Ebonics Ain’t the Answer

by

PATRICIA SMITH

We learnt it. We learned it. We learned, as DuBois said, that every black American inhabits “a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelations of the other world.” We learned that miming mainstream mumbo jumbo was a social and economic necessity. We learned because we have the capacity to learn, so how can we say that our children don’t possess that same capacity?

By the way, we speak a dialect — not another language. It is a dialect we love, one that warms us, comforts us and gives us community. And I wish I could say that we couldn’t care less how it sounds to the rest of the world. But those “you’re wrong, wrong, wrong” lessons stuck, and many black Americans are still ashamed of their soulspeak.

But those of us who are bidialectical learned from people who did not speak the way we did. We listened to teachers, many of whom themselves had dialects, and our brains worked and we grasped concepts and ideas and theories. As black kids, we were introduced to a world we had to enter in order to survive, and then we were offered the tools to get there. What they’re saying in Oakland is that those kids are too dumb to learn the way we did, and that’s insulting. They’re looking at dismal test scores. The answer? Ebonics!

Teachers should look out over a classroom and be energized by the differences, charged by the possibilities. Children, no matter how they be talkin’, should be challenged.

Patricia Smith is a columnist for the Boston Globe. Reprinted with permission from the Boston Globe.

So in one way them people in Oakland is right, black kids need to know long time ago that they special and ain’t nothing wrong with the way they be saying stuff cause if it so bad how come we be understandin’ each other all this time? But them kids don’t need nobody to official recognize no ebonics before they can learn other stuff. How you think some of us black folks who was in school long time ago can slip on that proper talk as easy as putting on an old coat?

THIS DON’T BE no new thang. Every time they be lookin’ at how black kids don’t be doin’ so good in school, somebody say you can’t drag them chillun out of one life and into another and just think everything gon’ be alright. So now this time in Oakland they be tryin’ to say that what black people talk is another language the same way French and Spanish is and that mean they be bilingual. They calling it ebonics. They say that them black kids can’t learn right unless they know the way that they already be ain’t wrong, that the way they be sayin’ stuff ain’t stupid or ignorant but just a way of talkin’.

So most of us black folks who mamas and daddies grew up down south and come here causa jobs, we grew up where everybody be lookin’ and soundin’ like us and didn’t nobody say nothing ‘bout that. We grew up gettin’ our hair pressed and testifyin’ in church and bringing mama the switch to whup our butts when we be done did something bad. We grew up singin’ Miracles songs and signifyin’ and tellin’ “yo mama” jokes and wasn’t nothing wrong with that till we got to school where they heard that loud brown language and said that’s wrong, and then they make us say stuff over and over to fix our tongues to they kinda English. And they say “you wrong” so much that we got embarrassed about our ownsewls, and who we was, and what was special ‘bout us.

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