




## Beyond Bilingualism: The Education of Immigrant Children

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### Cover Page Footnote

Elizabeth Ijalba, PhD, is Associate Professor, Linguistics and Communication Disorders, Queens College, CUNY. She mentors students through the Bilingual Biliteracy Lab. Her research focuses on dyslexia, autism, and parent-coaching. She co-edited-authored *Language, Culture, and Education: Challenges of Diversity in the United States*, Cambridge University Press. In 2023 she was awarded the Rehabilitation International Centennial Award for Significant Contributions for her work in advancing the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities worldwide. Dr. Ijalba is a Career Success Fellow at Queens College, CUNY, and is invested in bringing human rights, diversity-equity-inclusion, and cultural humility into clinical settings and education. Email: elijalba@gmail.com

## *Book Review*

# Beyond Bilingualism: The Education of Immigrant Children

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### **Book reviewed:**

Cioè-Peña, M. (2021). *(M)othering Labeled Children: Bilingualism and Disability in the Lives of Latinx Mothers*. Multilingual Matters. (257 pages) Formats: Hardback, Ebook(PDF), Ebook(EPUB) **ISBN: 9781800411272**. \$39.95  
<https://doi.org/10.21832/CIOE1289>

*(M)othering Labeled Children*, by María Cioè-Peña, is the type of ethnographic research that opens the door on the lives of Spanish-speaking Latina immigrant mothers, their children, their aspirations, and their struggles. The author shares with us her work with ten immigrant mothers and their children in Brooklyn, New York, while focusing on interviews (*testimonios*) and observations with three mothers. In reading their *testimonios*, we meet the mothers and their children at home while they are sitting in their living rooms, cooking in their kitchens, picking up their kids from school, or completing homework. These mothers weave in and out of their thoughts, sharing their emotions, the dreams that brought them to Brooklyn, New York, and the ways they sustain those dreams. We are reminded that these mothers left behind everything that was dear to them, including their language, community, friends, and extended family. Some mothers live with the pain and heartbreak of leaving other children behind. Family separation is a reality for many immigrant mothers.

Dr. Cioè-Peña begins by asking, “Why Mothers? Why *These* Mothers?” (p. 24). We learn that the author is the daughter of immigrants, and she reflects on the linguistic fractures and social constructions within her own family, where one sister only spoke English, their mother only spoke Spanish, and the author was bilingual and felt she was the glue that could hold everyone together. The author’s experiences within an immigrant family provide her with a platform to work toward her career as a bilingual teacher, knowledge about the inequities within the U.S. education system, and a basis for her later work in academia and as an author. Her aim in this book is not only

to include the experiences of immigrant, monolingual Spanish-speaking Latinx women, but also to shift the narrative from one that views them through deficit lenses: broken English, broken children, broken households, parts of broken systems, to one that acknowledges the ways in which they support their

children's academic growth through means that are not in keeping with traditional values but are no less meaningful. (p. 32)

Through their words, we learn that these mothers migrated to the United States because they wanted a better life for their families. In doing so, they live for their children; they project their own dreams and hopes through the small steps their children take, through their hugs, and through their words of love and comfort. But we are also reminded that their children are labeled and "othered" because they speak a language other than English at home, they bring traditions that are not part of school curricula, and they have learning differences identified as "dis/ability" by the school system.

We learn that the U.S. education system promotes low expectations for the children of immigrant mothers. Their children are not deemed capable of learning two languages, even though they start out as emergent bilinguals and language brokers who can translate for their parents. Through education policies that support monolingualism, schools become complicit in denying the basic human right of a mother tongue to the children of immigrants. We learn that mothers are advised that their children must only learn English. Their children are labeled as English language learners and often as students with disabilities.

One must wonder why, in the U.S. public school system, bilingualism is taken away from the children of immigrants, while in private schools bilingualism is taught and valued. We must wonder why the protections afforded under the Bilingual Education Act (1967) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1975) fail to make available a free and appropriate public education for the children of immigrants. We learn that the children of immigrants are often labeled with disabilities, placed in English-only classes, and deemed to require specialized services. And we wonder why there is such a high incidence of disabilities among children who are racialized and marginalized through their linguistic and cultural differences. We are reminded that labels can change how mothers perceive their children; labels can be disempowering. Schools can be disempowering and blind to the needs of immigrant families and their children. Through this analysis, we realize that immigrant families face deeper hurdles than their linguistic rights; their right to exist as a family is what is at stake.

Cioè-Peña reminds us that immigrant mothers are not perceived by schools as invested in the education of their children because they do not conform to Eurocentric expectations about parental school involvement. They do not attend PTA meetings, or volunteer at their children's schools, or participate in fundraisings, or communicate in writing with teachers, or attend teacher-parent conferences, or help their children with their English homework. Immigrant mothers are not deemed to value education because they themselves often have limited schooling or are perceived as having limited schooling. The simple fact of not being literate in English can contribute to the perception of not valuing education. Moreover, through these stories we learn that Spanish-speaking immigrant mothers are not deemed to be making an effort to learn English, even though they take every opportunity to enroll in English courses or to learn from cassette recordings or from their own children. They may be perceived as not appreciating the traditions in U.S. culture while wanting to bring their own ways and

their own language(s) into the schools. And yet these immigrant mothers state the reality that their children are U.S. citizens, and as such, English is their birthright, while Spanish is optional. Over and over, these immigrant mothers place their children's future before their own needs.

Most importantly, these mothers and their children are part of an immigrant group in 2016, a time in this country when immigrants were persecuted and increasingly victimized. The unity of their families is about to be threatened in alarming ways. These mothers are living at a time when immigrant children will be pulled away and separated from their families—a most infamous time in the history of the United States through a set of government policies targeting immigrants: zero tolerance, public-charge rule, changes to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and Temporary Protected Status. These policy changes impacted on the physical and mental health of immigrant families and their children (Torres et al., 2018; Vesely et al., 2019). However, when we think of 2016, we must remember that it was not the first time that children were pulled from their mothers' arms in the United States—children were pulled away from their Black mothers during slavery, and from their Indigenous mothers for many generations, and from their Latina mothers in modern times. We can also wonder if taking away a child's right to their mother tongue or home language is a form of pulling that child away from their mother, their loved ones, and their culture.

In this study, we are also shown that the education system in New York City can be unpredictable and difficult to understand. Even trained teachers cannot predict structural and pedagogical changes, as Cioè-Peña recalls from her initial years as a bilingual teacher in New York. The author recalls how school curricula were arbitrarily changed and did not conform to basic tenets in bilingual education; teachers became enforcers of the system, rather than educators. We learn from the immigrant mothers in this study that bilingual programs are not available or can be shut down; their children can be placed in special education programs where only English is mandated; they can be shuffled from one school to another, or from one classroom to another, or from one teacher to another. Their children can be at the mercy of IEPs that mothers do not understand; and the mothers' participation in decisions about their children is often brokered by older bilingual siblings and not by professionals within the schools.

Immigrant mothers face conflicts and challenges that are heartbreaking, but they never lose hope. Their eyes and dreams are set on their children's future, on hope, and not on the disabilities imposed on them, not on the labels in IEPs, and not on their language differences. These immigrant mothers share with us a message of love for their children and personal sacrifice. We can only be humbled by their strength and resolve.

Individual circumstances can be better understood when contextualized within theoretical frameworks and historical trajectories. This research study is framed within three main theoretical constructs. One is the intersectionality that influences the lives of Spanish-speaking Latina immigrant mothers—that is, the merging of oppressive roles imposed by society—those of being a woman, a Spanish-speaking Latina, an immigrant mother, the shackles of undocumented legal status, and the grim prospects of intergenerational poverty. A second construct is linguistic human rights. That is, the

right of every individual to communicate in one's native language with loved ones and to learn about one's culture. Cioè-Peña should also remind us that schools enforce Standard or General American English not only at the expense of other languages (i.e., Spanish), but also to suppress dialects or linguistic variation (i.e., Black American English). Finally, a third framework is the social construction of dis/ability—that is, the perceived notion that differences in ability are deficits leading to the oppression of individuals labeled as “dis/abled.” The immigrant mothers and children in this study move within the confines of these constructs—the multilayered forms of oppression imposed on them, the denial of their home language, and the othering by labels of dis/ability.

In framing the experiences of immigrant mothers and their children within these theoretical pillars, Cioè-Peña provides us with a holistic picture, a deeper understanding of their individual lives and those of their children. We can see them within society and within their historical timelines. We can see them as changers and mobilizers, as leaders and framers, and we can be hopeful and reassured that immigrant mothers can fulfill their dreams and hopes for their children. We can be optimistic that immigrant mothers are an engine for change in the United States. We can be better because of their struggle.

A word of caution is that this study is based on a very small sample of Spanish-speaking immigrant mothers. Although the author sets up this study with ten mothers, only three are invited as *testimonialistas*, where we can learn about their experiences. The methodology is not clearly stated, and Dr. Cioè-Peña does not explain why only three mothers were the main participants in this analysis. Thus, the experiential component in this study is limited to a subset of the original sample. We cannot generalize the experiences of these three mothers to all immigrant Latina mothers. However, we can learn and gain reflection from what they share through their *testimonios*. The writing is masterful, clearly stating the complexity in the lives of these mothers and their children and the social and educational challenges they must face.

*(M)othering Labeled Children*, by María Cioè-Peña, is a must-read for all teachers, and particularly for teachers in training and for professionals teaching the children of immigrant parents. Anyone with an interest in education or the sociology and welfare of immigrant families must read this inspiring book.

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