

A Pedagogical Outlook on How Disability and Inclusive Education are Perceived in Educational Rural Contexts

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ABSTRACT

In the process of building educational communities that include students with disabilities, it is a challenge to understand how diverse these students are in terms of their specificities, interests, potentialities, and expectations, to ensure their comprehensive development. The purpose of this study is to analyze the underlying assumptions in discourses about disability and inclusive education in the classroom, based on how these are perceived by teachers and counselors in public education institutions in the Colombian departments of Córdoba and Atlántico. The study is grounded on a qualitative, hermeneutic analysis, conducted in 10 focus groups, which took place virtually through the Zoom platform because of the global crisis generated by the pandemic. The data

RESUMEN

Una perspectiva pedagógica sobre cómo se perciben la discapacidad y la educación inclusiva en contextos educativos rurales

En el proceso de construcción de comunidades educativas que incluyan estudiantes con discapacidad, es un reto comprender cuán diversos son estos estudiantes en términos de sus especificidades, intereses, potencialidades y expectativas, para garantizar su desarrollo integral. El propósito de este estudio es analizar los supuestos que subyacen en los discursos sobre la discapacidad y la educación inclusiva en el aula, a partir de cómo éstos son percibidos por docentes y orientadores de instituciones educativas públicas de los departamentos colombianos de Córdoba y Atlántico. El estudio se fundamenta en un análisis cualitativo y hermenéutico, realizado en 10 grupos focales, los

gathered were examined using the tools provided by Textual Discourse Analysis, focusing on giving visibility to the instructors' voices and positions. The most relevant results related to the perceptions of disability were as follows: (1) For instructors, disability is associated with a lack, with incompleteness, or with an impairment. (2) For guidance teachers, disability is related to potentiality. Regarding inclusive education, both school counselors and teachers agree on (3) broadening the view towards a comprehensive and integrative approach to pedagogical work with students. (4) training in a pedagogical practice that contributes to different conditions of disability. One of the main conclusions is that the conceptions of disability and inclusive education are barriers present in the reality of rural educational institutions, therefore, they must be transformed systematically and gradually into affirmative actions from the reflexivity on practice.

Keywords: inclusive education; perceptions; pedagogical experience; rural educational contexts; teachers; counselors.

cuales se llevaron a cabo de manera virtual a través de la plataforma Zoom, debido a la crisis mundial generada por la pandemia. Los datos recogidos fueron examinados utilizando las herramientas proporcionadas por el Análisis Textual del Discurso, centrándose en dar visibilidad a las voces y posiciones de los instructores.

Los resultados más relevantes relacionados con las percepciones de la discapacidad fueron los siguientes: (1) Para los instructores, la discapacidad se asocia con una carencia, con lo incompleto o con una deficiencia. (2) Para los profesores de orientación, la discapacidad está relacionada con la potencialidad. En cuanto a la educación inclusiva, tanto los orientadores como los profesores coinciden en (3) ampliar la visión hacia un enfoque global e integrador del trabajo pedagógico con los alumnos. (4) la formación en una práctica pedagógica que contribuya a las diferentes condiciones de discapacidad. Una de las principales conclusiones es que las concepciones de discapacidad y educación inclusiva son barreras presentes en la realidad de las instituciones educativas rurales, por lo tanto, deben ser transformadas sistemática y gradualmente en acciones afirmativas desde la reflexividad sobre la práctica.

Palabras clave: educación inclusiva; percepciones; experiencia pedagógica; contextos educativos rurales; profesores; orientadores.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main social challenges of the 21st century is to guarantee inclusive and equitable quality education, promoting learning opportunities for all (see, for instance, UNESCO 2019, 2015). Such a challenge is the result of evolving understandings of personhood and education, which recognize that human development is diverse. These approaches see education as a right, to which all children, adolescents, youth, and adults should be granted access, regardless of their condition. Likewise, the concept of inclusion has placed emphasis on the need to reach all students, which implies that every student is equally important and has a right to receive relevant, equitable, and effective learning opportunities.

Furthermore, the considerations presented in the Guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education (UNESCO 2017) constitute a reference framework for the development of education policies oriented to overcoming the obstacles engrained in educational systems in relation to access, participation, valuing diversity, and learning processes and outcomes. Castillo (2015) emphasizes the idea that inclusive education requires the educational system to prepare, adjust, optimize, and update its resources, infrastructure, and educational proposals to respond to students' diverse interests, needs, and potentialities. This requires assessing institutional capacities to attend and respond to diversity. Certainly, this transformation also requires updating curricular and educational processes, in order to promote the identification of students' strengths and potentialities, thus ensuring meaningful, lifelong learning.

The importance accorded to diversity as a human characteristic that is present throughout one's life points to the need to overcome the understanding of inclusion as restricted to students with disabilities, and to also turn to others who may be excluded because of their gender, age, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status. Bearing in mind that such a conception of inclusive education goes beyond understanding and accepting diversity, its implementation becomes a challenge to educational systems. Real change in this front has yet to take place, in spite of all the efforts focusing on achieving SDG 4 and to develop the necessary policies to ensure quality education for all.

Colombian regulations consecrate inclusive education as a right through which human development can be guaranteed as a result of equitable, supportive, and comprehensive interactions. In this context, diversity is embraced as essential to school environments. Nevertheless, according to a joint report by UNESCO's International Forum on Equity and Inclusion in education, the Colombian Ministry of Education, and the Cali Mayor's Office, youth representatives claimed that there is no articulation between curricula and the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in today's society, especially for those who do not fit in the mold. They made a point to encourage "awareness-raising in schools and among community members to deepen understanding and reduce stigma" (UNESCO 2019, 18). In fact, the disconnect between education policy and the implementation of relevant pedagogical action in the context of inclusive education should lead teachers, school counselors, and community members in general to reflect on creating coherence between educational beliefs and practices. The challenge is to respond to the different expressions of diversity occurring among their students. With that in mind, this study presents the beliefs about disability and inclusive education from the voices and experiences of the agents involved in the educational process.

Such a question is of interest for research because even though in Colombia there is a vast body of legislation oriented at fostering inclusion in education, there remain still major tensions and difficulties, especially in public schools, that affect quality, equity, and relevance in education. Consequently, it is difficult to respond to the diverse needs and specificities students bring to the table and to ensure access and retention, and this is especially true for those who have some kind of disability. According to Castro-Suárez (2020), this situation results from the conception of inclusive education that has been predominant throughout history, which has been mainly associated with special education, as it focuses on the care of people with disabilities. For Castro-Suárez (2020), measures regarding the inclusion of people with disabilities in the public education system were based on the school integration approach proposed by Colombia's General Education Law 115 (MEN 1994) and resulted in the homogenization of educational care programs.

On the other hand, current research on inclusive education (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al. 2021; Rojo-Ramos et al. 2021; Furtado dos Anjos and Damasceno 2020; Waitoller et al. 2019; Anonymous 2018) coincide in their assessment of inclusive education as affected by different social, political, economic, and cultural phenomena that point to the need for monitoring the beliefs associated to the real meaning of inclusion. They also agree that the epistemic object of such a question is to be found in education itself. In this context, the question emerges: what are the grounds of inclusive education?

Corbett and Slee (2000) define inclusive education as an institutional, holistic, broad, public, political, social, and cultural environment, in which difference is embraced and celebrated, in a constant search for an inclusive educational culture as the basis for the structure of learning processes. Along the same lines, Ainscow et al. (2006, 25) highlights institutional capacities and associate inclusive education to the “process of studying and understanding barriers to student participation and learning, especially among those who are vulnerable, through the implementation of educational innovation policies, plans, programs, and actions.” The purpose is to propose and implement the necessary changes in the system so that all agents are committed to building inclusive, equitable, and supportive communities.

The importance given to building environments that favor participation and successful learning, based on the acknowledgment and elimination of barriers, has also been underscored by UNESCO (2000), when it states the need to ensure that children and youth reach their highest level of development, taking their diverse interests, potentialities, and needs into account, in any educational, social, cultural or community context.

2. BROADENING THE CONCEPTIONS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND DISABILITY

Definitions of inclusive education from different perspectives make it evident that valuing diversity goes beyond having special-needs children in the classroom. It shifts attention to how important it is for educational institutions to develop a clear concept of inclusion underlying their educational processes, according to their own social, cultural, political, and educational realities, as well as their infrastructure. Likewise, acknowledging the perceptions that different agents in the educational setting have concerning disability, as one of the expressions of human diversity, requires thinking of new ways to reconfigure the educational context.

The aforementioned requires us to go beyond joint declarations of principles and move to the universalization and institutionalization of inclusive education in educational establishments. To achieve this, inclusion must be approached from broader perspectives, associated to education policies, pedagogical practices on the part of teachers, and educational research (Bartolomé-Pina 2017).

A move to a holistic, unifying, transdisciplinary and comprehensive approach to inclusive education, as proposed by Serrudo (2012), also requires overcoming the traditional understanding according to which all students learn the same things at the same moment. Along these lines, the history of education in Colombia provides an example of the way in which education policies are interpreted, leading to the creation in 1992 of “inclusive classrooms,” which were ultimately recognized to be insufficient. This approach shifted later to an ideal of “inclusive schools,” with educational projects aimed at overcoming exclusion, by reordering institutional dynamics (Ainscow 2001), and finally to “inclusive educational systems,” which are constantly self-improving.

In this context, the Colombian National Ministry of Education has presented several self-assessment proposals through its Inclusion Index Document. In its first version (MEN 2008), the document was directed to elementary and middle schools, and attempted to strengthen institutional capacities to deal with diversity through inclusion-oriented management. A second document was published in 2016, proposing an assessment system aimed at higher-education institutions (MEN 2016).

As stated by Castro-Suárez (2020), these tools contribute analysis perspectives concerning the capacities that educational institutions have developed to offer inclusive education. They highlight the need to understand inclusion as a core, constitutive principle, and not a

mere modifier of the noun education, with the underlying idea that participation is part of the essence of education.

The purpose of such an approach is to contribute to the emergence of favorable conditions for educational justice, and the development of new ways to conceive and enact education. From this perspective, education takes place in and for diversity, in such a way that it responds to the students' personal, individual, social, and cultural characteristics, to multiple ways of being (and being-in-the-world), and to the relationships that individuals establish with themselves, with others, and with their context. The Colombian 1991 Constitution recognizes and values diversity (Constitution Política de Colombia 1991), and the text of the General Education Law 115 (MEN 1994) ratifies its importance in Title III, Chapter 1, articles 46-49, as inherent to every human being and a core principle of education.

Consequently, the abovementioned document expresses the open and inclusive nature of institutions and their educational processes, with the goal of embracing the different population groups without any restriction, as well as persons with disabilities or with exceptional talents. Furthermore, acknowledging human diversity leads to the recognition that every individual has the opportunity to participate fully and effectively, regardless of their specific circumstances, disability among them. Even though such an idea is readily embraced in contemporary approaches to inclusion, it was already present since the earlier days of integration in UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994), which underscores the importance of inclusive schools, acknowledging their students' diversity and guaranteeing quality, relevant education processes, committed to overcoming barriers that may interfere with the goal of achieving education for all.

With respect to the social responsibility to offer a framework of opportunities for persons with diverse abilities, styles, paces, and potentialities, paying special attention to their human condition, it is important to reconsider the notion of disability. According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2011), disability is the general term that includes impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. Impairments correspond to problems affecting body function or structure; activity limitations refer to difficulties in carrying out activities or tasks; finally, participation restrictions are problems to participate in areas of life determined by a socio-cultural context.

In the context of education, it is not uncommon to classify students by attributing to them some abilities (or lack thereof) which condition their expectations, thus consciously or unconsciously predisposing them to success or failure. This labeling of students is associated, as

explained by Appel (1986), with an ideal vision on the part of teachers, which has been constructed from their own personal stories and experiences, based on which they classify their students according to their own perceptions, expectations, context, and material circumstances.

Nevertheless, these features –which give a differentiated character to each individual—are a product of the interaction between the family and socio-cultural contexts since the moment of birth. As a result, these perceptions become socially established constructions. According to Cardona (2006), this process may be explained due to the natural tendency in our brains to create categories to differentiate phenomena. However, when this skill is projected onto individuals, it must be understood as a social event, and because it bears great importance on people's lives, it must also respond to an ethical commitment and must be subjected to rigorous analysis and multimodal monitoring.

These considerations create the conditions to develop continuous critical reflection processes about and in the context of teaching practices, as well as in relation to the beliefs and theories that underly pedagogical work in educational institutions. Teachers and institutions are called to dynamically reflect on their own ability to ground their practices on principles such as fairness, integrity, comprehensiveness, participation, respectfulness, and the celebration of difference and of the innate abilities that human beings bring with themselves.

From this perspective, the teacher's pedagogical endeavor, permeated by their ability to understand their students as complex subjects, transcends the traditional perspective, limited to an absence or an impairment. However, everyday reality in educational institutions, when analyzed from the perspective of the discourses coming from the agents that participate in it, shows the difficulties in assuming inclusive education as the basis for pedagogical work, and the need expressed by those agents themselves to develop the conceptual and practical tools to build a broader, more transformative understanding of it. In this sense, acknowledging the principle of diverse abilities implies, as mentioned by Echeita (2011), to recognize from the start that working for quality education for all implies to be committed to the design of plans, programs, and systematic, relevant, and contextualized actions, favoring participation and learning for everyone.

Along the same lines, the current study highlights the importance of moving away from the concept of disability to the concept of diverse abilities as a guiding principle of pedagogical practice. As explained by Sen (2000), it implies to see 'human development as an integral, ever-expanding process, in which fundamental freedoms relate to each other' (3). From this perspective, the purpose becomes to strengthen educational systems so that they can over-

come, as the author explains, the load of strictly defined identities and the vision of students as passive recipients, shifting to an understanding of the individual as a free agent, with social skills and opportunities to reconfigure their reality and their future.

Likewise, Nussbaum (2010) points to the importance of thinking of the educational system as a humanizing scenario, in which every individual may reach their full development regardless of their circumstances. In this context, the teacher's pedagogical practice and training processes related to it must undergo reconfiguration. The implementation of this goal leads to overcoming the barriers that are essentially the reflection of the interrelation between the idea of difference and the specificities of the social and cultural context, following a traditional concept of difference which, as mentioned by Cardona (2006), 'fails to address itself to minority groups' (28).

Other barriers may not affect the individual directly, but they do affect their participation and learning, and are associated with aspects such as physical infrastructure, attitudes, teaching methodologies, communication codes, or prejudices. These barriers hinder access and effective inclusion on a level playing field, since the abilities that a given student may have now become invisible, as well as the conditions of their respective context, which must be then reshaped to favor active, relevant participation in social life, or, in other words, their own development. As a result, we insist on the importance of an educational approach that takes into account the individual and social dimensions of the learning process, based on a concept of development through which students build their own lives and reasoning by interacting with others and with their own context.

Based on the previous considerations, we propose a qualitative, hermeneutic, and comprehensive study that has as its general objective to uncover the beliefs about disability and inclusive education existing in the discourses of teachers and school counselors in public educational institutions in the Colombian departments of Córdoba and Atlántico, considering possible differences between their testimonies according to their respective profession. This study intends to serve as a resource for decision-making and to support actions that favor the construction of more inclusive communities, responding to the specificities, expectations, and educational needs of their students in the regions explored.

3. METHOD

The methodology adopted in this qualitative research project follows a hermeneutic epistemic approach, which is oriented at understanding and interpreting reality, and perceptions,

intentions, actions, and meanings presented by individuals (Hamilton 2016; Gibs 2007) from different perspectives. In this case, we present the beliefs expressed by educational agents and their connection to pedagogical practice and their own desire, manifested and disrupted by tensions generated by discursive ordinances imposed by education policy. This in turn translates into a wealth of meanings and other forms of subjectivity that redefine school reality.

Data gathering was conducted through focus groups. The scope of this study, as stated in the objective, was the analysis of the meaning of the discourses on disability and inclusive education in the classroom, based on the beliefs of the agents involved in the educational process in public schools.

Sample

The population that participated in the present study are teachers and school counselors in rural educational institutions in the Colombian departments of Córdoba and Atlántico at the elementary and middle school levels. These two departments are part of the Caribbean region, located in the north of Colombia and South America. Intentional sampling was used, with 30 subjects participating as part of the category “schoolteacher” used as convenience criterion, while 15 participants were chosen with the criterion “school counselor,” for a total of 45 participants.

Due to the conditions resulting from the health crisis brought about by the pandemic, interaction took place virtually, through the Zoom platform, having signed confidentiality agreements and informed consent forms. Theoretical sampling parameters were observed, based on which it was possible to purposefully select the cases to be studied, according to their potential for the development of new theoretical insights concerning inclusive education in public educational institutions.

Tools

A questionnaire was designed in order to collect data and to lead the discussion within the focus groups. The questionnaire was prepared and validated by experts, following key elements in categories such as inclusive education, disability, barriers, and learning facilitators. 10 focus groups were conducted virtually with teachers and counselors in educational institutions in five municipalities in the department of Atlántico, and five municipalities in the department of Córdoba.

Procedure

The meetings lasted a total of 5 hours and 30 minutes, and the recordings were used to delimit the corpus, with a collected sample of texts, which were the result of the transcription of interventions within the focus groups. The process of analysis began with the segmentation of texts to individualize meaning units and to ensure the articulation of new insights and interpretations. Contrast of the analysis units resulted in emerging categories, which, as mentioned by Guba and Lincoln (1998), served as the basis for the inductive process. Since the process is centered on the subjectivity of participants, it facilitates the discovery of new relations.

Table I shows such a relational process within the corpus (referencing environments, categories, and analysis units). Personal and professional environments were taken as the starting point for the selected sample, and then the following categories were articulated: *Professional training*, *Beliefs about disability*, and *beliefs about inclusive education*. For each category, some questions from the questionnaire were purposefully selected, and the collected statements were arranged into analysis units, which were numbered to facilitate comparison between analysis units, which had been previously grouped according to the existence of similar elements between them.

Table 1. Environment, Categories, and Analysis Units for the Focus Groups.

Environment	Categories	Analysis Units for Schoolteachers Focus Groups	Analysis Units for School Counselors Focus Groups
Personal	Professional Training	8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 30, 32, 39, 84, 104, 15, 20, 48, 72, 102, 50, 54, 64, 97, 110, 24, 52, 57,	58, 85, 35, 43, 59, 61, 80, 87, 100, 17, 18, 46, 69, 75, 94, 106
Professional	Beliefs about disability	89, 68, 42, 44, 55, 56, 66, 92, 70, 76, 40, 83, 22, 53, 36, 113, 81, 28, 37, 19, 47, 107, 111, 108, 27, 31,	71, 79, 86, 96, 38, 73, 95, 112, 33, 60, 82, 91, 25, 93, 90, 23, 51, 67, 78, 99, 63
	Beliefs about inclusive education	16, 77, 98, 26, 49, 62, 74, 65,	103, 105, 109, 21, 29, 34, 41, 45, 114, 101, 88, 115

Source: author's own elaboration.

As stated by Moraes and Galiazzi (2007), the existence of such a degree of proximity in meaning between units constitutes a category and becomes a critical element for the analysis of the results presented below, where the voices from teachers are identified with the letter (D) and those from School counselors with the letter (O). They have been assigned a number that corresponds to the organization that textual discourse analysis revealed for every emerging meaning unit. Textual discourse analysis reveals hidden meanings within the discourses

by teachers and counselors in relation to disability and inclusive education. Systematic, rigorous analysis of these statements derives from the possibility of accepting the coexistence of different outlooks which find understanding as a common path in their quest for truth.

4. RESULTS

The analysis presented here, based on the field work we have conducted, accounts for the influence that different beliefs about disability and inclusive education have in educational processes that take place in institutions in the Colombian departments of Córdoba and Atlántico. This is especially true if we consider that the way in which each person understands and implements actions associated with an ideal of inclusive education, as presented in the literature of the field, represents—in essence—the theories, beliefs, and cultural constructions on which that person grounds their perceptions.

The belief in disability as a deficiency

Through textual discourse analysis, we have identified different meaning units that converge in an important way in the idea that disability is associated with a lack, with incompleteness, and with a personal difficulty on the part of an individual who is missing something, as illustrated in the following statements:

- “When you hear the word disability, you think there is something missing, some limitation, whether physical or maybe mental” (D22).*
- “A person with a disability is someone who is not going through a rehabilitation process” (D28).*

Such a deficiency-centered outlook on disability demonstrates the need to transcend these beliefs about disability as a lack or an inability to do something, and about inclusive education as someone else’s responsibility. A shift is necessary to an approach in which diverse abilities and a positive outlook on difference may serve to make educational processes more dynamic. Some of the answers also associate the concept of disability to a deficiency in specific areas, as evidenced in the following statements by teachers:

- “whether physical, emotional or intellectual, disability keeps you from learning in the same way that a normal student does” (D36)*
- “I would say disability refers to people with some limitation, whether, physical, psychological, emotional, sensorial or physical” (D47).*
- “By disability we mean that someone does not have a given ability, who is not up to speed with what we expect of them” (D36).*

When disability focuses on cognitive aspects, as teachers conceive of it, and not on the students' diversity, some barriers are put in place that restrict the potential to transcend to a holistic, unifying approach, which entails substantial transformations in relational dynamics among human beings, based on critical reflection, ethical commitment, and awareness of the socio-cultural, political, and historic context in which actions regarding educational practice are framed (Castro-Suárez 2020). Furthermore, prevalent in the discourse of teachers is an outlook on disability that focuses on the body, thus imposing upon the students once again a vulnerable condition:

– “when I was told that in my classroom, I was going to get one of those kids with a problem, I was really worried. I feel I don't know enough to guide him; I don't know much about how to work with these kids” (D47).

– “You know these kids are always going to have issues to develop as it should be, I mean their physical ability; it's hard for them to develop something, to learn” (D107).

– “It is the difficulty to do a specific activity” (D14).

These beliefs are present in the discourses of teachers and confirm that the idea of disability articulated by the World Health Organization (WHO 1980) over three decades ago still holds true: disability is associated to ‘any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal’ (28). This approach fails to understand disability in terms of its social dimension.

By the year 2011, the WHO's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health no longer defines disability only in terms of the individual's specific conditions but presents it as a situation in which different characteristics interact with contextual circumstances.

The statements presented above illustrate the personal nature of ideas around disability and the frequent association with concepts grounded on the idea that some people are better, more accomplished, or more valuable than others. In this context, this study highlights the importance of a diverse abilities approach to disability as a dynamic component in the process of acknowledging and getting all agents of the educational system involved.

Beliefs about disability that go beyond the idea of deficiency

At the same time, there were other interpretations closer to an understanding of disability from a social, diverse-abilities approach, particularly among teachers/school counselors who saw disability as related to potentiality. This is a more positive approach to disability, one which conceives of the student as a capable individual. According to Gibbs (2007), it encour-

ages participation and learning, by acknowledging and valuing their abilities. That does not necessarily mean that the deficit is made invisible, since from a differential approach, it needs to be acknowledged to provide a fair, equitable, relevant educational response, one that takes into account the student's specificities, needs, and interests.

Thus, these statements offer a broader concept of disability, associated with a differential condition that in turn creates the possibility and the ability to perform in different areas, with different interests and ways of learning, as evidenced next:

- *“Disability is an opportunity; my work experience has shown me that it is an opportunity” (O71).*
- *“Disability becomes an opportunity, but when you are determined, you find support and perseverance. What is normal in the human species is diversity” (O82).*
- *“Disability is one of many forms in which diversity manifests itself in humankind” (O33).*

In this context, school counselors agree that theirs is a solitary, demanding task, associated to getting students who are considered to have some disability by others, to receive an education that responds to their specific needs and requirements. In other words, their positive beliefs are important, but they are not enough, since in most cases, teachers still have the idea that they lack the necessary resources to adequately implement inclusive educational processes, as the following statements illustrate:

- *“We fight so that the people who are perceived to have a disability have the education they need, within the physical constraints that public institutions face.” (O99)*
- *“In general, public schools do not have the necessary physical infrastructure to be completely inclusive” (O67).*
- *“In the school, we work for children and youth to feel really integrated, and for them to get the opportunities to turn those disabilities into strengths” (O78).*

Teachers/school counselors repeatedly mentioned that, while they are willing to accept children in their institutions and classrooms, they do not have the resources, the time, or the training to incorporate practices that respond to the specific requirements and needs from children with some form of disability. Gutiérrez and Fernández (2020) have similarly pointed out that teachers' beliefs reflect the fact that 'the reality of inclusion in education is thought about from a hegemonic medical-clinical perspective which overestimates the impact of the need on the part of teachers for specific therapeutical support for students with disabilities' (9). Along the same lines, Polo and Aparicio (2018) have called attention to the need to foster transformations in the beliefs, values, and culture of the agents involved, in favor of a more positive, understanding outlook on disability.

On the other hand, concerning disability, school counselors confirm that some students may be close to exclusion due to a condition of poverty that further complicates their disability:

– “There are some students who do not have breakfast at home and come to school with the hope of finding something to eat” (O95).

– “Some of the parents are illiterate, which makes it more difficult for the students to have someone to help them with their homework” (O25)

– “Because rural areas are so far away, students who graduate cannot go on to higher education “ (O60)

This fact makes it even more difficult to potentialize students’ abilities and reinforces the situation of vulnerability and other unmet needs that students in rural contexts face (Barton 2008; Corbett and Slee 2000). In 2019, the National Administrative Department of Statistics (NADS) reported that ‘ Colombia has an approximate population of 45,500,000 inhabitants, from which 7.2 % believes to have some functional difficulty to conduct their daily activities, which translates to around 3,500,000 people with disabilities. Likewise, NADS’s Report on Formal Education ‘(NADS 2020, 20) indicates that 3.4 % of students enrolled in the public education system in 2019 reported special conditions associated to motor impairment (9.1 %); sensory impairment (14 %); cognitive impairment (34.8 %); and mental impairment (19.8 %).

The report also indicates that 22.5 % of people with disabilities are illiterate, compared to people without disabilities. Based on these figures, it is estimated that persons with disabilities go through an average of 4.49 school years, while that number is 6.48 school years for persons without disabilities. This illustrates the fact that even though teachers have formal pedagogical training, beliefs about disability are crucial in the possibility of taking pedagogical measures from the perspective of embracing and strengthening diverse abilities that the students with disabilities may develop, but not just as an inclusive practice on their part. It is mainly a challenge for educational systems, with the need to reconfigure curricula, assessment, and pre-service and in-service teacher education to foster transformation in comprehensive, transformative pedagogical practices.

About inclusive education and its close connection to disability

The statements by teachers and counselors confirm the need to rethink the relationship between meaning and action that exists between disability and inclusive education, especially as it has been understood as a form of oppression and an imposition deriving from education policy. The Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN 2017) defines inclusive education as a permanent process of acknowledging and embracing diversity, and the specificities, interests,

possibilities, and expectations that children, adolescents, youth, and adults bring with them, without any form of discrimination or exclusion. Inclusive education should guarantee human rights, and the necessary improvements and adjustments to the educational process. Nevertheless, such a defense of the right to inclusive education and leveling of opportunities remains to be achieved. Also subject to improvement are the professional development and training programs for teachers in the different subject areas, as well as their ability to strengthen at the same time their subject-area knowledge and their curricular and pedagogical knowledge to be able to offer really inclusive, relevant education, one that values diversity and responds to the individual and social abilities of their students, rather than just their difficulties.

From this perspective, the present study reiterates the importance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work as the basis for a multimodal educational process, in which practitioners from different areas promote a holistic, unifying approach to the student. In this sense, Coll (1996) suggests the idea of supporting the work of teachers in their respective subject-matter, but also in specific aspects to better deal with difference and work with families and the community, which in turn favors the transformation of beliefs and attitudes about difference.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of our analysis, which had as its purpose to uncover the beliefs shared among different agents in the school community, confirm the importance of developing pedagogical support processes in educational institutions, complemented with critical reflection about the meanings accorded to disability and their impact on conceptions of inclusive education. In this sense, it can be seen how beliefs underlying such discourses are permeated by cultural, historic, social, and contextual elements that affect the actions implemented. It also becomes evident that we need to move to an understanding in which, following the Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (United Nations 2006), the concept of disability is acknowledged as one that needs to evolve as a product of an effective and proactive effort on the part of people with disabilities, and bearing in mind the barriers that are present in the everyday life of educational institutions, especially in the rural context.

Along the same lines, school communities need to work to strengthen positive, socially conscious perceptions of persons with disabilities, particularly from a diverse-abilities approach, striving for their rights, autonomy, dignity, freedom, and diversity. Analysis of the results points to the importance of developing support processes for teachers, considering that most of the institutions that participated in the study do not offer the necessary training to properly offer the differentiated care required by children with disabilities in their classrooms.

This aspect becomes increasingly relevant, since, in the school context, it is precisely teachers who are meant to foster inclusion among children and youth, through the use of epistemological, conceptual, pedagogical, and methodological tools. These tools are to be used to design and implement teaching proposals aimed at developing skills, creativity, abilities, and effective participation on the part of student with disabilities.

Another relevant aspect for our analysis is the importance of acknowledging and strengthening a sense of ethics and commitment among teachers, as well as their ability to critically reflect on their own practice concerning inclusive education. It should be considered that it is from that position that it will be possible to implement affirmative actions that engage the remaining agents who are responsible for providing care and securing the students' rights and inclusion in the educational system, the community, and society at large.

In that sense, this study highlights the importance of favoring professional development processes among teachers, based on collaborative work, centered on critical reflection and the development of personal, emotional, social, cognitive, ethical, and interpersonal skills. The purpose is to generate educational proposals that not only foster participation, but that encourage meaningful, lifelong learning among students.

The present study contributes to demonstrating how, in spite of discourses promoting inclusive education as a mandate for the 21st century, there are still differences in belief on the part of teachers and school counselors, who are ultimately responsible for guaranteeing quality inclusive, equitable education and promoting learning for all.

In spite of the findings of this study, certain limitations should also be noted. First, the discussion among some participants in the focus groups may have a certain influence in the perceptions that they express with respect to disability and inclusive education. Other researchers, therefore, should be advised to triangulate the data obtained in this way with data obtained using other instruments, such as individual interviews. Second, our study is context-dependent, which limits the possibility of extrapolating it to a different context. These limitations encourage the development of further research in this area, which would certainly contribute to extending the analysis to other contexts.

Finally, the present study ratifies the importance of providing greater visibility to the voices, experiences, and knowledge of the agents involved in educational processes. From then, it will be possible to engage in collective construction aimed at fostering the development of pedagogical actions following the principle of diverse abilities.

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