



## Researcher Language Guide

# A Language Guide to Center Racial Equity in Education Research

The Early Learning Network and the broader community of education researchers and scholars are uniquely positioned to contribute evidence-based solutions to help ensure all children are provided high-quality learning experiences and environments to help them reach their potential. **But the language we use in our work matters.**

The words we use to describe children, families and communities, and the systems that support them, must align with our core values to promote social justice for Black communities and other marginalized communities of color.

Deficit language — words that are problem-focused and communicate that students are missing key skills — has implications for how children are perceived and the learning opportunities they are offered. This is especially critical for Black children and children of color who have been placed at risk due to long-standing inequities in education systems.

### Racial Equity Taskforce

In an effort to enhance diversity, equity and inclusion in our work moving forward, we created a Racial Equity Taskforce to examine potentially problematic terminology used in the field, and recommend an integrated vocabulary and protocol for developing, analyzing, evaluating and disseminating research findings. Adopting a common language that centers racial equity in studies of young children can promote more equitable practices when collecting data, disseminating findings, and making recommendations about practices, programs and policies.

### HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to help researchers reflect on and rethink some of the current language used in our field that may perpetuate prejudices and impede progress toward dismantling inequities in education. It is not meant to be an exhaustive or prescriptive list of equity-based language recommendations. In general, we suggest ways to use more specific, person-centered language in order to move away from wording that applies external value judgements to demographic characteristics like race, home language and socioeconomic status.

### Why is it important to embrace diversity, equity and inclusion in our research?

- › **To improve problem-solving:** Everyone, regardless of their background, brings a variety of skills, opinions, perspectives, strengths and experiences to the work.
- › **To enhance differences:** Everyone grows when exposed to a variety of different cultures, backgrounds and opinions.
- › **To increase productivity:** A diverse, equitable and inclusive environment helps everyone feel respected and more motivated to work together toward common goals.

# Finding Alternative Language Rooted in Equity

There are some widely used terms in education research that may be important to reconsider through a racial equity lens. **Below we identify terms that may be problematic and provide recommendations for alternative language that may better align with goals to enhance diversity, equity and inclusion.**



## INCOME-RELATED

**Widely used language:** Low-income students and families, underprivileged, urban and inner-city (when intended to describe students' income and not their geographic location).

**Alternative language:** Children from families with incomes at 200% of federal poverty threshold (or whatever other threshold describes the group); families with low incomes; families experiencing poverty; children from households with low incomes.

## GROUP-RELATED

**Widely used language:** Minority.

**Alternative language:** Historically marginalized population; marginalized groups; underrepresented groups; historically excluded groups; minoritized populations.

## CHALLENGE-RELATED

**Widely used language:** Struggling students/readers/learners, troubled, at-risk.

**Alternative language:** Early readers; students building foundational reading skills; students for whom teachers report higher levels of behavior problems; define what students might be at-risk for and clarify the measurement that was used to make that determination. Use precise language about how students were identified (e.g., defined as "needing intensive support").

## ACHIEVEMENT-RELATED

**Widely used language:** Achievement gap.

**Alternative language:** Disparities; opportunity gap.

## LANGUAGE-RELATED

**Widely used language:** English Learners/Limited English Proficiency.

**Alternative language:** Dual Language Learner (DLL); students who speak more than one language, bilingual and multilingual.

## CHARACTERISTICS-RELATED

**Widely used language:** Diverse (to describe children who are not white).

**Alternative language:** The term "diverse" is context specific. In settings where the children come from all racial/ethnic backgrounds "diverse" is an accurate description. In settings where most of the children are not white, it would be more appropriate to describe the sample based on their particular demographics.

## SKILL-RELATED

**Widely used language:** School readiness.

**Alternative language:** Although this language is commonly used by researchers and policymakers, there are opportunities to shift to alternative language that may better support diversity, equity and inclusion goals by being more specific. For example, rather than writing "Pre-K boosts school readiness," write "Pre-K boosts language and literacy skills."

## RACE- AND ETHNICITY-RELATED

**Widely used language:** Different race/ethnicities.

**Alternative language:** Follow the examples of how people describe themselves.



# Understanding the Need to Reconsider Terminology

It's important to understand the need to find new language in education research, and importantly, the people it affects. **Below we help unpack why certain terms used to describe children, families and communities may be problematic, and potentially work against efforts to promote diversity, equity and inclusion.**

## INCOME-RELATED

This language isn't person-centered. According to APA 7th edition: "...SES terms such as 'low-income' and 'poor' have historically served as implicit descriptors for racial and/or ethnic minority people" (p. 148).

## GROUP-RELATED

Some scholars and practitioners have begun shifting away from the term "minority" due to the concerns that these populations have been subjected to minoritizing practices and policies. This begins to shift the conversation to the individual experiencing the minoritization and to the systems that created it.

## CHALLENGE-RELATED

This language isn't person-centered. The term "struggling reader" doesn't inform instruction; it is not a fixed characteristic for students and may be used to perpetuate deficit perspectives that continue on with students throughout schooling (deficit orientation). In addition, the terms "troubled" and "at-risk" are similarly defined by a broader set of values and are also not fixed characteristics.

## ACHIEVEMENT-RELATED

This language ignores cultural differences and diversity, and doesn't take into account the lack of opportunities for many children outside the classroom.

## LANGUAGE-RELATED

These terms center English as the benchmark for successful language acquisition and use a deficit model of thinking about children's language abilities (language-as-problem orientation).

## CHARACTERISTICS-RELATED

The term "diverse" is veiled and non-specific, and is often used to describe children of color. It is more accurate to specifically name the demographic composition of the group. If indeed, the group is diverse (there are students from all demographic groups represented equally), then it would be appropriate to use the term "diverse."

## SKILL-RELATED

There is no clear consensus about what school readiness entails and some of the components of traditional descriptions of school readiness are based on standards that are not inclusive or equitable. They assume some early learning experiences — like center-based pre-K and academically-oriented programs — make students ready for school. However, students without those experiences may still be ready for school in their own communities and have a host of other competencies not captured in this description. "School readiness" labels children as not being ready to be in school based on assessments of academic skills that may not be commonly taught or supported in some early learning contexts, when in reality, access to school is typically based on a child's age.

## RACE- AND ETHNICITY-RELATED

Racial and ethnic categorizations in society (and at higher education institutions) are not neutral, but are informed by historical, social, political and economic contexts. **Race** is a social construct primarily based on skin color, hair texture and other physical attributes. It is a social structure engineered to communicate who has power and who does not, and race is used to distort views of groups, such as seeing groups as threatening, lazy, etc., and it is also used to justify

oppression (Markus, 2008). There is no biological underpinning for race, yet it operates via notions of difference and superiority created by society.

Similarly, there is no biological basis for **ethnicity**, but it is based on “a framework for acquiring a view of the self, the world, and future opportunities, while also providing a structure for interpersonal relations and subjective experiences” (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990, p. 292) such as a shared language, religious heritage or geographic location. Members of ethnic groups may differ by race, such as Latines who have a shared language of Spanish, national heritage or shared ancestry.



## General Communication Practices

- 1. Attend to your target audience in all research communications.** Be specific about who you are talking about and who you are referring to.
- 2. Be specific about how assessments were conducted** in order to better reflect biases teachers and parents may bring when assessing children’s performance.
  - › For example, when using a teacher report of children’s behavior problems, describe the outcome as “teachers’ perceptions of children’s behavior problems” rather than “children’s behavior problems.”

*The Early Learning Network seeks to improve the academic success of children, especially those from historically marginalized groups, by identifying research-proven policies and practices that narrow opportunity gaps and ensure early learning success is maintained as children transition from preschool to elementary school and beyond.*

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