Access and Equity for Students with Dis/abilities in Colombian Higher Education

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Abstract: Efforts to increase access to higher education in Colombia have resulted in increased enrollment across the country and an expansion of the postsecondary education sector. National legislation such as the 1994 *Ley 115* guarantees individuals with disabilities the right to an inclusive public education, and in 2011, Colombia also adopted and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Many sociopolitical and pedagogical obstacles remain, however, that make it difficult for students with disabilities to access higher education. In Colombia, only 1.7% of

students with disabilities graduate from a university setting (Fundación Saldarriaga-Concha, 2018). This article draws from data collected for a larger mixed methods study exploring the influence of different social identities on students' experiences at a private university system in Colombia; here we focus specifically on the experiences of students with disabilities. We were guided by critical disabilities studies in education (DSE) as a theoretical framework for conceptualizing disability in educational settings and explored how the experiences of dis/abled students at Dosantos University reflect institutional policy commitments. Data from first-person narratives illustrate that students with disabilities face discrimination inside educational spaces that reflect broader limited societal understandings of dis/ability, but that students still persisted. Participants documented the strategies they use to successfully access postsecondary opportunity, and an analysis of their experiences illuminates ways that universities can reduce obstacles in this process.
Keywords: higher education; critical disability studies; inclusive education

Acceso y equidad para estudiantes con dis/capacidad en la educación superior colombiana

Resumen: Los esfuerzos para aumentar el acceso a la educación superior en Colombia han dado como resultado un incremento de la matrícula en todo el país y una expansión del sector de la educación pos - secundaria. La legislación nacional como la Ley General de Educación 115 de 1994 garantiza a las personas con discapacidad el derecho a una educación pública inclusiva. En 2011, Colombia también adoptó y ratificó la Convención sobre los Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad. Sin embargo, persisten muchos obstáculos sociopolíticos y pedagógicos que dificultan el acceso de los estudiantes con discapacidad a la educación superior. En Colombia, solo el 1,7% de los estudiantes con discapacidad se gradúan de un entorno universitario (Fundación Saldarriaga-Concha, 2018). Este artículo se basa en datos recopilados desde un estudio más amplio de métodos mixtos, que explora la influencia de las diferentes identidades sociales, en las experiencias de los estudiantes en una universidad privada en Colombia; aquí nos enfocamos específicamente en las experiencias de estudiantes con discapacidades. La investigación fue guiada por los estudios críticos de la discapacidad en educación como marco teórico para conceptualizar la discapacidad en entornos educativos y exploró cómo las experiencias de los estudiantes con discapacidad en la Universidad Dosantos reflejan los comprimisos políticos institucionales. Los datos de las narrativas en primera persona evidencian que los estudiantes con discapacidad enfrentan discriminación dentro de los espacios educativos, lo que refleja una comprensión social ampliamente limitada de la dis/capacidad, pero los estudiantes aún persistieron. Los participantes documentaron las estrategias que utilizan para acceder con éxito a oportunidades pos - secundarias, y el análisis de sus experiencias orienta las formas en que las universidades pueden reducir los obstáculos en este proceso.
Palabras clave: educación superior; estudios críticos en discapacidad; educación inclusiva

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Access and Equity for Students with Dis/abilities in Colombian Higher Education Introduction

Students with disabilities often struggle in accessing higher educational spaces not because of personal limitations but because of sociopolitical constraints that limit opportunity. Institutional infrastructure, policies, and perceptions towards disabled people/persons with disabilities have created a history of excluding students with disabilities in educational spaces in many parts of Latin America. In Colombia, national legislation such as the *Ley 115* (Law 115) of 1994 guarantees individuals with disabilities the right to an inclusive public education in Colombian society. This same law also impacts students with disabilities once they enter *educación superior* (higher education). This piece of legislation outlines that formal education is to be granted to all individuals in Colombian society, regardless of ethnic group, physical limitations, exceptional capacities, and persons who require social rehabilitation (Ley 115, 1994).

However, even with legislation and a commitment toward inclusive priorities, students with disabilities have a difficult time accessing postsecondary education spaces in Colombia. Inaccessible educational spaces—both conceptually and physically—can be inferred through staggeringly low enrollment numbers, program and degree completion, and students' narratives about their experiences in higher education. Additionally, education statistics for students with disabilities are not easily accessible. The Saldarriaga-Concha foundation reported that in 2016, 15% of the Colombian population had a disability, but only 9.6% of this number were able to access higher education (Correa-Montoya & Castro-Martinez, 2016). This same source reports that 24.7% of disabled Colombians have not completed any level of education, and that 24.1% are categorized as functionally illiterate. While the *Ley 115* has attempted to create access and equity for persons with disabilities in Colombia, this lack of information indicates that students with disabilities are still not acknowledged as equally valid beings in higher educational spaces.

Throughout this paper, we use person-first language (people/persons with disabilities) as well as identity first language (disabled people/persons) when speaking about participants. Particularly in the United States, APA Division 22 has adopted and endorsed person-first language and perspectives in an effort to reduce stigma, stereotyping, and prejudice toward people with disabilities (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). However, there are also calls from within the disability rights

community and in disability studies to employ identity-first language when speaking or referring to disabled people (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Figueroa and Hernández-Saca (2021) employ the term "dis/ability" to critique the term as constructed "according to the societal norm of 'able-bodiedness'" and as a "push back against a standard of 'ability'" (p. 2). Disabilities studies scholars assert that using identity-first language allows individuals and groups to claim disability as fact and reframe as a point of pride (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Asserting disability indicates valuing disability, and the disabled person chooses his or her identity instead of allowing others to do so (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). We adhere to APA recommendations of using person-first language when referring to students with disabilities; however, we also use identity-first language (dis/abled) to highlight the normative contexts in which students live and study. We also use specific terms when speaking of or referring to a participant who has chosen to claim the disability as part of their identity (i.e. Deaf, Autistic).

Our research explored how the experiences of dis/abled students at Dosantos University[1] reflect institutional policy commitments through a critical disability studies in education theoretical framework which posits that a social understanding of disability challenges ways the medical model has defined disability as a "deficit" and instead attempts to illuminate narratives surrounding disabled persons' experiences. In our study, ten university students with a variety of dis/abilities participated in focus group interviews through which they shared their insights and experiences about attending university. The qualitative analysis process focused on how contextual factors, including policy decisions, create limitations for students by narrowly constructing typicality, rather than locating (mis)understandings of disability as a limiting factor for individuals. Using critical DSE, we sought to understand how social and cultural understandings of disability impact higher education experiences in Colombia.

Study Context

Efforts to increase access to higher education in Colombia have resulted in increased enrollment across the country and an expansion of the postsecondary education sector. Colombia's high school graduation rates increased from 20% in the 1990s to 47% in the late 2000s (Camacho et al., 2017). Due to this increase in high school graduation, there was a need to expand and increase postsecondary programs across the country. From 2001-2011, the number of postsecondary programs across Colombia nearly doubled from 3,600 to 6,276 (Camacho et al., 2017). However, concerns about the quality and capacity of these new programs arise when classroom spaces are overcrowded, and faculty are unable to provide necessary and adequate services to students (Camacho et al., 2017). In Colombia there are three types of postsecondary institutions that prepare students for professional careers in four- or five-year programs: private universities, large public universities, and smaller low cost private/public universities (Patrinos, 1990). In addition, a network of two-year public institutions known as *Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje* (SENA) provide technical and technological training. Over the last few decades, public and private universities in Colombia have switched to a U.S. research model of measuring quality of an institution, adopting scientific impact, student performance, and employability as indicators (Cayon et al., 2017). These measures are associated with efforts to amplify rigor and reputation of Colombian higher education

institutions, along with other programs specifically designed to increase opportunities for enrollment to students from underserved populations.

In their study of higher education governmental programs in Colombia, Pineda and Celis (2017) examined the student loan program *Ser Pilo Paga* (*SPP*) and university ranking systems *Modelo de Indicadores de Desempeño de la Educación Superior* (*Mide*). They analyzed the discourse around these reforms in press releases, government documents, and related documents from international organizations. They found that the loan program is promoted by the World Bank and that the ranking system is a direct imitation of broader institutional global culture (Pineda & Celis, 2017). The use of words such as "best" and "quality" directly coincide with an entrepreneurial university, which contrasts with local ideals of equity and inclusion in Latin American universities. The *SPP* program was developed in Colombia based on educational credit policy models implemented in other parts of the world, such as the US, Sweden, and New Zealand (Pineda & Celis, 2017). Students who benefit from the *SPP* program in Colombia generally come from a lower socio-economic background but perform well academically and are deemed "worthy" of educational credit programs. These programs are based in neoliberal assumptions of meritocracy that define academic capacity and promise in limited ways, and by promoting enrollment in private universities may also be detrimental to public education. The neoliberal logics that underlie such policies also rely on notions of competitiveness that are specifically harmful to people with disabilities. Criticisms of *SPP* claim that these loans may be popular in the short term, but they have limited effects of expanding university quotas in the long term (Pineda & Celis, 2017). Regardless of approach, efforts to increase access to higher education for the most vulnerable populations in Colombia are greatly needed.

These efforts to expand access have somewhat addressed dis/ability. National legislation such as the 1994 *Ley 115* guarantees individuals with disabilities the right to an inclusive public education, and in 2011, Colombia also adopted and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), indicating a move toward international inclusive priorities (Kamenopoulou, 2018). Colombia has recently enacted policy that addresses special educational needs in K-12 Colombian public schools. As outlined in *Decreto 1421 de 2017*, all schools must establish a *Plan Individual de Ajustes Razonables*—PIAR (Individual Plan of Reasonable Adjustments) which outlines all necessary curriculum and infrastructure changes to guarantee inclusive education for students with disabilities (Radinger et. al., 2018). Additionally, schools must accept students with special needs and make the necessary and appropriate accommodations. While legislation is in place so that students with disabilities can attend schools, growing research indicates that Colombia does not meet the curricular and physical modifications students with disabilities require to continue their educational career (Radinger et. al., 2018). Many sociopolitical and pedagogical obstacles remain that make it difficult for students with disabilities to access higher education. In Colombia, students with disabilities can access specific lines of public educational support but only 1.7% of students with disabilities graduate from a university setting (Fundación Saldarriaga-Concha, 2018).

Literature Review

Limitations of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education appears to be at the forefront for policymakers as it relates to students in educational spaces, suggesting a policy desire exists to guarantee individuals with disabilities rights to an education that is inclusive and appropriate as they enter educational institutions (Radinger et. al., 2018). In many instances, however, inclusion in education has meant that students with disabilities are physically included in general education settings, but educational practices have not changed to be able to equitably teach and serve these students in a manner that allows them to reach their full

capacities. In a comparative study of Italy and the US, Ferri (2015) explained that a barrier in inclusive education is not the failure of implementation of the law, but instead "the failure of these laws to disrupt the medical or deficit models of disability that remain embedded within current educational reforms" (p. 15). If existing policies were established prior to the adoption of a social model of disability and remain unchanged, they can negatively impact social perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors toward people with disabilities even while promoting "inclusion" (Ferri, 2015). Similarly, in their research of disability policy in higher education in Canada, Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) also found that higher education institutions use a medical framework of disability to implement policies and practices.

For example, research shows that special education teachers struggle to provide support inside inclusive classroom spaces. Teachers in the US have described how the experience of "pushing" into an inclusive classroom does not indicate they are welcomed in that space if once inside the classroom, special education teachers are not regarded as equal partners with the general teacher and play a more subordinate role (Ferri, 2015). While legislation is in place to help mitigate the accessibility and equity gap for individuals with disabilities in higher education, additional policy for inclusive education that addresses diverse and unique student needs and expands teacher preparation programs is needed. In her research of inclusive education policies for students with disabilities, Ochoa (2016) explains that teachers are expected and mandated to teach a variety of needs in a class but often do not have "the resources or knowledge to engage disabled students" (p. 80). She explains that educational institutions in Colombia are not prepared to adequately serve students with disabilities and points to a lack of resources and training or preparation (Ochoa, 2016).

Similarly, Molina (2010) researched Colombia's approach towards inclusive education in higher education for students with disabilities and found similar conclusions as Ferri (2015). She found that while Colombia has enacted federal legislation in education for students with disabilities, "*las acciones en el nivel superior o universitario son casi nulas y que no todas las instituciones se encuentran comprometidas con la inclusión educativa de las personas con discapacidad*" (the actions at the university level are non-existent and not all institutions are committed to inclusive education for students with disabilities; Molina, 2010, p. 110). Existing educational policy that addresses inclusive education for students with disabilities needs to be revisited and amended to better support and service students with diverse learning needs.

Self-Advocacy and Undue Burdens

Previous research on the experience of students with disabilities in higher education has identified how they engage in self-advocacy and resistance behaviors in order to navigate institutional climates that are often hostile or unwelcoming. Some studies have also focused on the role of physical and policy infrastructures in increasing or constraining access and opportunities in educational settings. In public postsecondary institutions across the U.S., for example, students with disabilities must first self-disclose their disability to the appropriate university office in order to receive accommodations and equitable services (Singh, 2019). This contrasts with the approach to K-12 education, in which students with disabilities are identified, assessed, and given services under federal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which requires public K-12 education settings to draft and implement an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and assure a Free Appropriate Public Education for any student diagnosed with disabilities. When students have reached higher education institutions, the responsibility in advocating and disclosing their disability shifts to the individual (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). While there may be a multitude of reasons why students with disabilities choose to not self-disclose their disability in higher education

institutions, many policies that govern post-secondary education systems do not mandate college education systems to locate students with disabilities either (Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

Research suggests a positive connection between a student's disclosure of their disability and self-determination skills (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Trainor, 2008). Self-determination skills are the ability to advocate for one's needs based on an understanding of one's disability and how it impacts learning (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Self-determination skills can help students with disabilities better advocate for the accommodations and services in higher education, but institutions are still accountable for ensuring that they are helping provide these necessary supports. Much of this literature, however, is not specific to Latin American higher education and sociopolitical contexts.

Additionally, physical barriers on and around higher education campuses also contribute to inaccessible classroom spaces, which in turn, forces students with disabilities to engage in self-advocacy and resistance behaviors. In one study, a student who uses a wheelchair to navigate campus shared that they had an exam in a building without elevators; rather than ask for help, the student decided to carry their wheelchair up a long set of stairs (Marshak et. al., 2010). Similarly, Hurtado and Agredo's (2012) case study research of university wheelchair users in Santiago de Cali, Colombia found that physical environments were not inclusive for students with wheelchairs. They found that the majority of their participants had inadequate postures "due to the adaptation to the university desk, which are designed for another type of population" (p. 547).

Existing research documents the impact of policies and practices in creating challenges for dis/abled students in higher education contexts. This study is one contribution to efforts to address these issues in Latin American contexts, and particularly in the wake of significant changes to the higher education policy landscape in Colombia.

Theoretical Framework

A critical approach to disabilities studies in education (DSE) was used as a theoretical framework for conceptualizing disability in educational settings in this study. Through the lens of DSE, disability is not solely defined through a medical perspective, but instead understood as also a social construct—continuously changing and redefining parameters by which atypical individuals may or may not be able to access power. Baglieri et. al. (2010) explain that DSE situates "disability" through human expectations and interactions in a social context, indicating that disability is fluid and can change over time. Additionally, societal interpretations of ability are also influenced by racial constructions and intersections of race and ability, further minoritizing dis/abled students of color (Annamma et al., 2013). In their proposal of a combined disabilities study and critical race theory perspective to examine special education, Annamma et al. (2013) recognize that "racism and ableism are normalizing processes that are interconnected and collusive" and operate in distinct ways in particular societal contexts (p. 6). In parts of the world shaped intensely by colonial inequities such as the Americas, "the category of disability is built on a Western paradigm that centers individualism, meritocracy, productivity, and rationality as the core standards of human development and able-bodiedness" (Figueroa & Hernández-Saca, 2021, p. 1). Our adoption of critical DSE to examine student experience in the Colombian context is therefore informed by theories that explicitly identify the impact of racialization and colonization on constructing ideas of what capacities are seen as normal, typical, or abled.

A key tenet of DSE explains that physical spaces, environments, and practices need to be changed to help students with disabilities access education, rather than requiring individuals to engage in additional labor to adapt to inaccessible spaces. This shifts the responsibility from the individual to the environment and proposes that society's cultural practices and ideologies reject the

deficit model of disability (Gabel, 2010). This approach views disability as an equally valid way of being and existing in a society (Ferri, 2015). In shifting cultural ideas and attitudes toward dis/abled people, DSE assumes individual competence and promotes full and meaningful access to all areas of society for individuals with disabilities. In educational spaces, infrastructure and curricular decisions are key areas of policy-making that directly impact student experience.

A DSE framework also privileges and highlights the voices of people/students with disabilities and centers their perspectives in conversations about policy reform and changes in infrastructure (Gabel, 2010). In order to create lasting and meaningful changes to achieve equity in the lives of people/students with disabilities in our society, their interests, voices, experiences, and expertise need to be regarded. Because teaching practices and policies are informed by cultural beliefs about deficits and differences (Valente et al. 2016), it is the responsibility of institutional authorities to confront these limiting assumptions and recognize the contributions of dis/abled students and broader communities. These interrogations must take into account how binary assumptions of normal/abnormal and abled/disabled are further shaped by limiting understandings of race (Annamma et al., 2013).

Throughout this research, we employed critical DSE to center the experiences of students with disabilities navigating higher educational institutions in Colombia. Our approach acknowledges the complexities of identity beyond dis/ability, how specific histories and policies construct situated understandings of normal, and that social oppressions intersect to particularly marginalize and minoritize certain individuals. We aim to privilege student voices in conversations about their experiences navigating postsecondary institutions, reject deficit models of disability, and contextualize environmental limitations and how they can be changed/altered so that dis/abled students can navigate these spaces in a truly inclusive manner. In this research we also aim to contribute to research on the impact of higher education policy on students experiences in Latin America.

Study Setting

The data collected for this research took place in Colombia at a private university system, which we refer to by the pseudonym "Dosantos University." We gathered data from students who attended the main location in the capital city and a smaller campus in an exurban area. Dosantos University System in Colombia was founded by a Catholic priest in 1957. Initially, Father Dosantos founded this system as a housing solution for underserved families. However, he wanted Dosantos to be much more than just a housing solution for some, and wanted to make education, art, and employment opportunities accessible for underprivileged populations. With this intention in mind, Dosantos University System began to develop and expand its reach throughout the years and became a safe educational space for underserved children in Bogotá, Colombia. Father Dosantos knew he wanted to establish a university modeled after the Catholic faith with the idea that all children deserve an education. After milestones from the educational programs at this first campus, they were granted official university status in 1990 and opened their doors in 1992 to students in Bogotá. From this model, Dosantos University System developed with many campuses around the country.

Colombia is the fifth largest country in South America, and providing access to education for individuals in more rural areas has been a consistent problem (Kamenopoulou, 2018). Armed conflict, lack of government presence, and lack of resources in more rural areas of Colombia contribute to inequalities and accessibility issues to quality education programs for individuals in these areas. For example, although located just 16 miles outside of Bogotá, the secondary campus at

which we collected data is significantly under-resourced (O'Donnell, 2017). Dosantos University System aims to serve and provide educational opportunities to students who have historically been excluded from postsecondary institutions because of factors such as disability, socio-economic status, and/or accessibility to a campus. The Colombian population is divided into six "*estratos*," or socioeconomic classes, with 1 being lowest and 6 highest. According to Dosantos University's 2019 data, students from *estratos* 1-3 comprised 97% of the total student population at Dosantos University (Informe de Gestion, 2019). These data indicate the university is successful at reaching students from poor backgrounds, but numbers for students with dis/ability remain extremely low. At the main campus in 2020, a total of 36 disabled students were enrolled, with reported conditions ranging from learning disabilities to physical impairments.

Methods

This article draws from data collected for a larger mixed methods study exploring the impact of individual and collective identities on the experiences of Colombian college students at Dosantos University, with the intention of guiding changes in student affairs practices and policies. The overall study adopted intersectionality (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991) as a guiding framework, acknowledging that overlapping social oppressions such as sexism, classism, and ableism place certain individuals in more marginalized positions not due to their personal identities but due to structural inequities. Quantitative data collected via survey indicated that approximately 30 percent of all respondents who identified as students with disabilities reported experiencing discrimination based on ability in Colombia in general. These students reported lower levels of discrimination at their Dosantos campuses (17.9% at the main campus and 14.3% outside the city), but these numbers reflect a need for greater attention to the needs of this population.

In this article we focus specifically on the experiences of students with disabilities, who comprise approximately 1.5% of the total student body at the two campuses included in this study. We employed a qualitative research approach that sought to allow for first-person exploration of phenomena (Maxwell, 2013) and gathered data through focus groups that allowed for participants' experiences and conversation to inform and add to one another (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In an effort to prioritize the perspectives of students from minoritized groups, the overall study oversampled from these groups. Approximately 10% of all focus group participants identified as dis/abled. The focused analysis guiding this article was driven by the following research questions: What are the experiences of students with disabilities navigating Dosantos institutions? How are these experiences related to institutional efforts and policies to provide equitable access to education for all students?

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected in-person from students at two campuses of the Dosantos University System, with the approval of all appropriate IRB and research ethics boards. The research team gathered information from semi-structured focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Powell and Single (1996) define a focus group as a group of participants selected by the researchers to discuss the topic of research. Focus groups are a way to gather substantial data in a comfortable and friendly atmosphere. The focus groups for this research consisted of no more than 10 participants, which provided for more fluid conversations and rich data. The conversations that took place during these focus groups opened up personal narratives and experiences about the realities of being a student with a disability attending Dosantos University. A recruitment survey was sent to all students enrolled at the two campuses where the research was conducted. In the survey, the students self-

identified and indicated meeting predetermined criteria to be a part of the focus groups. The participants in the two focus groups focused on dis/ability disclosed on the preliminary survey that they were at least 18 years old, were first-year students at the university, and were registered with the office of student services as a student with a disability. All data were collected in October 2019.

The focus groups allowed us to collect data from multiple participants simultaneously (Onwuegbuzie et. al., 2009) and were conducted exclusively in Spanish. At the beginning of the focus group, we read a disclosure statement to the participants approved by Dosantos University's ethics and research board. Juanita and Allison helped develop the pre-determined questions that guided each focus group, while Adalia and Juanita were co-facilitators of the conversations. Juanita and Allison participated in the ongoing analysis of all data for the larger project, and Adalia was involved in the analysis for the focus group data presented in this article. The focus group interviews were digitally recorded on audio devices. Adalia transcribed the recordings for the focus groups specific to dis/ability and removed identifiers from the data, including by assigning participants pseudonyms. Recordings were transcribed and analyzed in the original Spanish. The online software program Dedoose (Dedoose, 2020) was used to code the data using an iterative analysis process that looked for similar patterns, identified unique occurrences, and applied theoretical concepts (Maxwell, 2013). Adalia served as primary coder for these data, while Juanita and Allison reviewed and discussed the final interpretations.

Researcher Positionality

The three authors of this manuscript are members of a larger international research team, comprised of students, faculty, and student affairs professionals at the Dosantos university system in Colombia and two universities in the United States. Adalia is a K-12 special education teacher in a large urban district in Southern California whose parents emigrated from Colombia. She was a master's student at the time of the research and was invited to participate in the study based on her professional expertise and personal experiences. Juanita is a professor at an educational research center on the Dosantos main campus with extensive experience supporting the needs of students with disabilities. Allison is a professor of education at a university in southern California who formerly lived in Colombia and taught at a private *colegio*.

As educators we acknowledge that we are implementers of institutional policies and practices and have a responsibility to examine them for equitable outcomes. Sharing classroom spaces with students with diverse needs, we have experienced some of the effects of inadequate policy-making inside these spaces. In this research, our goal was to document and pay attention to the experiences and voices of students with dis/abilities as they navigate higher educational spaces. Their experiences and voices are valid and can help inform institutions about their shortcomings and harmful practices in educational spaces and contribute to positive changes to policy and practice.

Participants

We collected data from a total of 10 students across the two campuses. From the main campus in the capital city, there were eight participants with a variety of disabilities including a physical impairment, left side paralysis of the body, and several Deaf students. At the campus outside the city, there were two participants, one student who has Autism and one with a visual impairment. All participants selected the terminology they used to describe their disabilities. Table 1 provides an overview of all 10 participants.

Table 1

Participant Overview

Pseudonym	Education Level	Campus	Dis/ability
Apollo	First Year	Main City	Left side paralysis
Juan	First Year	Main City	Hyperactivity Disorder
Pedro	First Year	Exurban	Autism
Andrés	First Year	Exurban	Visually Impaired
Mia	First Year	Main City	Deaf
Santiago	First Year	Main City	Deaf
Henderson	First Year	Main City	Deaf
Lady	First Year	Main City	Physical Impairment
Wendy	First Year	Main City	Deaf
Sofia	First Year	Main City	Deaf

Findings

Through our lens of critical DSE, we examined how participants made sense of their identities as students with dis/abilities in a broader social context. Participants documented the strategies they used to successfully access postsecondary opportunity at Dosantos University, but their first-person narratives also illustrate how students with disabilities face discrimination both inside educational spaces and in Colombia society. In this section we include direct quotations in italics, presenting participants' contributions in the original Spanish followed by English translations.

Understanding Disability as Individual and Social Identity

Pervasive normative ableist ideologies in Colombia characterize the conditions under which students came to have a positive or negative sense of themselves as dis/abled. Some students referenced their disability as an essential part of their identity, such as Pedro who when asked "What is something important you think others should know about you?" responded:

Importante— yo soy un hombre autista. Siempre he sido autista desde que nací, toda mi vida he sido autista.

(Important—I am an Autistic man. I have been Autistic since I was born, I've been Autistic my entire life.)

Pedro also noted, however, that: *Para aceptar a un hombre autista como yo no ha sido nada fácil. (It's not an easy thing to accept someone who is Autistic).*

For many students, recognition in social settings was tied to developing a sense of feeling accepted in educational settings or among their families. This desire for acceptance sometimes led them to prioritize the approval and comfort of others rather than developing a strong sense of themselves as a person with a disability. Lady described:

> *Lo que más me identifica a mí son las ganas de salir adelante pues primero por mi familia que siempre es mi primer apoyo que uno tiene y como demostrarle al mundo que a pesar que no tengo [capacidades] como que yo puedo así me toque un proceso más lento.*
>
> (The thing that most characterizes me is my desire to move forward; first for my family, who is always my primary support, and [also] to show the world that although I don't have the same capacities, I can do it a bit slower).

Henderson recalled:

> *El primer semestre todos me miraban a mí y la tecnología y como que tenían miedo por la discapacidad y yo pensaba no, bien, yo puedo realizar, no hay problema.*
>
> (The first semester everyone looked at me and my technology and it was like they were afraid of the disability, and I thought 'no, it's okay, I can do it, there's no problem')

Several students described how their time in school was strongly associated with feelings of having been rejected or misunderstood in ways that reflected broader social assumptions. For these students, educational settings were significant sites of personal meaning making about individual and group identities. When asked about his experiences with discrimination in Colombia, Andrés focused on his experience in high school:

> *A uno lo ignoraban por tener otra condición diferente al de una persona normal entonces a mí me tocó retirarme...Simplemente por ser una persona con discapacidad visual. De ahí perdí un año porque ¿yo por qué iba a volver? Y de resto, después cuando me metí al colegio del cual me gradué todos han sido colaboradores.*
>
> (Other people ignore you for having a different condition than 'normal' people, and therefore I had to withdraw, just for being a person with a visual impairment. I lost a year because I thought 'why should I return?' When I later returned, I put myself through school and graduated, all without the help of others.)

For other students, initial experiences of being stigmatized as a person with a disability with peer groups or community settings motivated them to want to show that with extra effort they could be considered equal to others. These responses reflect acknowledgment of disability as a primary social identity, but with the goal of being seen as a person with additional capacities and interests that others could recognize or relate to. Apollo said:

> *Otra cosa es que las personas pensarían que uno por tener una discapacidad o algo por el estilo es menos que otra persona, pero yo he demostrado que, con esfuerzo, con estudio y demás uno puede llegar antes a ser mejor que las mismas personas que tienen todas sus capacidades.*
>
> (Another thing is that people think being a person with a disability makes them less than others, but I have shown, with effort, with study, and the rest that one can achieve more than the same people who have all their abilities.)

While Sofia described:

> *Las personas saben que eres una persona con pérdida profunda. Ellos no sabían que yo sabía matemáticas.*
>
> (People know that I'm a person with a profound [hearing] loss. They don't know that I know mathematics.)

Other students described how although they felt accepted by their school peers, it was because they weren't recognized as having any difference. Apollo described this as a positive:

> *A mí me pasa algo muy singular y es que yo en mi relación con mis compañeros ellos casi no saben que yo soy discapacidad porque a pesar que yo tuve una discapacidad al nacer y en mi (Inaudible) izquierda pues yo con terapias y con mucho trabajo y esfuerzo logré superarla demasiado. Prácticamente no se me nota demasiado y muchos de mis compañeros ¿usted tiene algo? Y yo, sí, pero no o sea no afecta mis relaciones tampoco como en el término de la exclusión o algo por el estilo jamás ha pasado y eso es algo que yo he ido prácticamente dejando atrás. Yo no me siento discapacitado. Y eso de cierta forma también me identifica y me hace sentir orgulloso.*
>
> (Something remarkable that has happened to in my relationships with my peers is that they hardly know that I'm a person with a disability, because even though I've had a disability that limits the strength on my left side since I was born, with therapy and a lot of work and effort I've greatly overcome it. People don't really notice, and many of my peers ask 'you have something?' And I, yes, but it hasn't affected my relationships or resulted in me being kicked out, or excluded, or anything like that. I've practically left it behind. I don't feel like a disabled person. And in some ways that makes me feel proud.)

Apollo's pride in not thinking of himself as disabled reflects the profound impact of living in a society where dis/ability (and other forms of difference) are routinely stigmatized. This forecloses the opportunity for dis/abled young people to develop a sense of pride in all parts of their identity and encourages them to overcompensate for others' lack of understanding by suppressing their own needs for recognition.

Narratives of Persistence and Perseverance

Commitment to college success was highly important for the participants, and their stories demonstrated how they persevered and persisted, despite receiving limited (if any) accommodations for their disabilities. Many of the experiences that the participants shared indicated they were strongly committed to their field of study and their academic goals and anticipated contributing to their communities and giving back to their families. Most participants expressed a need to work harder than their peers. Andrés shared his outlook about adapting to Colombian societal standards:

> *Uno aprende a adaptarse al ambiente o a la metodología como tal. Una persona con condición diferente aprende a desarrollar frente a una sociedad y diferentes obstáculos de la vida. Yo lucho en el estudio y me va muy bien, me esfuerzo bastante pero me va muy bien.*
>
> (One learns to adapt to the environment or the methodology. A person with a different condition learns to confront society and the different obstacles of life. I work hard to study and I do well—I have to put in a lot of effort but I do well).

Similar to Andrés, when asked about specific fields of study that may seem more difficult than the rest, Mia shared sentiments of perseverance:

> *Mi carrera es difícil pero yo puedo… es con esfuerzo. Entonces todas esas materias que son tan difíciles me hacen sentir orgullosa porque yo puedo. Yo puedo aprender y forzar el español para estar a nivel de las personas. Lo que más me identifica a mí son las ganas de salir adelante.*
> (My major is difficult but I can [be successful] by trying hard. In all of my classes that are difficult, I feel proud of myself because I can do it. I can learn and force my Spanish to be at the same level as others. The thing that identifies me is that I am a person with the will to get ahead).

Many of the participants expressed that they feel the need to prove that they are capable of doing the work that is expected in a university setting. Some also shared that having a disability shouldn't matter, and that they can produce the same work that their typical peers produce. In one focus group, the researcher followed up this comment asking if they thought that work should be modified for them to be able to complete it. One participant, Santiago, felt strongly that the work itself shouldn't be modified because he is capable of completing all of the work professors expect for their courses. Santiago's persistent sentiment that he should not receive accommodations or modifications due to disability can be attributed to a lack of institutional support, along with potentially internalized stigma due to the hegemonic expectations of ableism (see Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012).

Participants also shared stories of challenges they face in higher educational institutions. Pedro shared that the biggest challenge for him in this educational space was communicating with others and finding understanding from his classmates. Although Pedro perceived this challenge as specific to his own identity as an Autistic student, his experience reflects broader social attitudes toward people with disabilities. Pedro, however, viewed this challenge as one that had forced him to work hard to improve and develop his capacities to communicate with others, and was proud of the skills he had developed.

Inaccessible Infrastructure and Inequitable Policy

Limitations to the existing physical infrastructure and student support policies at Dosantos University negatively impact student experiences on campus. Lady, a student with a physical disability who uses a wheelchair, disclosed that she often has difficulty accessing campus spaces because they are too uniform in height to accommodate people at different heights:

> *Hay espacios que son bastante altos en los que se me hacen difícil. Yo tengo una forma de manejar, soy muy hábil para manejar mi silla, pero hay espacios que son muy altos y necesito pedir ayuda. Y pues no me gusta pedir ayuda y no creo que sea justo que los espacios no sean mas cómodos para gente con discapacidad.*
> (There are spaces that are very high and it's difficult for me. I have a way to maneuver, I am very capable of driving my wheelchair, but there are spaces that are too high and I need to ask for help. I don't like asking for help and I don't think it's fair that spaces aren't more comfortable for people with disabilities).

Lady's experience further reflects the need for students to constantly engage in self-advocacy and find ways to address challenges imposed by spaces that were not designed to be inclusive, but purport to welcome all learners. In the absence of transparent support and access, students must make do with the resources they can gather on their own. Similarly, contradictory curricular policies inequitably burden dis/abled students. Although there are processes in place at Dosantos University to allow for adaptation in instruction, certain aspects of summative evaluation and final grading procedures are inflexible and require students with disabilities to be held to the same standards as

their peers, without accommodation. Such policies therefore expect dis/abled students to continuously prove that they are equally capable as other students, while in effect requiring them to do more work.

　　　Many Deaf participants described shared challenges related to accessing university resources and navigating classroom spaces. In Wendy's case, she shared that content was difficult for her to understand when a professor would not allow her Sign Language interpreter to be present in the classroom. A fellow Deaf classmate, Sofia, described the financial difficulties involved in paying for interpreter support. As a Deaf student whose primary language is Sign Language, not being able to afford an interpreter becomes problematic inside classroom spaces, as Sofia explained:

> *Un intérprete profesional es super costoso, más de un millón de pesos. Entonces un intérprete normal, lo que apenas están aprendiendo el idioma, les cobra menos. Pero, eso era algo que yo no sabía. Pues, yo pensé que uno solo podía contar con los profesionales. Entonces ahí perdí un año porque no pude pagar para un intérprete. Y lo que pasó fue que en una clase me encontré con otra compañera sorda con intérprete y ella fue la que me dijo que no, uno puede contratar a estudiantes también.*
>
> (A professional sign language interpreter is very expensive, more than two hundred fifty dollars. An interpreter in training, a person who is just beginning to learn the language, will charge less. But I did not know that. I thought I could only hire professional interpreters. And so, I failed one year because I could not afford one. And so what happened was I was paired in a class with another Deaf student who paid for a cheaper interpreter. She told me that we could hire students as our interpreters too).

While Sofia was glad a classmate told her about another avenue for interpreters, there is no policy or practice in place that ensures Sofia is able to access the curriculum equitably. Sofia must hire an interpreter on her own in order for her to access her classes. This anecdote also emphasizes the impact of structural conditions on student experiences—two students with the same disability had very different experiences based on their individual sources of information or capacity to access services and confronted distinct barriers. The extreme social stratification of Colombian society, and the clearly marked boundaries created by financial disparity, multiplies challenges for students with disabilities with fewer economic resources. Sofia described how these conditions amplify discrimination:

> *Lo otro es un tema ya de discriminación hacia las otras personas por lo que tiene entonces es más un fenómeno de clases sociales que uno ve que ciertas personas se creen más que otras... porque tienen más o menos dinero o más o menos oportunidades y en esos contextos terminan trasgrediendo unos a los otros.*
>
> (Another [problem] is the discrimination against people based on what they have— it's a phenomenon based on social class and you can see that some people believe [they are better] than others...in this context people end up working against one another because they have more or less money or more or fewer opportunities).

Discussion

　　　The personal experiences of the 10 participants in this study reflect broader issues with access and equity for dis/abled students attending higher education institutions in Colombia, and other parts of the Americas. Findings from this study echo previous research that documents how students with disabilities are often expected to adapt and mold to an environment that is unwelcoming to diverse needs.

Mia's experiences as a Deaf student driven to overachieve and overcompensate draw on ableist ideologies, where the expectation is that students with disabilities adapt and fit into a school designed to exclude them (Loutzenheiser & Erevelles, 2019). Lady's experience navigating Dosantos University demonstrates how the campus is not friendly for individuals with physical disabilities. In a case study conducted in Santiago de Cali, Colombia of eight university student wheelchair users, Hurtado and Ágredo (2012) posited that wheelchair users require a physical environment that enables individual and autonomous development so that they can be successful on a college campus. Lady cannot achieve autonomy if she needs to continuously ask for help to access spaces that she should inherently already have access to. The environment itself needs to be altered in order to meet the diverse needs of a diverse population. From a critical DSE perspective, "inclusive education is fundamentally about all learners (rather than just disabled learners)" and strives to make "all learners' experiences with schooling inclusive and participatory rather than exclusionary and marginalizing" (Baglieri et al., 2011, p. 2128).

In a report to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Saldarriaga-Concha foundation explained that the Colombian state must ensure that teachers have the training and supports to provide students with disabilities with the appropriate accommodations to be able to succeed in an inclusive educational space (Correa-Montoya & Castro-Martínez, 2016). Employed as an analytic tool that examines "the ways cultural teaching practices enable and disable students" (Valente et al., 2016, p. 3), in this study critical DSE revealed how students at Dosantos University are directly impacted by inequitable curricular policies that discourage inclusive pedagogical practices. Baglieri et al. (2011) connect DSE-informed understandings of inclusive education that challenges and questions cultural practices of schooling in the pursuit of broader goals of democratic and socially just education. The idea that professor and teacher attitudes need to shift toward a more expansive paradigm was similarly emphasized in a study about inclusion in higher education institutions in Bogotá (Molina, 2003). suggests that higher education institutions must:

> *Promover la cultura en el respeto a la diversidad y el conocimiento de los estudiantes como sujetos, donde toda la comunidad, especialmente la conocedora en inclusión, para que se interactúe bajo estas premisas, ya que sólo así se podrá evidenciar con los cambios de actitud de los miembros de la comunidad, con el compromiso y la responsabilidad para lograr la inclusión de la población con discapacidad en la universidad.*
>
> (To promote a culture to address diversity and acknowledging students as subjects, where the entire community, especially those who are knowledgeable in inclusion, so that it interacts under these premises, since only in this way can it be evidenced with changes in attitude from members of the community, with the commitment and responsibility to achieve inclusion of the population with disabilities in the university).

Molina (2003) explains that campus culture in terms of understanding students with diverse needs is important so that the campus community, especially those in the field of inclusive education, can make these possible shifts in attitudes from members of the community to prompt inclusion for students with disabilities. For example, if Pedro's classmates were better informed, and more knowledgeable about diverse communication styles, Pedro would have experienced a more inclusive classroom space and perhaps not had such a challenging time communicating with peers, giving them the opportunity to learn from and about him. A Critical DSE approach challenges normative ideas about ability that limit the experience of all students and opens up new ways to understand participation and identity.

Implications for Practice

The narratives of injustice shared by participants in this study demonstrate that Dosantos University perpetuates ableist ideologies and practices with unchanging physical infrastructure, administrative policies, and curricular practices, despite its intentions to serve as a space for personal development. Frustratingly, some problems at Dosantos University could be solved fairly easily from an administrative planning perspective—prioritizing registration for students with disabilities, for example, would allow for examining the course schedules of students with limited mobility could ensure that their classes are assigned to physically accessible spaces. Other issues, however, are more deeply rooted, and achieving meaningful change that positively impacts students with disabilities requires a significant shift in perspectives and attitudes about students with disabilities in educational contexts. Without explicit efforts to counter the stigma and misunderstandings around disability that exist in broader society, universities in Colombia will perpetuate these attitudes.

Beyond countering deficit perspectives and documenting the perseverance of students with disabilities in Colombia, in this work we aim to promote the use of structural analyses that focus on systemic change. This study contributes to efforts to shift attitudes and perspectives about people with disabilities in higher education and promote equitable and inclusive educational opportunities and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability (Gabel, 2010). To achieve these goals institutions must not only design physical spaces that are accessible, but also promote educational practices that accommodate persons with disabilities and work toward broader social efforts to create a culture that views disability in new ways.

Because they are often the front-line implementers of disability policy in postsecondary educational settings, faculty and staff are influential in shaping the experiences of students with disabilities. In addition to expanding and improving policies that guide access and the distribution of resources, a key aspect of providing less traumatizing and positive experiences for dis/abled students at Dosantos University is a focus on the professional development of faculty. A clear need exists to build the knowledge base of instructors around issues of diversity and equity and understanding of their role in creating inclusive learning environments. Much of the literature, such as Hong (2015), Kamenopoulou (2018), and Marshak et. al. (2010), indicate lack of knowledge from professors and educators to adequately support students with disabilities in educational spaces. This becomes a problem in a classroom space because teachers and educators have assumed power. Educators have a significant influence on classroom safety and ambiance, therefore, empowering educators with more knowledge about equity, inclusivity, and diverse abilities can have a positive impact on a micro level for students with disabilities in classroom spaces. As universities adopt new, more inclusive policies and practices they must also make sure that faculty and staff are aware of institutional services (and constraints) and are able to support classroom-level accommodations and supports.

We strongly suggest that institutions include students with disabilities in the planning, drafting, and implementation process of educating staff and faculty about how to create fair, equitable, and accessible environments on campus. Institutions need to listen to the voices of students with disabilities to create necessary policy changes to better serve them. Changes in policy regarding how students with disabilities must disclose their disability with the corresponding university office in order to receive services are also necessary. Policies and corresponding institutional actions need to be sufficiently flexible in order to organically adapt to the particular needs of each student, without basing these decisions on specific medical diagnoses or perceived deficits. DSE reconceptualizes disability and shifts responsibility from the individual to social and cultural practices. Using such lenses can identify how ableism—the perception of certain abilities as essential for productivity—is maintained in higher education policy (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012).

Critical disability approaches further require institutions and policies to attend to the historic precursors that have contributed to present-day inequities, and address underlying racist, colonialist, and ableist assumptions (Annamma et al., 2013; Figueroa & Hernández-Saca, 2021). Therefore, policy that governs post-secondary institutions need to actively seek out students with disabilities at the beginning of their enrollment in these institutions to provide services and accommodations immediately. Additionally, how information is disseminated to the student population needs to be improved. For example, if institutions begin thinking about education using a universal design for learning (UDL) perspective, then dis/abled students are not seen as an afterthought but are instead included. Additionally, DSE breaks away from a medical definition of disability, and places more value on individuals and limitations placed on students with disabilities (Baglieri et. al. 2010). Therefore, students' narratives and experiences need to be highly regarded and sufficient when they advocate for services and accommodations inside classroom spaces. Students, like Sofia, shouldn't have to provide and pay for her own accommodations in a supposedly inclusive classroom space. Higher educational institutions need to change this practice, and create policies to provide free, equitable, and appropriate accommodations to students with disabilities. Further, inclusive educational initiatives need to be the responsibility of the entire campus community, not only student affairs personnel or instructional faculty. Building a compassionate campus community that accepts, acknowledges, and views dis/ability as an equally valid way of being human is part of broader efforts to transform higher education.

Conclusions

While there have been significant political and social changes over the years, Colombian society still has negative perceptions about people with disabilities. Using deficit language, segregating individuals with disabilities, and creating inaccessible physical environments for students with disabilities are still recurring issues that need to be addressed. In this study, we contribute to broader efforts to draw attention to equity in higher education in Colombia and to center the perspectives of dis/abled individuals. We encourage additional research in this area, along with comparative studies that examine Latin American policies regarding disability in higher education. Important critical work is being done in this area to specifically apply this approach to Latin American contexts (see e.g. Figueroa & Hernández-Saca, 2021), and additional research should take into account specific cultural assumptions, histories, and existing social inequities based on an intersectional analysis of class, race, and gender. By sharing our participants' stories about how people viewed them, and how they were excluded from educational opportunities and spaces we illustrate that infrastructure and policy changes are necessary to expand equity and access. These policy changes must also address the limitations imposed by neoliberal constructions of collective and individual worth—only then will institutions committed to socially just higher education reach their intended goals.

Acknowledgments

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