

Honoring Black Language

as a Rule-Governed Language

LANGUAGE → IDENTITY → LITERACY → POLICY

Resources to support literacy, dignity, and language bridge work.

Curated by **Lisa Marie Wilson**, Language Liberation & Literacy Consultant
With BlackECE · Black Californians United for Early Care and Education | Updated September 2026

“Language is the beautiful, divine connection of who we are.”

— Participant, 2025 BlackECE Symposium

What’s Inside

#	SECTION	WHAT YOU’LL FIND
01	Black Language Knowledge Briefs	The Black English Knowledge Brief series (Vols. 1–4) and Policy Factsheet
02	From “Word Gap” to Word Wealth	Research that challenges deficit framing of Black children’s language
03	Language as Identity Resources	Session materials plus readings organized Language → Identity → Literacy → Policy
04	Extended Reading Collection	California guidance, epistemic justice, and the literacy ecosystem
05	Continue Learning With Us	Symposium, webinar series, Institute trainings, and impact reporting
06	Join Our Networks — BlackECE	Where to follow, join, and connect with the coalition
07	Connect with Lisa Wilson	Contact information for consulting and collaboration
08	Quick Reference	Acronyms and definitions used throughout this guide

Tip: In Google Docs, open the document outline (View → Show outline) to jump to any section. Every title in this guide is a live link.

SECTION 01

Black Language Knowledge Briefs

Practical, accessible tools created by the Black English Language Workgroup—a partnership of BlackECE, Californians Together, Catalyst California, and Early Edge California—to help educators, caregivers, administrators, and advocates affirm Black English in early childhood settings.

START HERE · RESOURCE HUB

Discover Black English on the BlackECE Website

Black English Language Workgroup · BlackECE

Home base for the Knowledge Brief series and the companion webinar series. The workgroup challenges harmful language hierarchies and affirms Black English as a legitimate, rule-governed language rooted in Black history, culture, and community—so that Black children’s home languages are honored as assets rather than deficits.

The Knowledge Brief Series

VOL.	TITLE & FOCUS	ACCESS
Vol. 1	What Is Black English Language and Why Is It Important? <i>Foundational overview of Black English and why affirming it matters</i>	→ Download
Vol. 2	Tracing the Origins of Black Language: A Historical Brief <i>The historical roots and development of Black Language</i>	→ Download
Vol. 3	Honoring Black Language in Early Learning: Foundations for Literacy Development <i>How honoring home language lays the groundwork for early literacy</i>	→ Download
Vol. 4	Rooted in Voices: Emerging Insights on Black Language from Community Dialogue <i>What families and community members shared in dialogue sessions</i>	→ Download
Policy	Recognizing Black (English) Language: Policy Factsheet <i>The policy case for recognizing Black (English) Language</i>	→ Download

SECTION 02

From “Word Gap” to Word Wealth: Affirming the Brilliance of Black Language and Children

Black children arrive with rich, rule-governed language. These readings push back on the “word gap” narrative and invite us to count all of the language that surrounds and shapes children’s lives.

RESEARCH COMMENTARY · SUBSCRIPTION

Language Does Matter: But There Is More to Language Than Vocabulary and Directed Speech

Sperry, D. E., Sperry, L. L., & Miller, P. J. (2019). *Child Development*, 90(3), 993–997.

Responding to critics, the authors stand by their finding that the widely cited word gap did not hold up: once researchers counted more of the talk around children—not only speech aimed directly at them—the gap disappeared. They caution that word-gap framing casts low-income and minority families as deficient and risks sidelining children before school even begins.

COMPANION READING · ORIGINAL STUDY

Reexamining the Verbal Environments of Children From Different Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Sperry, D. E., Sperry, L. L., & Miller, P. J. (2019). *Child Development*.

The original study the commentary defends. It revisits Hart and Risley’s claims using recordings of young children’s everyday language environments across communities of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

SECTION 03

Language as Identity Resources

Materials and readings from the Language as Identity session, organized along a four-part pathway: how we understand Black Language, how language shapes identity, how identity fuels literacy, and how literacy connects to policy.

FROM THE SESSION

Language as Identity: Supporting Early Literacy Through Black English and Black Languages

2026 Black Literacy Matters Conference • *Boots on the Ground: Reclaiming Literacy, Rewriting History*

Presented by **Lisa M. Wilson** and **Samantha Thompson**



LANGUAGE
Foundations



IDENTITY
Language → Identity



LITERACY
Identity → Literacy



POLICY
Literacy → Policy

Session Materials

SESSION HANDOUT • GOOGLE DOC

Culturally Affirming vs. Culturally Responsive in Early Education for Black Children

A session handout distinguishing culturally affirming practice from culturally responsive practice in early education for Black children.

SESSION HANDOUT • GOOGLE DOC

Acronyms and Definitions

A quick-reference list of the acronyms used throughout the session. The full glossary is reproduced in Section 08 of this guide.

REFERENCE LIST • GOOGLE DOC

References — Language as Identity: Supporting Early Literacy Through Black English and Black Languages

The complete reference list for the session, spanning linguistic justice, culturally sustaining pedagogy, translanguaging, early literacy research, and California English learner and dual language learner policy.

SYMPOSIUM BRIEF • PDF

2025 BlackECE Symposium Black Paper — Dismantling Linguistic Oppression: The Path Toward Language Justice for Black Children in Early Care and Education

Authored by Lisa Marie Wilson, Language Liberation & Literacy Consultant • BlackECE

Captures the collective wisdom of the 2025 BlackECE Symposium in Los Angeles. It names Black Languages—including Black English, Gullah Geechee, and Haitian Creole—as sovereign, rule-governed systems and lays out policy themes such as recognition of Black Language and culturally rooted investment.



Foundations: Language

Start with the linguistics: Black Language is a complete, systematic, rule-governed language—not “broken” English.

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE • 2025

Gohar Grigoryan & Lilit Manvelyan (2025)

Grigoryan, G., & Manvelyan, L. (2025). Armenian Research Academic Repository (ARAR).

A 2025 scholarly article included among the session’s foundational readings on language.

BOOK • PUBLISHER PREVIEW

African American English: A Linguistic Introduction

Green, L. J. (2002). Cambridge University Press.

A foundational linguistics text that systematically describes the sound patterns, grammar, and vocabulary of African American English, demonstrating feature by feature that it is a rule-governed system. The link opens a preview of the opening pages.

BOOK CHAPTER • FREE PDF

African American Vernacular English Is Not Standard English with Mistakes

Pullum, G. K. (1999). In R. S. Wheeler (Ed.), The Workings of Language.

An accessible, myth-busting chapter in which linguist Geoffrey Pullum walks through systematic grammatical patterns to show that Black English follows consistent rules of its own—and that calling it “English with mistakes” is simply inaccurate.



Language → Identity

How race, power, and ideology shape which ways of speaking are heard as “correct”—and what that means for who children believe they are.

ARTICLE • FREE PDF

Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective

Rosa, J., & Flores, N. (2017). *Language in Society*, 46(5).

Introduces the raciolinguistic perspective, which examines how ideas about race and language are produced together—helping explain why the same language practices can be heard as “deficient” when they come from racialized speakers.

ARTICLE • SUBSCRIPTION

Introducing LangCrit: Critical Language and Race Theory

Crump, A. (2014). *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 11(3), 207–224.

Brings critical race theory into conversation with language studies, offering a framework for examining how language, race, and identity intersect in people’s lived experiences.

ARTICLE • FREE PDF (ERIC)

“What Is Africa to Me?": Language, Ideology, and “African American”

Smitherman, G. (1991). First published in *American Speech*.

Geneva Smitherman traces how Black Americans have named themselves—from “African” and “colored” to “Negro,” “Black,” and “African American”—arguing that identity is constructed through language. Includes findings from her five-city survey of community opinion.



Identity → Literacy

When children’s home language is honored, literacy instruction becomes a bridge, not a barrier.

ARTICLE • SCRIBD

The Ebonics Controversy: A Linguist’s Insight

Rickford, J. R. (1999).

Sociolinguist John Rickford reflects on the national debate sparked by the 1996 Oakland Ebonics resolution and on what linguistic research says about building on students’ home language to support reading and learning.

ARTICLE • OPEN ACCESS

African American English and Urban Literature: Creating Culturally Caring Classrooms

Campbell, E. E., & Nicol, J. J. (2017). #CritEdPol: *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies at Swarthmore College*, 2(1).

Argues that language and literacy instruction that validates children's home language and lived experience builds empathetic teacher-student relationships and supports achievement. Offers classroom strategies for weaving respect for linguistic diversity into a pedagogy of care.



Literacy → Policy

The legal and professional precedents that affirm students' right to their own language.

LANDMARK LEGAL CASE

Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor School District Board

473 F. Supp. 1371 (E.D. Mich. 1979) • Justia

The landmark "Black English case." The federal court found the district had not taken appropriate action to overcome a language barrier created when teachers failed to account for students' home language, and ordered that teachers be trained to recognize Black English and use that knowledge in teaching reading.

POLICY STATEMENT

Resolution on the Students' Right to Their Own Language

National Council of Teachers of English (1974)

NCTE's landmark affirmation of students' right to the language varieties in which they find their identity and style, paired with a call to prepare teachers to respect that diversity.

Extended Reading Collection

Go deeper into the policy systems, theory, and literacy practices that shape how schools recognize—or overlook— Black and multilingual children’s language.

California & CDE Multilingual Guidance

Trace how California identifies, serves, assesses, and reclassifies multilingual learners—and where the linguistic “norm” gets defined.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Reclassification of English Learners

California’s fourth reclassification criterion compares an English learner’s basic-skills performance with an empirically established range for English-proficient students of the same age. The underlying Education Code language also references curriculum designed for pupils whose native language is English—a key place to examine which linguistic norm students are measured against.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Reclassification FAQs

Unpacks how reclassification works in practice across its four criteria: ELPAC performance, teacher evaluation, parent consultation, and comparison of basic skills with English-proficient peers.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Disproportionality in California Public Schools

Defines disproportionality as racial or ethnic overrepresentation in disability identification, in specific disability categories, in discipline, and in placement. Local educational agencies identified as significantly disproportionate must take required action, including setting aside federal IDEA funds for coordinated early intervening services.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Special Education Assessment of African American Students (Larry P. Guidance)

CDE guidance on special education assessment of African American students and the Larry P. v. Riles decision, emphasizing nondiscriminatory assessment, multiple measures, and avoiding reliance on any single criterion such as an IQ score.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

California Practitioners' Guide for Educating English Learners with Disabilities

Addresses English learner identification, MTSS and pre-referral intervention, special education referral, assessment, IEPs, and reclassification within a single framework—especially useful for intersectional analysis.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Survey, Assessments, Programs & Reclassification

Traces the full pathway from the Home Language Survey through ELPAC identification, English learner programs and services, and reclassification to RFEP status.

Epistemic Justice, Language & Multilingualism

Who is recognized as a knower? These readings connect language policy to whose knowledge counts.

ARTICLE

Towards Epistemic Justice: Constructing Knowers in Multilingual Classrooms

Kerfoot, C., & Bello-Nonjengele, B. O. • *Applied Linguistics*, 44(3)

Examines who is recognized as a legitimate knower and producer of knowledge in multilingual classrooms—especially relevant to BlackECE's work.

→ [ERIC record \(for educators & policy bibliographies\)](#)

ARTICLE • OPEN ACCESS

On Linguicism, Epistemic Injustice, and Research in Language-in-Education

Mahboob, A. • *Language Learning*

Connects linguicism to the silencing of students' languages—and, with them, the silencing of their ways of knowing, doing, and being.

ARTICLE • OPEN ACCESS

Language, Translanguaging, and Epistemic Justice: Multilingual Learning Across the Curriculum

Kerfoot, C. (2024). *South African Journal of Science*.

Links translanguaging and multilingual learning with epistemic justice and knowledge production across subject areas.

FOUNDATIONAL BOOK

Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing

Fricker, M. (2007). Oxford University Press.

The foundational text that defines testimonial and hermeneutical injustice—essential theoretical grounding when using “epistemic injustice” as a formal term.

ARTICLE • 2026

Epistemologies of Language and Epistemic Injustice in Adult Basic Education for Immigrants

Applied Linguistics (2026)

A newer study examining monolingual and monoglossic language policies, epistemic agency, multilingualism, and racialized multilingual learners.

The Literacy Ecosystem

Literacy is more than reading: it includes talk, listening, writing, knowledge, and seeing yourself in books.

STATE GUIDANCE

California’s Approach to Literacy and Biliteracy

California Department of Education

California’s literacy approach spans foundational skills, oral language, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, and comprehension—alongside cultural and linguistic affirmation.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Literacy Practices in Today’s Context: A Discussion of Research and Application

NAEYC • Young Children, Winter 2026

Demonstrates that evidence-based literacy is broader than reading alone, encompassing oral language, knowledge building, writing, speaking, and listening.

FOR FAMILIES

Everyday Steps to Reading and Writing

NAEYC

An accessible family resource showing how talking, listening, reading, and writing connect from the earliest years.

FOUNDATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Rudine Sims Bishop: Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors

National Council of Teachers of English

The essential framework for understanding representation, self-affirmation, and children's literature.

→ [Hear Bishop on Reading Rockets](#)

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

The Lasting Legacy of Rudine Sims Bishop

McNair, J. C., & Edwards, P. A. (2021).

Examines Bishop's contributions to African American children's literature, cultural authenticity, and the mirrors-and-windows framework.

Continue Learning With Us

Keep building your practice through BlackECE's gatherings, webinars, and professional development.

ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM

BlackECE Symposium

2026 theme: *We Are the Return — Culture, Capital & Economic Justice in Early Care and Education* (August 6–7, 2026 · Sacramento)

The symposium convenes educators, families, policymakers, cultural workers, and funders around a reparative vision for California's early care and education system, grounded in Black cultural knowledge. Coming next: Sankofa Strong: Roots, Reflection, Rise in August 2027—sign up for updates on the symposium site.

→ [Symposium Resources](#)

Black English Webinar Series

A three-part series exploring Black (English) Language as a rule-governed language and a powerful asset in children's identity, belonging, and early literacy development.

#	WEBINAR	ACCESS
1	Understanding Black English: What It Is and Why It Matters <i>Foundational understanding, common misconceptions, and how language affirmation strengthens belonging and learning.</i>	→ Watch recording
2	Honoring Home Language: Black English, History, and Early Literacy Development <i>The historical roots of Black (English) Language and its connection to early literacy, drawing on family and community listening sessions.</i>	→ Watch recording
3	From Recognition to Action: Policy, Advocacy, and Black English as a Language <i>Advocacy and policy pathways, including recognizing Black (English) Language within broader understandings of Dual Language Learners.</i>	Check back for the recording at a later date.

Institute for Culturally Affirming Practices for Black Children

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT · COHORT 3 OPEN

Institute Training Sessions

5 sessions · 10 hours · Online via Zoom · \$750 (installments available) · Limited to 30 participants

Equips early childhood professionals, including P–3 educators, with tools to create enriching, supportive environments where Black children thrive, while addressing historical harms in education

systems. Participants attend all five sessions; optional “Make It Make Sense” (MIMS) follow-ups offer deeper reflection the next evening.

→ [Register](#) · → [Interest form](#)

SESSION	TOPIC	DATE · 6–8 PM PT
1	Affirming Black Culture: A Pathway to Wellness	Tue, Sept 22, 2026
2	Blood Memory: A Discussion of Historical Trauma and Black People	Tue, Oct 6, 2026
3	Raising Anti-racist Children Through Love and Healing	Tue, Oct 20, 2026
4	Black English is Real: Affirming Language in Black Culture	Tue, Nov 3, 2026
5	Cultural Affirmation: Putting it to Practice	Tue, Nov 17, 2026

IMPACT REPORT

Lift Every Voice Impact Report – BlackECE

BlackECE’s Lift Every Voice coalition grew to 90 advocates in 2024, empowering Black child care providers to champion policy change and amplify their voices at local, state, and national levels.

SECTION 06

Join Our Networks — BlackECE

BlackECE is a powerful coalition organizing our influence to ensure California's ECE system is culturally affirming for Black children, families, and educators.

CONNECT	LINK	WHAT YOU'LL FIND
Website	blackece.org	Policy agenda, resources, events, and the Black English hub
Instagram	@blackececa	Event announcements, community highlights, and resources
Facebook	BlackECECA	Community updates and conversation
LinkedIn	BlackECE	Professional network and organizational news
Lift Every Voice	Become a member	Join the advocacy coalition of Black child care providers
Email	contact@blackece.org	General inquiries

SECTION 07

Connect with Lisa Wilson

Lisa Marie Wilson

LANGUAGE LIBERATION & LITERACY CONSULTANT

Executive leader in education systems strategy and early learning policy. Author of the 2025 BlackECE Symposium Black Paper and co-presenter of the Language as Identity session.

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Linktree linktr.ee/BLanguage26

Quick Reference: Acronyms & Definitions

Terms used in the Language as Identity session and throughout this guide.

TERM	MEANING	TERM	MEANING
ACM	Ancestral Coaching Model	IEP	Individualized Education Program
ASCD	Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development	LangCrit	Critical Language and Race Theory
BlackECE	Black Californians United for Early Care and Education	LEA	Local Educational Agency
CALPADS	California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System	LEV	Lift Every Voice (BlackECE advocacy coalition)
CDE	California Department of Education	MTSS	Multi-Tiered System of Supports
DLL	Dual Language Learner	NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
ECE	Early Care and Education	NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
EL	English Learner	NCTE	National Council of Teachers of English
ELPAC	English Language Proficiency Assessments for California	PLIS	Preschool Language Information System
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act (2015)	RFEP	Reclassified Fluent English Proficient
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004)		

Honoring Black Language as a Rule-Governed Language

LANGUAGE → IDENTITY → LITERACY → POLICY