



Black Opportunity Destruction

“Do you mean he is taller than me am?” sarcastically barked Dr. Martin Rosenberg, my high school English teacher, to one of the students in our class. The student actually said, “He is taller than me,” but Rosenberg was ridiculing the student’s grammar. The subject of the elliptical (or understood) verb “am” must be in the subjective case. Thus, the correct form of the sentence is: He is taller than I.

This correction/dressing down of a student, that occasionally included me, occurred during my attendance at North Philadelphia’s Benjamin Franklin High School in the early ’50s. Franklin was predominantly black; its students were poor or low middle class. On top of that, Franklin had just about the lowest academic standing in the city. All of our teachers, except two or three, were white. Despite the fact that we were poor, most of Franklin’s teachers held fairly high standards and expectations.

Today, high standards and expectations, at some schools, would mean trouble for a teacher. Teachers, as pointed out in one teaching program, are encouraged to “Recognize and understand the cultural differences among students from diverse backgrounds, and treat such differences with respect. Intervene immediately, should a fellow student disparage a Black student’s culture or language.” That means if a black student says, “I be wiff him” or “He axed me a question,” teachers shouldn’t bother to correct the student’s language. What’s more, should anyone disparage or laugh at the way the student speaks, the teacher should intervene in his defense. Correcting the student’s speech might be deemed as insensitive to diversity at best and racism at worst, leading possibly to a teacher’s reprimand, termination and possibly assault.

A teacher’s job is to teach and failure to correct a student’s speech, just as failure to correct a math error, is a dereliction of duty. You might say, “Williams, Ebonics or black English is part of the cultural roots of black people and to disparage it is racism.” That’s utter nonsense. During the 1940s and 1950s, I lived in North Philadelphia’s Richard Allen housing project, along with its most famous resident, Bill Cosby. We all were poor or low middle class but no one spoke black English. My wife was the youngest of 10 children. Listening to her brothers and sisters speak, compared to many of her nieces and nephews, you wouldn’t believe they were in the same family. The difference has nothing to do with cultural roots of black people. The difference is that parents, teachers and others in authority over youngsters have become less judgmental, politically correct and lazy; therefore, speaking poorly is accepted.

Language is our tool of communication. If a person has poor oral language skills, he’s likely to have poor writing, reading and comprehension skills. To my knowledge, there are no books in any field of study written in Ebonics or black English. It is very likely that a person with poor language skills will suffer significant deficits in other areas of academic competence such as mathematics and the sciences. It doesn’t mean that the person is unintelligent; it means that he doesn’t have all the tools of intelligence. That is what’s so insidious about the state of black education today; so many blacks do not have a chance to develop the tools of intelligence. Many might have high native intelligence but come off sounding like a moron.

Black Americans should thank God that non-judgmental, politically correct people weren’t around during the early civil rights movement when blacks began breaking discriminatory barriers. Discriminatory employers would have had ready-made excuses not to hire a black as a trolley car motorman, cashier or department store sales clerk.



Written by [Walter E. Williams](#) on February 10, 2010

There are some significant challenges to being judgmental and politically incorrect and insisting on proper language. A professor or teacher can get cursed out by students or parents. A black student who speaks well, carries books and studies can be accused of “acting white” and find himself shunned and assaulted by other students.

I would be interested in hearing the teaching establishment’s defense of permitting poor language.

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