



Podcast #: Language and Social Class

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Host: Nolan, Ming, and Bryce

Guests: Chris Bell

Description: Teacher Chris Doell draws on her experience in restorative justice in education to discuss the intersections between language, race, and social class.

Transcript:

Bryce

Hi, everyone, welcome to this week's episode of The Socio Linguini Podcast. I'm Bryce, and I'm joined by . . .

Ming

This is Ming here.

Nolan

And this is Nolan. And for today's episode, we're going to be recording our podcast for our sociolinguistics class, where we talk about social class, and we're going to do an interview with an expert. And today's expert is my mom, who is a fourth-grade elementary school teacher. She's going to share some insights that she has to some questions that we'll be asking her related to economic class and her experience in the classroom. And so yes, I'll go ahead and let her introduce herself.

Doell

My name is Chris Doell, I am a fourth-grade teacher. I just finished my master's degree in education, actually, this semester. So that's kind of where I am professionally. You want me to talk about school yet?

Bryce

Sounds great. Go for it.

Doell

My school is really kind of an interesting school in that it's the oldest elementary school in Lincoln, Nebraska. I guess people could figure it out. It was built in the 50s. So the general neighborhood around it is lower socioeconomic housing, lots of apartments, things like that. But we also serve across a major street, there's a new housing development, and the homes on the other side of the road, go for about 1.5 million. And so we have both sets of children in the school.

Bryce

Tell us a little bit more about the context of your school and what that looks like on a day-to-day basis?

Doell

The school itself, it is about 50/50, boys and girls. We have 46% receiving free and reduced lunches. That kind of mirrors the district as a whole once you average it out. We are not Title I, but if we lost that higher socioeconomic status group, we would be. I'll be honest, as far as behavioral interventions, boys and minorities are disproportionately represented. We have a really supportive PTA. We have our administration as a principal, a vice principal, and a special education coordinator.

Nolan

I mean, it's a good school. I know I hear a lot of the stories from like when she comes home from work--right?--of all the kids who are having a hard time. But I know that they are really committed to helping these kids. And actually, that's kind of a group of tasks that has kind of fallen to you. So I don't know if you want to do some exposition on kind of just like how like, because you do have like the previous psychological experience, and now are fresh off your master's, maybe how that's kind of fallen to you and maybe talk about the restorative justice you worked on a bit recently. And then we can launch into more of the main topic for the day.

Doell

One of my passions really is creating equity for students, particularly for children from poverty, or children of immigrants. Lincoln, Nebraska, Lincoln Public Schools serves students from over 100 countries. And there are over 100 languages spoken within our schools. In my own classroom, and I only have 20 kids, I have--is it Vodou?--it's a African. Yeah, Vodou. Spanish, Kurdish, and Arabic spoken. And that's just among 20 kids. So making sure that these kids that are, have historically been underserved, and underrepresented is a passion of mine. Making up the gaps. One of the big pieces that have come to my attention is that kids in America where their first language is not English, or else from lower socio-economic statuses, hear 360,000 less unique words, than their counterparts that are from higher socioeconomic statuses and are born in America. So figuring out how to solve that gap is a real passion of mine. The other pieces: like I said, some of these minority kids are over represented in behavioral plans. My concern has been how we fix that. And I guess just anecdotally in my own class, you know, I have this little girl who's very blonde and very blue eyed and comes from the "good" side of the road. And, you know, honestly quite spoiled. And there's no reason why this child shouldn't have been receiving some behavioral support other than she's white, blue, blonde, blue-eyed, and native American or native--a native American who's not a Native American. And, you know, it was a tough talk that we had to have about why is this little girl not--you know, it's equity in the other way. Why is she not receiving the same support for her kind of over-the-top behaviors that my African American boy is. So kind of equalizing those things. My master's research was in restorative practices. And I implemented that in my classroom, creating a culture change around that is hard when you're used to punishment as the benchmark of how you control behavior, but we're making progress. And I'm committed to that going forward.

Ming

A your previous introduction, and I heard there's something called Title I. So could you please explain that term a little bit.

Doell

Title I, at least in Nebraska, that would be schools that represent a disproportionate amount of lower socioeconomic-status families. So I believe to be Title I status, it's 75% of your kids receiving free and reduced lunches. What we find in Title I schools, because of the issues surrounding poverty, is a lot more special education and behavioral support systems are in place. Like I said, my school is just on the edge. If they build a new school, in the nice neighborhood, we'll certainly get there.

Bryce

Yeah, for sure.

Ming

Also, like we noticed the gap between those rich kids and poor kids. Maybe I can use those terms, but like, maybe [they're] not accurate. But have you ever noticed any interaction between them? Like how their socioeconomic classes influence their interactions with each other?

Doell

I would say it was more evident in my class last year than this year because I was split about 50/50 between higher socioeconomic kids and lower socioeconomic kids. What's kind of cool about 9- and 10-year-olds is that they're close to making that differentiation. There's not a divide between them yet. Now, there's certainly you know, what's uncomfortable for me as a teacher, and as a person who has a lot of privilege in my own life, is when you hear the kids that haven't been more than 30 miles out of Lincoln, Nebraska, versus the kids who take their annual trip to Disney World. And how that goes down. You know, I don't think it causes any overt tension in the classroom. But I do believe that the kids who don't have are more aware of the differences than the kids that do have.

Nolan

You were telling me earlier in the year, how you asked the kids from this year to write about their own personalities. And maybe you want to share that brief story. Because it is just interesting how like, even though they don't tend to be aware that if you're rich enough, even if you're young, become aware of it. And that kind of becomes your personality.

Doell

My class, I would call that a high emotional needs class. And I typically serve children with high emotional needs. And so one of the things I do early in the year is I read a story, kind of surrounding liking yourself. And then one of the tasks I do at the end is write three things that you like about yourself. And 20 or 19 children wrote, you know, "I'm a good friend. I have a funny sense of humor. I'm a good helper to my parents." Things like that. The same little girl I was referencing earlier who needed help kind of behaviorally, her three things where "I take

good vacations. My mom drives a Lexus. And we eat at nice restaurants." So she had already externalized what her value was instead of having an internal point of view about her value. It was really powerful, actually, to read that.

Bryce

You said that, like your students are kind of right at that age where they're getting ready to become aware of this. So what do you think changes at that age that they suddenly become more aware of how their class maybe informs who they are?

Doell

Social development changes around this time, from what I would call kind of just a little kid mindset to a big kid mindset. And suddenly, you know, you see the girls worried about their hair, and you see, they're worried about their shoes, and you see that they're worried about their clothes. And there's a, you know (I keep going back to this poor kiddo), but she gets her clothes from Stitch Fix. And sitting next to the little girl who gets all of her clothes from Walmart. And just suddenly, you know, there's the cool good clothes and there's not that. Or, again, my family goes to Disney World and your family goes and plays laser tag. Those kinds of comparisons come to the forefront of their minds, I think. And like I said, certainly the kids, the poorer kids become more aware of that difference faster. And I find it's the girls in particular, I think, they get a little bit chippy a little bit earlier where in fourth grade, you start to see the girl drama and often it centers around these things.

Nolan

I guess I have the advantage of living with you so I get to hear all the tales. But one thing you're talking about today was the Black Lives Matter movement. And so one thing that we talked about in our presentation for class was kind of the relationship between class and race and gender and how they're not necessarily the same thing. But the other two contribute to what the other exists as. And so I know one of our questions was also then was how have you seen in class, influences play out between teachers themselves or between teachers and students? And maybe you want to talk about kind of how like Black Lives Matter has been handled? Because I'm sure there's probably some class insights you can have there too.

Doell

Yeah. Black Lives Matters . . . Let me back up. I'm really proud of my school district because they have gone all in on supporting equity in school. Be it racial equity or learning abilities--all things we're really striving towards and every month we have professional development surrounding equity in our schools. Which is awesome. We're a very red state. And so we did have riots in Lincoln this summer. Well, I wouldn't call it riots, I would call it marches but people have called it riots. And there was, I mean there was millions of dollars' worth of destruction that happened in Lincoln and you know discussion around what's more important: A million dollars or a life? In our own school, you can still see that same divide. For example, we're not supposed to make political statements at school. Of course. You know, I shouldn't be influencing what my children think about politics. Although maybe I do subversively do so I guess.

Nolan

You're kind of a bit radical sometimes.

Doell

You know, we talk about the Indian boarding schools and I paint just a horrific picture of what those were so I might manipulate that a little bit. But anyway, back to Black Lives Matter. One of the children wore a Black Lives Matter t-shirt. And one of the teachers, this was in a lower grade, got all worked up that you're not supposed to wear political apparel at school. And I was really proud of the district because they came back with that is not a political opinion. That's a question of equity and moving society forward. And so actually, they printed for everybody who wanted to, we could put a Black Lives Matter sign in our room and it's been really interesting to walk around and see which teachers have chosen and which teachers have not chosen it. I have in my class, I have three Middle Eastern children. I have 1, 2, 3 . . . I think I have 4 biracial Black children and I have 2 Hispanic children. And so when I put it up, there was probably a half hour discussion surrounding that. And I have 1 little boy who is biracial, Black, who's very well spoken, his parents have talked to him a lot. And he's kind of taken point on these discussions for the kids. But you can sense the change in the room when that went up when they knew that I was safe and that I cared and that I was going to open these discussions up the sense in the whole room got better now, there are certainly some children of Trump followers in the classroom from who I've heard some "white lives matter" comments. Yeah, and this little boy who is so well spoken, he's like, "man, you know," he can just--I don't have to talk at all. He just lays out all the facts. And it's kind of cool to watch 10-year-olds learn from each other because they're going to hear it so much better than hearing it from me. And this kiddo is a leader and he's well respected he's very athletic. So you know kids are willing to listen and follow him but you know, I give huge props to his parents because they have set him up to be able to talk about this in a really meaningful way.

Nolan

Well kind of the surprising thing too with like all the race related stuff that's happened this year or just the behavior issues or the learning development issues that are kind of prevalent in the schools and also when you did your practicum you were at a Title I school right?

Doell

Every school I did a practicum at was Title I.

Nolan

Right. And so you know, I think it's one of those things where class is really tricky because it might not be like the most overt thing that you notice and all of these relations but kind of one of the working lenses that we kind of had to apply is that like, it's the one that's kind of hanging underneath there and so like do you think it would be reasonable to say that like even though it's been these race relations things, or this kid that you know, has the behavior problems or whatever even when you think of support level for these kids, I'm assuming there might be

some correlation to the class status or just even the amount of money available to the school because you know, property taxes and how all that stuff works.

Doell

Well. What's cool about property taxes is that they're collected in Lincoln and divided equally among the schools. Which is good because you know, I actually had somebody ask me if you got paid better to work at a better school . . .

Nolan

Yeah like one over here.

Doell

Like oh my gosh, you know? What I would say like I said before. I do see that boys and minorities are over-represented for behavioral support. Part of that is how school is set up because school doesn't serve boys very well. The research says boys need to move more than girls and what do we ask boys to do all day? Sit like this and be a good learner. So I know that's a piece of it, but it's not the only piece of it. Point me a little bit more.

Nolan

Just follow the money.

Doell

Follow the money? Absolutely. Okay, so my own 10-year-old goes to a school with a very high socioeconomic status. Probably the second highest just because it's in Lincoln. It's the newest school. And I think is his entire school. About 500 kids, there are two children on behavioral plans. I have in a class of 20, I have seven children on behavioral plan.

Nolan

And probably a reason to have all of them on one.

Doell

I could argue every kiddo in my class needs check in checkout. Sure. Now, also, his school, not to get really political, is one of only three schools that we hold a mock election around the presidential election. His school was one of three in the city who voted for Trump over Biden, every other school in the city voted for Biden. So I just find that an interesting distinction and so when you play into you know what's conservative or what's Republican and who's a Democrat and what they're, you know, we're going to find the wealthier people are probably following Trump because the stock market and so forth. Certainly you see that play out in schools. I also think that those kids in a school like my son goes to they get some passes. You know. But at the same time, like I'm divorced, and I find that his father and I co-parent very successfully, where in my own school, those kiddos from the lower socio-economic statuses, they are not co-parenting successfully. So there's a huge disparity even between you know what kind of support they have at home and how the parents are working together, I have one kiddo in my

class that if he's with mom or if he's with that, it's a totally different experience in the classroom with him. So I always know which house he's at just by how his week's going.

Nolan

And that's one of things I want to talk about, or just make sure to point out, is that I think the thing that might be under represented or kind of hard to calculate or quantify, though, is just how the home life is constructed in relationship to the money. Because you're a teacher, so you're not wealthy by any means, but your life is stable. And your ex-husband's life is also stable. So it does mean you know, you're able to be those successful co-parents. Where, I think, lots of the kiddos in your life, you say all the time that their whole lives are just a mess. And the reason isn't necessarily because of the money. But I don't think it's crazy to say that like, money just really, really helps.

Doell

Well, here's the things that I know. When the little girl, Hispanic, they live in a single wide trailer, mom, dad, and six kids. You know, it's an intact family, but that's different than Nolan and I and my other son living in my 2,000 square foot house. That's a difference. A lot of my poor kids, they do live in an apartment, high divorce rate. Often we're finding moms and dads either working two jobs or working second-shift jobs. So then grandparents play a huge role in the upbringing of these children. And honestly, in you know, in my anecdotal experience, is that grandparents aren't going to parent the way the parents would. Just because they're grandparents, you know, they don't want to be that heavy and I don't blame them for that. Often, you know, they're older and they don't have the energy that they once had. So if something's going wrong, they may not fix it as quickly. The other thing, I'm thinking of one kiddo, in particular but I think that it could be probably generalized a little bit, is the effect of generational poverty and the effects of generational trauma. So this one little [girl] I'm thinking of, in particular, you know, she was raised in a very chaotic, abusive household. And as an adult, in her marriage, it was chaotic and abusive, so dad's out of the picture, but the four boys in the household have a lot of trauma and because of that trauma have a lot of needs. And we have a hard time getting mom to see what those needs are because that chaos and that trauma are normal to her, and she's kicked out the problem. So in her mind, she's fixed the problem. So, you know, and you don't see that so much where, you know, I came from an intact family and even though my family is not intact, I have those skills from having an intact family. So I think that you know, coming from a middle class background into a middle class background, better support somebody trying to move beyond poverty into middle class.

Bryce

Well, let's see, I'm looking at the time on the recording here, and we're getting close. I know there's one thing probably that would be interesting for all of us, given the nature of our program. So you do have lots of ELL students in your classroom. And so I wonder if there's any just good class related anecdotes maybe that you might have?

Doell

The big thing I see in my classroom, this is interesting to me, I have three children who are from Iraq. One is a zoom learner, and I don't have a very good sense of her, a remote learner. But the other two are, one is Kurdish and one is Arabic. And the little Arabic girl comes from a lot of wealth and she is just dressed like a princess every day. And the Kurdish child comes to school and you know, basically in sweats and two big t-shirts and hand-me-downs and you can really see and it's you know, I knew that there was class disparity and religious disparity in Iraq, but it's playing out in my classroom. Where, you know, I do have factions of girls that follow the Arabic girl and I do have factions of girls who follow the Kurdish girl. And you know, there's huge economic differences between their lifestyles and their families and so the Arabic child who's wealthy, is very coddled and very, you know, I don't think she gets on the internet at all. She's not very worldly. And the other little girl, she's talking to me about playing video games and using Discord. And for a 9-year-old that terrifies me. Her dad's a trucker, and he's gone a lot and mom doesn't speak English. And so getting to her support when she needs like academic support can be challenging because I have to line up an interpreter where the wealthier child, her dad speaks very good English. So yeah, I certainly kind of see that kind of played out in real life. My Spanish speaking kiddos, a lot of our curriculum includes Spanish language support, like our stories have a lot of basis. And I love that because that's those kiddos' time to shine. They love to correct my pronunciation when I'm reading stories or tell more about their cultural experience. So that part is really cool, because it kind of elevates their status in the classroom a little bit. The other interesting thing I think I see is I do see some white guilt among some of my kids where, well, we just read a story about Abe Lincoln this week about freeing slaves. And, you know, I'm hearing from my white kids, "How can people be this terrible?" And they just really want to make sure that everybody knows that they also know this is not okay. So that in and of itself is an interesting experience. Oh, I do have one more thing. So in this Abe Lincoln story Abe used the word . . .

Nolan

I'm gonna go ahead and put a just a slight trigger warning. I figured that's probably reasonable for this story.

Doell

Yeah, I think we should have a trigger warning because I am going to use . . .

Nolan

I don't know how many people are going to listen to this podcast. But I think it's doing my linguistic due diligence.

Doell

For people of African descent because I'm talking about slaves. Abe Lincoln used the word *Negro* in his speech. We know now that's not an okay word to use. But I'm reading this story to these children. And it was direct quotes from Lincoln, using the word *Negro*. So I gave a trigger warning to my class, "I'm going to use this word, this is what he said, the reason he said this word was because it was the most respectful word they had at the time to refer to a slave." And then my little boy who's so well spoken about these things. I asked him his point of view,

and he said, he's like, "That's a slave word." And he was very clear on that. He goes, "It's one step up from the other N-word, but that is a slave word. And we don't like it." And I really appreciated that he stepped right out front. Because then the other kids, we had a discussion of how language changes and when we went back to the story, the next day, somebody said, "Oh, this is the page with the bad word on it." Which I just thought was kind of funny. But I think it's a great way for these children to learn some history of language and meaning while they're learning the other things they need to know academically as well.