

Episode 22: Tatiana Perilla and Conchita Hernandez Legorreta

Summary Keywords: disability, people, educators, students, community, IEP, mental health, parents, laughter, legal binding document, services, support, school, immigrants

Speakers: Alex Schiwal, Tatiana Perilla, Conchita Hernandez Legorreta

Tatiana Perilla 00:08

Music Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining us on the MHDD Crossroads podcast. I'm really excited to welcome our guest today. It's Conchita Hernandez Legorreta. I'm gonna let you introduce yourself. Do you think you can share a little bit about yourself, such as what organizations you're a part of, and what led to your professional interests?

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 00:28

Yeah, thank you so much, and you pronounced my name so well. I grew up in California in a small rural town. I was born in Mexico, and moved to California with all my siblings, and I became undocumented. I'm legally blind, as is one of my other siblings. In the United States, I had an IEP. An IEP is a legal document that students with disabilities have in public schools. As I got older, I realized because my parents were Spanish speakers they didn't really understand what was happening in school and school didn't really make it clear to them what was happening. So I decided I wanted to be a teacher of blind students, because I didn't think I received the adequate services.

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 01:21

I got my master's at Louisiana Tech University. I became a teacher of blind students. I worked in DC for a long time and then also looking at kind of more systematic issues- that it's not just one school doing something but rather system-wide issues that are happening. I now work at the Maryland Department of Education and the Maryland School for the Blind overseeing the education of blind students in the state of Maryland. I'm a part of the National Coalition of Latinxs with Disabilities, which brings together people with disabilities that are Latinx and sharing our experiences and resources. We put on conferences as well. We share a lot of same experiences where a lot of people feel like they didn't get what they needed in school. There's just a lack of information and resources within our communities on topics of disability.

Tatiana Perilla 02:11

Awesome. Thank you for that introduction, and I'm glad that I pronounced your name well. I try my best, because I know people often don't pronounce mine *Laughter* either. Some of what you said is a great segue for what I wanted to ask you next, because you talked about having your own IEP and a little bit about your inspiration for wanting to become a teacher... As part of MHDD's Digital Storytelling series that we have, we've done some Spanish-speaking episodes with caregivers, who up to this point have all actually been immigrants that came to the United States from Latin America. They've talked about some difficulties that they've had with the school system. Some examples is difficulty with getting an IEP plan. And in one case, one of them talked about not knowing what a 504 plan was. I wanted to ask you, what are some rights that you think all parents should know that they have with the school system? Or even just rights in general?

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 03:11

Yeah, that's a really good question. I think the first thing everybody needs to know is that the IEP is a legal binding document. And that as parents, you have the right to contest any of the information and you are a part of the decision-making team. One thing I heard a lot growing up from my parents was like... Because we're coming from places that don't have any services, any education for people with disabilities, they saw it as a favor. So, they would say, 'Oh, the school was so nice providing us with something.' And in retrospect, they weren't. *Laughter* They were doing the bare minimum- but our families don't know that. My parents had no idea that it was a legal binding document. So that would be the first thing.

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 03:51

The second thing is they need to know that they can request an IEP meeting at any time, and the school must honor that. So if they learn later that 'Oh, I didn't know about this', or 'I connected with an advocate who helped me realize maybe the goals need to change.' A parent can request an IEP meeting at any time, even if the IEP meeting just happened, and it must happen within a timely manner.

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 04:13

The next thing, especially for communities that are immigrants and speak other languages at home, they need to know that they have the right to an interpreter in any meeting that has to do with the IEP or their child and the school must provide that. Many times, I was an interpreter at my own IEP meetings or siblings are interpreters at IEP meetings, and that's just not okay. That is not what should be happening. It should be somebody that's trained that knows the vocabulary. And if a parent shows up to a meeting and there is not an interpreter, they should ask for the meeting to be rescheduled until there is one.

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 04:51

The next thing is that parents have the right to fully understand the decisions being made about their child and ask as many questions as they need to fully understand. Especially for immigrant communities, understanding that the school is not doing you a favor- it is their legal right to provide this for you. And so, you should understand what is happening and even if you have to ask a lot of questions and get clarification... A lot of times professionals, we tend to use a lot of acronyms and a lot of really big jargon. Especially when it gets translated into Spanish not only is it acronyms and jargon in English, but now it's in Spanish, which a lot of times it's like new vocabulary that they've never heard of in their life. So they should really understand what's going on without feeling that they're taking over time or that 'Oh, it's something basic, I should know.' They should really get involved in understanding the IEP process fully.

Tatiana Perilla 05:51

You made have a lot of good points. I'm glad you emphasized how it's a legal binding document. And yeah, it's not necessarily they're doing you a favor and parents do have all these rights that maybe they're not aware of. That sort of echoes a little bit of what I've heard from some caregivers. Based on your education and experience in special education, do you think mental health has been prioritized enough in schools for students with disabilities?

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 06:21

Absolutely not. *Laughter* And part of that is that many educators still see disability and mental health as negative. They don't understand disability as an identity. They don't understand disability justice so when a student has a disability, they have negative feelings about it even if they are providers or general education teachers. Especially when a student has a need for mental health services, there's a limited amount of providers that provide mental health services in schools. And so students get prioritized that have the most significant needs, or that is documented in their IEP, right? Because that has to happen. Some schools have more police officers than they have mental health providers and that's a huge issue that we need to be dealing with. Then on top of that there is stigma within our communities. There's a lot of stigma within the Latinx community around mental health. It's like, 'Oh, are you crazy? Is that why you need mental health services?' which is very ironic. Because there's so much trauma and stuff as being a part of the immigrant experience and very few people get mental health support in order to deal with that. There isn't enough in schools. It's the lack of resources, the lack of understanding on both ends on the school and with people not understanding disability, and then also in the community, and with parents and families not understanding the need for mental health services.

Tatiana Perilla 07:50

Thank you. It does seem like there's a lot of stigma, like you mentioned, and it seems like schools could be a great place to start addressing that especially considering that people are there during some of their most formative years. It'd be a great place to start talking about

disability justice and letting go of that stigma. That sort of goes well with my next question I want to ask you, what advice would you give to educators who want to make their classrooms or their schools more inclusive?

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 08:19

Yeah, that's a really good question. I think the first thing that educators need to do is they need to learn about disability rights. They need to learn about disability justice, and they need to teach their students and empower their students with disability. When I was in school, I never learned about disabled role models. I didn't know it was a thing. I thought it was like, 'There's something wrong with me, so I get some help.' But it was never like, 'Oh, this is a great person who did all this and that.' We learn about all these amazing civil rights icons, which we absolutely should, and we should also be learning about disabled icons and heroes to look up to. But that doesn't happen unless educators understand that, and understand it themselves, and educate themselves about disability so that they can then teach their students. Because students with disabilities in school need to have disabled role models.

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 09:11

The second thing I would tell educators is, you need to learn about accessibility. There's so many educators who are providing inaccessible materials all the time. And people use the term a lot 'universal design for learning' and they're like, 'Oh, we use universal design for learning. We teach kids in multiple modes and ways.' And yet, their content is inaccessible. I would highly recommend that educators find out about accessibility and what they can do. A myth that I hear constantly is, each student is individual, so if I create something I created for that individual child... And while that is correct, accessibility is universal. And if you make your content universal then you can take that document, that presentation, and then that child can modify it based on what they need because you've already made it accessible. If you have scanned something in a copy machine, there's very little that student can do to make it accessible. That's kind of one of my biggest things is, make all your content accessible from the ground up. I don't think educators are taught that and especially general educators, who get maybe a semester of special education in their coursework and that's a lot. Some don't get any at all when they're absolutely going to be working with students with disabilities. There is not one general educator that won't have a student with a disability among their students. So I would say learn about disability culture, disability justice, disabled role models. Teach that to your students, and then apply accessibility into everything you do.

Tatiana Perilla 10:54

You are so right. I worked with the school board, both in Utah and in Florida, and never, not that I can think of, remember hearing accessibility even come up. In terms of teaching methods or even just materials as well, which you would think would come up if you're working with students with disabilities. That's huge. I love that you mentioned Universal Design for Learning.

We talked to someone about it recently and they made a point, if you go through it as a sort of checklist in a way you're missing the larger point and maybe it's not truly making something accessible.

Tatiana Perilla 11:34

I wanted to bring up the article that you wrote with Refinery 29, which I believe we can put a link for in our show notes. You talked about a number of important topics. One of them was about how you believe there's this misconception that the Latinx community is inherently more ableist. I wanted to ask you, why do you think this misconception is being perpetuated? And has that had an effect on resources or services?

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 12:03

Yeah, that's a really good question. I think this is like a complex question in the sense of... In everything in the United States, the default is white. And so whenever we talk about another group, it takes on a very different language. Sometimes educators will be like, 'Oh, it's in their culture. Latin students do this, because it's part of their culture.' And I'm like, 'Where did you get that?' *Laughter* I think you're trying, but you would never say that about a white child, 'Oh, they're doing this because it's part of their culture.' And I think people are trying to be understanding, trying to really be like culturally competent, but sometimes they're missing the ball.

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 12:45

In terms of ableism, I hear a lot that people say, 'Oh, the Latinx community is more ableist.' And the issue isn't that the Latino community is more ableist. Because ableism is everywhere. Rather, the Latino community lacks the resources and the information. As we talked about, I went through the school system and my parents had no idea what the IEP system actually meant. When there are conversations about disability, when there are conversations about empowerment, when there are conversations, they tend to happen on college campuses, which the Latino community is not accessing, or they tend to happen in English, which the Spanish speaking community is not accessing. And so we are being robbed of the opportunity to learn about these things. And so yes, there is a lot of stigma about disability, but it is because of the lack of resources and information. What I hear from educators is like, 'Oh, they came from Mexico. They have such negative ideas on disability. Oh my God, this is what they believe.' And it's kind of like taking it from a negative standpoint, where we need to really be looking at, 'Okay, how can we, as educators, make sure that we're communicating with a family? How can we make sure that we are having these conversations? How can we understand where it is they're coming from?' And one of the things I also like to point out, and I think it might be one of your next questions *Laughter* is the difference between individualism and interdependence. The Latinx community because there has been such a lack of information, a lack of resources, a lack of supports, and that includes kinds of services in home countries, that

the government doesn't provide you with anything or any type of support. The Latinx community in general, and a lot of communities, are very interdependent, so everybody works together. You think of community before thinking of an individual. So because of that, disability has kind of fallen within that. Where if somebody has a disability, because there is no other structure to help support, the community comes around and helps that individual and kind of works together.

Tatiana Perilla 15:01

You made a lot of really good points there. You're right, I was going to ask you next about independence versus interdependence. I want to clarify. Do you think the emphasis on independence as part of like the disability movement, does that make it harder maybe for some people of color to connect with the movement?

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 15:26

Yeah, absolutely. Not just with the movement but with services in general. Because services are so specific on the individual. I used to work as a rehab counselor, prior to being a teacher of blind students, and it was a big disconnect. Somebody would come in with their whole family, their parents and their siblings, and it was just like a whole crew would show up. And the provider would it be like, 'Oh, no, this is just for you. We don't want your family influencing you. We want this to be just what you think.' And it was a disconnect. Because that person was like, 'Well, this isn't just about me, I live with my family. They're the ones who provide my services and my support. So how can I make this decision?' And so some people would walk away from services, because they said, 'If I can't be included, if my whole family, my support systems can't be included in this decision-making, then I don't want to be a part of that.' And it absolutely hurts communities of color with disabilities, because individualism kind of takes away from our narratives of how we're able to do things and how we provide.

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 16:38

When there is a void of services, a void of support, a void of help, per se, then that's where community comes in. It may have been easier for other groups to have an individualistic mindset in order to get certain things, that really hasn't worked for people of color because that's never been the case and because we've never been at the forefront of those issues. For example, the Disability Rights Movement started in California and there was a lot of people involved, people of color, but they were never part of the narrative. They were never the ones doing the interviews. They were never the ones writing the stories. They were never the ones whose names we remember, we only remember the white people that were there. And so they were like, 'Okay, what do we do?' There are systems that you create of community, where systems are lacking. And that's one of the reasons why the National Coalition of Latinxs with Disabilities came along, as a way to support our community where there aren't systems in

place. Somebody might go to an Independent Living Center for services, but it doesn't mix in with their culture, it doesn't mix in with the way they view community.

Tatiana Perilla 17:51

I can see how it'd be really upsetting to be a parent and to be working with a provider, and to be pushed out of the services that they're providing. Especially because, it's just a little bit from my own experience and in talking to other Latinx people, the use of support systems is a huge strength. I believe that when we're working with people, we should be strengths based and taking that away would be a huge detriment. You mentioned the coalition. I wanted to see if you could tell me a little bit more about the National Coalition of Latinxs with Disabilities, and who do you think would benefit from joining it?

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 18:35

Yeah, so the National Coalition of Latinxs with Disabilities is a nationwide organization. That is really this, we were all kind of individually in our little niches across the United States, coming across the same type of barriers. Trying to be included in disability spaces, but not being white enough to be accepted, and then trying to attend cultural spaces, but not fully being accepted because of disability. It's kind of like, no matter where you go, people don't really understand. Also, just the availability of resources, right? So where do you go if you need information about how disability impacts immigration? Immigration places sometimes don't know. Disability centers don't know. So we came together and formed this organization to just provide a place for everybody to come together and network with each other and provide support, but then also provide information. We have a blog post where people post different information about their stories. We have an immigration subcommittee who works on immigration issues for people with disabilities. We have different categories. I would say anybody who identifies as having a disability, being Latinx is more than welcome to join. I consider it like finding community. As you talked about earlier, how important support systems are, especially support systems that understand you. Because a lot of times you're the only person in your family that has a disability, so your family doesn't understand you. And then your work, you're the only person with a disability or the only person of color. It's just a support system for anybody who would want it.

Tatiana Perilla 20:31

That's great. I like the emphasis, how you mentioned talking about people that have immigrated that have disabilities. Because I've noticed that there's conversations about disability, there's conversation about immigration, and sometimes it's like they're not highlighted in the conversation a whole lot. That seems like a gap that we need to address, because then you're going to be not giving them enough representation.

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 20:55

Absolutely, if I can add something to that. One of the big things... Immigration impacts people with disabilities on every level, but one of the big things that had happened was the public charge rule. And that pretty much was putting in place certain... If you used certain benefits you were barred from adjusting status, so you couldn't get a green card, you couldn't get citizenship. For people with disabilities, it became extra important to try to fight this because people with disabilities need the services for rehabilitation to survive. And so it disproportionately impacted people disabilities, but a lot of times when I would read articles about it, especially written from the immigrant perspective without a disability lens, a disability was completely kept out of the conversation. When I'm like, it hugely impacts people with disabilities that are immigrants, to be able to live in their communities. Like, you can't access any type of food stamps, any type of medical support, any type of rehabilitation, which people with disabilities need. I think it's changed that under Biden, I'm not exactly sure, maybe cut that out. But it is a huge impact for people with disabilities, and now that they're thinking of comprehensive immigration reform. How are people with disabilities included in that? Because some people with disabilities can't work and a lot of times immigration reform is tied to work, and employment. And so what does that look like for people with disabilities?

Tatiana Perilla 22:33

Mhmm. I like how you quickly mentioned there how maybe it's changed under Biden, because that's something I noticed especially with immigration is huge. You always have to stay up to date with the most current information because things have changed. You don't know what you're eligible for anymore. Like, one second, there's something you have to worry about and then you find out that that's changed and that can impact your life a lot.

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 23:01

Absolutely.

Tatiana Perilla 23:02

As a parting question, sometimes we like to ask people, how do you manage your own mental health? Are there any specific ways you have found that help you or any tips you would give to somebody on managing their mental health?

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 23:17

Yeah, that's a really good question. I'm definitely an extrovert, so the pandemic has been not to my liking. *Laughter* I don't think to anybody's liking, but especially those of us that are extroverts. We're just trying to figure things out. So for me, again, it comes back to like a support system. Having little things like, I have friends that I text with about different topics. It's called- I'm not sure if I can curse. *Laughter* But it's called Shit Talkers, that's what the categories are called. And we just talk about random things. Some of it is like, 'Oh my gosh, did

you see this happen with this person in the disability community?' And others related to different topics. So having those connections with people really helps me to just kind of continue to connect, and have meaningful relationships, and kind of build those connections. Another thing is dancing. I love to dance, and it's a way to get some type of exercise in during this time. I dance here at home, and whenever this is over, hopefully, dancing at places. Journaling has been also big for me. I like to journal. I like to craft and I'm actually staying right now with my sister, and her husband, and my nephew. And so I've been doing lots of crafting with my nephew, and he loves it, and I love it. It's a lot of fun. I think those three things, like having community, are a big part of what I'm doing.

Tatiana Perilla 24:56

Yeah, that need for connections was always important. I think we're seeing, especially now with the pandemic, how much more we really needed it than perhaps we realized before. Thanks for sharing your personal tips with managing your mental health. I'm sure there's some people out there who can relate to some of those or maybe are like, 'Hey, I didn't think about trying crafting.' Thank you for talking to me. I'm really excited that you joined me today. I've been looking forward to this. Is there any last second things that you want to throw out that maybe we didn't ask you about?

Conchita Hernandez Legorreta 25:29

No, thank you so much for having me. I love talking *Laughter* so this works. And yeah, I think the focus on mental health is really important, like you said, to figure out how they're dealing with mental health in this time. Also, trying to be present and education doesn't go away during this time and *inaudible* doesn't go away in this time. Trying to navigate all of those moving parts from different communities is so important, so thank you so much for having me.

Alex Schiwal 26:02

Music Thank you for listening to this episode of the Mental Health Crossroads podcast, where we explore the intersection of mental health and developmental disabilities. We hope you enjoyed this episode, make sure to visit our website at mhddcenter.org and follow us on social media @MHDDcenter. Thank you. *Music*