

Are We Post-Racial in The Classroom?
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On the anniversary of Obama's election last month, many pundits argued over whether or not Obama's election indicates we now live in a "post-racial society" – that is, race is irrelevant, we are united, racial differences are becoming less important, or right wingers can see past race.

This public debate remains superficial because those who frame it don't know the history of race in this country. For example, a superficial reading of educational history can lead one to claim that we are post-racial in the classroom today. The government no longer actively suppresses the home cultures of non-white students. Indian children are no longer ripped from their parents and put in boarding schools; pictures of Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King are in U.S. History books and on the walls of many classrooms. And yet, as Jim Cummins has argued, the vast majority of teachers in their daily instruction ignore the home cultures most urban students bring to school. His research concludes that such "squandering of personal, community, and national linguistic and intellectual resources within the mainstream classroom" actively discourages students from learning.

I saw such squandering in a seventh-grade Berkeley public school classroom two weeks ago when observing a teacher implement what she called her "daily oral language" drill. She wrote the following sentence on the board and asked the students to "correct it."

" my brother he don't like to deliver the new york times because its to heavy"

[Corrected version after discussion with students asking only what was "wrong" with the sentence: "*My brother doesn't like to deliver the New York Times because it's too heavy.*"]

Compare this to the lesson given by Stokely Carmichael in 1965, as recounted by Jane Stembridge. [*entire dialogue at www.educationanddemocracy.org/carmichael.pdf*]

He put ... sentences on the blackboard, with a line between, like this:

<i>The peoples wants freedom</i>		<i>The people want freedom</i>
<i>Whereinsoever the policemens</i>		<i>Anywhere the officers of the law go,</i>
<i>goes they causes troubles</i>		<i>they cause trouble</i>

....

Stokely: What do you think about these sentences? Such as--The peoples wants freedom.

Zelma: It doesn't sound right.

Stokely: What do you mean?

Zelma: "Peoples" isn't right.

Stokely: Does it mean anything?

Milton: People means everybody. Peoples means everybody in the world.

Alma: Both sentences are right as long as you understand them.

*Henry: They're both okay, but in speech class you have to use correct English.
(Stokely writes "correct English" in the corner of the blackboard.)*

Zelma: I was taught at least to use the sentences on the right side.

Stokely: Does anybody you know use the sentences on the left?

Class: Yes.

Stokely: Are they wrong?

Zelma: In terms of English, they are wrong.

Stokely: Who decides what is correct English and what is incorrect English?

Milton: People made rules. People in England, I guess.

...

Alma: If the majority speaks like on the left, then a minority must rule society.

Why do we have to change to be accepted by the minority group?

Stokely: Let's think about two questions for next time: What is society? Who makes the rules for society?

The teacher in Berkeley ignored the reasons why someone may speak and write in nonstandard English. Carmichael did not. Class discussion in Berkeley revolved only around what the "correct" rules are, ignoring the relationship that exists between language, identity and power. Perhaps that is the definition of post-racial the pundits are dreaming about. I would like to think the rest of us are not eager to embrace such a definition.