

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

Recognizing Black (English) Language: Policy Recommendations for California

Black Language, also known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), African American English (AAE), is a vibrant, rule-governed language, deeply rooted in communities across the United States. Recognized by expert linguists as a legitimate and systematic linguistic variety, Black Language reflects rich cultural, historical, and social traditions.

Black Language and Current California Law

Black Language is not recognized in California law and is therefore not reflected in most early learning and care (ELC) settings. As a result, Black children who speak Black Language may experience practices and/or attitudes that discourage or penalize their home language, which can undermine their social-emotional learning, sense of belonging, and language and literacy development.¹

The Gap Between Policy and Practice

The lack of a state statute affirming Black Language allows inconsistent and inequitable practices to persist across ELC settings without explicit protections or supports². This allows language bias and misunderstanding to shape how ELC professionals assess language use, participation, and proficiency. Historically, Black Language has been misunderstood and stigmatized, despite its linguistic legitimacy and deep cultural roots³, contributing to inequitable learning experiences. However, research shows that honoring and affirming children's home language, such as Black Language, in ELC settings improves English proficiency and learning outcomes and fosters a greater sense of belonging and affirmation.⁴

Policy Solutions to Recognize and Affirm Black Language

To advance educational equity for young Black children, state and local systems must intentionally establish and affirm Black Language through aligned policy and practice. Together, the solutions below build the foundation toward an affirming and effective early learning and care system in California for children who speak Black Language.

- **Recognize Black Language as a rule-governed, legitimate language within California state law and within Dual Language Learner (DLL) provisions.** This inclusion will ensure Black Language speakers receive state fiscal and programmatic support and are included in DLL data collection.
- **Invest in sustained, high-quality professional development that equips ELC educators across all settings to understand and affirm Black English Language.** Training and technical assistance should address language bias, appropriate language supports, and strategies to leverage children's linguistic strengths to improve literacy and language development.
- **Revise and strengthen curriculum and assessment practices** to ensure teacher-child interactions affirm children's language and culture, and that assessments do not penalize children for legitimate linguistic variation but instead reflect asset-based measurement approaches.

Endnotes

¹ Innovations in Higher Education. Including Black Language in Early Childhood Education: Addressing Linguistic Diversity in Teacher Preparation

² Reimagining Black education: Pro-Blackness as a path to liberation.

³ https://childrenspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Protective_Factors_Brief.pdf

⁴ https://childrenspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Protective_Factors_Brief.pdf