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Labelling diversity: The pathologisation of difference in culturally and linguistically diverse students

Etiquetar la diversidad: la patologización de la diferencia en el alumnado con diversidad cultural y lingüística

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Abstract:

This ethnographic study was conducted in a school located in a multicultural neighbourhood of Barcelona. The study examines local factors contributing to the disproportionate placement of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education pathways. Drawing on participant observation, school document analysis, and interviews with twelve members of the team, including management, teachers, and social work and psychopedagogy professionals, this study examines how the categories of cultural difference and ability interact within institutional discourses and procedures. The findings reveal an ethnocentric notion of ability that pathologises cultural difference, framing it as a social marker of disability, and managing it through a form of "benevolent coloniality" that positions special education as a mechanism of restorative justice aimed at restoring educational opportunities. However, the study identifies, in the institution's use of 'special education,' an attempt to compensate for structural deficits and to meet the demands of a society driven by performance indicators—a society that tends to marginalise those who fail to meet its established standards.

Keywords: inclusive education; cultural diversity; disability; overrepresentation; coloniality; Disability Critical Race Theory; DefectCraft.

Resumen:

Este artículo expone una etnografía educativa llevada a cabo en una escuela situada de un barrio multicultural de Barcelona, cuyo propósito es examinar los factores locales que contribuyen a la representación desproporcionada del alumnado con diversidad cultural y lingüística en itinerarios de educación especial. A través de la observación participante, el análisis

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de documentos escolares y las entrevistas a doce miembros del equipo, directivo, docentes y profesionales del ámbito social y psicopedagógico, se analiza cómo las categorías de diferencia cultural y capacidad interactúan en los discursos y procedimientos institucionales. Los resultados revelan una concepción etnocéntrica de la capacidad que patologiza la diferencia cultural considerándola un marcador social de la discapacidad y gestionándola a través de una forma de «colonialidad benévola» que entiende la educación especial como un mecanismo de justicia restaurativa para devolver oportunidades educativas. Asimismo, el estudio identifica en el uso de la «educación especial» por parte de la institución, un intento de compensar las carencias estructurales y de responder a las exigencias de una sociedad basada en indicadores de rendimiento, que tiende a marginar a quienes no cumplen con los estándares establecidos.

Palabras clave: educación inclusiva; diversidad cultural; discapacidad; sobrerrepresentación; colonialidad; *Disability Critical Race Theory*; *DefectCraft*.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of inclusion has undergone a significant evolution, promoting a vision of education that not only values diversity as a resource, but also actively engages in the removal of systemic barriers to full access and participation for each individual. Indeed, current conceptions of inclusion are closely related to understandings of disability and its intersections with gender, 'race' and other minority statuses, which intertwine to give rise to unique and subjective experiences of disability (Cole, 2022; Sandoval & Waitoller, 2022; Rentzi, 2024).

However, despite policy developments in this area, the concrete translation of these policies into effective educational practices remains a complex challenge, especially with regard to culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and those with special educational needs (SEN). In this article, the term "culturally and linguistically diverse students" refers to students who speak a language other than Spanish, Basque, Catalan, Valencian or Galician at home, and whose cultural references differ from the dominant cultural norms. Recognising how language, culture and identity are intertwined, the term encompasses emergent bilingual students, as well as those who are already bilingual or multilingual (Masunungure & Maguvhe, 2024).

Studies in international contexts—mainly in the United States, the United Kingdom and other Western countries—indicate that these students are more likely to be identified as students with special educational needs, which contributes to their overrepresentation in special education programmes (Ogbu, 1978; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Cavendish *et al.*, 2014; Frederick & Shifrer, 2018; Ngo & Sundell, 2023).

In the US context, decades of research have shown that African American and Latino students are disproportionately identified as having special educational needs, especially in the categories of intellectual disability and emotional or behavioural disorders (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Bal *et al.*, 2014).

Similarly, in the Spanish context, a tendency has been observed to refer culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students to segregated educational support programmes or specific classrooms, thereby creating a mutable structure of inequality that more severely impacts male students from non-European countries, particularly Pakistan and the Dominican Republic (Castaño *et al.*, 2024; Chieppa *et al.*, 2024).

This phenomenon raises fundamental questions related to justice and equity in education systems, and highlights the urgent need to explore in depth the local processes that create

or maintain these inequalities in the school environment. In the specific case of Spain, no empirical studies have yet been conducted to explore whether and how these processes occur within educational institutions, and what their repercussions are. Therefore, the purpose of this research is, on the one hand, to analyse how the categories of cultural difference and ability are articulated in the procedures and discourses of educational institutions and, on the other hand, to examine the implications that this interrelationship has on the school experiences of CLD students. This study is grounded in the principles of *Disability Critical Race Theory* (DisCrit), which argues that notions of ability and race are co-constructed and underpinned by an ideology of normality (Annamma *et al.*, 2013a). This ideology evaluates people according to an idealised normative paradigm, such that those who deviate from that standard are classified as 'disabled people'.

From this perspective, 'race' and disability operate as interconnected and mutually constitutive categories, generating specific forms of exclusion and stigmatisation that cannot be understood separately. Indeed, 'race' does not exist independently of notions of ability, while the very construction of ability is deeply conditioned by racial ideologies (Crenshaw, 1991). These dimensions act in synergy, reinforcing and shaping conceptions of normality and whiteness (Love & Beneke, 2021).

To guide our research, we use the third principle of DisCrit in particular, which stresses how the categories of 'race' and ability, socially constructed and continuously (re)produced by hegemonic power structures (Annamma *et al.*, 2013a), have tangible material consequences. As stated by Annamma *et al.* (2013a): "DisCrit emphasises the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labelled as raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms" (p. 11). In other words, when an individual is perceived as divergent from the hegemonic paradigm, and that divergence is interpreted as a deficit, this gives rise to significant consequences that result in inequalities and exclusions.

Similarly, following Butler's feminist theorisations (1997a, 1997b), we do not interpret practices of producing difference as passive acts or reflections of a pre-existing reality, but rather as performative processes of subjectivation (Reh & Ricken, 2012). In this sense, we argue that these differences are created and strengthened through social, discursive and cultural practices which, when repeated, institute, sediment and 'perform' categories of difference, such as disability, highlighting how these are socially produced within relations of power and subordination.

Therefore, this approach shapes the present study as an educational ethnography with a post-structuralist matrix (Gordon *et al.*, 2007) that does not merely investigate which practices produce specific differences, but also asks which discourses can be considered relevant contexts pursuant to their role in the discursive representation of sedimented social differences.

1.1. Context

This study analyses a school located in a central neighbourhood of Barcelona characterised by a high immigrant density (51% of residents with non-Spanish citizenship) and a long history in the schooling of newly arrived students and the development of inclusive practices. Founded in 1935, it provides pre-school education (3-6 years) and primary education (6-12 years). Until the 1990s, it mainly welcomed students from Catalan or Spanish families, but as of the year 2000, with the increase in migratory flows, the composition changed drastically: in 2001 foreign students accounted for 32% and, in 2002, 63%.

This change in the composition of the student body reflects the demographic transformations of the Spanish territory, especially in those communities with greater employment opportunities and, therefore, with a more marked increase in the migrant population. Data from the Catalan education system confirm this trend: in 2000, 16,577 students with non-Spanish nationality were enrolled, and in 2023 the figure rose to 231,789 (INE, 2023), showing a sustained growth in cultural and linguistic diversity. The neighbourhood where the school is located has a complex social fabric, as a result of the interaction of historical, geographical and cultural factors. Like other neighbourhoods with high

social segregation, its population is mainly composed of working-class, low-income sectors and a significant presence of migrant and Roma population, which faces disadvantages compared to the native-born population in terms of literacy and schooling (Ocampo-Torrejón *et al.*, 2020; Rodríguez, 2024).

In order to address this reality, the school has set up language reception classrooms, split classes and small groups. It currently serves 430 students of 23 nationalities, with a particularly strong presence of students from the Indo-Pakistani area. More than 70% of students are CLD, and 30% of these students were born in Catalonia. The school has a reception classroom, a special education classroom and support staff from the Intensive Support Service for Inclusive Schooling (SIEI), who have, in turn, set up a specific classroom. It is aimed at students with special educational needs resulting from very significant limitations regarding both intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour.

In addition to teachers and educators, the school has a permanent social team in charge of supporting students and their families, as well as offering training to teachers and promoting collaborative work with social, health and community services. This team also promotes workshops on the Catalan language, IT, physical activity, leadership, and discussion spaces for mothers.

2. Methodology

The research was carried out during the 2022-23 school year and took place over five months, from February to June, with scheduled visits three days a week, previously agreed with the management team. The duration and frequency of the observations, conducted in classrooms, in the special education classroom, in the SIEI classroom, during the teachers' meeting, were planned to allow for a deep and nuanced understanding of the school dynamics, while fostering the creation of relationships of trust with participants and capturing the complexity of daily interactions within the school.

2.1. Data collection

In order to understand how the notions of ability and cultural difference are discussed and applied and what their implications are for the school experience of CLD students and those with SEN, in addition to the field diary, we analysed the school's educational project and its leadership project, and generated data through participant observation and in-depth interviews.

Observations were carried out both in the regular classrooms, during everyday activities, and also in the special education classroom and the classroom set up with the Intensive Support Service for Inclusive Schooling (SIEI).

In order to triangulate the data obtained through observation, beyond the school's educational project and the school's leadership project, interviews were conducted with different key actors: seven teachers, the special education teacher, the school principal, the psychopedagogue [similar to an educational psychologist], the social integration specialist, and the curriculum coordinator (table 1).

TABLE 1. Participant data

Participants	Age	Gender	Educational stage	Subject taught	Minutes of recording
Teacher 1	53	Male	Primary	Catalan Language	48.10
Teacher 2	44	Female	Early childhood education	Arts Education	59.02
Teacher 3	31	Female	Early childhood education	Intercommunication and Languages	66.03
Teacher 4	48	Female	Primary	Mathematics	62.04
Teacher 5	52	Male	Primary	Knowledge of the Natural Environment	52.03
Teacher 6	50	Female	Early childhood education	Special Education	56.39
Teacher 7	32	Female	Primary	Special Education	130.04
Special education teacher	47	Female	Early Childhood and Primary Education		41.29
Social integration specialist	50	Female			74.12
Curriculum coordinator	52	Female			36.55
Psychopedagogue	35	Male			52.58
School principal	56	Male			49.47

To guide the interviews, a tailored protocol was developed for each group of interviewees, based on an extensive review of the literature on the disproportionate representation of CLD students in special education (Skiba *et al.*, 2002). Three main themes emerged from this analysis which structured the interview process (Trundle, 2024): the procedures and discourses of the school institution regarding notions of cultural difference and ability; the organisation of the school; the relationship between dominant and subaltern cultures in the school context.

The interviews, with an average length of 60 minutes and 63 seconds, were recorded and later transcribed with the informed consent of the participants. Anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected was guaranteed. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of social research (BERA, 2018) and with the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the Autonomous University of Madrid.

2.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis (Dahal, 2025) involved a constant interchange between empirical and contextual data, focusing on the meaning attributed by actors to the situations experienced and the material observed, as well as the comparison of data.

The *Grounded Theory* approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guerrero Puerta, 2024) was used, favouring an approach that, through the use of ATLAS.ti 23.0 software, led to the construction of categories and subcategories derived from an inductive process, the objective of which was to interpret the evidence obtained during the fieldwork phase (Nilsson & Moström, 2025), identifying recurrent themes, emerging patterns, and variations (table 2).

TABLE 2. Categories, subcategories and codes

Categories	Subcategories
Procedures and discourses of the school institution with regard to the notions of ability and cultural difference (C1)	SEN identification process (C1.1) Potential of CLD students (C1.2) Challenges faced by CLD students (C1.3) Expectations regarding CLD students (C1.4)
Organisation of the secondary school (C2)	Reception process for CLD students (C2.1) Participatory spaces (C2.2) Teaching practices adopted (C2.3)
Relationship between the dominant culture and the subaltern culture (C3)	Interviewees' portrayal of other cultures (C3.1) Hidden curriculum (C3.2) Spaces and forms of empowerment for minority cultures (C3.3)

The concepts of the theoretical framework of *Disability Critical Race Theory* (DisCrit) were used as sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1969), that is, as heuristic tools to guide research questions and data interpretation without imposing pre-existing categorisations or conditioning the course of the research.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The pathologisation of difference

The educational setting under review is characterised by a high number of students diagnosed with ASD and language disorders. Some of the interviewees highlight the unusual link between the type of neighbourhood and the prevalence of certain diagnoses: "The issues we encounter in the classroom depend very much on the different areas of Barcelona [...] In Sarrià (an affluent neighbourhood), for example, there is a lot of talk about mental health issues [...] Here we often come across cases of autism spectrum disorder, learning difficulties and language disorders" (teacher 1).

The identification process in the autonomous community of Catalonia stipulates that, if teachers identify any difficulties in a student, following a period of observation, the student will be referred to the Psychopedagogical Advisory and Guidance Team (EAP), which will assess whether or not to request their placement in special educational programmes.

The comparison with the EAP—responsible for identifying and assessing students' special educational needs and formulating the schooling proposal within the centre—reveals critical issues in how students' special educational needs (SEN) are identified. "In this neighbourhood, we find that the support provided by the EAP is indeed a little more intensive than in other neighbourhoods. 'I'd be lying if I told you it was equitable" (psychopedagogue).

In particular, difficulties in using the language of instruction are often interpreted in a way that reinforces diagnoses of cognitive or neurological deficits. This perspective is clearly evident in the psychopedagogue's words:

A Spanish-speaking child would almost definitely obtain a much better result. I can tell you that in 98% of our tests, verbal comprehension drops significantly. The IQ score it gives you is always lower. They always fall short of their potential... compared to other cognitive processes. Always. And in order for it to indicate an intellectual disability, the average must be obtained. So...

The diagnostic methods used tend to label cultural and linguistic differences as disabilities and pathologise them. As the tests do not take into account language barriers or the need for cultural mediators during their administration, they demonstrate bias and a lack of cultural sensitivity:

Just think, the other day we were assessing a non-Spanish-speaking pre-school student using a test that doesn't require language skills. Well, it doesn't require language produced by the student, but it does require an understanding of it, and we were just discussing this with the psychologist and we thought, goodness! If this little girl had worked on the vocabulary beforehand in the classroom, her cognitive level would surely have been much higher, or her cognitive performance better, because we asked her, "Which animal stings?" And there were different animals... But maybe she just doesn't know what 'sting' means! (psychopedagogue).

Underestimating the impact of certain identity markers in diagnostic assessments appears to increase the risk of misclassifying the difficulties experienced by CLD students as a disability. These students are more often labelled as 'less able', not because of actual cognitive or behavioural deficits, but because of a biased assessment of skills—such as comprehension or literacy—which may be influenced by their different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

"Those children are obviously more affected by the perspective we have of the deficit, aren't they? When you factor in the whole language issue, the situation can be... Well, the thing is, teachers and educational teams are ultimately very much conditioned to assess things from a literacy perspective. We continue to follow practices that no longer meet students' overall needs" (psychopedagogue).

This process forms part of what Tefera *et al.* (2023) conceptualises as *DefectCraft*, a set of institutionalised practices that not only attribute shortcomings to individuals and groups

that are already marginalised, but also transform such deficits into intrinsic and naturalised traits. Thus, from this perspective, disability becomes a 'racialised' and 'biologised' operational category. In other words, these disparities are justified by stating that CLD students have deficits that need to be 'corrected'.

Our observations confirm these claims. Empirical data do indeed show that linguistic and behavioural difficulties are often interpreted as academic difficulties, which are subsequently naturalised (Bourdieu, 1966). In fact, in the special needs classroom, we observed a Moroccan boy in Year 2 of primary school who was exceptionally skilled at calculations and logic puzzles. The teacher tells us that "he doesn't have any problems, he's just lively and has a bit of trouble with Catalan" (teacher 7).

In this case, a language difficulty and 'lively' behaviour were regarded as deviations from the required standard, which led to the decision to provide 'special' support. This suggests that teachers require specific abilities that can be understood as universally valid expectations regarding abilities (Merl, 2021).

In this way, the concept of ability is negotiated in such a way that what is considered a valid ability is closely linked to predefined cultural and educational standards (for example, proficiency in the language of the dominant culture or behaviour that best conforms to it). When these standards are not met, they lead to the medicalisation of differences, viewed as a form of deviation that justifies special intervention. On another occasion, during a session in which the class was sitting in a circle with the teacher, we observed the behaviour of a restless child who stood up and walked away from the group with a defiant attitude. The teacher lets him go without following him and tells us, "He always does the same thing. He doesn't socialise with the other children, is often angry, and doesn't follow the class rules. We think he's hyperactive" (teacher 3).

This statement highlights a key point: being able to behave in the way that teachers expect students to behave is an (ableist) norm. When repeated requests fail to elicit the expected behaviour, teachers interpret such deviations as an indication of inadequate ability. Consequently, given this lack of ability, the pathologising label emerges as the preferred tool for interpreting the child's behaviour: "That's the problem: right now, we can't separate clinical considerations from educational ones, because we often need clinical labels to identify needs" (social integration specialist).

This statement encapsulates the emerging awareness of a process of pathologisation that stems from the need to 'govern' and to neutralise those differences that deviate from prevailing normative standards. In the context examined, this neutralisation of differences is also achieved through a 'colour-blind' approach, based on a deficit ideology that renders difference invisible in order to reinforce inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

In fact, most of those interviewed believe that the educational needs of CLD students are the same as those of students from the dominant culture. Consequently, by adopting a universalist paradigm that fails to acknowledge the specific barriers faced by CLD students, the role that cultural and historical contexts play in perpetuating inequalities is obscured (Tefera *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, by homogenising students' identities and obscuring difference, the latter comes to be regarded as immaterial, irrelevant or non-existent and, as a result, is excluded from the processes of identity formation (Bessone, 2021). Thus, by rendering differences invisible and failing to take into account the specific nature of the experiences associated with them, the denial of diversity contributes to the creation of student identities that are seemingly neutral and ungrounded. Consequently, when the 'other' identity becomes visible, it can only be interpreted in terms of deficiency, since differences and special educational needs will be perceived as the result of an intrinsic 'deficiency' on the part of the individual, rather than as the result of a series of social, educational and historical factors. In this way, DefectCraft processes transform cultural differences into a social marker of disability (Tefera *et al.*, 2023):

1. (1) CLD students are often perceived as deficient, with poor academic performance and/or behaviour that is difficult to manage;
2. (2) students with disabilities are perceived as academically weak and prone to disruptive behaviour, which would justify the need for specialised educational interventions to support their academic progress;
3. (3) Based on this reasoning, it follows that CLD students should be identified as having a disability and, consequently, referred to special education programmes.

3.2. Benevolent coloniality

Our research highlighted that the majority of school and education staff are aware that: "With a little more stimulation, these children would reach their full potential because, for example, it's true that sometimes a child does not initially have a developmental delay, but since they live in certain conditions..." (teacher 5).

However, the categorisation and inclusion processes currently in place appear to contradict what is stated in the school's documents.

On the surface, the emergence of a multicultural social reality within the school seems to have compelled it to formally acknowledge these differences, both in its policies and its visual identity as a school. For example, the walls of the corridor have been covered with pictures of non-European women who have played a leading role in civil rights struggles; some teachers have sought to recognise the students' cultural backgrounds by adapting the teaching materials. One teacher tells us:

> "It reminds me of an articulated figure we made [...] I based it on an Asian person, perhaps Indian, as they resemble most of the students we have [...] So that they understand that the world is very diverse and that they are no exception in the world they live in" (teacher 2).

However, this recognition does not necessarily involve an effective transformation of the organisational context and educational practices; rather, it takes the form of a strategy that reconciles an apparent openness to inclusion with the preservation of pre-existing hegemonic structures. In fact, these initiatives do not appear to have altered the tendency to view inclusion merely as a superficial acceptance of cultural diversity. This approach is limited to celebrations and activities such as festivals or sharing traditional foods, without cultures being meaningfully incorporated into the school curriculum or recognised as fundamental educational resources. As one teacher points out: "It is up to us to show them the local culture, because that is what they don't get to see. They already see theirs, we can all see theirs, because it makes up 70% of the class" (teacher 5).

Here, students' culture is equated with physical characteristics—something 'visible'—which is considered sufficient to understand and value 'otherness' (Powel & Menendian, 2016). However, this assertion conceals the risk of an assimilationist approach to education that treats the dominant culture as the standard to which all other cultures must conform. It also highlights the exclusionary language used by the teacher, which banishes certain cultures and experiences from the realm of the 'here'—that is, from the hegemonic context of the school. The statement "they already see theirs" suggests, in fact, that the identities and cultures of CLD students are perceived as alien and not integrated into the school's cultural system. Note also the narrow and problematic view of culture that underlies these professionals' assessments, which assumes that 'group culture' is monolithic, ahistorical and fossilised.

Specifically, it appears that the management of cultural differences within the school is shaped by what we define as a form of 'benevolent coloniality', which recognises the labelling process as a necessary protective mechanism for ensuring educational opportunities but which, ultimately, perpetuates the subjugation of groups through curricular, assessment and pedagogical practices that systematically restrict access to educational opportunities:

"Depending on the diagnosis, depending on the label given to the child, they will be allocated certain resources [...] to ensure the child does not fail" (teacher 4).

This label means that the student is directed to the special needs classroom, where educational activities considered necessary to bridge the gap with the rest of the class are carried out.

> "Here, every classroom has a very different mix of students; there are children with very, very different levels [...] And it's very difficult for a child [...] in Year 6 to actually be at Year 6 level [...] So, here at this school, it really does pay to have a separate special needs classroom because it allows us to address specific difficulties as and when they arise" (teacher 7).

Therefore, being in a specialised classroom offers the advantage of being able to reinforce skills and access teaching staff who provide personalised support and take account of individual learning pace. This form of benevolent colonial paternalism views special education as an opportunity, a tool for addressing systemic and structural shortcomings.

"We have children in the special needs classroom who don't have a formal assessment, because we use all our resources and make the most of them to ensure the children are doing well and can overcome their difficulties" (teacher 1).

Special education thus appears to become a form of restorative justice that helps to compensate for the disadvantages arising from the students' social and cultural background. However, the words of one teacher clearly reflect the demand for educational uniformity that lies behind the labelling of students and their confinement to a specific physical space:

> "I realise some people might say, 'This is segregating the group that knows less', but I'll say it anyway: here at this school, it works well [...] Being able to work on specific areas with eight children who need this support—because otherwise they can't make progress— is essential. I think the extra support we provide here, with teachers, in a class where one person explains things to the whole group and then another comes in and takes aside all the students who are struggling, in this particular case, I think it's very effective" (teacher 6).

Consequently, faced with an increasingly diverse student population, processes of pathologisation and disability classification enable the development of systems for categorising students into relatively homogeneous groups, thereby perpetuating the view of learning as an individual practice without bringing about any educational changes in terms of inclusion (Sandoval & Waitoller, 2022).

Special education thus becomes a tool for perpetuating educational inequalities, as evidenced by the psychopedagogue's account: "There are teachers who breathe a sigh of relief when there is an individualised support plan in place. Once they have been diagnosed, the child suddenly 'gets better'. It's like, I've got it, that's it. If he isn't learning as much, it's because of the deficit."

In this regard, our ethnographic observation shows that the category of 'special educational needs' serves two main functions (Merl, 2021). Firstly, it acts as a discursive resource that allows teachers to interpret students' behaviour as an expression of disability and, consequently, to attribute a meaning to it that relieves them of responsibility for implementing methodologies and knowledge. Secondly, it creates a distinction based on expectations: it shapes teachers' perceptions of their students' future abilities, leading them to regard these as either sufficient or insufficient (Weisser, 2005).

Benevolent coloniality is also reflected in the belief that, to counteract the difficulties and disadvantages of their social context, it is enough simply to ensure that students "have fun and learn what they can, and that's that" (teacher 2).

As another teacher remarks: "We put academic matters to one side, because our priority is students' well-being" (teacher 5).

Our interviews and classroom observations reveal a genuine proactive approach on the part of the school, which is truly committed to ensuring a supportive environment for students who are regarded as resilient despite their vulnerability. Every morning, the school welcomes families and students with music, and offers a weekly one-hour session for teachers and students to talk about how they're feeling, academic issues or any problems they may be having with getting along with others.

Many of the interviewees' comments reflect a genuine desire for inclusion and care. However, there is a risk that this could lead to lower academic expectations for CLD students. Furthermore, they reflect a paternalistic approach that views these students primarily as vulnerable individuals in need of protection, rather than recognising their right to a quality education.

This view, in turn, relieves teachers of the responsibility for developing the skills needed to manage cultural diversity effectively.

It is also clear from observations and discussions with education professionals that a lack of time and staff, as well as the pressure to achieve certain results, make it difficult to foster genuine inclusion: "What we're lacking is time; I mean, we're asking for more staff because we don't have time to prepare materials and organise ourselves properly" (teacher 6). "I'd prefer to see more staff hired so that I can spend time in the classroom and ensure that as many students as possible are included, because I don't want to lose sight of the fact that students belong to a specific environment" (teacher 7).

From this perspective, special education and the associated exclusionary practices should not be viewed merely as a means of categorising students, but also as an institutional strategy designed to compensate for the systemic shortcomings of which the school itself is a victim. In this regard, schools not only reflect, but also legitimise and perpetuate power structures that directly affect the distribution of opportunities and the way in which differences are conceptualised within the educational setting. Therefore, as Bourdieu (1966) points out, these dynamics can be understood as a structured and structuring framework that shapes both practices and perceptions within the education system.

In fact, the standard of a student's ability is not simply the result of individual teachers' expectations, but rather reflects a broader social construct that is deeply rooted in the education system itself and in the cultural fabric of our society. Conceptions of ability and disability are embedded in education policies, institutional regulations and academic programmes (Buchner *et al.*, 2015), functioning as mechanisms for inclusion or exclusion depending on prevailing criteria. Therefore, as Campbell (2009) argues, these expectations do not originate solely within the school setting, but are also shaped by the social values and norms that define which forms of learning, performance and development are considered legitimate and desirable within a given historical and cultural context.

4. Conclusions

Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework that integrates critical cultural and historical studies of disability (DefectCraft), DisCrit and feminist perspectives, we explore the local processes that may contribute to the disproportionate representation of CLD students in special education.

In the first section, the research highlighted how notions of cultural difference and ability interact within a school setting, and what dynamics of pathologisation arise when identities—situated at the intersection of multiple differences—are interpreted through the lens of deficit (Artiles, 2013; Annamma *et al.*, 2016).

These dynamics, rooted in various school practices and procedures—ranging from referrals to special education to low expectations of students and a colour-blind perspective—reveal that forms of oppression operate at the intersection between cultural

difference and disability, creating a social hierarchy in which cultural difference becomes a marker of disability and is subordinated to the normative standards of the dominant culture (Gillborn, 2015).

In this context, the diagnostic label functions as a device of subjectivation, a performative act that not only describes a condition but also produces subjectivities through practices and discourses that simultaneously generate power and subordination (Butler, 1997a).

In the second section, we analyse the implications of this labelling process for the school experiences of students who find themselves at the intersection between these multiple differences, and reveal how non-conforming subjectivities are pushed to the margins, confined to specific educational spaces that seek to present themselves as a form of 'restorative justice', providing educational opportunities to those who, in deviating from hegemonic norms, destabilise the normative centre. In this practice, we identify the way in which 'benevolent coloniality' hegemonically constructs 'otherness', ostensibly to offer it protection.

Therefore, in the context under consideration, special education not only categorises students, but also places them within a power structure that defines and positions them in relation to the normative standards of the dominant culture. Thus, referral to these specialised support services serves as one of the main mechanisms for the local implementation of power dynamics that not only perpetuate pre-existing inequalities, but also function as active mechanisms for consolidating a cultural hierarchy that excludes and marginalises non-conforming identities.

It is concluded that the implementation of special education, as well as the exclusionary practices associated with it, constitutes a mechanism that seeks to compensate for the structural shortcomings of the school system and to meet the demands of a society driven by performance indicators, which tends to marginalise those who do not conform to established normative standards (Slee, 2011; Artiles *et al.,* 2023).

5. Limitations

We acknowledge that there are a number of limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the results obtained. Firstly, the limited time frame makes it impossible to capture how institutional practices and student experiences have evolved over time. Consequently, it has not been possible to analyse whether, and to what extent, students manage to reintegrate into mainstream education over the years, or whether the categorisation applied tends to persist, with lasting effects on their educational and social trajectories. Secondly, focusing exclusively on the internal dynamics of a single school limits the consideration of structural factors, such as residential segregation, which influence the configuration of such categorisations.

Thirdly, the lack of involvement of the students and their families in the research process prevented us from gaining insight into their interpretations of the categorisation processes, as well as from understanding the counter-narratives they generate and the strategies they employ to counteract and resist the deficit-based perspective that these processes may entail.

Finally, there is a clear need to complement the ethnographic approach with quantitative analyses that enable the impact of the observed phenomena to be estimated, as well as their relationship with relevant socio-economic indicators, with a view to identifying systemic patterns of marginalisation and exclusion in educational trajectories.

Contributions

Maria-Antonietta Chieppa. Investigation, methodology, writing - original draft.

Marta Sandoval-Mena. Writing - review & editing, data validation, supervision.

Alfredo J. Artiles. Writing - review & editing, supervision.

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