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*(Gandalf, describing Bilbo to his detractors. From the screenplay of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (Walsh et al 2012), based on the novel by J.R.R. Tolkien (1937) *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*)*

# CLASS IN THE CLASSROOM: ACADEMIC STRENGTHS

- May 2023
- Leonie Smith  
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# Setting up

What are you hoping to  
achieve today?

# BACKGROUND TO THE TALK

- Dr. Leonie Smith: Leverhulme Research Fellow in Philosophy at Manchester.
- Current Project: The Metaphysics of Socioeconomic Epistemic Oppression.
- Work on class and poverty-based epistemic injustice in education, in traditional and social media representation and participation, and in interactions with street-level organisations and actors.
- Cardiff: ran a funded pilot project with Cardiff University, Cardiff Council and local community groups on, 'Activating Alternative Advantages', introducing a non-deficit-based approach to widening participation and inclusive teaching. Sessions held with academics, professional services staff, students and local school-age pupils on the epistemic strengths of students from working-class backgrounds.
- Manchester, Cardiff and St Andrews: held interactive workshops on 'Class in the Classroom' discussing findings and the 'REWARD' narrative (presented here), helping academics, professional services staff, and PGR groups generate ideas for inclusive pedagogy within their own environments and spheres of influence.

Hosting academic workshop on 'Class and Higher Education' 16/17th August 2023 – details TBC, early sign-up here: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/class-and-higher-education-theory-and-findings-tickets-638751552087>.

# TODAY:

1. Decreasing social mobility
2. Two narratives around class inclusion
3. An alternative narrative
4. Ideas for creating class-inclusive classrooms

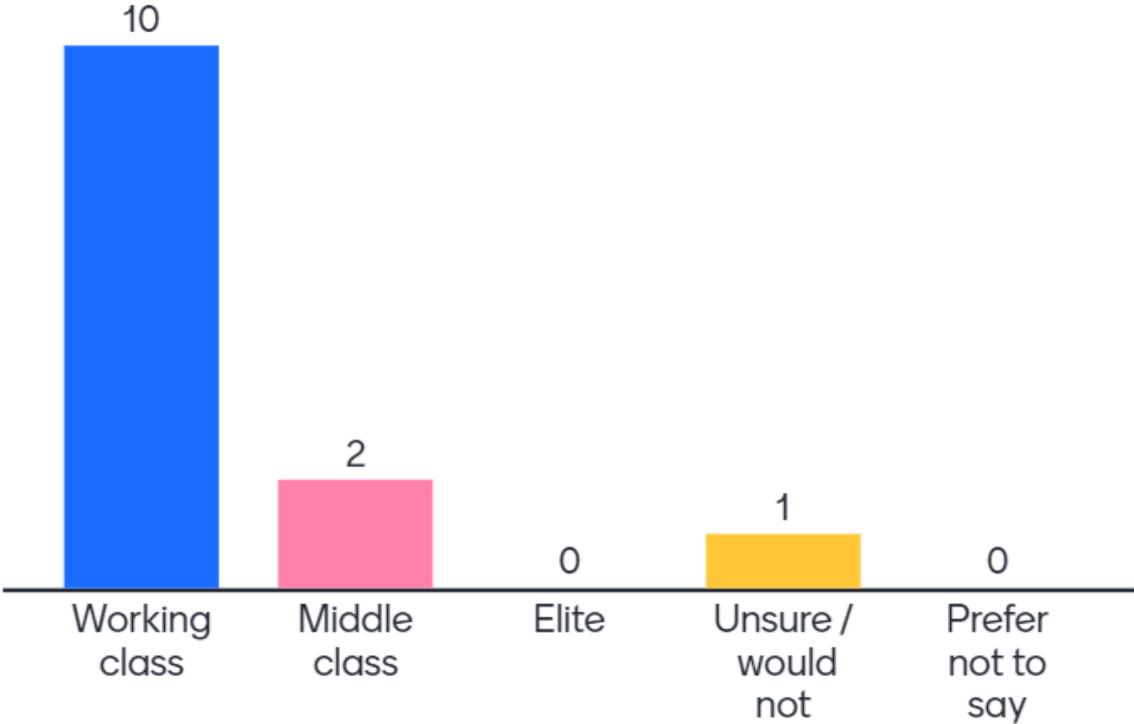
## QUICK POLL

How would you describe your originating class background?



**Survey results on next slide**

# How would you describe your class background?



The background is a dark, almost black, textured surface. A bright pink rectangular box is centered horizontally and vertically, containing white text. The text is a single line, reading "1. Class inequality in education and social mobility".

# 1. Class inequality in education and social mobility

- 
- Social-economic outcome largely determined by starting point.
  - In the UK pre-Covid:
    - Falling absolute mobility from 2007 onwards (*Major and Machin 2018*).
    - Greater attendance at university has not led to greater social capital or income for those who 'move up' (*Savage 2015*).

- In the UK **Post-Covid:**

- Both national longitudinal studies **and** bespoke ‘Social Mobility Survey’ indicate “that **both education and labour market inequalities have been exacerbated during the Covid-19 crisis** [...] these have disproportionately affected the social mobility prospects of the younger generation” (Major, Eyles and Machin 2021: 5)

- **Existing social mobility issues have been exacerbated.**



2. Two narratives (that I see)  
around class inclusion

# NARRATIVE 1



“We are building an **Aspiration Nation**. A country where it’s not who you know, or where you’re from; but who you are and where you’re determined to go. My dream for Britain is that opportunity is not an accident of birth, but a birthright”

*(David Cameron, then Prime Minister, at the UK Conservative Party Spring Conference, March 2013)*

# NARRATIVE 1



“I was once invited to speak to a Government Select Committee about whether economic status or being ‘working class’ should be a protected category like race, and disability [...] On the day, **most of the MPs in attendance were very interested in the perceived ‘lack of aspiration’ among the working class** rather than the middle class’s unfair advantages in gaming the system”

*(Lisa McKenzie 2020)*

# NARRATIVE 1

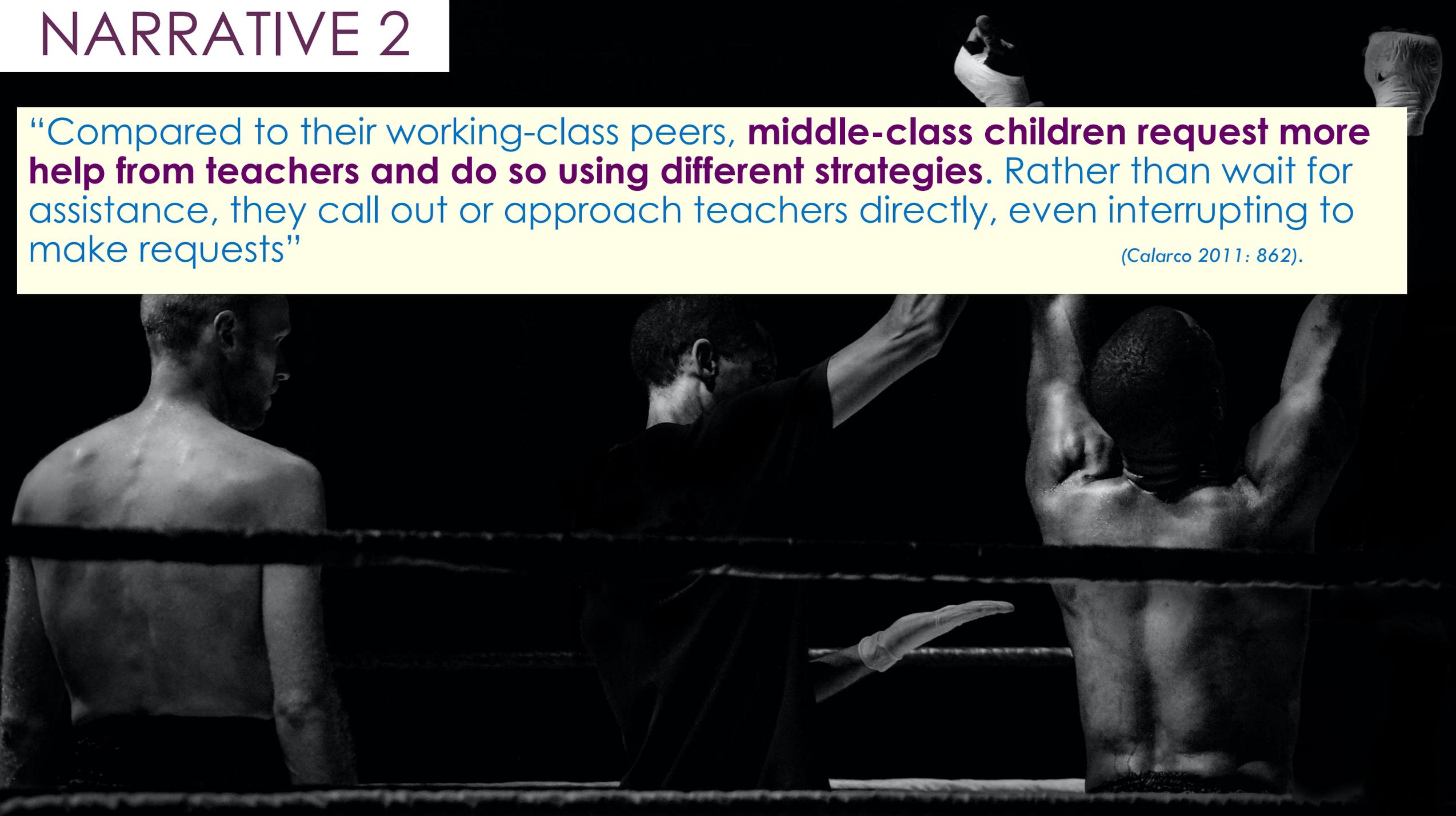
One possible way of constructing these facts, for someone who wants to support working-class academic achievement, is **ENCOURAGEMENT**:

- P1. Here are some **things working-class students feel, do or demonstrate, which get in their own way** (such as, displaying a lack of ambition).
- P2. **These things are bad for working-class students** in themselves (attainment outcomes) **and bad for the further outcomes they produce** (secondary and tertiary harms of not doing well in education).
- C1. We need to correct for these bad things** (motivate ambition) **or reduce their probability of occurrence** (incubate the message of meritocracy)

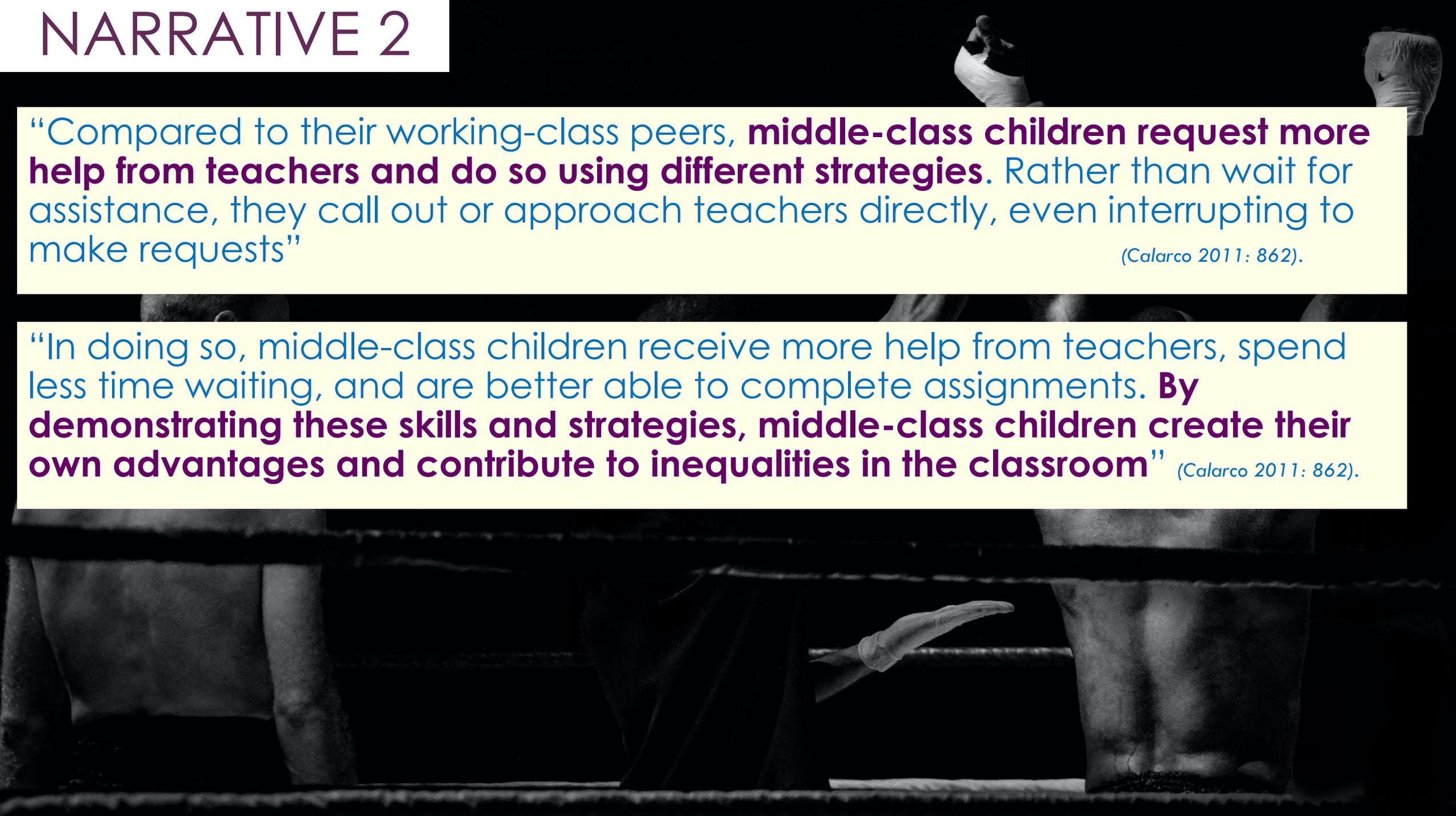
# NARRATIVE 2

“Compared to their working-class peers, **middle-class children request more help from teachers and do so using different strategies.** Rather than wait for assistance, they call out or approach teachers directly, even interrupting to make requests”

*(Calarco 2011: 862).*



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*(Calarco 2011: 862).*

“In doing so, middle-class children receive more help from teachers, spend less time waiting, and are better able to complete assignments. **By demonstrating these skills and strategies, middle-class children create their own advantages and contribute to inequalities in the classroom”** *(Calarco 2011: 862).*

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*(Calarco 2011: 862).*

“Furthermore, by attracting attention and support from teachers, **these strategies may also bolster students’ sense of academic competence and their attachment to school** (Karabenick 1998; Stanton-Salazar 1997)”

*(Calarco 2014: 20).*

# NARRATIVE 2



“We have been teaching students from more privileged backgrounds for so long, that **we take a lot for granted** on a college campus. Mental health offices, career service offices, **they are so used to students being more proactive and entering their doors because they've been taught that if you want something, you go out and get it.** The fact that you have to go seek things out, **that's an unspoken rule on a college campus that disproportionately hurts low-income students from disadvantaged high schools.** There is a bias towards privilege on a college campus that permeates so many things that we do”

*(Anthony Abraham Jack, interviewed in: Nadworny, Elissa (2019). As Elite Campuses Diversify, A 'Bias Towards Privilege' Persists. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/05/699977122/as-elite-campuses-diversify-a-bias-towards-privilege-persists> (accessed 21 December 2020).).*

# NARRATIVE 2

This research suggests an alternative construction of the narrative and approach to resolution, for those who care – **ADAPTATION:**

P1\* Here is **a thing middle-class students do** which working-class students do not do (such as, asking for help regularly).

P2\* This **gives middle-class students an advantage** over working-class students.

C1\* **We need to help working-class students do what middle-class students do...**

(Leonie Smith, MS)



### 3. An alternative narrative

# THE LOSSES OF 'ADAPTATION'



“My trajectory may be described as miraculous, I suppose – an ascension to a place where I don’t belong”

*(Bourdieu, in Eagleton and Bourdieu 1992: 117).*

# THE LOSSES OF 'ADAPTATION'



“As working-class people [...] regularly pointed out, **they often felt overlooked and disregarded** in schooling, part of an anonymous backdrop that middle-class children can shine against”

*(Reay, 2017, 138).*

# THE LOSSES OF 'ADAPTATION'



“It has been a really scary and stressful first term. I didn’t really have a clue what to expect, everything has been tougher than I was expecting, and I still haven’t settled in. It doesn’t help that **there is no one like me here.**”

*(Student, Akim, cited in Reay 2017).*

# THE LOSSES OF 'ADAPTATION'



“The further into postgraduate studies you go, and especially the further into struggling as an ECR you endeavour, **the less ‘like you’** everybody appears to sound, think, and be.”

*(Ross Clare 2020).*

# DIFFERENT APPROACHES

“Parents’ relationships with the school varied by social class and shaped their beliefs about teachers’ behavioral expectations. Those **beliefs led parents to adopt contrasting strategies for managing problems at school and to coach their children to do the same.**

Specifically, **working-class parents stressed ‘no-excuses’ problem-solving, encouraging children to respect teachers’ authority by not seeking help.**

**Middle-class parents instead taught ‘by-any-means’ problem solving, urging children to negotiate with teachers for assistance. [...] Such activation, in turn, prompted stratified responses from teachers and thus created unequal advantages in school”**

*(Calarco 2014: 2).*

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*(Calarco 2014: 2).*

But:

“In college or in the workplace, for example, **individuals who use no-excuses problem solving might do better** than those who are used to having parents or teachers solve problems for them”

*(Calarco 2014: 20).*

# EPISTEMIC EXCLUSION



“... an epistemic attention deficit [...] a failure to give working-class children the attention which they are due as people with epistemic capacities that can be acknowledged, celebrated, and (most importantly in this context) developed”

# EPISTEMIC OTHERING



**“... working-class people are always asked to explain themselves to academics and their stories mapped if not pathologized as objects of inquiry, known rather than knowers”**

*(Walkerdine 2021: 67)*

# EPISTEMIC NARRATIVE 3

This all suggests, to me, a third way of interpreting what those who care need to do to help working-class students thrive – **REWARD:**

P1# All else being equal, working-class students exhibit **behaviours** which have the potential to **help them develop epistemic virtues** – the ability to work independently and to persevere with (and thereby increase their likelihood of solving) problems – **which are valuable** for long-term academic and workplace success.

P2# **Educational reward structures are** (often) **not in place to reward or value these behaviours** (in terms of assessment practices etc.) in the short-term.

C1# Educational settings are (often) **causing those who exhibit behaviours which academia should value to be less successful**, to suffer anxiety and stress, and to prematurely leave HE, or to leave with less confidence and lower grades.

C2# **We need to change HE practices to allow these nascent epistemic virtues, and the students who practice them, to flourish.**

A few examples of practices which are likely to work **against** success:

- Assessments where the student gets feedback and a grade and **no chance to re-submit** after that feedback or grade (favouring students who seek out help before submission and **disadvantaging** those who persevere for longer alone and perform more independent research (**intellectual independence and courage**) and tenacity (**intellectual perseverance**).
- **'Invitations'** to 'get in touch for help' or use office hours (which working-class students will not see as positive behaviour) **rather than built-in support** points.
- 'Extra-credit' options which benefit those who ask and who have the personal background to have the time and opportunity to do additional work (and who will even consider asking for these opportunities).
- **References that focus on praising displayed help-seeking** / vocal behaviour in classrooms and express worries about a lack of 'involvement'.
- Demonstrable **modelling of support only for** these middle-class **help-seeking strategies**, and negatively framing independence and perseverance.

A photograph of a person standing on a dirt path in a dense forest. The person is wearing a colorful t-shirt, dark shorts, and sneakers. The forest is filled with tall, thin trees and lush green foliage. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking down the path towards the person.

## 4. Ideas For Allowing Working-Class Epistemic Virtues to Flourish

PLEASE LOG ANY SUGGESTIONS

Ideas for class-  
inclusive  
classrooms



<https://www.menti.com/alwefexqxcw2>

# Here are some answers suggested in my 'Class in the Classroom' workshops:

Formative assessment, authentic assessment, making classroom activities explicitly tied to assessment/LOs so students see the value in classroom activities

Writing development activities/courses in year 1

Would this work to make getting help part of expected practice? Peer-feedback with an assessed written reflection on the process that have feedback on a draft of an essay.

Start discussions like this in all schools. I like the idea of going through draft assignments. We do a broad non assessed assignment at the start of the programme to give feedback. Small group work, plain language

positively encouraging students who do ask for help a lot to persevere and be more independent so they are not unfairly advantaged and can develop those good qualities

Activity-based lecture/seminar sessions to combine course content with practice-based tasks. Circulate during discussions/tasks to provide equal opportunities for support and/or development. Use a mix of group and individual work.

More formative assessment. If concerned about time for marking can also integrate peer and group assessment

Multiple forms of assessment that play to different strengths and styles of learning and participation

Building class activities week to week that feed into assessments and how to approach them, backed up with a workshop for all students. Structuring workshop for small group discussion backed up with individual opportunities to discuss with tutor

Flipped classroom, I give questions they prepare and we then talk about those specifically.

Lecture-free styles, non-slide heavy, maybe compulsory office hour meetings with small groups of students or 1:1 rather than optional open-ended invitations

Flipped classroom idea so read and think through then we'll meet to go through learning

# And some more:

small group/pairs work

Maybe recognise class more explicitly? Where it is at play in interactions etc. Avoiding the elitist myth of the classless society

Design teaching and assessment strategy for the two different types of people. Perhaps this might need a mixture of self-reliance, and asking for help/group. I think to some extent this already happens on my programme.

Build confidence in students who are quieter, eg positive verbal feedback if they speak up

Value empathy - celebrate different voices, ideas and alternative opinions

recruitment - need more staff from working-class backgrounds

Assessments that emphasise process not (just) product - i.e. reflective assignments (and that normalise "failure" but not with a capital F)

appoint more academics from w/c and diverse backgrounds permanent staff

Tell students about the differences between working-class and middle-class classroom behaviours

share educational experiences at the start so we can check in whether these might act as barriers to thriving at HE. anchor virtues and values from the start, ask them what they bring and how these can be used at uni

Regularly using anonymous polling and feedback.

Written assignments with a review process earlier in the university degree (submit -> receive feedback -> resubmit)

reconsider how we recruit more w-c students, current WP initiatives tend to focus on young and exceptionally able people - what about more mature people with different transferable skills

# And some more:

Paired discussions before answering a question

Set points for engagement and support in the module, rather than optional opportunities which may favour students who are more prone to 'take advantage' than those who are more 'independent'...

Explaining all terms and examples used no matter how obvious they may seem (something you did very well in this session)

Be careful about language that praises students just for verbally engaging...focus more on creating opportunities for students to engage in a thoughtful way in a mode that suits them.

I like the idea of mandating an office hour slot. To my mind this overcomes the natural reluctance of working class students and bridges the gap to additional skills that will prove useful to them.

Encouraging using materials (e.g. pen and paper instead of a laptop) to make presentations/outputs that are accessible to all.

Not assuming that students who are communicating in a certain way (participative in class discussion, seeking help) are learning more or 'better' students

Create opportunities for students to get better at assessment literacy and to understand what is being looked for in assessments.

not assuming being 'more middle class' in their behaviours is the route to success

Formative assessment galore and then Building assessment forms for summarise assessment together with students

Create opportunities for students to speak and discuss points early in the lecture/seminar - as this may increase likelihood of engagement later on.

# POST SESSION COMMITMENT

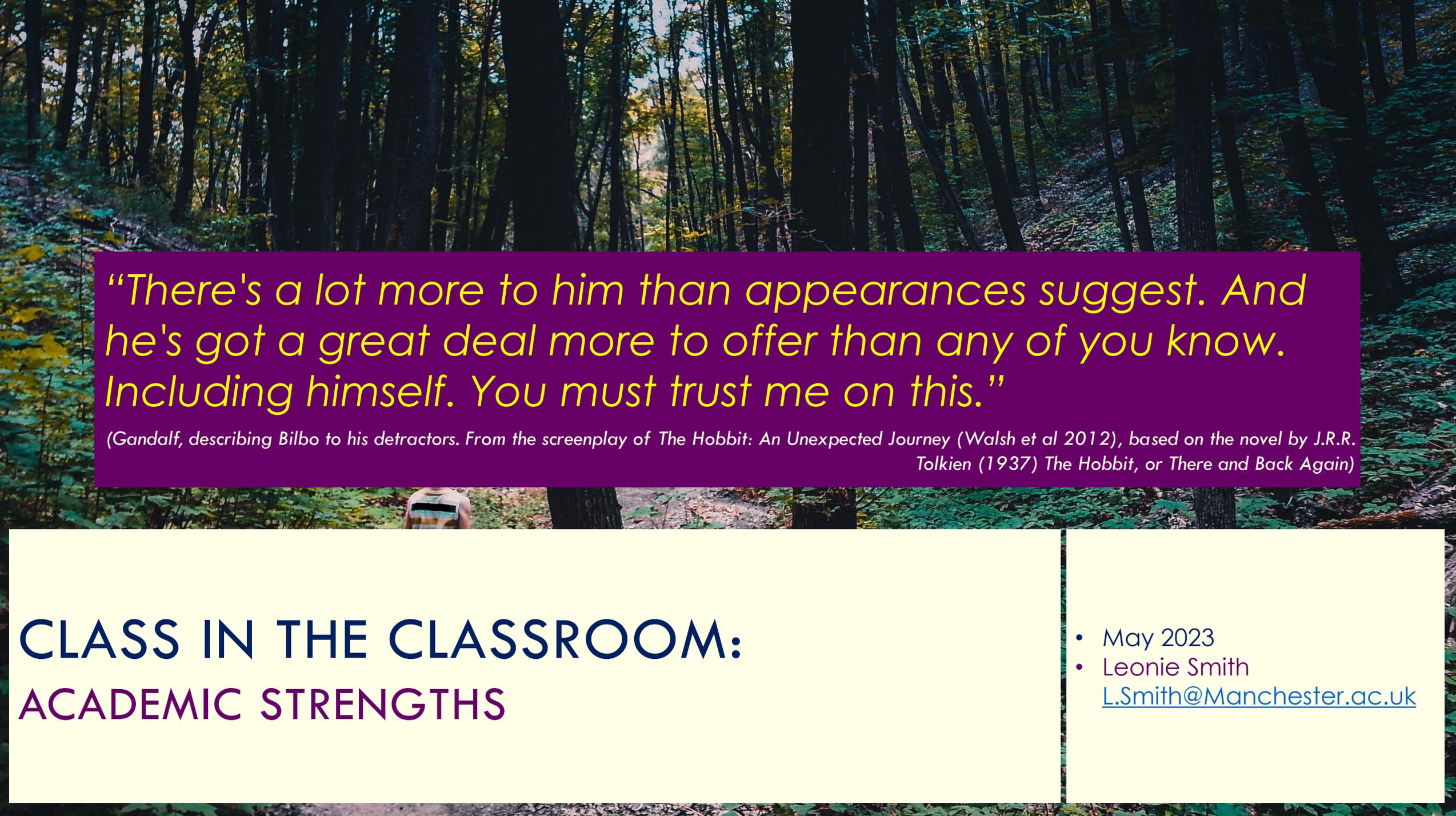
**Take-away:** one thing I will do to create a more class-inclusive classroom – please note these on mentimeter:

<https://www.menti.com/al3vnskq1yaf>



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