Adult education and belonging: A view from Ecuador

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Abstract

Access to education is a matter of individual and communal justice and development. However, simple access to education, and simple inclusion as often noted in DEI, fail to capture the structures of power and inequality that limit the potential of education. It is not enough to be in education, we must aim for an education adult students can belong to. This requires that we re-conceptualize belonging as complex, non-binary, and multifaceted, acknowledging the struggles of our adult students to participate in education. For this re-conceptualization, we call upon theories of liminal belonging, in particular Anzaldúa's idea of mestiza consciousness. We use adult education students in Ecuador as a case study to reflect on the gender and identity struggles to belong and conclude with some recommendations of how pedagogy and institutions can be adapted to foster belonging for adult learners.

Keywords: adult education, belonging, inclusion, liminality, DEI

> …Not even the best-intentioned leadership can bestow independence as a gift. The liberation of the oppressed is a liberation of women and men, not things. Accordingly, while no one liberates himself by his efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others.
> Paulo Freire

Introduction

Adult education is a matter of social justice. Neoliberal discourses present education as a necessary tool to prepare a state's labor for ever-changing technical and economic needs. This explains the emphasis on adult education in Sustainable Development Goal 4, which

includes target 4.4 'By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship' (UNDP, 2022). Yet, education is not simply an instrumental good. Education is an intrinsic good as it provides tools, strategies, and spaces for individuals to fulfill their human capacity (Sen, 2009; Rajapakse, 2016). Moreover, retaining education's link to the capitalist labor model reinforces its colonial epistemology: that knowledge is only that which serves the markets. Re-thinking education as a personal tool of empowerment (Rowlands, 1997) requires considering the individuals accessing and using education and what knowledge is for these individuals outside and beyond the structures of coloniality. In other words, it requires rethinking epistemology itself to consider how decolonial epistemologies can be built based on indigenous knowledge and cosmovisions that differ from the Western logos (Mignolo, 2009).

Education is also a tool for social change as students and teachers are empowered to shape society in a manner that allows for the greatest well-being. This is possible, again, only if education is critically assumed and identified as a political fact. This requires an educational policy and practice that seeks to overcome the traditional role of education as a transmitter of hegemonic narratives and, consequently, as an instrument of oppression. Education for social justice requires the involvement of the population in education, so everyone can have the necessary tools to participate in the building of a just society. This includes all adults, supporting the ideal of life-long learning. In particular, this process requires the amplification of voices that have been historically silenced and the acknowledgment of how education has been built *on* those silences (Sriprakash et al., 2020)

Despite its instrumental and intrinsic importance, adult access to education varies around the world. Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova (2017, p. 97) note that 'younger adults, those with higher educational attainment, those with jobs, or those employed in high-skilled occupations, participate more frequently [in education] than older, low-educated, and unemployed people or those employed in low-skilled occupations'. The COVID-19 pandemic will have sharpened these inequalities, with adults less likely than youth to make use of technology to advance their education in times of pandemic (Patrinos & Shmis, 2020).

In Ecuador, the focus of this paper, adult education, defined as access to any level of education for those over 18, is limited and of limited quality (OECD, 2018). Lack of access to education particularly impacts indigenous and Afro populations (Oviedo, 2022). For example, a 2008 study by Minority Rights Group International found that in 2001 'one-third of the indigenous population was illiterate compared to 4.8% of whites' (cited in UNESCO 2016, p.1). The 2008 constitution emphasized that primary, secondary, and tertiary education should be secular and free to access. However, entrance exams for tertiary education in practice favor those with the resources to obtain quality primary and secondary education (Rivera, 2019), which can be seen as a regressive tax. More importantly, even when access to education is possible for adults in Ecuador, there is a significant difference between *being in*, and *belonging to*, the educational setting. Belonging, we argue, makes all the difference.

This paper focuses on how we conceptualize belonging and explores adult students' expressions of belonging. It is key to understand that belonging is not unidimensional, unilinear, or binary. One does not simply start and stop belonging. Belonging is a multifaceted, multitemporal process embedded in different fields of power (Bourdieu, 2020). Discussing the inclusion of adult students in education requires us to consider these different fields, the distinct processes of entering each field, and the challenges of

managing their intersectionality. It also requires us to consider that one can partially belong in multiple fields and, therefore, we need to theorize the multiplicity of belonging/non-belonging and existing in these liminal areas of complexity.

This paper will start by presenting our methodology. We will then briefly review how educational inclusion has expanded historically in Ecuador and use this as a background to discuss how belonging to education has been conceptualized. We will then move on to theorize belonging by making use of insights from the literature on mestizaje and liminality. Mestizaje has been a key narrative in the construction of the Ecuadorian state, historically used to limit access to education and operationalize it as a tool of colonialism. We argue that rethinking education from a mestiza perspective can liberate it from colonialism and create spaces where non-hegemonic adult students can belong. This paper explores liminal belongings and looks at some of the ways our students have struggled to belong in relation to their other gender and identity structures.

Methodology

As Noblit and Hare state, understanding people and situations in emic terms promises respect toward people that positivism does not allow (Noblit & Hare, 1988). We try to center our work on the voices of the students who shared with us during our teaching. Our goal is to expand inclusion in education by bringing those voices to the center of our thinking about what education should be, seeking to address Jackson and Piette's criticism that:

> The voices of those who live outside the academic pale and on the margins of the Euro-American world are heard only occasionally, or in snatches, to make a point or confirm a hypothesis. These individuals are seldom described in depth or detail. Their presence is never deeply felt, and their own words are eclipsed by the specialist jargons of the academy (Jackson & Piette, 2015, p. 4).

We use qualitative, reflexive, post-critical ethnographic work to analyze particular forms of everyday politics, morality, and understanding (Noblit & Hare 1988; Anders, 2019), which form the basis of education: axiology, formation, and information. In this paper, we focus our ethnographic perspective on the 'everyday' as a concept, which implies, on one hand, a multilocal ethnography, where the 'world system' is not predefined, but rather the research explores how it is constructed (Marcus, 2001). On the other hand, this perspective allows a perception of everyday life that assumes a nonorthodox process of collecting information by connecting observation, memories, and specific interactions to organize the aforementioned 'world'. Thus, we have built an ethnographic body over years of teaching and collecting both our students' reflections and our critical notes on the experience and practice of teaching, on which this paper is developed.

We work with adult Masters students in pedagogy or educational sciences, whose trajectories to education highlight a variety of struggles including gendered divisions of time use and being part of cultural, racial, and ethnic groups who are not part of the elite. Making use of the insights from existential anthropology (Jackson & Piette, 2015), we actively and reflectively (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1989) consider and analyze the daily experiences of teaching and interacting with these students, to problematize adult belonging and exclusion in higher education. As part of this study, we have reviewed legal and educational texts produced by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, interviewed a Director of the Ministry of Education of Ecuador, analyzed interactions and discussions with students, and reviewed relevant literature on belonging and education.

All students and Ministry's employee's quotes are anonymized and non-dated to prioritize their privacy and well-being.

Opening education to 'others'

The educational enterprise cannot be separated from the colonial enterprise. Mass Western education was started as a tool to train workers for the industrial revolution, and to allow workers to labour without care concerns. Education brought by the empires to their colonies was designed to train workers while maintaining and justifying the status quo. Educational access was limited to limit access to cultural, social, and economic capital.

In what is now Ecuador, Spanish rule denied educational rights to indigenous populations, who were only trained in arts and handicrafts while African descendants were enslaved until 1851 (Ayala Mora, 2008). Ecuadorian independence in 1830 was simply an administrative change for these marginalized populations, resulting in no substantial change to social relations or educational access. Independence meant entering a period of coloniality where education was used as an arm of state power, sustaining the hierarchies of power established under Spanish rule (Quijano, 1992; Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007). Until the early 20th century, education was led by the Catholic Church, available only to Catholics, following European models and designed by European visitors. The Liberal Revolution of 1895 established secular, universal education. Even after its expansion in 1895, however, education remained a hostage of political forces, with money and favors handed out as payment for political support rather than for the wellbeing of students (Ossenbach, 1999), and with its Euro-centric logic and epistemology unquestioned (Oviedo, 2018).

Thus, the educational institutions set up by the Ecuadorian state limited what knowledge each population could access, and how this education was embodied and assessed (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). They supported a particular view of time and aging – with education seen as a linear process that should be undertaken in a certain order, at a given time, prioritizing children's education until well into the 20th century. Educational institutions normalized narratives of race, gender, and normality that sustained colonial power structures. Non-whites and women were presented as less rational, and unable to undertake advanced academic learning (Goetschel, 2007). Consequently, struggles to expand education – both in form and access - paralleled struggles to alter society, as changing how a society is educated has the potential to liberate and transform its members.

Women's education was led by the Catholic church after independence, reserved just for women of the elite, who were taught 'useful knowledge' for their domestic role, based on attitudes of piety, modesty, and honor so they might become 'gentle wives and mothers' (Soasti Toscano, 2001 quoted in Oviedo, 2013, p. 104). Education for women saw some expansion in the 20th century (Goetschel, 2007), affecting productive processes and the structures and dynamics of the family, care, and the state. Feminist scholars critiqued patriarchal narratives embedded in mainstream and critical pedagogy and highlighted the need to analyze the experience of women as students and educators, as well as the curricula content (Cox & Pascall, 1994; Hughes, 1995). The Organic Educational Law passed in Ecuador after the 2008 constitution acknowledged education's role in protecting women against violence and clarified the responsibility of the state in education noting that the state must 'Ensure that all educational entities develop an education in citizen participation, enforceability of rights, inclusion, and equity, gender equality, sexuality and environment, with an intersectional vision and a focus on rights'

(LOEI, 2011. Chapt. 2). From 2012, co-ed education was imposed on traditionally single-sex schools (Últimas Noticias, 2012). This is only a first step, however, as in these formally co-ed schools, boys and girls are still taught different curriculums in certain areas (Oviedo, 2018).

Meanwhile attempts by indigenous peoples to develop their educational institutions with their own pedagogy and epistemology, in their mother tongues, were severely repressed until late in the 20th century (Oviedo, 2018). State indigenous educational policy focused on literacy in Spanish, not in indigenous languages, and the political nature of education meant that rural, non-white populations received less educational funding. Intercultural and bilingual education became a new educational focus in the late 20th century. Interestingly, Intercultural Bilingual Education has a lower female school dropout rate in comparison to the regular state system (Oviedo, 2018, p. 133). The philosophy and praxis of this alternative education, in particular how it can be mainstreamed, is still an issue of contention in local and national politics. More importantly, for this paper, the focus on bilingual-intercultural education remains on children, implementing this model with adult students requires further conceptualization.

Paulo Freire's insightful criticisms of the educational system focused not only on who has access to education but on what that education involves and how it takes place. Freire saw the student not as a recipient of education, but as an active member of the educational process (Freire, 1978). The Freirean proposal is based on the fact that every individual can, from reflection on one's reality, build knowledge. Thus, the axis of this emancipatory education considers the individual as a reflective and critical entity capable of questioning the environment that surrounds them and the world in which they live (Oviedo, 2023). Emancipatory education is 'basically the pedagogy of men who are engaged in the struggle for their liberation' (Freire, 1978, p. 52). This opposes colonial educational models, which rely on what Freire calls banking education, in which the educator deposits knowledge in the student – tell students what they need to know and do not acknowledge the students' experiential knowledge. Intercultural bilingual education sees education in one's language as central to accessing and sharing one's own knowledge. The focus here is not just on learning the same material differently or with new tools but on rethinking what is learned, rethinking what knowledge is. However, this deeper change can be lost if the focus is limited to language and participation.

The 21st century in Ecuador has seen a further expansion in the conceptualization and application of educational inclusion to consider education more holistically and to advocate for inclusion along different dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, age, culture, religion, as well as considering capacity, affective and sexual orientations, class, disabilities, and migration (Salas Guzmán & Salas Guzmán, 2016). The acronym of DEI – diversity, equality, and inclusion – has become increasingly mainstream, with a blooming industry of DEI consultants guiding educational institutions on 'how to do DEI'.

But DEI has not yet brought us to education's full potential. In part because so many are still excluded. 'Who is excluded?' from education in Latin America Guillermo Ruíz wonders. The list is long:

> Many and for many reasons: the poor, peasants, sectors of the informal economy, the unemployed, indigenous peoples, ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, people from LGTBIQ collectives, refugees, illegal immigrants, among others. A social stigma weighs on these populations that contributes to increase the mechanisms of exclusion, all of which are expressed in the school systems (Ruíz, 2022. p.1).

These exclusions reflect existing fields of power – gender, nationality, and ethnicity, among others - and serve to establish education's boundaries.

International organizations note that 'one of the ends of inclusion is to confront exclusion and social segmentation, which is why one of its main hallmarks is access to diverse schools, which are the foundation for advancing toward more inclusive and democratic societies' (UNESCO, 2007, p. 39), yet structural inequalities, typical of capitalism, and especially of dependant capitalism (Rada Argol, 2014), limit or make it impossible for most countries to achieve this inclusion by increasing the number and diversity of its educational institutions.

Periphery and semi-periphery countries struggle to grant educational inclusion as a right. Even in those countries where the legislation has generated regulations for inclusive education, either from compliance with international agreements or from the modification of standards in education laws, adequate implementation has been difficult or impossible. This is what we have noted with non-gendered and intercultural bilingual education in Ecuador (Gobierno de la República del Ecuador, 2021). However, it is not just because there are still exclusions that education lags in its potential. It is also the case that 'inclusion' is not enough.

What does it mean to belong?

Behind the policy challenges to legislating and implementing inclusive education lies the very question of what inclusion means. While inclusion is presented in opposition to injustice and social exclusion, these concepts are polysemic. Social exclusion is associated with *marginality*, with being excluded from the core, a term developed by Park in 1928 (Ruíz, 2022). Both inclusion and exclusion are associated also with the normal/abnormal, following the normalizing and clinical bases that arise from modern colonial rationality, obsessed with classifying and demarcating reality and 'normal/abnormal' subjects to establish and validate hierarchies (Mara et al., 2021). To be excluded from education, therefore, is not only about lacking access to resources or credentials but also about being labeled as somehow less than the ideal normal. As deficient. To be included, on the other hand, is presented as a route into the core, an escape from marginality. However, inclusion can also mean compliance with the power structures.

Moreover, inclusion and exclusion are in constant change, they are unstable, redacting their borders in relation to individual and collective processes. The power structures that determine inclusion/exclusion have historical roots in the colonization processes (Gómez Hernández, 2018). Colonial practices affected not only the former colonies but also the metropolis. The concept of race organized colonial societies from a basis of inequality and provided a color grading of power that still pervades modern postcolonial societies (Quijano, 2014). In Ecuador to be educated is assumed as being white/whiter. As Clark notes '...by definition Indians were seen as ignorant because it was assumed that Indians who were educated would automatically become mestizos' (Clarke 1998, cited in Roitman, 2009)

As Armijo-Cabrera states, while notions of inclusion and exclusion in education have become mainstream in academia and policy-making at an almost global level, when deconstructed these concepts reveal their political dimension, revealing implicit meaning and connotations (Armijo-Cabrera, 2018). Armijo-Cabrera thus posits questions about how we understand inclusion, beyond its semantics:

> What does inclusion mean? Inclusion in what? What is included (dimensions, opinions, borders)? Why do we speak of inclusion? In contrast to what is one included? From where do we speak about inclusion (discipline, field, theoretical referents)? What type of study

are we undertaking (type, objective, theoretical-methodological focus)? How are educational policies and pedagogical practices concretized in the investigation units? (2018, p. 3, authors' translation).

To these questions we might add, how can a population oppressed by the values and economic forces of a state be included in the educational system that embodies these values and forces? Put differently, we face questions of epistemic injustice (Mignolo, 2009; Grosfoguel, 2007) as the oppressed are asked to learn to use the tools of the master (Lorde, 2018) rather than having their own tools valued.

Thinking of liminal belonging instead of inclusion

We face a paradox: the need to include populations in educational systems that contribute to the very structures that exclude them, since inclusion presents a path toward reconstructing education into its liberating potential. Moreover, we note that it is not enough for these populations to be 'in' the classroom. For education to change, they must be active actors in the education. They must belong to the educational process.

Theories of mestizaje can help us to think of a complex, non-binary way of belonging to a space of inherent inequalities and contradictions. These theories can also help us think about the possibility of belonging to multiple, contradictory spaces, in a manner that can be subversive and progressive. Mestizaje refers to ethnic mixture in Latin America – a mixture that emerged from the violent conquest of the Americas by Europeans. The mestizo narrative of inclusion created by Latin American states served to obfuscate and justify racial, gender, and economic inequalities created in the colonization process. Inclusion to the state was granted but only by excluding indigenous and African roots. Mestizaje became infamously 'an all-inclusive ideology of exclusion' (Stutzman, 1981). Yet from this space of inequality, injustice, and exclusion through inclusion, mestizos have found new ways to belong, at times solidifying, and at times questioning the boundaries of what a mestizo is.

How do individuals belong to the mestizo state? Belonging is dynamic and problematic. It is not a given and it is, in fact, not always desired, as belonging to the state requires an acknowledgment and acceptance of the structure and labels created by colonial powers. Gloria Anzaldúa (2012, p. 99-102) proposes that mestizas, in the borders, walk between cultures and are in all cultures at the same time, proposing a liminal, complex, multiple, and contested belonging:

> Because I, a mestiza,
> continually walk out of one culture
> and into another,
> because I am in all the cultures at the same time…

Anzaldúa continues that it is not just a matter of moving between spaces and inhabiting a liminal land of contradictory overlaps, but mestizaje consciousness is also a complex interaction with the binaries that create boundaries, challenging these in an embodied struggle for ultimate non-bounded inclusion:

> it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions… The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner… (Anzaldúa, 2012).

The mestiza consciousness, as presented by Anzaldúa, guides us to rethink belonging as dynamic, as a process not only of opposition but of reconstruction, questioning, challenging, and creation. This is belonging in liminal spaces, where you are and are not part of a community, where your very existence questions what the community stands for and who else should be included. It is not a simple, passive inclusion but a process of contestation. This conception of mestizaje is in line with decolonial thought, because it questions and problematizes mestizo as a homogenizing concept (Stutzman, 1981), a useful tool to 'Europeanise' the culturally and subjectively indigenous, as part of modernization toward whitening (Quijano, 2006), erasing diversity to grant hegemony to white domination. This concept of mestizaje assumes mixture most broadly, not as a genetic outcome, but as a human experience resulting from the clash of cultures that is the basis of colonialism.

Borders, liminal spaces, are inherently queried, and also the most radical spaces, as they are where changes can be made to expand who can belong. Freire refers to this potential for the liminal inhabitant when he notes 'To surmount the situation of oppression, [people] must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.' (Freire, 1978, p. 47). A liminal space reacts and reflects on cultural assimilation educational policies promoted established on behalf of the 'national culture' (Quijano, 2006).

When thinking about how adult students can belong to education, in a manner that allows them to live their lives fully and use education toward social change, this is the belonging we must operationalize. Adult students must consider a complex belonging that does not deny the inherent tensions of participating in an educational system that might discredit certain of their life experiences or communities but faces those tensions and builds upon them. Adult students might struggle to belong to the world of education, with its current rigid norms, hierarchies, and privileged knowledge. Returning to education as an adult, undertaking education while working, or being a non-traditional student, requires a flexible conceptualization and practice of belonging.

This is what Anzaldua's framework adds to previous discussions of decolonizing education and epistemology (Mitova, 2020). Anzaldua's focus on the lived experience 'in-between', constantly changing and adapting, highlights the fact that decolonization is not a single event but a continuous process (Mbembe, 2015, p.15) and that in that process we can find new ways of belonging. This is particularly powerful for adult students who belong to multiple realms and, in Ecuador, those considered of 'mixed ethnicity'.

Negotiating belonging

In our work with adult students in tertiary education, challenges to belonging are a discussion of daily pedagogical practice. When students doubt their ability to continue because of their identity, because of other commitments, or because of the content of the education they are experiencing, we enter a discussion of why and how they belong to the educational space despite these challenges. We negotiate policies to try and create spaces of belonging for our students while supporting their growing critical questioning of the structures that create these challenges.

The following are some reflections on the many ways our adult students struggle to feel they belong and how we have sought to find ways to extend their belonging in education. In our concluding discussion, we will highlight some of the policy implications of these reflections.

Belonging as a woman in Ecuador: gender and caring roles

In Ecuador, gender roles keep women out of adult education. Rethinking gender challenges through a mestizaje framework highlights that the solution is not to try to change or stop traditional female roles, but rather to understand that adult women students might need and want to straddle multiple roles. And this straddling, while challenging, also allows new understanding and knowledge to emerge. In this section, we will engage with the experiences of students in the Master offered by the Faculty of Education in Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Ecuador.

Most of these students are primary and secondary teachers who seek a master's degree to advance to management positions in schools or government. These students are women who start their workday at 7:30 in the morning and finish it at 3:30 p.m. They must then go from their schools to the University to attend courses which are taught three days a week from 4:30 to 8:30 p.m. Gender roles in Ecuador mean that these women are also expected to undertake domestic cleaning and caring duties before and after these working and studying hours. They need to support parents, manage their own children's educational needs, and prepare clothes and food for the household. They often go to bed only around midnight. In a few cases, husbands have begun to assume some of these care duties most often, however, these students are burdened with a double workload that impacts their academic performance. 'Sometimes I arrive home after my classes and my husband already has prepared the dinner, but sometimes he arrives even later' (Blanca, 2023). It, unsurprisingly, impacts their physical wellbeing: in class their physical exhaustion is evident, which in turn requires greater exertion from the lecturer to create a dynamic atmosphere.

Since the Covid pandemic, some of the courses have been held online. This has undoubtedly improved inclusion for these female students in multiple ways. First, by decreasing the burden of commuting which particularly impacts students from more marginal neighborhoods. Second, while students note that the face-to-face modality was a richer experience than the virtual one, they state that in the virtual modality they can at least have time to be close to their children and carry out other domestic activities. 'Even if it is not the same, at least I am home, so my kids feel me nearby. I feel a little bit less like a bad mother' (Rosa, 2023). The tension here is between being a student, advancing in a competitive career as a breadwinner, and fulfilling gendered caring roles. Students mention that even when there are other adults to care for their families 'there is nothing like a mother' thus arguing that they cannot be replaced and feel guilt when asking other adults for help.

The question, then, is how can adult women belong in higher education while fulfilling their caring roles. Distance education has helped by allowing them to almost physically be in two places. However, as Blanca underlines:

> Online education is more comfortable for us, going directly from school to home, but, definitely, the quality decreases, despite the teachers' efforts. Dialogue, and debates, that are crucial for education processes in the precise moment it comes (sic), these are not always possible online (Blanca, 2023).

There is a quality trade-off. Moreover, while the physical strain might be improved, the psychological strain is not addressed. Women are still feeling the need to be in two places and feeling unable to fulfil either role. The liminality of mestizaje here would highlight the need to guide our students away from the false dichotomy of two identities, where one excludes the other, and rather to reflect on the knowledge their positions as mothers,

women, carers, teachers and students in Ecuador gives them. What insights this liminality brings to the practice of learning and teaching.

This is a reconsideration of the content of education that allows the possibility of reflecting on their curricular practices and even questioning the limits of 'rational Western' epistemology. Allowing the knowledge of caring to become a point of reflection for pedagogy, revaluing their caring experiences, and refocusing on these experiences as central, rather than peripheral or in competition with their education. This strategy might help breach the practice of the two roles these students are seeking to fulfill, supporting their well-being.

Belonging as teachers: class and labor roles

Adults studying education while working as teachers face a particular hybridity of knowledge, as they learn about the possibilities and goals of education, yet might find themselves unable to practice these due to the political and economic context. The income of some teachers in the Education MA has improved since the reforms to the Organic Law for Intercultural Education (Gobierno de la República del Ecuador, 2021). The salary of those in urban public schools is enough to satisfy basic needs but not to have substantial savings. These teachers have 40 to 50 students from low socio-economic backgrounds per class, in schools with very poor infrastructure. The teachers at these schools must deal with a lack of didactic material, malnutrition, and domestic violence. In academic terms, they also struggle with the deficiencies created by two years of pandemic, for children with very limited home support, which meant a significant reduction in students' skills in almost all subjects 'The pandemic meant one, almost two academic years lost. Despite the efforts and having developed online courses, it was not the same. Now we see all these academic vacuums, students forgot basic content' (Maria, 2023). As students these teachers sit between the theoretical ideals of education, and the reality of poverty limiting students' options while expanding teachers' responsibilities.

On the other hand, teachers from private schools which serve the middle and upper classes, state that their salary is low compared to that of public-school teachers. Within a tacit school hierarchy:

> We feel like we are the "last wheel of the car" because they need to respond to the whims of the students, especially while grading subjects, a practice that is discreetly endorsed by the school authorities, who try to be sympathetic with the students' parents, who "want to see good grades for their children since they are paying high school fees" (Rosa, 2023).

Teachers then become implicit employees of wealthier parents, working to support the class structure to preserve the school's income and their own. As students in education, they are torn between their ideals of teachers as social transformers, and their inability to practice this given economic and power inequalities.

In general, the teaching profession is not valued in Ecuador. 'Nowadays, teachers are seen as those who could not enter the university to study more important careers…or those who could not find work and who opted for teaching as a way to survive' (Luisa, 2023). The devaluing of the teaching profession continues despite recent state policy (2013), which launched a bi-annual invitation for professionals to become primary and secondary public school teachers. The Ministry of Education's 'I want to be a teacher' program had 80,000 applicants by the end of 2013 '…of whom about 19,000 are already eligible [meaning] they have already passed the evaluations and will be able to access the 'merit and opposition' contests to gain a teaching position' (Ministerio de Educación de

la República del Ecuador, 2013). This program appeals to professionals as the government remains the main source of employment. Neoliberal policies have cut down public employment in other areas, making education an attractive option.

Teachers as students, face the contradiction of learning about the importance of education while living in a society that chronically undervalues the work of educators. They are torn between the ideal of theories and the realities of limitation from poverty and class hierarchies. Yet it is from this challenging duality that new insights for pedagogy can emerge. If education is to advance it must do so from the experiential knowledge of teachers in the field, thus pedagogy must prioritize helping students translate their experiences into knowledge that can be shared.

Language, identity, and belonging

Bernstein (2003) states that language is related to social class, with each class managing its own language idiosyncrasies. The language of education often reflects the language of the upper classes, creating a barrier to working-class, migrant, and indigenous students. This means some of our adult students face the additional challenge of learning a new language – whether it is the language of a different class or a different tongue – in addition to learning the subject content. They need to learn to use specific vocabulary and neologisms, to understand and use inferences, and to use language at a level that transcends the contextual reading of texts. They need to use academic rhetoric and conventions. Returning to school as an adult means learning to read quite long texts, an uncommon practice in most adults' working lives. It requires decoding texts with an intricate conceptual organization using a different logic from that needed for daily success in the work sphere.

Several students in the MA program are indigenous persons who work in bilingual intercultural education establishments. Since Spanish is not their mother tongue, they have difficulties reading academic texts that have specific vocabulary, 'Sometimes I need to read twice or even three times to fully understand academic articles. Sometimes I even need to look for the meaning of determined words. It takes me longer for this reason' (Maria, 2023). Above all, they have difficulties presenting their homework and research papers to Western academic standards. 'Even when I understand, the way I write is not how I am supposed to write, so I don't think my work reflects my understanding' (Maria, 2023).

As Maria's discussion notes, language barriers are not only about vocabulary but about modes of communicating, which are cultural, not just linguistic. There are deeper aspects to communication that have to do with the indigenous worldview and cosmology. Helping indigenous students feel they belong to the educational program, therefore, requires rethinking communication, not just in terms of language, but in terms of how information is understood and shared.

> There are some experiences I have with my students that I struggle to translate into Spanish for discussion, but even more, it is difficult to explain ideas and experiences that are different from what people here in the city think is normal (Miriam, 2023).

This discussion calls to question more broadly how education and learning are constrained within Western institutions. University is a Western creation that opposes certain indigenous educational practices that are based on narratives linked to community knowledge and oral culture. There is an incompatibility with a culture of academic writing, where education is done in segmented issues (subjects), organized as such from

Western rationality. Holistic knowledge can appear as opposed to scientific learning, which often overvalues numerical data. Individual argumentation is valued over communal knowledge-sharing and creation. For Indigenous students belonging to 'formal' education can, therefore, feel impossible if it requires them to deny or at least silence their cultural ways of knowing and learning. An inclusive education requires creating spaces where knowledge can be shared in multiple ways – not just in multiple languages – where indigenous knowledge is valued and welcomed.

Many of our students identify as mestizo, not indigenous. As Luisa said:

> I am not indigenous. It is good that there are universities for them, but that is not who I am. Most Ecuadorians consider themselves mestizos and we need an education that helps us understand what that is, without complexes or shame.

Mestizo ethnic identity in the context of Ecuador is an inherently liminal one: mestizos are constantly working to define who they are in relation to or in contrast to other identities. This process of self-definition is energy intensive. However, it can be encouraged as a process of self-reflection and critical historical awareness, from which an understanding of how education in Ecuador must change to overcome its colonial legacy might emerge.

For our adult students – of different economic classes, speakers of different languages, identifying with different ethnic backgrounds – unquestionably belonging to the coloniality of Western education is impossible. Their language, their ways of knowing, and their search for identity, locate them at odds with Western-based institutions that are only beginning to be decolonized. However, it is in the space of engaging with these institutions that new ways of knowing about themselves can emerge and inform future pedagogy. It is in this space that critical realizations about education can crystalize and inform future policies or criticism. As teachers, we stand to learn from the reflections our students bring so that we can jointly build new educational structures that allow belonging.

Concluding remarks

This paper has noted that inclusion and exclusion are two sides of the same coin. Both concepts are expressions of the social organization established by colonialism and remain as its heritage. Inclusion/exclusion is deeply linked to social inequalities and perceptions of otherness. The social exclusion of non-whites from education in colonial days is nowadays the patrimony of the marginal, who can be the non-white, non -western, the poor, some women, homosexuals, neurodiverse… regarded as abnormal, those who struggle and often do not succeed in mainstream education. This paper, then, has focused on how we can rethink belonging in education to overcome this colonial legacy.

Adult student participation in higher education is a matter of justice which can only be achieved by adult students belonging, not just being included, in education. We have argued that we must re-conceptualize belonging as complex, non-binary, and multifaceted, to acknowledge the struggles of our adult students to belong to education. We have highlighted several struggles of belonging: gender, economic class, identity, and language. We will now briefly note possible ways to address some of these struggles to create more flexible spaces of belonging for adult students.

The gendered expectations of female students in the private space, give rise to a struggle to belong to academia with its demands on time and schedules, and the time and energy demands of their roles as mothers, and carers. To help students bridge these two

spaces – of studies and of mothering – one of the authors sometimes shares their struggles as a working mother, helping to make these challenges visible and creating space to help students discuss possible solutions. While the universities provide some training on time management skills, we realized the problem was often not poor management, but time scarcity, and did our best to make deadlines flexible, work around childcare schedules, and support students with compassion and understanding. It was important to engage with students' stories of caring to help them holistically belong to the learning space. At times students came to us with an ultimatum. They felt they could not belong to the two contradictory worlds: the world of caring with its fluid, emotional, never-ending demands, and the world of studies, with its requirement for linear, rational, scheduled work. It was our job, beyond lecturing, to help them navigate a path between the two which required tremendous determination and strength from them as individuals.

In addressing economic class struggles we openly and thoughtfully discussed with our students our reactions to economic disparities and our placing in the hierarchy to help students see educational figures as belonging to more than one class. As greater economic diversity among students is possible, the opportunity for richer conversations that challenge assumptions can take place. There is, however, the need to create safe spaces for students to process the emotional costs of understanding economic injustices. Similarly, we need to consider curriculum materials that allow access in terms of content, language, and language needs.

Considering indigenous students, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar has agreed to flexibility in the assessment of student tasks. We have also worked on the possibility that indigenous students can present their work in the Kichwa language, the most widely spoken indigenous language in the country. These academic tasks can be graded and checked by indigenous lecturers from the University who speak this language, although this will need to consider the added workload to these lecturers. Thus, this requires institutional support to provide multi-lingual instruction that can help students develop linguistically without undermining their educational advancement. There is further need, however, to more thoroughly consider new models of learning and assessment that are compatible with non-western forms of learning.

These are a few areas that can create tension in belonging to education for adult students. Our discussion of these highlights the need for flexibility – in schedules and teaching – for creativity – in teaching and assessment – and critical thinking about the creation and delivery of education to support diverse adult students in their educational journey.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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Appendix

Interviews

Cristina, Ministry of Education of Ecuador, interview January the 4th 2023, Quito.
Blanca, student. Faculty of Education UASB, focus group, December the 1st, 2022, Quito
Luisa, student. Faculty of Education UASB, focus group, December the 1st, 2022, Quito
Maria, student. Faculty of Education UASB, focus group, December the 1st, 2022, Quito
Miriam, student. Faculty of Education UASB, focus group, December the 1st, 2022, Quito
Rosa, student. Faculty of Education UASB, focus group, December the 1st, 2022, Quito