

Algorithms of Access: Immigrant Mothers Negotiating Educational Resources and Services for  
their Children

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**Abstract:** This article draws upon the narratives of immigrant mothers (e.g., Japanese, Dominican, Filipina) of children with disabilities who reside in New York City. Common to each mother's narrative is a description of her ongoing negotiation between cultural meanings of disability and the American conceptualization of disability and its institutionalized response to disability. In considering these narratives through a disability studies lens, we identify ways in which race, class, culture, and language impact immigrant mothers' access to disability resources and services for themselves and their children.

### Introduction

The back roads between Santa Fe and Taos, New Mexico, lead to the sparsely populated town of Chimayo, home to *El Santuario de Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas*. This Southwestern spiritual center is nestled in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and serves as the destination for the largest annual religious pilgrimage in the United States. Each year during the *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) pilgrims trek along the winding path traveling on knees, walking, limping, or wheeling along in wheelchairs in the performance of a ritual that dates back centuries. Popular legend holds that the sacred ground in Chimayo offers healing—*milagros* (miracles)—to those in need.

On a recent daylong excursion to Taos, I (Linda) drove with my good friend, Ria, in deep discussion about our disabled sons who continue to face obstacles posed by the helping systems purportedly designed to advance their right to be in the world. We considered a stop in Chimayo to offer prayers although neither of us is particularly religious nor prone to pilgrimage. Still, at this stage of parenting, we would welcome miracles that could guarantee educational and social access for our sons whose diagnoses—cerebral palsy (Justin) and autism and cerebral palsy (Andres)—present on their bodies in deliberate ways. With parental encouragement and support, both live beyond the threshold for independence as assessed by educational and service-based agencies. Justin, nearly twenty years older than Andres, is a power wheelchair user who lives independently in an accessible apartment in Albuquerque. Andres is completing his last year of high school and lives at home with his mother. After the school district recommended homeschooling as Andres' only educational option, Ria left her position as a mediator to become her son's full-time classroom aide, thereby ensuring his legally entitled access to public education.

We are, as mothers, well-versed in the legal history of rights for disabled people and often swap parenting episodes about our sons that range from the mundane to the miraculous, informed by our particular knowledge about disability as a site of societal oppression compounded by race, class, gender and geography. The ableist landscape that disability scholars theorize is our lived cartography. Few parents would debate the value of advancing a political

interpretation of disability and yet throughout society “proper” the “ideology of ability remains largely unquestioned” (Siebers, 2008, p. 81). As American-born middle class parents who possess the cultural capital that might otherwise advantage us in our advocacy efforts (Ong-Dean, 2009; Hale, 2010)—it is significant that we have always experienced—and *continue* to experience—societal and institutional obstacles to access that are formidable, unyielding and overwhelming. Access may be a hard-won right, but it is a right that has proven illusive in context.

### Algorithms of Access

The challenges to access described above are not specific to the life stories of these two particular mothers, but rather reflect persistent issues documented within the literature shortly after the passage of The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, 1975—known now as The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act or I.D.E.I.A.—(Lipsky, 1985; 1989; Sonnenschein, 1981; Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, & Kaufman, 1978) until the present (Hale, 2011; Valle, 2009; Kalanyapur & Harry, 1999; Ware, 1999; 2003; 2004). Although I.D.E.I.A. guarantees educational access for children with disabilities, we argue that the degree to which *federal* legislation is realized within the lives of families is dependent upon a complex algorithm of factors within the *local* context.

If we look to civil rights legislation as a point of comparison, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 guaranteed equal rights for African Americans; however, no federal law could ensure swift attitudinal shifts among individuals at the local level where implementation of the law was to occur. (Indeed, the enactment of “affirmative action” policies, for example, functioned as a strategy to aid in local compliance.) Likewise, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) guaranteed access to a “free and appropriate public education” for children with disabilities, but could not ensure attitudinal shifts about disability at the local level where implementation was to occur. Whereas *racism* was acknowledged as a significant issue to address in the implementation of equal rights for African Americans, it is worth noting that no comparable acknowledgement was made in regard to *ableism* as a significant issue to address in the implementation of a “free and appropriate public education” for children with disabilities. The long-standing supposition has been that school professionals designated at the local level to implement special education law do so without bias—an assumption that reflects the assumed objectivity of the medical model upon which special education is grounded. Moreover, it has been largely understood that parents of children with disabilities are a monolithic group with whom school professionals interact without influence from their own belief systems regarding race/ethnicity, language, culture, gender, social class, and ability.

In this paper, we present narratives told by two mothers of children with disabilities who immigrated to New York City as adults (from Japan and the Philippines, respectively) and a third mother (whose parents emigrated to New York City from the Dominican Republic) who lives in the predominantly Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights/Inwood where she was raised. The mothers were identified by direct sampling. We traveled to the interviewees’ homes or a place convenient for them to reach to conduct semi-structured interviews. Interview questions centered, broadly, on the details of parents’ past experiences in finding out about and

gaining access (or not) to services for their children with disabilities. Each interview lasted from 2-3 hours.

The interview data was transcribed separately by each interviewer, then, working together, the authors aggregated the transcribed data. Next we coded data within interviews according to the following categories: Interviewee personal background; child's diagnosis; history of services and education for child with disability; interviewee report of her treatment by service personnel; interviewee report of her treatment by school personnel; treatment by other parents.

In our analysis, we propose that (1) race, class, culture, and language can impact mothers' access to disability resources for themselves and their children, (2) cultural stereotypes may influence interactions between school professionals and parents, and (3) the type and severity of disability matters in negotiating educational access. We argue that the complex interactions among these multiple factors disrupt the assumption of an objective context (where race/ethnicity, culture, gender, language, social class, and beliefs about disability are irrelevant) and create "algorithms of access" that influence negotiations between parents and school professionals.

#### Mother Narratives: Portraits of Access

We begin by contextualizing our discussion within the "narrative portraits" of three mothers of different non-dominant cultural groups in the United States: Takako, a Japanese immigrant, whose son's visual disability has been present since late infancy; Maria, a first-generation Dominican, whose son was identified as having a learning disability during his school years; and Agnes, a Filipina immigrant, whose daughter has Down syndrome.

Takako: "His teachers have been so eager to help!"

Takako, who emigrated to the United States from Japan approximately 20 years ago, is a wardrobe manager for both a ballet and an opera company. Her son's father, from whom she is recently divorced, is Italian. Their now 16 year old son, Matteo, was diagnosed at the age of ten months with retinoblastoma—the most common eye cancer of childhood.

In relating her son's medical history during the interview, Takako maintained a calm, focused, and even tone—reflective of the single-minded, steady focus on her son that she described in managing his initial diagnosis and treatment. Following Matteo's successful treatment, Takako concentrated on finding optimal educational opportunities for her son. She began engaging him in various educational activities, working from the assumption that he had the same abilities as any other child.

At the age of three, Matteo was evaluated for early intervention services by the child development center he attended. The results of this evaluation suggested that Matteo was "behind"; however, Takako did not agree with the assessment, asserting that his performance was most likely affected by the unfamiliar context and people involved in the test administration. She reflected, "I was not ready to admit that he was different." In fact, Takako sought to enroll

Matteo in a private, five day Pre-K program for typically developing children, in lieu of continuing one-on-one services from the Jewish Guild for the Blind. “After all,” Takako recalled, “he had learned to ride a bicycle!” She described the director as “very welcoming” and amenable to the idea of having Matteo in her program. Takako recalled, “She really wanted to work with him”—yet, it is worth noting, that Matteo was permitted only to attend one day per week unlike his able-bodied peers who attended Monday through Friday.

Takako went on to describe Matteo’s educational experiences in public school (elementary, middle school, high school) as largely positive. She noted that Matteo has always had the assistance of vision therapists who not only worked with his classroom teachers, but also functioned in an advocacy role for the family. These therapists have followed Matteo for years and maintain a strong relationship with him and his mother.

By Takako’s account, teachers at all of the schools “have been so eager to help.” It is worth considering, however, that the nature of Matteo’s disability, his ability to compensate for his disability, and the assistance he receives from vision therapists work together to create a context in which little is actually required of classroom teachers to include him. In fact, Takako retracted somewhat from her original stance by revealing later in the interview that films shown in the classroom, for example, are somewhat inaccessible to Matteo because he “doesn’t expect to be able to see it, but only to hear what is going on.” (In other words, it seems that Matteo’s willingness to compensate—instead of asking for modifications, such as having someone describe the visual aspect of what he is hearing—relieves teachers from having to think ahead about how to accommodate his disability-related needs within the classroom.) Moreover, Takako admitted that Matteo engages in a lot of guesswork in class and wonders if his teachers know how much energy he expends on “passing” (i.e., faking it) in order to blend into the classroom like his able-bodied peers.

Over the years, Matteo’s efforts in the classroom have been noticed and rewarded. Takako proudly noted that her son was *asked* to be one of the first students at a new and progressive middle school and then again at a new inquiry-based college preparatory public school that infuses technology and arts throughout the curriculum. He is successfully integrated at this school as the only student with a diagnostic label of “visual impairment.”

Maria: “Am I in a precinct?”

Maria, a New York City Teaching Fellow, is completing her master’s degree in bilingual special education. Born in the United States to parents who emigrated from the Dominican Republic, Maria was raised speaking both Spanish and English. She currently resides in the Dominican neighborhood of Washington Heights/Inwood where she grew up and attended public school. She lives with her 18 year-old son, Carlos, who was identified as having a learning disability in first grade and dropped out of school at the age of 16. As a New York City Teaching Fellow, Maria teaches high school in a self-contained special education class for students with learning disabilities. Thus, she has the dual perspective that comes with being a mother of a child who received special education services *and* a special education teacher in the public schools.

Maria was largely unaware that Carlos had any learning issues until his Catholic school kindergarten teacher called her in for a meeting. She recalled her bewilderment at the suggestion that “something was wrong” with her child—after all, she could name many things that Carlos did very well at home—as well as the anger she felt toward the teacher who concluded the meeting by stating, “You gotta get your kid to a psychologist.” Maria brushed off the incident, thinking that the teacher simply did not like her or her child.

Maria enrolled Carlos in a public first grade where he had difficulty learning to read. He repeated first grade with a teacher Maria described as “very loving and so nice.” This teacher explained that Carlos seemed to have “wires that were not connecting” and suggested that Maria take him for eye training in an effort to remediate his reading skills. A subsequent psycho-educational evaluation deemed Carlos eligible to receive resource services as a “learning disabled student.”

After a year in general education with resource services, Maria enrolled Carlos in another public elementary school known for being child-centered. She explained, “He did okay there. He was a really good public speaker, but continued to struggle with reading. He had good relationships with adults in the school.” She recalled these years as a time when Carlos seemed socially competent and engaged in school.

Maria’s countenance and tone notably shifted as she began to talk about Carlos’ transition to middle school—a period fraught with difficulties. He attended a neighborhood middle school for only a few months. Maria described the “Puerto Rican principal” at this school as “the *nastiest* person who ever talked about my son.” She recounted how this principal took her into her office and said, “I’m going to show you *evidence!*!” She pulled out one of Carlos’s notebooks and kept repeating, “He is doing *nothing*. Nothing!” Maria recalled thinking, “Am I in a precinct? You are talking to me like my son has been *charged* with something!!” She was determined not to cry in front of the principal, but when she left the office she “cried like a baby.” She recalled, “It was *horrible*. Horrible! That was the beginning of the end...I had nobody to talk to. I kept thinking—‘What am I going to do? What am I going to do with my kid?’ The assistant principal was Dominican and she did help me because I was feeling like my son was a *criminal*.” Maria decided to withdraw her son and re-enroll him at another public middle school; however, his experience at the next school was troubled, as well. Carlos dropped out of high school as soon as he could. Maria hopes that VESID (Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities) will help her son get training and a job.

During the interview, Maria was quick to point out how much Dominican parents want their children to be educated. She became teary talking about how she feels when she overhears teachers talking about “how *those* parents don’t care” about their children. She said, “When kids drop out of school, Dominican parents just cry and cry. When these parents come to me as a professional, I wish I had the magic answer. Parents just don’t know what to do when their kids are failing in school...I know a lot has to do with how the kid is being *treated* in school. Think about what happens to a kid when all he hears from teachers is that he is not going to *be* anything in life!”

Reflecting upon her years advocating for Carlos within the public school system, Maria remarked, “People see me...as a young, single, uneducated mom. The fact that I am getting my second master’s is my secret thing. I speak like everyone speaks and I am proud of it. School people sized me up. I could tell by the way that they spoke to me. White mothers are treated differently. If a White child has a learning disability, it’s real. That’s something we need to work with. If it is a Latino or Black child, it’s just that they are *bad kids*.”

Agnes: “I talked to the mothers at Riverside Park.”

Agnes, who emigrated from the Philippines to the United States in 1991, met and married her Irish American husband a few years after her arrival. Although they had decided “for financial reasons” not to have children, Agnes became pregnant at age 39. Their now 15 year old daughter, Katie was diagnosed *in utero* with Down syndrome. Agnes recalled how she anguished over telling her husband; however, he reassured her that “it doesn’t matter, we will have the child no matter what.”

Throughout the interview, Agnes repeatedly referenced her ongoing search for information, services, and appropriate educational settings for her daughter. Given that Katie’s disability was known at birth, Agnes recalled receiving information from the hospital about support groups for parents of children with Down syndrome. Later on, information about early intervention services came to Agnes through her husband who visited their city councilwoman’s office in search of assistance for Katie. As a result of this fact-finding mission, Katie began receiving early intervention services (e.g., speech/language, occupational and physical therapies) three times a week.

Unlike her husband who sought out information from organizations, Agnes relied instead upon neighborhood playgrounds as her source of knowledge. While Katie engaged in play, Agnes sought out mothers of children with (visible) disabilities to talk to about services and educational opportunities. For example, when she reached the decision that Katie should go to preschool “to be with other kids,” Agnes consulted “the mothers in Riverside Park” who recommended “the best school” (albeit with a waiting list)—a private inclusive family center with a commitment to educating children with and without disabilities. She eventually enrolled Katie in this preschool—and true to the assessment of the “mothers in Riverside Park”—had a very positive experience.

Agnes recalled that finding a kindergarten for Katie was not nearly so easy. The administration at the neighborhood elementary school informed her that they “did not have services” for Katie, so she would have to attend an elementary school out of the neighborhood that did have services. In light of this news, Agnes turned to a “playground mom” of twins—one with Down syndrome and the other without. She advised Agnes not to send Katie to the suggested alternative school, but rather to a well-known “good school” for meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities. Agnes explained: “We were initially denied access to [the good school.] They told us they couldn’t take her and they put her at [the other school] which is further away.” Unhappy with this situation, Agnes returned to the trusted staff at Katie’s preschool who directed them to a lawyer who succeeded in securing access for Katie at the desired school.

Although Katie was included in a general education kindergarten for two years, Agnes moved her in first grade to a self-contained special education setting because of the lower student-teacher ratio. She recalled that this class had “some [students] in wheelchairs, other ones with Down, and others with disabilities that you can’t tell.” Throughout Katie’s elementary school years, Agnes remained satisfied. She told us, “I am very happy about the teachers...yes, very happy. There is no problem there.”

Reflecting upon Katie’s upcoming high school years, Agnes shared that she and her husband have already begun thinking about possible options. “My husband started to talk about going somewhere else...but later on he decided to stay here because the services here can be easily reached.” In considering the possibilities for Katie’s secondary education, Agnes returned to her old friend from the playground who had given her advice about elementary schools. She recommended the largest private, inclusive educational organization for children with special needs in New York City where her own adolescent daughter with Down syndrome attends. Agnes seemed unsure about this school as an option for Katie: “Yeah, but I don’t know. My husband doesn’t like...that she would go on the bus...he wants to take her to school and pick her up from school.” With a look of worry on her face, Agnes then mentioned that they just found out that they have to apply for guardianship when Katie turns 18. The realization of the unending quest for information and resources into the foreseeable future appeared to weigh heavily on Agnes.

## Discussion

In order to make sense of the “narrative portraits” presented above, it is relevant to first consider the larger cultural context within which interactions between school professionals and parents take place (Ware, 1994; 1999; 2003; Valle, 2010). The idea that negotiations occur within a hermetically sealed environment free from cultural influence is at best naïve. All of us receive cultural messages through multiple sources—media (print, television, social), national histories, families, shared community experiences, to name a few. We need only look to recent news stories for examples of cultural stereotyping. Of late, Jeremy Lin, the surprise savior for the New York Knicks, has appeared regularly in both national and international headlines. It is of interest that journalists rarely refer to Lin’s prowess on the basketball court without also identifying him as Harvard-educated and Chinese. Serving to distinguish Lin from the typical (and stereotyped) professional basketball player, these descriptors perpetuate a dominant white racist framing of Asian Americans as belonging to (1) “the model minority” (a point we take up in greater depth in the following section) and (2) one large homogeneous Asian heritage. (Lin is, in fact, Taiwanese-American.) Moreover, racist images continue to appear in connection with Lin’s news coverage, such as the CBS airing of a fan’s sign featuring Lin’s face over a broken fortune cookie with the words “The Knicks Good Fortune” and a USA Today cartoon (February 23, 2012) that refers to Lin as “Moo Goo Guy Slam.” It is noteworthy that language mocking at the expense of Asian Americans is not uncommon in the United States and is “usually linked to societal discrimination against the racialized ‘others’”(Chou & Feagin, 2008, p. 11).

We do not mean to imply that school professionals may be more susceptible to these kinds of cultural messages than anyone else nor that members of non-dominant cultural groups

have no stereotypes of their own about dominant cultural groups or one another. Rather, we argue that it is important to *acknowledge* how cultural understandings can influence the supposedly objective process of negotiation between professionals and parents under IDEIA—as we see within the narratives of Takako, Agnes, and Maria.

### Cultural Stereotyping: Ignorance to Racism

In *The Myth of the Model Minority*, Chou and Feagin (2008) assert that a racial hierarchy exists in the United States predicated on a “white-to-black continuum of status and privilege with whites at the highly privileged end, blacks at the unprivileged end, and other racial groups typically placed by whites somewhere in between.” According to the authors, the American public perceives Asian Americans as a “model minority”—an (imposed) identity most often associated with strong educational values, academic excellence, and high college enrollment. Chou and Feagin suggest that the stereotype of a “model minority” is problematic on a number of levels:

First, it groups all Asian national cultures together...Second, assuming that people of Asian descent are culturally inclined to value education tends to be linked for whites to the argument that certain other racial or ethnic groups are culturally devoid of such a value...A third weakness of the typical “Asian culture” argument is that it ignores the very substantial and continuing negative impacts that white hostility and discrimination have had on Asian Americans (2008, p. 106).

Nonetheless, it is worth considering, the possible influence that a “model minority” stereotype may have upon the interactions with school professionals that Takako and Agnes describe.

Takako, quiet, poised and self-restrained, fits the stereotype many Americans hold about the Japanese; yet, there is no passivity or deference in the relentless way she pursues educational access for her son. She describes school professionals as “very welcoming” and “so eager to help” with Matteo’s integration into general education settings—the kind of overall positive experience that is missing from much of the literature about parents and professionals. It is possible that Takako’s ethnicity contributes favorably to her interactions with school professionals. Given that the “model minority” stereotype constructs Asian Americans as valuing education above most other cultural groups, it seems likely that Takako possesses the advantage of being perceived as highly committed to the education of her child.

It is also worth considering America’s admiration of Japan’s excellence in business and technology—as if it were the site of “some sort of external oriental wisdom, inaccessible to western experience...far across the seas like a rare and forbidden spice (Montgomery, 1992, p. 276). As a Japanese American, it could be that Takako is seen as someone to be respected for her intelligence and ingenuity. For example, it is of interest that Takako does not report being admonished by any professional to “be realistic” about expectations for her child—as many other mothers of children with disabilities report. Furthermore, it is possible that Matteo’s Asian heritage contributes to a favorable perception of his potential for academic success.



Agnes, a Filipina American, is also subject to the “model minority” stereotype that homogenizes diverse Asian and Pacific Islander groups. With the exception of having had to hire a lawyer to gain access into a desired elementary school, Agnes is likewise positive about her experiences with school professionals. It is worth considering how much influence that the cultural characterization of Filipinos as hardworking, honest, and honorable people might have upon the willingness of school professionals to engage with Agnes—the origins of which can be traced back to the Philippine government’s construction and promotion of a positive image for Filipino migrant laborers (Guevarra, 2009). It is noteworthy that Agnes searches out other mothers of children with disabilities rather than professionals, thereby minimizing her experiences of negotiation. Her choice to seek out mothers in informal spaces (rather than professionals in organized spaces) could be reflective of Agnes’ challenges in speaking and understanding English and/or a cultural deference to authority. Recently, a Filipina student remarked to one of the authors, “Yes, we are taught to *always* respect authority. We are taught not to cause a disturbance, not to cause conflict or argue. We are taught to be very quiet...” (private conversation at the student teacher orientation, January 25, 2012). Indeed, it is Agnes’ husband who exercises his white male privilege to engage professionals “to get things done” for their daughter.

Dominicans, on the other hand, historically have not been the beneficiaries of “positive” stereotypes of the kind imposed upon Asian Americans of late. In a graduate class about racial and ethnic identity formation in young children, for example, my (Gay’s) students were asked to anonymously report the ethnic group with which they primarily identified. Given a list of all ethnic groups reported by the class, each student was then asked to write descriptions which jumped to mind upon reading the name of each group. All lists were submitted anonymously in an effort to achieve authenticity—the kind that, one student revealed, in a move of unabashed honesty, by writing next to the category Dominican—“loud, driving flashy cars, drug-dealers, playing loud music, welfare queens.”

As stated previously, all of us, school professionals included, are exposed to cultural stereotypes that circulate through a variety of sources (e.g., print media, television, film, music, family and community, social media, personal experience)—yet we are most certainly not always aware of the origins of such cultural framings nor the difference between fact and stereotype. For example, the origin of the “welfare queen” stereotype can be traced to the collapse of the manufacturing industry in the 1990s that left “tens of thousands of Dominican workers” unemployed, creating “economic distress... particularly among Dominican women” (Hernandez & Rivera-Batiz, 2000, p. 44). In the workplace, Dominican women report having to contend with cultural stereotyping as the “mamasita” —a negative image akin to the jezebel stereotype of African American women “...[that is] part of the race-gender-sexual exoticization and ‘symbolic taint’ of the urban ghetto and its inhabitants” (Lopez, 2003, p. 186). Moreover, the New York City police department notably made national headlines when dozens of police officers posted inflammatory remarks on Facebook about West Indian parade-goers (including Dominicans) —describing them “animals” and “savages” (New York Times, December 11, 2011).

Guarnizo's (1994) observation that Dominicans tend to live, work and socialize with other Dominicans offers at least a partial explanation as to how these stereotypes are galvanized and perpetuated. Goris-Rosario (1994) further explains,

...Dominicans who work outside their community are no more integrated into the larger New York City community than those who work among Dominicans. Dominicans working outside their ethnic enclaves, although more likely to have non-Latino employers and supervisors and to speak English in their workplaces, work primarily around other Latinas/os with whom they speak Spanish and sustain ethno-racial norms.... Thus they are able to sustain and reproduce pre-immigration ethno-racial identities (p. 186).

Taken together, these factors make for a scenario in which there is little or no opportunity for majority groups to intermingle and socialize with Dominicans first-hand, presenting few opportunities for dispelling and dismantling stereotypical images of Dominicans.

Thus, the stereotypes described above may, in part, account for the unsavory nature of Maria's experiences with other-than-Dominican personnel. Her description of being made to feel "like a criminal....in a precinct" reflects Collins' (1990) assertion of the ways pejorative images and stereotypes of Dominican and other Latina women "justify the exploitation of women who are deemed racially inferior" (p. 18) Maria also related how a White male special education colleague regularly communicates contempt for Dominican special education students by being "nasty to the kids" under the guise of "being funny". She painfully described how these students experience his remarks as harassing and wistfully mused, "This story represents a lot of the stuff I've seen... a person's position in the world *does* matter. There *is* bias against these [Dominican] kids. I am a self-contained special education teacher. And I can tell you that these kids are *great*... It has nothing to do with good and bad kids. It is how they are *treated*."

#### Ableist Attitudes and Negotiating Access

In much the same way that cultural stereotyping circulates within American society, so do ableist notions of disability. If we contrast the low visibility of people with disabilities in all aspects of society to the glut of disability *representations* within our culture (e.g., film, novels, children's literature, television, animation, history, humor, language, print media), it seems likely that the majority of non-disabled people *think* they understand what it means to be disabled based upon representations of disability rather than first-hand accounts or actual relationships with people who have disabilities (Valle & Connor, 2010; Slee, 2004; Ware, 2001). Again, we do not mean to imply that school professionals are more prone to misconceptions about people with disabilities than anyone else; however, we do believe that they are not immune to misconceptions simply because special education is *thought* to be an "objective and scientific" process.

In keeping with I.D.E.I.A. procedures, a student's eligibility for special education services is determined by the administration of a psycho-educational evaluation. If results indicate that a student meets the criteria for one (or more) of the 13 categories of disability served under I.D.E.I.A., school professionals and parents meet to determine "the least restrictive

environment” (LRE)—a continuum of settings ranging from full inclusion to residential placement—in which to best meet the student’s educational and social needs. However, we contend that LRE negotiations are based less upon the individual manifestation of characteristics delineated within each of the 13 categories of disability and more upon the *perception* of those disabilities as being more or less appropriate for the general education setting.

Ableist attitudes can—and do—contribute to negotiations about LRE. What happens in negotiations directly reflects how professionals and parents *understand* disability. We challenge the assumption that school professionals necessarily operate objectively—immune to cultural messages about disability—and assert instead that access has less to do with the principle of LRE and more to do with how much a disability requires able-bodied people to *understand* and *do*. If we return to the narratives told by Takako, Agnes, and Maria, it appears that school professionals perceive students with disabilities as follows: 1) *delicately disabled*—students whose disabilities present in ways that non-disabled people easily acknowledge and grasp (e.g., visual and auditory impairments) and, depending upon where their disabilities fall along the continuum of mild to severe, can sometimes “pass” among the non-disabled; 2) *deliberately disabled*—students who are unable to “pass” as non-disabled ever because they move through the world marked as deliberate with every breath they take (e.g., physical disabilities, Down syndrome, autism); and 3) *defiantly disabled*—students who defy the rules of “appropriate behavior” because their needs conflict with the “normal” presentation we expect and are willing to accommodate (e.g., ADHD, learning disabilities, behavioral challenges).

Takako’s son, Matteo, clearly reflects the *delicately disabled*. Takako’s ability to negotiate access to general education for her son is enhanced by the fact that his particular disability is not only easily understood, but also generates empathic responses from others given its origins in childhood cancer. Moreover, it is significant that 1) Matteo’s low-incidence visual disability entitled him to vision therapists who have assisted his teachers and effectively advocated for him and his mother with continuity over the years, and 2) he is oftentimes able to “pass” in academic situations and compensates on his own. Taken together, these factors position Matteo as a model student for an inclusive setting—primarily because he requires little of his teachers and his “inclusion” undoubtedly leaves everyone feeling good about a successful integration of a “visually impaired student.” Thus, it is unsurprising that Takako concludes, “His teachers have been so eager to help.”

With a diagnosis of Down syndrome, Katie, the daughter of Agnes, could be considered *deliberately disabled*. Her embodiment marks her in the world as qualitatively different from non-disabled people, precluding any chance of “passing” among them. Agnes, like Takako, is not in a position of debating the presence of disability in her child; however, the agreed-upon acknowledgement of Katie’s deliberate disability comes with traditional ableist notions about competence. At one point in the interview, Agnes refers to Katie as “having an IQ of 75”—a “truth” that she accepts without critique. In seeking access for her daughter, Agnes seeks advice from other mothers (whose children are “like” hers by virtue of *their* deliberate disabilities). Other than negotiating access to “a good elementary school” closer to home for Katie, Agnes does not talk about negotiating with school professionals about access at any other time. She appears accepting of (and uncritical about) Katie’s lack of access to general education beyond kindergarten. She focuses instead upon the capacity of a smaller segregated setting to provide

“more attention” for her daughter rather than considering the least restrictive environment in which to provide her with an appropriate education. It is of interest that Agnes seems to regard Katie’s *deliberate disability* as more of a family issue that *she* must solve rather than an issue of educational access.

Of the three mothers, Maria is the one who reports substantial and ongoing difficulties negotiating educational access for her child. As a student labeled as having a “learning disability”, Carlos is perceived as *defiantly disabled*. Given that his educational needs do not conform to traditional expectations of schooling, Carlos’ success depends upon his teacher’s willingness to “do something” to provide access to the general education curriculum. Unlike the disabilities of Matteo and Katie that are unequivocally acknowledged, the manifestation of Carlos’ learning disability is subject to interpretation by school professionals—leaving Carlos highly vulnerable to the consequences of their unexamined ableist attitudes about competence. Maria describes how the significance of Carlos’ *defiant disability* shifts depending upon the school context, *who* is perceiving Carlos’ difficulties, and to *what* his difficulties are attributed. Thus, Maria’s account of her ability to negotiate access for her son is rife with challenges—and ends with Carlos dropping out of a school inhospitable to meeting his educational needs.

### Further Considerations

We hope that readers will recognize that this article is the first in what promises to be further exploration of the nuances in each of the portraits of access we presented. Due to the limits of space we have restricted our discussion to only a handful of the themes we will continue to explore. For example, given the unique positions that culture affords when intersecting with disability how might our analysis inform the systems that shape the lives of students and their families? Can cultural competency impact the xenophobia at play in the face of the credentialing process that casts parents as a monolithic group—to be managed by professionals who are not exempt from misconceptions about culture and the families they serve? We also acknowledge that presenting our typology poses the risk of simple categorization, or the blunting of the existing 13 categories. What we aim to tease out over time is not so much who belongs within our categories, but rather, to show how society unconsciously construes those distinctions on first sight. Our typology provides a tool for educators to utilize in unpacking their understanding of ableism in schools and society. As Maria wistfully noted, “It has nothing to do with good and bad kids. It is how they are treated.” We fully intend to wrestle with the degree to which federal legislation is or is not realized within the complexity of cultural contexts we view as algorithms of access.

### Conclusion

In this article we explored specific mechanisms, practices and elements which actively prevent working-class, immigrant families whose first language is other than English from having the same access to services for children with disabilities as do their middle and upper middle class, non-immigrant counterparts. The narratives we presented point to institutionalized stereotyping of ethnic/cultural groups by public school personnel—a fact that immigrant mothers believe to be influenced by the ethnic/cultural background of educators. Within this collection of narratives, we revealed how the *type* of disability significantly influences the nature of

professional response that immigrant mothers and their children with disabilities can expect to receive. Our research contributes to the growing literature on the ways that disability complicates motherhood, and further we consider the ways that race/ethnicity, culture, gender, language and social class imprint that experience. We believe that much remains to be mined by exploring the tensions, gaps and complexities that mothers experience as they seek access to educational provision for their disabled children.

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