

Contesting Ableist Ideology: Drawing on Latinx Mothers' Cultural Values to Define Dis/ability  
Plain English Summary  
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## Introduction

Family-school collaboration is protected in legislation: the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEIA) identifies parents as equal members of a multidisciplinary team. However, *parent involvement* as defined by this policy, positions Latinx parents of dis/abled children as having deficits and needing to be encouraged to participate in their children's education. This scholar undertook research with Latinx mothers of dis/abled children and set out to explore how current expectations for *parent involvement* do not take into account the cultural patterns of families as they support their children's developmental and academic goals. The research team included mothers of dis/abled children.

## Summary of empirical research

Disability critical race (DisCrit) theory is expanded to analyze how cultural identity can challenge the meaning given to disability during special education processes. The cultural values of *familismo* are used as an analytical framework to challenge the discourse of *parent involvement* and deficit perspectives of family's participation. Narrative Inquiry methodology showed how three Latinx mothers of dis/abled children draw on their cultural identity to sustain ongoing communication during family-school encounters. Participants were asked: how did professionals talk about disability, your child in school and at home, and do you believe your ideas were part of the decision-making process?

## Main findings and arguments

In this article, family-school encounters are revealed as instances when Latinx mothers of dis/abled children experience unequal influence; believing school professionals made the decisions during special education processes. In response, Latinx mothers identified barriers experienced during family-school interactions. First, Latinx mothers of dis/abled children challenged school practices rooted in the medical model of disability, which conceptualize their child as (ab)normal. Secondly, Latinx mothers of dis/abled children confronted professionals' beliefs that their role was limited because they lacked the English proficiency to navigate English-only spaces and to support their children's learning at home. Thirdly, Latinx mothers of dis/abled children described culture as a barrier as they expected to draw on their values of *familismo* (commitment and interdependence) to build trusting relationships with school professionals. Latinx mothers of dis/abled children experienced these barriers as injustice and therefore, they made moves to resist special education processes and to advocate for their right to inclusive education.

A new approach is needed; one that highlights the voices of families of dis/abled children as a way to acknowledge their ways of knowing and identities as the foundation of every

family-school interaction. This article can help educators and school professionals understand Latinx mothers of dis/abled children as navigating culture, language and disability to show a counter-story set against special education processes grounded in deficit perspectives. Holding firm to their cultural identity rooted in *familismo*, Latinx mothers of dis/abled children described themselves as engaged and committed and as wanting to collaborate with school professionals during special education processes. Yet, these mothers viewed disability labels as problematic and described tensions around language and preferred program placement. Hence, Latinx mothers of dis/abled children constructed meanings; ability (as competence), linguistic diversity (as a strength) and culture (as an asset). Regardless of being positioned opposite school professionals' goals and priorities in special education, their lived experiences as immigrant Latinx families of dis/abled children, provide an understanding of what it means to be the family of a dis/abled child in a new country.

Expanding DisCrit theory, Latinx mothers of dis/abled children are recognized as having raced-gendered knowledge that represents their strength and resistance at the intersection of ableism, linguicism and racism. These mothers emerge as knowledge experts in the way that they draw on their cultural values of *familismo* as lessons from the home that serve as an anchor during family-school encounters. This article is important because it presents Latinx mothers of dis/abled children as engaged in the continuous work of (re)defining *parent involvement* as family engagement that is grounded in commitment and interdependence.

### Implications

Latinx mothers identified their dis/abled children as bilingual (Spanish-English). Research shows consequences for emergent bilinguals with a disability include being placed in more restrictive environments than their monolingual peers with a disability, receiving limited language support or having fewer opportunities to learn bilingually. Teachers working with emergent bilinguals, need to explore their funds of knowledge or existing cultural and linguistic assets, and integrate these resources into instruction. To address educational inequities and improve the learning experience of bilingual dis/abled students, research is needed to explore ways in which bilingualism and biculturalism, as well as being dis/abled, can be conceptualized as assets for learning.

In this article, the Latinx mothers of dis/abled children represent a range of citizenship status and ancestries. To address social justice, teachers must recognize the importance of a dual analysis of race and ability within a system that seeks to categorize children as *normal* and *disabled* and how this disproportionately impacts those from culturally and linguistically diverse families. This research sheds light on immigration policy that is tied to racist and ableist ideas which construct immigrant bodies as less 'abled'. This tells us that school processes of labeling bilingual learners as disabled must be challenged. Teacher educators must design courses that prepare teachers to adopt critical frameworks (e.g., DisCrit) to understand how systemic inequities are experienced at the intersection of culture, language and dis/ability. Coursework that uses student and family narratives can help teachers contextualize their own beliefs to understand how these impacts their work as teachers.

Finding out more:

Disability as a constructed concept is not a commonly understood or propagated idea in the mainstream of an ableist society.

<https://www.autistichoya.com/2012/08/disability-in-ableist-world.html>

Going to School- IR a la Escuela: Movie scenes shot in special education and inclusive classrooms show the determination of young students to learn. These stories are filmed against a backdrop of the historic campaign by parents and teachers to protect the Human Rights of children with disabilities in public schools.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iV\\_riKQPtQk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iV_riKQPtQk)

### Author Biography

Eileen C. Osieja, Ed.D., Teachers College, Columbia University, centers her research on disability studies and teacher preparation for inclusive education. Before becoming a university-based educator, Dr. Osieja was a teacher and educational specialist with extensive experience in urban public schools in New Jersey. Her research examines the experiences of Latinx mothers of dis/abled children in navigating special education processes. She recognizes the epistemic significance of family narratives of dis/ability that remains obscured by school policies and procedures. Dr. Osieja is committed to preparing educators to promote the relationships among families and schools toward equitable and inclusive school environments.