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Decolonising Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND): A Systems Theoretical Framework for Global Inclusivity

Vincent Lien 

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper reconceptualises Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) through the lens of Niklas Luhmann's universal theory of society (Müller and Powell 1994), particularly the concepts of structural coupling and interdependency to emphasise a decolonial perspective. While SEND has traditionally been informed by Eurocentric models of disability and education, this paper argues for an epistemological shift towards recognising the experiences, epistemologies and needs of the Global South and indigenous communities. By critically engaging with international legal frameworks such as the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO 1994) and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) (2006), the paper highlights the limitations of existing SEND models and explores how a systems theoretical approach can better accommodate global diversity. The threefold argument focuses on how SEND can perform its educational function through structural coupling, navigate interdependencies and interpenetration with societal systems (such as economy, politics, healthcare and technology), and engage in self-reflection to ensure systemic autopoiesis. Additionally, the paper calls for the inclusion of indigenous and Global South perspectives in SEND frameworks to address systemic inequalities and develop inclusive educational systems. Ultimately, it proposes a dynamic, decolonial re-entry process that challenges the blind spots in SEND's self-observation and seeks to create more equitable global policies, practices and research.

1 | Introduction

1.1 | From Social to Educational to Socio-Educational: A Historical Trajectory of SEND

There exists a span of one hundred or so years between the concepts of 'special needs' and 'special educational needs' for individuals with various physical and mental disabilities in the United Kingdom (Warnock 1978). This shift reflects a guiding binary distinction of 'need' versus 'do not need' in the socio-educational

attitude since the late 18th century. It was also a time when '[i]nterest in education as a functional system arose' (Baraldi and Corsi 2017, 45). The nature of those needs was also contingent to the wider societal changes. It is suggested that the middle of the 19th century witnessed 'a stirring of social conscience over the plight of the disabled ... but it was primarily concerned to relieve their stress, not to educate them' (Warnock 1978, 10). The shift from being a social support provision to one with an educational emphasis marked the genesis of the formation of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) as a distinct system

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paralleling the evolution of the educational system. The concept of differentiation underscores the many twists and turns of the evolutionary paths of both systems.

The challenge of differentiation in SEND is twofold. On the one hand, differentiation has been person-centred. On the other hand, differentiation has been treated as a solution to perceived educational and social issues. The prevailing assumption is that differentiated treatments can change individuals, leading to broader educational and societal improvements. Its supremacy is enshrined by the United Nation's *World Declaration on Education for All and Framework on Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs* (UNESCO 1990) and the subsequent *The Salamanca Statement* 'to further the objective of *Education for All* by considering fundamental policy shifts required to promote the approach of inclusive education' (UNESCO 1994, iii; see also Eikeland and Ohna 2022, 157). Consequently, pedagogical thinking has revolved around the instrumentalisation of differentiation based on the assumed causal linear chain consisting of individuals, education and society. Educational theorists, medical professionals, psychologists, sociologists, policymakers, technological developers and activists have devoted decades to design interventional programmes and to formulate theoretical frameworks to facilitate differentiation in education (Ainscow et al. 2019; Lindsay et al. 2020; UNESCO 2024b). These endeavours are framed as pedagogical innovations that emphasise a shared moral imperative (OECD 2022). Despite its progressive pedagogical commitments, SEND is rooted in a conservative tradition stemming from European Enlightenment beliefs in the transformative power of reason and rationality through education on individuals.

In this paper, I propose a radical departure from the conservative tradition of SEND research to formulate a systems theoretical framework as a starting point towards decolonising SEND. I begin by conceptualising SEND as a subsystem of the system of education. The second section explores the compatibility of systems theoretical thinking with decolonisation in promoting social justice through inclusive education. The next section demonstrates how the principle of second-order observation can reveal the blind spot in decolonising education's relationships with other function systems in the form of structural coupling. This section is, in turn, followed by adopting a third-order observation to reflect on a systems theoretically informed praxis of decolonising SEND. The paper concludes by advocating for a paradigm shift in decolonising SEND research that takes into consideration of some of the theoretical tenets in Luhmann's systems theory.

2 | SEND as a Functional Subsystem of the System of Education

Baraldi et al. (2021, 69) suggest that functional systems must satisfy three conditions: the abilities to differentiate and combine its function for society, its performances for other subsystems and its reflection for itself. To qualify as a function system, SEND therefore must fulfil the same criteria, particularly its social function. The following paragraphs explain the ways in which SEND can be considered a suitable candidate as a function system through the process of internal systemic differentiation.

I argue that through internal differentiation, SEND has evolved as a subsystem of the education system to cope with its increasing systemic complexity as a result of attempting to fulfil its increasingly complex and complicated societal functions. Luhmann explains: 'The differentiation of functional subsystems means ... the establishment of new system/environment differences within the original system' (Luhmann 1995, 53). He continues: 'The functional orientation thereby retains the "holistic" aspect of older systems theories but combines it with the capacity to specify problems more precisely' (Luhmann 1995, 53). In this sense, SEND can be considered as an extension of the education system to specialise in addressing a specific educational challenge that intersects directly with other function systems such as healthcare, economy, politics and technology.

It has to be noted, too, that presenting SEND as a 'system' runs the risk of exacerbating the 'observed inflation of function systems in social systems theory' (Roth and Schütz 2015, 13). It is therefore important that one takes a critical approach to the theorisation of SEND as a subsystem to the function system of education against 'the horizon of functional differentiation' (Roth and Schütz 2015, 12). In so doing, the observation of the function of SEND can therefore be reformulated based on Roth's diagram (Roth and Schütz 2015, 12). Let level 2 be the system of education, level 1 its environment, in other words, society. Level 3 now becomes the system of SEND, and the system of education therefore becomes its system environment. A new level 4 is now inserted as a distinction for the subsystem of SEND at level 3 to refer to itself, thus 'turning [itself] into [its] own medium' (Roth and Schütz 2015, 18). The relationship between these two levels is referred to as 'reflection' (Roth and Schütz 2015, 18).

As a self- and other-referential subsystem, SEND therefore organises its observational operations autonomously to delineate what communications fall inside the system boundaries and what remain external in the environment. In other words, the specific problems that cannot be resolved in the 'original' system that is the broader education system, a system that is orientated around, paradoxically, the concept of 'education for all' as a mainstream educational imperative. Such operational closure within SEND implies systemic autopoiesis, a concept borrowed from Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (Luhmann 2013, xi–xii), that underlines a systemic capability to generate new meanings through each recursion of communicative operations and to create elements that are essential to system reproduction while remaining sensitive to its environmental irritations from other societal systems.

This understanding of SEND places greater emphasis on the recursive and discursive nature of distinction-making that guides the operations of self- and hetero-observations, in other words, multidirectional communications between SEND and other functional social systems such as education, politics, law, economy, healthcare and technology. When the distinction difference/norm is re-entered into systemic communications, distinctions such as diagnostic labels become blurred and dissolve, allowing new distinctions to form by the act of boundary-crossing—a concept borrowed from George Spencer-Brown's logical calculus *Laws of Form* (Spencer-Brown 1969)—to allow new distinctions to be identified, actualising the possibilities in 'the horizons of potentialities' (Luhmann 1995, 75). In this

co-constructivist reframing, SEND is positioned in partnership with other co-evolving systems, not a 'footnote', an 'other', an 'addition' or an 'afterthought' (Stanbridge 2024)—an outside observer.

Theoretically speaking, re-entering the system/environment differences in the systems theoretical modelling of SEND facilitates boundary-crossing to allow potentialities to be actualised. This can mean an inevitable paradigm shift in epistemological approach. SEND research moves from the preoccupation with what it means to be an individual and the study of the interactions between individuals and society to a description of the recursiveness of social phenomena. The question of SEND must be approached as an 'interactional process or a circular system' (Ghesquière and Van der Aalsvoort 2004, 218). Practically speaking, such a theoretical actualisation can have pedagogical implications, influencing policymaking, and guiding future research through interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and multinational collaborations towards a system that is capable of the safeguarding its own autopoiesis.

To understand SEND as a subsystem of the system of education also has several theoretical ramifications. Firstly, such understanding treats SEND as a system capable of organising its structural elements through organisational communications in the manner of operational closure while maintaining its openness to its environment. The system/environment differences are therefore characterised by SEND's structural coupling, interdependency and interpenetration with other societal systems. In the case of SEND, its communicative structure has evolved over the past centuries to allow further communications to continue to develop its systemic structure. For example, to facilitate the establishments of special schools catering for the welfare and education of the blind and the deaf in the late 18th-century Britain (Warnock 1978; Lindsay et al. 2020) required coordination with political communication around the semantics of needs and of responsibilities using pupils as its medium (Luhmann 2023). The distinction of need/no need and the distinction of responsible/not responsible then guided the self-referential and other-referential communications within the symbolically generalised medium of 'special needs'. Over time, the concept of 'special educational needs' emerged in response to societal demands to support those individuals whose apparent and/or hidden needs are not satisfactorily met by formal education (Stanbridge 2024).

When ascertaining the relationship between SEND and other societal systems, it is necessary to make a distinction between the educational system and schools (Luhmann and Schorr 2000, 237–238). In that education 'is a global function system communicating through teaching and instructions. Schools, on the other hand, are (becoming) local organisations communicating through decisions' (Anderson and Pors 2021, 822). By extension, the same differentiation applies to the system of SEND. The following discussions of SEND as a subsystem to educational system therefore concentrate on SEND as a system based on communication through pedagogical programmes that are informed by, and informing, other systems in its environment through structural coupling and interdependency. It is in this sense that we can talk about the relationship between SEND and institutions at multiple levels in terms of system/environment differences. Each serves as the other's environment. Based

on this conceptualisation, we can then formulate a theoretical framework to address some of the environmental conditions on which the system of SEND can fulfil its core functions as our first step towards decolonising SEND.

3 | The Compatibility of Systems Theory and Decolonising SEND

The discourse surrounding Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) has historically been shaped by Eurocentric perspectives, rooted in Western philosophies of education and disability (Kamenopoulou 2020). These models, while globally influential, have not adequately accounted for the diverse experiences and epistemologies of marginalised populations, particularly those in the Global South and indigenous communities (Connell 2020; Meekosha 2011). This paper aims to address these limitations by advancing a decolonial reconceptualisation of SEND through the lens of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory as a framework for fostering global inclusivity (as discussed in Sections 3 and 4).

Purported to resolve the theoretical shortcomings of 'incongruent perspectives' (Luhmann 2020, 11) that characterise contemporary sociological enterprise in a global context, Luhmann offers his distinction-based social theory of reflexive self-referentiality (Luhmann 2020, xiii) as an alternative to contribute to a more pluralistic approach. In the sense of de-ontologising Eurocentric rationality, it can be regarded as a precursor to the call for decolonising sociology (Connell 2018). It prefigures a paradigmatic shift from northern to southern theory (Connell 2020). Luhmann's systems theory is designed to be independent from (not outside of) existing social theories and free from the limitations of humanistic, regional (natural) and anthropocentric epistemologies of traditional sociological investigations (Luhmann 2020, 10). Instead of being construed as yet another example of privileged Eurocentric perspective, the universal applicability (Müller and Powell 1994) of systems theory lends itself a compatible analytical tool to describe and to critique the dominant social understanding of SEND. By applying its theory of distinctions, the guiding distinction of Global North and Global South becomes visible and its observation possible. However, it is also worth noting that this second-order observation of SEND is not free from its own blind spot, which requires another perspective to reveal; and this process continues. It is the recursive nature of observation of society that gives systems theory its circular nature (Luhmann 2020, 1).

At its core, systems theory explores how complex systems—such as education and SEND—structure themselves to manage internal and external complexities through processes of differentiation. SEND, as a subsystem of the educational system, organises its operations through structural coupling to coordinates with external societal systems such as economy, politics, healthcare and technology while maintaining operational closure to preserve its autonomy (Luhmann 1995). However, this structural coupling has been historically biased by Western models of disability and education, which often disregard the epistemological contributions and lived experiences of non-Western societies (Goodley 2013; Grech 2012; Meekosha 2011; Grech and Soldatic 2016). More problematically, they are also intertwined

with broader societal subsystems that operate under their own internal logics, often limiting the scope of inclusivity within SEND. For instance, the neoliberal economic system functions according to the operational logic of profit/loss, which places a financial emphasis on educational outcomes that favour productivity and measurable achievements. Similarly, healthcare system often centres around the binary code of identifiable/un-identifiable diseases, where medicalised views of disability can obscure complex social or cultural underpinnings in the domain of social work that applies the distinctions of 'help/non-help and case/non-case' (Roth and Schütz 2015, 20). Politics, too, operates according to the distinction of power/powerlessness, which may marginalise those with disabilities when policies are shaped by hegemonic ideologies. Even technology, guided by a binary opposition of works/does not work, often excludes individuals with disabilities by failing to design adaptive tools that meet diverse needs.

These operational logics, or 'binary schematizations' (Baraldi et al. 2021, 42), of societal subsystems intersect with SEND in ways that reinforce existing inequalities. The Eurocentric focus of SEND, therefore, has inadvertently aligned with the dominant Western paradigms that prioritise efficiency, productivity and uniformity over diversity and inclusivity. In these situations, we witness (or observe) an unfolding paradox of binary distinctions in the case of SEND when inclusive intensions (guided by liberal values) lead to excluding actions (that liberal values intend to eradicate) by applying the guiding distinction of inclusion/exclusion into inclusion itself. Rasch remarks that 'the distinction of inclusion/exclusion is quintessentially self-referential. It desires inclusion but can achieve it only by excluding exclusion' (Rasch 2000, 109). By employing Luhmann's theory of distinction, this paper argues for a critical shift away from these constraints, proposing a more flexible and reflexive framework that allows SEND to decouple from these limiting operational distinctions and embrace a more pluralistic, global approach to education and disability. In the same breath, this paper serves also as a reminder that the distinction of inclusion/exclusion is 'doubly paradoxical' (Rasch 2000, 108). While striving for global inclusivity, we are mindful that whatever solution that is on offer, though it 'definitely "unfolds" the paradox of the original problem, making it at least temporarily invisible[,] it never *permanently* solves the original paradox' (Rasch 2000, 109; emphases are original).

In spite of the inherent double paradox of inclusivity, this paper proposes a systems theoretical framework that moves beyond these Eurocentric biases, advocating for the integration of perspectives from the Global South and indigenous communities. By embracing the plurality of knowledge systems to undo epistemic violence (Morris 2010, 35), or epistemicide (Santos 2015), SEND can evolve into a more inclusive and reflexive system, capable of adapting to the complexities of global diversity and reflecting on its constraints and limitations, not—this is important—to make itself perfect, or 'complete' (Luhmann and Schorr 2000, 377) through reflection.

A critical engagement with international legal frameworks such as the *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO 1994) and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) (2006) underscores this need for change. Although these documents communicate

organisational decisions to promote inclusive education, they often reinforce Western-centric assumptions about disability and inclusion. By re-entering SEND's guiding distinctions—such as difference/norm and need/no need—into communication through a decolonial lens, this paper suggests that SEND can navigate its interdependencies with other societal systems more equitably, creating structural coupling that better reflects global realities.

A key focus of this systems theoretical approach is SEND's ability to perform its educational function while engaging in self-reflection. It is a fundamental process in systemic autopoiesis. Autopoietic systems generate their own elements through recursive communication, ensuring their self-reproduction and continual evolution, a biological concept of self-regeneration that Luhmann borrows from Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (Luhmann 2013, xi–xii). However, for SEND, as a meaning-constituted self-referential system, to engage in meaningful self-reflection, it must confront its blind spots, particularly the Eurocentric assumptions that have historically shaped its development. By introducing a dynamic process of boundary-crossing and re-entry, the system can evolve, forming new distinctions and facilitating a more equitable framework for education.

4 | SEND and Structural Coupling

Central to the adaptation of Maturana's concept of structural coupling is Luhmann's emphasis on compatibility and selectivity. He explains that such coupling can be conceived as a two-sided form and this form 'does not refer to the entire environment, since not everything that exists is structurally coupled with the system. Rather, couplings are highly selective. Something is included and something else is excluded' (Luhmann 2013, 85). Crucially, 'structural coupling is always compatible with autopoiesis' (Luhmann 2013, 85). The implication of this assertion is that in the dynamic relationship between system and environment, 'there are possibilities of [structural coupling] exerting influence on the system as long as its autopoiesis is not destroyed' (Luhmann 2013, 85). Brunczel (2010) infers that structural coupling therefore means 'a narrow zone emerges, in which a system can get into contact with its environment' (Brunczel 2010, 53). It implies that systems only include information that can be of value by excluding everything else from the environment. Given that SEND is resulted from systemic differentiation from the education system by means of adding SEND's 'operative closure ... into the binarity' (Baraldi et al. 2021, 42) of the system of education that 'develops a specific code that distinguishes between conveyable and unconveyable' (Baraldi et al. 2021, 83), SEND's coupling with other functional systems can be expected to serve more specific purposes. For example, the decree of inclusive education connects SEND with other function systems such as politics (Lindacher 2024). Under this condition, we can try to ascertain how SEND aligns its expected social functions with societal systems in its environment by retrospective analysis. The theoretical framework of structural coupling therefore offers us an analytical tool to identify the specific elements in other systems that are deemed viable environmental irritations through SEND's self- and other-observation for its autopoiesis.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) as a subsystem within the broader educational system is expected to

fulfil specialised roles while contributing to the overarching social function of the entire system through structural coupling with other societal systems. The following section outlines how SEND is structurally coupled with the system of economy, politics, healthcare and technology to fulfil its social function.

4.1 | SEND and the Economic System

The social model of disability is deeply connected to the economic system, as economic policies and resource allocation play a significant role in either reinforcing or dismantling barriers to education for students with disabilities (Ainscow 2020b; Frawley et al. 2015). Taking an instrumentalistic view of education, two economists based at University of Chicago, Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz, conceptualise education as ‘human capital’ (Robeyns 2006, 72), effectively treating human individuals collectively as a national asset, in so doing fundamentally dehumanising individual human beings to the point of serving exclusively an external function that is the growth of economy. Guided by this principle of economic instrumentalism, any investment in education has positive values only if it brings about financial returns. It is therefore understandable why human capital theory (HTC) enjoys such a broad appeal among political economists, policymakers and educators with its glossy mantra of ‘knowledge economy’ (Livingstone 2012). What happens when economic returns cannot be guaranteed, when ‘investment’ seemingly turns to ‘waste’ according to such a linear causal input/output relationship in certain areas of educational provision?

Luhmann’s concept of structural coupling between SEND and the economic system focuses on the provision of financial resources, grants and employment programmes that support the inclusion of students with disabilities which have suffered from ‘chronic underfunding’ (NCB 2024), according to National Children’s Bureau. Interestingly, from the perspective of second-order observation, it is worth noting the interactions between the operational logics of structurally coupled systems.

In education, there has been a growing trend since the 1990s to adopt the logic of social Darwinism in the neoliberal economic system that is based on the distinctive binary codes of profit/loss, win/lose or survive/perish. This inextricable ‘intersystem’ (Luhmann 1995, 213) link between education and economy has long been observed by political economists and educational commentators in terms of the commodification of education and learners in a neoliberal economic system (Hastings 2019; Patrick 2013; Rudd and Goodson 2017). The relationship between education as a public service for the common good and neoliberalism that places higher values on competition, personal responsibility and reduction of government spending, for example, has been argued as being one of incompatibility and rising tension, particularly in the context of SEND and educational inclusion (Broderick and Roscigno 2021; Mac 2015, 2022; Patrick 2013; Romstein 2015; Rudd and Goodson 2017). Nevertheless, the coupling between the two systems is evident.

The OECD report, *Equity and Inclusion in Education* (2023), highlights the growing concerns among governments and education policymakers with equity and educational inclusion,

following major developments around the globe such as ‘demographic shifts, migration and refugee crises, rising inequalities, and climate change’ (OECD 2023, 11). From an economic standpoint, governments and institutions are under pressure in their responsibility for the distribution of funds that enable schools to allocate resources, including providing necessary accommodations and pedagogical adjustments, such as adaptive technology, specialised teaching assistants and accessible infrastructure. National and Federal policies such as the Equality Act (Gov.UK 2010) in the United Kingdom and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States create the structural coupling between SEND and economic systems by providing the financial framework for inclusive education. In a global context, the disparities between contrasting socio-economic conditions across nation states and geographical areas further exacerbate the challenges in the provision of quality education to learners with special educational needs and disabilities, often found in the most socio-economically disadvantaged households (Cole 2023; Kauffman 2020; Frawley et al. 2015; Miles and Singal 2010).

This interaction exemplifies how SEND depends on economic policies to perform its function, though the economic system must account for SEND in its resource distribution. For example, inclusive education may increase economic equity in the long term by fostering the skills of all citizens, including those with disabilities, who will then contribute to the workforce.

4.2 | Political System: Legislation and Rights-Based Frameworks

Subsystems in a functionally differentiated society form interdependent relationships through observing relevance in each other for reproduction (Baraldi et al. 2021, 118). For example, functional systems can be structurally coupled through shared symbolically generalised communication media. In the previous section, we see how the systems of SEND and economy are structurally coupled through the shared symbolic media of specific needs and funding, in which both pedagogical knowledge and money are conveyed in the intersystemic network of communication, incorporating common language of specialist educational terminology and fiscal vocabulary to construct a reality understood by both systems.

Perhaps, the most intriguing coupling is between SEND and its broader system of education. In this relationship we see how the symbolically generalised medium of ‘success’ in education (Baraldi and Corsi 2017, 32) can overshadow its ‘wellbeing’ counterpart in SEND. In turn, we can see how ‘success’ gains currency at the expense of ‘wellbeing’, for example, in a neoliberal economic system, the symbolic medium of success is privileged in the pursuit of efficiency, competitive advantage and productivity over wellbeing. The following paragraphs examine the interplay between SEND and the political system that is mediated by the legal system.

In this section, we turn our attention to the relationship between the system of SEND and the political system. Their relationship is primarily mediated through legal and regulatory frameworks. Political system establishes the power of mandates

and expectations for inclusive education, as seen in the *CRPD* (2006), which enshrines the right to inclusive education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity in Article 24 (*CRPD* 2006, 14). The decree of inclusive education therefore 'is unfolded in its potential for irritation for the educational system' (Lindacher 2024, 3). Considerable momentum has been garnered by international and national political developments. For example, the *Salamanca Statement* and the United Kingdom's Equality Act (Gov.UK 2010) provide further guidance for ensuring equality in education (Ainscow 2020a, 2020b; OECD 2023; Göransson and Nilholm 2014; Hornby 2014; Mitchell 2005; Schuelka 2018). It is important to note, however, structural coupling does not imply direct influence from one system to another, for example, from politics to education, or to the SEND system. Rather, systems require catalytic impetus in the form of irritations that are 'generated and perceived (and possibly processed) by a system' (Lindacher 2024, 3). From the perspective of systems, in addition to 'irritation' and 'stimulus' (or 'perturbation' if quoting Maturana), Luhmann prefers the term 'resonance capability [*Resonanzfähigkeit*]' (Luhmann 2013, 88) activated by structural coupling.

The structural coupling between SEND and politics in this context is encapsulated by the latest UK government report, 'Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and alternative provision (AP) improvement plan: right support, right place, right time' (Gov.UK 2023). Political system can only appear to 'exerts influence' on SEND through legal frameworks of laws and regulations that outline the rights of students with disabilities if its potential for irritation is actualised. SEND system, in turn, reciprocates such environmental irritation with organisational communications regarding the effectiveness of political directives, potentially advocating for further legal reforms or adjustments in the implementation of inclusive education (Ainscow 2020b; Lindsay 2003; Oad 2023; Thomas 2013). On a practical level, the social model of disability encourages policymakers to focus on dismantling institutional and societal barriers rather than simply providing accommodations for impairments (Nichols and Quayle 2008). A concrete example of this is the continuous dialogue between SEND professionals, advocacy groups and policymakers, leading to the refinement of education policies to better serve students with disabilities. The utilisation of such feedback loop is evinced, for example, in the context of higher education (Riddell et al. 2005). Interdependent reflexivity underlines this kind of intersystemic interaction, whereby both systems (education and politics) adjust their self-referential operations based on feedback (other-reference) from one another, in so doing creating a more responsive and inclusive legal framework.

4.3 | Healthcare System: Addressing Diverse Needs

Similar to the political and the economic systems, the healthcare system contributes to the construction of SEND as a constantly evolving self-referential system by making its own complexity available in a way that Luhmann describes as interpenetration (Luhmann 1995, 213). Such occupational and professional parallelism is prevalent in the argumentation in educational discourse surrounding the idea of professionalism and professional status of the teachers. The overarching semantics of 'evidence'

as the basis of practice is transfused from the scientific reflection of the medical system to the pedagogical reflection of the educational system. Central to the mission of SEND is its care for the wellbeing of the most vulnerable groups in society. This mission can only be realised when supported by medical evidence, in turn, reports of interventional and/or therapeutic success provide evidence to justify the pathologisation of conditions, thus forming a profoundly interpenetrative relationship by explicitly linking clinical patients and children with SEND as a shared medium. Like the healthcare system's operational logic based on the sickness/health guiding distinction that 'structures the arena of communication between doctors and patients' (Baraldi et al. 2021, 145), in its support to students with special educational needs and disabilities—certified by the medical and registered in the social welfare systems—the system of SEND requires educational practitioners to act on evidence to implement recommendations from the healthcare providers to perform both educational and social functions.

The intense parallelism between SEND and healthcare also reveals that, like the healthcare system, the entire SEND system 'is geared towards the negative side of its code' (Roth and Valentinov 2022, 336)—deficiency. Whereas healthcare system surveys its environment for cases of illnesses rather than health, SEND system searches out individuals who are 'deficient' in certain physical, mental, intellectual, emotional, psychological and communicative capacities. When healthcare system 'is characterised and maintained by operations pertaining to the treatment of ill not healthy person' (Roth and Valentinov 2022, 336), it can be argued that the system of SEND is also characterised and maintained by operations pertaining to the treatment of person 'with special educational needs and disabilities' not person in the mainstream educational and social settings. But does this intensely close relationship between SEND and healthcare sit comfortably with individuals who may have medical diagnosis of certain forms of special educational needs or disabilities but refuse to be pathologised, especially when informed by critical disabilities studies or educational decolonisation (discussed in Section 5)?

This basic relational model is profoundly hierarchical in its privileging professional judgement informed by scientific knowledge, which is in turn based on another level of guiding distinction of knowing/not knowing. The assumption is clear: The patients and students with SEND are in a passive position (not knowing), whereas the doctors and teachers assume their active role (knowing) in administering required medical treatments or pedagogical interventions. Or we can assess this polarisation in a Spencer-Brownian expression that shows not knowing=unmarked state and knowing=marked state. What if we, in Luhmann's terminology, crossed the boundary?

It is worth considering a different scenario when the difference of the unity after such a transgressive act is observed as part of SEND's self-description. In other words, a scenario that facilitates the emergence of a new form of knowledge that factors in the lived experiences of patients and students with SEND (Hall 2019). The theorisation of this emerging body of knowledge therefore necessitates a methodology that emmeshes 'scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that defines particular attributes as impairments, as well

as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations' (Minich 2016, 3). In systems theoretical framing, Michailakis (2003) takes this methodological departure further to argue the 'improbability of communication' (Luhmann 1995, 157) about a person's 'disabilities' across a range of functional systems on the basis that 'system-specific communication about these individuals cannot be transferred into another system' (Michailakis 2003, 215).

Ghesquière and Van der Aalsvoort's (2004, 218) advocacy for a systems theoretical understanding of SEND as an 'interactional process or a circular system' comes significantly close to a more recursive and discursive observation (that is not without the inevitable blind spot of its own) of the relationship between SEND and the healthcare system that may offer a more nuanced description of their complex interdependency. The author of *What Really Works in Special and Inclusive Education* (Mitchell and Sutherland 2020) further supports this structurally coupled relationship by showing how educational systems must integrate medical, psychological and legal inputs (external systems) to ensure inclusivity, however improbable or imperfect the intersystemic communication is. At the same time, the SEND system remains focused on its core mission of quality education, even when it must accommodate external interventions recommended in documents such as Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP), Individualised Education Plans (IEPs), Student Support Document (SSD in higher education in the United Kingdom) and therapies.

The interaction between SEND and the healthcare system therefore is critical for addressing the diverse needs of students with special educational needs and disabilities. Crucially, empirical research based on participatory designs or conducted by persons with disabilities can help build a fuller self-image of SEND system. The evolution of the theorisation of disabilities (Hosking 2008; Fine 2019; Hall 2019) underscores that health services should not merely focus on treating impairments but should work in tandem with education to remove the barriers identified by studies from a diverse range of perspectives that limit participation (Ainscow 2005; Hodkinson 2010; Miles and Singal 2010; Qu 2022). This interrelationship is vital for ensuring that students' medical and therapeutic needs are met, allowing them to engage fully in education.

From a practical perspective, structural coupling can take the form of a continuous dialogue between SEND and healthcare systems to ensure that students receive necessary accommodations, such as speech therapy, mental health counselling and physical therapy. These services are critical for enabling students with disabilities to participate in education on equal terms with their peers. The healthcare system also provides necessary diagnostic and support information that SEND uses to adapt its educational strategies (Castro and Palikara 2017). For example, collaboration between health professionals and schools ensures that students with autism spectrum disorders receive the necessary accommodations in class (Saggers et al. 2023). Healthcare providers and educators must continuously share information to create an individualised educational programme (IEP) that addresses both the educational and health-related barriers these students face (Jachova et al. 2018).

4.4 | Technology: Interface of Inclusion, Equality and Equity for SEND

If improbability underlines intersystemic communication with regard to SEND (Luhmann 1995, 158; Michailakis 2003), embeddedness characterises the ubiquitous presence of technology in education (Watson and Romic 2024), and by extension, SEND. Offering an expansive definition of technology to extend 'beyond machines or software to include a variety of processes aimed at simplifying or automating tasks, functions or processes' (Watson and Romic 2024, 2), Watson and Romic (2024, 11) consider technology as being bimodal. From the perspective of structural coupling, they argue that, on the one hand, 'it is instrumental in that it structurally couples between thought (the psychic system) and the physical world'. On the other hand, 'it has a semantic role in that it becomes a medium for communication and thought and therefore is a structural coupling between thought and society (the system of communication)' (Watson and Romic 2024, 11).

Being a tool and a medium at the same time to connect humans to society in both tangible and abstract forms underscores technology's unique position and potential in the functioning of SEND. Within this theoretical framing, technology plays a pivotal role in supporting students with SEND in overcoming societal barriers, particularly in the context of the competing medical, social and rights models. Technological innovations, such as adaptive devices, assistive software and online learning platforms, enable students with disabilities to engage in education more fully, for example, during the global pandemic when teaching was delivered online (Ahmed and Opoku 2022; Rice 2022). In this sense, technology acts also as a mediator between SEND and society by providing the tools needed to facilitate access and participation (Benton and Johnson 2015; Lambert 2019; Mahmood et al. 2017; Schindler et al. 2017), and on the other hand, it provides a useful vehicle for feedback from the system of SEND to that of technology (Gov.UK 2021), contributing to the network of systemic self-observation as a result.

Ensuring that all students have access to necessary technological resources requires coordinated efforts between SEND, policymakers, and the technology sector (Sweeney 2016) through meaningful intersystemic interpenetrative communication. For example, the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)* highlights the state's responsibility to ensure equal access to education for people with disabilities (Article 24). This legal mandate shapes the operations of the SEND system, showing how legal frameworks penetrate education, creating a structurally coupled relationship reinforceable by law. SEND adapts to these mandates while maintaining its core educational functions through operational closure.

In terms of the integration of technology into SEND in practice, structural coupling takes place when educational institutions adopt technological innovations designed to assist students with disabilities. For instance, text-to-speech software, screen readers and communication devices allow students with physical or learning disabilities to access the same educational content as their peers (Coleman et al. 2015; Mitchell and Sutherland 2020; Mulloy et al. 2014). Given such close structural coupling, the technology sector is compelled to continuously adapt its

offerings based on feedback from SEND professionals, creating an ongoing cycle of improvement and innovation, which in turn yields greater financial returns for its investment. As such, the interdependency of the systems involved forms a symbiotic relationship that binds each other in a co-evolutionary process, as evinced in the most recent technological breakthrough in the field of artificial intelligence (AI).

The popularity of generative AI has gathered its momentum in recent years. In response, education practitioner and policymakers have also placed greater emphasis on its inclusive potential with its applications in educational settings. Following the release of ChatGPT in November 2022, AI has become a global focal point in the promotion of social justice through educational inclusion to narrow the digital divide and to remove inequality. Crucially, inclusion is defined to be a 'transformative process that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people and adults, while respecting and valuing diversity and eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education' (UNESCO 2019a, 1). In other words, education under the auspices of UN directives is expected to be designed for all, and it can be argued, by all and for all, with the help of the multifaceted affordances of AI.

Despite the burgeoning optimism however, technological advancement also exacerbates the situation of digital divide and inequality. One of the inherent attributes in technology is digital divide that is indicative of the broader social and structural inequalities where students with disabilities have limited access to technology (DiMaggio and Hargittai 2023; Gorski 2005; Sloane 2019) in both local and global contexts. Global organisations such as World Economic Forum published *A blueprint for equity and inclusion in artificial intelligence white paper* (WEF 2022) to point out that 'AI as a tool to improve the lives of people in an inclusive way is a promise yet to materialize' despite its 'profound impact on all industries, and more importantly, on the lives of people in all communities' (6). The opening paragraph in the *Global education monitoring report* (2024) highlights the disparities in a global context, citing: 'Children with at least one sensory, physical, or intellectual difficulty are 7 percentage points less likely than the average child to complete primary school: with a gap of 10 percentage points in Zimbabwe and 14 percentage points in Iraq' (UNESCO 2024a, 3).

Education, more than any other functional systems, is entrusted with such a noble mission, seen particularly in the context of Education 2030 (2016). To reiterate education's role and functions in society, the Assistant Director-General for Education of UNESCO, Stefania Giannini, proclaims in the opening speech of the Artificial Intelligence for Sustainable Development policy forum during the Digital Learning Week 2019: 'It is education that powers sustainable development, and this will only succeed if it leverages the digital revolution and in particular AI' (UNESCO 2019b, 22). Education is positioned as the key to the safeguarding of future international developments and the promotion of social justice, and the adaptability of education to technological advancement will determine their outcome.

Like the general educational system, SEND shares the role of fulfilling a critical societal function, ensuring the inclusion and development of students with special needs and disabilities that

is outlined in the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UNESCO 2016, 7). Although the broader education system is tasked with transmitting knowledge, fostering social integration and preparing individuals for societal roles, SEND specifically adapts this mission to the unique needs of individuals with disabilities. For example, in the United Kingdom, the *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision improvement plan* (Gov.UK 2023) proposes to achieve such a goal by introducing a single national system (7). This subsystem ensures that society's values of equity and accessibility are realised, contributing to broader goals such as economic productivity and social cohesion.

Leveraging technological innovations to bring about reforms in education may seem technically plausible, pedagogically compatible and morally desirable. Besides, the introduction of assistive technology to remove barriers to access to quality education for students with SEND injects much hope and excitement for educators. Yet, it is worth considering the inherent paradoxes in educational reform in terms of its two main objectives: quality and equality (Baraldi and Corsi 2017, 96). Because quality implies the differences between better and worse, inequality becomes an inevitable and direct product of the pursuit for quality (Baraldi and Corsi 2017, 96). It is in this sense that the coupling of technology and education for the advancement of educational inclusion must account for its own internal paradoxes: the more sophisticated the technology the potentially more subtle inequalities that it will produce. Exclusions in this process of inequality production become more difficult to identify and therefore to attribute to certain levels of the intersystemic coupling.

To acknowledge the inherent paradoxes of self-observation is to observe the blind spot of self-observation. Up to this point, this paper has offered a second-order observation of the self-description of the SEND system in terms of structural coupling, also with references to interdependency and interpenetration. As self-referential systems can 'insert description of themselves into themselves' (Luhmann 1990, 184), SEND formulates its self-description not with a simplified image of itself. Instead, it conceives itself as one of those complex systems that 'orient themselves towards their own complexity' (Luhmann 1990, 184). Unlike self-conscious units such as human individuals, Luhmann explains: 'Self-observation on the level social systems has to use social communication. Self-observing communication refers to the system that is produced and reproduced by the communication itself' (Luhmann 1990, 184). Functionally differentiated modern society, Luhmann continues, 'had developed theories as instruments of self-observation within different functional sectors' (Luhmann 1990, 185).

So far, we have focused on the self-observation of SEND by connecting it to theories developed within various social domains such as economy, politics, healthcare and technology. Though not being able to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for self-observation, all of these theories serve as useful instruments nonetheless. The following pages attempt to offer a third-order observation of the self-observation of SEND to observe its own blind spot. This third-order observation is made from the vantage point of decolonial praxis

as another instrument for SEND's self-observation, drawing references from theories developed within critical disability studies.

5 | The Horizon of Potentialities: The Future of Decolonising SEND

This paper has highlighted an epistemological limitation in its description of a second-order observation of SEND as a subsystem of the broader system of education in the United Kingdom. By extension, it also suggests areas for future research foci. The limitation of observing how SEND observes itself through analysing its structural coupling with other functional social systems such as economy, politics, healthcare and technology presupposes the existence of a blind spot (Luhmann 2013, 111) that requires a third-order perspective to render it visible and meaningful (Luhmann 2000, 61; Luhmann 2020, 328; Salem 2014, 30). The ordinal sequencing of observation denotes not a hierarchy of significance nor does it delineate a mere 'chain phenomenon ... It is also about reflection on the conditions of the possibility of second-order observation and its consequences for what can then still be a common world or a society that makes description possible' (Luhmann 2020, 328). The possibility of second-order observation is dependent upon the structural coupling between SEND and other societal systems based primarily on ideals and concepts developed in the industrialised Global North or the West. Because of this epistemological standpoint, on reflection, this paper offers only a partial view of our common world or society.

This systems theoretical capacity to reflect is consistent with the Luhmannian concept of re-entry whereby the system/environment distinction is re-entered into the system. In other words, the guiding distinction of the Global North and the Global South is re-entered into the system of SEND to allow further distinctions to emerge (Baraldi et al. 2021, 206). At the operational level, I propose a boundary crossing to the previously unmarked state in the SEND discourse to facilitate a third-order observation, namely, from the standpoint of decolonial scholarship in conjunction with critical disability studies.

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, the evolution of SEND as a subsystem of education in the United Kingdom reflects a specific socio-historical development (Lindsay et al. 2020; Warnock 1978). However, this trajectory has largely been shaped by Eurocentric and Western orthodoxy, often ignoring the diverse experiences and epistemologies of the Global South and indigenous peoples. The notion of 'special educational needs' itself reflects a paradigm rooted in modernity and Enlightenment ideals, where educational provision is based on standardised, individualised interventions grounded in biomedical approaches to disability (Grech and Soldatic 2016; Grech 2012; Soldatic and Grech 2017). Such approaches risk reinforcing forms of exclusion for populations in the Majority World, where these models do not always resonate with local realities or the complex ways disability is understood and identified within their communities (Singal 2010). Disability studies, when observed through the lens of southern theory, can be accused of becoming 'complicit in the neocolonising of the Southern space' (Grech 2012, 52).

When examining SEND as a subsystem of education through a decolonial lens, it is also crucial to acknowledge and re-examine its structural coupling with other social systems, such as economy, politics, healthcare and technology, often privileging the Global North. Global inequalities mean that systems in the Global South often do not have the same resources, infrastructure or support to provide inclusive education. In this context, SEND research must move beyond simply exporting Western models of disability and inclusion and instead engage in empowering and enriching dialogues with local communities to develop contextually relevant practices (Connell 2020). Historically, SEND emerged within a specific colonial context. The concept of 'special needs' emerged against the backdrop of industrialisation and the rise of nation-states in Europe, which began categorising people based on their ability to participate in labour markets (Goodley 2013; Goodley et al. 2019). As the Global North developed systems to manage and 'include' disabled people, the Global South's experiences of disability remained deeply affected by colonial histories that marginalised indigenous ways of knowing and being (Meekosha 2011; Shakespeare et al. 2002).

The traditional SEND paradigm has perpetuated forms of marginalisation by means of taxonomical categories informed by Western medical science, particularly when policies and practices are exported from the Global North to the Global South, often ignoring the indigenous, cultural and socio-economic contexts that shape education and disability (Grech 2012). For instance, international frameworks such as the *World Declaration on Education for All* (UNESCO 1990) and the *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO 1994) have promoted inclusive education worldwide, yet they have been critiqued for embodying a neoliberal agenda that privileges Western ideals of inclusion from an ableist perspective without considering the realities of the Majority World (Goodley and Lawthorn 2019; Kumar et al. 2012; Armstrong et al. 2010).

Indigenous epistemologies often conceptualise disability differently, focusing on communal wellbeing and collective responsibility rather than individual impairment. Singal (2010) explains her preference for the term "people with disabilities" rather than disabled people, in an attempt to highlight a need to focus on the individual rather than the disability' (417). Yet, these perspectives are rarely acknowledged in dominant SEND frameworks, which centre medicalised and individualised approaches to education. In countries within the Global South, especially those grappling with postcolonial realities, SEND practices that rely on such frameworks can be ill-fitting, even harmful, as they do not align with indigenous concepts of community and disability (Grech and Soldatic 2016).

A decolonial perspective on SEND challenges its Eurocentric foundations and calls for an epistemological shift towards recognising the diverse ways in which disability and education are understood globally (Yee and Butler 2020). Indigenous epistemologies, for example, offer alternatives that see disability not as a deficit to be rectified but as part of the fabric of human diversity that should be respected and supported within communal contexts. In many indigenous cultures, education is not an individualised endeavour but is seen as a communal activity, where learning is holistic and integrated with the needs of the

community, environment and spiritual life (Yee and Butler 2020). Drawing inspiration from the spiritual dimension that often characterises indigenous belief and attitudes towards different attributes of a person, advocates of decolonising research have proposed a methodology that is built on an understanding of ‘indigenous modes of difference’ (Lovern 2021). Introducing the case of Mōri Vitalism as ‘the belief in an original single source of life continues as a force that imbues and animates all forms and things in the cosmos’ (Lovern 2021), the author argues that since an ideal person or way of existing is absent from Mōri spirituality, ‘[d]ifferences in bodies or in minds allows for the expansion of knowledge beyond a single set of shared constructs or shared theories’ (Lovern 2021). Others have proposed specific approaches to conduct qualitative research that employs explicitly indigenous methodologies, including ‘(1) exercising critical reflexivity, (2) reciprocity and respect for self-determination, (3) embracing “Other (ed)” ways of knowing, and (4) embodying a transformative praxis’ (Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021, 1).

In the Global South, the systems of education, including SEND, are often deeply affected by socio-economic factors such as poverty, political instability and under-resourced public institutions. For instance, in African and South Asian countries, access to special education services may be limited, and many children with disabilities remain outside formal education systems altogether (Miles and Singal 2010). Yet, the Western model of SEND, rooted in individualised support and formal schooling, fails to account for these broader systemic issues (Hodkinson and Williams-Brown 2022). A more relevant approach would recognise the need for multi-level strategies that address not only educational barriers but also the wider social, economic and political contexts in which children with disabilities live (Erevelles 2011).

Furthermore, the technological and political systems that SEND is coupled with in the Global North may not translate well to countries where infrastructure is lacking. In the Global South, schools may not have access to assistive technologies, and political systems may be unable or unwilling to prioritise the education of children with disabilities (Barnes 2011; Puli et al. 2021), as shown also in the case of South Africa during COVID-19 pandemic (McKinney et al. 2024, 2).

6 | Conclusion

A Luhmannian approach to decolonising SEND is particularly pertinent because it emphasises the autopoietic nature of systems, whereby systems such as SEND continuously reproduce their structures through recursive communications. This self-referential process allows SEND to adapt to changing societal conditions. Decolonisation, in this sense, becomes not merely a political or ethical imperative, but a systemic one, the other side of the coloniser/colonised distinction, the negation of colonialism. For SEND to remain relevant and effective globally, it must engage in a process of self-reflection that challenges its Eurocentric blind spots and integrates the diverse, often marginalised, perspectives of the Global South and indigenous populations. The inclusion of these perspectives ensures that SEND can evolve in ways that reflect the lived realities of different communities, thereby fostering greater equity and inclusivity.

In the enigmatically titled ‘I see something you don’t see’ (Luhmann 2002), Luhmann criticises the Frankfurt School by pointing out that their ‘occupation with texts rather than with realities, the description of others’ descriptions—all of this fits into the picture of a tradition of thought unable to see what possibilities today’s society offers for self-description’ (192–193). Against this particular historical backdrop, decolonising SEND may stand to offer a *differing* perspective from a post-Enlightenment tradition of rationality that privileges logocentrism and scientific objectivity.

The systems theoretical framework proposed in this paper offers three distinct benefits for decolonising SEND to safeguard its function to society, performance in relation to other function systems and its ability to reflect. Firstly, it allows for structural coupling with non-Western epistemologies and indigenous knowledge systems, enabling SEND to engage in more dynamic exchanges with diverse societal systems to formulate a kind of global, ecological communication. This reconceptualisation moves beyond Western-centric diagnoses and interventions, recognising that disability and education are experienced and understood differently across cultures. By facilitating boundary-crossing and communication across systems, Luhmann’s theory helps SEND better accommodate these diverse perspectives through structural realignment to promote social justice as its core function.

Secondly, interdependency between SEND and other subsystems—such as economy, politics, healthcare and technology—is reconceived to include Global South and indigenous systems of knowledge, fostering a more inclusive approach to education and disability. SEND’s interdependency with other societal systems must not only accommodate the needs of the Global North but must also be sensitive to the political, economic, healthcare and technological realities of other regions while remaining sensitive to dramatic changes to global environment and ecosystem. By using a Luhmannian framework, SEND can actively engage performatively with these systems, ensuring that educational policies are responsive to the unique challenges faced by marginalised populations.

Thirdly, turning itself into its own medium through self-reflection and autopoiesis, SEND can address the limitations of its current models and generate new elements for systemic reproduction. This is essential for decolonising research to generate new theories, as SEND must critically re-examine its foundational assumptions and use new theories for self-observation. Luhmann’s emphasis on the recursive nature of systems helps to create spaces for re-entry, where new distinctions and possibilities emerge as SEND engages with its own blind spots. The systemic ability to reflect and evolve is particularly critical for ensuring that SEND’s future development is globally inclusive, rather than reproducing Eurocentric biases. We can anticipate a programme that broadens the research horizon by entering decolonisation into the Global North/Global South distinction in SEND. Such reflective praxis creates spaces for global partnerships and interdisciplinary collaborations that challenge dominant Western paradigms. In so doing, it supports a more equitable and globally representative system of education. In Luhmann’s terms, decolonising SEND can therefore be described as follows: ‘The basic difference between actuality and

the horizon of potentialities is that it is possible to redifferentiate differences among open possibilities' (Luhmann 1995, 74–75).

Furthermore, recalling the warning against decolonisation as a tokenistic piecemeal or a mere metaphorical posturing (Tuck and Yang 2012), in advocating for a decolonial shift, this paper also calls for the inclusion of indigenous and Global South epistemologies into SEND's operational framework. Decolonising SEND research entails moving away from Eurocentric prescriptions and fostering methodological pluralism that values the diverse ways in which disability, education and inclusion are conceptualised across cultures. This paradigm shift is critical for reshaping the research methodologies and theoretical foundations that have long informed SEND. Decolonising SEND research through a systems theoretical lens not only broadens the epistemological horizons of SEND but also challenges the structural inequalities that have marginalised non-Western contributions to educational theory and practice. This paper, therefore, urges education practitioners, researchers and policymakers to engage in decolonial praxis (in a Freirean sense) in their endeavour to promote social justice through global educational inclusion. In doing so, a systems theoretically informed decolonising SEND research inserts the North/South distinction back into the distinction between educational studies (*Erziehungswissenschaft*) and the art of education (*Erziehungskunst*) (Luhmann and Schorr 2000, 205) to continue the debates about the relationship 'between theory and praxis' (Luhmann and Schorr 2000, 205).

Ultimately, this paper argues that a Luhmannian systems theoretical framework offers SEND a way to navigate the complexities of global diversity while retaining its systemic function. By emphasising structural coupling, interdependency and autopoiesis, the framework not only supports the decolonisation of SEND but also promotes its evolution as a subsystem capable of fostering global inclusivity and equity. The decolonisation of SEND is, therefore, a theoretical and practical imperative for reshaping global educational policies, practices and research.

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