“¿Porque no está en español?”:

Voices of Latinx Mothers Within the Special Education System in the South Bronx

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Your child is one and a half years old and you go in for a regular checkup. Aside from the usual procedures for a checkup, you notice the doctor is intensely observing your child. Not knowing what might be going on, you simply ask “is everything okay?”

Your doctor responds, “How many words does your child say already?”

You are taken aback by the question, but realize you never really put much thought into this. “Hmm...now that you ask, he only babbles.”

You look at the doctor’s face and realize this is not a good sign. “By now your child should be saying basic words, like ‘mam’ or ‘papa’, I think you should get him evaluated at an early intervention center. Give me one moment and I’ll provide you with details.”

You are instantly stunned. What is an early intervention center? How did you not notice before that something was off? So many questions are racing through your mind, but what question do you start with? You do not understand a thing, but you trust your doctor and they help you set up an appointment with the early intervention center because the person who picks up the phone only speaks English.

After the doctor gets off the phone with the center, she tells you the location, date, and time of the center where your child will get evaluated. You wait nervously for two weeks until it’s time to take your child.

Before you step into the center, you take a deep breathe in and out. You’re worried about what they might say to you and what they might do to your child. What exactly are they evaluating? You have never been through this process, let alone heard about it. You brace yourself and then take a step inside. You look around and there are so many signs up, but all in English. You search for a sign that might be in Spanish, to at least give you any sort of information, but you find none. You see the receptionist and make your way over, while she greets you. She speaks to you in English and you do not understand what she is asking you. You point to your child and hope she understands that you have an appointment. You proceed to show her the information your doctor wrote down for you that includes the time of the appointment. She nods her head and signs you in and points to the waiting area where you will sit down and wait.

You see there are books and toys set up at the table next to you, so you let your child play with some while you wait. Still, you are nervous. You have not seen anyone else in the agency besides the receptionist. There is a door in front of you, but no one has come out, you do not know what to expect. The whole time you hope that there is someone who speaks Spanish because you are worried about what is going to happen, and you want to communicate with someone.

Fifteen minutes later, someone walks out and begins walking towards you. Thankfully they speak Spanish and explain to you that they will be taking your child into some of the play rooms they have set up and will let your child play with certain toys that are meant to exhibit certain skill sets. They will also be giving your child commands to see if they can successfully follow through. You've never heard of this before and suddenly you realize toys are no longer just toys, they become ways to test the intelligence of your child. You get a little worried, you've never worked on building specific skills with your child, especially since you're a first-time mother. Then you realize that the commands will probably be given to your child in English, a language so foreign to you that you never learned a word of it.

They take your child to the rooms in the back and let you know you can watch your child through the one-way glass. In the playrooms there are balls everywhere, puzzles, rugs, and lots of toys. First, they start off by giving your child a shape that they have to match up to the correct shape in a container. You watch as your child is unable to match the shapes correctly. You do not know what this means, but you know it's not a good sign.

After ten minutes of watching your child not being able to complete different tasks, you no longer want to watch and instead go back to the waiting room. Your heart sinks. You do not know what is happening, but you know something is wrong. Why didn't you notice anything before? Why didn't you try harder to talk to your child or try to strengthen their skills?

After an hour or so, the therapist comes back with your child, you do not know what is going to happen next, so your palms are sweating profusely. You ask, "so how did it go?" as you hold your child close to you on your lap.

The therapist can tell you are worried. "You do not need to be scared. Your child will need some services from us because his speech and motor skills are not where they need to be for their age. This is okay, we will help get them to where they need to be. This will require some services to be given at home every week. There will be different therapists who will work with your child to build specific skills, they are professionals so they have worked with many kids before, you don't have to worry about that. We will call you so we can set up what times your child's therapist will be able to go to your house. There will also be a social worker assigned to you that will help you through the process, they will be there to support you and we will make sure they speak Spanish so you can understand all this information. In a week or so, you will receive a detailed report from us of what our diagnoses is for him, outlining the tasks we did with your child, the way they responded to them, and what some next steps will be."

So many thoughts are racing through your mind. This is so much information given all at once. You have never experienced a situation like this. There is only one question racing through your mind, and you know you have to ask it.

“So, what is wrong with my child?”

The therapist looks at you for a couple seconds before answering the question. “We believe your child has a learning disability. However, with the therapies we will provide, we are hopeful that your child will be able to develop the skills they need.”

Your heart sinks. What is a learning disability? What does that even look like? What does this mean for your child? Is your child not normal? You are afraid to ask because a part of you does not want to know the answer. After you say your goodbyes to those at the agency, you make your way home. You hold your child tight in your arms and let out a few tears. You have no idea what will happen next or even what your child's life will be like moving forward. What will the future hold? Will your child ever achieve a normal life? You do not want to accept the reality of the situation and instead try to avoid asking yourself more questions.

About a couple days later you receive a phone call from the agency and the detailed report though the mail. They tell you what day and time your child’s therapist will be going to your house. Then they tell you the name and phone number of your social worker so you can call her and set up a meeting time before the therapists start going to your house. They make clear that your social worker will be the person you will go to if you have questions or concerns.

A couple days later, your social worker goes over to your house and you show her the long and detailed report and tell her you have been unable to read it because it is all in English. You have tried using Google translate, but there are terms that you do not even understand in Spanish. Translating more than 20 pages on Google translate also requires more time than you have. Thankfully, your social worker is very patient and translates each page for you. She explains to you that your child has a learning disability and will need multiple services to help develop specific skills. She tells you there is nothing to worry about because she will guide you through the process and be there to answer any questions. This comforts you and you know you are not alone in the process, especially because you can openly communicate with her in Spanish. Although you are thankful and glad she speaks Spanish, you wish you understood English and could read the report yourself.

For two years your child receives services like speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy all at home. You get used to having therapists around and by then you understand the kind of activities each one of them do with your child. Although you are familiar with this process already, your social worker lets you know that it is time for your child to begin going to school. You have no idea how to go about this. You sit down with your social worker and she asks you if there are any schools you want to look at. You sit there quietly. You know of a couple schools in the area but have never visited them. You tell her of the few you do know of and she tells you to set up a time to go visit these schools in your area.

A week later, you visit a school that is four blocks away from you, you walk through the hallways and into the main office. You try to check in but the person at the front desk does not speak Spanish. You wait 10 minutes until they finally find someone available who can translate. Once someone who speaks Spanish shows up, you explain you are there to visit the school. They escort you to sit into a classroom and observe what goes on. After a couple of minutes, the director asks to speak to you and meet your child. They want to make sure your child is a good fit for their school. They put your child in a classroom and observe them, give them toys to play with, and they ask your child to follow some simple rules. However, your child cannot complete them successfully and you know it. You watch as your child fails to complete the tasks and you do not know what to do, you wish you could help. You get flashbacks from the early intervention center you took your child to years ago, and your stomach starts to feel uneasy. Afterwards, the director pulls you aside and tells you they cannot enroll your child because they do not have the resources to help him build the skills he needs. Your eyes begin to tear up and you cannot hold back your tears any longer. So where is your child supposed to go? What school will take them in?

The director comforts you and lets you know that there are schools available specifically for children with learning disabilities, your child is not the only one who needs different accommodations. After this visit, you call your social worker and let her know you want to investigate schools specifically for students with learning disabilities. The next time you meet with her, she shows you a list of schools that could fit your child's needs. The only problem is that these schools are not near your home. Your child would need to be picked up by the bus every day. You are hesitant about this but ultimately, you just want the best for your child, so you agree.

You end up visiting a school that is 40 minutes away from home by train. The school is dedicated to children ages 3-5 with disabilities. You meet some of the teachers and observe a classroom while your child sits in on it too. You like the environment because the children are not treated any differently, regardless of ability. There are also many teachers who help every student, some students even have a teacher specifically for them. Thankfully, there is one teacher who speaks Spanish and explains to you that their school makes sure to use and meet every child's Individual Educational Plan (IEP) in order to ensure that they are progressing in their education. She explains the subjects they teach and the type of work students do. You feel this is the school for your child and tell her you want to enroll your child. With the help of the director of the school and your social worker, your child is enrolled within a week.

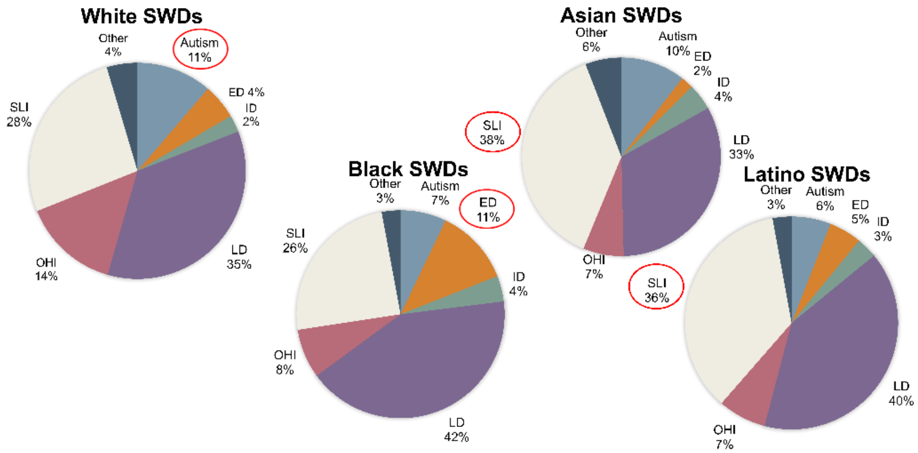
Fast forward to two years later, you have to begin the process again and enroll your child into a public school that offers special education services. This is where your child will begin their elementary school journey. Your social worker assures you that there are public schools in your area, within walking distance, that your child can enroll in and where they will continue with the IEP. You visit and pick the school you feel is best for your child. This is a relatively smooth process because your social worker handles most of it. However, once your child enrolls into a public school and begins 1st grade, your social worker lets you know that she will no longer be assigned to you because now the public school your child is going to assumes full responsibility. Any questions or concerns go directly to them. You start to worry, what will you do without your social worker? Why did you not know this earlier? She understood you and your situation perfectly well, and she was able to communicate with you when others were not. What now? Who will help you?

During the first day of school you meet your child's new teacher, but she only speaks English. She introduces herself and all you can do is smile and nod at her, you do not understand a thing she is saying and no one is around to translate this small interaction. You want to ask her what this school year will look like for your child and what he will be learning, but you are afraid to because you know she will not understand. No one is around to help you ask her these questions. Instead you kiss your child goodbye and walk away, with all these questions racing through your mind. Once you leave the building you worry about how this year will go, but you have no one to communicate these thoughts to. Now that your social worker is gone, who will you communicate with?

INTRODUCTION

This is a paper about Latinx mothers and the special education system in South Bronx, New York City. Special education is a crucial topic to study because of the way it impacts different communities, specifically minority ones. Through the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students ages 3-21 who have a disability are mandated to receive a free and appropriate public-school education. In the United States alone, 13.7% of students are enrolled in a special education program (NCEC, 2019). However, there is overrepresentation within minority communities. About 17% of students in special education are Native American/Alaskan Native, 16% are Black students, and 12% are Latinx (NECS, 2019).

New York City remains one of the most segregated school districts in the country. In the NYC public school system, 41% of students are Hispanic and 26% of students are Black. Additionally, 20.2% of students in NYC schools have a disability and 5.64% of schools have a population where students with disabilities make up less than 10% of students (New York City Council, 2019). Within special education, there are different classifications like learning disabilities, autism, emotional disturbance, and speech or language impairment. This is crucial to know and study because Black students account for more emotional disturbance cases, while Latinx students account for me speech and language impairment cases (Figure 1, Research Alliance for NYC Schools, 2018). This highlights the role race plays into special education because stereotypes are present when Black students are overrepresented for cases of emotional disturbance and Latinx students for speech and language impairment due to being English Language Learners or being proficient in Spanish.



Source: Research Alliance calculations based on Special Education Student Information System (SESIS) data provided to the Research Alliance for New York City Schools by the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Data are shown for all active students age five and over with an IEP in 2015-16. Students served in Alternate Learning Centers (District 88) and in a grade below Kindergarten are excluded from all analyses (Ns: White = 26,900, Black = 65,902, Asian = 13,624, Latino = 101,935).

Figure 1: Race in Relation to Special Education Classification

For this study, my research question is: How do Latinx mothers respond and navigate the process of special education programs in the South Bronx? Answering this question is important because most studies done on special education center around the children in these programs, but rarely is research dedicated to parents who play a crucial role. I center this research around Latinx mothers because the special education system becomes more complex to navigate when language barriers are present, which differs from the experiences of other parents.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs an interview-based qualitative research methodology. To start off, I reached out to Latinx mothers, whom I was previously in contact with, and gave them a summary of my research and asked whether they would be willing to participate. At the end of each interview I conducted I asked if they knew other Latinx mothers with children in special education, and if so, if they would be willing to tell them about my research and if they would be willing to participate. If they agreed, I would be passed down their contact. Using this snowball sampling technique, I found a total of 10 participants. I started my process off my texting each participant individually, provided a summary of what my project consisted of, and if they were willing to participate, to let me know what time and date worked best. All participants agreed and interviews ranged from a minimum of 20 minutes to a maximum of an hour. To begin all interviews, I read aloud the participant consent forms (Appendix A**)** to make sure they knew more details about their role in this study, and then I asked if they consented to participating. All participants agreed to the terms on the consent form. Next, I asked a total of 14 questions **(**Appendix B), for example, what difficulties did you encounter in the education system because of the lack of Spanish resources? All interviews were conducted in Spanish and I recorded the phone calls on the recorder app on my laptop and labeled them according to the order of the interviews. After each recording was saved, I would start transcribing the interviews in Spanish. Lastly, I created categories of recurring themes that showed up and the Spanish quotes within these categories were translated into English.

As a first-generation college student who grew up speaking Spanish and in the South Bronx, I am familiar with the struggles mothers often face due to language barriers. I also have a younger brother who is currently enrolled in a special education program, providing me background knowledge on this subject. This topic is of interest to me because I have watched my mother struggle with understanding the special education process in NYC, what special education is, and what it means for my brother, which is a struggle many Latinx mothers deal with. Since special education is a complex system already, it becomes more complicated for mothers who find there is information missing and language barriers present. By highlighting these issues in this study, I hope to bring awareness to and find solutions to creating a more equitable system.

FINDINGS

Guidance Received from Teachers

After conducting the interviews, I noticed similarities between the mother's responses and created themes accordingly. The first theme that was consistent between most of the interviews was the guidance received from teachers. One mother stated:

> *"Well [the special education process] wasn't too difficult because the teachers helped me. They evaluated him and…they did explain to me what the evaluation was about" (Interview 6).*

Another mother made clear that:

> *"From the start, there was always someone who supported me. Even when I moved to this area, they also helped me make the changes and everything worked out well" (Interview 10).*

Both statements demonstrate the role of teachers in providing parents with more information about special education. Mother's felt that they had someone to support them and guide them through the process. Many mothers do receive this kind of assistance from teachers and other professionals, however, this is not the case for all mothers.

Lack of Guidance from Teachers

In contrast to the first category, this second category depicts the lack of guidance mothers received from teachers and professionals. Although mothers did note that they received support from teachers, this was not the case for all. It is necessary to acknowledge that some mothers felt that they were not guided well enough through the process because they lacked information. For instance:

> "*When he had to change schools… that's when I felt that I was left alone because the social worker told me "okay, your son has three options: he can go see these schools and see if you like them or not." Then, I was no longer in the case anymore…. And I said,*

> *"who am I going to communicate with because what if there is something I don't like along the way?" In that moment, no one told me I wasn't going to have a social worker anymore" (Interview 7).*

Another mother described a similar experience and stated:

> *"In the beginning, I had so much help but then I didn't have the social worker anymore, I didn't have someone who I could talk to [about special education], [during the school year] there were only meetings on certain dates and locations, and that was the time you had to talk or ask questions" (Interview 8).*

Both interviews revealed that these parents felt as though when they first began the process, there was someone helping along the way in picking schools, helping translate, and providing resources, however after students reach a certain age, they are no longer assigned a social worker. Social workers usually speak the client's native language, so when parents lose this main source of communication, it becomes hard to reach out to other professionals.

Issues with Communication

Difficulties with Translations

Another main theme I found was issues with communication, specifically difficulties with translations. Since students in special education receive their Individual Educational Plan (IEP) first— which outlines their goals for the academic year—this is a crucial document parents need to understand so they can be involved with their child's progress. A child's IEP helps parents track the progress their child is and should be making, however, many parents are unable to read their child's IEPs because they are not readily available in other languages besides English. During the interviews, some mothers brought up the frustrations they experienced with this:

> *"[I wish I knew how to] interpret the IEP. In the beginning I didn't know how to understand the IEP, even though I tried so hard to, that really complicated things for me" (Interview 5).*
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> *"Well [with the IEP] I do have some problems because I've been told that I can ask for it in Spanish, and I have asked for it in Spanish so I can read it…I don't know if I have to call another place for them to give it to me…[but] I did ask for it and have not received it" (Interview 10).*

Although a student's IEP is one of the most crucial documents throughout the special education process, it is still widely inaccessible for many parents. In a study done by Mandic et al. (2012), focusing on literary-related barriers for parents in the special education system, it was found that "few states provide documents scoring in the lowest reading levels. The mean and median grade level was 16 for the 51 documents assessed using the revised SMOG" (p 198). This elucidates that documents provided by state departments of education are written at high literacy levels, which many parents are unable to understand for many reasons like being speakers of other languages or not having received a higher education. This implicates that literacy is a barrier for parents because it impedes the degree to which they can be involved with their child's education. This study further explained another implication being that "parents' advocacy efforts are frustrated by an emphasis on documents rather than participation, the use of jargon, a confusing classification system, and power dynamics that tend to silence and limit parental participation" (p 200). Overall, many parents are left in the dark and feel disempowered because they are not able to understand documents which are not written to serve them, further disenfranchising their child's access to an equitable education.

Mothers also found that translations were not always sufficient when wanting to obtain information. Mothers often struggle to understand what special education is and what it means for the future of their children, but it becomes even more complex to understand when there is a language barrier present. Some of the mother's responses to this were:

> *"...since everything was in English, it made things a little more difficult. [The teachers] would translate things for me, but it's not the same as someone reading it themselves in Spanish" (Interview 6).*
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> *"...not all teachers speak Spanish, and they usually find someone who can translate for you, but it's not the same as being able to understand it yourself. For me, it's difficult to understand because I don't speak English, and if I have many questions or doubts, I can't ask them, and they can't answer me easily" (Interview 9).*

The language barrier creates an environment where Latinx mothers feel like it will be an extra burden to try to communicate teachers and ask questions because it would require outside assistance. Often the translation services are provided through telephone calls, which are time consuming when teachers have to explain the situation first to someone over the phone and then go back and forth between everyone. Mothers recognize that although translation services clarify what teachers are saying, translations will never be the same as receiving information in their native language.

Language Barrier with Their Child

Especially for Latinx mothers, another language barrier exists with their children. Since Latinx mothers primarily speak Spanish and not all speak English, communicating with their children who are dominate in English, becomes troubling. In my interviews, mothers expressed that speaking to their children became a hard task because:

> "*Sometimes I speak to my son and I say a word in Spanish and he doesn't understand me, and maybe if I say it in English he would understand, but I don't know how to say [the word] in English" (Interview 8).*
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> *"…explaining what is right and wrong and helping him with his homework [is difficult] because all of it is in English and I don't understand it, and he doesn't understand me either…but I can't communicate with him and the problem is that there is a disconnect" (Interview 9).*

Students in special education, much like the typical education system in the United States, are taught in English, only some schools provide a bilingual education. This makes being involved in their child's education laborious because mothers are not able to effectively communicate with their child who do not understand the native language of their family. Additionally, since most of the schoolwork their child is tasked with are in English, there is minimal space for mothers to be able to help their child and explain educational concepts.

In extreme cases, some parents erase their native language completely because of the push to speak and understand English. For instance, in one interview the mother described:

> "…*the director of that school told me we had to concentrate on speaking one language because maybe our bilingual situation was confusing my son" (Interview 4).*

Believing that focusing on English would help her child progress, she listened to the director and started to solely speak English at home. This presents a power imbalance between parents and teachers. Specifically, a study done by Burke and Goldman explained that "Parent (vs. school staff) participation rates during IEP meetings are consistently low (Leiter & Krauss, 2004): Specifically, during IEP meetings, parents speak significantly less frequently than special education teachers (Martin et al., 2006)" (2018, p 4). Consequently, many parents are not aware that they can contest the suggestions of teachers if they do not believe it will be beneficial to their child. The implications of this is that parents tend to settle for less than their child deserves because they do not understand their rights and are disempowered to speak up.

Additional Labor

Self-Advocacy

These difficulties mothers face within the special education system results in having to take on additional labor, which is another prominent theme amongst the interviews. With a system as complex as the special education one, mothers are often not equipped with information, so instead they must learn how to self-advocate. Without self-advocacy they risk not getting the most beneficial education for their child.

A few mothers emphasized during the interviews that they made sure to research what special education was when they knew their child would need it. For instance,

> "*I looked for help, but I knew the process—like I said—I'm someone who investigates a lot" (Interview 5).*

In some of the interviews, mothers made it clear they had to look up information online, ask teachers, or ask around if there was information they did not know. Being able to understand the process of special education, made it easier to understand what was happening with their child at school, making it possible to be a part of their education as well.

Furthermore, one mother explained that she took the extra step to be able to advocate for her child:

> "*I had someone who had gone to a lot of seminars and courses…And I had to see and educate myself about that. So when I had this person—called an advocator of*

> *education—I enrolled [in courses] and all of that, so [the process] became easier" (Interview 5).*

This describes the process of hiring a Parent Advocator, which is beneficial for parents to have, but a study found that "Existing systems, such as schools, did not educate families about resources and services. Not receiving accessible information about their rights, many CLD [culturally and linguistically diverse] families did not know the services to which their children were entitled, or that they could contact an advocate." (Burke & Goldman, 2018, p 5). Although a parent has the right to request a Parent Advocator, many do not have this communicated to them, resulting in parents strictly relying on teachers and therapists, instead of also having an additional person that is designated to them who speaks their native language and can explain the special education process.

To combat this labor, parents need an advocacy program that is led by special education professionals who are speakers of other languages. This program will ensure that parents have a space where they can receive information in their native language and ask questions they may otherwise feel they are unable to do at their child's school. Parents will have an extra support system of professionals as well as other parents who are experiencing similar struggles. A program specifically for parents will be beneficial in building their advocacy skills and create a sense of community amongst other parents who can later help each other and exchange advice.

In a study done by Burke et al. (2016), they created an advocacy training pilot program aimed at Spanish-speaking Latinx families and found "from the formative and summative evaluations, participants reported high levels of satisfaction. [Additionally] Second, intervention (versus control) group participants demonstrated significantly greater special education knowledge and empowerment" (p 2532). Although this was just a pilot program, Latinx parents reported they wanted more training like this available because they found it necessary in being able to advocate for their children. This study demonstrates the need for educational systems to invest in establishing programs for Latinx parents that will support their journey in navigating the special education process because it is laborious for them to do this work alone. The need for programs like this one is further emphasized through my interviews when mothers stated they wanted this type of service:

> *"[I wish there was] someone who would tell you "your child isn't doing so well in this, you can receive help over here"...so that they can help your child and he can learn more. But the way things are right now, we are not going to find things like this or someone to communicate this to us. This is what I need the most...more programs provided by the school to help parents and help our children" (Interview 9).*
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> *"There should be associations or programs that help you get a second opinion [on what is being recommended for your child at school.]..There should be information available here that explains if you don't agree with what is being recommended, you don't have to sign off on it, you have the right not to, and they can help explain if there is a law about this" (Interview 8).*

These programs can serve as a place where parents can get a second opinion and have support in deciding for their child. With the help of professionals and other mothers who understand the process and are going through similar experiences, mothers can find what is best for their child and do not have to resort to simply not knowing.

Emotional Labor

Furthermore, navigating the special education system also results in emotional labor for parents. Throughout the process, it can be difficult for parents to come to terms with the extra help and services their child may require, especially if their child has some sort of learning disability. The last mother I interviewed expressed that one of the hardest things for her was getting her child the help he needed because she did not accept that he needed the extra help. Specifically, she stated:

> "*As a parent sometimes we don't notice or don't accept [that our child needs the program] and we say "no, my child will be going to a normal school," and it's difficult, but we have to [enroll them in the program]" (Interview 10).*

It takes an emotional toll on parents who have to accept and understand that their child needs extra support and take the next step to ensure they receive adequate services. It also becomes a frustrating process for parents because they are the ones who need to make decisions, and sometimes with minimal help. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), parents have the right to "(1) participate in meetings; (2) review school records; (3) obtain an independent evaluation; (4) deny consent or disagree with decisions; and (5) resolve disputes using mediation or due process (IDEA, 2004). Given these rights, parents serve as an accountability mechanism to ensure their child receives appropriate services and supports" (Burke & Goldman, 2018, p 1). Although it is beneficial for parents to have these rights and take part in their child's education, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all parents understand these rights and some never come to learn about this. It takes an immense toll on parents, especially Latinx mothers who do not know the English language nor the school system, to be expected to know what the can and cannot request for their child. To do so requires previous knowledge on the special education system that not all parents have access to.

In this same interview, the mother was reflecting on her experiences and concluded that:

> "*From the beginning, they did not place my son in the correct school, but those two years he spent at that school helped me out in something because I learned many things, I matured as well. I learned some good things in spite of the bad situation" (Interview 10).*

This presents another issue within special education—children being put in schools that do not provide the environment for them to flourish. This is especially prominent amongst mothers who do not understand the special education process and have no information on what the best fit for their child may look like. The special education process is tedious because either a parent feels like they made the right choice, or they made the wrong choice for their child. The mother from interview 10 highlights the reflection involved in this process when parents often have to think back to their decisions and learn from it, or unfortunately as seen in other interviews, blame themselves for certain choices.

Burke et al.'s (2016) study further elucidates the demand for emotional support for parents. It is unfair to require parents to navigate the special education system on their own and make decisions for their child without proper information, all while having to deal with the emotional labor that comes along with it. In the pilot program Burke et al. established, they noted "Other participants reported wanting emotional support. One participant wrote, ''I would like to have therapy as a family.'' Another participant wrote ''emotional help''" (p 2536). It is crucial that parents are provided with the emotional help they need because special education demands so much time and effort that it can become frustrating for parents. It is even more difficult for Latinx mothers who navigate this process with minimal help due to language barriers. Parents play a major role in the education of their child, therefore it is necessary for them to have funded programs that deal with provided therapy and support. The need for a program like this can be seen in interview 10 when the mother described:

> *“Well, when they first tell you [that your child will need special education services], it’s like they tell you your child is different than everyone else, and at first you’re a little disappointed…the first thing I thought was that my child was not normal” (Interview 10).*

If this mother had the support from a therapist or an emotional support group program, she would have been able to navigate the process of accepting her child and not stressing the label of “normal” and “abnormal” that is often associated with students in special education. Emotional support programs can help empower mothers to accept the needs of their child, which can improve the ways they advocate for their child.

Idea of Normalcy

Consequently, the extent of this labor contributes to the idea of what is considered normal and not normal within education. When asked, “What do you hope for your child in the future?”, many of the responses were similar:

> *“I want her to be a normal girl, a normal person. Someone who gets her education, gets a job…who is independent” (Interview 5).*
>
> *“Well for me, I only want him to have a career, not depend on other people, and for him to succeed” (Interview 6).*
>
> *“I hope that he will be able to develop by himself, be independent. I think that’s what all mothers want, for [their kids] to be independent” (Interview 7).*

These three mothers expressed that in the long run, they wanted their children to achieve a sense of normalcy, which is usually seen through being successful by obtaining a career. Through these statements we see that special education is associated with a child not being normal and being codependent on others. This lack of normalcy is also heightened through the labor mothers put into their child’s education because they have to rely on themselves to get the right services for their child and keep demanding more. This is unlike what other parents must go through with their children whose teachers make most of the decisions. This strenuous process results in parents wanting their child to be normal to deal with a less complex education system that requires extensive work from them.

It is crucial to recognize the internalized ideas society holds on students in special education and those who have learning disabilities. In an article written by R.P. McDermott (1993), it is explained that a learning disability comes about because society labels it as such and gives it a negative connotation. McDermott states “by the normal line of reasoning, the child is the unit of analysis, and the disability is a mishap that scars a child’s road to competence.... In America, we make something of differential rates of learning to the point that the rate of learning rather than the learning is the total measure of the learner” (p 271-272). McDermott points to the American culture as one where the normalcy of a student depends on their intellectual ability and whether they can perform at a fast rate. This cultural emphasis on the rate of learning is detrimental to students in special education because they are often labeled as “abnormal” when in reality these students just need more support. This push for normalcy harms students who have learning disabilities because they are regarded as incompetent, adding to the barrier's mothers have to overcome due to these societal standards they have internalized. The above quotes show that while navigating the special education process, they internalized this culturally constructed idea of “normalcy,” and in turn, started to question the “normalcy” of their child. This makes it harder for the mothers to accept that their child needs extra services, therefore, potentially leading the children to miss crucial learning opportunities at school.

Self-blaming

The self-blaming was apparent in some of the interviews because mothers often put it upon themselves when their child encountered problems in their education. Specifically, one of the mothers expressed:

> *"Sometimes I get frustrated because so many years [of learning] were lost and because I didn't fight back hard enough when they decided to take his services away... So yes, it's frustrating as a mother because we don't always inform ourselves, ask questions, or say 'no' when we're told "your child doesn't need services anymore" (Interview 8).*

The self-blaming results in additional emotional labor for mothers because they feel they are the reason their child is not progressing as much as they should. They feel that it is solely up to them to make sure their child is getting the services and support they need, but this should not be the case. Special education can be successful when educators and parents collaborate and communicate well about the child in question, however this is not what always happens. For this mother, feelings of frustration emerged because she did not have adequate information available to assert her right to contest the educators who decided that her child no longer needed services. She expressed that the educators told her that her child was ready for an inclusive classroom and would have his services stripped away, even though she did not agree. However, she felt she did not have a choice because the educator communicated that she should be proud her son was able to meet the standards and move out of the special education program. Consequently, years later now that her child is in high school, he needs to be evaluated again because his current teachers explained to the mother and he needs extra support. Almost eight years later and her child is experiencing difficulties learning, in part due to having these services taken away when the mother knew he was not ready.

This story highlights the extent to which mothers blame *themselves* for not speaking up, asking questions, or informing themselves, when in fact it is not solely their responsibility. Mothers are quick to self-blame without recognizing the issue is with the educational system not them. Mothers may blame themselves for not being able to speak the language that grants them access to information, but the educational system should be blamed for not having resources and translators readily available. This self-blaming pattern is damaging because it shifts the responsibilities of schools onto the parents. This is also observed by McDermott's study (1993), in which he observed a student who is labeled with a learning disability and concludes that "that the world was precisely organized for making his disability apparent, that he was the negative achievement of a school system that insisted that everyone do better than everyone else" (p 273). McDermott explains that it is not a child who is the problem, but rather the school system is to blame for highlighting what learning and normalcy should look like for every child, when it is impossible for every individual to be the same. The same goes for parents who feel that they are not doing enough or fighting hard enough for their child, the problem is not them, the special education system is responsible for failing parents. Put it rather simply, wanting to support their children and all the efforts that go into providing such support takes a heavy emotional toll on the mothers themselves: the special education system creates an "abnormal child" and guilty mothers.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the special education system must be revised to acknowledge and find solutions to the barriers Latinx parents, and those who are speakers of other languages, face. Not every parent has the privilege of speaking the language that provides access to information on special education. Not every parent can confidently walk into their child's classroom and ask questions in English. These are not possibilities for many parents, which consequently is a disadvantage to their child because they cannot always have someone who can advocate for them. The barriers described in this research should serve to start a conversation on the aspects of special education that have to change to successfully provide an equitable education to all children.

First off, it is necessary for schools to create advocacy programs for parents. These programs must have professionals present who understand special education terminology and the rights every parent is entitled to. Professionals must also speak the native language of parents or have translation services readily available at any time. This creates a space where parents can go to get more information at any time and helps parents interact with other parents who are going through the same system. Parents can become a network of support to each other, which will help gather more resources for their children. Secondly, parents must be provided with free individual and group therapy sessions where they can talk about the emotional labor that comes with navigating a complex system like special education. Parents should have a space where they talk about their mental health and build their self-advocacy skills through empowerment.

Towards the end of each interview, I asked mothers for a piece of advice they would give to other mothers who were facing similar situations. Taking in what these mothers said, what I want to say to other mothers is that they have the right to demand a quality education for their child. They have the right to demand more if they feel their child needs more support. Although it is hard, especially in a system that perpetually keeps them down, mother's need to let go of the fear to speak up. Like the mothers in this study have done, they need to keep fighting and be involved every step of the way. Throughout these interviews, I've noticed self-blaming being a source of lack of empowerment, which can create a disadvantage for a child. To this I would say that mothers need to realize that they are not to blame for the barriers they face, the school system is for not provide adequate resources for parents to thrive. I want every mother to realize that they do not have to carry a heavy responsibility that is not theirs. Every mother is within their right to demand more from schools that are not doing enough to support them.

The voices of Latinx mothers reveal the irony of special education being that it highlights the difficulties a child faces instead of creating an environment that nurtures it. This system perpetuates the idea that students with disabilities are not normal through constantly creating unrealistic standards that every child is supposed to meet. Instead, we need to look at education as a cultural structure that we all play into. We accept the idea of standards and learning rates when instead we need to “give up our preoccupation with individual performance and examine instead the structure of resources and disappointments made available to people in various institutions” (McDermott et al., 1993, p 295). By examining the educational structure at play here, we shift the responsibility to the school system instead of placing it on a child or their parents. Overall, these findings are meant to display the barriers mothers face as a result of an educational system that does not provide resources to parents and creates an environment where differences strip a child's right to an equitable education.

On a larger scale, the irony of special education system and Latinx mothers reveal the shortcomings of the public educational system in the United States as a whole. As a society, we have internalized that anything that strays from what the educational standards are is abnormal, but we need to examine the educational system that created these standards in the first place. By dismantling what is perceived as normal and abnormal in a child, we can work towards creating an educational system that values an individual child for what they can do rather than what they cannot, and one that creates an equal opportunity for every parent to be involved and present regardless of language differences.

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APPENDIX A: Participant Consent Form

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to unpack how Latinx mothers navigate the special education system in the South Bronx. The aim is to understand the difficulties Latinx mothers face due to language barriers.

Procedure:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Respond to interview questions about your experience.
2. If you are willing to, provide documentation of your child's IEP forms, report cards, **or** letters you are sent from your child's school.

The total time required to complete the interview should be approximately 1-2 hours.

Benefits/Risks to Participant:

Participants will help contribute to the knowledge of the perspectives of Latinx parents who learn to navigate the special education system. This study will be helpful in finding ways to help Latinx parents who face language barriers with this system. Risks include any discomfort or sensitivity you may feel while responding to personal interview questions about your experience.

Voluntary Nature of the Study/Confidentiality:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to complete the study at any point during the experiment or refuse to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable. You may also stop at any time and ask the researcher any questions you may have. Your name will never be connected to your responses in this interview; instead, a pseudonym will be used for identification purposes. Information that would make it possible to identify you or any other participant will never be included in any sort of report. The data will be accessible only to my advisor, but she will not have access to participant names or other identifying information.

Contacts and Questions:

At this time you may ask any questions you may have regarding this study. If you have questions later, you may contact me, Anyi Rescalvo, at 347-248-6089 or arescalv@hamilton.edu, or my faculty supervisor Chenyu Wang at cwang1@hamilton.edu. Questions or concerns about institutional approval should be directed to Jeffrey Ritchie, Interim Chair of the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects, 315-859-4678 or iboard@hamilton.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked any questions I had regarding the procedures and they have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in this study.

Name of Participant ____Date: __________
(please print)

Signature of Participant ____

Age: (Note: You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study. Let the experimenter know if you are under 18 years old.)

Thanks for your participation!

APPENDIX B: Interview Protocol

1. Before your child was enrolled in a special education program, what did you think about special education? Did you know what it was?
2. When did you realize your child needed special education classes? Are there any particular incidents/moments/stories that you'd like to share?
3. What was the process like for you in enrolling your child into special education classes?
4. Was there anyone to help you in this process?
5. Did you find that there was a lack of information available in Spanish?
6. What difficulties did you encounter in the education system because of the lack of Spanish resources?
7. How did you feel because of the lack of Spanish resources that were available to you?
8. What information did you wish was available in Spanish?
9. What were you most worried about when you enrolled your child into a special education program?
10. Have you been able to build connections with your child's teachers?
    a. If not, what makes building a connection difficult?
    b. What kind of support do you think would be helpful for you and your child to go through the special education program?
11. What are some difficulties you still face today?
12. What information or advice would you give to other Latinx mothers who are in a similar situation?
13. What do you see your child doing in 3 years or 5 years? What do you hope for your child?
14. Do you know other Latinx mothers who might be interested in being interviewed?