

Decolonial reflexivity and positionality: Inclusive practice for SEND and neurodiversity

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Positionality, Privilege & the Colonial Matrix of Power



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Framing the Conversation

Decolonising 'SEND' begins with us:

- Knowledge is never neutral
- Knowledge is historically produced
- Education legitimises particular epistemologies
- Positionality shapes pedagogy

Who am I in who I teach/support?

Colonial Matrix of Power

Colonialism did not end — it reorganised. As a result, power operates across:

- Knowledge
- Authority
- Economy
- Subjectivity

Aníbal Quijano – Coloniality of power (2000; 2007)

Walter Mignolo – Epistemic dominance (2011; 2018)

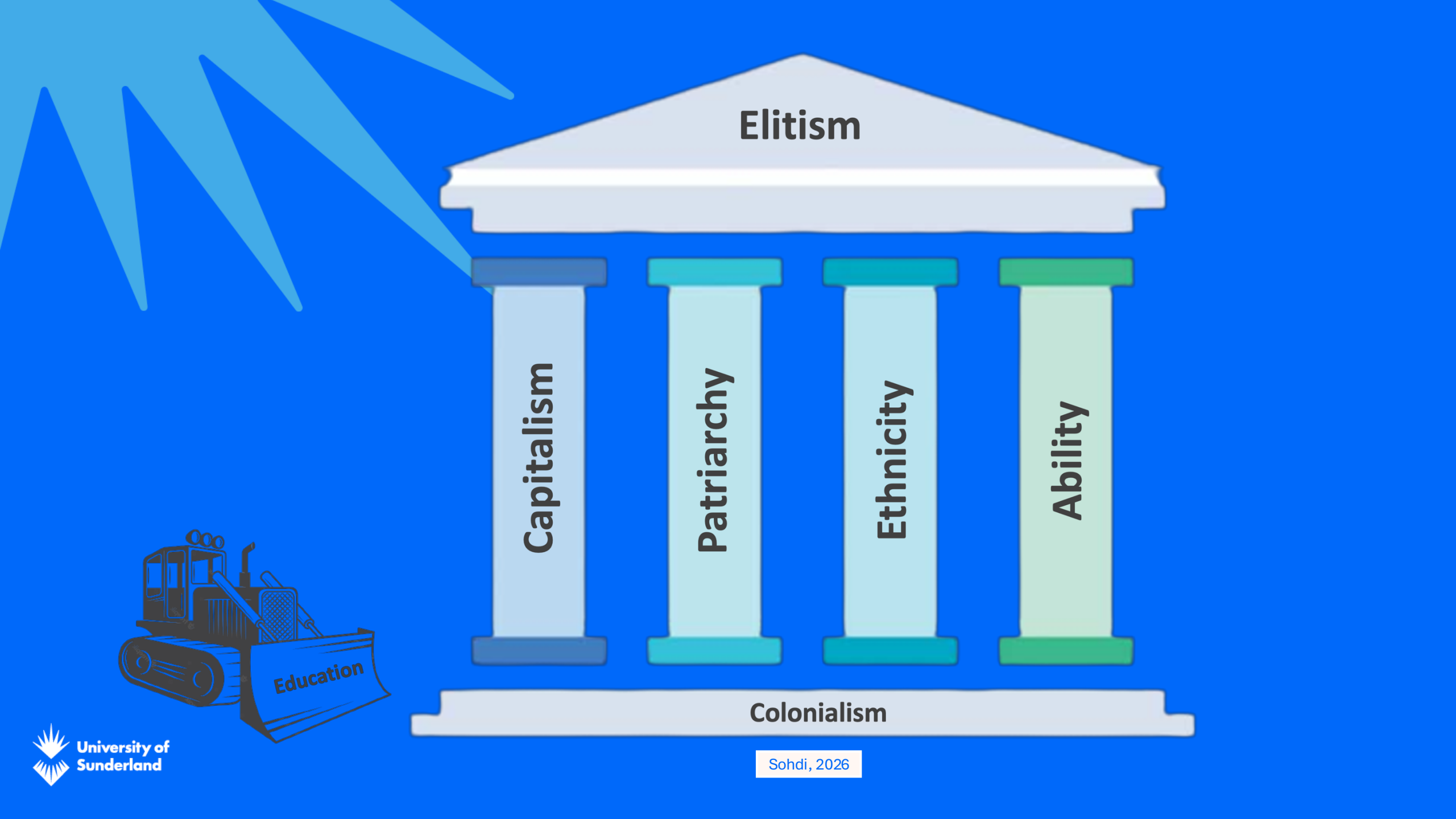
Modernity and coloniality are inseparable.

What is Positionality

Positionality = our location within social, political and epistemic hierarchies. It shapes:

- Authority
- Legitimacy
- Safety
- Expectation

Not identity alone – but relational power.



Elitism

Capitalism

Patriarchy

Ethnicity

Ability

Colonialism

Education

From Awareness to Responsibility

If we hold privilege:

- We can leverage it to disrupt inequity
- We can redistribute epistemic space
- We can amplify marginalised scholarship

If we lack privilege in certain pillars:

- We can bring authentic lived experience
- Without being tokenised
- Without carrying disproportionate labour

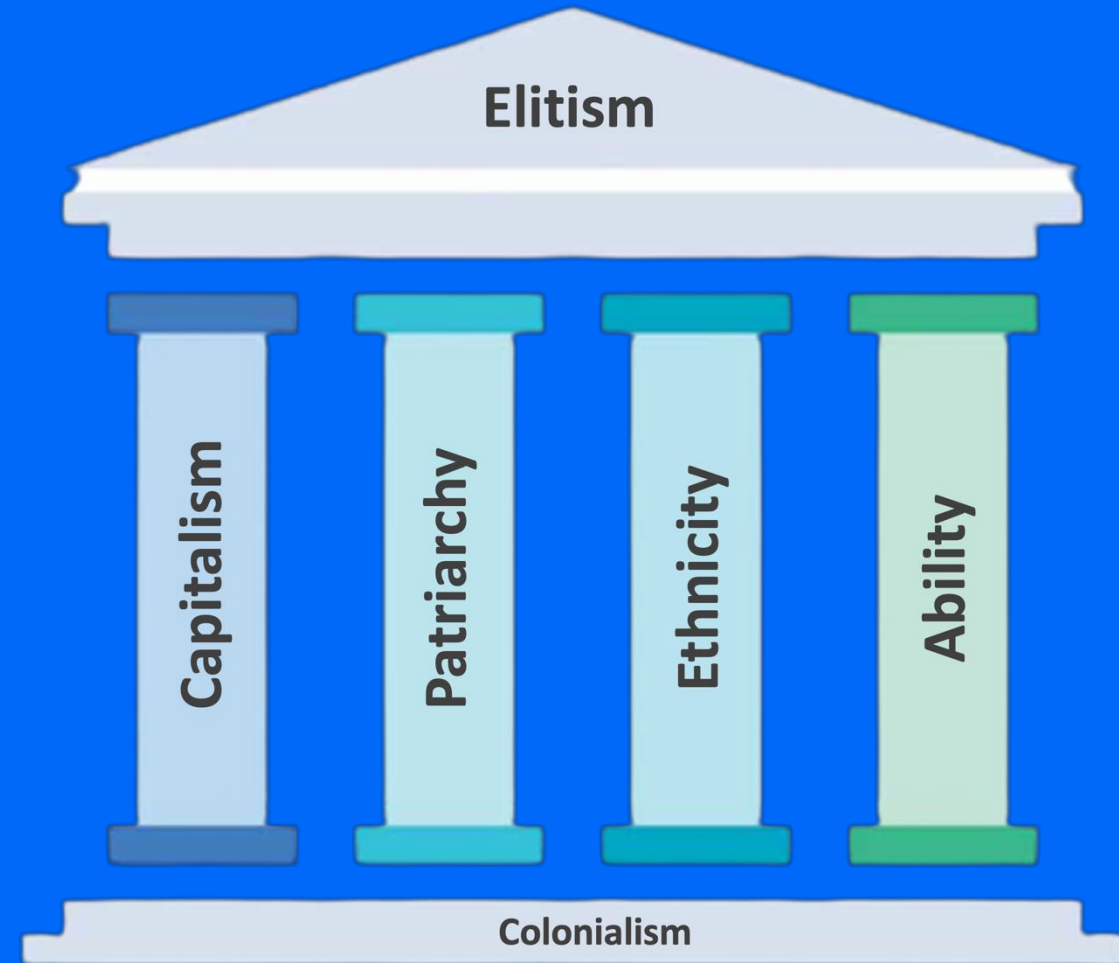
Decolonising positionality = Relational accountability.

Individually plot yourself across the four pillars and reflect:

- Where do I experience structural advantage?
- Where do I experience marginalisation?
- How might this shape my teaching authority?

Discuss:

- What surprised you?
- How does this shape your curriculum decisions?



Decolonising SEND – Rethinking Knowledge, Support and Practice



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From Inclusion to Decolonising

Decolonising SEND asks us to question:

- Who defines “ability” and “normal”?
- Whose knowledge shapes SEND diagnosis and support?
- Which learners are misunderstood or marginalised?
- How can we redesign learning environments?

Decolonising SEND = challenging deficit thinking +
expanding ways of knowing and learning

Colonial Legacies in SEND

Many SEND frameworks were/are shaped by:

- Western psychology
- Medicalised deficit models
- Norm-referenced testing
- Behavioural conformity

This had led to:

- misdiagnosis
- cultural bias
- exclusion

Rethinking Specific Learning Differences

Decolonising SEND also means rethinking learning differences such as:

- Dyslexia
- Dyscalculia
- Dyspraxia

Focus shifts from:

“Learning deficit” to “Different cognitive processing”

Autism Through a Decolonial Lens

Traditional view: autism = social deficit

Decolonial / neurodiversity view: autism = different ways of experiencing the world

Key areas to rethink:

- communication
- sensory experience
- social interaction

Sensory, Physical & Cognitive Diversity

Inclusive learning environments consider:

- sensory accessibility
- physical accessibility
- cognitive accessibility

Decolonising SEND asks:

Are environments designed for **all bodies and minds**?

Who Needs to Change?

Amira is a 21-year-old trainee in a Further Education setting. She is autistic and has recently disclosed this after beginning her placement. Her mentor comments that she is *"very knowledgeable but lacks confidence in front of groups."*

During observations, feedback frequently includes comments such as:

- *"Needs to make more eye contact."*
- *"Should project her voice more confidently."*
- *"Needs to be more animated."*
- *"Should circulate around the classroom more."*

Amira explains that:

- maintaining eye contact makes it difficult to concentrate;
- she prefers clear, structured communication rather than improvisation;
- she carefully plans lessons because unexpected changes increase anxiety;
- several learners have commented that they appreciate her calm teaching style and detailed explanations.

Following a progress review, additional targets are set to help her become *"more like an effective teacher."*

Who Needs to Change?

Are we helping Amira become a better teacher, or helping her become a more acceptable version of one?

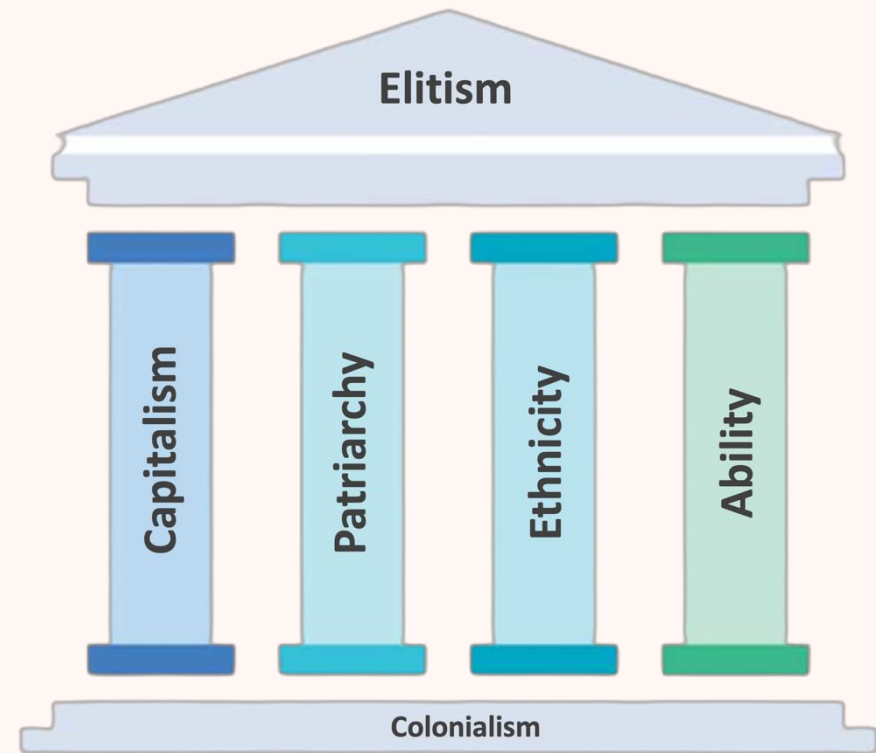
Intersectionality in SEND

SEND does not exist in isolation.

Learners' experiences are shaped by:

- race
- culture
- language
- gender
- socioeconomic context

Intersectionality matters



From *Accommodation* to Transformation

Traditional approach: adjust learners to the system

Decolonial approach: transform the system

Focus on:

- inclusive curriculum
- flexible pedagogy
- learner agency

From *Accommodation* to Transformation

Interrogate your own positionality by regularly reflecting on how your identity, experiences, privilege and assumptions influence your expectations of learners, teaching decisions and interactions with colleagues.

Move beyond deficit thinking by asking "What barriers exist within the environment?" rather than "What is wrong with the learner?", recognising that many challenges arise from inaccessible systems rather than individual deficits.

Design for learner variability from the outset by embedding principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), providing multiple means of engagement, representation and expression rather than relying solely on individual adjustments.

Critically audit your curriculum to consider whose knowledge, histories and perspectives are represented, ensuring that Global South scholars, disabled academics, neurodivergent voices and marginalised communities are positioned as producers of knowledge rather than simply examples or case studies.

Challenge assumptions about professionalism and participation, recognising that behaviours such as eye contact, verbal confidence, speed of processing or classroom presence are culturally and socially constructed rather than universal indicators of competence.

Adopt flexible pedagogical approaches that provide multiple opportunities for learners to demonstrate understanding, including multimodal teaching, varied participation methods and diverse forms of assessment where appropriate.

Recognise and value neurodiverse strengths, shifting conversations away from remediation towards identifying and building upon learners' different cognitive, sensory and communication strengths.

Use inclusive language by avoiding deficit-based terminology and reframing discussions to focus on strengths, potential and removing barriers to participation rather than fixing individuals.

Critically evaluate assessment and behaviour policies, questioning whether they privilege particular cultural, linguistic or neurotypical norms and considering how they may unintentionally disadvantage some learners.

Consider intersectionality in decision-making, recognising that SEND, neurodiversity, race, ethnicity, language, gender and socioeconomic background interact to shape learners' experiences of education and inclusion.

Engage in collaborative critical dialogue with colleagues to challenge taken-for-granted practices, share different perspectives and collectively identify opportunities to create more equitable learning environments.

Shift from accommodation to transformation, viewing reasonable adjustments as one part of inclusion while also working to redesign curricula, teaching practices, learning environments and institutional systems so they are inherently more accessible for everyone.

Embed reflexivity as an ongoing professional practice, treating decolonisation and inclusion not as one-off initiatives or training events, but as continual processes of questioning, learning, adapting and responding to the diverse experiences of learners and colleagues.

Commit to relational accountability, using positions of influence to amplify marginalised voices, redistribute opportunities and challenge inequitable structures, recognising that inclusive practice is a collective responsibility rather than the responsibility of individual practitioners alone.

Thank you

Any Questions?