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Decolonising inclusive education: an example from a research in Colombia

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Inclusive education is a concept born in the global North. Research has shown that its relatively recent but widespread adoption by countries in the global South is often done without consideration of the actual needs of these contexts, and by solely focusing on strategies for learners with disabilities. As a result, inclusive education has been criticised as a neo-colonial project in need of renovation. The aim of this article is to show how research can broaden the understanding of inclusive education and make it more relevant to southern contexts. Drawing on an ethnographic research on inclusive education in Colombia, I present some unique examples of vulnerability, but also experiences of belonging in the direst of circumstances. I conclude that in order to decolonise the concept of inclusive education and make its practice sustainable in southern contexts, we need more culturally sensitive research to inform our understanding of these under-researched spaces.

Keywords: inclusive education; decolonising methodologies; Critical Disability Studies; Colombia; global South

Introduction: inclusive education as a neo-colonial project

Inclusive education is a concept first developed in the global North, and it strongly reflects its theoretical positions and contextual realities. In Thomas and Vaughan (2004), we read about the first time the word *inclusion* was used by a group of educators, writers, parents and disabled adults in Toronto, Canada in 1988. The term caught up quickly in the USA and Canada, and after a few years, in the UK. The 1990s were a period of intense Anglo-American academic collaborations and activities advancing the concept of inclusion in education, which can be argued to have culminated in the adoption of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs in 1994. Signed under the auspices of UNESCO, the Salamanca Statement is considered a watershed moment in the history of inclusive education, because it stipulated that children with disabilities should be educated in regular schools alongside their peers. According to Kozleski et al. (2011), following the adoption of the Statement, a *second generation* of low- and middle-income countries, mainly in the global South, started embracing inclusive education at the policy level.

In recent years, inclusive education has been gaining widespread recognition and adopted at

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the level of governmental policy worldwide. Since the Salamanca Statement and since the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2006, there is a dominant discourse across countries of the North and South around inclusive education as a human rights issue. Consequently, inclusive education has become central to the education agenda globally, also evident in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015. SDG 4 is to ensure *inclusive and equitable quality education,* hence emphasising the importance of access and participation for all learners in education.

However, at the same time it is widely accepted that inclusive education is a vague concept, the understanding and operationalisation of which can be shaped by various historical, cultural and other local factors. Thomas and Vaughan (2004:1) note that the social, political and educational streams of thought that inclusive education represents 'while united in direction and general sentiment, germinated differently in different parts of the world'. This can be described as a paradox, that is on the one hand a common acceptance of inclusive education as the morally right option, evident at least in the international community's agreed goals, and on the other hand, different understandings and operationalisations of inclusive education depending on the local context.

In mainstream northern literature, there is scarcity of critical work on the conceptualisation and operationalisation of inclusive education in southern contexts. The limited research available has been conducted by global North based researchers and from a global North perspective (for a full discussion see Kamenopoulou, 2018a). Recently there have been significant efforts to change this northern dominance in the field (see e.g. Singal et al., 2018), but more critical research is still needed. Within this framework, inclusive education *can* be and *has* been criticised as a neo-colonial project imposed on the South by the North (Walton, 2018), simply put, a mere transfer of ideas, knowledge and expectations about what educational systems could or should achieve from the 'civilised' North to the 'uncivilised' South.

This article is set within the wider context of the current global movement for the decolonisation of education and argues that in order to make inclusive education meaningful and sustainable in southern contexts, we urgently need more culturally sensitive research to expand our knowledge of these under-researched spaces. Decolonisation aims to challenge the dominance of epistemologies of the North in research and writing (Meekosha, 2011). Recent campaigns have challenged the lack of southern perspectives from disciplines like sociology, health and education (Connell, 2018). The aim of this article is to demonstrate how research can be used as a tool towards broadening the understanding of inclusive education and making it relevant to global South contexts. In support of my discussion, I will draw on findings from an ethnographic research on inclusive education in Colombia and I will present examples of vulnerability and circumstances leading to exclusion, but also examples of belonging and inclusion in the direst of circumstances that the research captured in this context.

Very little is known about inclusive education in Colombia (Moreno Angarita and Gabel, 2008; Kamenopoulou, 2018b), therefore this article contributes to the limited research available on this geographical area. However, this article has significance beyond Colombia, as it contributes to current debates on educational inclusion in the global South and the role that global North biases and assumptions play in this process.

Literature review: understandings of inclusive education in the global South

Before discussing understandings of inclusive education in countries of the global South, it is necessary to emphasise that the way people understand *inclusive education* and participation in school and society more generally must be examined in close relation to how they understand *disability* and *rights*, including the right to education. Moreover, central to this discussion should be the consideration of how dominant global North discourses around *rights*, *disability*, and *inclusive education* continue to influence policies, practices and research in and about global South contexts. In this section, I address these pertinent points.

Historically, various ways of understanding disability have existed in different societies. As an example, Ancient Greeks, even those of the enlightened Classical age, are well-known for their harsh attitude towards disabled people. Writing in particular about perceptions of Intellectual Disability in antiquity, Stainton (2017) reviews the writings of great thinkers of the time like Plato, Socrates and Aristotle and highlights the dominance of the discourse of *reason* above anything else and its association with a person's *value*, an approach that has since dominated western thinking about disability. However, it is crucial to emphasise as well that different perceptions of disability have existed even within the same historical period, and the belief held by ancient Greeks that some mental illnesses were sacred gifts from the gods is an illustrative example mentioned by Stainton (2017:1), who emphasises that 'there is of course no absolute unanimity of social response. At any given time, a variety of attitudes and responses can be identified'. With the emergence and spread of Christianity, the *grace* discourse came to influence the understanding of disability in the western world, therefore shaping a *care* model of disability, which reflects a perception of disabled people as innocent *human beings* in need of *compassion* (Stainton, 2017).

In modern western thinking, two contrasting ways of conceptualising disability have been dominant, namely, the *medical* and the *social* models of disability. On the one hand, the heavily criticised- but still apparent in the thinking and practice of many professionals and researchers- the medical approach conceptualises disability as the product of biological causes that lie within the person and therefore focuses on fixing the disabled person. This approach started emerging after the first world war in response to the injured veterans in need for rehabilitation, and over the years it crystallised as the medical approach to disability, in which health professionals have the authority and focus on fixing disability (Bernal Castro and Moreno

Angarita, 2013). On the other hand, the social model conceptualises disability as caused by social factors that are external to the person's impairment and focuses on removing the disabling barriers that exist in the surrounding environment (Oliver, 1990). First put forward in the 1970s by disabled activists in the UK, who reacted against society's predominantly medical view of disability and advocated for disabled people's rights and full inclusion in all facets of society, the social model has dominated western thinking over the last 40 years and has come to influence the way disability is currently perceived in northern contexts. What is relevant to note here, is that nowadays the social or rights-based model of disability can be seen to underpin disability inclusive development not only in northern countries, from where it emerged initially, but also in the international sphere (Albert, 2004). Two illustrative examples of international policy making that reflect the rights-based discourse are the aforementioned UNCRPD and other UN-led initiatives like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

However, the claims for the universality of the rights-based discourse and for its relevance across countries of the North and the South have been criticised by disability scholars as neo-colonial, because of the complexities surrounding the notions of rights, disability and inclusive education. Grech (2011a: 91) stresses that 'first of all, any discussion about rights must emphasise that these are a Western invention'. Connell (2011: 1378) points out that rights are safeguarded through the UN but in reality, this work includes 'unstable coalitions of governments, bureaucracies and NGOs' and that in the global South, NGOs too 'are constrained by the neoliberal environment from which they are funded, and are influenced by the professional cultures of the global North'. Meekosha (2011a:1388) citing Mutua and de Sousa Santos, contends that 'the language of universalism assumes developing countries will evolve to the 'higher standards of Western human rights, such as the recognition of individual rights', which suggests a colonialist and imperialist approach.

The main argument here is that the notion of individual rights does not even exist in many in global South contexts, and assuming it does, is an act of perpetuated colonialism, because it assumes that Northern values, belief systems, and understandings *are relevant* in Southern contexts. Evidence in support of the different perception of rights in relation to disability in global South countries can be found in the writings of Miles, who explains that the introduction of the rights terminology into the conceptualisation of disability has made moderate progress in Asian contexts, 'where 'rights' are more often perceived as moral conduct in society than as legally enforceable entitlements of individuals' (2000:616). Singal (2006) also notes the difference between a 'directive principle' and a 'fundamental right' and demonstrates that in India, education has historically been perceived by the government as the former, and as such, it is not legally enforceable within this context. Soldatic and Grech (2014) criticise dominant discourses on disability rights for the crucial reason that they tend to disregard the difference between human and citizenship rights, which only a country's government can enforce. This means for example that 'under the CRPD, a person's claims for disability rights currently fall outside the remit of disability justice as articulated by the Convention, and this is arguably one

of the limitations when rights are transnationalised' (Kamenopoulou, 2018b:1208). Discussing the relation between human rights and citizenship, Owen (2017:264) sees a clear problem with the view of human rights as universal in that 'it risks universalising […] one institutionalised form of citizenship whose dominance itself owes much to the history of imperialism…'. Furthermore, other authors stress the complex role that intersections play in how rights are perceived in historically poor and extremely unequal global South contexts, intersections that are ignored in arguments for the universality of human rights. As Grech (2011a: 92) puts it:

> In the overriding presence of poverty and deprivation, rights more often than not run the risk of being utopian, and inattention to local contexts, political economies, histories and cultures may make them contextually insignificant.

As a result of the rights-based agenda underpinning the international development of inclusive education and its claims to universality, other theoretical and philosophical frameworks prevalent in global South contexts in relation to disability, rights and education are ignored or dismissed. Miles (1995: 50) explains why this is a problem:

> At least 70% of global disability is experienced in countries and contexts upon which western ethics and philosophy impinge only peripherally. […] Yet most of the disability in the world (certainly 70%, possibly more) is felt and thought about in other terms. Many of these 'other' terms are unfamiliar to most westerners and may have been dismissed with stereotypes of 'eastern fatalism'; or are considered 'outdated', or even the old colonial standby, 'barbaric'.

Indeed, recent research provides evidence for the different conceptualisations of disability and inclusive education in global South contexts. Meekosha (2011:678) stresses that 'disability is not universally understood' and calls for a decolonisation of disability and for the consideration of other perspectives. She mentions as examples the non-existence of a category of discourse for disability in Sub-Saharan Africa and the different ways for discussing bodily functions that Indigenous Australian people have. In our research on Bhutanese teachers' understanding of disability and inclusive education (Kamenopoulou and Dukpa, 2017), we found evidence of traditional cultural beliefs about disability as caused by past life karma, which is in line with previous research in Bhutan (e.g. Schuelka, 2015) and in other Asian countries (e.g. Ryani et al., 2016). Bernal Castro and Moreno Angarita (2013) stress that disability has historically been experienced and perceived differently by western and eastern cultures, and that the latter have had similar perceptions with Indian American cultures, such as for example the belief that bodily differences should not mask our human essence. In relation to inclusive education, research has shown that it is a concept often transferred to southern contexts uncritically, i.e. without reflection on the actual needs of these contexts, and readily perceived as mainstream placement of children with disabilities (Singal, 2006; Kamenopoulou and Dukpa, 2017; Kamenopoulou, 2018b).

As a consequence, arguments against a universalising discourse on inclusive education have been made. Artiles and Dyson (2005:40) maintain that this discourse is 'based not simply on its assertion of universal human rights, but on the universalisation of theories of human difference, policy prescriptions and largely unsubstantiated empirical claims', and warn that the operationalisation and effectiveness of inclusive education in one context must not be perceived as equally desirable or practically possible in other national contexts. In line with this, Grech (2015a: 13) is critical of 'experts' on disability inclusive development from the global North who 'scurry the world for meetings, research and consultancy', because inclusive education and disability are fluid and vague concepts that can take different meanings depending on the local context and can be shaped by the complex interactions between factors like education background, social class, economic status, religious and cultural beliefs. By acknowledging the barriers created by these intersections, we must also focus on the historical, political, and social factors that have systematically kept children with disabilities from accessing primary education (Singal, 2006). In line with this, as a way forward, Artiles and Dyson (2005: 43) propose 'that those who wish to understand the global phenomenon of inclusive education need to do so from a perspective which takes due account of context'.

In light of these arguments against the existence of a universal understanding of the notions of disability, right and inclusive education, the need for research approaches that are culturally sensitive and able to capture the subtle characteristics of particular local contexts, immediately becomes apparent. Such approaches have been proposed by several authors in the field of inclusive education, for example, Barton (1997) who argues for the need to listen to the context, where inclusive education is expected to take place; and Booth (1999) who stresses the value of comparative and qualitative research that can capture local voices. Artiles and Dyson (2005) also suggest a comparative cultural historical research framework; and writing about disability studies, Grech (2015a:15) stresses that we urgently need 'qualitative research humanising, prioritising, listening to and articulating the voices of disabled people in extreme poverty – research unafraid of the 'uncontrollableness' of data/life'. The need to listen to the perspectives of people from the global South was the rationale underpinning the recent publication of 4 qualitative studies that captured under-researched perspectives on inclusive education and disability from Malaysia, Bhutan, Philippines and Belize (Kamenopoulou, 2018a).

To conclude, a plethora of authors have argued that for international inclusive education discourse to meaningfully interact with local understandings and other contextual characteristics, research on inclusive education in the global South must make use of appropriate methodologies that allow neglected voices and perspectives to be heard and help decolonise current knowledge and understandings of disability, rights and inclusive education. In the next section, I present an ethnographic research on inclusive education in Colombia in order to illustrate how the current understanding of inclusive education can be broadened through research in order to support sustainable international inclusive education development. The focus will be on examples of: a) vulnerability or disadvantage, b) belonging or inclusion,

and c) local understandings of inclusive education, which I argue can be useful in challenging and broadening current global North influenced and centred understandings of inclusive education.

Broadening the understanding of inclusive education: a research in Colombia

The research design that I adopted for this study was shaped by the wider Critical Disability Studies literature, which places emphasis on the need for southern perspectives on disability and inclusive education both in theory and data generation (Connell, 2007, 2011, 2018; Miles, 1995, 2000, 2011; Meekosha, 2011; Goodley et al., 2019). Decolonising theory and research warrants a recognition of 'the associations between disability, poverty, and exclusion from education, and the consequences of such intersections' (Damiani et al., 2016: 868) and focuses on the complex interplay between various disabling factors like inequality and poverty that have historically existed in global South contexts and on their consequences for the lives of disabled people in these contexts (Grech, 2011a; 2011b; 2015b). I adopted an ethnographic approach and collected data through semi-structured one-to-one interviews and focus groups with 35 professionals in total, including teachers, support staff, Head teachers, academics, teacher trainers, and trainee teachers from the capital, Bogotá. I also gathered documents and visual media relevant to my research foci, and kept qualitative notes in my field diary. Before and after fieldwork, I conducted systematic searches of the literature on inclusive education in this context. For a full presentation of the research design and the main findings, see Kamenopoulou (2018b). For a critical reflection on two very different school settings that I visited, see Kamenopoulou (2019).

Inclusive Education and Disability in Colombia

Colombia is a country rich in biodiversity and natural resources, which is currently classified by the Word Bank as 'upper middle-income'. However, it is also an extremely unequal country, scarred by deep social and economic divisions that persist since its colonial past and that continue to fuel its over half a century long internal conflict (Kamenopoulou, 2018b). There is ample evidence that Colombia is facing a complex humanitarian crisis, because of conflict, violence and human rights violations, and because it is prone to natural disasters affecting those in remote and poor areas disproportionately, where there is little or no government presence (UNICEF, 2017). Serious human rights concerns are continuously raised in relation to the country (see Human Rights Watch, 2019), despite the historic 2016 peace agreement between the government and the FARC guerrillas that was intended to put an end to the violence. Due to the conflict, Colombia currently has the 2nd highest number of internally displaced people worldwide (IDMC, 2018). Evidence suggests that conflict and displacement interfere with access to education for a significant number of Colombian children, and that amongst those most at risk for exclusion are disabled children, girls, and those of Afro-Colombian and

indigenous decent (OCHA, 2019).

During its earlier history, Colombia remained under the influence of traditional Spanish catholic values and hierarchical structures, because in the colonial and post-colonial periods, Christianity played a key role in spreading western values and belief systems to the 'uncivilised' people of the colonised lands. In relation to the perception of disability, Magaña et al. (2019) discuss the role of *paternalism*, established as a power structure in the Colonial era through the Spanish Catholic Church. Paternalism, they maintain, is still evident in the view of disabled people as in need of protection and seclusion at home and as not able to actively participate in school or society. According to González (2004, cited in Moreno Angarita, 2011:17), Colombian legislation still reflects this view by not considering disabled people as 'independent and productive individuals with the potential to achieve full participation' (my translation). Another cultural value first imposed on indigenous people by the colonisers, and still relevant in how disability is understood in Colombian society today, is that of *respeto*, which emphasises the need for people to respect those in power. Accordingly, Magaña et al. (2019) explain, parents of children with disabilities are encouraged to unquestionably accept the views of professionals regarding their child's disability and this may include for example the diagnosis given or the treatment proposed.

Moreover, in a discussion of the development of education in Colombia throughout its modern history, Orlando Melo (2017) argues that the two key characteristics of the education system in the last 60 years that have survived since the colonial and post-colonial eras are: a) *education* as a *privilege* for the wealthy groups of society and b) the somewhat *uncritical adoption* of Western innovations. Inclusive education is an example of such innovations and since Salamanca, Colombia has made significant progress in embracing it at the policy level as inclusion of learners with disabilities (Kamenopoulou, 2018b). Immediately after the adoption of the Salamanca Statement in 1994, Law 115 marked a milestone, because it made inclusive education compulsory and mandated that educational institutions should organise (directly or through third party contracts) appropriate actions that will allow 'academic and social integration' of students with 'limitations or exceptional capabilities' (article 46, my translation). This resulted in the sudden closure of special schools, the demonisation of special education, and the absence of other viable alternatives for children with disabilities, many of whom still remain out of school (Ministerio de Salud, 2018).

Recently, Colombia aligned itself more with international standards, by ratifying the UNCRPD in 2011 and signing the SDGs in 2015. In the bid to meet SDG 4, Colombia introduced new legislation on the inclusion of children with disabilities in education (Decreto 1421/2017). However, evidence strongly suggests that inclusive education is far from a reality in this context. In a review of studies on the extensive Colombian legislation for the inclusion of people with disabilities, Moreno Angarita (2011:16) concludes that despite international agreements and a sufficient policy framework including 4 relevant laws and about 200 decrees,

the lives of people with disabilities have not improved, and argues that 'justice fails where it should protect the most vulnerable and disadvantaged'. Moreno Angarita (2011) argues that this gap between policy and practice is due to mistakes in the implementation of the legislation and lack of several necessary pre-requisites for inclusive education such as teacher preparation, but she also stresses the crucial role of a local perception of disability as a medical rather than a matter of social justice. Last but not least, the sole focus of policy on learners with disabilities ignores the plethora of vulnerable learners that exist in this context, such as for example those whose education is disrupted because of forcible displacement (Kamenopoulou, 2018b).

To sum up, due to extreme social injustice, in Colombia the interests of multinationals and the wealthiest groups continue to have priority over the rights of the poorest and most marginalised, including people with disabilities and women, who are disproportionately affected in education and other contexts. Colombia's unique sociocultural specificities have shaped and continue to shape its peoples' experiences of inclusion or exclusion, equality or inequality, and to put it simply, of having their rights respected or not within education as well as all other contexts. Because of its historical context, Colombia lends itself to an intriguing case study on the participation (or not) of vulnerable groups in education. Although Colombia has aligned itself with international policy on inclusive education, it remains a challenging context, where the adoption of international conventions has yet to be translated into meaningful local practices.

Examples of vulnerability: complex intersections

During fieldwork, I went to an inner-city primary setting in one of the most deprived areas of Bogotá, because it was described to me as an example of pioneering inclusive practice for children with a range of disabilities. The school was very popular for its inclusive approach, and consequently attracted many children with disabilities from areas far beyond its neighbouring zone. It is relevant to note here that this was criticised by some teachers as the opposite of inclusion, because they argued it is not fair or equitable for children and their carers to have to travel far to get to a school that will accept them, instead of being able to join their local school:

> The boy's mum told me: 'I work from 3 in the evening until 10 in the night'. So she used to wake up at 3 in the morning, get the boy ready (for school), her eyes were so tired, they came to school by public transport, then by foot, and [after the end of the school] she went back home to work. They live far, so they have to travel for 2 hours to get to Bogotá. Then she has to push the wheelchair in the middle of the city at 5am in the morning to get to school. She lasted like this for 6 months, then she quit her job, because it was clearly impossible. (Class Teacher)

In the above extract the complex intersections between gender, social class, poverty and

disability become immediately apparent, because the mother of this child struggled not just because of her child's disability, but also due to poverty and social inequality, which for example denied her child access to a school closer to their home. Furthermore, in addition to its *disability inclusive ethos*, the school was in an area of Bogotá infamous as the biggest red-light zone in the city, and was also situated in between two big open-air markets. Because this area offers cheap temporary accommodation to poor families, it attracted a varied population, including local merchants, craftsmen and women, and indigenous families, who travelled frequently buying and selling their products, as well as sexual workers from the red-light zone nearby. Locals described this area of Bogotá as dangerous and one they would tend to avoid in the night because of drug dealing, prostitution and violence. Hence in addition to the high percentage of pupils with disabilities, communing from afar, the wider population of the school also reflected the characteristics of the local population and was very heterogeneous:

> We have children in the autistic spectrum, [we have] everything, children with very profound difficulties, […] we have children with cognitive difficulties; we have children of Afro-Caribbean descent; indigenous children, children of sexual workers; children of families who live in the streets; children of people who work in the food markets, because we are in between two street markets. (School Head)

I was moreover able to record more examples of vulnerability that existed in this context in my field notes. For example, while I had stopped to take a picture of a wall display in one of the school corridors, a 6-year-old girl came to me and my companion; we could tell that she was very upset, because she was crying. My companion, who knew the girl from her previous work with the school gave her a hug and asked what was wrong. The girl said that her mother had left and that she was sad because she did not know when she was coming back. My companion explained to me that the girl was from a family of indigenous heritage, who were traditionally ambulant merchants, and that very frequently the adults had to leave the children with neighbours or extended family members and go travelling for weeks or months in order to acquire or sell merchandise. When I met one of the school teachers, she had just finished an activity with the class for which children had to write about their holiday. She told me that it is extremely rare for the children in this school to go on a holiday with their parents and that most of them would never have experienced that, because of poverty.

Examples of belonging: the role of special education

One significant and unexpected finding was that in one of the Universities that I visited, trainee teachers with disabilities had sophisticated support in accessing their courses and the wider University. What was even more interesting was that this support was entirely the work of the team of academic experts on Special Education. This means that the same academics were responsible for organising teaching and provision for all students on their Special Education courses, as well as additional Special Needs support for all the other students with disabilities

on the rest of the Education courses offered by the University, e.g. Maths, Science. This support was mainly specialised on students with a sensory impairment and primarily focused on special provision for deaf and blind students, including sign language interpreters and sign language courses for deaf/hearing impaired students, and resources for blind/visually impaired students.

It was explained to me that this arrangement was the result of lack of initiative from the University that initially accepted students with disabilities, but allocated them to study Special Education. In other words, the University assumed that people with disabilities only wanted to become teachers for people with disabilities, an approach strongly challenged by the academics I interviewed, who told me how they proceeded to having discussions with the students themselves, which led to them to propose that a support service be set up to allow access to all taught programmes by students with disabilities:

> Firstly, we asked the deaf people if they want (to study) Special Education and they said: 'no, we have different dreams'; And we were surprised because they told us: 'we want (to study) Biology, we want Mathematics, we want, we want, we want' […]

In the absence of other formal structures, Colombian academics with Special Education expertise were perceived (and perceived themselves) as the ones responsible for offering the support necessary:

> The others, who are in other disciplines, well they don't have much to say, whereas we, well we have a lot to say (on the inclusion of students with disabilities).

Apart from offering specialist provision, raising awareness about disability amongst their academic colleagues was also considered part of their role:

> What do we do? In our programme, any time we have a new initiative, we have a meeting with the academics, meeting with teams from other programmes that have nothing to do with Special Education and we provide the guidelines, we raise awareness and they start getting interested and this is one informal way of managing this process. And I think that this is not an obligatory mechanism, but it is spontaneous.

Another example of belonging based on the philosophy of Special Education that I encountered, was the inclusion of children and young people with severe, profound and complex disabilities in institutions of a non-educational nature, called 'Centros Crecer', that were run by the social services. It was explained to me that the centres existed because the education system was not ready to meet complex needs. The focus of the centres' work was vocational, and included preparation of the young people for financial independence:

> Maybe for us, from our academic reading let's say, making beads is to devalue the

> person with a disability or demonstrates a charity model of disability. And this is what the theorists and books have always taught us. However, when you meet with the children, they tell you 'but this makes me happy, I want to sell my products', so it was the meaning this had in these children's lives. So the teachers have managed that the children turn their activities into their life projects. (Lead)

However, one of their aims was to ensure as many children and young people could be included in education further down the line:

> What we initially do, the primary thing we do is that these children return to school. Or if they've never been, that they enter the school. OK, let's say that for the children, who at this moment are 18 or 17 or 15 years, well we already know that it is too late. But at least we have managed that the teachers of the little ones, that they are sensitised and they start making links with schools. (Lead)

Although clearly aware that these centres are not aligned with the current policy and legislation context pushing for inclusive education, the lead reflected on the *benefits* of these centres as the only choice for these children and young people:

> We already know that this is not the best choice, but we also know one thing: that the children are happy there […] and that our society needs this. What I mean is that the education system has not managed yet to accept these children. This is very important.

She moreover shared their plans for the future, imagining the centres as a form of part time placement for children and young people alongside mainstream placement:

> Our dream is that our centres become centres where we support the development of the capabilities of children with a cognitive disability because this is our history, but that our centres, how can I put it, are not opposed to the school, but complementary to it. We could have the children two days a week and they could go to school three days. Or if they go to school in the morning, we could have them in the afternoon. In which case we should not be responsible just for the completion of the homework!

Local understandings of inclusive education

In terms of the local interpretation of inclusive education as mainstream placement of learners with disabilities, which I have fully discussed (see Kamenopoulou, 2018b), it is relevant to stress here that all participants criticised the rapid policy changes imported from the North, and shared concerns that these changes could not be reflected that rapidly in real life within the particular Colombian context. The following quotation from the lead of the Centros Crecer

summarises this point eloquently:

> We have been in this process for 30 years. How can you explain it? We can't suddenly say: 'just because there is a declaration, there is a convention that tells me that these children must go to school, I shall not take them on anymore'; it is difficult because the reality that people live here in Bogotá and in Colombia, in reality it has not been so easy to link these children up with schools. I mean that transferring inclusion from paper to the real life of people is a big challenge. So social integration continues to be the responsibility of our centres that one would typically classify as special schools.

Similar concerns were echoed by the teachers and academics in the field, who reflected on the changing notion of inclusion and its consequences for special education expertise, which historically existed in the country prior to the UNCRPD:

> So what's happened is that before (the UNCRPD) we had special education, special teachers were the specialists, the experts, and there were therapists, phono-audiologists, and there was a group (in the school) of expert professionals in special children, but now this whole discourse has been turned on its head, and now teachers need to know everything and now we hate and vilify the experts, so they don't want to have experts in schools. Because of 'the right to education', any teacher can have a child (with disabilities), it doesn't matter how or where or when, because every teacher will have a child (with disabilities). (Mainstream teacher)

> I am asking myself many things: where are we heading to in relation to special education? Where do we go with all those changes that are so fast and they don't let us think…what is their purpose? I mean, what is it that they want in reality? What do they aim for? And the families? What do they think? It is different to talk about [inclusive education] at the academic level, but it is a totally different thing what families experience. (Academic)

In summary, the findings presented here highlight: a) the role of complex intersections in creating disadvantage within this context, b) the continued role -but uncertain status- of special education in supporting learners with disabilities, and c) local understandings reflecting a tension due to the mismatch between local special education initiatives and the philosophy of inclusive education as stipulated by international documents like the UNCRPD. In addition to this, there was a shared concern that more time is needed in order for imported inclusive education policies to be implemented successfully within the Colombian context.

Decolonising inclusive education: the need for culturally sensitive research and writing 'from the South'

The findings presented in the previous section demonstrate that within the particular Colombian context: a) vulnerability/disadvantage can be the result of complex intersections, b) belonging can be the result of special education provision, and c) local people are concerned that inclusive education is imported from abroad without due consideration of the realities of the Colombian context. These findings are in line with previous literature arguing that in southern contexts, complex intersections between disabling factors are bound to challenge the success of inclusive education and this is why we need to understand the specific sociocultural context where inclusive education is expected to be achieved (Barton, 1997; Booth, 1999; Artiles and Dyson, 2005). This research therefore highlights some of the unique social, cultural and economic circumstances of the specific Colombian context, where there is extreme inequality, resulting in poverty and virtually no government support for many groups of society, such as the lower social classes, women and the numerous ethnic minorities (Kamenopoulou, 2018b). Hence when factors such as ethnicity, gender, social class and disability interact and create disadvantage, marginalisation and exclusion, these factors cannot be separated or perceived in isolation, but their complex interplay needs to be better understood. Similarly, the continued presence of the philosophy and practice of special education in Colombia despite the ratification of the UNCRPD, should also be conceptualised in relation to the specific Colombian context. Within this context, the continued existence of the special education model in the form of the Centros Crecer, for example, can be understood as a necessary mechanism that currently fills the gaps of the formal education system and as an alternative form of provision of a vocational nature for children and young people who would otherwise have no access to any type of provision. In the same way, the role that Special Education experts still play in supporting disabled students to access their University courses, can also be seen as a necessary strategy because of the lack of other formal mechanisms within their organisation. It therefore seems that the role of Special Education in supporting inclusion within this context, needs to be explored more and understood better. In their literature review on education and disability in different contexts, Singal et al. (2017: 63) point out that 'we know virtually nothing about how children with disabilities are learning in special schools', thus this is an area that warrants further research.

It is worth emphasising that participants specifically reflected on the time needed for new policies to become translated into practice that is meaningful for children and their families, and I have argued that 'Colombia needs time to reflect on the meaning of inclusive education within its current historical and cultural context' (Kamenopoulou, 2018b:1209). If inclusive education is to address inequality and powerlessness within and beyond education, the adoption of international rights-based discourses should be translated into national policies and practices

that reflect local needs, because 'the issue of context […] is central to questions of educational disablement' (Slee, 2001:172). As indicated by Beltrán-Villamizar et al. (2014), there are currently numerous groups of disadvantaged learners in Colombia who are excluded or at risk of exclusion from education, such as learners from ethnic minorities, victims of the armed conflict or populations living on the borders. However, my research has shown that inclusive education in this context focuses on *mainstream placement of children with disabilities*, thus neglecting other vulnerable populations (Kamenopoulou, 2018b). This is in line with Slee's (2014: 11-12) analysis of policy reform in relation to inclusive education around the world, which he argues 'has tended to be broad in its reach, consistent with UNESCO's statements on 'Education for All', but in many quarters inclusive education is, in reality, often a default vocabulary for SEN'. When alignment with international policies is not in dialogue with local needs (Artiles and Dyson, 2005), then inclusive education remains a rhetoric, because in reality, there is no engagement with the factors creating educational disadvantage and exclusion within a specific context. Slee (2018: 11) stresses that 'the reluctant acceptance of inclusive education as an organising mantra has not prompted an interrogation of the essence of exclusion, the smelly side of schooling' and this could not be the case more than in global South contexts like Colombia, where complex intersections create and perpetuate educational disablement and exclusion (Singal, 2006). I have argued that understanding these intersections and how they may cause or exacerbate educational disadvantage requires time and not just a swift adoption of international policies and imported rights-based discourses.

Having established in previous sections of this article that inclusive education is a concept and an area of research and practice that needs to be decolonised, it is imperative to consider the question of *how* this can be best achieved. The findings of this research highlighted several contextual characteristics, which can give an insight into how difficult it may be for SDG 4 (*Inclusive and equitable quality education for all*) to be met by Colombia given its cultural, social and political context. The argument that I propose here is that my research was able to capture these subtle contextual characteristics, because of the culturally sensitive theoretical and methodological framework that I adopted. In a critique of the dominance of Northern theories in the field of disability studies, Connell (2011:1372) argues that a recognition of the experiences of people living in the global 'periphery' as opposed to the 'metropole' will expand current understandings of disability. As mentioned earlier, numerous scholars have made significant contributions to the field of southern disability studies or disability studies from a Southern Theory perspective, to mention but a few: Ghai (2012) questioned the usefulness of global North theories about disability in the context of India; Grech has written extensively and eloquently about disability and poverty in rural Guatemala (2013; 2014; 2015a), the need to challenge dominant Eurocentric epistemologies and to decolonise disability studies (2011a; 2011b; 2015b); Meekosha (2011) urged for an 'intellectual decolonisation' and an end to the one way transfer of ideas from the North to the South; Meekosha and Soldatic (2011) and Soldatic and Grech (2014) discussed some of the key challenges when universalising discourses on human rights; and Miles offered a historical discussion of disability from the

viewpoint of eastern religions (1995), argued that Asian understandings of disability should not be forced into European categories (2000) and questioned the appropriateness of theoretical models from the North like the social model of disability when exploring Asian religious contexts (2011).

Theorising about a possible 'agenda of change' Connell (2018: 6) proposes two possible routes for decolonising social science: a) addressing *what* it studies and b) *how* it proceeds. The former concerns the research focus and the latter concerns the methodology adopted, and both strategies were used in my research, which in this way managed to capture examples of vulnerability, belonging and understandings from the perspective of the local people. It is straightforward to explain the *what* of my research, because of the dearth of research conducted so far on inclusive education in Colombia (Moreno Angarita and Gabel, 2008; Kamenopoulou, 2018b). Hence this research focused on a geographical area on which very little is known in relation to inclusive education, which Connell (2018) argues can be an effective way of decolonising current knowledge production even without any methodological innovation, that is, with the use of conventional methods of enquiry. In terms of the *how* of my research, it was conceptualised from the beginning as an ethnographic study, i.e. qualitative and reflexive in nature, with the aim of immersing myself in the context, minimising my influence as an northern outsider and maximising local perspectives and voices, hence there was great focus on the role of power relations between the researcher and participants or between North and South. Close collaboration with local stakeholders helped shape the research focus and aims prior to and during fieldwork, ensured access to hard-to-reach educational establishments and was key to the identification and recruitment of participants. Simply put, the local actors did not just have the research imposed on them by a northern outsider, but were actively involved in shaping and influencing its direction throughout. Magaña et al. (2019: 1604) report on the adaptation of a US educational programme for parents of children in the Autistic Spectrum to the Colombian context and stress that 'Latin America is at the heart of coloniality, and special care must be taken to ensure that Latin American people have agency in the research performed in this area' (p.1608), something I also achieved with my collaborative research approach. Being able to conduct the research in the local language was another key strategy I used in order to balance out the power relations and make participants feel at ease, which in turn allowed the collection of rich narratives. This also involved reviewing the research and other literature produced by Colombian and Latin American authors in relation to inclusive education, which helped embed my findings within the wider context of southern research (for a comprehensive literature review, see Kamenopoulou, 2018b). Gibb and Danero Iglesias (2017) point out that the role of language in ethnographic research has been under-discussed by researchers, who should openly acknowledge the ways in which their levels of fluency in a second language might affect the research process. Moreover, they argue that conducting ethnographic research in a different language is complicated, since it is not only about fluency, but also about being able to identify subtle differences in dialect, understanding colloquialisms and slang terminology and/or when to use a polite or casual tone. I agree with these authors

that this topic warrants more discussion since I found that my native speaker level in the local language, including the understanding of colloquialisms and different accents, was a significant factor contributing to the success of my fieldwork.

At this point, it is necessary to stress why gathering local voices can be considered in itself a methodological approach that contributes to the decolonisation of the study of inclusive education. Writing about the field of disability studies, Nguyen (2018: 21-22) argues for the need to re-theorise disability from the periphery, explaining that this 'requires scholars to challenge our privileges as knowledge producers about disability from the position of the colonizer to begin re-theorizing disability from the standpoint of the colonized'. I argue that this idea can also be applied to the study of inclusive education. In a recent article, Walton (2018: 34) criticises inclusive education as a neo-colonial project pointing out that: 'the pressure to adopt inclusive education comes with scant recognition of ways in which the history of colonialism and underdevelopment in countries of the global South compound the problems of educational exclusion'. She moreover discusses some possibilities for using inclusive education as a tool supporting decolonial or critical education such as for example that it 'must concern itself with resisting coloniality in education and promoting emancipatory and socially just ways of being' (p. 41). According to Walton, the implications for research are as follows: valuing local culture and knowledge, privileging the voices and experiences of those living in the periphery, and setting up collaborative research projects. As I explained earlier, for my research I adopted this approach with strategies such as reviewing the local literature, collaborating with local stakeholders in the design of the research, and listening to a range of local voices (although it was not possible to include the views of disabled students, see Kamenopoulou, 2018b). As a result, I was able to gather evidence of challenges, successes and understandings from the perspective of local actors. Hence when exploring inclusive education in global South contexts, researchers from the global North need to acknowledge that power relations and issues like language might obscure the perspectives of the locals. Accordingly, capturing a range of local voices allows a cross-cultural view of inclusive education and provides insights into how it can be implemented sustainably in a given context. This is because local perspectives allow the exploration and illustration of unique experiences of disability, disadvantage, inclusion and exclusion in southern contexts.

To sum up, by focusing on an under-researched topic and geographical area and by listening to under-represented local voices, this research added to the limited critical literature on inclusive education in Colombia, and captured some key current challenges and opportunities from the perspectives of those who live in this context. The research design adopted was qualitative and key considerations included addressing *power relations*, researcher *reflexivity* and *positionality* and *cross-cultural sensitivity*, which I argue allowed me to capture subtle contextual characteristics and prioritise local voices over my pre-existing assumptions.

Conclusions: ways forward for research

Although a single research, article or book cannot decolonise the entire field of inclusive education, as I have demonstrated here, there are specific strategies that researchers can use in order to contribute to knowledge production on inclusive education that is not *about* the South but *from* the South. Given the role of the sociocultural context in shaping inclusive education in practice, it is safe to argue that 'knowledge without context is in fact no knowledge at all' (Denning, 2001: 135). To conclude, decolonising inclusive education requires critical engagement and reflexive research approaches that can capture local specificities and subtle contextual realities. This critical engagement and reflexivity should not only take place at the beginning or the end of a research, because they are not a starting point or an end goal, but a continuous activity, 'an ongoing epistemic journey' (Walton, 2018: 32), influencing and shaping not only the foci of the research, but crucially, how it is conducted and disseminated, and ultimately, if it prioritises the experiences and perspectives of the people living in the global periphery, whose voices have long been neglected.

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