

Listening to the voices of children with disabilities in Colombian Escuela Nueva schools

Julia Hayes^a

^aIndependent Education Consultant. Corresponding Author- Email: julia@inclusioncreativa.com

With the aim of addressing the low learning outcomes of children living in poverty in rural areas of Colombia, the Escuela Nueva (EN) approach has been used to successfully educate children since its inception in the 1970s. Its design also has elements which have the potential to deliver inclusive education for children with disabilities: children learn in multigrade classes at their own pace, working in groups through the provision of self-instructional learner guides. The role of the teacher is that of facilitator, freeing up time for those who need more support and using formative assessment methods to assess children's progress. However, there has been no research on children's views on how it addresses their needs. Using visual participatory methods, this study explored the views of 26 rural Colombian children with disabilities on their understanding of disability and difference, and the ways in which EN addressed their needs. The findings suggested that there were many elements of the EN approach that children liked and supported their learning, but that the design of the model could not overcome all barriers that children with disabilities faced. Children's understanding of difference focused upon skin tone rather than disability, gender or socio-economic status. This demonstrated that when researching the topic of disability, it is imperative that one gains a deep, rich understanding of not only the ways in which disability and difference are understood, but also the ways in which intersecting aspects of the context impact upon children.

Keywords: Inclusive education; children's voice; Escuela Nueva; visual participatory methods

Introduction

Colombia is one of the many countries in the global South committed to provide inclusive and equitable quality education for all children by 2030 (Sustainable Development Goal 4), including those with disabilities, who are acknowledged as the most excluded or marginalized children (UNESCO, 2015). However, while there are global agreements on the principle of inclusive education as something to be pursued (e.g. UN, 2006), its meaning and nature are contested (Norwich, 2014). Furthermore, a growing body of literature has questioned the relevance and application of current models which have been generated in the global North and

© The Authors. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License

subsequently exported to southern contexts (Armstrong, et al., 2011; Kamenopoulou, 2020). It is argued that these models do not account for difference in lived realities, cultures and contexts of countries and communities in the global South (Grech, 2011; Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014). To better understand the realities that children with disabilities face, privileging their voices re-introduces minority perspectives into research production in order to change the ‘colonizing, medicalising and pathologizing tendencies’ of research which is usually expert-led (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999:234). Nind (2014:2,12) uses the umbrella term ‘inclusive research’ to describe research that is conducted ‘with, by or sometimes for those [being researched] ... and in contrast to research on them’. Drawing on childhood studies literature and shaped by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), this includes children, who are considered competent social actors with the capacity to shape their own lives and those of their community (Percy-Smith, 2011). However, the views of children with disabilities are rarely sought by researchers or policy makers, due to the perceived complexity of conducting research with them (Wickenden & Elphick, 2016; Ibrahim, 2022).

Challenging this trend, the past decade has seen an increasing body of participatory research, which has foregrounded the views of children with disabilities in the global South. In this, children have described some of the practical and emotional issues that need to be addressed to enable them to be included. Physical access to school buildings is of particular concern to children with physical and sensory disabilities. They describe a lack of transport, inaccessible surfaces and a lack of ramps or toilet facilities (in India, Mahbub, 2008; in Ghana, Singal et al., 2015), as well as resources and technology for children with hearing and visual difficulties (in Zimbabwe, Musengi & Chireshe, 2012; in Ghana, Gregorius, 2016). Having school friends is of central importance to children (in Uganda, Bannink et al., 2016; in Chile, Eguiguren et al., 2020), while many children experience bullying (in Chile, Villalobos et al., 2014; in Nigeria, Brydges & Mkandawire, 2016; in Vanuatu, Jenkin et al., 2017). However, there are also contrasting examples, in which teachers and peers have consistently supported those with disabilities to access learning materials (in India, Mahbub, 2008; in Chile, Albornoz et al., 2015; in Ghana, Gregorius, 2016) and to move around the school (in Vietnam, Ngo et al., 2013). However, support from peers and teachers is not systematic, and some children felt embarrassed to ask, fearing that this made them stand out (in India, Singh & Ghai, 2009; in Nigeria, Brydges & Mkandawire, 2016). Thus, the evidence suggests that children are advocating for not only practical and physical access to learning, but also for models of education that support their social and emotional needs.

While there are some common themes, it is also important to recognise the heterogeneity of children’s experiences. For example, the views of children with physical and sensory disabilities are well represented, while there is less work focusing on children with intellectual, communication and behavioural difficulties (Wickenden & Elphick, 2016; Ibrahim et al., 2022). Moreover, children’s understanding of their disability differs, and is influenced by cultural understandings and attitudes. For example, in Colombia, Figueroa (2011) noted that

children characterised disability as an illness that resulted in not performing at the same level as others. Furthermore, intersections such as gender, poverty and location have an influence. For example, research with girls with disabilities in Vietnam suggests that they faced additional barriers to schooling (Nguyen et al., 2014), while in Iran, a study reports that girls living in rural areas may have less access to education (Don et al., 2015). The impact of poverty meant that children in Vietnam reported having to leave school to work or support the family (Ngo et al., 2013; Nguyen et al., 2015). Thus, research with children with disabilities needs to capture nuanced accounts of children's understandings and lived experiences to better understand the factors that impact upon them.

The Colombian context

Colombian children with disabilities have had the right to an education since 1991, when the country committed to providing education for all (Law 12, Colombian Congress, 1991). There was a concerted focus upon increasing access for children with disabilities in regular schools after the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2009, and this resulted in legislation that gives all children aged 5 to 15 the right to a free inclusive education and individual support planning (Ministry of Education (MEN) 2013, 2017). However, it is estimated that only 43.2% of children with disabilities attend school (Correa and Castro, 2015), and of those who do attend, less than two thirds complete their education (63%) compared with 91% of their non-disabled peers (OECD, 2016). While little is known about the learning outcomes of children with disabilities, it is apparent that the outcomes of all children are greatly affected by the intersections of their wealth, gender and location. Colombia is ranked as one of the 10 most unequal countries in the world (OECD, 2016), and despite a decline in rural poverty in the past decade, multidimensional poverty was still more than twice as high for rural Colombians in 2017, when compared to those in urban areas (Radinger et al., 2018). Rural poor boys and girls have much lower outcomes than their urban equivalents, and there is a general trend of underachievement of boys in Latin America, in which they are less likely to complete primary school than girls (Murphy-Graham et al., 2021).

Researchers who have explored why rural children in Colombia have poorer academic outcomes than their urban counterparts have identified several factors. These include a combination of rural poverty, rural school infrastructure, the effects of 50 years of conflict and the intersection of race (Gómez et al., 2021). Afro-Colombians and indigenous people represent 11% and 3% of the population respectively, and are more likely to live in remote, rural areas (DANE, 2018). Despite this, structural racism has received little attention and the experiences of many communities in Latin America have been historically erased through the nation-building concept of 'mestizaje' (mixture) (Wade, 2005; Moreno-Figueroa and Saldívar, 2016). Within this concept, there exists a 'graduated scale of colour and prestige' (Nascimento,

2007:17), where people with lighter skin are more likely to be wealthy and receive more education. Despite these large disparities, research on inclusive education in Colombia remains limited (Kamenopoulou, 2018), and this is particularly the case with regards to the intersectional dimensions (Moreno et al., 2022).

Escuela Nueva

With the explicit aim of addressing the low learning outcomes of Colombian children living in poverty in rural areas (Colbert & Arboleda, 2016), the Escuela Nueva (EN) model was first developed by Colombian educators in the 1970s. Subsequently adopted in many rural areas, it currently accounts for 8% of all children enrolled in primary education in Colombia (OECD, 2016:136). Considered a good example of ‘what works’ in rural southern contexts by international organisations such as UNESCO and the World Bank (Foundation Escuela Nueva (FEN), 2017), research on the learning outcomes and measures of self-esteem of children in EN schools has consistently demonstrated that EN children outperform children who attend non-EN schools (Psacharopoulos et al., 1993; Hincapié, 2015; Hammler, 2017). Furthermore, the EN methods appear to have a positive impact on the peaceful social interaction of children (Forero et al., 2006). However, there appears to be no research that has examined how a model which aims to address the local Colombian context addresses the needs of children with disabilities.

Descriptions of the EN model in the literature appear to suggest that it has elements that could support the education of children with disabilities. Learner diversity is welcomed by design, in which learning at one’s own pace is encouraged to accommodate children who need to miss schooling or enter late due to the demands of the agricultural calendar (Colbert & Arboleda, 2016). In addition, the EN model embraces the use of multigrade classes with children of all ages (FEN, 2017). Promoting heterogenous learning, encourages the understanding that ‘difference’ is not something that only applies to learners with disabilities, but rather is part of any community at different ages and stages of development (Howgego et al., 2014). Peer learning is a central feature of the model, and children work together through structured learning guides, which provide active learning activities. This ensures that all children have access to help from their peers and there is a strong focus upon learning to live together peacefully (*convivencia*), which includes a friendship mail board where children can send each other positive messages. With children working in groups, the role of the teacher is that of facilitator, freeing up time for those who need more support, who guides and assesses their progress using formative assessment methods.

Despite its success, there are notable gaps in the EN literature. There are few accounts of children and teacher experiences of learning in EN classrooms and where the views of both have been sought (Benveniste & McEwan 2000; Forero et al., 2006) this is through large-scale

survey methods, which limit the nuance one can capture of the classroom experience. Qualitative research by Hammler (2017) who used semi-structured interviews with a smaller sample of teachers, and Suárez et al. (2015) who interviewed three teachers, focused on adherence to the implementation of the model, thus leaving a gap in terms of capturing the perspectives of teachers or children on how children's needs are being addressed. Most pertinent to this study, is that there has been no prior research that explores both EN and disability, the way in which the needs of children with disabilities are addressed in the classroom or children's views on this. Consequently, the objective of the research was to explore the perspectives of children of disabilities on how the EN model addressed their needs.

Fieldwork, data and participatory visual methods

The research was conducted as part of a doctoral study focusing on how the needs of children with disabilities were understood and addressed in Colombian EN schools. Using a multi-site case study design, I spent nine months conducting fieldwork with five rural primary schools (schools A-E). The schools had adopted the EN model in 2016, with support from Foundation Escuela Nueva. The Foundation was established in 1987 by Vicky Colbert, who is the ex-Director of a former Government programme to implement the Escuela Nueva model across Colombia (Colbert & Arboleda, 2016). Now a social enterprise, FEN trains and supports regions and schools in their adoption of the model.

To contextualise the experiences of children with disabilities with the views of their classmates, I conducted individual and groupwork with all children over the age of seven, i.e. 53 children in total. With limited access to diagnostic services in rural areas of Colombia (Moreno-Angarita, 2010) and issues of underreporting of disability in countries of the global South (Mont, 2007; Cappa et al., 2015), I used the Washington group child functioning module questions (for children aged 5-17 years) with teachers (see Sprunt et al., 2017) to identify 29 with disabilities out of a school population of 101. Of the 29 children with disabilities, 26 were over 7 years old. Their moderate difficulties were mainly related to aspects of their learning (15), concentration (15) and remembering (11). Other difficulties included behaviour (9), self-care (6), coping with change, making friends (5), anxiety (3) and seeing (3). One child had a difficulty with walking and another with hearing.

Utilising a multi-method approach, children were given the option to participate in four different activities: photovoice, drawing, diversity photo discussions and a 'visual voice interview' on who helps when they are stuck. Table 1 outlines the activity choices children made.

Table 1: Activity choices of children aged 7-11 years

| Activity | Photovoice | Drawing | Diversity photo discussions | Visual voice interview |
|---|------------|---------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| No. of children who chose activity | | | | |
| Total no. of children n = 53 | 45 | 35 | 42 | 40 |
| No. of children with disabilities n = 26 | 22 | 8 | 23 | 19 |

In the case of photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997) children took photographs of ‘what helps me learn, what does not help me learn’. Following an individual interview in which they discussed what was in the photo and how it helped them learn (or not), children worked together to generate group themes for their photos and, in the case of two schools, created an action plan to address the issues they raised. In the drawing activity, children were asked to draw three things: something about their family, what they most liked or did not like about school, what they wanted to be when they grew up, and finally, anything else they thought was very important to them. In the diversity photo sorting task, six groups of 6-8 children were given photos of Colombian children that represented different aspects of diversity (race, gender, disability, socio-economic status), and asked to put the photos together in groups that they considered were the same. However, while analysis of the photovoice, drawing and diversity discussions provided an overview of the themes that shaped children’s learning, I lacked insight into the moments when they found school-work difficult. Consequently, to explore children’s experiences of being stuck, and who they thought helped them in those moments, I created a ‘visual voice interview’ template that explored three aspects:

- In which subject were they most likely to have experienced being stuck?
- Who would they talk to (if at all) if they were stuck?
- How did their peers, teacher and parents typically react when they were stuck?

To support children to express their emotions, the template included an emotions face chart for them to point to. The template acted as an interview guide and children chose whether to draw, or whether they wanted an adult to draw, as the discussion progressed.

Data Analysis

All activities and interviews were audio recorded, and children’s own verbal descriptions of their photos, drawings and group discussions formed the basis of the analysis (see Angell et al.,

2015). I transcribed the audio recordings of all child sessions in Spanish and translated these into English. Thematic coding was used to analyse the audio data, based upon an inductive approach. Using Atlas.ti, the analysis process involved the iterative development of themes through two cycles of coding (Miles et al., 2014).

Ethical considerations

Seeking informed consent from children brought distinctive ethical challenges, ensuring that all, including those with disabilities, understood their participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, without addressing the relations of power/knowledge between not only myself as adult and the children, but also that of a white researcher from the global North conducting research in a country of the global South, my research risked reproducing the same imbalances that I sought to challenge (Spivak, 1985). To address this, my first action was to identify a methodological framework, participatory design and methods (i.e., photovoice, drawing, group discussions, child-led theme generation and action planning) which aimed to minimise the negative effects of power on the participants and to privilege their views. To ensure children understood their participation was voluntary, I introduced myself to the children using a pre-prepared visual poster to explain my reason for being in the schools, with an outline of the activities I was offering and the importance of consent and confidentiality. Children then had all day to talk to me and add their names to a large method menu poster, opting to do any combination of photovoice, drawing, individual interview or group photo sorting, with an additional column for their suggestions. During the activities I was vigilant as to whether a child was giving assent, on an ongoing basis, based upon their body language and non-verbal responses (Cocks, 2007), and some children opted in for activities once they saw them in progress. Following the British Educational Research Association guidelines, data was kept confidential and ethical approval was given by the University of Cambridge, Foundation Escuela Nueva and the Director of the schools. Children chose their own pseudonyms and their individual permission to audio record data was requested in each activity, before being destroyed post-transcription.

Findings

Escuela Nueva and inclusive education

The responses of children with disabilities suggested that learning in an EN classroom was a broadly positive experience. However, nuanced accounts also suggested that one cannot assume that the different facets of the model include all children at all times.

Peer groups can support learning but are not a panacea

The importance of friendships and peer support was a consistent theme in all schools, and the

majority of children (36/40) who took part in the ‘when I’m stuck’ interview said they received some level of help from their peers. The EN model promotes working together in groups, and a culture of supporting one another was clear in all schools. Kira described preferring to ask her friends:

Kira (9-year-old girl, School A): ... I don’t really ask the teacher. I would start with asking my friends, and maybe the teacher later.

Julia: Why is this?

Kira: Because I have more confidence in my friends, and I am with them all the time, whereas the teacher is with the rest of the class...in my 4th grade group I am really good at multiplications, but the others are better at divisions, so we work it out between ourselves.

Similarly, learning in a multigrade class meant that some children with disabilities had the opportunity to help their younger classmates:

Malefica (7-year-old girl with learning and behaviour difficulties, School B): ... the teacher helps us, and the other children help me, and we can help teach the younger children so they can do things, and this makes me happy.

Nairo (10-year-old boy with diagnosed learning difficulty, School E): I like this year best – I’m the oldest and I have the responsibility to help others.

However, children’s accounts suggested that those with disabilities had more mixed experiences of receiving help than those of their non-disabled peers. Summarised in Table 2 below, a comparison of the accounts of children with and without disabilities suggested that the latter were more likely to report only positive experiences of receiving help from their peers, whereas the former had more mixed experiences. Reasons given included teasing on occasions, but also, that other children did not necessarily have the time required to attend to a child who was struggling, when they had to complete their own work.

Table 2: Children’s views on whether their peers helped them learn

| Child’s response | Children help me | Children sometimes help | | Children don’t help | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| | | Some help, some tease | Some help, some don’t have time | I am ashamed | Children tease | Children don’t help |
| Non-disabled children n = 21/40 | 18 | 2 | 1 | | | |
| Children with | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|--------------|----|---|---|---|---|---|
| disabilities | 8 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| n = 19/40 | | | | | | |
| Totals | 26 | 7 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 |

Thus, there were various examples of positive support from peers, such as the following quote:

Katerine (7-year-old girl with a self-care difficulty and low attendance, describing a photo she took of her friend): He is my best friend and always helps me when something is difficult for me.

However, there were also children who had mixed experiences, and those who were too embarrassed to ask for help from anyone:

Batman (9-year-old boy with learning and social difficulties, School B): Some help and some make fun of you, if you can't do things.

Julia: What do the other children say when you are stuck?

Falcao (7-yr-old boy with concentration difficulties, School E): They don't know...I don't tell them, I tell no-one.

Problematising the notion of peer support being a positive thing at all times, children's responses challenge the assumption that by placing peers together on a table and asking them to work together necessarily results in positive peer support and learning.

Learning materials and social relationships

All children were very positive about the role of learning materials in helping them learn. These included the EN learning guides, with positive comments about the content, pictures and activities. However, while most children with disabilities were positive about the guides, they were considered less useful by four of the children who struggled with reading. For example:

Alex (10-year-old boy with learning difficulty, School C): The guides don't help me because I find it hard to read. I don't like reading ... writing doesn't help me because I get really tired very quickly.

A further issue mentioned by the child with a diagnosis of cognitive deficit was that he disliked having to share his guide with another boy in his grade. Rather than promoting positive peer relationships, he found it stressful to share and frequently argued with the other boy. Similar to the issues regarding the role of peers in the EN model, this emphasises that for the learning

materials to be inclusive of all children, there needs to be emphasis on not only ensuring children can access the learning content, but also on negotiating the social relationships that active, group-based learning entails.

Going at your own pace vs losing the year

Flexible promotion and a child going at their own pace, underpin the EN approach and have the potential to support children with disabilities. However, a consequence is that if children do not make enough progress, the state school system requires them to repeat the year – known colloquially as ‘losing the year’ [*perdiendo el año*]. Children in EN classrooms sit with grade-based peers, and therefore their immediate group may change from one year to the next. Children (including those who had and had not repeated the year) saw repeating as a negative experience; something to be avoided and used as a threat by parents and teachers to try and motivate children to work harder:

Dulce (7-year-old girl with learning, behaviour and anxiety difficulties, School A): The teacher helps me a lot, because she knows that I have to pass and that I cannot lose the year, and that I have to go to the next classroom (junior class).

Julia: And what happens if you lose the year?

Dulce: My Mum would hit me.

Julia: Actually hit you or say she was going to hit you?

Dulce: Yes, it’s because she doesn’t want me to lose the year.

Mauricio (11-year-old boy, School C): Losing the year would be a bad thing to say to your parents. When my achievement is good, they are happy, and if it is bad, well then, they are sad, but it’s not like they get angry and say something like ‘you will lose the year!’.

The tensions that this causes for children were illustrated in the case of two sisters in School D who lived two hours away from their school and whose attendance was poor. Interviews with the sisters revealed they were anxious about having to repeat a year and claimed that the rain often made the river impossible for the horse to pass. One of the sisters described her anxiety:

Julia: Do teachers help?

Florecita (11-year-old girl with self-care, learning & behaviour difficulties and low attendance School D): When I can’t do it, they say how can I not do it? But also how to do it.

Julia: So does the teacher tell you off?

Florencia: Sometimes, for example, that I can't do it and gain a better score. And today the teacher said you don't come every day and they say we are losing the year - and I feel bad about that.

Thus, while allowing a child to learn at their own pace supports the inclusion of children, implementing this within a wider state system that requires a child to pass the year is a constant pressure for them.

Understandings of disability and the role of intersections

Children's participation in the research highlighted the importance of understanding not only their view on EN but also the wider contextual factors which influence their experiences. For example, while my research focused on disability, it quickly became apparent that children's knowledge of disability was very limited and not the most salient aspect of difference to them. Very few reported being familiar with the word 'disability' [*discapacidad*], but instead used words like 'the poor little ill children' [*enfermitos*] and 'special children' [*niños especiales*]. When asked to expand on what they meant by the term special this included forms of othering based on a medical model of disability, in which the 'problem' is located within the individual rather than the wider environment:

Child 1 (10 years old): It is when the genes or the mother and father come together and they end up like that – they are not normal like us, rather they are special.

Child 2 (9 years old): Like they are born and they only have one arm.

Child 3 (8 years old): Or their mother smokes and then they affect the shape of their body, and they get born like...

Child 2 (9 years old): With illnesses.

Child 3 (8 years old): Without noses; they have big hands.

No child referred to themselves as having a disability – including the one child who knew he had a diagnosis. There were, however, 10 children who referred to having difficulties with their learning which they described in terms of not being able to do what other children could do. For example:

Malefica (7-year-old girl with learning and behaviour difficulties, School B): There are children like me, like Cielo, we don't know how to read, and we find it hard.

Julia: So why is it some children can read, and others can't?

Malefica: It's because we don't understand the words because of the letters, so it's hard to read.

Furthermore, of the ten children who had mentioned they had these difficulties, seven considered themselves as responsible for not achieving at the level of their peers. This reflected a pattern that I noticed, where children who were identified as having disabilities frequently blamed themselves for their difficulties, giving examples of their own lack of skill or effort, again, reflecting the medical model of disability:

Ironman (9-year-old boy with self-care difficulties, School B): I wasn't very much a companionable person, I was solitary, and neither on the other hand did I do my homework.

Nairo (10-year-old boy with diagnosed learning difficulties, School E): It is that I don't pay attention to the things. I've always been like this; I don't know why.

Julia: So, do you mean you think that it is your own fault that this happens?

Nairo: Yes.

However, in contrast, the most positive example of a child's self-esteem regarding their learning difficulties was that of Gato, an 11-year-old boy with difficulties in reading and writing. As a result of slow progress, Gato had repeated two years of schooling. Consequently, he was in the same grade as his younger brother, Juancho. However, rather than considering himself less able than his brother, he was both aware that he learned differently to others and positive about this:

Gato: (my brother and I) learn differently, like, erm, we do things differently, but we learn at the same level.

However, the most salient aspect of difference for the children appeared to be a child's skin tone, rather than differences in learning. Despite the diversity photo sorting task representing male and female children with various disabilities, different socio-economic backgrounds and race, the most consistent intersection of difference that children used to group the photos was skin tone. In contrast, only two groups used disability or poverty as a category of difference and no children grouped the pictures by gender. During the discussions that pertained to skin tone, children's comments reflected the view that having darker skin was perceived as less positive than lighter skin. In one group, some of the children were laughing at the pictures of the Afro-Colombian children, and when I asked someone to explain to me what made them laugh, a 10-year-old boy explained that his peers were showing a 'lack of respect' and shared the joke that the others were referring to. He explained how children were '*morenitos*', which is a polite term for dark-skinned:

10-year-old boy, School B: They are '*morenitos*' and I don't want to be annoying, but people say they wash themselves with mud. So here my friend is morenito (points to friend of same ethnicity but darker skin), but I am *not* saying that he washes with mud. He's my friend and it doesn't matter to me if he was born, he was born...

9-year-old boy: White.

10-year-old boy: ... or black, equally he is my friend – he is a child.

Furthermore, when comparing photos of the Afro-Colombian children and those with the lightest skin colour, two children in another group who had separated the pictures into groups according to skin colour described how those with lighter skin were more beautiful and had better prospects due to wealth:

Julia: And the lives of children who have lighter skin (points to pictures of lighter skinned Colombian children), are you saying their lives will be different to these (points to pictures of Afro-Colombian) children?

Girl: Yes, they (points to pictures of children with lighter skin) are beautiful, because they are whiter.

Boy: They will have nice houses with a hot shower.

Interestingly, when they discussed the grouped photos of children with a darker skin tone, they did not appear to differentiate between Afro-Colombian children and indigenous children who had darker skin, reflecting the focus upon *mestizaje* in Colombia.

A further intersection that impacted upon children's capacity to learn, was their home situation and the role that poverty played within this. Most children (36/40) responded with an unequivocal, 'yes', when asked if parents helped a child when they were stuck, with positive examples such as Ariana's:

Ariana (8-year-old girl with learning difficulties, School B): My mum, she helps me, she takes my hand to help me write better.

However, children also provided powerful accounts of the barriers that prevented parents from supporting them in their homework tasks. For example, two children with disabilities said that their parents could not help them with their homework, because they themselves could not read.

Julia: So, who helps you in the house when you have homework?

Cielo (7-year-old girl with learning and social difficulties, School B): My family. Sometimes my mum doesn't know how, so then my dad helps. He knows everything and my mum doesn't know so much.

Batman (11-year-old boy with learning and social difficulties, School B): I have to ask for help – like my mum and dad, but they didn't study, so I have to ask a friend.

Julia: So your Mum and Dad can't read?

Batman: No.

Children also gave accounts of the impact of poverty in some families. Two girls with a disability described not having pencils at home to complete their homework. When I explored this further with Girl 1, she disclosed that this resulted from a lack of money and her father spending that money on alcohol:

Girl (7-year-old girl with learning and behaviour difficulties): My Father goes down to town to buy me a pencil, but sometimes he doesn't buy it.

Julia: Why is that?

Girl: Sometimes because he doesn't have the money, and I don't do (my homework).

Julia: So you said sometimes he can't buy them for a reason – is it because the shop is closed? Or another reason?

Girl: Because he sometimes drinks a lot, and goes up to (local town) and he drinks, and carries on drinking and carries on until we have no money.

These nuanced accounts of children's understanding of the ways in which intersections of disability, race and poverty are experienced, emphasise that it is essential that all intersecting aspects of difference within particular local contexts are addressed in both education and research.

The importance of the natural environment

All children cared about looking after the natural environment, and their themes of 'natural environment' [*naturaleza*] included many pictures of the local flora and fauna. Conversations about children's lives revealed that they were very knowledgeable about sowing potatoes, milking cows and riding horses. Katerine, who struggled to attend consistently, emphasised the central importance of the countryside for her:

Katerine (7-year-old girl with self-care difficulties and low attendance, School D): My dad is a farm worker, and my mum looks after trout and sowing for all of the farm.

Julia: And do you have to work with them?

Katerine: I help them. I can sow potatoes, clean clothes. I can do everything.

Julia: And in the future, what would you like to do? Would you want to stay where you live or...?

Katerine: Well, I don't know yet, but what I love... where I live, I walk outside and I feel, I feel (*puts arms out wide, inhales and exhales deeply, smiles*) oh, my land! [*ai, mi tierra!*] There it is so peaceful, and this is my favourite.

Thus, planning for this child's inclusion should incorporate her love for the rural environment, providing opportunities to build upon her existing knowledge, while at the same time addressing the access challenges that living in a remote area brings. In conclusion, to truly

include a child in their school community, practitioners and researchers alike need to consider the intersections of disability with other factors that are salient in a child's context.

Discussion

The findings suggested that there were many elements of the EN approach that children liked and supported their learning – for example, the emphasis on rural learning, building social support into the design, and being given the opportunity to help other younger children as a result of the multigrade setting. However, the EN model could not overcome all the barriers that children with disabilities faced. As argued in the introduction, EN's focus upon capitalising on the benefits of working collaboratively with others, provides peer support for children with identified difficulties in the classroom setting. Similar to the wider literature on children's views (Musengi and Chireshe, 2012; Eguiguren-Istuanay & Wood, 2020), my findings suggested friendships were of central importance to the children, and identified as one of the main elements of school life that they thought helped them learn. However, Srivistava et al. (2015) noted that the mere physical presence of students with disabilities in schools or classrooms does not automatically lead to positive academic or social outcomes. Similarly, data from the children with disabilities suggested that the support of peers and working as a team is not always as straightforward or positive as is advocated by EN. Reflecting the experiences of children in the wider literature (e.g. Nguyen et al., 2015), children with disabilities had mixed experiences of support from their peers. Moreover, support from peers was also dependent on children's own desire or capacity to seek help from others. Thus, while I observed that peer support was a strength of the model, my research suggested that to maximise its effectiveness, teachers need to be alert to peer conflict, group dynamics and to implement strategies which build a cohesive, supportive team culture in the class. In conclusion, while working in a team has the potential to be inclusive and foster positive relationships, it should not be considered a panacea for addressing the needs of children with disabilities.

Two further aspects of the EN model that appeared inclusive were its focus on a child learning at their own pace and the use of formative assessment. However, the findings described the tension between this aspect of the EN approach and being located in a wider state system that uses summative assessment, as it requires children to be deemed 'ready' to pass the year and move onto the next grade. Both children and their parents perceived repeating the year as a negative life event, and that while EN may advocate learning at one's own pace, this does not concur with the wider messages they received from their parents and teachers or the pressure to pass the year. Thus, despite EN advocating children learning at their own pace in EN schools, children have, instead, absorbed the normative-based message that it is more important that they keep up with others and be 'good enough' to pass with them into the next grade. Furthermore, the labels and framing of disability and special educational needs, as described by teachers, were not key to the way in which children with disabilities perceived their difficulties. Instead, the aspect of the system which most highlighted a child's individual

difficulties with learning, was the requirement to pass the year. Failing to do so was a visible marker for their peers, families and the child themselves, that the child's learning progress differed from others, for which they often blamed themselves. The tensions that arise from children being required to achieve national standards of achievement, while ensuring equity for those who are disadvantaged within a system is a topic of debate at the global level (see for example Peters and Oliver, 2009; Kozleski, 2020). Within this specific research context, the very real anxieties that children shared about repeating the year, highlight the importance of ensuring they have a way of understanding their capacities that emphasise not only the areas in which they struggle, but also their areas of strength. Furthermore, faced with a summative system that means some might fail the year, teachers should aim to reassure children that, regardless of external requirements to pass the year, their best efforts are all that the teachers require.

In addition to insights into the EN model, findings highlighted the importance of exploring children's understanding of disability and difference, with regards to intersections. Rather than disability, the most salient difference to the children was that of skin tone. Children's attention to detail regarding differences in skin tone between the photographed children reflected this 'pigmentocracy': a term coined by a Chilean anthropologist Alejandro Lipschutz in 1944 to refer to inequalities or hierarchies based on both ethno-racial categories, such as indigenous and black, and a skin colour continuum. With skin colour as their main focus, common signifiers of disability, such as a child using a wheelchair, or a child with a visual impairment who was receiving support from an adult, were ignored and all group discussions, at some point, involved a discussion on the gradation of colour of skin tone. Consistent with research on inequality and wealth in Colombia, the children in my research correctly identified that the lightest skin-coloured children in the photographs were more likely to be wealthy in Colombia, and the Afro-Colombian children were more likely to be living in poverty and considered less beautiful (Wade, 2019). Thus, in considering how to ensure children with disabilities are included by their peers in this context, it would be essential to recognise not only their learning needs, but also the issue of race. This reaffirms how an intersectional approach to disability is essential to ensure children's individual needs are met in a given context.

Finally, the use of visual participatory tools, supported children with learning and communication difficulties to express their views. This emphasizes that children with a range of impairments can participate in research, and it is our role as researchers to find ways that make that possible for them. However, one limitation of the research was the extent to which I could adopt an emancipatory approach. A delay in finding a suitable translator and transport issues towards the end of the fieldwork reduced my capacity to involve children in the research design at the beginning and to subsequently co-create action plans and dissemination with more than two schools. Thus, not only should methods be accessible, but researchers need to be allowed extra time to address the practicalities of accessing rural schools with limited transport links. A further limitation for the findings was that the needs of the children with disabilities

who took part were classed as moderate, based upon the Washington group categories. Had the needs of children been much more complex, I consider it likely that the findings might have been different.

Conclusion

This article explored children's experiences of learning in rural Colombian EN schools, with a focus upon the ways in which the EN model addresses the needs of children with disabilities. The findings showed that there were many elements of the EN approach that children liked and supported their learning, but that the design of the model could not overcome all barriers that children with disabilities faced. Children's understanding of difference focused upon skin tone rather than disability, gender or socio-economic status. This demonstrated that when researching the topic of disability, it is imperative that researchers begin their research by gaining a deep, rich understanding of the ways in which disability and difference are understood by children. Furthermore, acknowledging that a child's disability is just one lens through which to explore their experiences, disability research is made richer by exploring the ways in which intersecting aspects of the context impact upon children with disabilities.

Acknowledgments

With thanks for the supervision of Professor Nidhi Singal (University of Cambridge) and funding from the Education and Social Research Council (University of Cambridge Doctoral Training Programme).

References

- Albornoz, N., Silva, N. and López, M. (2015). Escuchando a los niños: Significados sobre aprendizaje y participación como ejes centrales de los procesos de inclusión educativa en Chile. *Estudios Pedagógicos (Valdivia)*, 41, 81-96.
- Angell, C., Alexander, J. and Hunt, J. A. (2015). 'Draw, write and tell': A literature review and methodological development on the 'draw and write' research method. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 13(1), 17-28.
- Armstrong, D., Armstrong, A. C. and Spandagou, I. (2011). Inclusion: by choice or by chance? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(1), 29-39.
- Bannink, F., Idro, R. and Van Hove, G. (2016). 'I Like to Play with My Friends': Children with Spina Bifida and Belonging in Uganda. *Social Inclusion*, 4(1), 127-141.
- Brydges, C. and Mkandawire, P. (2016). Perceptions and Concerns about Inclusive Education among Students with Visual Impairments in Lagos, Nigeria. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 64(2), 1-15.
- Cappa, C., Petrowski, N. and Njelesani, J. (2015). Navigating the landscape of child disability measurement: A review of available data collection instruments. *Alter*, 9(4), pp.317-

330.

- Cocks, A. (2007). The ethical maze: finding an inclusive path towards gaining children's agreement to research participation. *Childhood*, 13(2), 247–66.
- Colbert, V. and Arboleda, J. (2016). Bringing a student-centred participatory pedagogy to scale in Colombia. *Journal of Educational Change*, 17(4), 385–410.
- Colombian Congress. (1991). Ley 12 de 1991 (Enero 22). Congreso Colombiano: Bogotá.
- Correa-Montoya, L., & Castro-Martinez, M. (2016). Disability and Social Inclusion in Colombia: Saldarriaga-Concha Foundation Alternative Report to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Saldarriaga-Concha Foundation Press: Colombia.
- DANE (2018). Cuantos somos? (*how many are we?*) 2018 Census Infographic. Available at: <https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/estadisticas-por-tema/demografia-y-poblacion/censo-nacional-de-poblacion-y-vivenda-2018/cuantos-somos>
- Eguiguren-Istuan, O. and Wood, R. (2020). Perspectives on Educational Inclusion from a Small Sample of Autistic Pupils in Santiago, Chile. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 22(1), 210–220.
- FEN. (2017). Historia de Escuela Nueva en Colombia Una renovación pedagógica para el siglo XXI [History of New school in Colombia A pedagogical renovation for the 21st century]. Fundacion Escuela Nueva.
- Figuerola-Angel, M. X. (2011). Meanings about educational services in the regular classroom for children with disabilities in three educational institutions. *Diversitas: Perspectivas en Psicología*, 7(2), 321–333.
- Forero-Piñedo, C., Escobar-Rodríguez, D., & Molina, D. (2006). Escuela Nueva's Impact on the Peaceful Social Interaction of Children in Colombia. In Little, A.W. (ed.), *Education for All and Multigrade Teaching: Challenges and Opportunities* (pp. 265–300). US: Springer.
- Gomez-Gonzalez, J. E., Rodríguez-Gómez, W. and Rodríguez-Gómez, E. (2021). Explaining the Rural-Urban Student Performance Gap for Different Distribution Quantiles in Colombia. Documentos de Trabajo. Available at: <https://repositorio.redinvestigadores.org/bitstream/handle/Riec/94/Pisa%20Colombia%20para%20revista%20Feb%2010%202021%20rev%20tarde.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>
- Grech, S. (2011). Recolonising debates or perpetuated coloniality? Decentring the spaces of disability, development and community in the global South. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(1), 87–100.
- Gregorius, S. (2016). Exploring narratives of education: disabled young people's experiences of educational institutions in Ghana, *Disability & Society*, 31(3), 322–338.
- Hammler, K. (2017). *The Colombian Escuela Nueva School Model: Linking Program Implementation and Learning Outcomes*. Doctoral dissertation, Tulane University, Payson Center for International Development.
- Hincapié, D. (2015). The effectiveness of multigrade classrooms: Evidence from Colombia's New School model. *Association for Education Finance and Policy*, 1–45.

- Howgego, C., Miles, S. and Myers, J. (2014). Inclusive Learning: Children with disabilities and difficulties in learning. HEART Topic Guide, London/Brighton: Department for International Development/Institute of Development Studies.
- Ibrahim, S., Vasalou, B. et al. (2022). A methodological reflection on investigating children's voice in qualitative research involving children with severe speech and physical impairments. *Disability & Society*, 37(1), 63-88.
- Jenkin, E., Wilson, E. et al. (2017). Listening to the voices of children: understanding the human rights priorities of children with disability in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. *Disability & Society*, 32(3), 358-380.
- Kamenopoulou, L. (2018). 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.'. *Disability and the Global South*, 5(1), 1192-1214.
- Kozleski, E. B. (2020). Disrupting what passes as inclusive education: Predicating educational equity on schools designed for all. In *The Educational Forum* (Vol. 84, No. 4, pp. 340-355). Routledge.
- Lipschutz, A. (1944). *El indoamericanismo y el problema racial en las Américas* (2a. ed.). Chile: Editorial Nascimento.
- McEwan, P. J. (2008). Evaluating multigrade school reform in Latin America. *Comparative Education*, 44(4), 465-483.
- Mahbub, T. (2008). Children's views on inclusion: Inclusive education at a BRAC school—perspectives from the children. *British Journal of Special Education*, 35(1), 33-41.
- MEN. (2013). Documento Conpes Social 166 de 2013, Política Pública Nacional de Discapacidad e Inclusión Social. Available at <http://www.mincultura.gov.co/areas/poblaciones/poblacion-con-discapacidad/Paginas/166.pdf>.
- MEN. (2017). Decreto 1421, 29 de Agosto. Gobierno de Colombia: Bogotá. Retrieved from <http://es.presidencia.gov.co/normativa/normativa/DECRETO%201421%20DEL%2029%20DE%20AGOSTO%20DE%202017.pdf>
- Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M. and Saldaña, J. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing.
- Mont, D. (2007). Measuring health and disability. *The Lancet*, 369(9573), 1658-1663.
- Moreno-Angarita, M. (2010). Infancia, políticas y discapacidad. *Facultad de Medicina*. Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- Moreno-Figueroa, M. G., & Saldívar-Tanaka, E. (2016). 'We Are Not Racists, We Are Mexicans': Privilege, Nationalism and Post-Race Ideology in Mexico. *Critical Sociology*, 42(4-5), 515-533.
- Moreno, M.A., Kamenopoulou, L., & Grech, S. (2022). Colombia and the struggle for social justice. In A. Hodgkinson, Z. Brown (eds.), *Key issues in SEND and inclusion: International Perspectives across six continents* (pp.201-212). London: Routledge.
- Murphy-Graham, E., Montoya, T. et al. (2021). Examining school dropout among rural youth

- in Honduras: Evidence from a mixed-methods longitudinal study. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 82, 1023-29.
- Musengi, M., & Chireshe, R. (2012). Inclusion of deaf students in mainstream rural primary schools in Zimbabwe: Challenges and opportunities. *Studies of Tribes and Tribals*, 10(2), 107-116.
- Nascimento, E. L. (2007). *The sorcery of color: Identity, race, and gender in Brazil*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Nind, M. (2014). *What is Inclusive Research?* London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ngo, A. D., Brolan, C. et al. (2013). Voices from Vietnam: Experiences of children and youth with disabilities, and their families, from an Agent Orange affected rural region. *Disability & Society*, 28(7), 955-969.
- Nguyen, X.T., Mitchell, C. et al. (2015). Engaging girls with disabilities in Vietnam: making their voices count, *Disability & Society*, 30(5), 773-787.
- Norwich, B. (2014). Recognising value tensions that underlie problems in inclusive education, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 44(4), 495-510.
- OECD. (2016). Education in Colombia, Reviews of National Policies for Education. OECD Publishing: Paris. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264250604-en>
- Parveen, Z. and Batool, B. (2020). Value priorities among deaf and hearing adolescents in Pakistan: a comparative study. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(1), 50-57.
- Peters, S. and Oliver, L. A. (2009). Achieving quality and equity through inclusive education in an era of high-stakes testing. *Prospects*, 39(3), 265-279.
- Psacharopoulos, G., Rojas, C. and Velez, E. (1993). Achievement evaluation of Colombia's Escuela Nueva: Is multigrade the answer? *Comparative Education Review*, 37(3) 263–276.
- Radinger, T., Echazarra, A. et al. (2018). OECD reviews of school resources: Colombia 2018. OECD Publishing.
- Singal, N., Mahama-Salifu, E. et al. (2015). The impact of education in shaping lives: reflections of young people with disabilities in Ghana. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(9), 908-925.
- Singal, N. & Muthukrishna, N. (2014). Education, childhood and disability in countries of the South – Re-positioning the debates. *Childhood*, 21(3), 293–307.
- Singh, V., & Ghai, A. (2009). Notions of self: lived realities of children with disabilities, *Disability & Society*, 24(2), 129-145.
- Spivak, G. C. (1985). Three women's texts and a critique of imperialism. *Critical inquiry*, 12(1), 243-261.
- Sprunt, B., Hoq, M., Sharma, U. et al. (2017). Validating the UNICEF/Washington Group Child Functioning Module for Fijian schools to identify seeing, hearing and walking difficulties. *Disability and rehabilitation*, 1-11.
- Srivastava, M., de Boer, A. and Pijl, S. P. (2015). Inclusive education in developing countries: a closer look at its implementation in the last 10 years, *Educational Review*, 67(2), 179-

195.

- Tuhiwai-Smith, S. L. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Bloomsbury academic.
- UNESCO. (2015). Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all. Available at www.unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002331/233137E.pdf
- United Nations. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Treaty Series, 1577, 3.
- United Nations. (2006). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Treaty Series, 2515, 3. Available at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp>
- Villalobos, B., Carrasco, C. et al. (2017). Inclusión y violencia: Prevalencia de victimización entre pares en estudiantes que participan en Programas de Integración Escolar. *Revista Latinoamericana de Educación Inclusiva*, 8(2), 161-178.
- Wade, P. (2005). Rethinking 'Mestizaje': ideology and lived experience. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 37(2), 239-257.
- Wade, P., Scorer, J. and Aguil, I. (2019). *Cultures of anti-racism in Latin America and the Caribbean* (p. 232). London: University of London Press.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M.A. (1997). Photovoice: concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education Behaviour*, 24(3), 369-87.
- Wickenden, M., & Elphick, P. (2016). Don't forget us, we are here too! Listening to children and their families living in poverty. In Grech, S. and Soldatic, K. (eds.), *Disability in the Global South: The critical handbook* (pp.167-185). US: Springer publishing.