

Inclusion and Diversity: Educational Strategies for Addressing Racism in Children in Colombia

Inclusión y diversidad: estrategias Educativas para reflexionar contra el racismo en niños en Colombia

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Abstract

The objective of the study developed was to design, implement and evaluate a pedagogical proposal that promotes inclusion and respect for cultural diversity at Alfonso Lopez Educational Institution in the city of Cali, Valle del Cauca in Colombia; addressing the problem of racism in the school environment. A qualitative approach was used, based on action-research, with a methodological design that included participant observations, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires directed to sixth-grade students and teachers. The research was developed in several stages: initial diagnosis, design and implementation of the pedagogical proposal "Teaching Diversity and Tolerance", and evaluation of its impact. The population studied included fourteen students, four teachers and four directors, selected through the convenience sampling. The most relevant outcomes reveal that the pedagogical proposal contributed significantly to reducing manifestations of racial discrimination, improving academic performance, school coexistence and the students' emotional well-being. In addition, a greater acceptance of cultural diversity and a strengthening of the sense of belonging among students were observed. These results highlight the effectiveness of educational interventions designed to foster an inclusive and respectful environment in diverse school contexts.

Keywords: Racism; Social inclusion; Cultural diversity; Peaceful coexistence; Colombia

Resumen

Se desarrolló un estudio, cuyo objetivo fue diseñar, implementar y evaluar una propuesta pedagógica que promueva la inclusión y el respeto a la diversidad cultural en la Institución Educativa Alfonso López, ubicada en la ciudad de Cali, Valle del Cauca en Colombia; abordando el problema del racismo en el entorno escolar. Se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo, basado en la investigación-acción, con un diseño metodológico que incluyó observaciones participantes, entrevistas semiestructuradas y cuestionarios dirigidos a estudiantes y docentes de sexto grado. La investigación se desarrolló en varias fases: diagnóstico inicial, diseño e implementación de la propuesta pedagógica "Enseñando Diversidad y Tolerancia", y evaluación de su impacto. La población estudiada incluyó catorce estudiantes, cuatro docentes y cuatro directivos, seleccionados mediante un muestreo por conveniencia. Los hallazgos más relevantes revelan que la propuesta pedagógica contribuyó significativamente a reducir las manifestaciones de discriminación racial, mejorando el rendimiento académico, la convivencia escolar y el bienestar emocional de los estudiantes. Además, se observó una mayor aceptación de la diversidad cultural y un fortalecimiento del sentido de pertenencia entre los estudiantes. Estos resultados destacan la eficacia de intervenciones educativas, diseñadas para fomentar un ambiente inclusivo y respetuoso en contextos escolares diversos.

Palabras clave: Racismo; Inclusión social; Diversidad cultural; Coexistencia pacífica; Colombia

INTRODUCTION

Racism remains as one of the most significant barriers impacting students' academic and emotional development in the current educational context, especially in communities with noticeable cultural diversity (Castillo-Guzmán & Caicedo, 2019) that receive migrant populations, justified under segregation as a protective measure for children against adults' struggles for their rights, aligning with some concepts proposed by Freire and Arendt (Rüschepöhler, 2024).

Additionally, countries legislation applies institutional racism, creating hierarchies through policies that label races as "populations" maintaining the segregation of human groups that are promoted as deserving special treatment (Wien et al., 2023).

In Colombia, the Political Constitution in its Article 7 indicates that ethnic groups and their cultures must be recognized and protected. Similarly, Article 10 of the same Constitution states that the education provided to ethnic groups must guarantee training that includes native languages (Constituent, 1991), although this condition is not often met. A similar situation is observed among individuals who identify themselves as part of black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, or Palenquero populations (Resolution 0762 of 2020); however, the reality is different, as education in this country operates with colonial representations, contributing to the normalization of racism in educational institutions (Castillo & Caicedo, 2016).

Consequently, aggressive behaviors occur in school environments, influenced by origin, race, or ethnicity, resulting in difficulties for students to concentrate and make decisions, thereby affecting their self-esteem and mental health (Mpfou et al., 2022). This situation creates a hostile learning environment that contributes to marginalization, resulting in poor academic performance, absenteeism increased, and, in the most severe cases, school desertion (Duk & Murillo, 2016).

To combat racism, respect for diversity is essential, promoting pedagogical actions that recognize social and cultural multiplicity in order to control discrimination and foster equality in the classroom and mutual spaces (Mouratian, 2015); for this reason, studies are necessary to identify the causal relationships of current situations (Gamba et

al., 2024) in various parts of the country, the region, and the world.

For the aforementioned reasons, we present the results of a process of implementing and evaluating a pedagogical proposal that promotes inclusion, respect for cultural diversity, and peaceful coexistence within the classroom. This proposal entitled "Teaching Diversity and Tolerance" aims at reducing racist attitudes and improve both academic performance and the students' emotional well-being through sensitization and intercultural education at Alfonso Lopez Educational Institution in Cali, Valle, Colombia, where there have been identified that racist attitudes and manifestations of racial discrimination have a considerable negative impact on the academic performance, school coexistence, and sixth-grade students' emotional well-being.

METHOD

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted, using action-research as the main strategy (Hurtado de Barrera, 2012). Various instruments were employed for data collection, including participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires directed to students and teachers (Sampieri, Callado, & Lucio, 2014). The observations provided detailed documentation of daily dynamics in the classroom, identifying specific moments where discriminatory attitudes manifested. The semi-structured interviews facilitated a space for participants to share experiences and perspectives on racism in the school environment, offering a deeper understanding of the emotional and academic impact of these attitudes. Finally, the questionnaires allowed for data collection that complemented the qualitative findings, facilitating a more integrated analysis of the phenomenon.

The population consisted of sixth-grade students, teachers, and administrators at Alfonso Lopez Educational Institution. In total, a population of 32 students, eight teachers, and five administrators was considered, from which a convenience sample was selected, including fourteen students, four teachers, and four teaching administrators. These participants were relevant in all stages of the study, which were developed in a structured manner to ensure the effectiveness and relevance of the intervention.

The research process was developed in three

stages:

In the first stage, an initial diagnosis was conducted to identify and understand the manifestations of racism in the institution and their impact on students' academic performance and emotional well-being. This stage defined the problem to be investigated, established objectives, identified various backgrounds associated with the study, and adjusted different methodological aspects.

The second stage involved designing the pedagogical proposal "Teaching Diversity and Tolerance." This proposal was carefully made to address the identified issues, designing the necessary instruments for data collection and adjusting them for integration into various activities, workshops, and dynamics implemented over several weeks in class. The central objective of these activities was to reduce racist attitudes and promote an atmosphere of respect and peaceful coexistence among students, ultimately conducting a diagnosis of the process and designing a pedagogical proposal.

Finally, in the third stage, an evaluation of the impact of the proposal's implementation and analysis of the results was conducted, utilizing various data collection techniques, which included participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires directed at students and teachers, discussing the results obtained. Classroom observations were complemented with a diary, where the observed dynamics and manifestations of discrimination were recorded in detail.

The interviews, with both students and teachers and administrators, provided a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiences related to racism, as well as the effectiveness of the pedagogical proposal. A specific instrument was designed to evaluate the impact of the proposal in terms of inclusion and respect for cultural diversity, allowing for the measurement of changes in students' attitudes and improvements in academic performance and emotional well-being.

It is important to highlight that the entire research process was carried out under strict ethical considerations. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were guaranteed, and informed consent was obtained from parents and students

legal guardians, ensuring that they fully understood the purpose and procedures of the research. This ethical approach was fundamental to ensuring the integrity of the study and the validity of the results obtained.

RESULTS

The implementation of the pedagogical proposal had a positive and significant impact on the discrimination issue identified at Alfonso Lopez Educational Institution. According to the results obtained from the evaluation, a considerable reduction in discriminatory attitudes was observed, especially regarding the treatment among students from different cultural and physical contexts.

The proposal fostered greater awareness of diversity importance and mutual respect, leading to a noticeable improvement in school coexistence. Students displayed a greater willingness to accept and value differences, which not only reduced incidents of discrimination but also strengthened bonds of solidarity and camaraderie within the classroom.

Table 1. Results obtained after implementing the pedagogical proposal

| Category | Subcategory | Results |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Discrimination experiences | Skin color | After the implementation of the pedagogical proposal, a significant reduction on discrimination incidents based on skin color was observed. Students demonstrated a greater awareness of the importance of respect for diversity. This contributed to a more inclusive and less hostile school environment, where interactions among students became more respectful and empathetic. |
| | Physical | Discrimination based on physical traits also showed a notable decrease. Students began to appreciate physical diversity, which reduced teasing and derogatory comments related to appearance. The pedagogical proposal promoted an environment where physical differences were accepted and respected, allowing students to feel safer and more comfortable in their school environment, thus strengthening group cohesion and sense of belonging. |
| Impact on academic performance | Low academic performance | The students' academic performance who were previously affected by discrimination improved significantly. The creation of a safer and more respectful learning environment allowed students to focus better on their studies and actively participated in school activities. The reduction in discriminatory experiences eliminated emotional and psychological barriers that had previously hindered their performance, which reflected an increase in their qualifications and willingness to participate in the classroom. |
| | School desertion | Cases of school desertion due to discrimination decreased significantly following the pedagogical intervention. The creation of a more inclusive environment and the strengthening of relationships among students fostered a sense of belonging that helped retain those who had previously considered leaving school. The strategies implemented not only addressed incidents of discrimination but also provided emotional and social support, resulting in the improvement of student's retention and continuity in their education. |

| Category | Subcategory | Results |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Emotional responses | Sadness | The pedagogical proposal significantly contributed to easing sadness and emotional distress among students affected by discrimination. By feeling more accepted and respected students’ experienced notable improvements in their emotional well-being, which was reflected in increased motivation, self-esteem, and a more positive attitude towards learning. The intervention not only addressed immediate emotional issues but also promoted the development of resilience skills, allowing students to better manage difficulties and strengthen their long-term mental health. |
| | Anger | The early intervention and promotion of a respectful environment significantly reduced feelings of anger and anxiety among students. With the support of the pedagogical proposal, students learned to manage their emotions better, which not only improved coexistence but also reduced conflicts and disruptive behaviors in the school environment. The implementation of conflict resolution techniques and the promotion of empathy helped to transform the school climate, creating a more harmonious and cooperative space for all members of the educational community. |
| Grades improvement | Training to manage the conflicts | The training provided to teachers was crucial for the success of the pedagogical proposal. With specific training in managing discrimination situations, teachers were able to intervene more effectively in conflict incidents, contributing to the creation of an inclusive and respectful learning environment. This training not only improved educators’ ability to handle difficult situations but also provided them with tools to foster a culture of respect and diversity within the classroom, which had a positive impact on academic performance and the students’ well-being |
| | School attendance | School attendance improved significantly, as students felt more motivated and secure to attend classes. The creation of a welcoming and inclusive environment, as a result of the pedagogical proposal, significantly reduced absenteeism. Students, feeling valued and accepted, participated more enthusiastically in school life. Additionally, the increase in attendance also favored better academic performance and more effective integration in extracurricular activities, thus strengthening the sense of community within the school. |

The results of this research demonstrated a notable reduction in incidents of racial discrimination following the implementation of the pedagogical proposal. Significant improvements were observed in school coexistence, an increase in academic performance, and a decrease in absenteeism levels. In addition, students reported greater emotional well-being and increased acceptance of cultural diversity within the classroom. The training provided to teachers, focused on managing discriminating situations and promoting an inclusive environment proved to be crucial for the success of the intervention.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research reveal that racism and exclusion at Alfonso Lopez Educational Institution manifest in various ways, from verbal aggression to explicit acts of social exclusion (Montoro, García, & Rodríguez, 2016). These racist behaviors primarily stem from peers and are exacerbated by the possible neglect or ignorance of some teachers regarding how to manage these situations, intensifying the impact on the affected students. In terms of academic performance, those suffering from racial discrimination show significantly lower achievement, primarily due to emotional effects that impact their study dynamics (Castro-Suárez, 2019).

Constant exposure to derogatory comments and social exclusion reduces their motivation and confidence in their abilities, aligning with the theory of racial inferiority, which suggests that individuals from racially discriminated groups internalize these negative perceptions, affecting their performance in various areas of their lives, including education (Valero-Pacheco, 2015). Additionally, school coexistence is seriously affected by racism. Students who are discriminated tend to isolate themselves or be isolated, creating an informally segregated school environment. According to Salgado (2020), this reinforces racial hierarchies and perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and discrimination.

The impact on students' emotional well-being is significant; interviews reveal effects that generate stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem among discriminated students. These emotional effects are supported by the theory of racial domination, which asserts that social and educational structures

reinforce power relations and subordination (Puertas-Molero et al., 2020).

Comparing these results with previous studies shows an internalization of racial inferiority by the students (Kenneth & Clark, 1950), evident at Alfonso Lopez Educational Institution through negative stereotypes. This aspect manifests itself in their behavior, academic performance and subtle forms of distrust toward black students, or minimization of their abilities (Salgado, 2020); observable in the attitudes of some teachers and students. This type of racism is less visible but equally harmful as it perpetuates prejudices without the need for openly discriminatory acts.

The theory of inclusive education (Sarrionandía & Ainscow, 2011) suggests that creating a learning environment that values and respects diversity improves educational outcomes and students well-being. However, the findings of our study underline the lack of effective inclusion and diversity policies, contributing to an excluding educational environment. The research evidences the need for an intersectional approach in educational theory, considering how racism interacts with other forms of discrimination.

It is crucial to develop a comprehensive approach that addresses both the explicit and subtle manifestations of racism, creating a school culture that fosters respect, empathy, and solidarity among all members of the educational community. This study not only contributes to a better understanding of racism in educational settings but also offers practical guidance for the implementation of inclusive policies and strategies in other educational institutions. Its relevance extends beyond Alfonso Lopez Educational Institution, contributing to the broader debate on the need for inclusive education that respects and values diversity, thus promoting an equitable and enriching school environment for all (Sarrionandía & Ainscow, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

The study has revealed that, although manifestations of racial discrimination are often subtle, their impact on academic performance, school coexistence, and the students' emotional well-being is thoughtful and detrimental. Through a qualitative approach based on action-research, it has been possible not only to identify the dynamics of exclusion and marginalization present in the school

environment but also to implement an effective pedagogical proposal that has significantly contributed to improving the school climate.

Racism, as observed in this study, is not limited to explicit verbal aggression; it rather manifests insidiously through attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices. These dynamics of exclusion create a hostile environment that negatively affects students' self-esteem, their motivation to learn, and their ability to fully integrate into school life. Students who experience discrimination tend to show low academic performance, increased absenteeism, and, in some cases, school desertion, featuring the urgency of addressing these issues with specific educational measures.

The implementation of the pedagogical proposal has proven to be a crucial step toward creating a more inclusive and respectful school environment. The results indicate a significant decrease in incidents of racial discrimination and a notable improvement in coexistence among sixth-grade students. Additionally, an increase in academic performance and school attendance was observed, as well as an enhancement in students' emotional well-being, evidenced by greater self-esteem and improved emotional management. These findings validate the effectiveness of educational programs that promote cultural diversity and tolerance, integrating activities and methodologies that foster empathy and mutual respect.

A key finding of the study is the importance of continuous teacher training in topics of diversity and inclusion. The specific training provided within the framework of this research prepared teachers with the necessary tools to handle discrimination situations more effectively, which in turn contributed to improving the learning environment. This aspect is fundamental to ensuring that schools not only react to incidents of discrimination but also actively prevent their incidence through inclusive pedagogy.

The results of the study highlight the need for educational institutions to adopt clear and effective policies against racial discrimination. It is essential to establish reporting and response mechanisms for incidents of racism, review curricula to ensure they reflect and value diversity, and promote awareness

programs for the entire educational community. Only through a comprehensive approach involving teachers, students, and administrators a truly and inclusive school environment can be built.

Likewise, this study contributes to the broader debate on inclusive education, highlighting the need for an approach that addresses not only the explicit manifestations of racism but also considers more subtle forms of discrimination. Creating a school culture that values and respects diversity is essential for the academic and personal success of all students. Inclusive education is not only a desirable goal but an urgent necessity to ensure that every student can thrive in an environment that recognizes and celebrates their differences.

Finally, this study conducted at Alfonso López Educational Institution with sixth-grade students shows that, with the right strategies, it is possible to transform the school environment into a space where diversity is valued and where every student has the opportunity to reach their full potential. The implementation of the pedagogical proposal "Teaching Diversity and Tolerance" has been a significant step in this direction, and its results provide practical guidance for other institutions seeking to face similar challenges.

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