

**Inclusive Education in the global South? A Colombian perspective: ‘When you look towards the past, you see children with disabilities, and if you look towards the future, what you see is diverse learners.’**

Leda Kamenopoulou<sup>a\*</sup>

*“School of Education, University of Roehampton. Corresponding Author- Email: leda.kamenopoulou@roehampton.ac.uk*

The findings of the research presented in this paper come in the aftermath of a momentous year for Colombia, a year that saw a historic peace deal signed between the government and the biggest left-wing guerrilla group (FARC) with the aim of bringing an over 50 year civil war to a long awaited conclusion. At a time when the Colombian people are being required to genuinely reflect on what inclusion means to them and how best they can achieve it within their deeply diverse society, I present findings from an ethnographic research that I conducted on inclusion in education focusing on the capital, Bogotá. The research foci were a) inclusive education in practice, b) teacher preparation for inclusive education, and c) local understanding of inclusive education. Findings include a local understanding of inclusive education as synonymous with disability, special teachers as synonymous with inclusive education in practice, and big gaps in teacher preparation for inclusive education. Based on these findings, I emphasise that inclusive education is a global North-created concept, which can acquire different meanings in global South contexts, and I argue that Colombia in particular needs time to make its own understanding of inclusive education a priority.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education; Disability; Sustainable Development Goals; Social Justice; Southern theory

**Introduction: Inclusive Education in the global South**

There is a vast literature on inclusive education, yet the term remains ambiguous and problematic. There is no single definition (Lawson et al. 2006; Erten and Savage, 2012) and there are different views regarding its exact focus: does inclusive education concern only children with disabilities and their participation in mainstream education, different groups of children who are disadvantaged, and hence at risk of exclusion from the education system or all children and their equal participation in education? (see Kiuppis, 2014). More importantly

perhaps, the meaning and implementation of inclusive education in practice have been found to vary depending on the cultural, social and historical context (Mitchell, 2005; Hansen, 2012), and research has highlighted gaps in our understanding of the interpretation of inclusive education within different contexts (Barton, 1997; Kamenopoulou and Dukpa, 2017; Kamenopoulou, 2018).

Despite these unanswered questions, recent UN-led global agendas, like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and subsequently, the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015) have called on countries to work towards inclusive education. It is relevant to note here that inclusive education was not explicitly mentioned in the MDGs, but it was put firmly on the map with the 4<sup>th</sup> SDG, calling for *inclusive and quality education for all* (Kamenopoulou, 2017). Similarly, disability was also for the first time named in five of the SDGs, including the 4<sup>th</sup> goal, aiming to end the discrimination of children in education on the basis of a number of characteristics, including disability (Kuper and Grech, 2017). Accordingly, many global South countries have signed up to these UN-led agendas, and have as a result started embracing inclusive education at the level of policy.

Yet inclusive education in the global South remains underexplored and we desperately need more research on which groups remain excluded and in which contexts. For example, there is a noteworthy lack of data on the education of some of the poorest and most marginalised children, especially in Latin America (Miles & Singal, 2010). Furthermore, Grech (2015:11) stresses that the global South is a ‘complex and hybrid space’ that should be understood ‘in its own right’. This is because global South countries have unique cultural and social fabrics shaped by their people’s struggles with the legacy of colonialism in the form of postcolonial and neocolonial structures and oppression, extreme poverty and economic, social and political inequality, uneven distribution of resources, neoliberal capitalism imposed from the global North, internal conflict and forcible displacement; and moreover struggles due to complex intersections between disabling factors like poverty, gender or disability (Stubbs, 2008; Connell, 2011; Grech, 2011; Grech & Soldatic, 2015).

In this paper I present the findings from an ethnographic study on inclusive education in Colombia that captured the perspectives of the local people. Focusing on the capital Bogotá, the research aims were to a) explore how inclusive education is implemented in practice, b) learn more about how teachers are prepared for inclusive education and c) capture an understanding of inclusive education relevant to this context. During fieldwork, I visited different education establishments and I gathered the voices of various education professionals. The aim of this paper is to present and discuss key findings in relation to the above three research foci. Before I present my findings, I discuss some pertinent literature and the research methodology I adopted.

## Mapping the context: Colombia and Inclusive Education

Someone from Europe [...] cannot easily imagine the violent contrast that can exist within the same country between the world of the Caribbean (coast) and the world of the mountainous range of the Andes. First of all, a geographical contrast [...] Also a human contrast [...] When we talk about a river, the longest that a European reader can imagine is the Danube, which is 2.790 km long. How could they imagine the Amazon, which at some points is so wide that from one side you cannot see the other? (García Márquez and Apuleyo Mendoza, 2008:48 and 72, my translation)

Colombia is a country of unimaginable diversity: human, biological and geographical. It is the fifth largest country in South America with a population of 47.6 million people (OECD, 2016), covering a vast territory boasting both Pacific and Atlantic coasts and bordering 5 other countries (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Map of Colombia showing Bogota as Distrito Capital (source: dmaps.com)



The border with Venezuela alone is over 2000km long. The mountainous range of the Andes runs through the country, dividing it in two huge valleys and creating several hard to reach areas. Its rich geographical diversity is also reflected in its cultural fabric that remains multi-ethnic and diverse, with many indigenous languages still in use today, as well as countless local customs and traditions (Guzmán Martínez, 2007). At the same time, the Colombian political and social context is unique too, due to postcolonial systems and structures in the form of historically uneven distribution of land and wealth and deep social and economic inequalities, all of which sparked decades of internal armed conflict alongside the illegal drug trade, which in turn fuelled the conflict. A mere glance at UNICEF's recent situation reports on Colombia reveals a complex humanitarian crisis on account of conflict, but also because the country is prone to natural disasters like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that often affect those in remote and poor areas where there is very little government presence (UNICEF, 2015, 2017). This crisis results in some children with unique characteristics and needs, such as internally displaced children, whose number in Colombia is one of the highest in the world (IDMC, 2017) or child soldiers (Paez, 2003).

In Colombia, inclusive education entered into law in 1994 (Ley 115, 1994) and in 2011 the country ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006) thus demonstrating alignment with international priorities. Moreover, there are some flexible models that provide access to education to different disadvantaged groups such as the New School (*Escuela Nueva*) initiative or the ethno-educational programme (*Centro Etnoeducativo*) (OECD, 2016). In 2010, the government adopted the impressive 'De Cero a Siempre' early years policy, which aims at holistic and multi-agency collaboration in order to support all children's rights during the early years (Cook, 2015). There is however scarce research on inclusive education in Colombia (Moreno Angarita and Gabel, 2008) and more data is needed specifically on the inclusion of disadvantaged groups of children in education (OECD, 2016). The evidence available suggests that in practice the participation of all children in education is far from a reality and that many continue to remain excluded from the education system. For example, in relation to children with disabilities, statistical data show high numbers still out of the school system (DANE, 2010). According to official reports (Ministerio de Educación, 2009) the percentage of school dropouts in some rural areas and border regions is as high as 11%, which is double the national figure. Data from UNESCO (2015) indicate that 16% of out-of-school children in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean are in Colombia with very large gaps in reading proficiency between urban and rural areas. There is also evidence that armed conflict and internal displacement have had a negative effect on access to education for a significant number of Colombian children, with disabled children, children of Afro-Colombian and indigenous decent, and girls being the most at risk (OCHA, 2017). Finally, there is evidence that socio-economic background, geographic location, ethnicity and other variables continue to shape the educational outcomes of Colombian children (OECD, 2016). Hence, Colombia can be described as an example of a global South context, where factors that affect access to and outcomes of education, like

violence and forcible displacement, interact with variables like poverty, race, gender and disability -it can be assumed that these intersections can jeopardise the realisation of inclusive education.

On a broader level, these figures reflect an unequal education system that perpetuates the circle of huge social, economic and political inequalities that have historically existed in the country. For example, the Colombian education system relies heavily on private organisations (OECD, 2016), an approach that has been argued to ‘simply reproduce the social structure’ (Patrinos, 1990:165) and to hamper any improvement in equality of opportunity. Uribe et al. (2006) support this view and underline some remarkable differences in quality between the public and private sectors in Colombia. Apart from wider contextual factors, in more specific relation to inclusive education, literature suggests that the organisation of inclusive services *per se* has many weaknesses. In a comparison of inclusive policies between Colombia and Chile, Vásquez-Orjuela (2015) points out how the former faces numerous challenges at the level of policies, structure and funding. She explains that Colombia’s 1991 Constitution clearly reflected a social justice approach to public services thus placing the focus on the decentralisation of education. In this model, a principal agent, i.e. the Ministry of Education is responsible for setting up policies at the national level, and two further agents, i.e. the regional and territorial authorities act in a complementary way by being responsible for organising the delivery of education to those children with needs. However, this situation is problematic in practice, because the organisation of funding for policy implementation is distributed across three different levels, which can cause many problems. A good example is that of territorial authorities frequently resorting to placing children in private schools that come at a low cost and where the education provided is of dubious quality.

Moreover, local research has stressed the lack of teacher preparation for inclusive education (Padilla, 2011; Hurtado Lozano and Agudelo Martínez, 2014; Vásquez-Orjuela, 2015). Beltrán-Villamizar et al. (2014) call for a more rigid approach to teacher training for inclusive education, and Vásquez-Orjuela (2015) observes that in an attempt to be inclusive, the relevant legal framework (Decreto 366, 2009) paradoxically promotes greater exclusion by ‘assuming something for which there is no preparation’ (Claro, 2007 cited in Vásquez-Orjuela, 2015:53). Another big question concerns the discourse adopted throughout the relevant legislative and policy framework. Vásquez-Orjuela (2015:57) notes that even though policies advocate for inclusion, ‘the concept is focused on the student, for being the one who presents limitations of performance’. This focus of policies on deficit is also mirrored by recent local research. In an analysis of all disability related studies conducted in Colombia between 2005 and 2012, Cruz-Velandia et al. (2013) found that the majority of researchers had backgrounds in disciplines traditionally linked to a medical approach to disability, e.g. physiotherapy, occupational therapy or phonoaudiology. Focusing on the impairment within the individual leads to approaches often aimed at fixing the ‘deficient’ individual, instead of

fixing the environment by making it more inclusive -hence leading to segregation and exclusion.

In summary, Colombia has aligned itself with international goals and priorities with respect to inclusive education by introducing pertinent legislation, but evidence suggests that participation in education for all, especially the most vulnerable, faces challenges within this very complex global South space. However, research on inclusive education in Colombia is scarce. I therefore set out to explore it in some depth from the perspectives of local people in order to produce culturally sensitive and contextually relevant findings. Next I present the research methodology adopted.

## **Methodology**

The interpretation of our reality with foreign schemas only contributes to rendering us every time more unknown, every time less free, every time more solitary (García Márquez, 2010: 26)

For this study I adopted an ethnographic approach with a case study methodology. I conducted the research in Bogotá, because despite the stark differences between the regions of Colombia, this mega-city is a giant melting pot, which attracts a range of vulnerable populations from all rural and urban areas of the country (Rueda-García, 2003), who come to the capital led either by political violence or poverty (Feiling, 2012), including immigrant populations, recently coming mainly from Venezuela (Brodzinsky et al., 2017). Focusing on Bogotá as a ‘case-study’ allowed the collection of rich data that helped explore the context in depth (Yin, 2009). The phenomenon under investigation was inclusive education and the particular foci were: 1) teacher preparation, 2) inclusive practices, and 3) local understanding of inclusive education.

My ethnographic approach was shaped by theoretical literature arguing for the need to challenge the Westerncentrism of knowledge on inclusive education, disability and the global South, both in terms of theory and data generation (Connell, 2007, 2011; Grech, 2011, 2013, 2015; Miles, 1995, 2000, 2011). From the perspective of de-colonising methodologies, adopting an ethnographic approach was necessary in order to immerse myself in the context and to listen to the voices of local participants (Grech, 2014). Accordingly, my priority was to limit the extent to which my perspective as an outsider would influence my investigation, and to avoid carrying out a superficial study in a global South country as a researcher from a privileged background, by adopting as much as possible the perspective of an insider and by capturing the voices of the locals. In terms of positionality, despite being a European, white, middle class, female academic, with predominantly western education and life experiences, I have close family links with Colombia that span over a decade and that brought me to the

country in the first place. I have been to different regions of the country (Costa Caribe, Altiplano Cundiboyacense, Eje Cafetero, Llanos), always travelling with locals and following their way of life. Hence despite being an outsider, I am familiar with the social and cultural context and I speak Spanish with the local accent and idioms. Being able to communicate like a native speaker with the locals during the entire data collection proved to be a catalyst for the success of my ethnographic research.

Data collection methods included semi-structured qualitative interviews and focus groups. I visited public Universities, where I interviewed academics educating teachers. I also visited local schools (both private and public), where I interviewed senior staff and other teaching staff. I was invited to attend a regional meeting for support teachers (Docentes de apoyo). I also met those responsible within the Council for managing some special schools (Centros Crecer) that exist in Bogotá. In total, I interviewed 35 professionals, including general teachers, support teachers, head teachers, academics, teacher trainers, and trainee teachers. All interviews took place in Spanish and were audio recorded with participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim. I also collected documents (i.e. books, journals, curricula) and visual media relevant to my research foci, and kept qualitative notes in my field diary. Before and after fieldwork, I conducted systematic desktop searches on the subject of inclusive education in Colombia, using keywords relevant to the three research foci, and gathered pertinent literature. The entire study was completed within a two-year period (2015-2017).

In order to address the research foci, I initially extracted and cross-checked factual data from interviews, field notes, and desktop research findings. I then extracted and thematically analysed data reflecting participants' views and opinions, and all data relevant to local understandings of inclusive education. The narratives were rich and allowed me to identify detailed accounts of several frequently interconnected challenges, as well as some positive initiatives. It is impossible to do justice to this extremely complex setting within the space of one paper and in the next section, I only present main findings pertinent to the research foci, leaving aside other crucial issues that emerged like the inclusion of disabled students in Universities, the challenges linked with diagnostic assessment (Diagnostico) or the role of special schools (Centros Crecer), some of which will be published separately (see Kamenopoulou, in press).

Regarding the limitations of this research, it is hard to ignore the fact that it did not capture the thoughts of children and young people with or without disabilities in relation to the research foci. Admittedly, this is an important part of the Colombian story missing, since the voices of the pupils would have given unique insights into what inclusive education means to them and how they experience it in their everyday life. This was a consequence of the limited funding available for the research, which in turn limited its duration and scope. Grech (2015) talks about a general lack of funding for research on regions like Latin America, and the scarce resources I managed to secure for my study illustrate that research focused on the

global South is currently very low in the priorities of global North funding bodies. A final consideration regarding the limitations of this research is that it captured a moment in time and some of the findings might only reflect that moment. This article should therefore be read bearing in mind at the same time that Colombia is a country where things can change very rapidly.

## **Findings**

### ***Research focus 1: Inclusive education in practice***

The single most important finding emerging from all sources was that in practice, inclusive education was synonymous with the existence of support teachers. A school in this context is referred to as ‘inclusive’ only if it employs support teachers. Even if a school has pupils who need support, it is not inclusive if it does not employ support teachers. In fact, some schools were seen as deliberately avoiding to become inclusive:

There are schools that have children with disabilities but they do not have a support teacher, because the Head does not request it, sometimes so they are not obliged (to become inclusive), and sometimes in order not to get sent more disabled populations. (Support teacher, focus group interview)

There are school Heads who, even if they have disabled children, they say that they don't, so they don't send them a support teacher and in this way they are not obliged (to become inclusive). (Local coordinator of support teachers)

This perception of inclusive education as mere existence of support teachers in a school and vice versa (the perception of support teacher presence in a school as synonymous with an inclusive identity), strongly suggests that support teachers in this context were the backbone of the entire inclusive process. More importantly perhaps, both inclusive education and support teachers were exclusively associated with pupils with disabilities. The full title of support teachers is ‘specialised support teachers’ (Docentes de apoyo especializado) and they usually have a degree in Special Education (Educación Especial) and since 2003, in Education with a focus on Special Education (Educación con énfasis en Educación Especial) or other similar backgrounds. For example, I interviewed support teachers who were phonoaudiologists, clinical psychologists and occupational therapists. Support teachers are only hired to support pupils with disabilities and learning difficulties, who have a diagnosis issued by the health services. In terms of how they provide support, it was explained to me that before the UNCRPD, they used to support by withdrawal, whereas now the tendency is not to withdraw:



When Colombia approved the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, from then on we started talking about inclusion. So we broke with this model that was withdrawing the children, do completely different things with them from what the rest of the school was doing. But with inclusion we agreed that all children had to enjoy all activities; that we had to make curricular adaptations so they can complete all the activities. (Local Coordinator of support teachers)

So now, support teachers are usually in charge of screening tests and curricular adaptations, tasks described to me by support teachers I interviewed, who also stressed that their workload is really challenging, because it is very common for schools to hire only one person for all disabled pupils. However, as I explain next, general classroom teachers (Docentes de aula) disagreed and preferred the old model of support by withdrawal.

The second finding in relation to the first research focus relates to the many complex challenges that support teachers faced in their everyday collaboration with families, teachers, and schools, mainly stemming from an overall lack of clarity as to what their role means and how they are to be deployed. These challenges included firstly cultural perceptions of their role that in turn shaped families' expectations. It was reported that many parents perceived support teachers from the perspective of a religious/care model of disability, and accordingly were not entirely focused on the educational nature of the support that these teachers were mainly there to offer:

[Families] still see them as teachers with a caring soul, who are going to heaven, because they are good people, yes? [They believe] that instead of strengthening the family, they are going to sort out all the (bureaucratic) arrangements for them so the family can receive [the funding]. (Head Teacher)

Secondly, support teachers faced many struggles in their daily collaboration with the classroom teachers: i.e. the latter's resistance to engage with inclusive processes and a general disagreement about the nature of the support that the former should provide. In relation to the first issue, general classroom teachers were generally described as 'resistant' to inclusive education and unwilling to work with pupils with disabilities, whom they perceived as the sole responsibility of support teachers:

Academic 1: In the school it keeps happening, and it happens today: the Special Education practitioners arrive, 'oh great, these five children are yours'.

Academic 2: 'take them out', many local teachers tell them, 'you go and work with these pupils, take them out of here, out of the class'; so support teachers deal with the pupils who do not fit in the school, the ones that the teacher cannot perceive as their pupils, because they are the special children, the children of integration, of inclusion, the diverse, the 20 thousand names that they want to give them. (Focus group with

academics/teacher educators)

This lack of willingness to engage with support teachers and disabled pupils was mainly attributed to a lack of specialised knowledge and strategies for working with children with disabilities on the part of general classroom teachers due to gaps in their training, which did not include any preparation for inclusive education. This was the second research focus, which I present in the next section. In specific relation to general-support teacher challenges, it is worthy to mention that teachers not only were the target of criticism by support teachers, but they themselves often criticised strategies used by support teachers:

We are very frequently told (by class teachers): ‘you do not do anything, you do not work, why don’t you take the children to a special class?’ (Support teacher)

The two support teachers in this school are never in classes, they never go to classes. One of them is in charge of measuring the children’s IQ, all the time she evaluates them, all the time, that’s her task, don’t ask me why...and the other one, I don’t know, but he never goes in the class, preparing hand-outs or something. He photocopies a hand-out, the same for all children, and he distributes the hand-out to the children with special needs and they all complete the hand-out, regardless of their timetabled subject. (General classroom teacher)

Finally, another challenge in relation to the role of support teachers was their own uncertainty about their specific duties due to lack of guidance, which in turn left them confused and vulnerable to exploitation:

A while ago they hired many support teachers in Bogotá, but they sent them like this: ‘go and work for inclusion’. And the poor girls who had just graduated and did not even know what their duties were. So they arrive at the schools and they are made to cover for teachers who are ill, those who don’t show up...So we need to follow up the details of the role of the specialised support teacher and that s/he is not the only one responsible for the whole inclusive process. (Local coordinator of support teachers)

To sum up, inclusive education in practice was considered the responsibility of support teachers, i.e. professionals of various backgrounds hired to support pupils with disabilities. They support mainly by making adaptations to the curriculum, and their role is challenged by many daily tensions, especially with the classroom teachers who were described as unwilling to engage with inclusion. Moreover, recent inclusive approaches focused on keeping the disabled children in the same class with their peers, were seen by general teachers as lack of input and effort by support teachers.

***Research Focus 2: Preparation of teachers for inclusive education***

The main finding was that teachers in Bogotá had scarce opportunities to be prepared for inclusive education as part of their basic training. This was supported by the desktop research that led to the identification of 16 Universities in the capital offering education related programmes, out of which 1 offered an undergraduate and a postgraduate programme on Special Education, and 1 offered a postgraduate programme on Disability and Social Inclusion. At undergraduate level, teachers may choose optional modules on topics like diversity and inclusion and they can specialise on inclusive education in their thesis at masters or doctoral level. Hence at a basic level, teachers can only specialise in Special Education—a qualification leading to the very problematic support teacher role discussed above. These findings mean firstly that general teachers receive limited input on inclusive education and thus learn not to consider it their role:

Teachers who graduate, maybe they are told: ‘yes, inclusive education, so you are going to find pupils with disabilities in your classrooms’. But in reality they are not educated, they are not made conscious of the fact that they are going to be responsible for children with disabilities. (Support teacher)

Secondly, from the stage of basic teacher training, inclusive education is associated with disability and a separate specialisation on Special Education. This was perceived as another reason for the general teachers’ disengagement from the inclusive process:

We (Colombians) have an image of Special Education. We (who train special teachers) are useful for a school mechanism that continues to exclude many. Special Education has a semantic baggage that in this country results in special teachers being ‘the ones responsible for’ and the general classroom teacher... while special educators exist...the general classroom teacher will never be responsible (for disabled children). (Academic/teacher educator)

Moreover, the lack of general teacher preparation for working with children with disabilities was evidenced by teachers sometimes citing their lack of knowledge as the reason for being reluctant to work with these children:

We have the two faces of regular teachers. The first, some teachers who are willing to, very few, conscious that the work of the special teacher needs to be strengthened and who support our work in the class. And others, who are the majority, resistant, segregationist, excluding with their attitudes, with their activities. [...] It is all about knowledge, and they all come with a tendency (to say): ‘I know about my area, but I don’t know how to deal with this child who has a difficulty’. And this is the reality that most of us face. (Support teacher, focus group interview)

However, participants also acknowledged that teachers' unwillingness to engage with inclusive practices was also due to their overloaded and undervalued everyday role:

What happens is that at the same time, teachers are in a very difficult situation. The situation of Colombian teachers is deplorable in the sense of bad pay, an asphyxiating system, a lot of mental illness, a lot of pressure, complete lack of support, and a lack of recognition. Total ignorance of the effort that teachers make when they are successful, there are no incentives. It is very clear that being an excellent teacher here is valued the same as being a lazy teacher (Academic)

Despite those wider issues, there was overall agreement that radical changes in basic teacher preparation will bring about change in teacher attitudes:

Without a complete transformation of all teacher training, here and in the whole country, we will continue in this same vicious circle: one starts working as a qualified early years teacher and they say: 'children with Down Syndrome? This is not my job, this is for those qualified in Special Education'. Because the basic teacher training does not give the student the attitude or the knowledge that this is their responsibility (Academic/teacher educator)

To sum up, basic teacher training programmes currently available in Bogotá do not prepare teachers for inclusive education, even as perceived in this context, and participants saw a radical reform as necessary. At the moment, if trainee teachers want to go down the inclusion route, they have to specialise in special education/disability. Hence from early on, teachers in this context are faced with a choice between becoming a general teacher or a teacher for disabled children (an inclusive teacher). This divide was reflected in the general teachers' negative attitudes and resistance towards working with disabled children, which were also attributed to their precarious job conditions and lack of motivation.

### ***Research focus 3: Local understanding of inclusive education***

The third focus aimed at capturing an understanding of inclusive education relevant to local people and context. It is evident that findings presented thus far in relation to the first two foci, overwhelmingly point to a local understanding of inclusive education as special education or as education of children with disabilities. Here I draw on data from the last interview question, which directly enquired about participants' own understanding of inclusive education, as well as data reflecting wider local understandings that I encountered. The main finding was that on the one hand, within the local context, there is a narrow understanding of inclusive education as synonymous with disability:

Academic 1: Sometimes we get post-graduate students who are special teachers trained elsewhere, who tell us about 'the children of inclusion'. So one asks: 'who are the children of inclusion?'

Academic 2: Let's say this is a term of the Secretariat of Education that has a programme, so they are the children of inclusion because they are those who belong to this programme, and they require diagnostic assessment of disability in order to be able to come to the programme and benefit from some special support. So they have become the 'children of inclusion'.

Academic 3: and for this reason they are called 'inclusive schools' (for having these children). [...]

Academic 1: Inclusion in this country was not understood in an open way. It was understood in a closed way, that is, how to integrate them, yes? And to integrate who? Principally those people with disabilities. In other words, here, the issue of race, gender, religion, culture is not necessarily discussed so much in relation to inclusive processes. (Focus group with academics/teacher educators)

However, despite accepting that this is the predominant local understanding of inclusive education in their context, some viewed inclusive education as a wider concept:

Isn't all education inclusive? It is a form of socialisation; the school is a process of socialisation, so there could not exist a school that does not socialise and another one that is inclusive. (Head teacher)

This broader project was seen as concerning more groups of marginalised learners and related to the range of vulnerable children currently in Bogotá and the entire country:

To be honest, we are now still working on peace in Colombia, so for example [...] you find displaced children, children with disabilities as a result of the war, children who have mental health problems because of the war. [...] There are children crying in the school because their mum left them, [...] girls are being raped; there is an issue: we are in a post-conflict [era]. (Support teacher)

When you look towards the past, you see children with disabilities and what you should do is look towards the future; and if you look towards the future, what you see is diverse learners. So next to children with disabilities, you see displaced children, immigrant children, adopted children, so there are so many characteristics. (Academic)

Finally, interviewees reflected on the tendency of Colombia to hastily adopt international initiatives without due consideration of local needs and meanings:

Look, this is the example that shows you the madness of what we do in Colombia. In February, March, Salamanca took place in Spain and here already a few months later we were signing the law saying what they had just said in Spain. So law 115 erases the panorama of Special Education as an option supported by the State. [...] The typical story: a mother of a disabled child creates a special school, makes it pleasant and parents are happy. They suddenly close down the school and the woman is afraid and does not want others to know that her child has a disability so she does not know what to do; teachers rejecting the children because of lack of any type of preparation. So it was a total chaos. Many children ended up in their homes, hidden, again, because their parents were too afraid to send them to the mainstream. (Academic/Teacher educator)

To sum up, although the predominant discourses emerging from all narratives suggested a current local understanding of inclusive education as a narrow field, synonymous with disability, some participants showed evidence of understanding inclusive education as a wider project thus linked to the very particular needs of their context.

## **Discussion**

According to the voices captured by this research, inclusive education in practice and at the level of teacher preparation in Colombia is solely focused on disability, and this was generally reflected on a local understanding of the concept of 'inclusive education' as 'mainstream education for disabled children'. As a researcher coming from the global North, I expected that addressing the needs created by poverty and social disadvantage, racism or displacement would be far higher in the priorities of local teachers compared to disability, given Colombia's current problems. Interestingly, my findings point to the exact opposite to my global North ideas and assumptions: in this context, inclusive education was more or less synonymous with disability, and the rest of the children at risk for exclusion did not emerge as the focus of inclusive education. The possible implications of this for the success of inclusive education in Colombia should not be underestimated. By solely focusing on one group, will there not be a negative effect on the education chances of other disadvantaged groups? Do those groups then remain invisible, neglected and excluded? Apart from disabled children, Beltrán-Villamizar et al. (2014:68) identify four groups of vulnerable children in Colombia: 1) ethnic groups (for example, black, afro-Colombian, indigenous and Roma populations), 2) the victims of the armed conflict, 3) those being reinstated in society after being actively involved in the armed conflict, and 4) populations living in the borders. As mentioned previously, there are different policies and programmes aimed at disadvantaged groups in Colombia. For example, as far as displaced children are concerned, the Victims Law (Ley 1448, 2011) guarantees access to education for the victims of the conflict, making

provision for free access to education and educational resources to children of those registered as displaced. Moreover, Article 93 of the Law states that the national, regional and municipal levels ‘must develop common strategies for teacher training’ (2011:316). The government has launched initiatives to address the needs of displaced children that include teacher training, like for example, ‘the Learning Circles’ (Círculos de Aprendizaje) project, which has been recognised by law as the official education programme for displaced children (Changemakers, 2008). However, this research highlighted that such initiatives remain disconnected from the general education system, because the everyday practice and perception of inclusive education is not focused on these groups. This suggests the invisibility of many children at risk in Colombia—although there was acknowledgement of the existence of these groups, participants accepted that the context on the whole did not regard these groups as the focus of inclusive education- and invisibility leads to needs not being met and to the continued exclusion of these children from the general education system.

With regards to the possible reasons for this local interpretation of inclusive education as education of disabled children in the minds of local actors and in their daily practice, two issues stand out from participants’ voices: 1) the current status of general and support teachers in Colombia and b) the adoption of global North-led international conventions and western models of inclusive education without due consideration of the particular needs/characteristics of the Colombian context. Regarding the former, participants highlighted teachers’ precarious conditions in Colombia, their lack of preparation, awareness and motivation to be involved in the inclusive process, all of which were seen as factors leading to them perceiving inclusive education as the job of the special teachers, hence as primarily associated with disability. Colombia is a middle income country, which means that it is not poor, but it is crucial to emphasise that ‘it is the single most unequal country in Latin America, which is, in turn, the most unequal continent in the world’ (Feiling, 2012:26). In other words, a few Colombians hold all the wealth and power, while almost half the population continues to live in conditions of extreme poverty. Data on teachers’ salaries across different OECD countries show that Colombian teachers are amongst the lowest paid despite the fact that they spend a comparatively high amount of time teaching, that is, excluding other administrative duties (OECD, 2015). Moreover, almost all of the public funding for education is used to cover teachers’ salaries, and therefore there is little room for investment in approaches that could improve the quality of education such as teacher development (OECD, 2016). Hence findings from this research support previous local literature arguing that teacher preparation for inclusive education in Colombia is in need of a radical reform (Padilla, 2011; Hurtado Lozano and Agudelo Martínez, 2014; Vásquez-Orjuela, 2015), but they also highlight wider socio-economic reasons contributing to negative teacher attitudes to inclusive education, thus expanding our knowledge of the global South as ‘a repository of anxieties, tensions, conflicts, ambivalences, geopolitical asymmetries as well as resistance’ (Grech, 2014:145).

Apart from the problems facing general teachers in Colombia, there are big challenges to do with how support teachers are perceived and deployed within the current inclusive framework. It emerged that there was lack of clarity as to their role, which resulted in many tensions. In the relevant legislation, support teacher duties include providing academic advice, making the curriculum flexible, support for families, and inter-agency coordination to ensure services are provided according to need and in order for the child to remain in education (Decreto 366, 2009). However, participants expressed that these duties need to be further clarified to avoid exploitation and more daily tensions. Yarza de los Rios (2011) notes that under the current system, special teachers are excluded from applying for a teacher position in state schools. Instead, they have to either work in private special schools or settle for the less well-paid and undervalued role of support staff. This means that the skills of support teachers are not given the same weight as those of general teachers, a phenomenon, which Yarza de los Rios calls ‘de-professionalisation’ of special educators (38). This, coupled with the lack of clarity around their exact role, leaves them in limbo and at the mercy of a system that insists on deploying them as a mechanism of segregation and exclusion of disabled pupils.

Last but not least, the current status of special educators in Colombia and the local understanding of inclusive education as mainstream placement for disabled pupils, must be judged against the way discourses on inclusive education are translated in this global South context. For example, the adoption of inclusive education following the Salamanca Framework (UNESCO, 1994) was translated into the immediate closure of many special schools and left special teachers in limbo. Grech (2014: 147) warns about the ‘overzealous enthusiasm about imported inclusive education discourse and the demonising of special education [which can] even be harmful when disabled children in extreme poverty, remain barred from any schooling’.

Colombia has a history of colonialism and imperialism: during a previous visit when I undertook the 22-hour coach trip from Santa Marta -a city on the Caribbean coast- to Bogotá, I was struck by the fact that the only thing to be seen on either side of the road for about 6 hours were endless fields of banana plantations, owned by huge international corporations. Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1955) eloquently describes how these plantations literally emerged out of nowhere at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and almost in a fortnight fundamentally changed the natural and human landscape of the region. Even recently, during the adoption of the 1991 Colombian Constitution, which is generally considered a model of human rights, ‘free trade and privatization were sacrosanct, as was their alliance with the Americans’ (Feiling, 2012:142). Within this context of neo-colonial interests and oppression, one can understand why in modern Colombia, human rights policies and legislation for inclusion can be imported uncritically from the global North. It is noteworthy for example that Colombia ratified the CRDP without signing its sections that allow the commission to receive complaints about human rights violations (Correa-Montoya and Castro-Martinez, 2016).



Hence, the adoption of international conventions in reality changes very little for people of a country where human rights defenders and activists continue to face smear campaigns, death threats and attacks (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Soldatic & Grech (2014) explain how after the CRPD, dominant discourses about disabled people's rights homogenised disabled people across the global North and South overlooking the crucial difference between *human* rights and *citizenship* rights; they point out that the former does not apply to the latter, which can only be enforced by the nation state. This means 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 (for more see Soldatic and Grech, 2014).

This research therefore highlights how inclusive education is a western concept 'that carries with it colonising connotations' (Damiani et al., 2016:867) and how discourses on inclusive education are still 'fabricated in the global North and transferred to the global South, with little or no alertness to context or culture' (Grech, 2014:130). In western discourses, inclusive education has historically been associated with disability, and especially since the Salamanca Framework, stipulated disabled pupils' right to access mainstream schools, thus establishing an association between inclusive education, mainstream placement and disability from early on (Vislie, 2003; Nilholm, 2006; Kiuppis, 2014; Kamenopoulou et al. 2015). Despite the emergence of multiple other perspectives in global North literature (Booth, 1999; Norwich, 2008; Wilde & Avramidis, 2011; Ainscow, 2012), research shows that the earlier association remains strong in global South contexts, in which inclusive education is readily perceived as mere mainstream placement for disabled pupils (Singal, 2006; Kamenopoulou and Dukpa, 2017). Participants in this research accepted the fact that at the level of practice and teacher preparation, inclusive education is synonymous with disability, but they also showed evidence of linking the concept to other vulnerable populations that live in the country. Hence this research suggests that Colombians need more time in order to adapt western discourses on inclusive education to the complexities of their context, and to process their own understandings of inclusive education and their local relevance.

## **Conclusions**

By way of conclusion, this research has reinforced the argument that inclusive education is a concept that can be understood differently in different contexts. As a way forward, if we insist on placing concepts created in western Europe and north America-or what Connell calls the 'global metropole' (2011:1372)- at the heart of global agendas and goals (and I particularly refer in this case to the use of the term 'inclusive education' in the 4<sup>th</sup> SGD), it is wise to remember that such concepts are likely to acquire different meanings in global South contexts.

For this reason, it is important that we continue to learn more from so far neglected global South contexts about the harsh realities, anxieties and obstacles people face in these complex spaces. More culturally sensitive research is needed on inclusive education in the global South, because ‘in the current global climate of increased efforts to ensure participation of all children in education, there is great need to approach local and cultural contexts that still remain largely unexplored’ (Kamenopoulou and Dukpa, 2017:13).

Finally, Colombia is a global South space still in the process of negotiating its own understandings of inclusive education and the local relevance of this global North-created concept. I argued that the current oversimplified focus on one category of need is harmful for Colombia (as well as other global South contexts), because it renders invisible the plethora of vulnerable children that live in these contexts, and leaves the complex intersections between factors leading to educational disadvantage unchallenged and unresolved.

As a way forward, Colombia needs time to reflect on the meaning of inclusive education within its current historical and cultural context, and to plan teacher preparation and practice in a way that is both meaningful and sustainable. Education is central to the success of the peace building process, and using the opportunities offered by the post-conflict era to create an *education system for all* will be key to the successful creation of a *society for all*.

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