
Latina Mothers' Experiences with Their Young Children's Inclusive Special Education

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ABSTRACT: Early childhood inclusion is widely recognized as a support system in the U.S., but it may be less familiar to Latine families. This study explored Latina mothers' experiences with early childhood inclusive special education for their children with disabilities in public schools. Using virtual, semi-structured interviews, five caregivers shared their perspectives. Participants identified both the benefits and concerns of inclusive special education for Latine children with disabilities and their families. Findings provide valuable insights for enhancing understanding and acceptance of inclusive education among Latine families, highlighting strategies to sustain and optimize inclusive practices in early childhood settings.

KEYWORDS: Disability, early childhood, inclusion, Latine families, young children

Methodology

Findings

Discussion

Limitations

Implications for Research and Practices

[Conclusion](#)
[References](#)
[Author Contact](#)

Since the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004), many U.S. schools have committed to integrating students with disabilities into general education classrooms. This trend underscores a national commitment to implementing inclusive educational practices to support all students with disabilities in mainstream school and classroom environments (Danniels & Pyle, 2024; Westling, 2019). However, there has been considerable variability in the educational placement of students with special needs within general education settings, differing notably across states (Westling, 2019). For instance, the percentage of students with intellectual disabilities who are included in general education classrooms is 16.9% nationwide but ranges from 4.8% in Illinois to 64.9% in Iowa (Westling, 2019).

In addition to geographic variability and differences in the time allocated for services, factors such as the type and severity of disabilities, as well as race/ethnicity, substantially impact the degree of inclusion within general education settings (Kim et al., 2020; Odom, 2000). Students with severe disabilities, such as autism or Down syndrome, are often found to spend much less time in general education classrooms (Kim et al., 2020; Ryndak et al., 2012). Although placement in general education settings is not directly associated with improved educational outcomes for students with disabilities, research highlights the importance of early inclusive education in enhancing optimal educational experiences for all children from a young age.

Early childhood is a pivotal stage of development, and access to early education in general education provides young children with disabilities rich opportunities to learn and grow through meaningful interactions with peers and educators. These interactions are essential for children to acquire critical social, emotional, and communication skills that contribute to their overall development and well-being (Eadie et al., 2024). For children with disabilities (CWDs), early experiences within general education settings are particularly important, as they help with recognizing and addressing diverse needs from the beginning of formal education (Erwin et al., 2022). For instance, research has documented improved early literacy skills, such as print knowledge and phonological awareness (Lonigan et al., 2013), in children with developmental delays or disabilities when they learn alongside typically developing peers in the same classroom, as the inclusive setting creates a rich language environment beneficial for their language development (Olsen et al., 2019). Moreover, early inclusion establishes favorable conditions for CWDs to engage in various classroom activities, such as cooperative learning and play, leading to considerable gains in academic, cognitive, and social competence (Pyle et al., 2017; Rabin et al., 2024). These positive impacts may further reinforce development and support the participation of all children across educational settings.

Achieving the full and meaningful inclusion of children with disabilities across all settings requires intentional integration into educational and social environments that nurture their academic, social, and community development (Daniels & Pyle, 2024; Keles et al., 2024). Inclusion in general education settings ensures equitable education opportunities by providing all children with access to high-quality instruction and curricula tailored to meet their diverse learning needs (Petriwskyj, 2010). Community inclusion fosters an environment where every child feels valued and accepted, promoting a sense of belonging and recognition of individual differences (Daniels & Pyle, 2024). Social inclusion emphasizes the importance of acceptance by peers and teachers, regardless of race/ethnicity, immigration status, or disabilities (Keles et al., 2024). Together, these facets of inclusion aim to create an educational setting that benefits all students and supports their educational trajectories, fostering an early understanding and appreciation of diversity, especially for children with special needs from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

In the United States, Latine¹ children under the age of five make up nearly 25% of the total child population (Agurto et al., 2024). However, less than half of preschool-aged Latine children receiving special education and related services participate in early childhood education (ECE) programs (Smith et al., 2021). Previous studies have examined possible barriers that Latine families with CWDs may face in accessing ECE. These barriers may include family preferences (Greenfader & Miller, 2014; Johnson et al., 2017), immigrant status (Ijalba, 2016), the availability and quality of ECE programs within their communities (Ansari, 2017; Rabin et al., 2024), language and/or cultural differences (Alvarez & Downer, 2024), and educators' experiences working with CWDs (Kim et al., 2020). For example, Cycyk and Hammer (2020) conducted an interview study with 35 Mexican immigrant caregivers (i.e., mothers) of toddler-aged children with and without disabilities and found that the majority, 24, preferred family-based care, and their children did not attend a full-time ECE program or receive home-based early childcare services. The reasoning behind their preference for family-based care as opposed to inclusive ECE services needs to be further explored.

Building close partnerships between caregivers and early childhood educators is critical to positive outcomes for CWDs (Buren et al., 2022). Research by Miller et al. (2016) demonstrated that teachers in a low-income, predominantly Latinx community considered forming ongoing and stable parent-teacher relationships to be essential for students' academic success. Therefore, understanding families and parents, particularly their needs and characteristics, is a key step in building positive relationships, which can ultimately lead to

¹ The terms Latino, Latina, Latin@, Latinx, and Latine reflect evolving efforts to describe individuals of Latin American descent with attention to gender inclusivity. While "Latinx" is widely used in academic spaces, it remains linguistically awkward in Spanish. "Latine" offers a more culturally and grammatically appropriate gender-neutral alternative (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2024; Salinas & Lozano, 2021). We use "Latina mothers" to refer to participants and "Latine" when referencing families, caregivers, or children more broadly, aligning with inclusive and contemporary usage.

meaningful parental involvement in the inclusion process (Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011). Additionally, Sutterby et al. (2007) found that Latine families possess distinct strengths to support their children's education. The authors further suggested that Latine parents are more likely to engage actively in their children's education when educators communicate effectively, making efforts to provide clear explanations, answer questions, and create a welcoming environment for Latine families.

Language and cultural factors also shape educators' capacity to support young Latine CWDs and their families. Even when teachers report some preparation to work in bilingual classrooms or familiarity with Latine cultural values, many still struggle to communicate effectively in Spanish or to engage Latine parents in sustained partnership (Espinoza & Taylor, 2022). Although early participation in inclusive settings is linked to stronger academic and socio-emotional outcomes, persistent barriers to accessing inclusive ECE—paired with limited, culturally responsive support within those settings—can undermine the long-term development of Latine CWDs. These realities underscore the importance of improving caregiver–educator collaboration that is linguistically accessible, culturally affirming, and responsive to families' lived experiences.

Latina mothers of young children with disabilities encounter unique experiences in the education system. Alvarez-Frank et al. (2025) stated that Latina mothers experience distinct forms of cultural stress that influence their family interactions and advocacy skills. While a strong commitment to their children's well-being, often expressed as a "Por mis hijos" (for my children) mindset, can be a source of strength, it may lead Latina mothers to focus on their children's needs as opposed to their own, making an impact on the family's interaction between parents and school personnel. Discrimination, a prevalent challenge for these mothers, can lead them to adopt strategies like remaining silent as opposed to advocating for their children to protect them from its effects. These unique experiences and perspectives highlight the need for culturally inclusive practices designed to support Latina mothers in navigating the education system in the United States.

Although the importance of parent involvement and collaboration with parents for children's successful inclusion in general education settings is highlighted in the literature, few studies examine Latine families' beliefs about or experiences with their children's inclusive special education. Thus, this study aims to explore Latine caregivers' perceptions and experiences regarding inclusive education for their young children with disabilities. By focusing on the experiences of Latina mothers, the study seeks to understand how these caregivers navigate and evaluate the inclusion process in early childhood education settings. To guide this investigation, the study will address the following research questions: A) How do Latina mothers describe their experiences with early childhood inclusion for their children with disabilities? B) What benefits and barriers do they identify in their children's inclusive education? And C) What recommendations do they have for improving inclusive education for young Latine children?

Methodology

This qualitative exploratory study examined Latina mothers' experiences with and perspectives on the inclusion of their children with disabilities in early childhood general education classrooms. Semi-structured individual interviews were purposely designed with loose structures of questions, but clear foci of investigation to explore Latina mothers' experiences when their young children with disabilities first entered the public school system, particularly into an inclusive learning environment.

Participants and Settings

Using a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2002), we recruited five participants. Each participant completed a self-screener for eligibility, with the criteria being (1) 18 years old or older, (2) self-identifying as a Latine caregiver, (3) having a child with a disability, (4) having that child attend preschool or kindergarten in a public school, and (5) having that child attend an inclusive class with other children with and/or without disabilities. To recruit the participants, we used printed flyers at publicly available bulletin boards in a Midwest US area. We also posted on social media and used a snowball approach. Approval of the Institutional Review Board was obtained from the first author's institution and participants' consent was obtained before the interviews.

Six individuals completed the eligibility screening through Qualtrics. All six were eligible, but one withdrew before the interviews, resulting in five participants. Their ages ranged from 23 to 39. Four participants identified as Spanish-English bilinguals, while one identified as Spanish-speaking only. Four participants were born in Mexico. Income level, marital status, and prior training related to their children's inclusion in ECE varied. All five participants resided in a metropolitan area in the Midwest. Table 1 depicts participants' demographic information. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

Name	Age	Interview Language (Primary Language)	Country of Birth	Education Level (Country)	Profession	Household Income	Marital Status	Previous Inclusion Training
Carly	23	English (Spanish)	U.S.	University (U.S.)	Education	\$50,001-60,000	Single	Diversity & inclusion course
Lisa	36	English (Spanish)	Mexico	Associate's (U.S.)	Stay at home mom	\$0-30,000	Married	N/A
Abby	34	Spanish (Spanish)	Mexico	University (Mexico)	N/A	\$50,001-60,000	Married	Early intervention service
Mary	33	English (Spanish)	Mexico	College certificate (U.S.)	Certified nursing assistant	\$0-30,000	Single	N/A
Nina	39	English (Spanish)	Mexico	High school (Mexico)	Stay at home mom	\$30,000-40,000	Partner	N/A

Data Collection

Based on focus group interview questions developed for early childhood educators (Kim et al., 2020), we created semi-structured individual interview protocols with probe questions (Trainor, 2013) for Latine caregivers. After the first, second, third, and fourth authors drafted the questions, all authors met to discuss and ensure applicability and appropriateness. To ensure interview fluidity and validity, all authors also met for a mock interview to review the order of questions and make minor word changes for better wording and translation. The protocols included a total of 17 questions, including six member-check interview questions, which asked about parents' overall experience with inclusive education, the benefits, barriers, and expectations for future inclusive classrooms, and the types of support they would like to see for successful inclusion. All questions were translated into Spanish by the second author and reviewed for accuracy of translation by the third author. Both English and Spanish protocol versions were available for participants.

All interviews occurred via Zoom during times convenient for each participant. All interviews were audio-recorded by the interviewers. Of the five participants, two completed the interviews in English with the third author, and three completed the interviews in Spanish with the second author. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the three Spanish interviews were translated into English by the second author. Both the second and third authors were Spanish-English

bilinguals. The total transcript length, including member-check interviews, was 113 pages. The length of the interviewers' fieldnotes was five pages.

Data Analysis

Both deductive and inductive coding were used (Miles et al., 2020). Based on the research questions, literature review, and interview questions, the first author developed *a priori* codes (i.e., definition for inclusion, benefits of inclusion, barriers and challenges of inclusion, and hopes for inclusion). The *a priori* codes were shared with all authors. The second and third authors separately completed an initial line-by-line screening of all five transcripts in both languages using the *a priori* codes. All authors met to discuss the initial data screening. During that meeting, the second and third authors shared emerging codes from their initial screenings (e.g., peer modeling, teacher-to-student ratio, socialization/communication) after using *descriptive coding* (Miles et al., 2020) to summarize and refine data into emerging codes. All authors separately worked to expand and refine the codes.

All authors then met again and discussed the codes and coding categories and collaboratively developed the themes and sub-themes. As the interview protocols were initially developed based on the focus group questions for the early childhood educators (Kim et al., 2020), the authors found overlap with the themes from that study (e.g., benefits, barriers and challenges, and prospects of inclusion). Before finalizing the themes and subthemes, all authors agreed that, across the five participants, feeling and emotion words associated with their children's education and relationship with schools were often reported. The second and third authors employed *emotion coding* to identify emotions voiced or presented by the participants regarding their experiences with inclusion (Miles et al., 2020). After the additional round of coding with *emotion coding*, all authors came to a consensus on final themes and subthemes.

Trustworthiness

To secure the trustworthiness of data, all five participants were invited for the member checking interviews. The second author met with each participant after the initial analysis of the data. Each participant was able to confirm researchers' interpretations on their individual interviews and validate the veracity of the obtained data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, the accuracy of translation for each transcript was checked by the third author after the second author completed the interviews in Spanish and translated the transcripts into English. Peer review of the findings was conducted by a doctoral student who was not involved in the study; they posed questions related to the research topic and findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data quality was checked against the

researchers' bias and personal assumptions by writing fieldnotes through the data collection process and reporting researcher positionality (Miles et al., 2014).

Positionality

The first author, a South Korea-born researcher who is bilingual in Korean and English, focuses on school collaborations with caregivers of young children with autism from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. She is an interventionist, a board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA), and a qualitative researcher. The second author, a Mexican American Early Childhood Special Education teacher who is bilingual in Spanish and English, specializes in working with children with and without disabilities in Latine communities, with a focus on advocating for diverse families. The third author, a Latina researcher who is bilingual in Spanish and English, studies the engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse families of children with disabilities, drawing on nearly two decades of experience in early childhood, elementary, bilingual, and special education. The fourth author, a South Korea-born researcher who is bilingual in Korean and English, researches collaboration between parents from diverse backgrounds and teachers in inclusive settings. The fifth author, born in China, is fluent in Mandarin and English, and her research centers on effective interventions for students with math disabilities and inclusive education for children with special needs.

Across the study, this diversity within the research team generated rich cross-cultural dialogue about recruitment, interpretation, and meaning making, as each member drew on their own cultural knowledge and lived experience with families. The authors' reflexive conversations shaped decisions from participant recruitment through data analysis and reporting, strengthening the cultural sensitivity and interpretive trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings

Findings from the individual interviews revealed four key themes among the Latina mothers of young children in inclusive early childhood classrooms: (a) conceptualization of inclusion, (b) perceived benefits of inclusion, (c) concerns associated with inclusion, and (d) hopes for the future of inclusion. Caregivers shared diverse perspectives that reflected their experiences with and understandings of inclusion in relation to their child, themselves, and school contexts.

Conceptualization of Inclusion

When caregivers were asked to define inclusion, many expressed some uncertainty. While they had a general idea, most described inclusion as the integration of children with and without disabilities. Abby, for example, explained,

They [students] had to go to a special place, well, in particular, my son had to go to a room, inclusive, with more help and there were children who had special needs and children who did not have special needs.

Abby viewed the inclusive classroom as a "special place" where children received support. Her understanding appeared to be informed by interactions with early intervention providers and early childhood educators.

Similarly, Lisa recalled her understanding of inclusion based on advice from her son's IEP team, explaining, "I can't really remember exactly what they said, but it was about him being around children who don't have speech or behavioral problems." She remembered the team's recommendation for inclusion to help her son interact with more children and benefit from a structured setting. Carly expanded on these perspectives, focusing on the concept of equitable education for all students. She defined inclusive education as a place where "They [children] receive the special attention and supports they need, but in a way that ensures everyone is equal in the classroom." She added that it was where children with special needs "find where they belong."

In addition to defining inclusion, caregivers were asked about their prior exposure to it, particularly during their own schooling. Four participants who grew up outside the U.S. mentioned little to no exposure to people with disabilities while growing up. Nina, for example, shared,

Before, I didn't even realize, nor did I know that there was that type of general inclusion because in Mexico... Well, when I was in Mexico, there weren't those services there. There were no such services or special classes for people who needed them.

Prior to their children's inclusion, caregivers said they had not been exposed to inclusive classrooms or practices. Caregivers who were raised outside of the U.S. reported that their first experiences with inclusion occurred through their children's early education programs.

Benefits of Inclusion

Caregivers believed that inclusive education provided benefits on multiple levels, both for themselves and their children. They discussed language, communication, and social gains, attributing these to opportunities for peer interactions and teacher support. They also described positive emotions associated with their children's growth in inclusive settings. Nina, for example,

expressed joy about her son's development, and Carly described feeling happy and proud, explaining, "Oh, you know, that makes us feel great as Moms... [I] feel like I'm just so happy he's growing. He's thriving. He's happy to go [to school]." Lisa also shared her happiness, attributing it to how excited her child was to attend school each day. She noted, "Even walking out of school, he's excited," and added that her child's attitude changed for the better once he was placed in an inclusive classroom.

Caregivers attributed their satisfaction with inclusion to the developmental gains they observed in their children's language and communication skills. Latina mothers particularly emphasized the opportunities their children had to learn language, communicate, and socialize with typically developing peers through peer modeling. Illustrating this theme, one participant, Nina, stated that her son's expressive language improved significantly in the inclusive classroom, explaining, "He didn't speak before... And when he did, he used incomprehensible words. Now, I believe the improvement [in his language] came from the school." Lisa noted similar improvements in her child's communication skills, with all caregivers agreeing that interaction with typically developing peers played a positive role in their children's language development.

Caregivers also discussed their children's social development. Nina noted that her son, who was previously withdrawn, became more interested in interacting with others after observing his peers. Carly echoed this point, explaining how her son, who once avoided other children, grew more comfortable in social situations through the natural exposure provided by the inclusive classroom. Mary shared that observing other children helped her daughter develop better social interaction and play skills, even outside of school. Caregivers consistently linked peer interaction with social growth and increased engagement in classroom activities.

Finally, caregivers emphasized the importance of teacher expertise and support in making inclusion successful. Mary, for example, expressed her appreciation for the staff working with her daughter, acknowledging their efforts to create a welcoming environment and make her child excited about coming to school. She explained, "The staff, I would say, has very good experience with kids because, I mean, I see them when she comes in. They try to cheer for her." Abby also felt that the inclusive classroom was a better fit for her child than a general education classroom, particularly because of the more favorable student-to-teacher ratio. She explained, "In the [general] classroom, there is one teacher for many children. Here [in inclusion], there are four staff members for about 18 children... I feel that they have a lot of help and support." Carly similarly appreciated the one-on-one support her child received in the inclusive classroom, noting, "He sometimes, or most of the time, does side learning with his special education teacher... I think he does it occasionally." Across interviews, caregivers consistently identified teacher support, expertise, and favorable student-to-teacher ratios as key features that contributed to positive experiences.

Concerns about Inclusion

While caregivers described inclusion as beneficial, they also identified challenges. Their concerns focused primarily on family communication, social integration, and classroom support structures. Caregivers highlighted challenges in connecting with other families. They reported having limited opportunities for natural, casual interactions with other caregivers, despite their children being in inclusive classrooms. For example, Nina felt unable to interact with other parents because she couldn't pick her son up from school. She explained, "I have not had contact with the parents of his classmates because he gets picked up by the bus." Carly shared a similar experience: "I haven't really interacted with a lot of them, just because, I mean, I'm always at work, and I don't really pick him up." Some caregivers were concerned that families of children without disabilities were not familiar with inclusion or special education needs, which limited their ability to connect with them. Carly explained that she didn't think she could interact with other families until she was better prepared to explain inclusion to other parents. She said, "I would like to be a little bit more educated on it." and added, "I feel like it's a little bit challenging because it's a little out of my comfort zone. And it's like, I'm basically new to it [inclusion]." Lisa echoed this sentiment, sharing an instance where she had to explain inclusion to another parent. She said, "I had to explain to the parent, 'Oh, he's [in] an inclusive classroom.' And they were like, 'Oh, I didn't know [about inclusive classrooms].'" Several caregivers reported that limited opportunities for connection and differing levels of awareness about inclusion made it harder to form relationships with other families.

Some caregivers also raised questions about whether inclusion was appropriate for all children. For example, Nina questioned whether inclusion was suitable for children with severe disabilities. She shared, "It'd be nice if it were, but I feel that it wouldn't work much for the typical ones or for children with a severe disability... only if it [disability] were a little bit mild." She worried that children with intense needs or severe behavior issues might distract others. Mary expressed similar concerns, using her daughter as an example: "Other kids start crying because they see her crying, and everybody is just looking..." Mary felt uneasy about the attention her daughter's behavior attracted, even though she generally supported inclusion. Carly also expressed concern that her son's speech delay made it difficult for him to fully integrate with his peers. She explained, "It's a little bit challenging for him to blend in with the rest of his peers... Even now, I think he feels left out of a lot of stuff." Lisa shared the same concern, wondering when her child would be able to interact with others more easily: "You don't know how soon your child is gonna be able to interact with everyone." Like Carly, she worried about her child's social integration within the inclusive classroom. Caregivers expressed concern about how children with varied needs were supported and how peer responses affected their children's experiences in the classroom.

Another concern that caregivers expressed was whether or not teachers could consistently support all children with special needs while managing an entire classroom. Lisa worried that larger numbers of students in inclusive classrooms

might prevent teachers from focusing on individual children when needed. She said, “Maybe, just the amount of children—I feel like maybe there are times when the teacher can't really focus on just one student.” Mary echoed this concern, suggesting that a lower student–teacher ratio would better enable teachers to support children with diverse learning needs. She said, “I feel like it should be one-on-one [student-teacher ratio] almost.” In line with this concern, Carly acknowledged that working with her son, who could be “challenging,” might be difficult for his teacher, especially when balancing the needs of other students. She worried that some teachers might not be able to comprehensively respond to her son’s needs with so many other students in their class. She explained, “Sometimes, you know, like other teachers who don’t have the... who aren’t as supportive...” Across interviews, caregivers identified staffing levels and individualized attention as factors influencing the effectiveness of inclusion.

Hopes for Inclusion

Caregivers shared hopes for continued improvement in inclusive education. They described wanting additional information, more consistent communication, and ongoing collaboration with teachers and schools. They expressed a desire for more accessible information and frequent communication. Nina, for example, wished for “more information in Spanish” and Carly echoed this need, saying she’d hoped for more information about inclusion because she wanted to be “a little bit more educated” about it. Lisa listed options for schools to help inform families, such as newsletters or resources that parents could consult. Mary suggested workshops, mentioning that she regularly checked her email for these types of opportunities. Further elaborating on this point, Abby emphasized the importance of collaboration by saying, “I really like to know what’s happening, and if we can work together, it’s better.” Nina agreed and said she had hoped for more frequent, informal check-ins with teachers in inclusive classrooms. All caregivers mentioned a desire for either more information, communication, or collaboration, with suggestions ranging from additional meetings to newsletters, workshops, and phone hotlines available in families’ native languages.

They also hoped for additional therapy time and classroom resources. Carly wished her son had more time with his therapist, saying, “She [therapist] does not go in often, and I wish he had more support.” Abby agreed, adding, “I think the time for therapies should be increased.” These caregivers believed additional therapy time would better support their children’s development in an inclusive classroom. Most caregivers also hoped that teachers would receive more support and resources to optimize their children’s inclusion experience. Carly suggested that having more resources would help teachers assist children with disabilities. Nina believed teachers needed additional support from staff and therapists as well as more funds. She also mentioned the need for smaller class sizes so “everyone can receive the same attention.” Lisa expressed a similar desire for increased support for teachers, and Mary added that teachers might benefit from training videos,

opportunities to observe other classrooms, and more time to collaborate with families. Caregivers hoped for additional supports and resources that would enhance inclusion for children, teachers, and families.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand Latina mothers' experiences with and perspectives on their children's inclusive preschool education. The findings highlight both the positive impacts and the challenges of inclusive education from the caregivers' viewpoints. Overall, the results underscore the significance of culturally responsive communication, collaborative relationships, and equitable access to support services within inclusive early childhood programs. In the following discussion, we discuss key themes that emerged from the findings.

First, some caregivers expressed uncertainty and a lack of confidence in defining inclusive education, often hesitating or using filler words when asked to explain it. Most had limited prior exposure to the concept, with their understanding based primarily on information shared by early intervention providers, clinical professionals, or individualized education program (IEP) teams. This suggests the need for comprehensive communication to bolster caregivers' understanding of inclusive education, as a lack of a clear understanding may impact their ability to fully support their children in inclusive settings. Recent efforts in early childhood education have sought to clarify inclusion through national and organizational statements emphasizing equitable access, participation, and support for students and families (e.g., Division for Early Childhood/National Association for the Education of Young Children; DEC/NAEYC, 2009). However, these efforts may not always reach Latine families effectively. Providing early, accessible, and culturally relevant explanations of inclusion, using translated materials, visual examples, and plain-language communication (Leyser & Kirk, 2004), may help bridge this gap.

Next, the benefits of inclusive education reported by caregivers align with existing literature on the positive outcomes of inclusion. Latina mothers emphasized the potential of inclusive education to integrate children, particularly those with disabilities, into mainstream educational and community settings. They noted improvements in their children's social, language, and communication skills as key outcomes of inclusion, which may contribute to peer interactions and role modeling in inclusive classrooms (Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2017). These findings resonate with research that highlights the impact of positive peer role models in shaping children's social behaviors and academic engagement, contributing to overall developmental progress (Bailey, 2022). The mothers' reports of joy, pride, and satisfaction also highlight the emotional dimension of inclusion, reflecting families' sense of belonging and optimism when children are supported in integrated settings. Although caregivers in this study did not directly address the broader societal impacts of inclusion, such as reducing prejudices and fostering

acceptance, this remains an important aspect of inclusive education that could benefit Latine families of children with disabilities (Scorgie & Forlin, 2019).

Despite recognizing the benefits of inclusion, caregivers also identified several challenges. They expressed the need for more personalized educational plans, effective behavior management strategies, and increased collaboration with educators. Caregivers particularly mentioned difficulties in maintaining communications with teachers and schools, which hindered their ability to stay informed about their children's progress. This finding reinforces the critical role of consistent, two-way communication between home and school (Kefallinou et al., 2020) to build trust and shared understanding. Additionally, caregivers highlighted the need for expanded access to therapy services and comprehensive educational resources, pointing to persistent challenges related to funding limitations in early childhood special education programs (Reichow et al., 2016). Furthermore, caregivers felt socially isolated and desired better support networks within inclusive settings, consistent with research on the social isolation of families with children with disabilities (Caicedo et al., 2014). Developing family engagement opportunities that are flexible in time, format, and language may help foster a sense of community and shared learning among families in inclusive programs. To address these issues, stakeholders should consider organizing community events with flexible scheduling to foster connections among all families and to share information on inclusivity. Caregivers also recommended clearer communication about the benefits of inclusive education, various inclusion options, and caregivers' role in the IEP process (Illinois State Board of Education; ISBE, 2022). Ensuring that families understand how inclusion supports individualized goals and how they can participate in decision-making may strengthen both family engagement and student outcomes. Meaningful inclusion supports children's IEP goals through collaboration with families, additional teaching staff, and access to support services (Kefallinou et al., 2020). Providing Latine caregivers with repeated, accessible information about this process is crucial.

Caregivers also raised concerns about the full integration of children with severe or complex disabilities into inclusive settings. They were concerned about whether their children would receive adequate support, especially with the added challenge of fully integrating children with significant disabilities. Educating caregivers about the benefits of peer-to-peer socialization in inclusive settings could help alleviate these concerns by highlighting how inclusive environments naturally promote skill development and social acceptance (Ahmetoğlu, 2015). Additionally, caregivers emphasized the importance of targeted teacher training and resources, expressing concern that teachers may not always be fully prepared to manage the range of needs present in inclusive classrooms. Ensuring that educators receive adequate training and support is crucial for the success of inclusive education (Van Mieghem et al., 2018). Additionally, understanding the varying characterizations of inclusive education among educators can help ensure they receive the necessary support to meet the needs of diverse children and families in inclusive settings (Krischler et al., 2019).

Finally, caregivers expressed hopes for increased support at the family, child, and teacher levels, reflecting broader systemic improvements to inclusion. Latine families' desire for more information and communication opportunities underscores the need for schools to provide information in comprehensive and accessible ways. Parents' emphasis on receiving information in Spanish highlight the centrality of language access in promoting engagement among Latine families. Their hopes for increased therapy time and optimal child outcomes align with research that emphasizes the necessity of individualized support within inclusive settings (Odom et al., 2011). Caregivers also stressed the need for more support for teachers, including targeted training and resources, which reflects the ongoing challenge of equipping educators to effectively implement inclusive practices (Van Mieghem et al., 2018). Despite efforts to enhance access to early intervention services, inadequate funding remains a significant barrier to providing sufficient support for educators serving young children with disabilities (Reichow et al., 2016). Addressing these systemic issues through sustainable funding structures, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and culturally responsive outreach is essential to advancing equity in early childhood inclusion.

The findings of this study extend existing research by emphasizing the value of family voice in shaping inclusive practices. The rich cultural values, advocacy skills, and lived experiences that Latina mothers bring serve as vital funds of knowledge that can inform and strengthen inclusive practices. When these familial insights are acknowledged and integrated into preschool settings, they can enhance cultural responsiveness and foster deeper partnerships between educators and families. Centering family perspectives as part of collaborative planning not only promotes equity but also aligns with the foundational principles of family-professional partnership in special education. Additionally, these findings contribute new insights to the fields of early childhood special education and multicultural education by emphasizing the need to center culturally and linguistically diverse family voices, specifically those of Latina mothers, in shaping inclusive practices. They reveal how inclusive education can be more effective when it is informed by families' cultural knowledge and when communication strategies are adapted to meet diverse linguistic and cultural needs.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the small sample size ($n=5$) may limit the generalizability of the results. Second, we relied exclusively on virtual interviews for data collection, which could restrict the depth of exploration of participants' experiences. However, we mitigated this by conducting both individual interviews and additional member-checking interviews, allowing us to triangulate the data and validate our interpretations. Additionally, by providing thick descriptions from participants, we aimed to ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the data (Miles et al., 2020).

Implications for Research and Practices

This study presents several implications for research and practice. Future research may build on current findings by exploring the inclusion experiences of caregivers from diverse backgrounds. While the inclusion experiences of the Latina mothers of children with disabilities may be unique, they may also share commonalities with those of caregivers from other cultural backgrounds. As classrooms become increasingly diverse across the U.S., understanding these varied inclusion experiences yields significance for enhancing inclusive practices more broadly (Eden et al., 2024). Furthermore, the participating Latina mothers were from a large metropolitan city in the Midwest with a substantial Latine population, and this region has many ECE programs with relatively high Latine student enrollment. However, in areas with lower Latine representation or limited access to inclusive ECE programs, the inclusion experiences of Latina mothers of children with disabilities may differ significantly. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of Latine caregivers' conceptualization and experiences of early inclusion, future studies may continue to recognize and build upon the strengths and cultural knowledge Latine families possess by conducting this research across different geographic regions across the United States, including interviews with newly immigrated Latine families with children with disabilities. Finally, it would be valuable for researchers to explore the perspectives of various stakeholders who work with Latine children with disabilities, such as general and special education teachers, service coordinators, therapists, and social workers. Understanding these stakeholders' perspectives may better inform the support system for Latine families and their children with disabilities.

The concerns expressed by Latina mothers of children with severe disabilities emphasized the need to address specific challenges in inclusive classrooms, particularly regarding appropriate teacher-to-student ratios and the availability of bilingual educators. Also, increasing service time and providing access to a broader range of services from different therapists could enhance children's performance across various domains, including social, cognitive, and communication skills. Adequate support and services in place may also foster more positive experiences for Latine children within inclusive classroom settings. Moreover, the findings in this study suggest that providing Latina mothers with access to information is essential for empowering them to advocate for their children. Therefore, disseminating information through print materials, workshops, and emails could be useful to keep the Latine caregiver informed and help them better understand their rights and responsibilities in early inclusion. Additionally, there is a clear need for additional targeted professional development programs, vital to equipping educators with the competencies required to support *all* students in inclusive educational environments. Table 2 summarizes the main themes with associated discussion suggestions.

Table 2
Summary of Themes and Suggestions

Themes	Suggestions
Conceptualization of inclusion	Improve clear and comprehensive communication to strengthen caregivers' understanding of inclusive education and enhance their support for children in inclusive settings.
Perceived benefits of inclusion	Promote awareness of inclusion's broader social impacts to strengthen community acceptance and support for Latine families.
Concerns associated with inclusion	Educate caregivers on the value of peer-to-peer socialization to highlight how inclusion supports skill and social development.
Hopes for the future of inclusion	Provide funding and expanded professional development to strengthen ECE programs.

Conclusion

The findings from this study contribute to the understanding and optimization of Latine caregivers' perspectives on inclusive education, highlighting both strengths and areas needing improvement. The approach adopted in this study provided a lens to understand the original perspectives on Latina mothers of young children with disabilities and offered suggestions for multicultural education more broadly. The experiences shared by these Latina mothers emphasized the importance of clear communication, accessible information, adequate caregiver support networks, individualized support for children, and comprehensive professional training for educators. Addressing these areas could promote inclusion and Latine family engagement, benefitting the diverse needs of children and their families.

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