



Published July 21, 2023

The Role of Ableism in Language Education in U.S. Schools

What is ableism? How does it relate to language education?

Ableism is discrimination that positions enabled bodyminds as superior to dis/abled bodyminds. Bodymind(s), a disabilities studies term, refers to the interrelated nature of the body and the mind, and how they often act as one. Critical language education research acknowledges how student positionality (e.g., race, class, documentation status) and home language(s) impact access to language maintenance (i.e., multilingual) programs. Missing from the discourse is ableism and, specifically, the presence of ableism, how it is promoted and upheld, within language education through inclusion/exclusion practices. Ableism influences perceptions of students' linguistic abilities, and, subsequently, placement decisions (e.g., transitional bilingual special education, monolingual special education [SPED] with English language supports), often resulting in decreased home language(s) instruction across all grades.

Which students are most affected by ableism in language education?

Racialized students with dis/abilities (SWDs) and their families experience compounding oppressions due to the intersection of power and privilege around race and dis/ability. Furthermore, linguistically-minoritized SWDs, including deaf learners, encounter marginalization stemming from society's promotion of normative and hegemonic ideals, resulting in physical and intellectual exclusion across institutional structures (e.g., healthcare, education). Thus, emergent bi/multilinguals labeled as disabled (EBLADs), racialized students dually-classified as English Learners (ELs), and SWDs are most affected.

How does ableism result in linguistic exclusion?

The devaluation of dis/abled bodyminds (i.e., ableism) limits EBLAD access to multilingual programs, usually under the guise of support, across all disability categories but especially high incidence classifications (e.g., Specific Learning Disability, Speech-Language Impairment). Language educators are regularly absent/excluded from SPED discussions further parsing student needs across disciplinary silos. Conversely, language educators often prioritize the linguistic needs of "at risk" students (e.g., ELs, "newcomers") before considering SPED. Unfortunately, this prioritization infringes on students' rights and upholds the stigmatization of dis/abilities and SPED while promoting ideologies of bilingualism as elite/enrichment. Consequently, most EBLADs are placed in English-only SPED programs under the misconception that bilingualism is counterproductive to their academic growth. Thus, post-diagnosis/classification, teachers forefront academic achievement over linguistic sustainability regardless of the research or individual student need. Ultimately, the absence of intersectional policies and settings denies millions of students access to the educational *and* linguistic spaces needed for socio-academic growth.

What about bilingual SPED programs?

Bilingual SPED programs represent a diminutive portion of all bilingual programs; are often housed in more restrictive/segregated settings; and center English acquisition, not bilingualism (i.e., Transitional versus Dual Language Bilingual Education). These settings rarely reflect/support



Published July 21, 2023

students' existing linguistic practices *and* long-term needs. This dissonance sustains the long-standing practice of dichotomizing language and disability needs which is, ultimately, a mechanism of ableism.

How does ableism impact families?

School agents' placement of students with disability-related needs in unsupportive general education and/or unsupportive bilingual settings leads caretakers to reject bilingual instruction for their children. Parents often feel frustrated by assessment outcomes and /depictions of their EBLAD's academic performance, unaware of potential mismatches between institutional (normative) expectations and individual capacity/ability. Such miscommunications and misunderstandings lead to increased English-only placements because academic stagnation is attributed to bilingual instruction rather than inappropriate instructional approaches/support. However, when placed in English-only settings, EBLADs' opportunities to learn are greatly reduced, alongside linguistically-minoritized caretakers' ability to interact with school-agents, and advocate for, and participate in, their child's education. Therefore, opting for English-only-instruction resolves immediate frustrations while introducing long-term ones arising from the linguistic disconnect between home and school.

Why is ableism relevant for future research and practice?

Equity scholarship across language education is growing; however, attention to the role of normativity in gatekeeping remains limited. Therefore, future research should include investigations of (1) how perceptions of normativity influence understandings/theorizations of proficiency, standards and assessments; (2) pedagogical practices centering SWDs as language learners; and (3) how disability designations impact student participation levels in, and consequently impact the growth of, language programming. To create truly inclusive spaces, we must center/produce anti-ableist scholarship that codifies how language education discourse and pedagogical practices enforce hegemonic perceptions of who *can be* multilingual.

Further reading:

- Cioè-Peña, M. (2021). *(M)othering labeled children: Bilingualism and disability in the lives of Latinx mothers*. Multilingual Matters.
- Cioè-Peña, M. (2020a). Raciolinguistics and the education of emergent bilinguals labeled as disabled. *The Urban Review*, 53, 443-469. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-020-00581-z>
- Cioè-Peña, M. (2020b). Bilingualism for students with disabilities, deficit or advantage?: Perspectives of Latinx mothers. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 43(3), 253-266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15235882.2020.1799884>
- Henner, J., & Robinson, O. (2021). Unsettling languages, unruly bodyminds: Imaging a crip linguistics. <https://psyarxiv.com/7bzaw>
- Kangas, S. E. N. (2014). When Special Education trumps ESL: An investigation of service delivery for ELLs with disabilities. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 11(4), 273-306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2014.968070>



Published July 21, 2023

- Kangas, S. E. (2021). "Is it language or disability?": An ableist and monolingual filter for English learners with disabilities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 55(3), 673-683. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/10.1002/tesq.3029>
- Kangas, S. E., & Schissel, J. L. (2021). Holding them back or pushing them out?: Reclassification policies for English learners with disabilities. *Linguistics and Education*, 63, 100927. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2021.100927>
- Migliarini, V., & Stinson, C. (2021). A disability critical race theory solidarity approach to transform pedagogy and classroom culture in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 55(3), 708-718. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/10.1002/tesq.3028>
- Phuong, J., & Cioè-Peña, M. (2022). Perfect or mocha: Language policing and pathologization. In S. A. Annamma, B. A. Ferri, & D. J. Connor (Eds.), *DisCrit expanded: Reverberations, ruptures, and inquiries* (129-146). Teachers College Press.
- Stinson, C. (2018). Beyond compliance: An approach to serving English language learners with disabilities. *TESOL Journal*, 9(4), 1-8. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/10.1002/tesj.405>

Dr. María Cioè-Peña is a bilingual/biliterate education researcher and assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Educational Linguistics Division. Her work examines the intersections of disability, language, school-parent partnerships, and education policy. Taking a sociolinguistic approach and stance, she pushes and reimagines the boundaries of inclusive spaces for minoritized children. Her book *(M)othering Labeled Children: Bilingualism and Disability in the Lives of Latinx Mothers* (published by Multilingual Matters) was the winner in 2023 of the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) First Book Award.