

The Brilliance and Importance of Affirming Black English in Early Childhood Education

Vol 4. Rooted in Voices: Emerging Insights on Black Language from Community Dialogue

Black Californians United for Early Care and Education (BlackECE), Catalyst California, Early Edge California, and Californians Together have partnered to build shared understanding and momentum to recognize and value Black Language in early learning and care (ELC) settings. Between October 2024 through May 2026, the partnership engaged Black ELC professionals, researchers, advocates, and families through a series of advisory convenings and community listening sessions covering topics such as Black Language in educational settings, multilingual learners (MLs), language advocacy strategies, and multilingual policy and practice. These sessions were designed to honor community knowledge as the starting point for systemic change through collaborative dialogue. Insights from the work have surfaced both the cultural and linguistic richness of Black Language and the harms of its ongoing marginalization, informing shared language, an aligned understanding, and strategies to elevate and center Black Language across ELC settings. Four key themes emerged across sessions: the need for narrative change, family engagement, affirming Black Language, and professional development for educators.

Narrative Change and Community Voices

Community sessions revealed that understanding of Black Language as a legitimate, rule-governed linguistic system is still emerging, even among Black families themselves. **While some participants recognized Black Language as a meaningful expression of cultural identity and heritage, and expressed enthusiasm for seeing it affirmed in ELC settings, others expressed uncertainty about its value or described it as “broken English.”** Participants from African immigrant backgrounds shared additional layers of complexity, reflecting the diasporic experience of linguistic suppression across generations.

Valuing Black families and Black Language requires a shift in dominant narratives. Community voices underscored that storytelling and community-informed narratives are powerful tools for advancing policy and systems change, particularly when they affirm cultural belonging as a pathway to linguistic affirmation. **Moving this work forward requires strategic narrative framing that centers Black families as experts, not subjects, while meeting families where they are and creating space for effective advocacy rooted in lived experience.**

Family Engagement

Family engagement emerged as foundational. When programs reflect the voices, needs, and lived experiences of Black families, learning becomes more relevant and sustaining. **Positioning Black families as leaders and knowledge-holders in their children’s learning not only creates a culturally responsive learning environment, but also an affirming experience where children’s identities are honored, children do better in school, and experience improved overall psychological well-being.** Participants emphasized that families want their children treated with care, seen as individuals, and supported by educators who communicate openly and consistently. Programs that build genuine trust with Black families, particularly those navigating intersecting identities including immigration status, African diasporic backgrounds, and biraciality, create the conditions for children to thrive.



Affirming Black Language

Central to this work is legitimizing Black Language and integrating it into curriculum and instruction. Participants called for expanding the definition of “multilingual learners” to explicitly include Black Language speakers, affirming children’s full linguistic repertoires as classroom assets. **Research consistently shows that supporting home language strengthens cognitive, social, and cultural development, making recognition of Black Language both an educational and justice imperative.**¹ Participants also named the psychological harm of suppression, with at least one community member sharing that as a child, they would not use Black Language at school because they did not feel welcomed and feared being misinterpreted. Participants also pointed to the lasting impact of national backlash to the Oakland Unified School District’s Ebonics resolution in the 1990s, noting that this history continues to shape how Black families engage with schools and reinforces the importance of affirming Black Language today.

This lived experience of self-suppression as a form of protection makes it clear that affirmation is not optional; it is essential.²

Professional Development for Educators & Administrators

Educators play a critical role in creating affirming environments. Participants emphasized the need for sustained professional development, coaching, and accessible resources that address both implicit and explicit biases. When paired with authentic family engagement, professional learning equips educators to design culturally sustaining environments where all children can thrive. Educators and Administrators cannot affirm what they have not been prepared to recognize. **Professional development must move beyond awareness to action, equipping educators and administrators with practical tools and ongoing support to honor Black Language as a complete linguistic system.**³



Key Takeaways for Action

Across families, practitioners, and experts, stakeholders shared a clear vision for moving this work forward:

Center Black families’ expertise and lived experiences as essential to sustainable systems change.

Honor the diversity within Black communities, including African immigrant and diasporic families, in all awareness, engagement, and advocacy efforts.

Explicitly name and protect Black Language in policy and practice as a home language.

Continue community connection and awareness efforts, recognizing that a narrative shift around Black Language must happen alongside, not ahead of, trust and understanding.

Invest in ongoing professional learning and practical tools to support the creation of affirming classroom environments.

Endnotes

¹ Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. *The Benefits of Being Bilingual*. <https://headstart.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/benefits-of-being-bilingual.pdf>

² Jones, J. Black Language is Antiracist Language Arts Education: A Pedagogical Call for Black Linguistic Justice. *Urban Rev* 57, 1329–1345 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-025-00757-5>

³ University of Houston, Communication Sciences and Disorders. (n.d.). *Supporting Black children’s language, literacy, & joy*. [University of Houston \(uh.edu\)](https://www.uh.edu)



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