

“No Barriers, Just Bridges”

Teaching World Languages to Children of Color on the Autism Spectrum



A WHITE PAPER

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The recent executive order signed by President Donald Trump to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education has raised significant concerns, particularly among families of color with special needs children. This move threatens to exacerbate existing inequities in education, as the Department plays a crucial role in enforcing civil rights laws and ensuring equitable access to educational resources.

The proposed dismantling of the Department could lead to a reduction in federal oversight, potentially allowing states to implement policies without adhering to standardized civil rights protections. This shift may result in inconsistent support for special needs programs across states, disproportionately affecting families of color who rely on federally mandated services to ensure their children receive appropriate educational opportunities.

This puts the advocacy work for Black children, particularly those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, almost exclusively into our living rooms. Parents need to be adequately prepared to fill the gaps in the educational services for their children, and world language learning is not excluded from that work.

Given this reality, it becomes even more critical for us to challenge the traditional narrative around language learning in children with autism, especially within communities of color. While parents are stepping up to advocate for their children's needs, they're often met with misconceptions about bilingualism. These misunderstandings, deeply embedded in educational and medical frameworks, create a divide between what research supports and the advice families are typically given.

When it comes to autism and bilingualism, too many families—especially African American families—are told they have to choose. The message is often the same: “Stick to one language so your child doesn't get confused.” But research says otherwise. Autistic children can learn more than one language, just like any other child, and for many families, bilingualism isn't just a nice extra—it's a core part of who they are. Still, the way we talk about language learning in autism often leaves out the voices and experiences of families of color. It doesn't account for the ways language connects us to culture, community, and belonging.

I saw this firsthand when I worked with a family whose daughter was nonverbal. Her mom was struggling to figure out how to support her communication while also introducing Spanish in their home. What happened next showed me just how

important it is to push back against outdated advice and make sure families get the full picture.

One of the first families I worked with had a 7-year-old daughter who was nonverbal. Although she had not been diagnosed, the mother considered herself a special needs mom. Her daughter parroted everything that she heard, rarely connecting words into sentences, and expressed her wants using grunts and pointing. Although she never expressed it, I could see the worry and sometimes shame that mother would have in her eyes whenever her daughter grunted instead of using words. Of course, she loved her little girl. She would do ANYthing for her. She was actually one of the reasons why she came to me for language.

My advice to her: keep learning and keep speaking. Use as much Spanish as you can. Talk to her only in Spanish. For some, this may seem unconventional. But she did it. Obediently and with the Mama Pantera courage I advocate for. After one year, not only was her daughter using more Spanish, she was using more English, and now she's teaching herself Mandarin! This is not intended to be a moment of braggadocio, but rather to emphasize a critical point: ANYbody has the ability to learn languages, and for some of us, learning a language can be a huge benefit for some learners. Teaching Spanish—or any world language—to children on the autism spectrum requires structured, multimodal, and engaging approaches that cater to their unique learning styles. Since many children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) benefit from predictable routines, visual aids, and interactive experiences, incorporating these elements can enhance their ability to acquire and use a new language successfully.

It is important to stress one important assertion: children diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum may have average or above-average intelligence; however, autism can still compromise learning and development in a number of ways. A common myth is that children on the autism spectrum have a diminished capacity to learn. The truth is, it is merely a different way of processing and retaining information. More on that research in a bit.

It's not about whether autistic children *can* learn—it's about making sure they're given the right tools and opportunities to do so. And when it comes to bilingualism, too many families are being told to limit their child's potential instead of expanding it.

What we know about autism and bilingualism - The research, y'all!

You want to give your child every opportunity to succeed, especially when navigating a world that isn't always built with them in mind. If your child is on the autism spectrum, you may have heard conflicting advice about whether learning more than

one language is a good idea. Some say bilingualism could confuse a child with autism, while others insist it can open doors to better communication and cognitive flexibility. But what does the research actually say? And more importantly, how does it apply to Black families raising autistic children in bilingual or culturally rich communities? Much of the existing research on autism and bilingualism overlooks the unique experiences of African American families—families who may speak both English and African American English (AAE) at home or who want their child to learn Spanish, French, or another language for future opportunities.

Research has been growing examining the positive impact bilingualism has on children with autism spectrum disorder, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) and Canada (Digard & Sorace, 2022; Gross & Tager, 2022; Digard, et al, 2020; Gonzalez-Barrero & Nadig, 2019). Bilingualism has the potential to mitigate certain executive functioning difficulties, such as set-shifting, the ability to shift “back and forth between tasks given specific demands” (Miyake, et al, as cited in Gonzalez-Barrero & Nadig, 2019, p. 1044).

How do we “do it for the culture?”

We know that when special education doesn’t account for culture, it doesn’t work for our children. That’s why this conversation is so critical. We have to be the ones pushing for culturally-sustainable practices—classrooms that reflect and respect who our kids are, how they learn, and what they need to thrive. Because if we don’t demand it, who will?

This is especially true in world language education, where Black children with special needs are often overlooked or left out of the conversation entirely. Too often, teachers assume that because a child struggles with communication in one language, adding another will only make things harder. But research tells us a different story—bilingualism doesn’t confuse autistic children; it strengthens their cognitive flexibility and deepens their connection to culture.

So, what does it take to make world language classrooms work for our kids? First, we need teaching strategies that honor different ways of learning. Special needs children, especially those with autism, often thrive with structured routines, multisensory instruction, and clear, predictable patterns. This means using visuals, movement, and interactive storytelling—not just memorization and worksheets. It means recognizing that some kids process language differently and giving them multiple ways to engage, whether that’s through music, role-playing, or technology-based tools.

More importantly, it means creating an environment where our children feel seen. That means representation—showing Afro-Latino culture in lessons, using images

that reflect the diversity of the Spanish-speaking world, and making sure our children hear voices that sound like theirs. It also means embracing their strengths—whether that’s a strong memory for vocabulary, a love of rhythms and patterns, or a deep focus on specific topics.

When we talk about special education and world languages, we have to stop asking if our kids *can* learn another language and start asking *how* we can teach it in ways that affirm who they are. Because when we do, we open up doors—doors to cultural pride, global opportunities, and, most importantly, belonging.

When we talk about bilingualism and autism in African American families, we have to look at it through a culturally sustainable lens. Language isn’t just about words—it’s about identity, history, and connection. Families should never have to choose between giving their child access to multiple languages and holding on to the way they naturally communicate at home. Research shows that bilingualism doesn’t confuse autistic children; in fact, it can give them more tools to express themselves and connect with their loved ones. But too often, the advice families get doesn’t consider their culture, their language, or their community.

Culturally sustainable education means making sure language learning supports a child’s full identity, including the way their family and community communicate. For African American families, that means recognizing that learning Spanish (or any other language) should add to their linguistic strengths, not replace them. It means making sure schools and speech therapists understand and respect African American English as a valid and rich way of communicating. When families feel like they can bring their full selves into language learning, it strengthens their connection to both their heritage and the world around them. Research needs to center these realities so that families of color don’t just have access to bilingualism—they have access to it in a way that affirms who they are.

Girl! I need structure! - Strategies to implement

Learning a new language at home doesn’t have to feel like extra work—it can be a natural part of your family’s routine, something that fits into what you’re already doing. For African American parents raising special needs children, the key is to make language learning feel easy, engaging, and connected to your child’s strengths. Whether it’s through music, storytelling, or everyday conversations, small, consistent moments can build real language skills over time. The goal isn’t to create more pressure but to add tools that work for your child and your household. With that in mind, here are some simple, culturally affirming strategies you can start using right away to introduce and reinforce a new language at home.

1. Incorporating visual supports such as visual schedules, timers, and picture cues.

Children with ASD often benefit from visual learning strategies, as they process information more effectively through images rather than abstract auditory input (Quill, 2000).

◆ **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS):** Using PECS with Spanish vocabulary can help students connect words to images and reinforce meaning.

◆ **Visual Schedules:** A structured daily plan with images and Spanish words helps students anticipate learning activities.

◆ **Flashcards and Word Walls:** Reinforce Spanish vocabulary through labeled images of household items, foods, or common actions.

Click [here](#) to get access to the PDF of printable language flashcards that you can download, print, and make tactile for your child!

Does your child have a special interest? Please complete this [form](#), and we will send you 10 customized PECS cards tailored to your child's interests.

2. Creating a structured environment.

Children with ASD often thrive in structured environments with clear expectations. Explicit instruction in Spanish grammar and vocabulary, with step-by-step guidance, can enhance comprehension.

◆ **Modeling and Repetition:** Teachers should model correct pronunciation and sentence structure before asking students to repeat.

◆ **Sentence Frames and Scripts:** Providing structured phrases (e.g., "Me gusta ____ porque ____") helps students construct sentences with confidence.

◆ **Direct Instruction on Cognates:** Teaching students Spanish-English cognates (e.g., "animal" and "animal") can boost comprehension.

3. Providing social skills training.

Since social communication can be a challenge for children with ASD, using Spanish in structured social situations can help them practice language while developing interaction skills (Hambly & Fombonne, 2012).

◆ **Role-Playing Activities:** Simulate real-world scenarios, such as ordering food at a restaurant or asking for directions, using Spanish dialogues.

◆ **Peer-Assisted Learning:** Pair students with a buddy to practice Spanish conversations in a supportive setting.

◆ **Social Stories:** Create Spanish-language social stories that model appropriate greetings, requests, and polite expressions.

4. Using individualized instruction.

Many children with ASD have focused interests, and integrating these into Spanish lessons can increase motivation and participation (Winter-Messiers, 2007).

◆ **Personalized Vocabulary Lists:** If a student loves trains, introduce Spanish terms like "tren," "vagón," and "ferrocarril."

◆ **Thematic Lessons:** Design lessons around students' interests, such as dinosaurs, space, or music, while incorporating Spanish vocabulary.

5. Allowing sensory alternatives and breaks.

Since many children with ASD respond well to hands-on, kinesthetic, and auditory learning methods, incorporating multiple senses in Spanish instruction can improve engagement and retention.

◆ **Songs and Rhymes:** Spanish songs, such as "Cabeza, Hombros, Rodillas y Pies" (Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes), can reinforce vocabulary while encouraging movement. My good friend, Jessie Feliz of Spanish S.W.A.G.(™), has a great series of short (1-2 minute) videos that incorporate songs. Download her playlist here: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnjiZqGHNFF1wadh78Vli8ds9x083uOJP&feature=s_hared

◆ **Tactile Activities:** Using textured letters, sandpaper words, or manipulatives with Spanish words can strengthen language retention.

Here is a list of tactile materials you can paste onto the Bilingual Brown Babies Flashcards:

- Sandpaper
- Beads
- Fur
- Velvet
- Feathers
- Tiny weights

◆ **Sign Language or Gestures:** Pairing Spanish words with gestures (e.g., pointing to objects while saying their names) can reinforce meaning.

The Bilingual Brown Babies Baby Bonding Workshop offers audio for songs as well as easy-to-implement tips, also appropriate for your family!

6. Providing reinforcements.

Since children with ASD may experience anxiety when speaking in a new language, creating a supportive and pressure-free learning environment is essential.

◆ **Use Positive Reinforcement:** Reward participation with praise, stickers, or a preferred activity.

◆ **Allow Alternative Responses:** Instead of verbal responses, let students point to images or use assistive devices if they feel more comfortable.

◆ **Flexible Assessment Methods:** Evaluate understanding through art, writing, or matching activities rather than oral assessments alone.

7. Technology and Assistive Tools

Many children with ASD engage well with technology, making digital tools an effective supplement for Spanish learning.

◆ **Language Learning Apps:** Duolingo, Gus on the Go, and Fun Spanish offer interactive, gamified lessons.

◆ **Speech-to-Text Tools:** Assistive technology like text-to-speech apps can support pronunciation practice.

◆ **Virtual Reality (VR) or Augmented Reality (AR):** Immersive language experiences, such as Google Expeditions, allow students to explore Spanish-speaking environments.

Conclusion

By tailoring Spanish instruction to the unique learning needs of children on the autism spectrum, educators can foster meaningful language acquisition. Using visual aids, multisensory strategies, structured lessons, and engaging technology can help these students develop confidence in Spanish while enhancing cognitive and social skills. With the right methods, language learning can be a rewarding and achievable experience for children with ASD.

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