

How Black children in England's schools are made to feel like the way they speak is wrong

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Whiteness is an invention of the modern, colonial age. It refers to the [racialisation of white people](#) and the disproportionate privilege—social, linguistic, economic, political—that comes with this. Crucially, as an invention, whiteness is not innate—[it is taught](#).

As an educational project, whiteness is designed to [maintain](#) racial hierarchies. Whether or not that intention remains or is recognized in modern schools, the racism underpinning that educational project [continues](#) to shape [education](#) in England.

Black children are more likely to face [disproportionate disciplinary](#) procedures and be [excluded](#). They face discriminatory hair policies, and, when their speech is deemed to differ from "standard" or "academic" English, they face [anti-black linguistic racism](#).

And in recent years, whiteness and anti-black linguistic racism have become further normalized under the so-called "[what works](#)" agenda of education [policy](#).

The UK government launched the [What Works network](#) in 2013, in order to design policies, and how they are delivered, on the basis of what they called "the best" research evidence available.

In education, this claim that policymaking is scientifically objective and evidence-led is used to bolster the idea that the resulting policies will effectively do what they say, namely tackle inequality. However, my work shows how what-works-based education policy is not objective or neutral. It normalizes white, middle-class language and can result in the use of non-standard, non-academic language being [disciplined](#) in schools.

The 'what works' agenda

[Between 2021 and 2022](#), I conducted research in two different secondary schools in London. I observed classrooms, did interviews and analyzed policies and lesson materials.

Both schools had majority white staff, serving mostly black children

from low-income families. Both schools had subscribed to a "what works" approach to [language teaching](#).

The first [school](#) had introduced "evidence-led" curriculum materials, entitled [English Mastery](#). Teachers I collaborated with reported how these materials encouraged them to correct how their pupils spoke, avoiding language deemed to deviate from standard norms.

As a result, black children simply kept quiet or produced minimal answers, which they were further criticized for. Being made to internalize the ideology that their language was deficient resulted in their identity being eroded, an impact [which research bears out](#).

This ideology was further articulated by the staff I interviewed. One teacher said "what works" curriculums would "address persistent errors" and curtail the use of "colloquial" speech, thereby allowing marginalized children to "function properly in the world". Another teacher described how management had insisted on a "standard English only" policy because they deemed classrooms to be full of what they termed ["poor quality talk"](#).

[Research has long shown](#) that standard and academic English are not neutral categories but social and colonial constructions based on the language of the white middle classes. Yet in these schools, acquiring standard and academic English is seen as the path to social justice. Similar thinking has been shown to underpin [decision-making](#) at Ofsted, the UK schools inspectorate and national policy too.

Despite the claimed intentions around racial equity and justice with which they are marketed, "what works" materials risk reproducing anti-black prejudice. They define any student as "functioning" or "working" as one who models their language on whiteness. And they still result in working-class, black children facing language discrimination, because, as

research shows, beliefs about [so-called "proper language"](#) always relate to beliefs about race and class.

The 'word gap'

In another school I studied, management had designed policies to tackle the so-called "[word gap](#)". [Since the 2010s](#), there has been a resurgence among education specialists in England—[policy makers](#) at [Ofsted](#), authors of [teacher textbooks](#) and the [education publishing industry](#) at large—of this idea, which is rooted in 1960s theories of [verbal deprivation](#) and was recycled in 1990s [educational psychology](#).

As [education secretary](#) in 2012, Michael Gove [told the UK parliament](#) that the lack of attainment in children from disadvantaged backgrounds was due to "growing up in households where they are not read to and where they do not have a rich literary heritage on which to draw". Amanda Spielman, chief inspector at Ofsted [reiterated](#) this position in 2018: "These children arrive at school without the words they need to communicate properly."

This reductive argument poses that the solution to systemic inequalities but in giving marginalized children more, "better" words than what their families and communities provide them with. In other words, it blames not the socioeconomic system for failing these communities but the communities themselves for not having the right language and literacy practices.

In one school, where management had subscribed to this kind of thinking, believing that it was in the best interests of marginalized children, I found that [word-gap interventions](#) meant black working-class children were much more likely to have the way they speak categorized as deficient. Rather than developing their vocabulary, this strategy too resulted in [children](#) keeping quiet in lessons, internalizing the idea that

their language was [not academic](#) enough.

Challenging anti-black linguistic racism

Educational linguists have [consistently pointed out](#) that language hierarchies are not based on empirical fact but stem from institutional racism. As sociologists Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Derron Wallace put it, "speech codes and vernacular associated with black youth are seen as oppositional to, and disruptive of, academic orientations".

To counter this, the teachers I collaborated with in my research designed new classroom materials that would, instead, affirm students' voices. We worked with the black British writer [Benjamin Zephaniah](#), using his 2020 novel *Windrush Child* and interviews he has given in which he talks about his experiences of having his language and racial identity policed.

His experiences matched many of the students we worked with. For example, when asked to complete a linguistic profile of themselves, one student Joy, who, with Nigerian heritage speaks English and Yoruba, drew a portrait of herself with her mouth clamped shut. She was able to unpick how her Yoruba, previously, had been silenced in school.

Children were encouraged to interrogate the intersections of power, class and race which sees their own language stigmatized. Their discussions were also, crucially, [joyful and full of love](#) for black language and culture.

Another teacher collaborated with parents and students on a new whole-school language policy, which insisted that [black children](#) are just as linguistically dexterous as their white peers and [emphasized](#) that there is no racial justice without linguistic justice. The first draft of the policy stated:

We do not believe in the existence of a word gap and wholly reject such deficit and racist descriptions of language. If a gap does exist, it exists in the way that people perceive language, rather than how they use it.

Beliefs about [language](#) are [never just about language](#). They reflect institutional power dynamics. As one black teacher I collaborated with put it:

We need to stop thinking that the way children speak is the problem, and start thinking about the way that adults listen as the problem

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