

Challenges of inclusive education in Latin America: the early childhood education perspective

Ana Milena Mujica-Stach^{1*} <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4033-0026>

¹Universidad de Los Lagos. Chile

*Autor para la correspondencia: ana.mujica@ulagos.cl

ABSTRACT

This article reflects on educational actions supported by education laws. Methodologically, it was approached from a qualitative approach within the interpretative paradigm. The field design was defined; and grounded theory was assumed with the support of the Atlas ti tool for the findings. It is concluded that the challenges of educational inclusion in Latin America imply that teachers assume a leading and motivating role in designing strategies adapted to the students, thus guaranteeing equity and freedom within the governmental framework.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Early childhood education; Social policy; Teacher competencies.

Introduction

Nowadays, educational inclusion implies, on the one hand, the dismantling of paradigms and traditions, and on the other hand, the rise of new realities based on transformation as a way to achieve a model characterized by diversity and not by homogeneity.

It is for this reason that education should be conceived as a human act that implies a vision of the world and of life, where knowledge and different ways of thinking are configured as the elements that allow people to develop integrally on the basis of a social project that implies the need to live and have security, to belong, to know oneself, to create and

produce. Education can be considered as a social tool to understand the world, to live, to belong, to discover oneself, and to create.

From this reality, Latin American states should direct their actions to the construction of public policies, with a view to erecting spaces where the difficulties to achieve communication and inclusion are reduced, paying attention to various forms of disability, with the aim of ensuring that citizens receive a comprehensive education.

In this sense, UNESCO (2020), in the Regional Forum on Educational Policies, expresses the following: Latin American societies need to unite and build bridges, as well as to value the importance of educational systems, which are a reflection of the daily discrimination towards migrants, the setback in the progress towards equality, gender identity, and false beliefs about the limit of the potential of people with disabilities, so that joint action should be taken to promote urgent changes.

Based on this reality, international organizations demand that Latin American governments adopt inclusion as a holistic educational strategy from early childhood, in order to incorporate the learning needs of marginalized or excluded groups, and address the four pillars of learning: learning to know, learning to be, learning to do, and learning to live together.

In view of the above, from the educational perspective, we intend to address inclusion in early education, especially within the Latin American context, as a mechanism that allows attention to the diverse social conglomerates, being a guarantee of ensuring equity and freedom within the framework of governmental decisions to achieve permeation of early education establishments in terms of social justice.

Development

Inclusion can be conceived as a never-ending process, which implies a constant search for improvements and innovations to respond more positively to student diversity. Consequently, it implies a continuous process of learning and development in the educational system as a whole.

From this follows participation as an element that must be present in the culture, curricula

and communities of schools. Inclusion implies that educational institutions critically examine the measures they can implement to enhance the learning process and encourage the participation of all students.

In order to understand the challenges of inclusive education in early childhood education in Latin America, the philosophy of the organic laws of education must be interpreted in terms of how they assume the inclusion process.

In this sense, the General Education Law of Mexico (2019) states, in Article 7, that education, in addition to being compulsory, will be inclusive, eliminating all forms of discrimination and exclusion, as well as the other structural conditions that become barriers to learning and participation, therefore: (a) It shall attend to the capacities, circumstances, needs, styles and rhythms of learning of the learners; (b) it shall eliminate the different barriers to learning and participation faced by each of the learners, for which purpose the educational authorities, within the scope of their competence, shall adopt measures in favor of accessibility and reasonable accommodations; (c) shall provide the necessary technical-pedagogical and material resources for educational services, and; (d) shall establish special education available for all types, levels, modalities and educational options, which shall be provided under the necessary conditions, based on the decision and prior assessment of the learners, parents or guardians, teaching staff, and, if applicable, on the basis of a health condition.

For integration and inclusion, Chile's Education Law (2009) aims to eliminate all forms of arbitrary discrimination that impede students' learning and participation. Likewise, the system encourages educational establishments to be a meeting place for students from different socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic, gender, nationality or religious backgrounds. Likewise, the Chilean School Inclusion Law (2015), in its Article 3, proposes integration and inclusion as a system that will tend to eliminate all forms of arbitrary discrimination that impede the learning and participation of students.

In Venezuela, the Organic Law of Education (LOE), (2009) establishes in Article 6, paragraph c, that the State shall guarantee access to the Educational System to people with educational needs or disabilities, through the creation of conditions and opportunities; this implies that Venezuelan educational institutions are obliged to generate the necessary conditions to make this article viable, not only by generating organizational responses that allow these people academic admission, but also by producing actions oriented to the adequate attention of the social group in reference.

Similarly, in relation to the inclusion of students with disabilities, the LOE (2009) states that education will be governed by laws and other special regulatory instruments that will establish the way in which this subsystem is integrated and related, addressing all related aspects, in addition to ensuring equality in access, continuity and progress throughout the academic courses.

Regarding Colombia, the General Education Law (1994) states that inclusion in the educational service recognizes that education for people with various limitations or exceptional abilities is fundamental in the public education system. Educational institutions must coordinate pedagogical and therapeutic activities to promote the academic and social integration of these students.

Article 19-A of the Peruvian General Education Law (2003) defines inclusive education in all its stages, forms, modalities, levels and cycles. Educational institutions adopt measures to ensure conditions of accessibility, availability, acceptability and adaptability in the provision of educational services, and develop personalized educational plans for students with special educational needs, guaranteeing the creation and implementation of educational support services for inclusive education.

In relation to Inclusive Education, the Republic of Ecuador contemplates in its Constitution, and in other legal instruments, that the national educational authority will implement measures to promote the inclusion of students with special educational needs who require technical, technological and human support, namely, specialized part-time or permanent staff, and/or curricular adaptations and physical accessibility, communication and learning spaces in a school education establishment.

The foregoing approaches serve as support to consider the need to propose new mechanisms that, translated into models, can support, guide and optimize teacher training in inclusive education, as a response to the new demands of quality teacher management, and with relevance to the new realities presented by the complex dynamics of Latin America.

This implies assuming inclusion from the educational perspective as a daily process, which requires motivated, updated and innovative teachers, who are able to plan, and design strategies that take into account the potential and limitations of their students, recognizing them as autonomous beings who learn in response to their own interests and needs, for which educational reflection is proposed.

Within the framework of discussion, and as a theoretical exercise, from the perspective of the aforementioned organic laws of education, four dimensions could be established: (a) inclusion referring to disability and special educational needs; (b) inclusion understood as a response to disciplinary exclusions; (c) inclusion oriented to all groups vulnerable to exclusion; (d) inclusion as Education For All (EFA).

From the above, it follows that an educational process based on inclusion must be flexible and open to the reality where the student develops, opening the possibility of achieving a more comprehensive and human formation of that being.

Finally, in order to understand the challenges of inclusive education at the early childhood, preschool and kindergarten levels in Latin America, it is necessary to visualize the following categories of analysis: availability, acceptability and accessibility.

Inclusion in education from the perspective of teacher training

In the geographic context of Latin America, inclusive education at the early education level, from the point of view of key informants, is covered by philosophical principles regulated in the different organic and special education laws. Hence, quality, equity, equal opportunities, access without distinctions or privileges, and attention to individual educational needs dominate legal action as issues to be addressed.

Under these considerations, Martín et al. (2017) present five perspectives to contextualize inclusion: a) Inclusion refers to both disability and special educational needs. b) Inclusion is understood as a way to address disciplinary exclusions. c) Inclusion seeks to include all groups that are vulnerable to exclusion. d) Inclusion implies promoting a school that is accessible to all. e) Inclusion as Education For All.

Therefore, inclusion constitutes a tool for the promotion of respect for human rights from the school, thus eliminating exclusion and being understood as a means for the development of competencies, which would mean progress in the forms of inclusion in Latin America.

The development of teaching competencies in the area of educational inclusion should occupy a space for reflection, since, through the didactic axis, it is the teachers who manage the curriculum. That is why this process of reflection implies becoming aware of the need to assume the responsibility of ensuring compliance with the educational goals enshrined in the current legal framework of each country, since teachers are a fundamental pillar of the system, an element that makes them, at the same time, the focus

of organizations, researchers and intellectuals, due to the responsibility associated with the performance of the functions of those who teach.

Consequently, their professional performance requires them to update their educational approach according to criteria and guidelines that are considered good practice, based on specific standards. From the perspective of teacher training for inclusion, it is necessary to ensure equity and inclusion in educational systems and programs, including the training of professionals to address this challenge.

It is important to seek support in diverse educational and psychological theories that promote the inclusion process, as well as to use information and communication technologies appropriately. Diversity and different levels of attention should always be considered as an opportunity to generalize learning without making distinctions.

In agreement with the authors, the importance of linking teachers in the care of students with deficiencies or in special conditions has been evidenced, for a better applicability of evaluation and teaching strategies that allow the inclusion of students with different characteristics.

Having said the above, it is pertinent to establish the challenges of inclusive education in Latin America from the perspective of early education, since it contributes to teacher training, to the promotion of didactic tools, and to evaluation and inclusion strategies.

The school is increasingly recognized as the enabling environment for achieving educational inclusion. When an educational institution embarks on the process of inclusion it provides students with special educational needs the opportunity to grow, actively participate in society through interaction with their peers, and overcome many of the difficulties they face, especially in the social, physical, and cognitive domains.

Challenges from the Pedagogical Practice for the attention of diversity in the classroom: interdisciplinarity.

From the educational point of view, the term competence focuses on fostering critical and creative thinking skills, as well as on strengthening the ability to retain information, achieve meaningful learning and develop practical skills that are useful in the performance of individuals in society.

However, today it is evident, from my experience as a teacher of Kindergarten Education in Chile, that the approach to the teaching and learning process in educational centers is

focused on purely cognitive aspects, without a real recognition by the teacher of the diversity present in the classroom. This limits the promotion of competencies in students that are essential for their effective integration into society as useful citizens.

In this sense, several researchers who are committed to learning development suggest that one way to achieve knowledge integration is precisely interdisciplinarity.

Hence, Bell et al. (2022) define it as the "communion between two or more disciplines that come together to study, evaluate and treat a specific situation from different visions, in order to offer activities that seek integral development, avoiding isolated and repetitive work" (p. 102). The above implies disciplinary integration, where cooperation between disciplines entails real interactions that are a fundamental basis for the development of competencies, since from this point of view knowledge is assumed as a whole, and not in a fragmented way, which prevents the presence of the link between the various aspects of reality in the formation of the Self.

This vision as a challenge to achieve inclusion implies teamwork, strengthening an integral education where all the elements of the educational act are interconnected, favoring the development of competencies. In this way, interdisciplinarity values teamwork, promoting the integration of knowledge, of the community with the educational center, and of the personnel working in the institutions. In other words, it strengthens community ties and the previous knowledge that students bring from the environment where they live, as well as their specificities and strengths.

It is important to emphasize that interdisciplinary problems offer an opportunity to educate children and youth from an integral perspective of the world, with social and environmental awareness. Therefore, it is essential to start from the students' previous knowledge, which allows the implementation of what is known as an integrative pedagogical axis.

In this approach, previously acquired knowledge serves as a basis for learning new knowledge through the restructuring of meanings, as well as for solving problems in different situations.

On this premise, from an integral and interdisciplinary perspective, for the construction of knowledge it is important to emphasize that competencies are presented as a way to approach the teaching-learning process effectively. Therefore, it is necessary to define competencies in relation to concrete situations that are framed in knowledge, social

context, and physical context. In other words, it is a matter of establishing situations in which students can construct, modify or question knowledge and competencies related to the disciplinary contents.

From the above, it is revealed that competence has in itself a dialectical sense in terms of the practical understanding of inclusive education and its relationship, in addition, with the cultural content pointed out by Bell et al. (2022), who argue that inclusive education "aims to welcome into school life all subjects, whatever their characteristics" (p. 110), making them part of a group, in which their "individual responsibility is fundamental for the development and coexistence of the same, thus enjoying a quality education that allows them to achieve success in their lives. 110), making them part of a group, in which their "individual responsibility is fundamental for the development and coexistence of the group, thus enjoying a quality education that allows them to achieve success in their academic life" (p. 111).

It follows from the above that, within this process of fostering competencies and the ways of acquiring them, it is essential to promote the skills and values transmitted from generation to generation by human groups. It is for this reason that to speak of an educational process open to this interpenetration of the teaching-learning process with the reality where the student develops, is to open the possibility of achieving a more integral and human formation of that being, since he becomes the center of it.

In this way, the educational content will recognize both the student's previous knowledge and the immediate reality where he/she lives, thus promoting the interdisciplinary linkage of knowledge based on emerging approaches that allow the orientation of the teaching-learning process focused on the development of competencies in students, overcoming the old model where that process was assumed through a series of "objectives" that the learner had to achieve.

Hence, it is evident that all competence has immersed in itself a sense of practicality, effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction of some aspect of reality, whether personal, social, natural or symbolic, i.e., competence is oriented towards the promotion of skills and abilities in the person, the center of the teaching-learning process.

In this sense, it can be affirmed that the aforementioned authors generally agree that competence is a complex term, which is fostered by considering internal aspects of the individual, among which the following stand out: cognitive, affective, attitudinal,

aptitudinal, and experiential aspects; as well as the spatial reality where the individual develops, such as the social, geographical and technical context.

All of the above leads in one way or another to the search for and selection of models, methods, techniques, resources and skills that allow the subject to perform efficiently in a given area.

Likewise, it should be emphasized that, in order to establish a competency, it is necessary that it is developed, considering the following components: (a) technical knowledge; (b) methodological knowledge; (c) knowing how to be and participate, and; (d) knowing how to be.

These considerations are interpreted by Becerra (2012) in terms of what, how, with what, and for what purpose this competence should be developed. The aforementioned author raises the following questions that guide the methodological process towards the construction of the same: What is required to know in order to do that doing? How should one proceed with that knowledge to carry out the doing? With what should the how be accompanied? What for? Expressed in a doing.

In this order of ideas, it is important to recognize that the elaboration of a competency goes beyond a mere wording with an infinitive verb. It must be initially oriented on a series of components and a structure where "Doing, Feeling, and Knowing" is expressed (Becerra, 2012), since, if it is not built according to these criteria, we would have competencies whose content is so generic that it does not respond to concrete realities, or, on the contrary, does not respond to the real needs that we wish to develop.

Based on the methodological approach followed by the researcher, this work was approached with a qualitative approach, from a phenomenological interpretative perspective, using software for qualitative data analysis (Atlas ti). In this sense, a narrative and interpretative analysis of the interviews applied for data collection, generated from grounded theory, is presented. In this order of ideas, the analysis is descriptive, and it was carried out in four (4) fundamental phases (Coffey and Atkison, 2003):

1. Coding phase: data reduction.
2. Data association phase.
3. Memos production (it is a process that occurs from the first moment of coding).
4. Analysis phase: data interpretation.

Analysis and interpretation of results

According to the results, this study proposes educational inclusion based on three identified categories: Availability, Acceptability and Accessibility. These categories are derived from the findings of the study and are fundamental to understanding the proposed approach.

Emerging category: Availability

By availability we can understand the ability of an element to function according to a specific function at a given time or during a specific period of time, as long as it is provided with the necessary external resources and certain conditions are met.

From these considerations, the educational perspective of the availability of educational inclusion at the initial level emerges.

The results show that in order to practice educational inclusion actions, it is necessary to have some requirements or conditions for their implementation. For the key informants, educational inclusion requires availability, understood as the capacity to develop sufficient tools to optimize social relations for inclusion in educational contexts.

Referring to the above, the study demonstrated the relevance of availability as an indispensable category, since it demands the training of personnel according to the requirements of the current laws on educational inclusion in countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, and Chile.

In the same way, availability for this study also implies institutional training. In line with this point, in Chile, for example, the School Inclusion Law (2015) states that the State will strive to eradicate any type of arbitrary discrimination that hinders the learning process and the participation of all students.

Emerging category: Acceptability

Like Availability, in the actions undertaken for Educational Inclusion, the Acceptability category also requires, for this context, sufficient tools for staff and institutional training, but, in addition, that such actions are reflected in the Educational Inclusion, counting on the faithful compliance with the laws in force in Latin American countries where the acceptance of multiculturalism is expressed in all social and educational spaces.

For the author, Acceptability in education, seen as a fundamental human principle, aims to raise awareness of social and cultural structures that enable the attainment of other rights. In simple terms, it is considered that for students to feel secure, education should be relevant, of good quality and culturally appropriate. Students must believe that in the education system they acquire knowledge that matches their interests, and that such knowledge is useful for their present and future lives.

Emerging category: Accessibility

Koester (2016) points out that Accessibility involves major considerations to generate learning without discrimination, which are illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Dimensions of educational accessibility

Dimensions interrelated	Considerations
Non-discrimination dimension	This means that education must be legally and de facto accessible to all, including the most vulnerable groups, so that exclusion from education based on ethnic or contextual origin, skin color, gender, language, religion, opinion, socio-economic status, birth or disability must be eliminated. Likewise, the educational offer must be accessible in a safe and geographically reasonable terrain, or by means of modern technology. <u>Also, education must be compulsory and free for all.</u>
Physical accessibility dimension	
Affordability dimension	

Source: Self elaboration with information taken from “Affordable, accessible, acceptable and adaptable education for indigenous peoples in Mexico: A statistical review” by Koester (2016), p. 37.

Considering Koester's (2016) approaches, this study implies important guidelines on accessibility in Latin American educational contexts, since accessibility implies addressing migration and interculturality that has been manifested in recent years. Likewise, the study sample concluded that in order to generate spaces without discrimination it is necessary to address gender diversity, and to achieve this requires the development of diversity practices in the classroom.

Conclusions

The results show that Latin American countries have generally sought to undertake actions for educational inclusion. However, there are significant weaknesses in the mechanisms implemented to guarantee the success of respect for diversity in educational contexts.

In view of the considerations emerging from the study, the importance of availability is evident at the early education, preschool or kindergarten level. For this educational level, it is essential to appreciate and value the resources that allow respect for inclusion as a social and human right. In the same sense, at this level, acceptability is projected as a category that enables the training of personnel from their own motivation, in terms of the development of actions involved in educational inclusion.

The author of this paper proposes immediate action to promote educational inclusion in countries where there is evidence of weaknesses, i.e. Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and Venezuela. This presents a challenge in the actions of inclusion, in the name of which educational, social and cultural programs should be used to improve the learning conditions of students.

This is why the challenge for Latin American teachers is linked to knowledge management as a space for training in interdisciplinarity, since children in early childhood, preschool or kindergarten education observe their environment and do not have the vision of dividing it by discipline; In the same way, from their point of view, teachers seek to focus the students' attention on the taste for different disciplines, therefore, they must provide them with a learning experience that is close to their interests, in addition to being coherent with the situations they experience in their daily lives

Consequently, this interdisciplinary methodology seeks to avoid the fragmentation of knowledge, which helps the student to develop reflection and analysis skills by approaching problems from a global perspective. In this way, objectivity and the ability to understand the problems together are fostered.