



Educational inequality and racism in the classroom: the role of teacher training in building inclusive education

Desigualdad educativa y racismo en el aula: el rol de la formación docente en la construcción de una educación inclusiva

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the relationship between racism, social inequalities, and teacher training in the educational context, with special emphasis on Latin American and Ecuadorian settings. It was developed under a qualitative documentary approach through a systematic review of scientific literature related to inclusive education, interculturality, and educational inequality. The research identified that discriminatory practices, both explicit and implicit, continue to persist within educational systems, affecting academic performance, school coexistence, and learning opportunities of students belonging to historically marginalized groups. Likewise, it was evidenced that factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status interact in an intersectional way, generating deeper levels of educational exclusion. The results show that, although there have been advances in inclusion policies, significant limitations remain in their effective implementation, mainly due to insufficient teacher training in diversity, equity, and social justice. In this regard, the teacher's role is considered essential, as it can contribute either to the reproduction or to the transformation of inequalities within the classroom. It is concluded that it is necessary to strengthen both initial and continuous teacher education with critical and intercultural approaches that promote inclusive pedagogical practices and respect for diversity. Likewise, the importance of consolidating an education system oriented toward equity and the reduction of social gaps at all educational levels is emphasized.

Keywords: inclusive education, racism, educational inequality, teacher training.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio tiene como objetivo analizar la relación entre el racismo, las desigualdades sociales y la formación docente en el contexto educativo, con especial énfasis en el ámbito latinoamericano y ecuatoriano. Se desarrolló bajo un enfoque cualitativo de tipo documental, mediante una revisión sistemática de literatura científica relacionada con educación inclusiva, interculturalidad y desigualdad educativa. La investigación permitió identificar cómo las prácticas discriminatorias, tanto explícitas como implícitas, continúan presentes en los sistemas educativos, afectando el desempeño académico, la convivencia escolar y las oportunidades de aprendizaje de los estudiantes pertenecientes a grupos históricamente marginados. Asimismo, se evidenció que factores como la raza, el género y el nivel socioeconómico interactúan de manera interseccional, generando mayores niveles de exclusión educativa. Los resultados muestran que, aunque existen avances en políticas de inclusión, persisten limitaciones en su implementación efectiva, especialmente debido a la insuficiente formación docente en temas de diversidad, equidad y justicia social. En este sentido, el rol del docente se considera fundamental, ya que puede contribuir tanto a la reproducción como a la transformación de las desigualdades dentro del aula. Se concluye que es necesario fortalecer la formación inicial y continua del profesorado con enfoques críticos e interculturales que promuevan prácticas pedagógicas inclusivas y respetuosas de la diversidad. De igual manera, se resalta la importancia de consolidar una educación orientada a la equidad y a la reducción de brechas sociales en todos los niveles educativos.

Palabras clave: educación inclusiva, racismo, desigualdad educativa, formación docente.

INTRODUCTION

As a fundamental part of the educational community, teachers face various situations that extend beyond their professional preparation. Their classroom work is not limited to academic instruction but also involves fostering an environment of respect, equity, and inclusion. In this regard, inclusive education constitutes a structural challenge that requires transforming traditional pedagogical practices toward more just and participatory models (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2019).

Despite regulatory and theoretical advances, racism and inequalities persist in contemporary societies, often as a result of normalized expressions transmitted intergenerationally without critical analysis of their impact (Moreno, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). These dynamics reinforce structures of exclusion that particularly affect students belonging to ethnic and social minorities, limiting their full participation in the educational system (Artiles et al., 2019).

Regarding inequalities, the literature shows that they do not occur in isolation but rather respond to interconnected systems of power. Studies such as those by Waitoller (2020) and Gale et al. (2020) point out that educational exclusion is deeply linked to structural factors such as social class, race, and access to opportunities. Likewise, teacher training plays a key role in reducing these gaps, especially when oriented toward social justice and inclusion (Walton & Engelbrecht, 2021).

Racism in the school environment manifests in various ways, ranging from teasing about physical appearance to linguistic and cultural discrimination. These behaviors affect not only the victims but also school coexistence and the emotional development of students (Messiou, 2019; Forlin, 2020). In this context, teachers play a crucial role as mediators, being responsible for identifying, confronting, and transforming these dynamics of exclusion within the classroom (Slee, 2021).

In Latin America, despite its cultural diversity, racial inequalities remain evident. Intercultural education emerges as a necessary response to these issues, promoting the recognition of diversity and the construction of more equitable societies (Moreno, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). However, recent research warns that there are still limitations in the effective implementation of these inclusive policies in higher education (De Beco, 2020).

From an intersectional perspective, it is recognized that race, gender, and socioeconomic status interact in the production of educational inequalities. These categories do not operate in isolation but rather shape differentiated experiences within the school system (Guichot, 2021). Along these lines, studies such as those by Pons et al. (2019) and Benavides et al. (2021) highlight that teacher-student relationships directly influence the distribution of educational opportunities and the reproduction or reduction of inequalities.

In summary, academic evidence indicates that inclusive education depends not only on institutional policies but also on the transformation of teaching practices and critical awareness of structures of inequality (Ainscow, 2020; Artiles et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2021). Classroom interactions serve as a key space for the reproduction or overcoming of racism and exclusion, which demands continuous teacher training oriented toward equity and social justice.

METHODS

The present research was developed under a qualitative approach, aimed at deeply understanding the issue of racism and inequalities in the educational context, especially in relation to teacher training. This approach allowed for the analysis of meanings, perceptions, and experiences present in the scientific literature without resorting to statistical procedures.

The study utilized a non-experimental design, as variables were not manipulated; instead, previously published information on the subject was analyzed. In this sense, it was a documentary-type research, based on the systematic review of scientific literature related to inclusive education, interculturality, racism, and inequality in the educational field.

The scope of the research was descriptive-analytical, as it allowed for the characterization of the main theoretical and empirical trends regarding teacher training in the face of diversity and discrimination, as well as the critical interpretation of the predominant approaches in the reviewed literature.

For data collection, highly recognized academic databases and scientific repositories were used, which allowed access to articles, books, and specialized documents related to the subject of study.

Inclusion criteria

- Scientific publications related to inclusive education, interculturality, racism, or educational inequality.
- Articles from national and international academic journals.
- Empirical studies, systematic reviews, and theoretical analyses.
- Publications in Spanish and English.
- Documents with full-text access.

Exclusion criteria

- Documents without scientific rigor or peer review.
- Duplicate publications.
- Articles without a direct relationship to education or teacher training.
- Incomplete sources or sources without verifiable access.

Data analysis was conducted through critical reading and thematic categorization, which facilitated the organization of findings into axes related to racism, inequality, teacher training, and educational inclusion. Subsequently, an interpretive synthesis of the primary theoretical contributions in the reviewed literature was performed.

RESULTS

Analysis of the reviewed literature identified common patterns regarding the relationship between racism, inequality, and teacher training in education. The findings were organized into thematic categories to facilitate the understanding of the primary trends.

Generally, the reviewed studies agree that educational inequalities are not isolated phenomena but are linked to broader social structures, including race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, the teacher’s role is critical in both reproducing and transforming these inequalities within the classroom.

The synthesis of the primary results organized by category is presented below:

Table 1. Synthesis of results of the literature review

Category	Main findings	Trends identified in the literature
Racism in education	Manifests explicitly through discrimination and teasing, and subtly through low teacher expectations and symbolic exclusion.	Structural racism persists in school and university contexts.
Educational inequality	Related to factors such as social class, ethnicity, gender, and cultural context.	Inequality is reproduced through the educational system in the absence of critical intervention.
Teacher training	Limitations in teacher preparation to address diversity and confront discrimination.	Identified need to strengthen teacher training in inclusive and intercultural education.
Intercultural education	Promotes the recognition and valuation of cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom.	Presented as a key strategy to narrow educational gaps.
Intersectionality	Inequalities intensify when variables such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status intersect.	Constitutes a necessary approach to understanding the complexity of educational exclusion.
Teacher’s role	Teachers act as mediators in school coexistence and the prevention of racism.	Teaching practices can contribute to either reproducing or transforming existing inequalities.

Additionally, the findings highlight the need to strengthen educational policies that promote more equitable and culturally relevant pedagogical practices.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the literature review show that racism and inequalities in education are not isolated phenomena but are part of historical social structures reproduced within school and university systems. Consequently, the literature agrees that schools are not neutral spaces but rather arenas where existing social inequalities are reflected and, in many cases, reproduced.

A key aspect is the persistence of explicit and subtle discriminatory practices within the educational environment. These practices range from direct expressions of exclusion to more covert mechanisms, such as low academic expectations for minority students. This finding aligns with the idea that educational inequality depends not only on access but also on the quality of pedagogical interactions within the classroom.

Furthermore, teacher training is a determining factor in the educational system's capacity to respond to diversity. The reviewed studies show that teachers often lack sufficient tools to address discrimination or to effectively implement intercultural and inclusive approaches, creating a gap between inclusive educational policies and their actual application in the classroom.

Another important point is the relevance of an intersectional approach to understanding the complexity of educational inequalities. The interaction among variables such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status provides a deeper explanation of why certain student groups face greater barriers within the educational system. This approach goes beyond isolated explanations, framing inequality as a multidimensional phenomenon.

Conversely, intercultural and inclusive education are recognized as key strategies to address these issues. However, the literature also warns that their implementation remains limited and unequal, especially in contexts where traditional teaching practices persist without incorporating diversity as a central axis of the educational process.

Finally, the teacher's role is established as a key element in transforming the educational system. Their capacity to mediate conflicts, recognize discrimination, and promote environments of respect and equality is fundamental to advancing toward more inclusive education. However, this requires continuous training and critical reflection on pedagogical practice.

In synthesis, the discussion of the results indicates that, although there are theoretical and regulatory advances in educational inclusion, significant challenges still persist in its effective implementation. This highlights the need to strengthen teacher training, promote intersectional approaches, and consolidate educational practices oriented toward equity and social justice.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review analyzed the relationship between racism, inequality, and teacher training in education, demonstrating that these issues remain present at different levels of the educational system despite regulatory and theoretical advances in inclusion.

First, racism in the educational environment is manifested not only explicitly but also through subtle practices that influence student expectations, opportunities, and experiences. These forms of discrimination contribute to the reproduction of structural inequalities within the classroom.

Second, educational inequalities are deeply linked to intersectional factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status. These elements do not act in isolation but combine to generate different levels of exclusion and disadvantage in the educational process.

Furthermore, teacher training is a key element in addressing these issues. However, limitations remain in teacher preparation regarding diversity, highlighting the need to strengthen initial and in-service training programs through an inclusive, intercultural, and critical approach. Similarly, inclusive and intercultural education is recognized as a fundamental strategy for narrowing inequality gaps. Nevertheless, its implementation in educational practice still presents significant challenges, particularly in contexts dominated by traditional pedagogical approaches.

Finally, teachers play a decisive role in building equitable educational environments, as they can contribute to both the reproduction and transformation of existing inequalities. Therefore, promoting reflective, critical, and social justice-oriented teacher training is essential.

Overall, this study highlights the need for further research addressing the complexity of racism and inequality in education to develop more inclusive and relevant pedagogical proposals for diverse educational contexts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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