

[Tell Them, 'You're Acting Obama' \(A personal essay\)](#)

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As people have been debating whether or not President Obama should be addressing school children on the first day of school, I've been thinking about a study published in *Psychological Science* one of the most preeminent journals in its field.

University of Michigan researchers lead by **Dr. Daphna Oyserman** presented black high-school students in Detroit with a color strip of browns and blacks. Then they asked the teens to choose which color on the strip most closely matched their skin tone. Then the teens had to answer a battery of questions on their academics and social behavior. The researchers then went to the schools, obtaining the kids' GPAs, and teachers' reports on their behavior in class.

Overall, those teens who rated themselves as having the darkest skin tones had higher GPAs, better behavior reports, and a higher belief in their academic ability. The lighter the kids' skin color, the lower the GPA, the worse the behavior report, and the less they believed in their academic competency. The researchers did another version of the experiment, where Hispanic kids rated themselves as "looking Latino," whatever that was, and they found a similar pattern.

The researchers theorized that darker-skinned and "Latino looking" teens had an unshakable ethnic identity. No one could accuse them of "acting white" if they excelled in school, because such a comment would be ridiculous. But for the lighter-skinned youths, such an accusation would be more potent.

That their status within their ethnic community was somehow more tenuous lead them they to live up to the ethnic stereotypes to shore up their ethnic ties. Even if the stereotypes they were living up to were negative ones.

The kids were just so desperate to have a strong sense of belonging. They'd rather embrace the negative stereotype than have no "image" at all.

The finding made my heart hurt, because I've been tutoring poor minority kids in urban Los Angeles for more than a decade. In that time, more than one kid has told me that they refused to "act white." They've told me that only white kids did homework; they didn't need to go to school. I've been bewildered as middle school kids have insisted to me that they were proud of the fact they couldn't read, because that proved they were real blacks. (I argued with them on this, but they weren't listening.)

All of which is why, within hours of President Obama's inauguration, I had developed a plan. I went around telling all of my tutoring kids that if they were doing their schoolwork, and someone ever said they were "actin' white," I wanted them to say this in response.

"No, I'm not. I'm acting Obama."

When I first said this, the kids acted like I was from Mars.

"No, seriously," I insisted. "Do you think Obama is walking around the White House like," I started flashing gang signs, "Yo - yo, Con-gress, whassuppp??"

At which point, they were laughing.

"All right, then. How do you want to grow up to be like? The thugs on the street out there on the corner, or Obama?"

"Obama."

"Then let's start acting like him then."

I had no real illusions that I could singlehandedly change the kids' mindset on this, but, still, it was worth a shot. And I figured it couldn't hurt.

A month later, one of my tutoring kids came bounding into Tutoring - he's a Hispanic seventh-grader who really struggles at home and school,

"Ashley! Ashley! I have to tell you something!" he yelled.

I'd never seen him this exuberant before.

"OK, what?"

"A couple days ago, there were these three boys at school. And they were all like, 'C'mon, let's ditch. Let's go do something fun. This is boring.'"

"Yeah?" my eyebrow raised warily.

"So I tol' em, 'No,' and they said I was actin' white, and so I said, 'No, I'm actin' Obama' just like you told me to."

"You did!?"

"Yeah! And they were all like, 'Well, OK, then,' and left me alone. So I didn't ditch that day."

"I am so proud of you!"

"And the other boys didn't ditch neither! We all stayed."

"I am so proud of you! Of all four of you."

"Me too!"

Seriously, at that moment, I didn't care what the president ultimately accomplished with the economy or health care or anything else. Because, on that day, for those four kids, the world had already changed.--