upper-middle-class) says he'll look. He leaves the greeting area, searches through the dress-up area, and brings back a black dress. Liza holds them up but it doesn't match either. Derrick and Adrienne (both Asian and upper-middle-class) say they can find the right dress, and they go to look. They don't find it, and then Grace (Asian, working-class), Mark (white, working-class), and Henry (mixed-race, upper-middle-class) go to look for the dress that the string came from. Liza is amused by the kids' curiosity and sings, "Searching, searching, searching, searching for a dress..." while they search for the right dress. None of them end up finding the matching dress. The activity took the remainder of the time left for greeting time.

In this example the upper-middle-class children first interrupt greeting time in sanctioned ways. Seeing a clock on the message board, Erica holds up her new watch. When Liza mentions fog, Adrienne confirms Liza's observation by noting the fog at her house. This leads Liza to ask all the children if there was fog at their homes. The upper-middle-class children then really co-opt greeting time by creating their own game. Liza allows and encourages the game, which is led by the upper-middle-class students and at first only participated in by them. In rewarding Erica's ingenuity in creating the game, Liza is also rewarding her interruption, her interests outside the group, and encouraging her leadership skills.

A final example from greeting time demonstrates again that upper-middle-class children's linguistic style allows them to "take the floor." In this example, the upper-middle-class children use their quick talking, ability to respond to teachers' verbal requests, and sense that the teacher is talking directly to them to monopolize the time to practice their verbal presentation skills. The working-class child, Mark, is pushed off the floor by the moreregarious upper-middle-class children:

Number three on the message board is the letter "P." "What does the letter P say?" Susan (a teacher) asks. "Popcorn! Poppy!" Jared (Hispanic, upper-middle-class) yells. "Papa!" Catherine (white, upper-middle-class) shouts. The class was asked to bring things from home for Show and Tell that started with the letter P. Susan asks next,

“Did anyone bring anything that starts with P?” Aaron, Jared, and Erica (all upper-middle-class) say they did and Susan asks them to go to their cubbies to get their letter P items. Jared comes back with a Pokemon book. Susan asks him to stand in the middle of the circle and show everyone the book. She then asks him how to spell “Pokeman.” After he does so with help from Susan, he sits down. Attention turns to Erica (white, upper-middle-class), who came back empty handed. Liza (a teacher) says she must have forgotten her letter P item. She asks Aaron (white, upper-middle-class) to stand up and talk to the group about what he brought, a guitar pick. Thinking that that’s all of the children who brought things for Show and Tell, Liza then asks the class what a “pea” is. Catherine (white, upper-middle-class) yells “Pickle!” Liza says that does start with P but she’s thinking of something round and green and a vegetable. A bunch of the kids yell out “peeeeeeaa.” Liza then says, “Friends that brought a show and tell P, it’s time to put them away.”

As the kids are leaving greeting time, Liza sees that Mark (white, working-class) is sitting with a book he brought from home. “Mark you brought your book?! Way to be on top of that. We’ll do it after lunch!” Mark nods and returns his book to his cubby.

Mark did not speak up; Liza did not see Mark until after it was time to move on to the next exercise. Because the upper-middle-class children’s language style matches the style teachers expect, they are rewarded immediately and allowed to further their language skills. Mark’s language style — sitting quietly and not calling teachers’ attention to himself — means that he did not participate in the activity and did not have the opportunity to advance his verbal presentation abilities. The combination of all of the children’s classed linguistic styles creates an environment in which Mark could not “take the floor.”

It was not just during greeting time that the upper-middle-class children used their linguistic styles to “take the floor.” This happened more generally in interactions with adults. Throughout the day, the upper-middle-class children initiated more conversations with adults, interrupted more, and asked adults for more attention and more help. For example, I took field notes on my laptop. The wallpaper of my laptop has a picture of my two small dogs and another two dozen pictures of them were in a desktop folder. The upper-middle-class children regularly pulled up a chair next to me and asked to see pictures of my dogs. They asked about their names, their ages, if they got along, and where they were. They directed me to show them specific pictures. None of the working-class children, on the other hand, approached me for a month and a half after all of the upper-middle-class children did. When they did, they stood silently by my side. “Want to see my dogs?” I’d ask. They would nod and I’d open up a folder of pictures. None of the working-class kids ever asked to see a specific picture. In this way, upper-middle-class children sought out and obtained more adult attention and had more practice in being rewarded for asking for what they wanted.³

There are more severe consequences for the children’s different class approaches in seeking out adult attention. Working-class children are often silenced by the interruptions of

³ It is possible that the children could read my own upper-middle-class identity, and that this example is partially an example of the upper-middle-class children recognizing that I am like their parents and teachers. Similarly, it is possible that I seemed different to the working-class children’s parents and therefore less approachable. However, it is my guess that the bigger influence is how children of different classes perceive adults and what norms they follow in approaching and interacting with adults of all classes. Lareau (2003) finds that middle-class and working-class children are socialized to have different ideas about how to approach and interact with adults.

upper-middle-class children in daily conversations with teachers. This hinders their ability to further their conversation skills and to have their voices heard:

Susan, a teacher, asks April, a black working-class student: “What’d you do for your birthday? Did you do anything at home?” April says people came over to her house. “Did you have a party?” She nods. Susan asks her what she ate at her party. “Cake.” “What flavor?” “Chocolate.” “Yum, I had doughnuts for my birthday,” Susan says. Adrienne (Asian, upper-middle-class) is at a nearby table but hears this conversation. “Guess what I had for my dinner?” she asks them. She had cake too. “Guess what? I had a Halloween cake. I bought it at the store,” Erica (white, upper-middle-class) says. “I have the best rain boots,” Catherine (white, upper-middle-class) says as a non sequitur. She holds them up. “They have Hello Kitty on them.” Emily (white, upper-middle-class) starts tapping her feet. It spreads. Soon most of the kids are tapping and then stomping their feet. It becomes very loud. Susan asks them to stop. Her conversation with April is over.

In this example, Adrienne, an upper-middle-class girl, uses her language skills — including a sense of entitlement to adult attention — to interrupt and catch Susan’s attention. Other upper-middle-class children join in, and soon Susan’s attention is completely diverted away from the working-class student who was answering Susan’s questions with minimal words but seemed to be enjoying the attention. April could not compete with students with more extensive vocabularies and who were willing to ask for the teacher’s attention. Furthermore, the children ate meals at tables divided by class. (State regulations mandate that teachers be certified to work independently with the grant recipients. Liza was tardy in turning in her credentials to the State, so at meal times the upper-middle-class students sit with Liza and the grant recipients sit at a different table with Susan. Liza was only a week late in submitting her paperwork, but the teachers decided to leave the groups intact for the whole year.) The upper-middle-class table was often loud, while the working-class table was silent or quiet at meal times. The upper-middle-class children socialized each other into talking more, conversing with equals, and chatting over meals. The confidence they had in speaking with each other may have also carried over into their level of confidence in approaching adults.

Another example highlights another aspect in the previous example of Susan’s and April’s interaction: teachers are not purposefully discriminatory toward working-class students. In fact, teachers do make an effort to verbally engage with working-class children. But even when upper-middle-class students do not interrupt and “take the floor,” the mismatch between teachers’ expectations and working-class students’ linguistic style can thwart conversation. Teachers expect quick, enthusiastic chatter from the children. When they are met with initial silence, they may turn to students whose linguistic styles match their own:

During large group time, Lydia and April (both black and working-class) pretend to make food in the kitchen area of the classroom. Warren (a regular substitute teacher) goes over to them and asks what they’re cooking. They don’t answer but pretend to keep cooking. A few seconds later, Warren leaves to talk to Derrick (Asian, upper-middle-class). Derrick and Warren pretend to be tigers, and Lydia and April start talking to each other again.

Had Warren started playing first and talking second, or given Lydia and April a longer chance to begin talking, the working-class girls may have included him in their game. Warren, likely seeing their immediate silence as disinterest, leaves to talk to an

upper-middle-class child. Derrick responds promptly and the teacher and student pretend to be tigers. Warren asks Derrick about the sounds a tiger makes and what tigers eat. The upper-middle-class child hears even more questions, sees that he is treated as a conversational equal, and learns about tigers. Had Warren taken a different approach, it is possible that Lydia and April could have also practiced their verbal skills. Or, perhaps the combined class and gender mismatch between Warren and the girls made playing in the kitchen together unlikely regardless of Warren's approach. Either way, despite teachers' good intentions, many examples show that upper-middle-class students end up with the most teacher attention and most opportunities to develop their language skills.

Even in times of need, working-class children are reluctant to approach a teacher, verbally ask for help, and momentarily "take the floor." Here, Lydia is crying and hurt, but is still hesitant to request help:

Lydia (black, working-class) bumps her head on the corner of a table. Tears quietly stream down her face. Susan and Liza (teachers) are across the room talking about the way an upper-middle-class student cries: his tears stay in his eyes, they don't run down his face. Meanwhile, Lydia stops crying and goes to stand directly in front of Susan, holding her hand on her head. She doesn't say anything while Susan and Liza finish their conversation. After the conversation is over, Susan asks Lydia what's wrong. Lydia holds her head and doesn't say anything. "I see you're holding your head but tell me what's wrong," Susan tells her. Lydia continues to hold her head and look at Susan with pleading eyes. "You have to tell me what happened," Susan tells her. Lydia points to the table in the kitchen. April (black, working-class) is there, and points to the corner of the table. "You hit your head?" Susan asks. Lydia nods. "Let me look...I don't see anything," Susan says, examining her head. "Need a hug?" Susan asks. Lydia nods and Susan gives her a hug.

The teachers clearly care about all of their students, but their expectation is that the children will tell them when something is wrong. The working-class students' needs go unmet for much longer because they take longer to approach the teachers and then use fewer words to explain the problem. Meanwhile, upper-middle-class children often demand the teachers' attention by talking more and treating teachers as equals.

Furthermore, similarly to Lareau's (2003) findings, upper-middle-class children were more likely to ask for help in tasks that working-class children did themselves. Upper-middle-class children often asked the teachers and me to help them zip coats, put on gloves, button their pants, take off their outer shirts, and perform other daily tasks that the working-class children performed independently. For example, Emily asked me nearly every day I was in the classroom to help her both put on the princess dress she wore around the classroom, and then later to help her take it off. She asked for help putting on her snow pants and zipping her winter coat. Erica, Derrick, and Henry (all upper-middle-class) also regularly asked for help when putting on princess or animal costumes and preparing to go outside. Yet, despite the fact that the working-class children also wore the dress up outfits, snow pants, and winter coats, they rarely asked for help. They could accomplish tasks independently more often, and when they could not, they stood near the teachers and waited for the teachers to notice. So while generally the working-class children were more self-sufficient, many of the upper-middle-class children received more adult attention because they could not or would not do daily tasks on their own. Overall, upper-middle-class children were much more prone to "take the floor." In doing this, they both silenced working-class children and acquired the bulk of teachers' attention.

Taking a Stand

Class-based language differences resulted not just in disparities in who “took the floor” most often and received the most teacher attention, the different linguistic styles also resulted in different levels of power between the students. At Community Preschool, conflicts over toys and turns were a regular part of the preschool day. School policy dictates that conflicts be resolved through verbal negotiations. Teachers instruct children to “use their words” to find solutions to their disputes, and they reward those who do so successfully with getting their wishes met. Yet this policy, viewed as egalitarian, widens both class-based power differentials and the class language gap in the classroom. Given that upper-middle-class children enter preschool with the language style that most closely matched the school’s desired language style, they won the majority of the disputes and, like with taking the floor, won the most help in advancing their own language capacities. Their ability to “take a stand” had substantial advantages.

Upper-middle-class students “use their words” to “take a stand” most often. In other words, they argue more than working-class children. A majority of the children’s disagreements were not cross-class, but between two upper-middle-class students. These loud disputes usually garner teacher attention, and with a teacher’s assistance they practice their negotiation skills. From these teacher-mediated sessions, upper-middle-class children learn that they are expected to assert their position (“take a stand”), use rational arguments to defend their position, draw upon reasoning that appears to be fair, and that verbal competency leads to getting their way. Teachers take children’s disputes seriously, and use them as an opportunity to help them work out the best ways to “use their words.” Upper-middle-class students, due to their propensity to argue (which is probably learned at home), receive more practice improving their language skills. Here are two ordinary examples:

Jared (Hispanic, upper-middle-class) whines that Erica (white, upper-middle-class) has Baby Doll. Susan (a teacher) tells him that Baby Doll wasn’t with him and it doesn’t look like he’s playing with him. Susan asks Jared to plan to do something else but Jared is firm that he does not want to do anything else. Jared asks again for the doll. This leads to a “Yes/No” back and forth yelling match between Erica and Jared. Susan holds Baby Doll and says she’ll hold him until they work something out. Jared suggests that when he’s done Erica can use it. Erica does not agree. Susan asks, “Erica, what’s your choice?” Erica suggests she dresses up the baby and then gives it to Jared. Jared doesn’t like this idea. He suggests he uses it now and Erica uses it outside. Erica says she wants to make her own Baby Doll out of snow. Jared gets excited about this idea. They decide to play together with Baby Doll now and then make a new one outside. They get wrapped up in a conversation about how to use snow to make hair.

Catherine (white, upper-middle-class) and Erica (white, upper-middle-class) work together on a puzzle. They start to argue over who can put one of the final puzzle pieces into place. Susan (a teacher) sees the argument, comes over, and asks how they can solve the problem. Erica first suggests that Catherine puts the piece in tomorrow, but Catherine won’t be at school tomorrow. Susan asks them to find a different solution. Catherine suggests she put this puzzle piece in and Erica works on a different puzzle tomorrow. Erica doesn’t like this idea. Susan sits with them for five minutes until they come to a solution through discussion.

In these examples of upper-middle-class conflict, the teacher helps the students learn to negotiate. They also build their repertoire of language skills, working on rationalizing and

debating, and also learn from the teacher's vocabulary and mediation capacities. Since the working-class students do not engage in these long debates over toys and turns, they fall even farther behind the upper-middle-class students in learning how to use language to resolve conflicts and to win arguments.

When it comes to cross-class disputes, then, working-class students are at a distinct disadvantage. Cross-class conflicts often follow a formula that favors upper-middle-class children. First, the upper-middle-class child calls over a teacher to help them settle the conflict. Then the teacher asks what the problem is and how the children propose to solve it. Nearly always, the upper-middle-class student is the first to suggest a solution — usually that they play with the toy first and when they are done they pass it to the working-class student. The working-class student silently watches this process unfold or argues momentarily and then gives up the fight. In cross-class disputes, then, unless the teacher advocates for the working-class student (which sometimes happens) upper-middle-class students nearly always get their way while the working-class student does not. Language styles lead to power differences in the classroom. Below are examples of how this played out in two cross-class conflicts:

“Caroline, I was using that,” April (black, working-class) says quietly to Caroline (a teacher), referring to the glue Emily (white, upper-middle-class) just grabbed. “Well how about one person uses it and then gives it to the next person?” Caroline suggests. “I’ll use it first,” Emily says, even though April is holding the brush and was clearly using it first while Emily had just grabbed the bottle of glue. Emily then explains to April why she should use it first and how she’ll give it to April when she’s done. April listens, looks unconvinced, but doesn’t say anything. She hands the glue brush to Emily. “See, you use it like this,” Emily says and then shows April how to “properly” use the glue. When she leaves the table April grabs the glue.

Sam (Asian, working-class) and Henry (mixed-race, upper-middle-class) argue over the use of a toy car. Caroline (a teacher) tries to help them find a solution. “I’ll give it to Sam when I’m done with it,” Henry suggests. “Does that work?” Caroline asks. Sam says yes.

These two typical examples illustrate how the upper-middle-class children are often the first to suggest a solution to the problem and quickly take steps to implement their plan. The working-class children go along with the upper-middle-class children's suggestions without proposing their own solutions. They do not have the practice that upper-middle-class children receive — probably at home, but also at school — in long negotiations over toys and turns. And even when teachers do not see what happened, they side with the student they could hear “using their words” in the way they deem most appropriate. Again, this often advantages the upper-middle-class students. This example is representative:

“Stop, Sam,” Aaron (white, upper-middle-class) says to his working-class peer. They are simultaneously grabbing a toy truck. Liza (a teacher) gets up and before she can see what’s happening she says, “Stop Sam!” She says she heard Aaron ask him to stop and he needs to wait until Aaron is done playing with the truck before he can play with it.

These illustrations show that upper-middle-class children receive the most practice negotiating while at school, and capitalize on this practice to win the majority of cross-class disputes. These differences had real consequences: working-class students often do not obtain what they want. They may learn that verbal conflicts are conflicts they will lose, that school is not a place where they have the power to get their needs met.

Exceptions to the Rule

Of course, working-class students do not lose every dispute. The teachers' motto is to "use your words," and they tried to teach all of the children to do so. They intervene when they see an opportunity to teach students this lesson, showing them that the desired use of words wins them what they want:

Susan (a teacher) watches as Erica (white, upper-middle-class) grabs a toy calculator from Sam (Asian, working-class). Sam cries. "Sam, say 'I'm using that,'" Susan instructs. He does. Erica does not give the calculator back until Susan asks her to and she reluctantly hands it to Sam.

Teachers try to teach working-class children to perform class in a way that will win them power, but this method of conflict resolution is less automatic to working-class students. However, when teachers hear that working-class students are "taking a stand" and "using their words," the teachers help make sure their words are followed through with the appropriate actions:

Jared (Hispanic, upper-middle-class) goes over to the kitchen and takes the plastic plates April and Lydia (both black and working-class) are playing with. "Stop it Jared! Stop it Jared!" He doesn't listen. Lydia looks with pleading eyes at Susan as she does not call out to her teacher but yells again, "Stop it, Jared!" Susan hurries over: "Jared! She asked you to stop! You need to listen to her!" Jared stomps away without the plates.

In this example, a nearby teacher reinforces that the working-class student "correctly" uses her words and her wishes should be abided by. The student, Lydia, in some ways is lucky: her lack of entitlement to call out to Susan means that if Susan is not close enough to see her pleading eyes, Susan would not have intervened and Lydia would still have lost control over the plates. There are many steps to winning a negotiation, and they must be carefully followed. As working-class students have less experience enacting all of them, it is less likely they will complete them successfully and win a dispute.

Discussion

Preschoolers perform class. Children at Community Preschool enacted class through their different linguistic styles. Upper-middle-class preschoolers used their increased willingness to speak, interrupt, and talk to adults as conversational equals to routinely "take the floor." In doing so, they inadvertently but effectively silenced the working-class preschoolers, who used fewer words, did not use language to call attention to themselves, and did not talk to adults as they talked to each other. Similarly, upper-middle-class students used their willingness to "take a stand" to gain teachers' attention, improve their negotiation skills, and win the bulk of cross-class disputes. Young children do not just know about class, but are class actors as well.

Their class performances are consequential. In both "taking the floor" and "taking a stand," upper-middle-class children seized the bulk of adults' attention. This attention allowed them to improve their own linguistic skills: they practiced responding to questions, making public presentations, debating, rationalizing, and negotiating. They used language to learn more language. They also used their linguistic style to get their needs met. Seeing adults as those whom they could talk to, they asked for help more often and won the

attention they were seeking. They also won the toys and the turns they were fighting over. In other words, upper-middle-class students won power over the verbal space and the material objects in the classroom. As Bourdieu (1991) states, language bestows power.

Upper-middle-class children's class performance did not just help them improve their own language skills and win power in the classroom. In "taking the floor," they pushed working-class children off the floor. In "taking a stand," they made it difficult for working-class students to take their own stand. The combination of the children's class styles made it so that working-class children lost opportunities to improve their own language skills, lost attention from adults, lost the ability to get their needs met quickly, and lost cross-class disputes. In terms of power in the classroom, working-class children were at a loss.

These findings have consequences for how we conceptualize how children learn to perform class, as well as for class reproduction. In terms of the former, we can see two points. First, children are not just socialized by adults in the institutions of family and school. Peers are highly influential in shaping each other's class performances. The young children at Community Preschool entered the school with certain class-based linguistic styles; the children's interactions compounded these styles. Peer influences led the upper-middle-class children to become more verbal, more practiced presenters, and more skilled negotiators. Peer influences, on the other hand, created an environment where already quiet, verbally unassuming working-class children, had even less of a chance to practice their language skills. Families may instill their children with class-based linguistic styles, but peers help cement them.

Second, to the extent that adults do instill children with their class performances, it may be more of a circular than a linear process. As would be predicted by the new sociology of childhood, the children at Community Preschool were not passive recipients of teachers' socialization. Despite the teachers' best intentions, the children's class styles led teachers to react differently to upper-middle-class and working-class students. Upper-middle-class children called attention to themselves more and asked explicitly for teachers interventions more often; teachers then disproportionately allocated their attention — and their words — to upper-middle-class children. The teacher-student interactions meant that the advantaged children received more advantages.

Class reproduction is why children's class performances matter. To the extent that these findings are generalizable, they indicate that children's class performances could amplify the class-based linguistic gap as upper-middle-class children drown out their working-class peers. The gap could show up in tracking, standardized test scores, and college entrance exams, all of which compound existing class disparities by routing children of different classes into paths which produce different life outcomes. Preschoolers' class performances may be a root of later inequities. Children, as well as adults, play a role in class reproduction.

Furthermore, working-class students may be learning, as young as age four, that school is not a place for them. They see the teachers' attention drifting to their peers of a different class, they see their own needs going unmet as their peers receive more help, and they come to find out that when they argue with an upper-middle-class peer in school it is unlikely they will win. Without the linguistic tools to succeed and with the seeds of a feeling — perhaps one that they cannot articulate — that school rewards people not like them, the roots of academic disengagement may be being put into place. As Crosnoe (2009) finds, being a small working-class fish, in a big upper-middle-class pond, may not be beneficial to working-class students.

Finally, this paper calls into question the ability of preschools to level the playing field. Mixed-class preschools may be sights where inequality is bolstered instead of dissolved. It should not be assumed that mixed-class settings are beneficial to working-class students.

Working-class students do not soak up middle-class students' vocabularies by osmosis; middle-class students may create boundaries to working-class students' ability to learn. This study also indicates the importance of training teachers to appreciate working-class students' linguistic styles, and to find ways of giving all students equal opportunities to "take the floor," win disputes, and get their needs met. If these changes do not occur, preschoolers will be active if inadvertent agents in reproducing inequality; their class performances will lead to class reproduction. For now, the privileged will be privileged, no matter how young.

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Jessi Streib is a graduate student at the University of Michigan. She studies how social class inequality is unintentionally reproduced.