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Theoretical-practical approach of the inclusion of students with intellectual disability in Colombia*

Enfoque teórico-práctico de la inclusión de estudiantes con discapacidad intelectual en Colombia



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* The article stems from the doctoral thesis titled "Epistemological Model for the Educational Inclusion of Students with Cognitive Disabilities in Institutions of the Banana Zone of Magdalena.

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Abstract

The study examined the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in Colombia, comparing the theoretical and practical aspects of educational inclusion. A quantitative and descriptive approach with a positivist methodology was used, surveying 59 teachers. The results revealed discrepancies between theory and practice in inclusion. While a significant percentage of teachers believe that the "Right to Equality" and "Non-discrimination" are addressed, few indicated that individualized learning plans are always developed. Regarding the "Right to Participation" and "Individualization," although positive actions are perceived, there is a lack of consistency in their implementation, especially in the removal of physical barriers and pedagogical obstacles. These findings suggest a disconnect between perception and practice in the implementation of educational inclusion in Colombia.

Keywords: intellectual disability, education, inclusion.

Resumen

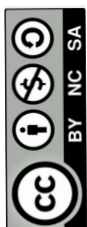
El estudio examinó la inclusión de estudiantes con discapacidad intelectual en Colombia, comparando los aspectos teóricos y prácticos de la inclusión educativa. Se utilizó un enfoque cuantitativo y descriptivo con metodología positivista, encuestando a 59 docentes. Los resultados revelaron discrepancias entre la teoría y la práctica de la inclusión. Mientras que un porcentaje significativo de docentes considera que se aborda el "Derecho a la igualdad" y la "No discriminación," pocos indicaron que siempre se elaboran planes individualizados de aprendizaje. Respecto al "Derecho a la participación" y la "Individualización," aunque se perciben acciones positivas, hay una falta de consistencia en su implementación, especialmente en la eliminación de barreras físicas y obstáculos pedagógicos. Estos hallazgos sugieren una desconexión entre la percepción y la práctica en la implementación de la inclusión educativa en Colombia.

Palabras clave: discapacidad intelectual, educación, inclusión.

Introduction

Worldwide and specifically in Spain and Italy, attention to the educational processes of children with intellectual disabilities has evolved towards a more inclusive approach, centered on the individual needs of students. In the past, these children were often segregated in special schools or lacked access to formal education. However, [Anta et al. \(2024\)](#) indicates that in recent decades, there has been a movement towards educational inclusion, seeking to ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities, have access to quality education in inclusive environments.

This shift has been driven by increased awareness of the rights of people with disabilities, as well as research demonstrating the benefits of inclusion for all students. According to [Pérez et al. \(2024\)](#), many countries have now adopted policies and laws that promote educational inclusion, and measures have been implemented to support students with intellectual disabilities



in regular educational settings.

These efforts include training teachers in inclusive teaching methods, adapting curricula and educational materials to meet the individual needs of students, and providing additional support such as classroom assistants or assistive technology, as stated by [Gallegos \(2023\)](#). Although there are still challenges in the effective implementation of educational inclusion, significant progress has been made in improving educational processes for children with intellectual disabilities globally, according to [Castillo \(2021\)](#).

For [García et al. \(2023\)](#), educational inclusion is of vital importance for children with cognitive disabilities, as it provides them with the opportunity to access quality education tailored to their individual needs. When children with intellectual disabilities are included in a regular educational environment, they can reach their full potential, both academically and socially, by interacting with their non-disabled peers and receiving the support they need to overcome their difficulties, as mentioned by [Manco & Tobón \(2023\)](#). In this sense, [Acosta and Villalba \(2022\)](#) indicate that inclusion fosters acceptance and respect for diversity, promoting a culture of inclusion in society as a whole.

Inclusion also contributes to the social and emotional development of children with cognitive disabilities, allowing them to form relationships with other children and develop a sense of belonging in their school community. By participating in educational and extracurricular activities alongside their peers, these children can acquire skills for daily life and prepare for greater autonomy in the future, as noted by [Silva et al. \(2023\)](#). Therefore, educational inclusion is essential to ensure the right to education for all children, regardless of their abilities, and to promote a more inclusive and respectful society.

Much has been said about the inclusion of students with disabilities in the education system, but in practice, the reality shows a different side. Inclusion goes beyond having a teacher who attends to these children in the regular classroom. It is about providing the right conditions for them to fully participate in the educational process. According to [Bermúdez \(2022\)](#), this includes having multidisciplinary teams that can provide support and guidance to teachers, adapting the curriculum and educational materials according to the needs of each student, and creating an inclusive school environment that promotes acceptance and respect for diversity. Only in this way can true educational inclusion be achieved for all students.

In Colombia, attention to the educational processes of children with intellectual disabilities has experienced significant advances in recent years, although challenges in their full inclusion still persist. The country has adopted a series of policies and regulations that promote inclusive education and guarantee access to education for all children, regardless of their abilities.

It is worth noting that one of the main advances has been the implementation of Decree 1421 of 2017, which establishes the legal framework for the educational attention of students with disabilities. This decree recognizes the right of these students to receive inclusive education and establishes guidelines for their care in the educational system. According to Bolaño-García



(2023), the Ministry of National Education has implemented programs and strategies to strengthen educational inclusion, such as the Todos a Aprender Program, which seeks to improve the quality of education for all children, including those with intellectual disabilities.

Despite these advances, there are still challenges in the effective implementation of inclusive education in Colombia. One of the main problems is the lack of resources and training for teachers, which hinders adequate attention to students with intellectual disabilities. According to Valdés *et al.* (2023), social and cultural barriers persist that limit the full inclusion of these children in the education system. All of this allows us to infer that while Colombia has made progress in addressing the educational processes of children with intellectual disabilities, it still faces significant challenges that must be addressed to ensure their full inclusion in the education system.

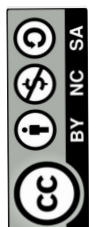
On the other hand, Henao (2023) states that inclusive education in Colombia has faced several challenges that have hindered its success. Some of these challenges include the lack of adequate resources, insufficient teacher training in inclusive education, lack of access to support technologies for students with disabilities, architectural barriers in educational institutions, and social discrimination. Similarly, Cornejo-Espejo (2023) points out that the implementation of inclusive policies at the national level has been inconsistent and has faced difficulties in its effective application at all educational levels. These factors have contributed to the lack of expected success of inclusion in Colombia.

In some institutions in the Zona Bananera of Magdalena, Colombia, weaknesses in inclusive policies have been observed, indicating that students experience low academic performance and lack of participation in the educational process, which can affect their self-esteem and motivation. This affects their emotional and social well-being.

Furthermore, students without disabilities are also being affected by the lack of inclusion, as they commonly develop negative attitudes towards diversity and inclusion, which can perpetuate discrimination and exclusion in society. They may also miss out on the opportunity to learn important skills such as empathy and tolerance, which are crucial for living in an inclusive society.

This situation can result in learning difficulties for students who do not receive the necessary support, affecting their academic performance and overall development. Moreover, the lack of results in inclusive policies can have a negative impact on society as a whole, as quality education for all is crucial for the social and economic development of the country.

The foregoing allows us to infer that when inclusive policies fail to achieve their objectives, exclusion and inequality are perpetuated, which can have significant long-term consequences for the education system and society as a whole. Additionally, if teachers fail in the process of inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities, negative effects can be observed in all students, both those with disabilities and those without. Therefore, it is important for teachers to strive to create an inclusive educational environment that benefits all students. In this sense, the study sought to examine the theoretical-practical approach to the inclusion of students with intellectual



disabilities in Colombia. Additionally, it proposes to establish a comparison between the theoretical and practical components of educational inclusion processes in Colombia.

Methodology

The study is framed within a positivist paradigm and follows a quantitative approach, aiming to measure and analyze observable variables. According to Acosta (2023a, 2023b), positivism is based on the idea that knowledge is obtained through observation and experimentation, seeking general laws to explain phenomena. On the other hand, Arias (2016) considers that the quantitative approach is characterized by the collection and analysis of numerical data to establish patterns and relationships between variables.

The study is descriptive in nature, as it seeks to describe the characteristics and behaviors of a specific group of teachers who work with children with cognitive disabilities, without seeking to establish causal relationships. The study sample consisted of 59 teachers working with students with disabilities.

Regarding inclusion criteria, teachers with experience in caring for children with cognitive disabilities in the educational context were considered. Likewise, ethical considerations such as confidentiality of information and informed consent of participants were respected.

For data collection, the survey technique was used, applying a questionnaire to 59 teachers working with this group of students. The questionnaire was validated by five experts in the field and demonstrated high reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.968. The data obtained were processed using the statistical program SPSS version 27, which allowed for descriptive statistical analysis and the establishment of patterns and relationships between the variables studied.

Results

Next, the tables detailing the results for each proposed objective are presented.

Table 1

Research competencies of teachers

Indicators	Response options					
	Always		Moderately		Never	
	Fr	F%	Fr	F%	Fr	F%
Right to equality	25	42,3	34	57,6	0	0
Right to non-discrimination	50	84,7	9	15,2	0	0
Right to participation	27	45,7	32	54,2	0	0
Right to individualization	10	16,9	35	61,0	14	23,7
Total	59	100	59	100	59	100

Note: Source: Own elaboration.



In Table 1, the theoretical components of educational inclusion are presented, regarding the following indicators: Right to equality, where 57.6% highlighted that this right is always recognized in educational institutions from institutional guidelines, and 42.3% of teachers acknowledge that inclusion has been moderately addressed as a right for all children.

Regarding the Right to non-discrimination, 84.7% of teachers consider that non-discrimination towards students with disabilities is always actively promoted, while 15.2% consider this to happen moderately. Similarly, concerning the Right to participation, it is observed that 54.2% of the surveyed subjects stated that students with disabilities are moderately consulted about their preferences and needs in the educational environment, with 45.7% believing that this always occurs.

In terms of the Right to participation, a similar trend is observed, where the majority considers that students with disabilities are moderately consulted about their preferences and needs in the educational environment, but a significant percentage believe that this always happens, suggesting a good level of student participation in their own educational process.

When analyzing the indicator of Right to individualization, it is evident that 61.0% of teachers believe that sufficient resources and personalized support are offered to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities to some extent, while 23.7% consider that teaching plans are never adapted to address the specific needs of each student with disabilities, and only 16.9% mentioned that this is moderately fulfilled.

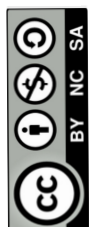
Table 2
Practical Components of Educational Inclusion Processes

Indicators	Response options					
	Always		Moderately		Never	
	Fr	F%	Fr	F%	Fr	F%
Development of individualized learning plans	5	8,4	20	33,8	34	57,6
Teacher training	0	0	27	45,7	32	54,2
Curriculum adaptation	25	42,3	25	42,3	0	0
Removal of physical barriers	10	16,9	30	50,8	19	32,2
Total	20	33,8	39	66,1	0	0

Note: Source: Own elaboration.

In Table 2, the results related to different indicators of the practical components of educational inclusion are presented. Regarding the development of individualized learning plans, it is observed that 57.6% of teachers consider these plans to be moderately developed, while 8.4% believe they are always implemented, and the remaining 33.8% indicate that they never occur.

Regarding teacher training, 54.2% of respondents think this training is done moderately, 45.7% believe it is never carried out, and no teacher indicated that this training is always done. In relation to curriculum adaptation, 42.3% of teachers consider this adaptation to be moderately



done, another 42.3% indicate that it is always done, and the remaining 15.4% think that the curriculum is never adapted.

Regarding the removal of physical barriers, 50.8% of respondents believe this removal is moderately done, 32.2% indicate that it is never carried out, and the remaining 16.9% think that these barriers are always removed. Finally, regarding the reduction of pedagogical obstacles, 66.1% of teachers consider this reduction to be moderately done, 33.8% indicate that it is always carried out, and no teacher thinks it is never done.

Table 3

Comparison between the theoretical and practical foundation of the inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities in Colombia

Indicators	Theoretical (Always)	Practical (Always)
Right to equality	42,3%	8,4%
Right to non-discrimination	84,7	0%
Right to participation	45,7%	0%
Right to individualization	16,9%	33,8%
Development of individualized plans	-	8,4%
Teacher training	-	0%
Curriculum adaptation	-	05
Removal of physical barriers	-	16,9%
Reduction of pedagogical obstacles	-	33,8%

Note: Source: Own elaboration.

In Table 3, the results are compared between the theoretical and practical components of educational inclusion for children with intellectual disabilities, showing differences in the perception and practice of surveyed teachers. Regarding the "Right to Equality," it is observed that 42.3% of teachers consider that this right is always addressed in institutional guidelines, but only 8.4% indicate that individualized learning plans are always developed, suggesting a gap between theory and practice in this aspect.

In the case of the "Right to Non-Discrimination," the contrast is even more evident, as 84.7% of teachers believe that non-discrimination is always actively promoted, but in practice, no teacher indicated that teacher training is always conducted in this regard, reflecting a disconnect between perception and action. Regarding the "Right to Participation," 45.7% of respondents believe that this right is always addressed, but no teacher indicated that physical barriers to participation are always eliminated, suggesting a lack of coherence in the implementation of this principle.

Regarding the "Right to Individualization," 16.9% of teachers consider that this right is always respected, but 33.8% indicate that pedagogical obstacles are always reduced, indicating greater attention to teaching adaptation than to the customization of learning plans. Hence, these results suggest that, although there is widespread awareness of the principles of educational in-



clusion, there is a significant gap between theory and practice in implementing these principles in the educational context.

Discussion

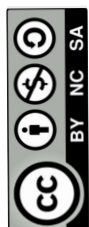
Considering the results of this study, we sought to contrast them with previous theories that would allow establishing the practical and theoretical importance of inclusive education in Colombia. In this regard, [Chen-Quesada et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that the right to equality in the education of students with intellectual disabilities is fundamental to ensuring their full development and participation in society.

However, equality in theory is not always reflected in practice, as many students with disabilities still face barriers to accessing inclusive and quality education. [Larrazabal-Bustamante \(2023\)](#) indicates that for this right to be effectively fulfilled, educational policies should focus on adapting educational environments, training teachers in inclusive pedagogies, and promoting a school culture based on acceptance and respect for diversity.

Furthermore, [Colmenero et al. \(2019\)](#) state that the implementation of concrete measures to ensure equality in the education of students with intellectual disabilities also contributes to building a more just and inclusive society. However, [Castillo et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that when these students are provided with the same educational opportunities as their peers, they are being empowered and allowed to develop their full potential. For [Dorado & Benavides \(2023\)](#), this not only benefits the students themselves but also enriches the school environment and prepares all students to live in a diverse and plural society.

Regarding the right to non-discrimination in the education of students with intellectual disabilities, [Rivera-Vargas et al. \(2023\)](#) consider that this implies that they should not be subjected to differential or unfavorable treatment in the educational setting due to their condition. According to [Hoyos et al. \(2023\)](#), to ensure this right in practice, it is essential to adopt measures that promote awareness and education in inclusive values. This includes training teachers in inclusive pedagogies and diversity management, as well as fostering a school culture that rejects any form of discrimination. Additionally, [Arnaiz-Sánchez et al. \(2021\)](#) emphasize the importance of promoting the active participation of students with disabilities in school life and in decision-making processes that affect them, so that they feel valued and respected in their educational environment.

According to the rights to participation, [Rivera-Vargas et al. \(2023\)](#) argue that this refers to creating a school environment that values and promotes the participation of students with disabilities on equal terms with their peers, as well as providing them with the necessary support to express their opinions and contribute actively to the teaching-learning process. Additionally, according to [Moya et al. \(2023\)](#), it is important to ensure that school facilities and educational resources are adapted to facilitate the participation of all students, regardless of their abilities.



In this regard, [Mateus et al. \(2017\)](#) points out that, to achieve effective participation, it is essential for teachers and school staff to be sensitized and trained in inclusive strategies that promote active participation of students with disabilities.

Likewise, [Vallejo & Castro \(2023\)](#) state that it is necessary to promote collaboration between the school, family, and community to ensure a supportive environment that fosters the full and effective participation of all students, in line with the principles of equity and non-discrimination. According to [Ruiz-Bernardo \(2016\)](#), to ensure this right to individualization, it is necessary for teachers to have the training and resources to design and implement individualized teaching plans that meet the particular needs of each student. This may include adapting educational materials, modifying teaching methodologies, and providing specific supports, such as educational assistants or assistive technologies.

According to [Rodríguez & García \(2024\)](#), it is important to promote a school culture that values diversity and recognizes the different ways in which students learn. This involves fostering an inclusive environment where individual differences are respected, and the skills and potential of each student are recognized and valued, regardless of their abilities.

The theories cited suggest that it is important for these indicators and the rights of inclusive education to translate into practical actions to ensure that the rights of students with intellectual disabilities are respected and their full participation in the educational system is promoted.

Conclusions

The discrepancy between the theoretical recognition of rights and their practical implementation can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the lack of adequate resources, both material and human, to fully implement the principles of inclusion. This includes insufficient training for teachers and a shortage of specialized support and services to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities.

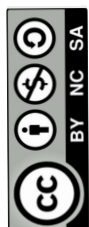
Furthermore, there are cultural barriers and negative attitudes towards disability that can hinder full inclusion. These attitudes may manifest in discriminatory practices and a lack of awareness about the importance of inclusion for the comprehensive development of all students. Additionally, the lack of coordination and collaboration among the different actors involved in the educational process, including teachers, administrators, families, and educational authorities, can impede the effective implementation of inclusion rights.

On the other hand, the absence of a clear and coherent educational policy regarding inclusion can also contribute to this gap between theory and practice. This indicates that the effective implementation of inclusion rights requires not only theoretical commitment but also a concerted effort to overcome practical and cultural barriers that hinder the full participation of all students in the educational system.



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