

Decolonizing inclusive education: Potential contributions of participatory research, postcolonial thinking and Ubuntu worldview

Victoria Mehringer¹ and Yahya El-Lahib

Abstract

PURPOSE: This article examines how knowledge production creates and maintains colonial dominance and unequal power relations between the Global North and the Global South, with a focus on the context of international inclusive education. It questions how participatory research approaches can methodologically manage these power relations in international practice settings. Dominant Eurocentric scholarship and knowledge have created processes of Othering to justify the supposed superiority of knowledge and practices from the Global North and the assumed inferiority of knowledge from the South. Thus, it is important to understand how the production of knowledge, in the colonial past and contemporary neocolonial world, is shaped by power dynamics and relations. Inclusive education can play a significant role to help these colonial dynamics and their impact on practices that affect marginalized social groups. These power imbalances influence intercultural and international research projects, especially in the field of inclusion and disability. Despite extensive knowledge about disability in the Global South, Eurocentric and Western knowledge production is largely dominated by the Global North.

METHOD: The article offers a dialogue on the extent to which participatory research can methodologically help manage these power relations in international comparative research on disability and inclusion. The paper also discusses limitations and challenges faced by inclusive education researchers navigating global power dynamics and realities. The paper offer recommendations on how to decolonize inclusive education research informed participatory research informed by postcolonial thinking and Ubuntu World views.

RESULTS: The theoretical dialogue shows that participatory research, with its ontological and epistemological foundations, is able to decolonize research in the international research context on disability.

CONCLUSION: The conclusion of this work is that a foundation of postcolonial theories, participatory research and disability/inclusive education provides a solid ground for initiating a paradigm shift.

Points of interest

- While the Global North often occupies a dominant position in producing knowledge about disability, perspectives and insights from the Global South are frequently overlooked or marginalized, reflecting ongoing inequalities in research, resources, and recognition.
- This hierarchy of knowledge is closely linked to colonial histories, shaping whose knowledge is valued, whose voices are heard, and whose experiences are sidelined in academic contexts.

¹ Corresponding author: victoria.mehringer@fhnw.ch

- Exploring participatory research through a postcolonial lens and discussing the ontological similarities with the Ubuntu Philosophy from African Societies.
- Reflecting on whether, and in what ways, participatory research can contribute to the decolonization of research in the fields of disability and inclusive education and critical thinking about methodologies that center marginalized voices and foster more equitable knowledge production

Keywords: Inclusive Education, postcolonial Disability, participatory research, Ubuntu Worldview, Decoloniality

1. Introduction

This article aims to explore the role of knowledge production in perpetuating the dominance and imbalanced power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South with a specific focus on international inclusive education. It explores how participatory research can methodologically manage these power dynamics and relations. Nind (2014) reminds us that the common denominator of inclusive, participatory research and inclusive education is the shared desire to focus on marginalized individuals and groups, giving their voices the attention they deserve and breaking down barriers. As such, we argue that inclusive education informed by postcolonial theories have the potential to interrogate the power dynamics and relations that shape education systems, especially in a globalized and neoliberal-oriented world of Global North dominance, austerity and funding cuts.

This paper begins with an introduction to postcolonial theories and structures to demonstrate how colonial power relations influence the discourse on inclusion and disability. The paper then moves to discuss how participatory research can help manage these dynamics in the context of international research related to inclusive education. To this end, an overview of participatory research is provided to engage with a theoretical and methodological dialogue to help facilitate resistance through inclusive education.

As we start this article to address colonial and power dynamics related to the Global South and the Global North, we take the liberty of positioning ourselves at the beginning of the article to disrupt colonial construction of what is considered to be “valid knowledge” and situate our claims within postcolonial thinking. This positioning is preceded by a classification and presentation of the Global South/Global North dynamics to unpack how they manifest through knowledge production and dissemination. As such, we position our article within a postcolonial understanding of the term Global South, which refers to “developing countries (...) that are largely located in the southern hemisphere, have a generally low-income level and are confronted with various structural problems” (Kowalski 2020, p. 1). Similarly, the Global North refers to “developed countries with a focus on the northern hemisphere that are characterized by high income levels, technological progress, well-developed infrastructure and macroeconomic and political stability” (Kowalski 2020, p. 1). As such, we situate our discussion to critically engage with an analysis of the operation and manifestation of colonial power dynamics as they shape inclusive education locally and internationally.

Victoria Mehringer positions herself as a white, social science researcher in the context of disability, displacement and inclusion who grew up in the Global North. Through several stays in Africa and international collaborations in Vietnam and Cambodia, she has become familiar with lifeworld-oriented practices and living realities in the Global South. Through a joint research project with partners in Uganda, she has gained international research experience in the field of disability, inclusion, and participatory research.

The second author is Yahya El-Lahib a Bedouin Arab social work scholar and disability activist located in Canada. His extensive research and practice centers around disrupting the colonial operation of knowledge production as it manifests through dominant practice approaches and modalities. His transdisciplinary approach to research, teaching and practice interrogates the intersection between disability and coloniality as they manifest in international and transnational spaces of practice.

Both authors explore the intersection of displacement, migration and disability in their academic work and community practice. In their practice and research, both interrogated the colonial power relations as they shape the realities of disabled displaced populations from the Global South. Both authors have extensive knowledge and experience working with participatory research principles across diverse geographies. Victoria Mehringer is currently working on her dissertation in Germany, where she investigates the experiences of displaced families with a child with a disability, also using elements of participatory research. This article will discuss how the paradigm of participatory research can influence both national and international discourse in the context of disability.

As we position ourselves epistemologically, theoretically and methodologically, it is also important to speak to our personal and professional relationship to disability and inclusive education. Both authors have an intimate relationship to disability that fuels our understanding of the everyday lived experiences of disability and impairment while we navigate the ableist world that manifests itself in the normalization of the disabling effects. As disability scholars and activists, it is important to acknowledge the nuanced realities that disabled people face without falling into the trap of identity politics and representation. As such, we position ourselves in relation to disability by rejecting the colonial construction of bodies that entangle able-bodiedness with normalcy. This relationship shapes not only the ways we construct our identities (whether disabled or not), but also the ways our bodies have been interpreted, engaged with, and rejected based on the spaces and contexts we occupy. Informed by postcolonial thinking and our commitment to intersectional analysis, we offer this positionality as a way forward to center the relationship we have to disability and our perspectives and experiences navigating the systems of ableism as a starting point to this paper in our efforts to move the discussion beyond identity politics. As such, our position here is an attempt to center the discussion on the relationship to disability as a launching point to interrogating the disabling effects of living in an ableist and colonial world.

2. Postcolonial Theory to Unpack Power Dynamics & Relations

Many critical disability scholars posit that postcolonial theory is key to examine the ways Global North/South power dynamics and relations influence and shape international discourse on disability (El-Lahib, 2017, Grech 2011). As such, it is important to situate this paper with a brief discussion of postcolonial theory. An important pioneer in thinking about colonialism and its power dynamics and relations is the postcolonial Palestinian scholar Edward Said. *Orientalism* was his seminal work in which he analyzed the colonial construction of the Other and the ways that construction manifests in everyday realities. Said's (1978) work on postcolonial theory interrogated and criticized the Orientalist construction of the other (the Orient) through images and stereotypical representations in art, culture and other discourses (Bhatia 2014; Siouti 2022). Through his work, Said laid the foundation for a postcolonial theory that examines the ways the Other is constructed, understood, and interpreted. More specifically, we position our understanding of the concept of Othering, to refer to practices of exclusion and demarcation that constructs a deviation from the norm or normality and thus produces a person as different (Hostettler 2020). Othering goes hand in hand with a hegemonic self-stylization of the subject and creates feelings of belonging to certain groups (Maihofer 2013).

Edward Said (1978) understands *Orientalism* as a way of thinking that makes an ontological and epistemological distinction between "the Orient" and "the Occident," suggesting power dynamics that

play out in various forms and through different institutions. Such understanding is important as it shapes the power dynamics and relations within international contexts. Indeed, Postcolonial thinking challenges dominant Western perspectives that aim to dominate the Orient and gain authority over it. Said argues that the Orient and everything Oriental were first created as a frame of reference to define Europe or the “West”. According to Said, the “European identity” was constructed as superior and sublime in contrast to all non-European people and cultures. The Orient was thus constructed with the aim bring about the superiority of the West (Said [1978] 2019). In this way, asymmetrical power relations between the West and “the Orient” were created, which still exist today and maintain othering processes. As Siouti et al (2022) assert “European culture is presented as ‘inherently progressive’, ‘modern’, ‘civilized’, ‘rational’ and ‘masculine/dominant’, while other cultures are seen as ‘frozen in their path of development’, ‘uncivilized’, ‘irrational’, ‘traditional’ and ‘feminine/submissive’” (p. 8).

Similarly, Quijano (2000) in his work theorizing coloniality of power speaks about colonial dynamics where he argues that the Western, Eurocentric perspective has carried out objectification practices and portrays people of non-European origin as ‘primitive’ and European people as modern. This dualistic notion was used to establish dominant power relations on the basis of which non-European people were exploited, dominated and constructed as objects of knowledge. This conceptualization of the modernization process centered around Western and Eurocentric assumed superiority in knowledge production that renders Global South ways of knowing as inferior, sidelined and erased (Quijano 2000).

This dominant Eurocentric paradigm of science and knowledge helped to justify the supposed superiority of knowledge from the Global North and the assumed inferiority of knowledge from the global South (Chataika 2012; Ghai 2012; McEwan 2019; Meekosha 2011; Quijano 2000; Razack 2009; Said 197). It is also crucial to understand the historical and ongoing colonial division of the world through these dynamics to examine the role of knowledge production in facilitating such discourses. As El-Lahib (2017) suggests, knowledge has played a key role in shaping the power relations between the Global North and South in ways that normalized the persistence of the ‘us versus them’ dichotomy. Such a dichotomy is evident and continues to influence cross-cultural and international research projects and priorities. For example, in the context of disability research, Chataika (2012) argues that researchers from the Global South often fear that the relevance of their work will be undervalued or questioned by researchers from the Global North. As such, the colonial assumption of the Global North’s knowledge as ‘superior’ manifests in the devaluing of research and knowledge from the Global South.

Postcolonial theories make it possible to uncover and interrogate the after-effects and continuities of colonial practices to question unequal power dynamics and relations while making the hierarchy between the West and the “Others” visible. It is also a useful theoretical approach to examine the ways the “Other” is constructed, interpreted, and represented in various knowledge production spaces. In doing so, it challenges the privileged global geopolitical and social positions and renders them subject to critical examination. Thus, it sheds light on the actual and potential forms of resistance and emancipation of marginalized groups (Afeworki Abay 2023). The aim of postcolonial theories is therefore to deal with the colonial past, ongoing colonial power relations and decolonization (Mignolo, 2012).

3. Disability and inclusion from a postcolonial perspective

The international discourse on disability is also permeated by postcolonial influences. We preface this discussion with Goodley and Swartz (2016) claim to recognize that disability emerges in geopolitical, temporal and epistemological contexts and needs to be understood within such broader perspectives beyond deficit orientation. This recognition helps in understanding disability as a socially constructed site of oppression while rejecting the deficit orientation promoted through medical modalities that locate disability within the body of disabled people. Doing so as a starting point will ensure that inclusion is

understood a political endeavor that seeks to facilitate meaningful participation beyond technicalities of access.

Indeed, within the field of inclusion and disability, power imbalances are noticeable in the production of knowledge, which is often dominated by male agenda in disability studies (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009) as well as global North priorities (e.g. disability studies in the USA or the UK are assumed to be superior), dismissing the wealth of knowledge and experience about disability in the Global South (Chataika 2012). Ndlovu (2024) calls into question the ways Western researchers have manipulated and disempowered the discourse on disability in Africa and asserts that these colonial practices continue to shape disability issues and priorities.

Western discourse on disability in the Global South continue to construct disability and people with disabilities in a homogenized ways dismissing disability, cultures and historical contexts to a uniform mash. This not only reduces the complexity of disabled realities and contributes to the over-generalization of their issues but is also the result of neo-colonial influences and the power manifestation of Othering and assumed Global South inferiority (Grech 2012). This reduction of complexity ignores the fact that disability as a phenomenon must be understood in relation to historical, cultural, political and other social contexts. The dominance of Western influence on disability can be seen through the hegemonic position of Western Disability Studies. For example, the social model of disability, developed in the UK, has played a key role in shaping disability priorities across the globe (Grech 2012). The social model of disability assumes that disability is a social construction and that people with disabilities are marginalized fringe group who experience social exclusion and discrimination due to the disabling social effects. In this model, a distinction between impairment (located in the body) and disability (located in the disabling social reality) must be considered independently of each other. Disability is not caused by impairment, but by the social structures that hinder people's abilities to fully participate in society. According to the social model, these barriers and structures must be dissolved to achieve inclusion (Waldschmidt 2015).

Furthermore, Barker and Murray (2013) contextualize the social model of disability and locate it within a political framework of Western, minority-led activism. As such, the privileged conditions of existence within the system of globalized capitalism are not classified in a self-reflexive manner when interpreting the past of Disability Studies. However, this reflection is urgently needed given the global reach and influence of the social model. A further critique of the social model comes from disabled academics and activists as well as feminist scholars, who problematize the strict separation of impairment and disability calling into question the binary distinction between biological and social manifestation of disability and gender constructions. These scholars also criticize the fact that women with disabilities continue to be excluded in academia, even though they have made a decisive contribution to the development of critical disability studies (Meekosha & Shuttleworth 2009). Wilde and Fish (2025) highlight the need to further develop the social model of disability recognizing the importance of intersectionality and social identities such as class, race, gender, age to interrogate colonialism and Western dominance in disability studies. Singal (2010) further points out the limitation of the social model and its applicability to Global South realities, especially in cases where disability results from preventable causes such as malnutrition or disease. In such cases, it becomes clear how closely disability is intertwined with socio-economic and political conditions, which highlights the need for intersectional analysis and perspectives. Indeed, intersectionality and intersectional analysis offer critical disability scholars and activists ways to interrogate the systems that shape the disabling effects of the overall socio-economic and political contexts, which the social model falls short in investigating.

Furthermore, Tremain (2015) notes that the social model of disability ignores the discursive and cultural conditions under which disability arises. It assumes a "pre-discursive" phenomenon, which results in a reduced view of disability. Inherent in the dominance of the social model in the international context is

the misinterpretation that the social model of British disability studies can be transferred to different cultural contexts and global realities (El-Lahib; 2020; Grech 2012).

The dominance of Western understanding of disability are not limited to the social model. Meekosha (2011), highlights that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and general human rights are also based on individualistic concepts and processes that are culturally Western and Eurocentric. Despite the fact that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was co-drafted by people from the Global South and even initiated in Mexico, the dominance of Western understanding of disability has enabled and continues to enable a worldwide debate on the rights of people with disabilities (Meekosha 2011). Rósa (2020) further adds that international agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) must also be viewed as a neocolonial organization due to Western and Eurocentric influence on its definitions of disability. The WHO provides countries with a medical model of disability, and thus the assumption that disability can be “solved” through modern, Western medical intervention approaches which feeds into the institutionalization of disability as a deficit. These ableist assumptions are enforced on countries in the global South as universally correct due to the power and influence of these international agencies and institutions (Rósa 2020).

In addition to international debates on disability, the reality of migrants and displaced disabled populations from the Global South is also permeated by postcolonial influences. For example, Rizvi (2021) describes how mothers of children with disabilities in the UK internalize Western assumed superiority when exposed to individualistic, Western, Eurocentric and colonial perspectives on care. In her study, Rizvi describes how migrant mothers construct white professionals in disability care as more professional and trustworthy, thus demonstrating how colonial notions of white supremacy have been internalized by these mothers (Rizvi 2021). Similarly, El-Lahib (2017) interrogates the ways ableism, racism and colonialism have been normalized and accepted when it comes to facilitating settlement services for immigrants and refugees with disabilities. Such tensions speak volumes to the need for understanding disability and disabled realities within a broader socio-political and economic perspective that centers colonialism and colonial realities.

Barker and Murray (2013) call for the discourse on disability to move away from the universalist Western perspectives anchored in the social model and invite scholars and activists to develop a differentiated theory of disability that is informed by on cultural aspects and include the situated experience of disability. For this to be actualize, it requires a form of decolonization of disability knowledge and discourse that rejects the assumed universality of theories and practice models developed in the Global North and challenges the assumed inferiority of the Global South.

Similarly, inclusive education is not immune to colonial influence and must be viewed through a postcolonial lens. A postcolonial inclusive education would recognize the “historical and contemporary complexity of the various contexts in which inclusive education has to be implemented” (Abulrahman et al. 2021). In their article “Revisiting (inclusive) education in the postcolony”, the authors conclude that education systems in postcolonial societies are characterized by historical and contemporary power structures that are often based on and reflect Eurocentric perceptions and priorities. These systems lead to exclusions and inequalities as they marginalize local non-Western forms of knowledge and indigenous education systems. The authors argue that inclusive education should not simply be understood as access to existing structures but requires a radical transformation that takes into account local contexts, cultural values and alternative forms of knowledge (Abulrahman et al. 2021).

4. Participatory research - an overview

Before we delve into the question of whether participatory research approaches can be helpful to limit the colonial influences in research practice, it is important to offer an overview of participatory research.

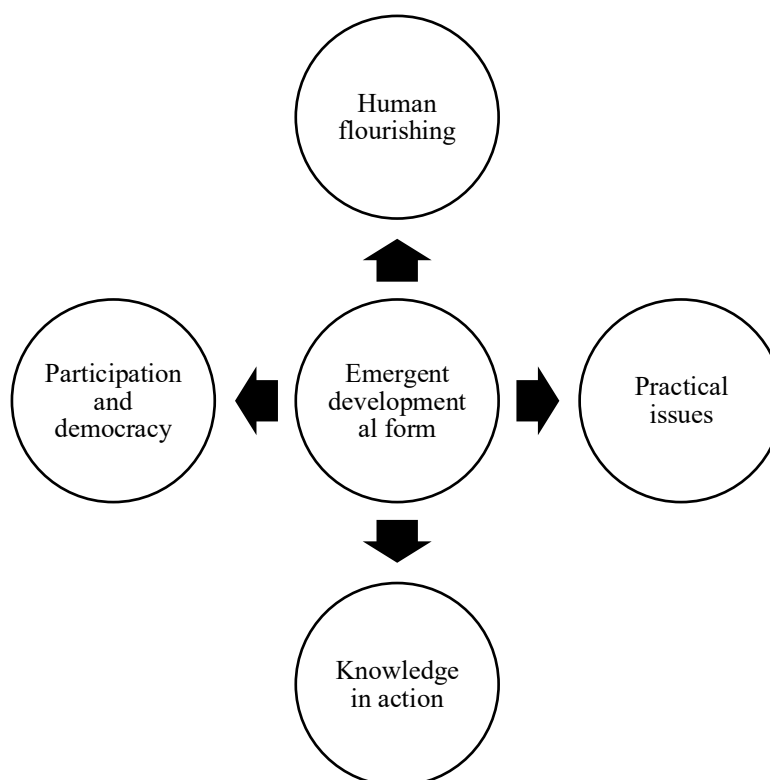
Participatory approaches represent a wide range of methods, methodologies and research typologies, ranging from conventional and academic frameworks to the most radical postmodernist-decolonial understanding of research (Reason and Bradbury 2008b). This range is also reflected in the variety of terms used to describe participatory approaches in the international research field, which also illustrate that there are different origins, aims and theoretical frameworks. Terms such as participatory action research, action research, educational action research, participatory, rural appraisal, tribal participatory research, critical system theory and many others can be found in the international research landscape (Reason and Bradbury 2008b).

A key characteristic of participatory research methods is their aims to shape the research *process* together with the people whose lives and actions are to be examined. This means that the research objectives, questions and priorities arise from the combination of two perspectives - the scientific research and the practical realities of the lived experience. Ideally, both sides benefit from the research process that centers the lived experiences of marginalized social groups as the foundation of knowledge production process (Bergold and Thomas 2012). Research is thus enriched by life-world experiences and the voice of researched groups are central to the process and outcomes of the inquiry. For example, in the context of inclusive education research, principles such as diversity, various dimensions of heterogeneity and differences are seen as natural and enriching, the connection to participatory research is beneficial due to these shared values and the critical input that researched groups make to the research process and outcomes. These values are participation, observation, reflection, giving individuals a voice, collaboration, community, democracy, exploration and learning, to name a few (Armstrong 2019). As such, inclusive education informed by postcolonial thinking and shaped by participatory research principles would represent a step forward to decolonize research and enrich disability studies.

Indeed, participatory research process enables the researchers involved to mentally detach themselves from familiar routines, patterns of interaction and power structures in order to fundamentally question and re-evaluate existing interpretations and strategies during their research. Such a process helps move away from the techno-specificities of research to allow for the lived realities of disability to be at the heart of research priorities and processes. However, merging the perspectives of science and practice is not achieved simply by deciding to conduct participatory research. Rather, it is a challenging process that develops when science and practice meet, interacting to build relationships and mutual understanding (Bergold and Thomas 2012).

According to Reason and Bradbury (2008a), participatory research is characterized by five features, which are shown in Figure 1. One of the main purposes of participatory research is to produce knowledge that influences the everyday life of the target group and aims to improve people's well-being. In addition to this expansion of knowledge in a practical sense, the aim is also to gain theoretical knowledge that stimulates emancipation processes of individuals and challenges the status quo (Reason and Bradbury 2008a). In other words, participatory research can be viewed as a form of resistance that challenges the notion of theoretical and methodological conformity within scientific research and allows for marginalized social groups to take ownership of the research process and outcomes.

Figures 1: Characteristics of participatory research (figure taken from Reason and Bradbury (2008a))



Martinez-Vargas (2022) identifies four areas of participatory approaches. One area is industry, which aims to improve production areas through participatory research and is conceived in cycles of reflection and action. In addition, the participatory approach in education is used to examine pedagogical practices to help with understanding the process of education as well as the quality and impacts of learning that students and instructors achieve. Other areas of participatory research include the field of development, which takes a greater account of social participation and the participation of marginalized groups, as well as the representation of an indigenous perspective, which is to be made accessible through participatory research (Martinez-Vargas 2022). To this end, as a research method that centers the lived experience as a valid source of knowledge, participatory approaches have the potential to inform inclusive education, unsettle Western and Eurocentric construction of disability, and disrupt colonial power dynamics and relations between the global North and South.

5. Participatory research from a postcolonial perspective

After reconstructing the history of ethnographic research and research methods used by colonial conquerors to research colonized people, Ndlovu (2019) advocates for approaches that “intensify struggles for epistemic freedom”. This requires a decolonial framework to knowledge production where research methodologies must be active sites of decolonial research. This entails that researchers need to actively engage in process of rethinking and unlearning assumptions about the superiority of dominant Western methodologies. Thus, a postcolonial perspective and participatory research approaches can be brought together to highlight commonalities between postcolonial theories, local indigenous knowledge perspectives, and participatory research to interrogate and push back against Western epistemic hegemony as they relate to inclusive education.

An important part of these commonalities can be explained by the ontology underlying participatory research, which is dialogical and relational in the Buberian sense (Wood 2020). The importance of

Buber's philosophy of dialogue is also emphasized in Veck and Hall's (2020) research where they draw on Buber's (2006) distinctive concept of 'inclusion'. These authors assert that inclusive research in education privileges neither the researcher nor the researched, it privileges the "dialogue that brings both the researchers and the researched together in an educative relation" (Veck and Hall 2020, p.1082). Centering the relational aspect of inclusive education is inherently connected to participatory research, where the flow of knowledge exchange in learning spaces depends on the value given to the dialogue process that enriches knowledge production with the lived experiences of historically marginalized groups. This in turn centers the relational nature of knowledge production as a process where research is not only centered around researchers' objectivity and neutrality, but also its process informed and influenced by those affected by its outcomes.

Indeed, the dialogical ontological basis of participatory research assumes that, in the Buberian sense, individuals need other individuals in order to learn, and the learning relationship can help in creating a space where every experience counts. In this ontology, work must be relationship-oriented before the empirical investigation can begin. Compared to positivist or interpretive ontologies, participatory research ontology adopts a more critical reflection and assumes that a critical consideration of how individuals construct and perceive experiences for themselves and how they move within their system is fundamental. It is about raising the view of the whole system from different positions while appreciating and recognizing every contribution to it. These basic ontological positions of participatory research are also paralleled to the Ubuntu philosophy of African societies (Wood 2020). The Ubuntu philosophy demonstrates how indigenous knowledge from the Global South could inform disability studies, especially when adopting postcolonial analysis to challenge colonial power structures.

As an Indigenous way of being, Ubuntu is helpful to critically decolonize inclusive education. The term "Ubuntu" is made up of the prefix u-, the abstract noun prefix bu- and the noun stem -ntu, which means person and can be translated as personality or humanity. "Ubuntu" is common in the Nguni languages of South Africa, and similar terms exist in other African languages, such as botho (Sesotho), bumuntu (kiSukuma), bomoto (Bobangi), gimuntu (kiKongo), umundu (Kikuyu), umuntu (Uganda), umunthu (Malawi) and Vumuntu (shiTsonga). Ubuntu, which emphasizes communal values such as respect, compassion and shared responsibilities, is grounded in the belief that an individual's well-being is intrinsically linked to the community's collective health and harmony (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Chigangaidza, 2022). Ubuntu, thus, is seen either as a set of shared characteristics (appreciation of others, kindness, compassion) or as a broader value system. It serves as a collective term for the norms and values of traditional Indigenous African societies and describes the relationships and the quality of these relationships within the community (Hailey 2008). Indeed, van Breda (2019) highlights two key distinctions that set Ubuntu apart from the dominant Western conception of individuals and communities. The author asserts that Ubuntu is founded on the moral qualities of a person with a focus on features like generosity, empathy, forgiveness and considerateness towards others, while centering the interconnectedness between people as collective. As Mpofu and Sefotho (2024) assert in their discussion of the relationship between Ubuntu worldviews and the principles of inclusive education, Ubuntu challenges us to reject "individualism and selfishness in favour of collective well-being and social harmony" (p. 129). Ubuntu, which can be understood as African humanism (Gaylard 2004) can be helpful to interrogate Western values of individualism. Relating Ubuntu Philosophy to disability in Sub-Saharan Africa, Mutunga (2024) concludes that Ubuntu provides a holistic framework for understanding disability, moving beyond the medical model to include social, economic, and cultural dimensions (Mutunga 2024). As such, an approach to inclusive education informed by Ubuntu goes beyond simply integrating disabled students into regular classrooms by encompassing a "comprehensive and holistic approach to education that addresses the individual learning needs of all students (Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

Further, in a systematic review, Hailey (2008) works out five approaches that understand Ubuntu as a relational ontology. Ubuntu can be understood as a framework that enables the development of a self in relation to others. Communities that are based on the Ubuntu philosophy are characterized by social justice and social cohesion, and harmony. Another contribution related to living the Ubuntu philosophy is the promotion of a collective, consensus-oriented and collaborative ways of being, living and working, which goes hand in hand with the pooling of resources. Hailey (2008) notes that organizations that adopt Ubuntu as a guiding principle develop a common working conditions characterized by acceptance, dignity, kindness and care can demonstrate increased productivity. Chilisa (2012) concludes that researchers adopt an ethical and moral attitude through Ubuntu that questions hierarchies and focuses on research relationships are more connected to their researched groups, and their research findings reflect a more authentic representation of their realities. Looking at Ubuntu as a philosophy and as a worldview, one can only agree with Wood (2020), who asserts that there are great beneficial similarities between participatory research approaches and Ubuntu. The fact that these similarities can also be successfully linked in the context of disability and inclusive education will be further elaborated on later in this article.

Participatory research is based on an epistemology of critical subjectivity. Insight and knowledge are generated from critical self-reflection and from a reflexive dialogue between all individuals close to the research. A variety of ways, forms, relationships, and representations of knowledge generated throughout the research process are accepted and embraced. The ontology outlined above, and the inherent epistemology of participatory research, lead to a methodology that is characterized by political participation, collaborative character, action and social change (Wood 2020). Here we find epistemological similarities to an indigenous research paradigm, which can be so well linked to participatory research characteristics and is contrary to the dominant Western and Eurocentric research paradigm. As Wilson (2008, p. 56) affirms that:

“The major difference between those dominant paradigms and an indigenous paradigms is that those dominant paradigms are built on the fundamental belief that knowledge is an individual entity: the researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is something that is gained and therefore knowledge may be owned by an individual. An indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all of creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, or just with the research subjects I may be working with, but it is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the cosmos; it is with the animals, with plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond the individual's knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge. ... you are answerable to all your relations when you are doing research.”

In order to bring about decolonization of knowledge and research, postcolonial, indigenous methodologies must be adopted and applied or to say the least, inform meaningful research process for marginalized social groups. Decolonizing research approaches interrogate dominant Eurocentric research paradigms and challenge their assumed universality and applicability to different contexts and realities. This is crucial because research paradigms have a direct influence on how research questions about realities, knowledge and values are answered and how research processes are managed and approached. Research from a decolonial stand-point is a building block to dismantle colonial influence and disrupt Western hegemonic ways of knowing and being. This entails that a decolonial research paradigm research priorities, chosen methodologies, data collection and analysis process, the reporting of results and the distribution of research findings (Chilisa 2012).

As such, we argue that participatory research approaches with their described ontological and epistemological characteristics are suitable or capable of decolonizing research in a meaningful way. Centering the importance of relational knowledge production through meaningful participation is not

only a rejection of the extractive research approaches but also creates a research process that honors the lived experiences of participants as a valid source of knowledge. A necessary shift in the drive to decolonize research methods begins with creating research spaces that honor and celebrate these important paradigm shifts.

6. Participatory research from a postcolonial perspective in the context of disability & inclusion

In their research project looking into Ubuntu Worldviews in Uganda, Bannink Mbazzi et al. (2020) also came to the conclusion that the phenomenon of disability and the scientific discussion about disability is globally permeated by a dominance of the Global North. They found that Global North professionals working with disabled people in the Global South are confronted with views and theoretical perspectives that do not coincide with their own. To overcome these challenges, the authors relied on participatory research project based on the Ubuntu philosophy. With this conceptual framework, they developed an inclusive peer-to-peer intervention grounded within local Indigenous knowledge. Various stakeholders participated in the development of this framework including children, parents, teachers, disability and rehabilitation professionals and researchers. The feasibility of this intervention and its acceptance in the community were evaluated using participatory approaches which investigated this experiences of this intervention in 10 communities, 64 children and parents and 33 teachers who were involved in the project. The results show that the intervention strengthens their local community unity as well as their feeling of togetherness, and that every single person can contribute to a more inclusive society (Bannink Mbazzi et al. 2020).

The research project by Bannink Mbazzi et al. (2020) served as inspiration for a small research project as part of a university seminar in the inclusive education program (Catholic University of Applied Science Freiburg), which was carried out by Victoria Mehringer, first author with cooperation partners in Uganda. The main aim of the research was to familiarize students with research methods and the international characteristics of inclusive education. This project is now intended to serve as a space for reflections that examine the challenges of participatory research and challenge the colonial influences on research and knowledge production. To illustrate the importance of participatory research informed by Ubuntu worldviews, we present the research process as outlined below.

The research project sought to answer the following research questions: *What is the reality of life like for children with disabilities in Uganda? What barriers and challenges do they face in their lives? What resources do they have access to?* To answer these research questions, a Photovoice method was used in consultation with a local NGO, aiming to use the research results later for political purpose of advancing disability rights. The Photovoice method was used to encourage members of the community to map the strengths and concerns of their own community. Using pictures or photographs taken by participants to match the research question, a critical dialogue was initiated in a group discussion that invites an exchange about the focus of the research or the problem or the questions (Wang and Burris 1997). The students developed open tasks for the research question on how the photovoice method should be implemented. These were reflected upon in video calls with the staff of the participating NGO in Uganda. The staff then continued to work with the community. The employees of the NGO were responsible for the composition of the sampling on-site. The previously defined age group of 6 to 12 was adjusted by the NGO staff during the search for participants. Four interviews were conducted. Two with relatives of children with disabilities aged 13 and 4 who had a physical disability and did not communicate verbally. Two interviews were also conducted with young adults aged 12 and 22. The interviews were conducted in Luganda and translated into English by the interviewer during the interview, which must be considered methodologically critical. At the same time, it was a pragmatic solution to do justice to the multilingual setting. All interviews were conducted using an interview guide

to ensure better comparability. The interviews were transcribed by the students and analyzed using Kuckartz content analysis. This analysis was discussed and validated with the NGO staff.

Due to financial imbalances, the technical equipment was financed by the German university, which may have influenced a certain position of power that can be seen as the result of economic and geopolitical conditions of universities in the Global South and their relationship to institutions in the Global North. This position of power could not be completely ignored in discussions of content, nor can it be dismissed completely in the research process. The influence of funders and funding agencies on research and knowledge production has been well documented in the anti-colonial and postcolonial scholarship (El-Lahib, 2020; Chataika, 2012). The tension that can arise between the researchers from the Global South and those in the global North also became clear in the empirical material. For example, in several interviews based on the photos, the families mentioned the financial hardship and the hope for donations from the university. These tensions gave rise to “white savior” fantasies as described by Montez de Oca (2012), with reference to the film “The Blind Side” (which, was well reflected upon and examined in the seminar). This challenge could have been better addressed in the project by using resources that exist on site, even if this meant working with an approach other than the photovoice method. As we outline these tensions, it is important to also recognize the need for more discussions on how to effectively decolonize research and knowledge production, as this would help not only in reclaiming erased Indigenous knowledge from across the globe, but also a way to facilitate a more inclusive knowledge production process that honours different paradigms and world views. This in turn would allow countries in the Global South to validate their knowledge and address the remnants of colonial systems that continue to shape their realities and access to knowledge in concrete ways.

7. Summary and conclusion

This article discussed postcolonial theory and Global North/South power dynamics and relations as they shape the realities of disability and inclusion in the field of inclusive education. The article offers some direction on how a postcolonial framework can help facilitate an emancipatory approach to knowledge production that decenters dominant Western and Eurocentric approaches to research. The article also offers a postcolonial informed direction to participatory research that centers Indigenous ways of knowing as a form of resistance to dominant colonial, Western and Eurocentric research paradigms.

Participatory research designs provide the epistemological basis for including indigenous knowledge that can be helpful in conducting research in an international context. This would allow other knowledge and perspectives about disability to be acknowledged and embraced and used as an emancipatory and decolonial research framework. A key foundation of international participatory research projects in inclusive education is to rely on theories beyond dominant Western and Eurocentric conceptions of disability, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, regardless of the good it may have done or its promise to advance disability rights. To this end, we assert the need to deconstruct colonial influence and positions of power in all phases of research, including how research priorities are set, by whom and for what purpose. Such a decolonial approach is consistent with critical disability theories that centers the lived experience of disability as the key foundation to research for change.

Within the national context of countries located in the Global North, conducting participatory research for inclusive education could be used to shed light on the colonial realities that many displaced disabled people face as they settle in these host countries. This would help service providers in inclusive education better understand the power dynamics that shape their clients' realities and allow them to provide services that are relevant and appropriate to their individual needs. Similarly, this would allow disabled migrants and refugees to better integrate without risking the loss of their cultural identity and belonging by encouraging migrants to dissolve and critically question their own inherent images of professionals from the Global North and their dominance in knowledge about disability.

In conclusion, we assert that participatory research informed by postcolonial theory has the potential to challenge and disrupt colonial power dynamics and relations while simultaneously giving voice to marginalized social groups. This is especially true in the field of inclusive education, and it supports an approach to research that is reflexive, interactive, interpersonal and relational. It also helps in situating the researcher within a position that navigates power dynamics and disrupts the dominant, expert-oriented, and top-down approaches to research. A paradigm shift is necessary to take place to facilitate a meaningful decolonial approach to research, and participatory research informed by postcolonial theories and Indigenous frameworks is key to start such a shift, and potentially, actively facilitate broader decolonial social change and transformation.

References

- Abdulrahman, H., Adebisi, F., Nwako, Z., & Walton, E. (2021). Revisiting (inclusive) education in the postcolony. *Journal of the British Academy*, 9s1, 47–75. <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009s1.04>
- Afeworki Abay, R. (2023). Dekolonialisierung des Wissens (Vol. 85). transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839470534>
- Armstrong, F. (2019). Social Constructivism and Action Research: Transforming teaching and learning through collaborative practice. In F. Armstrong (Ed.), *Action Research for Inclusive Education: Participation and Democracy in Teaching and Learning* (pp. 5–16). Routledge.
- Armstrong, F. (Ed.). (2019). *Action Research for Inclusive Education: Participation and Democracy in Teaching and Learning*. Routledge.
- Bannink Mbazzi, F., Nalugya, R., Kawesa, E., Nambejja, H., Nizeyimana, P., Ojok, P., van Hove, G., & Seeley, J. (2020). ‘Ubuntu Bulamu’ – Development and Testing of an Indigenous Intervention for Disability Inclusion in Uganda. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*, 22(1), 403–416. <https://doi.org/10.16993/sjdr.697>
- Barker, C., & Murray, S. (2013). Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (4. ed., pp. 59–73). Routledge.
- Bergold, J., & Thomas, S. (2012). Participatory Research Methods a methodological approach in Motion. *Forum Qualitative Research*, 13(1).
- Bhatia, S. (2014). Orientalism. In T. Teo (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* (pp. 1294–1300). Springer New York.
- Chataika, T. (2012). Disability, Development and Postcolonialism. In D. Goodley, B. Hughes, & L. J. Davis (Eds.), *Disability and social theory: New developments and directions* (1. publ). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chigangaidze, R. (2022). Utilising Ubuntu in social work practice: Ubuntu in the eyes of the multimodal approach. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 36(3), 291 – 301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2021.1981276>
- Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. SAGE.
- Davis, L. J. (Ed.). (2013). *The disability studies reader* (4. ed.). Routledge.
- El-Lahib, Y. (2017). Theoretical Dimensions for interrogating the intersection of disability, immigration and social work. *International Social Work*, 60(3).
- El-Lahib, Y. (2020). Social work at the intersection of disability and displacement: Rethinking our role. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 31(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2018.1531744>
- Gaylard, R. (2004). “Welcome to the world of our humanity”: (African) humanism, ubuntu and black South African writing. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 20(3-4), 265–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564710408530357>

- Ghai, A. (2012). Engaging with Disability with Postcolonial Theory. In D. Goodley, B. Hughes, & L. J. Davis (Eds.), *Disability and social theory: New developments and directions* (1. publ, pp. 270–286). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goodley, D., & Swartz, L. (2016). The Place of Disability. In S. Grech & K. Soldatic (Eds.), *International Perspectives on Social Policy, Administration, and Practice. Disability in the Global South: The Critical Handbook* (1st ed. 2016, pp. 69–83). Springer International Publishing; Imprint: Springer.
- Goodley, D., Hughes, B., & Davis, L. J. (Eds.). (2012). *Disability and social theory: New developments and directions* (1. publ). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grace, J., Nind, M., Haas, C. de, & Hope, J. (2024). Expanding Possibilities for Inclusive Research: Learning from People with Profound Intellectual and Multiple Disabilities and Decolonising Research. *Social Sciences*, 13(1), 37. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13010037>
- Grech, S. (2011). Recolonising debates or perpetuated coloniality? Decentring the spaces of disability, development an. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 15(1).
- Grech, S. (2012). Disability and the Majority World: A Neocolonial Approach. In D. Goodley, B. Hughes, & L. J. Davis (Eds.), *Disability and social theory: New developments and directions* (1. publ). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grech, S., & Soldatic, K. (Eds.). (2016). *International Perspectives on Social Policy, Administration, and Practice. Disability in the Global South: The Critical Handbook* (1st ed. 2016). Springer International Publishing; Imprint: Springer.
- Hailey, J. (2008). Ubuntu: A Literature Review: A Paper Prepared for the Tutu Foundation.
- Hostettler, K. (2020). Kritik - Selbstaffirmation - Othering - Immanuel Kants Denken der Zweckmässigkeit und die koloniale Episteme // Kritik - Selbstaffirmation - Othering: Immanuel Kants Denken der Zweckmässigkeit und die koloniale Episteme. Edition Moderne Postmoderne. transcript.
- Kowalski, A. M. (2020). Global South-Global North Differences. In W. Leal Filho, A. M. Azul, L. Brandli, A. Lange Salvia, P. G. Özuyar, & T. Wall (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. No Poverty* (pp. 1–12). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69625-6_68-1
- Leal Filho, W., Azul, A. M., Brandli, L., Lange Salvia, A., Özuyar, P. G., & Wall, T. (Eds.). (2020). *Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. No Poverty*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69625-6>
- Maihofer, A. (2013). Nachwort: Hegemoniale Selbstaffirmierung und Veränderung. In S. Vögele & K. Hostettler (Eds.), *Postcolonial Studies: Vol. 15. Diesseits der imperialen Geschlechterordnung: (Post-)koloniale Reflexionen über den Westen* (pp. 319–332). transcript.
- Martinez-Vargas, C. (2022). *Democratising Participatory Research: Pathways to Social Justice from the Global South*. Open Book Publishers.
- McEwan, C. (2019). *Postcolonialism, Decoloniality and Development* (2nd ed.). Routledge Perspectives on Development Ser. Routledge.
- Meekosha, H. (2011). Decolonising disability: thinking and acting globally. *Disability & Society*, 26(6), 667–682. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2011.602860>
- Meekosha, H., & Shuttleworth, R. (2009). What's so 'critical' about critical disability studies? *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, 15(1), 47–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1323238X.2009.11910861>
- Mignolo, W. (2012). Mariátegui and Gramsci in »Latin« America: Between revolution and decoloniality. In N. F. R. Srivastava & B. Bhattacharya (Eds.), *Routledge research in postcolonial literatures: Vol. 36. The postcolonial Gramsci* (pp. 191–218). Routledge.
- Montez de Oca, J. (2012). White Domestic Goddess on a Postmodern Plantation: Charity and Commodity Racism in The Blind Side. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 29(2), 131–150. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.29.2.131>

- Mpofu, J. & Sefotho, M., M. (2024). The relationship between the philosophy of Ubuntu and the principles of inclusive education. *Perspective in Education*, 42(2), 128-144. <https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v42i2.7338>
- Mugumbate, J. & Nyanguru, A. (2013). Exploring African philosophy: The value of ubuntu in social work. *African Journal of Social Work*, 3 (1), 82-100
- Mutanga, O. (2024). Ubuntu philosophy and disabilities in Sub-Saharan Africa: Successes, promises, and challenges for inclusive development. In O. Mutanga (Ed.), *Interdisciplinary disability studies. Ubuntu philosophy and disabilities in Sub-Saharan Africa* (pp. 1–17). Routledge.
- Mutanga, O. (Ed.). (2024). *Interdisciplinary disability studies. Ubuntu philosophy and disabilities in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003343684>
- Ndlovu, S. (2024). Re-writing the Disability Script from the Global South: Tsitsi Chataika's Contribution to Disability Studies Scholarship in Africa. *The Thinker*, 99(2), 64–74.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2019). Provisional Notes on Decolonizing Research Methodology and Undoing Its Dirty History. *Journal of Developing Societies*, 35(4), 481–492. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X19880417>
- Nind, M. (2014). Inclusive research and inclusive education: why connecting them makes sense for teachers' and learners' democratic development of education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 44(4), 525–540.
- Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Views from South*, 1(3), 533–580.
- Razack, N. (2009). Decolonizing the pedagogy and practice of international social work. *International Social Work*, 52(1), 9–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872808097748>
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008a). Introduction. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2. ed., pp. 1–10). SAGE.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.). (2008b). *The Sage handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2. ed.). SAGE.
- Rizvi, S. (2021). Undoing whiteness in disability studies: The special education system and British South Asian mothers. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rósa, B. (2020). At the intersection of development, disability and postcolonial theory: Are people with a disability marginalised among the marginalised? *Andragogical Yearbook* [Online], 26.
- Said, E. W. ([1978] 2019). *Orientalism* (Reissued in Penguin Classics). Modern classics. Penguin Books.
- Singal, N. (2010). Doing disability research in a Southern context: challenges and possibilities. *Disability & Society*, 25(4), 415–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687591003755807>
- Siouti, I. (2022). Othering in der qualitativen Migrationsforschung: Herausforderungen und Reflexionen in der Forschungspraxis. In I. Siouti, T. Spies, E. Tuider, H. von Unger, & E. Yildiz (Eds.), *Postmigrantische Studien: Band 12. Othering in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft - Herausforderungen und Konsequenzen für die Forschungspraxis // Othering in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft* (107-128). transcript.
- Siouti, I., Spies, T., Tuider, E [Elisabeth], Unger, H. von, & Yildiz, E. (2022). Methodologischer Eurozentrismus und das Konzept des Othering: Ein Einleitung. In I. Siouti, T. Spies, E. Tuider, H. von Unger, & E. Yildiz (Eds.), *Postmigrantische Studien: Band 12. Othering in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft - Herausforderungen und Konsequenzen für die Forschungspraxis // Othering in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft* (pp. 7–30). transcript.
- Siouti, I., Spies, T., Tuider, E [Elisabetz], Unger, H. von, & Yildiz, E. (Eds.). (2022). *Postmigrantische Studien: Band 12. Othering in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft - Herausforderungen und Konsequenzen für die Forschungspraxis // Othering in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*. transcript.
- Srivastava, N. F. R., & Bhattacharya, B. (Eds.). (2012). *Routledge research in postcolonial literatures: Vol. 36. The postcolonial Gramsci*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203128916>

- Teo, T. (Ed.). (2014). *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*. Springer New York.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7>
- Tremain, S. (2015). This Is What a Historicist and Relativist Feminist Philosophy of Disability Looks Like *Foucault Studies*(19), 7–42.
- Van Breda, A. (2019). Developing the notion of ubuntu as African theory for social work practice. *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 55(4), 439. <https://doi.org/10.15270/55-4-762>
- Veck, W., & Hall, M. (2020). Inclusive research in education: dialogue, relations and methods. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(10), 1081–1096.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1512659>
- Vögele, S., & Hostettler, K. (Eds.). (2013). *Postcolonial Studies: Vol. 15. Diesseits der imperialen Geschlechterordnung: (Post-)koloniale Reflexionen über den Westen*. transcript.
<https://doi.org/10.14361/transcript.9783839423431>
- Waldschmidt, A. (2015). Disability Goes Cultural: The Cultural Model of Disability as an Analytical Tool. In A. Waldschmidt, H. Berressem, & M. Ingwersen (Eds.), *Disability Studies body - power - difference: volume 10. Culture - theory - disability: Encounters between disability studies and cultural studies* (pp. 19–27). transcript.
- Waldschmidt, A., Berressem, H., & Ingwersen, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Disability Studies body - power - difference: volume 10. Culture - theory - disability: Encounters between disability studies and cultural studies*. transcript.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior : The Official Publication of the Society for Public Health Education*, 24(3), 369–387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>
- Wilde, A., & Fish, R. (2025). Gender, feminism and the project of critical disability studies (CDS). *Disability & Society*, 40(3), 533–554.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Wood, L. (2020). *Participatory action learning and action research: Theory, practice and process* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

Conflict of interests

The Authors confirm no conflict of interest exists.