


## Article

# Inclusive University Education in Bolivia: The Actors and Their Discourses

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**Abstract:** Education policies in Bolivia and other parts of Latin America have improved significantly in recent years. However, there continue to be barriers to higher education for students with specific educational support needs and difficulties are still found in the institutional management of inclusive education. This paper aims to better understand the elements that facilitate and hinder university inclusion of students with functional diversity in Bolivia. The methodology used is qualitative. The discourses of key informants within the university community were collected using the focus group technique. The software Atlas.ti-8 was used for data processing and inductive coding was performed using the constant comparison method. The study's main findings indicate that both the categorization of functional diversity and the financing model in place have a great impact on inclusive education actions at the university level. The research also reveals a lack of correspondence between the rights of people with functional diversity and the resources allocated to them. The conclusions point to the need to establish intersectional institutional strategies based on the recognition of diversity as an essential value in the development of inclusive and sustainable education.

**Keywords:** inclusive education; students with disabilities; functional diversity; higher education; inclusive policies; Bolivia; disability; educational responses; inclusive teachers



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Educational Inclusion as a Response to Social Exclusion

The topic of educational inclusion has received considerable attention in recent years. Scientific evidence around the world shows growing interest in this field, especially among studies examining the right to pursue higher education or educational practices [1]. Likewise, international bodies are increasingly focusing their efforts on developing forms of higher education that promote equity and social justice. The United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) has underlined the need to transform policies, education systems and learning environments in an effort to better respond to the diversity of people in education [2]. In this regard, educational inclusion has become the subject of international consensus since the approval, in 2006, of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The U.N. Convention reinforces inclusive education as a right, diversity as a principle, equality as a mechanism and justice as a value. In consideration of these postulates, the UNESCO understands inclusive education to be the right of all people to receive a quality education, with special attention to the most vulnerable groups. Specifically, the Education 2030 agenda, based on Sustainable Development Goal number 4 (SDG4), emphasizes equal access to all levels of learning, taking into account persons with disabilities and gender differences. The different aims established as part of SDG4 include access to inclusive education from preschool levels all the way through adult learning and the highest levels of education. Quality university teaching is one of the promises laid out

in the 2030 agenda. To achieve it, the agenda sets the objective of implementing programs, services and infrastructures that are inclusive and effective for all, such as training plans that emphasize sustainability, human rights, citizen participation; the construction of accessible spaces and adaptation of existing spaces; increased grants and scholarships; and the training and reinforcement of specialized teaching staff [3].

The international agreements signed by governments worldwide recognize that inclusive education is a key factor in sustainable development, because it acts as a catalyst for the transformation of society [4]. Inclusive education promotes the cultural, political and social renewal which is so necessary in today's world and which, through educational actions, brings greater opportunities for individuals, groups and communities [5].

International scientific production has shown, in different geographical contexts, the important role of educational inclusion policies for functionally diverse students in higher education [6–10]. However, a gap remains between the intentions behind the political strategies and the actual results found in university practices [11–17].

The foregoing has given rise to a number of reflections and investigations. On the one hand, there have been numerous actions focusing on individual variables, such as aspects related to the learning experience or to teaching approaches and practices [10,18–22]. On the other hand, aspects related to the educational environment, such as stereotypes and discrimination, must also be addressed when seeking an inclusive educational environment [23–25]. However, there are other elements involved in educational processes for inclusion that are less studied and not often taken into account in the development of inclusive educational actions. History, culture and the different economic, political and geographical determinants existing in each community also affect the various actors involved and the progress or regression of a sustainable inclusive education [10,23–28].

### *1.2. From Higher Education in Latin America to the University in Bolivia: Prospects for Development*

One of the greatest educational achievements of many countries in Latin America is having been able to drastically reduce the illiteracy rate. This is corroborated by the UNESCO report of 2015 which stated that 98% of the children of Latin America and the Caribbean were receiving the compulsory level of education of their country at that time, far ahead of other regions such as southern and eastern Asia. More specifically, in the Plurinational State of Bolivia (hereinafter Bolivia) the illiteracy rate was 36.21% in 1976 while in 2015 that figure had fallen to 7.54% of the population.

However, the gross enrolment ratio in the later stage of secondary education in Latin America is just 80%, much lower than the 100% of Europe and North America and of the agreements of the Education 2030 Agenda. Looking at the changes in the number of students in higher education in Latin America, we see that the figure increased by more than 23 percentage points from 2010 to 2017. In the vast majority of Latin American and Caribbean countries, growth in the number of students in higher education has been positive, the exceptions being Cuba and Puerto Rico, which have seen drops of 56.9% and 13.4%, respectively. The countries showing the most growth in this period are Peru, Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, Colombia, Honduras and Bolivia, the latter with a rate of 33.3%.

Another aspect relevant to this analysis refers to the type of school, public or private. For the region of Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole, most students study in private universities. This trend has been on the rise in recent years, growing from 51.70% in 2010 to 54.65% in 2017 [29].

Looking more closely at the socioeconomic context of Bolivia, according to data published by the United Nations Organization [30] between 1990 and 2019, the country's Human Development Index (HDI) increased from 0.551 to 0.718 during this period, an increment of 30.3% that places the country in position 107 of the ranking. Between 1990 and 2019, life expectancy at birth in Bolivia increased by 15.4 years, the average years of schooling increased by 2.6 years and the expected years of schooling increased by 2.9 years.

The per capita Gross National Income (GNI) in Bolivia grew by about 96.5% between 1990 and 2019.

In Bolivia the GNI in 2019 (0.718) is lower than the average of the countries belonging to the high development group (0.753) and also lower than that of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (0.766). Within Latin America and the Caribbean, Bolivia is comparable to Ecuador and Paraguay, whose HDI occupy 86th and 103rd place, respectively, in the ranking.

With respect to education, the expected years of schooling are 14.2. However, in Bolivia's university system it is important to point out that, despite its short history compared to other States, it has achieved significant advances in recent years. One of the most important has been the increasing demand for education by young people and adults. Student enrolment has grown exponentially in the last few years, as has the total number of universities in the region. For example, at public universities student enrolment jumped from 213,291 in 2000 to 551,353 in 2017. As for private universities, in 2000 the total number of students enrolled was 44,357, but the figure reached 128,871 in 2016. It is calculated that a total of 57 branches of private universities are functioning in Bolivia, many of them increasing their numbers by adapting their programs to the needs of students from nearby countries, where the educational offer is less accessible. Similarly, the adhesion of many university degree programs to the Mercosur education network has enhanced the quality of education. This network promotes common policies and encourages the mobility and exchange of both professors and students in the countries of Latin America [31] and has been very beneficial to higher education in Bolivia.

Even with the incipient growth of universities in Bolivia, it is helpful to review governmental and university policies to confirm whether the university promotes inclusion in conditions of equality in the higher education system. It was in the 1990s that education policies began, for example, to incorporate specific resources for children with special educational needs. Particularly worth highlighting is the reform of the education system laid down in Act 1565 of July 1994, which set up two modes of learning, regular and special. The reform led to the differentiation between students with learning difficulties and those without and to the former being taught in psychopedagogical support classes within the regular learning mode. However, this law had significant limitations; it was difficult to implement in secondary or higher education levels [32] and it should have had greater application in rural areas [33]. Soon thereafter another law was enacted, the Avelino Siñani-Elizardo Pérez Law on Education, the principles of which are to promote a decolonizing, productive, socio-communitarian and, particularly, intercultural education [34]. Diversity and its recognition represent an important part of this law. This legislation makes a priority of universalizing education and to do so it takes into consideration the social circumstances of students.

In Bolivia, like in other Latin American states, one of the most remarkable characteristics of public universities is the system of autonomy exercised by students and teachers, who together comprise a university co-government system. Said autonomy allows the university to decide how it is to be managed, through its by-laws and internal regulations, and also to administer its own resources. Private universities have their own formulas for governing, with different structures existing in each institution. However, the two types of university—public and private—do meet and establish accords at the National Congresses of the Executive Committee. This is the forum in which guidelines are drawn up regarding degrees, statutes of autonomy, personnel conditions, representation to the State and other issues.

In accordance with their autonomy, the different universities have put in place regulations to promote access by all students in equality of conditions. The fact is, having achieved the universalization of compulsory education, the transition from the compulsory levels to the higher levels by students with individual, social and economic difficulties remains a challenge [35]. To help address this situation, and increase access to the university by less advantaged students, the Executive Committee of Bolivian Universities has

promoted several types of actions [36]. The two most important ones are: Here we look at two of the most important: (I) the decentralization of the university towards rural areas; and (II) the policy that establishes free access to the university by certain social groups, among them students with disabilities.

With respect to the former, it is the universities that decide whether to incorporate this type of policy into their internal regulations in the form of bylaws. The ultimate objective is to increase the scope of the university in economically disadvantaged social sectors and also to broaden the university's link with the production sectors. With considerable success, many universities in Bolivia, both public and private, have implemented this type of policy by creating what are called indigenous academic units or rural units.

With respect to the latter, Bolivia has a long tradition of free access to higher education, so much so that selective processes were not established until the 1990s [37]. Currently there are admission tests but, to promote the access of vulnerable groups to higher education, persons with disabilities and members of certain ethnic or socioeconomic groups are exempt from these exams. In relation to disability, in 2009 direct admission for students with disabilities was established by virtue of Resolution no. 9/09 of the National Congress of Universities, issued by the Executive Committee of Bolivian Universities. From that point on, the universities that are part of the national system adopt the policy of direct admission, as well as the creation of disabled student support services.

The examples cited are evidence of the significant advances made in promoting inclusive education in the country. However, the absence of an inclusive culture in the institutions, the characteristics of university management (decentralized and autonomous) and the proliferation of private universities with their own lines of actions are telling indicators that application is not likely to be very homogenous.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate, using the discourse of the actors involved, the contextual factors that facilitate and hamper the university education of students with disabilities in Bolivia. The research sought to identify how inclusive education is defined and discussed, how people view the implementation of policies in this field and what challenges remain pending.

We believe that delving into these questions will open up new horizons, to date little explored in this context, which may contribute to the advancement of education that is sustainable and inclusive with all people, groups and communities.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Procedure

Qualitative methodology was used in this research. The first part of the project consisted of the bibliographical review of the reference material such as scientific articles, institutional documents and regulations concerning socioeducational policies in Bolivia.

The steps followed to limit the scope of the study were the decisions regarding which databases to consult, which search terms to use, what the time interval should be and the format and field of study of the sample of documents to be analyzed. First of all, it was decided that the databases Scopus and Web of Science (WOS) would be used, based on the tool Journal Citation Reports (JCR). There is general consensus in the scientific community that these tools are the most relevant for research. Secondly, the search terms selected varied over time as the research progressed and the project became better defined. All search terms were related to the object of study and the search was performed in English. During the search different Boolean operators were used and it was decided that the terms had to appear in the title, abstract or key words. The search was also limited to articles published prior to 2021 and within the social sciences field. With the bibliographical review of scientific articles, it became apparent that only a small proportion of the papers deal with Latin American contexts.

The review of institutional and regulatory documentation was performed digitally with the official bodies themselves being used as sources. Especially important among them were the UNESCO Digital Library, the database of the United Nations Economic

Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the digital documents of FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana en Ciencias Sociales) and the Gaceta Oficial, Bolivia's legislative search engine.

In the second phase primary data was collected from the sectors implicated: the actors involved in political and institutional management, as well as from university students with disabilities. To gather data, we decided to use the Focus Group technique (hereinafter FG). To ensure validity in the study the literature points out that at least two groups must be formed per sector defined to be able to ratify the results obtained in one group in the other group [38,39]. For this reason, a longitudinal system was designed for data collection and comparison to make it possible to identify remarkable changes over time [40], with three FGs taking place at three different times: September 2018, March 2019 and February 2020. Efforts were also made to achieve sample representativeness with respect to the study universe, so that it would be possible to make generalizations based on the results.

We especially wanted a variety of agents involved in higher education to be represented and for the information provided to be the fruit of participatory reflection with feedback from other participants. In this way, the information collected is not limited to specific questions but also comes from new ideas mentioned during the debate. This can lead to the detection of elements which are key to a better understanding of the study's context [41].

The central topics explored in order to foment debate included:

1. Elements relative to the values, principles and attitudes that are present in the community and institutional culture and are necessary for progress towards a sustainable and inclusive education for all. Specifically, the attitudes and values of society with regard to social inclusion of diversity, social justice, educational equity and the response of the education sector.
2. Aspects related to policies of inclusion (philosophy, regulatory framework design, strategies for implementation, political will, participatory processes). Specifically, the perception of the impact that inclusive strategies and policies have had on the universities of Bolivia.

These priority topics were presented in an open-ended manner, giving informants the opportunity to develop new references and highlight the information they viewed as especially relevant until data saturation was reached. To ensure the internal reliability of the study, the information was recorded and subsequently transcribed. To ensure its external reliability the information collected was analyzed and coded by two different researchers. Interpretive concordance between the researchers was sought by designing descriptive categories with a low level of inference, so as to correct for possible perceptive distortions and biases [42].

## 2.2. Participants

A non-probabilistic sampling technique of the intentional type was used. To create the groups, participants were selected based mainly on their role in the institution. Thus, persons with the following profiles took part: students (with and without disability), professors (with and without disability), administrative and specialized personnel, and persons occupying institutional university posts in areas key to achieving inclusion (for example, admission and student access). All together 26 different informants participated. They were distributed into three FGs and their identification was anonymized using an alphanumeric code (see Tables 1 and 2).

**Table 1.** Codes of the informants (Acronyms).

Criterion	Description	Code
Type of relationship with students with disabilities	Student with disability	SD
	Student without disability	S
	Professor	P
	Member of administrative and services staff	T
	Relative of student with disability	F
Sex	Female	♀
	Male	♂
Individual identifier	Number ranging from 1 to 26	n

**Table 2.** Informants of the Focus Groups.

Informants	Code
University professor, 1, female	P1♀.
Student without disability, 2, female	S2♀
Relative of student with hearing disability, 3, female	F3♀
University professor, 4, female	P4♀
University professor, 5, female	P5♀
Student with physical disability, 6, male	SD6♂
Student with physical disability, 7, female	SD7♀
Member of University's administrative and services staff, 8, female	T8♀
Member of University's administrative and services staff, 9, male	TPr9♂
Student without disability [Universidad], 10, female	S10♀
Student without disability [Universidad], 11, female	S11♀
University professor, 12, female	P12♀.
Member of University's administrative and services staff, 13, male	T13♂
Student without disability, 14, male	S14♂
Student without disability, 15, female	S15♀
University professor, 16, male	P16♂
Member of University's administrative and services staff, 17, female	T17♀
Student with visual disability, student representative, 18, male	SD18♂
Student with visual disability, student representative, 19, female	SD19♀
University professor, 20, male	P20♂
University professor, 21, female	P21♀
Student with physical disability, student representative, 22, male	SD22♂
Student with physical disability, 23, male	SD23♂
Student with hearing disability, 24, male	SD24♂
Student with physical disability, student representative, 25, male	SD25♂
Student with visual disability, student representative, 26, male	SD26♂

In two of the three FGs the profiles were mixed (students, professors and institutional personnel). One FG was comprised of 10 participants and the other had 8. A third FG was made up entirely of university students with disabilities. For this third group our aim was to look closely at the narrative of the disabled people themselves, giving the central role to the recurring and significant elements that had arisen in the first two FGs.

The FGs were held at the facilities of the Universidad Autónoma Gabriel René Moreno de Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia). The rooms used were accessible, comfortable and allowed for a pleasant setting free of interruptions. To facilitate interaction during communication the subjects to be addressed were distributed 15 min before each session. The FG sessions lasted an average of 1 h and 40 min.

All informants gave their consent to anonymous use of the data and to its exclusive use for scientific and educational purposes. All research activities followed the guidelines of the Committee for Ethics in Human Research (CEIH) of the university of the principal researcher responsible for the projects comprising this paper.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

To transcribe the information, the software Express Scribe was used. A manual procedure was developed to eliminate personal data or any information that put the anonymity of the participants at risk.

The tool Atlas.ti-8 was used to analyze the data. Coding followed an inductive and iterative process in which concepts and ideas were grouped and gradually concentrated into larger codes and recoded in central themes [43].

### 3. Results

The results of the focus groups are compiled below. Examining the discourse of the university education community, the data analysis has allowed us to identify: (a) elements used to define educational inclusion, (b) how the policies implemented in this area are viewed and (c) the challenges still pending.

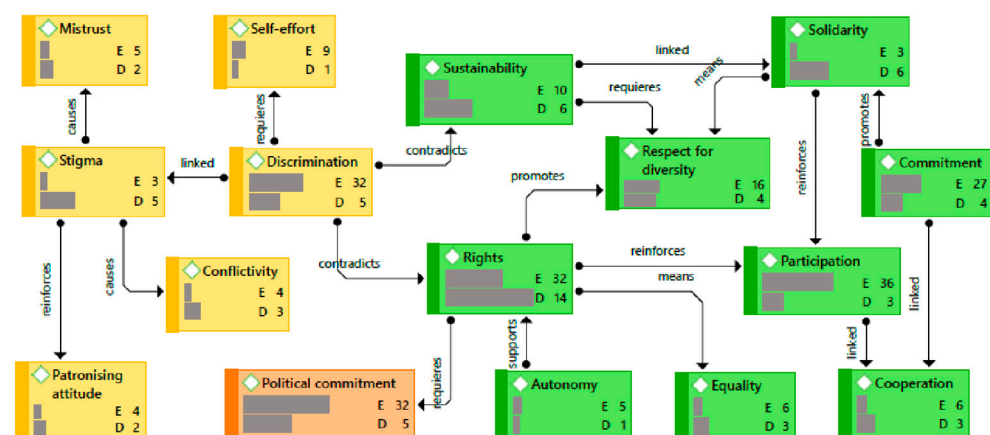
To facilitate comprehension of the categorization of the findings, definitions are added to clarify the central categories, which were decided by the researchers based on the emerging coding, the grouped characteristics, existing literature and the approach to our object of study.

The central categories based on the results obtained are as follows:

1. Elements used to define educational inclusion: this is a grouping of the ideas, values and beliefs that comprise a vision or philosophy about the conceptualization of educational inclusion.
2. How the policies implemented in this area are viewed: this is a grouping of processes and elements, identified by the informants, regarding aspects that comprise the university's organization system for addressing diversity.
3. Identification of the challenges still pending: this category offers a systematization of the informants' contributions regarding the challenges, changes and actions that remain pending in order to achieve an education that is fair, equitable, inclusive and sustainable for all.

#### 3.1. Elements Used to Define Educational Inclusion

Figure 1 shows the map of relationships between the different codes. This figure offers an overview of the process of analysis and a systematization of the information collected in relation to the elements used to describe, (re)signify and constitute inclusive education. In short, these codes are the elements used by the informants to give content to the ideological and theoretical paradigm about inclusive education.



**Figure 1.** Identifying elements in inclusive education in Bolivia. Positive elements appear in green; negative elements in yellow; variable elements in orange. The letters E and D inside the codes indicate the following information: Rooting (E) or number of citations that have been linked to that code which indicates the saturation of the discourse; and Density (D) or number of links to other citations. Source: authors. Network created with the data analysis software Atlas.ti V.8.

A total of 16 codes were identified in the informants' discourses. The codes in green are positive elements concerning educational inclusion, the ones in yellow are negative elements and the ones in orange refer to variable elements.

To provide an overall vision of the discourse produced by the informants some representative statements are quoted. This block is organized around three persistent codes in the narrative of the FG: respect for diversity, equality and rights.

### 3.1.1. Respect for Diversity

Bolivia defines itself as a multiethnic and pluricultural nation in its Constitution. This naturally has an influence on its laws, which incorporate this aspect of Bolivia's identity in many different spheres. Analysis of the discourse reveals that this emphasis on ethnic diversity lies at the core of the country's inclusive culture, which is mainly understood as the need for educational inclusion of the indigenous communities. In this regard, the discourse showed a diversity model centered on multiculturalism as the subject of social and political theorization. Ethnic diversity is respected and valued as a fundamental element of community building in Bolivian society, and it is argued that social phenomena such as migrations (both internal, from rural areas to the city, and external and foreign) benefit the development of the communities:

1:3. Santa Cruz is a metropolis that is growing and, well, this town is going to keep getting bigger and there will be more and more people born here or arriving as immigrants. It is a nice example of diversity (P16♂).

On the other hand, belonging to an ethnic minority is linked to situations of socioeconomic inequality which are considered, in turn, elements of diversity in the educational sphere that should be targeted for action. In this respect, the value of the indigenous movement is visible in the development of educational inclusion policies founded upon the principles of equality and solidarity.

1:65. Indigenous people have been the rallying cry of the struggle because there is considerable political and social capital there. In contrast, you don't see the same value given to the sectors with disability (P20♂).

Indeed, other forms of diversity are not so strongly consolidated in the theoretical imaginary of inclusive education shown by the participants. Sexual diversity, for example, does not appear in the discourse while functional diversity (disability), the central theme of this paper, arises only after being mentioned explicitly by the researchers, and even so it is addressed with emphasis more on difference, highlighting "acceptance" and tolerance of "limitations" and not the possible benefits that functional diversity can bring to an inclusive society:

1:5. Yes, because in fact all of us, really, are...not disabled, but different. For example, I am from Cochabamba and so I am different from someone else, while another person may be different because he or she can't walk. What this means is that we are all different and there is no reason for us to classify each other into groups (T17♀).

In fact, the participants with disabilities mentioned the existence of a stereotypical image with which they do not identify and which they feel does not represent them. This stereotyped conceptualization of functional diversity spotlights the disability of the subjects as a homogenizing phenomenon, and ignores their diverse capabilities. They thus believed that both their reality as individuals and the specific educational needs of each disability are being excluded.

1:79. Whenever disability is mentioned it is represented by a person in a wheelchair or by a person with Down syndrome. When the whole disabled people's movement was happening in La Paz, it did not represent me, because it's a variety, it is not just one disability, it is not only one (PPr21♀).

### 3.1.2. The Principle of Equality and Its Transformation into Rights

The principle of equality is the foundation of the ideological construction of inclusive culture. The participants thought that, to be coherent with the values inherent in inclusive



culture, it is necessary “to create conditions for us all to be equal” (P20♂). However, even professors questioned the efficacy of the university education system in promoting inclusive culture, and pointed out the democratic shortcomings of a hierarchical system divided into power strata in which status is achieved through social reproduction processes and in which “capabilities,” in social production terms, take on great relevance.

1:61. I would say that it is a question of power. The democratic conceptualization that we have in teaching settings has a big effect, because sometimes it is not really that democratic, and it gives primacy to knowledge, and to the status that knowledge brings, so as not to establish conditions of equality for those that have a disability (PPr21♀).

In this respect, the participants pointed out the great relevance of the regulation of social rights promoting conditions of equality in the field of education in Bolivia. The participants considered the profuse legislation of recent decades to have contributed to the incorporation into Bolivian universities of populational groups that found themselves in situations of chronic educational exclusion from higher education. They made special mention of the opportunities for a university education now available to students from indigenous communities and persons with disability. Specifically, they highlighted the law establishing “free admission” of people with disabilities to the university as the compensatory policy that has most benefited educational inclusion at the level of higher education.

They also, however, expressed concern that such rights are not given the concrete form of sustainable and consistent measures, based on criteria of equality, in all parts of Bolivia. The high degree of autonomy of university governing bodies, which decide whether or not to implement measures intended to guarantee the educational rights of social groups at risk of social exclusion, can become an element of educational inequality between the State’s different territories. Students denounced how university authorities can decide unilaterally not to apply this measure for a certain time.

2:5. They did not take into account that eliminating direct admission for students with disability was illegal (...), that the achievement of direct admission for students with disability was done at the national level, and the voiding of a national resolution has to be done at the level of the national Congress. In other words, it was totally illegal what the University Vice-Chancellor did at that time (SD7♀).

Arbitrariness in the application of the legislation results in disabled students perceiving they are conceived as “objects of benevolence” (SD19♀) and not as subjects entitled to rights with the same opportunities as all other citizens.

In addition, in the context of working towards inclusive education, participants underlined the relevance of the attitudes toward diversity shown by all social agents. First, they mentioned the need for political and administrative institutions to be involved in the struggle for educational inclusion at the university level, pointing out the scant “political will” and a “lack of support by authorities” (P1♀) in the application of current legislation.

1:40. So maybe there are no architectural barriers, but the attitude is what really counts, and we have had to work really hard on that (SD19♀).

The specialized personnel that must implement the measures find that the authorities “turn a deaf ear” to these problems (T8♀). The causes of this lack of institutional involvement are linked mainly to two circumstances: (1) the allotment of resources; and (2) the “commitment” of the teaching staff. With regard to the former, putting in place actions conducive to educational inclusion requires economic, material and specialized human resources, the provision of which depends upon the “school philosophy” and the criteria used by the school’s directors to prioritize actions in these areas.

1:41. We have to recognize that the sensibilities of the authorities can sometimes be an opposing factor, some see it as an inconvenience and an expense, while others see it as an opportunity to reap benefits (P20♂).

As for the commitment of teaching professionals, the general perception is that their involvement is low, and there is a “lack of participation by people who could provide support, in this case the professors” (Pu5♀). Students also report discriminatory attitudes

shown by university professors towards students with special educational needs due to the demands associated with attending these students.

1:9. There is rejection by the teachers in receiving these students in this university, not all of them but some, and this is because the teacher has the obligation to listen to a one or two hour talk about how to treat these students (SD18 $\sigma$ )

Finally, as an element of consensus, the discourse underlines the relevance of citizen participation, mainly promoted by the university student movement, in the building of a more inclusive culture in Bolivian society in general and in the university community in particular.

2:38. Direct admission is not the product of a concession made by the authorities to the students, it is the conquest of the students who developed the project, worked on it and ensured it was adopted. And the result is that the university recognizes this specific unit in its bylaws (Pu4 $\sigma$ ).

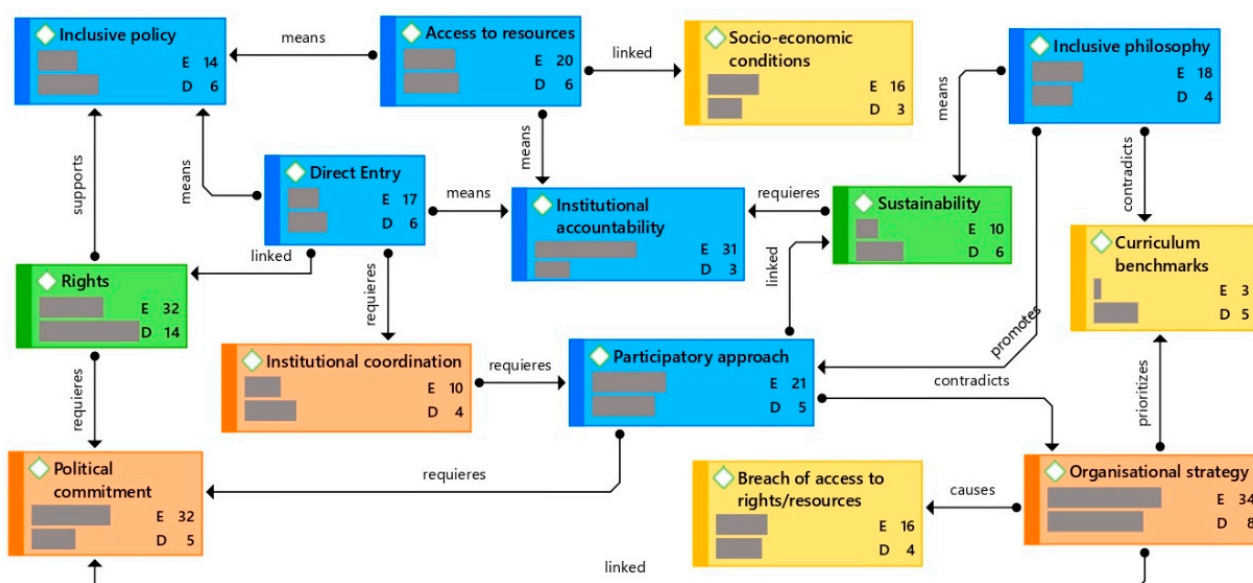
The teaching staff and specialized personnel, for example, recognize that achievements such as “direct admission” are the product of citizen participation and the struggle of university students over the last decade, expressing the necessity of “giving [these social initiatives] the place they deserve” (T9 $\sigma$ ).

### 3.2. Inclusive Policies. The Inclusive Capacity of Bolivian Universities

Figure 2 shows the relationships between the different codes in this category. This figure systematizes the information about the implementation of inclusive policies by university institutions. The codes agglutinate the quotes of the informants about the processes of inclusion undertaken within the university system.

A total of 14 codes were identified in the informants’ discourses. The codes are presented in different colors. The elements considered positive appear in blue, those considered negative in yellow and those considered intermediate in orange.

To structure the results, we have organized the participants’ perceptions—of the different regulations, plans and educational programs currently in place for persons with disabilities—according to the following dimensions: socioeconomic and regulatory conditions of the country; institutional strategy; correlation between rights and resources (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Identifying elements in Bolivian education policies in the area of educational inclusion. Essential elements appear in green; positive elements in blue; negative elements in yellow; variable elements in orange. The letters E and D inside the codes indicate the following information: Rooting (E) or number of citations that have been linked to that code which indicates the saturation of the discourse; and Density (D) or number of links to other citations. Source: authors. Network created with the data analysis software Atlas.ti V.8.

### 3.2.1. Socioeconomic and Regulatory Conditions

The development of socioeducational policies in the Bolivian context has progressed significantly in the past two decades. Bolivia had such high levels of inequality and social exclusion affecting people with disability that, as participants indicated, “it was taken as a natural fact that disabled people did not have access to the university and that nobody took them into account” (Pu4♀).

In this framework the participants have a very positive view of the progress made in recent decades in the area of social policies aimed at the educational inclusion of students with special educational needs. As an inflection point, many participants mention the growing visibility of people with disabilities starting in the 2000s. This process did a great deal to raise Bolivian society’s awareness of the need to legislate in order to properly attend to the social needs of this collective.

Especially, the participants recalled what they consider a milestone in inclusivity, the fact that in 2009 the new Bolivian Constitution included the obligation of State powers to protect the rights of people with disabilities. The discourse highlights the innovative and progressive nature of this measure, which makes Bolivia’s Carta Magna one of the world’s most advanced in its recognition and protection of the social rights of this group.

2:36. We mustn’t forget that this Constitution is probably one of the very few that explicitly identifies the rights of people with disabilities. They are not mentioned within other rights, such as the right to health or education, but instead are the subject of specific articles. It seems to me that this law is a response to that process (Pu4♀)

Participants said that the current Law of Education has been a great step forward in the recovery of traditional culture and languages, and also in the guarantee of compulsory education and the decentralization of education into rural areas. However, they also stated that its application in primary education is not meeting the aims related to transitioning to secondary education levels and higher education among students with disabilities.

1:7. In our country there is no pertinent education at schools that responds appropriately to diversity. The first thing we see are the stereotypes of the persons who “can’t” and very few people discover that those who have disabilities actually have great potential and that like any other person they can be included in society and enjoy the same rights (SD19♀).

The participants also made clear the lack of coordination among the measures put in place by different laws pertaining to the educational inclusion available in upper levels. Specifically, they criticized the disconnection between the different laws applicable to Bolivian higher education, pointing out that the principal cause is the non-existence of unified protocols for transition from primary and secondary levels, generally at special education institutions, to university education.

1:53. The law of persons with disability (. . .) has underlined the necessities existing in terms of inclusion in higher education. But what does the system lack? What it has not dealt with successfully are the transitions from regular education to higher education. We cannot reach an agreement between the two parties to assume responsibility for the transitions and also the academic offerings. I think that is missing (SD19♀).

2:19. In our unit we had no more than 10 students with disability that were admitted every year (SD7♀).

According to the participants, although the law includes specific support measures for students with disabilities in the special education schools to reinforce their learning, those students who later manage to attend university receive very little support.

### 3.2.2. Institutional Strategy Model

According to the Bolivian constitution, public universities enjoy great autonomy in their organization, operations and implementation of socioeducational policy. However, the principles and values that constitute the ideological foundations of university institutions are established by Bolivia’s national legislation concerning education. The philosophy underlying this legislation makes reference to participation in the educational system, the

accessibility of the system and the quality of the education. The discourse of the FGs contains information regarding the first two principles.

With respect to the principle of participation, one of the elements that informants consider key in university-level educational inclusion is the institutional strategy of co-government. University co-government is perceived as a way to strengthen the educational community by promoting student involvement in decision-making in institutional affairs, but also as an opportunity to learn about the exercise of active citizenship, something that will have positive repercussions on local community development.

1:52. As part of the Bolivian university system, they can include, because there are also accreditations and the capacity to choose, which is what characterizes these decision-making bodies (. . .), but individuals who become part of that dynamic are there because they want to contribute and take part in those decisions (P21♀).

The participants all pointed out the relevance of the various means of participation in the university community, all of which promote co-government. Yet they also highlight the need to deepen the democratic methods and ensure greater participation by all social agents in decision-making bodies, at both institutional and State levels.

1:65. Inclusive education should not be limited just to students, it should also reach university workers, including those with disabilities. It is not just a matter of access to the university; the institution has to adopt a posture more in tune with reality. (PPr21♀)

2:102. It would be good for the support staff if non-disabled students could also provide support (. . .). We have to cover the whole university. (E10♀)

In addition, co-government as an institutional strategy has favored application of the rule of “free admission” for persons with disabilities, a compensatory measure considered by the informants to be the greatest achievement in terms of inclusion in higher education in Bolivia. The process was long and it required close cooperation by the different institutions, both student organizations and those within the administration of the universities. In the view of the participants, the University Committees of Students with Disability have been the associations that have worked the hardest to guarantee compliance with the “free admission” rule in each university.

2:2. In 2007 direct admission for students with disability was approved. (. . .) In 2009 the first students with disabilities entered the university thanks to direct admission. That year’s Vice-chancellor gave the support needed for the direct admission accord (SD7♀).

The participants from private universities (many of which are Catholic) recognized the need for an institutional policy in Bolivia that can guide the inclusive strategy in higher education and that goes beyond the “superficial, transitory and assistance-focused measures” (PPr21♀). This would promote the development of coherent and homogenous policies regarding the right to education of student with special needs.

The participants stated that the institutional philosophy of the universities, both public and private, focuses on the inclusion of disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, creating decentralized educational facilities in rural areas that would otherwise have few opportunities for higher education. Thus, while they acknowledged the link between belonging to an indigenous community and socioeconomic inequality, they perceived that the measures adopted are neglecting other factors in educational inequality, such as disability, which, in addition, may be a further component of socioeconomic exclusion. Thus, while the compensatory measures of educational inclusion are viewed positively, participants stated that these measures are insufficient if they are not accompanied by socioeconomic inclusion measures that make the educational career of the targeted students sustainable.

1:14. We give direct admission to an indigenous person or a disabled person and we are not admitting millionaires, but rather indigenous people and people with disabilities. (. . .) The thing is, these people still have the problem of food, housing.... We are giving them support but it only goes half way. It is not enough to give them a spot at the university, because that is not the only requirement for doing well at the university. So, if we want to do things right, let’s give them full support (P16♂).

1:17. We should be concerned about them and not just about letting them in. The conditions needed to give these people support so that they can perform well and complete their studies are not there (P16♂)

As the participants pointed out, a large proportion of students with disabilities have trouble covering the costs of studying (materials, transportation, room and board), which, in their view, has a detrimental effect on their academic performance and their ability to complete their studies. In this regard, the measures put into practice are not considered sustainable, in that they do little more than facilitate direct admission of students; they are not able to lay a foundation for and effectively sustain the inclusive effects over time.

### 3.2.3. The Correlation between Rights and Resources

Discourse analysis allows the identification of a lack of concordance between the subjective rights of people with disabilities and the provision of resources for the exercise of such rights. On the one hand, the common narrative of all the informants indicates that the specific legislative framework is adequate and sufficient, reflects the principles of equality and social justice and follows the guidelines of the most demanding international bodies, but that its practical application in university communities is turning out to be deficient and inadequate. According to one of the participants:

1:19. (. . .) at this point we need no more rules but rather compliance with the rules. (SD7♀).

However, as a complement to the previous discourse, the informants also stated that the failure to comply with the rules is due largely to a lack of resources that would allow the measures to be implemented and respected with full guarantees.

1:25. (The allocation of resources) is a university policy that we should define at the University Congress and make into a sustainable policy. There is no consideration for these people. (P16♂).

That is, there is legislation regulating this group's access to higher education but the legislation does not have enough resources to ensure real, effective and sustainable implementation. The informants believe that these problems must be addressed with comprehensive State-level policies that are capable of unifying action criteria.

Thus, what those involved in inclusive university education are demanding is the possibility of applying both measures and specific resources that give operational content to the current legislation.

### 3.2.4. Upcoming Challenges

This section presents contributions made by the informants about the challenges, changes and actions that still need to be undertaken in order to achieve education that is fair, equitable, inclusive and sustainable for all.

The narratives regarding aims still to be met constitute a fundamental discourse in all of the FGs. The informants mentioned these challenges throughout their interventions and not necessarily in the specific block that the FGs dedicated to these issues. This dimension represents a central element of the analysis because it reflects the predominance of the shortcomings of educational inclusion policies in Bolivia.

In this respect the informants agreed that there is a clear need to guarantee the right to an inclusive education through the real and effective materialization of education policies. The experiences described reveal a persistent lack of practical implementation of the education policies.

1:78. Listening to the others here and summing it all up, I think that one real threat is politicization, the fact that psychological violence against this group is assumed, because they are recognized, they are used in discourses but when it comes to transforming it into reality, we see nothing. For example: I'm not sure the new infrastructure in the university has even recognized the right of people to move from place to place. The only department that has a ramp is Architecture, which just happens to be the only one that does not have any people with motor disabilities. The few students that have access to bathrooms adapted

for motor disabilities have to go to INEGAS, which is a private entity, but none of the university's infrastructures recognize that right. And for me that is specific psychological violence, it is one of the worst threats because it naturalizes the problem of a few people vs. their discourse (Pu4♀)

This discourse also shows how inclusion is used as a theoretical and political dimension but is not given the elements necessary to create a commitment within educational institutions. This idea finds its complement in the importance of generating an educational culture of inclusion, indisputably a challenge that must be given priority.

While the design of policies has resulted in legal recognition of the phenomena of exclusion of people with functional diversity, the informants placed the accent on the lack of shared values and attitudinal barriers as circumstances that hamper implementation of the right to an education for students with disabilities. For this reason, in the FGs there was mention of raising social and community awareness as a tool to move towards education systems committed to the right of education of all people and in equal conditions.

55:55. We don't have barriers, we have ramps, but someone has to help us and asking for help is uncomfortable, so they really should be enhanced with handrails. One observation was that the ramp had been at the Law School for a year and it had to be adapted to bring it up to code. I wanted to see what it was like but there was no way to access it, and in the bathrooms not a single one was adapted so that a wheelchair could get in. Society does not teach us to make sure we are included, that's why there should be more talks to raise awareness (SD23♂)

34:31. I have something important to say, because if I don't know the Other I am never going to identify with the Other, and I will understand the Other even less...or not at all. So, there must be a campaign or a movement to begin with, but not something temporary, because campaigns have their time and then disappear. It must not be temporary; it has to be ongoing (...). We need to march, have demonstrations, make sure we are heard, write formal letters as students, build awareness (SD7♀).

The strategy involves increasing social visibility in public areas. Raising awareness is understood not just as a set of formal, structured activities aimed at a specific audience. It is also continual and permanent actions carried out in public and that facilitate the raising of awareness about the reality of people with functional diversity. These proposals represent a change in the very conception of disability because it is the people with functional diversity who play the central role in the processes of social transformation.

In sum, informants pointed to the need for a systemic change in education systems. The expansion of public policies must be accompanied by opportunities to bring about cultural change in the people who comprise the educational institution. These findings show that the gap between legal declarations and the effective materialization of rights poses the primary challenge for the future.

To make progress in this direction, in the FGs emphasis was placed on attitudinal, cultural and structural factors as the main causes of the limited progress made in the institutionalization of rights. The narratives warn of the persistence of discriminatory processes towards students with disability. Advances on the legal level are necessary but not sufficient to ensure significant change on the path towards inclusion. Disability continues to be perceived as a personal, limiting and stigmatizing condition. Therefore, the value given to the education of this population group is not equal to that given to the population without disability.

As observed in the FGs, diversity is not considered an enriching factor that contributes to the well-being of individuals, groups and communities. On the contrary, diversity (whether functional, cultural, sexual or of any other type) is signified as an indicator of risk, fragility and/or vulnerability that justifies specific assistance for that person. In the context of education, functional diversity acts as an element that identifies subjects deserving of a set of special educational actions regulated by specific policies. However, as seen in this project's data, being a beneficiary of legal provisions that establish special educational attention by no means guarantees a real process of educational inclusion.

#### 4. Discussion and Main Conclusions

In this paper the main factors affecting the construction of inclusive education in Bolivia were analyzed. Specifically, the research sought to learn how inclusive education is defined and discussed, how people view the implementation of policies in this area and what challenges remain pending. Exploring these dimensions has allowed us to discover a series of characteristics that are essential for understanding how the inclusive capability of the Bolivian university system is being built.

In relation to the values and attributions that give meaning to inclusive education, the actors involved highlighted the positive influence of the values of respect for diversity, equality and rights. However, respect for diversity is mainly executed as an axiom linked to cultural richness, and not to functional diversity. In this regard, our study suggests that the theoretical construction of the diversity paradigm does not embrace multiple realities but rather a particular and limited vision of those oppressed groups that have had greater political protagonism. Despite the advances made in the visibility of functional diversity, disability is not often conceived as part of the richness of human diversity but rather as a negative and limiting condition for which there exists an obligation to offer special educational attention [44,45]. This limited understanding of the richness of functional diversity makes it difficult to progress towards the building of a discourse of inclusivity in the realm of education. The dominant discourses of participants who occupy management positions uncovered an ideal of disability built from adversity, reducing the opportunities given by higher education as a setting of privilege to reinvent a deteriorated and negative identity of functional diversity [46,47].

The individuals participating in this research also warn that bringing about conditions of equality will be very difficult if universal practices are used. In this regard, our work coincides with other studies conducted in different contexts [11–14]. On the one hand, the principle of equality underlies the ideological narrative of inclusive education [48–50], but the professors themselves denounce arbitrariness in the application of legislation, which conditions and restricts the principles of equity and equality from the perspective of inclusion.

This results in students with disabilities perceiving that they are conceived as “subjects of benevolence” and not as subjects of rights in conditions of equal opportunity, like other citizens. Our informants point to the importance of the (scant) political will, on the one hand, and of high levels of student engagement, on the other, as the main factors that have shaped the ideological development of inclusive education in Bolivian society and in the university community in particular. Our study thus reveals the importance of political and institutional involvement, and also the organization of processes of direct participation by individuals with functional diversity, as elements that directly influence the way the inclusive education paradigm is identified and the way that inclusive educational practices are incorporated. Coinciding with Zembylas [51], we put forward that the theorization of inclusive education should include, implicitly, how it is practiced, lived and experienced in each context. Mere enactment of a policy of inclusion does not carry with it positive and universal ethical values. The findings of this project can be taken as a warning of the need to study how we think about and approach inclusive education using a paradigm in which theoretical models incorporate the instrumentalization of inclusion.

Along these lines, in relation to inclusive policies, the principal findings of this research indicate that three dimensions are particularly significant and influential in the construction of educational inclusion of university students in Bolivia. These areas are: (a) the country’s socioeconomic conditions and legal framework; (b) the institutional strategy model; and (c) the correlation between rights and resources. Here it is important to point out one of the limitations of this project, related to the profile of the participants. Although the sample comprised the entire university community, through students, professors, administrative and specialized personnel, and academic posts, it was not possible for this last category to be represented by the highest academic positions of the participating universities. The testimony of high-ranking posts would have been very valuable in identifying the processes of

involvement and management by the highest decision-making levels of university organization. Their participation in future projects would no doubt lead to a better interpretation of the inclusive policies in place in the university system.

All the participants viewed very positively the progress made in recent decades in the area of social policies for educational inclusion of students with specific educational needs. These measures have been particularly beneficial for rural populations. However, with regard to the collective of people with disabilities, these actions have not been rolled out to their maximum potential. The informants criticized the disconnection between the different laws that regulate higher education and the absence of unified protocols to favor the transition from primary and secondary education to university education. These shortcomings indicate that there is a gap in the coverage provided by education policies, which is something that has occurred in other parts of the world as well [13,16]. In addition, the informants described a lack of transversality and intersectionality, which must be present in the design and implementation of educational inclusion policies [52,53].

In this same realm, that of the institutional strategy, there is a need to broaden the participation of all the social agents in the decision-making bodies, but it must also happen at the state level. Following the line drawn by previous projects [54,55], we are convinced that including the collective with disabilities has a positive impact on the design and implementation of inclusive actions, which will thus better reflect and respond to the diversity of needs. For example, according to the participants, the institutional model of the universities, both public and private, has developed with its sights set on achieving inclusion of the most underprivileged groups, creating decentralized educational facilities in rural areas which would otherwise be excluded from higher education. This process benefits indigenous communities because they are significantly affected by socioeconomic inequality. However, these measures do not target people with functional diversity and that also present a strong component of socioeconomic exclusion starting at early ages [56,57].

This research also points to a lack of correspondence between the recognition of the rights of people with functional diversity and the resources allocated to them. These findings coincide with previous works [58,59]. In the present project it is also suggested that even though there is legislation regulating the access of this group to higher education, not enough resources are provided to achieve full educational inclusion. Such processes have the effect of strengthening a private, alternative network in which students with disabilities seek additional resources through solidarity platforms or funding associations, in hopes of guaranteeing their ability to receive a quality education [60].

Inclusive policies are a frame of reference that must be materialized through the implementation of inclusive practices, actions and processes, within the universities themselves, that involve the institution and all of the social agents comprising the socioeducational community. This is the great challenge faced by inclusive higher education in Bolivia. According to our research, in this great challenge the main disruptive elements are the limited funding allocated by public institutions to the implementation of inclusive measures and the attitudinal barriers found in the university community.

The lack of funding is presented as one of the main problems running through inclusive education strategies at all levels and in different geographical contexts [26–28]. In addition to the inadequate funding model, the categorization of functional diversity ends up conditioning and restricting the ways in which inclusive education is implemented [61]. In this regard, our study shows that functional diversity is not signified as a value that enriches education but rather as an indicator of risk that identifies people who are beneficiaries of special educational attention. However, the findings also show that the recognition of rights by no means guarantees educational inclusion.

In addition to the elements studied, we must continue examining the new social and educational scenario as it arises due to the impact of COVID-19. The incipient international scientific production following the pandemic points to a growing interest in the urgent implementation of new models of educational support for students with functional diversity [62–66]. Also, in the specifically Latin American context, the pandemic



has only exacerbated the significant barriers already faced by persons with disabilities in the educational sphere [67]. The unsolved problems from before the pandemic are now accompanied by increased educational inequity, growing vulnerability and social-economic precariousness, plus the subsequent difficulty of accessing a job market that has become even more unstable and competitive after the pandemic [68].

Bearing this in mind, besides the changes in funding priorities and teaching models, it is important to remember the stress factors linked to adaptation processes, which lead to fear, anxiety and, on too many occasions, defenselessness [69]. The universities have an important role to play in the mediation of responses seeking to reduce these stress factors in a global and consensual manner linked to the World Education Coalition (UNESCO), with the aim of jointly seeking the best learning solutions, which include focusing on students' psychosocial problems [70]. From the perspective of this study's findings, it is becoming increasingly necessary to establish solid links between academic institutions, professors and students to ensure regular social interactions, promote social protection measures and respond to the psychosocial problems that students with functional diversity may face in situations of risk like those experienced as a result of the pandemic.

Therefore, we urge scholars to delve more deeply into these areas, in search of practical solutions to the needs associated with functional diversity in the field of higher education and that are fundamental to building a true model of educational inclusion for all persons, groups and communities.

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