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 they are in terms of their specificities, interests, potential, and expectations to ensure their comprehensive development. The purpose of this study is to analyze the underlying assumptions in discourses regarding disability and inclusive education in classrooms while considering how they are perceived by teachers and counselors in two of Colombia’s departments, Cordoba and Atlantico, as well as their public education institutions. The study is grounded on a qualitative, hermeneutic analysis, conducted in 10 focus groups. The data gathered was 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. instructors believe disability is associated with a lack of something, incompleteness, or an impairment. 2. Guidance teachers view disability as potentiality. One of the main conclusions is that the conceptions of disability and inclusive education are barriers that manifest in the context of rural educational institutions. Therefore, they must be transformed systematically and gradually into affirmative actions.

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

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Introduction

One of the main social challenges of the 21st century is to guarantee inclusive and equitable quality in education while promoting learning opportunities for all (see for instance, UNESCO 2019, 2015). Such a challenge is the result of evolving understandings of personhood and education that recognize human development as diverse. These approaches see education as a right to which all children, adolescents, youth, and adults should be granted regardless of their conditions. Likewise, the concept of inclusion has placed emphasis on the need to reach all students, implying 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) constitutes 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, 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. This transformation also naturally requires updating curricular and educational processes in order to promote and identify students’ strengths and potentialities to ensure 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 narrow understanding of inclusion as solely related to students with disabilities to one that addresses possible exclusion based on 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 developing 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
In the context of inclusive education, there is a need to ensure coherence between educational beliefs and practices, as well as to respond to the different expressions of diversity among students. This study is an effort to understand the agents’ beliefs about disability and inclusive education in Colombia, aiming to address the challenges in public schools that affect the quality, equity, and relevance in education.

The study also highlights the importance of monitoring the epistemic object of inclusive education, which is the education itself. The following question emerges: what are the grounds for inclusive education? The understanding of inclusive education as an institutional, holistic, broad, public, political, social, and cultural environment is essential for its effective implementation.
difference is embraced and celebrated in a constant search for an inclusive educational culture as the basis for the structure of learning processes. Ainscow et al. (2006, p. 25) highlights, along the same lines, institutional capacities and associates 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 (2006); it states the need to ensure that children and youth reach their highest level of development by taking their diverse interests, potentialities, and needs into account in any educational, social, cultural or community context.

Broadening the conceptions of inclusive education and disability

As such, 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 while underlying their educational processes according to their own social, cultural, political, and educational realities, as well as their infrastructure. Correspondingly, acknowledging the perceptions that different agents in educational settings have concerns for disability as one of the expressions of human diversity would require thought behind new ways to reconfigure educational contexts.

On top of that, the aforementioned is required 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 with education policies, pedagogical practices brought by teachers, as well as 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 everything at the same time. Along these lines, the history of education in Colombia provides an example of how educational policies are interpreted, leading
to the creation of “inclusive classrooms” in 1992, which were ultimately recognized to be insufficient. This approach was then shifted to an ideal of “inclusive schools” with educational projects aimed at overcoming exclusion by reordering institutional dynamics (Ainscow, 2001) to finally fit what are known as “inclusive educational systems” that are constantly self-improving.

In this context, the Colombian National Ministry of Education has presented several self-assessment proposals through its Inclusion Index Document. Its first version (MEN, 2008) was directed to elementary and middle schools as it 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 (2018), these tools contribute towards 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 message 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/or enact education. From this perspective, education takes place in such a way that it responds to students’ personal, individual, social, and cultural characteristics to multiple ways of being (and being-in-the-world) in relationships that individuals establish with themselves, with others, and within their context. The Colombian 1991 Constitution recognizes and values diversity (Constitución Política de Colombia, 1991), and the text of the General Education Law 115 (Congreso de Colombia, 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 above mentioned document expresses the open and inclusive nature of institutions and their educational processes to embrace different groups without any restriction, including disabled people or 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 or a potential disability. 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 while 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 people 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; participation restrictions are problems in areas of life determined by a socio-cultural context.

In the context of education, it is not uncommon to classify students by attributing some abilities (or lack thereof) to them which, in turn, condition their expectations, and 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 how students are classified 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 families and socio-cultural contexts since the moment of birth. As a result, these perceptions become socially established constructs. 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 manifestation because it bears great importance on people’s lives while also responding to an ethical commitment that must be subjected to rigorous analysis and multimodal monitoring.

These considerations create the conditions to develop continuous critical reflection processes about the context of teaching practices, as well as in relation to the beliefs and theories that underlie 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, as well as innate abilities that human beings bring.
From this perspective, a 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. Nevertheless, everyday reality in educational institutions, when analyzed from the perspective of the discourses coming from agents within in it, shows the difficulties in assuming inclusive education as the basis for pedagogical work, and the expressed need by those agents themselves to develop the conceptual and practical tools to build a broader and 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.

Following these 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 'human development as an integral, ever-expanding process in which fundamental freedoms relate to each other' (p. 3). From this standpoint, the purpose is to strengthen educational systems so that they can overcome, 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 social and cultural contexts following a traditional difference which, as mentioned by Cardona (2006), 'fails to address itself to minority groups' (p. 28).

Other barriers may not affect the individual directly, but they do affect their participation and learning while also being 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 student may now have become invisible, as well as the conditions of their respective context, which must then be reshaped to favor
active, relevant participation in social life or, in other words, their own
development. As a result, 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 is of utmost importance.

Objective

Based on the previous considerations, a qualitative, hermeneutic, and
comprehensive study was proposed with the general objective to uncover the
current beliefs about disability and inclusive education generated in teacher and
school counselor discourses within Colombia’s departments of Cordoba and
Atlantico as well as their public educational institutions while considering possible
differences between their testimonies according to their respective professions.
Hence this study intends to serve as a resource for decision-making to support
actions that favor the construction of more inclusive communities responding to
the specificities, expectations, and educational needs of their students in the
explored regions.

Methods

The methodology adopted in this qualitative research project follows a
hermeneutic epistemic approach oriented at understanding and interpreting reality,
perceptions, intentions, actions, and meanings presented by individuals (Hamilton,
2016; Gibs, 2007) from different perspectives. In this case, the beliefs expressed
by educational agents are presented, as well as their connection to pedagogical
practice and their own desire manifested and disrupted by tensions generated in
discursive ordinances and imposed by education policy. This in turn translates into
a wealth of meanings and other forms of subjectivity that redefine school’s 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.

Participants

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 elementary and middle school levels. These two departments are part of the Caribbean region located in the north of Colombia, South America. Intentional sampling was used with 30 subjects participating as part of the category “school teacher” used as convenience criterion, while 15 participants were chosen with the criterion “school counselor,” giving a total of 45 participants.

Due to the conditions resulting from the health crisis brought about by the pandemic, interaction took place virtually through Zoom after 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.

Measures

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. The recordings were used to delimit the corpus with a collected sample of texts that were the result of the transcriptions on the 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 1 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**. Some questions from the questionnaire were purposefully selected for each category and the collected statements were arranged into analysis units, which were numbered to facilitate comparisons between analysis units that had been grouped according to the existence of similar elements between them.

**Table 1. Environment categories, and analysis units for the focus groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Analysis units for school teachers focus groups</th>
<th>Analysis units for school counselors focus groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Professional training</td>
<td>8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 30, 32, 39, 84, 104, 15, 20, 48, 72, 102, 50, 54, 64, 97, 110, 24, 52, 57, 75, 94, 106</td>
<td>58, 85, 35, 43, 59, 61, 80, 87, 100, 17, 18, 46, 69, 71, 79, 86, 95, 112, 71, 79, 86, 96, 38, 73, 95, 112, 33, 60, 82, 91, 25, 93, 90, 23, 51, 67, 78, 99, 63, 64, 97, 110, 24, 52, 57, 75, 94, 106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Beliefs about Inclusive Education</td>
<td>16, 77, 98, 26, 49, 62, 74, 65</td>
<td>103, 105, 109, 21, 29, 34, 41, 45, 114, 101, 88, 115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 teachers voices are identified with the letter (D) and School Counselors with the letter (O). They were duly assigned a number that corresponds to the organization of the textual discourse analysis revealed for every emerging meaning unit. Textual discourse analysis revealed hidden meanings within their discourses in relation to disability and inclusive education. Thus systematic, rigorous analysis of these statements derived from the possibility of accepting the coexistence of different outlooks which looked to understanding as a common path in a quest for truth.

**Results and discussion**

The analysis presented hereafter, based on the field work conducted, accounts for the influence of different beliefs about disability and inclusive education during educational processes that take place within Cordoba and Atlántico institutions. This is especially true when one considers how each person understands and implements actions associated with an ideal of inclusive
education, as presented in its field’s literature, represents the theories, beliefs, and cultural constructs in which perceptions are made.

The belief that disability is a deficiency

Through textual discourse analysis, different meaning units have been identified that cover significantly the idea that disability is associated with lacking something, incompleteness or with a personal difficulty related to an individual 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 to a more inclusive-centered outlook and 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 made 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 it, and not on students diversity, barriers restrict the potential to transcend to a holistic, unifying approach that would entail 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 practices are framed (Castro, 2018). 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 (with which) to do a specific activity” (D14).

These beliefs are present in the discourses of teachers and confirm the idea of disability, as 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 (World Health Organization), Disability and Health no longer defines disability only in terms of the individuals’ specific conditions, but presents it as a situation in which different characteristics interact with contextual circumstances.

The above statements 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 involving all agents of the educational system.

**Beliefs about disability that go beyond the idea of deficiency**

At the same time, interpretations pointed closer to an understanding of disability from a social, diverse-abilities approach, particularly among teachers and school counselors who saw disability as related to potentiality. This is a more positive approach to disability that conceives a capable individual. According to Gibbs (2007), it encourages 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, its acknowledgment could provide a fairer, more equitable, relevant educational response 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. The following supports the aforementioned:

- “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 it is a solitary, demanding task to receive students considered to have some form of disability as well as provide an education that responds to their specific needs and requirements. In other words, their positive beliefs are important but 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 state:

- “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).
- “At 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 and school counselors repeatedly mentioned that, while they are willing to accept children in their institutions and classrooms, they do not have the resources, time, or training to incorporate practices that respond to the specific requirements and needs of children with some form of disability. Gutiérrez and Martínez (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 for teachers in specific therapeutic support for students with disabilities' (9). Polo and Aparicio (2018) have also brought attention to the need to foster transformations in the beliefs, values, and culture of agents involved in favor of a more positive understanding and/or outlook on disability.

That said, school counselors confirm that some students may be close to exclusion due to a condition of poverty that further complicates a person’s 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 & Slee, 2000). In 2019, the National Administrative Department of Statistics (NADS) reported that ‘Colombia has an approximate population of 45,500,000 inhabitants with 7.2% believed to have some functional difficulty to conduct daily activities - approximately 3,500,000 people with disabilities. Likewise, NADS’s Report on Formal Education (NADS, 2020, p. 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 when compared to people without disabilities. Based on these figures, it is estimated that people with disabilities go through an average of 4.49 school years, while that number is 6.48 school years for people without them. 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 students with disabilities may develop, but not just as an inclusive practice. The challenge for educational systems is to reconfigure curricula, assessment, pre-service and in-service teacher education to foster transformation in comprehensive, transformative pedagogical practices.

Conclusions

The analysis and end results have uncovered the beliefs shared among different agents in the school community, confirming 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 implemented actions. The need to move to an understanding in which, following the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (Toolkit, 2014), the concept of disability is acknowledged as a product
of an effective and proactive effort of people with disabilities has become evident, particularly in relation to the barriers that everyday life of educational institutions in rural contexts.

School communities need to work along these same lines to strengthen positive, socially conscious perceptions of people with disabilities, specifically from a diverse-abilities approach, striving for their rights, autonomy, dignity, freedom, and diversity. On top of that, the results point 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, within the school context, teachers are meant to foster inclusion among children and youth through the use of epistemological, conceptual, pedagogical, and methodological tools. These tools are used to design and implement teaching proposals aimed at developing skills, creativity, abilities, and effective participation on behalf of students 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 this sense, this study highlights the importance of favoring professional development processes among teachers based on collaborative work, 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 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 teacher and school counselor’s beliefs who are ultimately responsible for guaranteeing quality inclusive, equitable education and promoting learning for all.

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.

Practical implications

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, as such, guarantee human rights, 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. The professional development and training programs should also be subject to improvement for teachers in different subject areas, their ability to strengthen their subject-area knowledge, and the extent of their curricular or pedagogical knowledge offered in inclusive, relevant education that values diversity and responds to the individual and/or student social abilities rather than only their difficulties.

From this perspective, this 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 students. In other words, supporting teachers’ work in their respective subject-matter while also in specific aspects to better deal with difference and work with families and the communities in the hope of transforming beliefs and attitudes regarding difference.

Limitations and future research directions

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, the 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. The main limitation of the study was to conduct the 10 focus groups virtually through the Zoom platform because of the global crisis generated by the pandemic.

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