

**ADAPTATION OF AFRO COLOMBIAN STUDENTS TO AN
INTERCULTURAL CONTEXT IN UNIVERSITIES IN BOGOTÁ**

A literature review submitted as a requirement to obtain the degree of
professional in Modern Languages

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Abstract

From color of skin and ways of speaking to interculturality backgrounds, minorities as Colombian afro descendants are still suffering because of discriminatory issues, especially in universities in Bogotá, where higher education is addressed towards globalization. These types of violations affect the development of Colombian afros in the education arena, they sometimes experience isolation and episodes of discrimination in the study hall, promoting social inequity and injustice. In this context, afro descendants need to include the adaptation to the social requirements present in the capital city in order to achieve individual projects. Nevertheless, society manifest acts of discrimination in the lecture room, and in different spheres of human relations and interactions affecting the processes for proper advance in the generation of elements for successful communication. Yet, afro students adapt to academic atmospheres by integrating and assuming roles proper of that environment.

Key words:

Afro descendants, interculturality, discrimination, communication, adaptation, education.

Desde el color de piel y formas de hablar hasta trasfondos de interculturalidad, las minorías en Colombia, como la de afro-descendientes están sufriendo debido a temas de discriminación, especialmente en las universidades en Bogotá, donde la educación superior está dirigida hacia la globalización. Esta clase de violaciones afectan el desarrollo de los estudiantes afro colombianos en el campo educativo, en donde algunas veces experimentan aislamiento y episodios de discriminación en el aula de clase, promoviendo inequidad social e injusticia. En este contexto, los afro-colombianos necesitan incluir la adaptación a los requerimientos sociales presentes en la ciudad capital para el logro de proyectos individuales. No obstante, la sociedad manifiesta actos de discriminación en el aula y en distintas esferas de relaciones e interacciones humanas, afectando así el proceso para un adecuado avance en la generación de elementos de comunicación exitosos.

Palabras clave: Afro-descendientes, interculturalidad, discriminación, comunicación, adaptación, educación.

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ADAPTATION OF AFRO COLOMBIAN STUDENTS TO INTERCULTURAL CONTEXTS IN UNIVERSITIES IN BOGOTÁ

Introduction

The following document covers the situation of afro Colombian students when they migrate from other regions of Colombia, due to diverse factors as violence, extreme poverty or with the purpose of having better life opportunities; as Brown (2015) explains ‘problems facing Afro descendants in Colombia include poor access to education, healthcare and jobs. Afro-Colombians are widely discriminated, often live in impoverished conditions, and find themselves excluded from the labor market’ (para. 8).

Under those circumstances, the text analyzes the intercultural manifestations towards afro Colombians in the educative context in Bogota capital of the country, where the multiculturalism is evident in all contexts and places for thousands of people with diverse ethnic groups. Then, it is vital to identify the motives which produce afro Colombian people to migrate to an intercultural city. According to this, the definition of intercultural communication gives the necessary mechanisms to find the adaptations and manifestations of them in academic backgrounds as universities in Bogotá.

Apart of this, the paper includes the perception that other ethnic groups have about afro descendants, assuming wrong stereotypes and promoting discrimination, racism, and sometimes violence and rejection among this diverse and huge population. Reales (2005) states that from the colleges the afro Colombian face to socio-racial exclusion, because of the false myths that society has about them, making hard to get a job or integrate roles in companies.

The literature review refers to articles about the interaction and manifestations of afro descendants inside the study hall context, aiming to refer to multiculturalism integration; as Arévalo (2006) defines, knowing and recognizing the differences, the acceptance of the value, and logic of acknowledgement of other cultural system, and finally overcoming the ethnocentric prejudices, in spite of racism and distance that people mark to afro Colombians. (p. 65).

Statement of the problem

Since its discovery by 1492, Colombia has been a nation highly characterized by social violence, inequity and racism in its diverse ethnicity and multiculturalism. For centuries the country experienced violence for the cause of slavery -which was legally abolished by 19th century-. From there on, black people have been involved in political violence which, for instance, as indicated by Melo, J (n.d.), developed crucial events as the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in April 9th, 1948 (the following events are part of what is called “El Bogotazo”), and more recently for the cause of land mines placed by guerrillas in several places of the Colombian territory due to their fight against the Colombian army, and land expropriation from peasants; here –of course- including indigenous people. Most of these population that suffered these events have been displaced and arrive to Bogotá in search of new life opportunities.

Afro Colombians adaption has reached the academic context, an atmosphere of educated mates from different backgrounds and ethnicity meeting in Bogotá. This implies a transformation process that may not always represent preserving the culture, especially when afro descendants are still surrounded by the sickness of racism, labor and social exclusion in a media dominated in numbers by white people.

The adaptation process may also represent a loss of cultural expression and identity in order to be adaptable to a globalized model, in which cultural roots are not as important as the need to get a well-paid work. Then, based on the existing literature review, the objective of this document is first, to determine how afro Colombians adapt their lives to those academic environments and second, to determine if universities help to preserve the culture of black people or to vanish it, concluding how this cultural changes influence the personality of afro descendant students in Universities in Bogotá.

Interculturality for Communication

The modern world is mainly defined by associations in terms of social and economic relations. A bridge to succeed in this arena is the mutual acceptance of the different cultures that, when combined, create interculturality. This is manifested in forms of communication as verbal and non-verbal –for instance gestures and body language-, a general knowledge of others

backgrounds and experiences, habits and traditions, and the capability to accept all of them as others accept the proper one.

In this regard, interculturality is a process in an established culture as it is a tool that according to The European Council creates exchanges among different cultures based on mutual understanding (2008); creating an environment of tolerance, increasing participation and interaction in social groups. Mondragon (2010), (as is cited in Ruiz, 2014, p.40).

Similarly, interculturality allows both to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of cultures for developing bridges of communication, and a sense of equity where no one is above or superior to others.

As Trujillo stated, interculturality is the recognition of the value of diversity in communities (2002). In the same way, the benefits of that exchange of cultural expressions transcends to other areas of human activities. As an example in fields as business, education, tourism, politics and diplomatic relations, and promotion of Human Rights, among others; all of this corresponding to the modern projection towards the elimination of barriers and limitations of distance and language.

To illustrate this, in virtual and face to face jobs, Ghosh (2012) declares that “employees with intercultural backgrounds can also provide the company broader coverage in a global marketplace. The ability to accurately speak and write the language, overcome cultural barriers and communication filters and know what customers want.” In other words intercultural communication creates ties that cover from close personal to business links.

Besides, interculturality allows different cultures to enter and interact, for instance, in fields as the academia and, even more importantly, this success can be a clear symptom of welfare in teams as they can perceive each other as important for the component of a group or work team. Then interculturality contributes to the enhancement of integration for achieving corporative goals and for the creation of new contacts. This can be positive for building up new personal relations.

It is essential to highlight that Rojas & Castillo declared -interculturality as the way of relating between ethnic groups and the majority society, this allows to learn the knowledge of both sides, (as cited in Herrera, 2007, p.102), developing this form in different scenarios as everyday life, culture and politics where multiculturalism is manifested.-

Moreover, Mato (2007) affirmed that after centuries of discrimination, recently indigenous peoples and afro descendants have been making significant strides in various fields, which are expressed in international agreements, for instance in constitutions, laws and various regulations (p.63). An exact example of it is the Law 70 of 1993 that established the integration of afro Colombians to national educative system- As well as these advances have been possible thanks to the intercultural communication between afros and other ethnic groups. Finally, in the educational field can be seen how the afros have gained access to higher education, enabling not only exchange but also the assessment of their languages and collective knowledge and the engines that almost all institutions has created for learning and sharing information.

Even though exchanges of culture can generate conflicts in terms of language, attitudes and the way people perform tasks, duties or simple activities among others, then, respect and dialogue become key elements to end strifes. This is so done because of the implicit agreement of mutual recognition of values and life styles. As Zhou stated, intercultural competence is the ability to deal with different cultures and effectively requires cultural awareness, personal attitudes, self awareness and capability to understand belief and values of others (2011).

Likewise, Allwood (n.d.) finds four cultural dimensions which are present in the communicative interculturality divided in patterns of thought –defined as common ways of thinking-, patterns of behavior –covering the acts aware or unaware-, patterns of artifacts –related to common ways for using materials-, and imprints in nature –related to the tracks left in places, roads and agriculture, among others. (p.2)

Here the human being is involved as a whole in constant self-surveillance of what is spoken, agreed, acceptable and respectable. There lies the common and non verbal agreement of mutualism, where one gives and receives in equal measure while growing, learning, and acquiring new valuable –positive and negative- experiences.

In summary, intercultural communication is vital in order to establish proper links in intercultural relationships; keeping elements of respect for differences, diversity and interaction in every encounter among individuals and social groups in different fields of human interactions, including the environment itself and all of this in the frame of respect for Human Rights and equity. Above all, human interactions remains a vital component in the construction of human relations. Moreover and as Mato (2007) specified, international regulations and pro actions in defense of humanity and rights to afro descendants signifies advances toward the recognition of

minorities as important members of society; those rights become the voice and the participation of afro Colombians in the integration to undertake studies in higher education.

Racism and Discrimination in the Study Hall

Colombia is a regionalized country and for historical reasons and race divisions has a highlighted distinction between “black” and white-mestizo; the incorporation of coastal people into cities as Medellin or Bogotá establishes nexus of afro descendants and other ethnic group relations. That is why Wade (1993) in his book “Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia” stated that emigrations developed a situation where afro Colombians are considered invisible as for the citizens they are strangers and have a different way to disclose their culture. Furthermore, afro Colombians have suffered discrimination to adapt their lifestyle to these cities without losing their identity.

In Colombia, the mobilization of black people from their natal town to a city has involved factors as the change of customs and expressiveness. According to this, it is said that “Colombia has one of the largest black populations in Latin America. Especially notable is the concentration of black people in the poor, underdeveloped Pacific coastal region, where they form perhaps 80-90 percent of the population” (Wade, 2010, p.342). Also, the Colombian state has created some institutional space for blacks, indigenous people, and minorities.

Moreover, in the same section of the document, Wade explains that those afro organizations indirectly constitute a form of discrimination as they are the form to make known the voice and presence of afro descendants. In addition, previous statistical studies undertaken by Dureau et al. showed that thousands of people have migrated from other regions of Colombia to Bogotá during the second half of last century (as cited in Quintero, 2010, p. 5). They arrive to the capital city with the purpose of having better job opportunities and acquire work experience. Further, many families stay indefinitely in the city to gain knowledges in universities. However, they face major problematic issues called racism and discrimination.

In this regard there are multiple features and ways to make them visible. For the case of black people in Colombia it is seen three main generalized forms as to race, racism and linguistics. It is relevant indicate here that –as Ramírez (2014) declared- there is not a science to study violations to afro descendants and cases are seen separately and managed in terms of legal

implications and sanctions, (P.73). No matter the form, discrimination is a concern that appears subtly and is not perceived or when it is, it is just ignored.

As for the case of Bogotá inside the lecture room, there is a study undertaken by Ramírez (2013) where he identified four main forms of discrimination; the first is isolation-grouping that refers to the limitations experienced by black people when forming work-groups inside the study hall; the second is re-update of racism based on social and cultural patterns where black people are naturally discriminated because of the color of the skin, habits and linguistics; the third one is called problematization of racism, where the fact of being black and its consequences are normal for afro descendants.

Finally, he states that the fourth concern is paternalism and condescension, this is especially sensitive as it has to do with the assumption taken by the educator when trying to express sympathy sentiments towards the black student in order to soften situations of discrimination, without considering that manifestation as a problem to attack, avoiding the enhancement of human rights as a fundamental treat and equality for all (p.83-85). In consequence, this study indicates the prerogative surrounding the perception around black people from white-mestizos. This sounds the way it is, “discrimination”. The use of the word “race” may represent a form of discrimination as well.

Interculturality Manifestations towards Afro Descendants in the Study Hall

Interculturality in Colombia is manifested on different fields due to the influence of European, Asian, and African descendants that makes Colombia a multicultural country. The article “Afro Colombians” (n.d) summarized that from the several ethnic groups, the afro Colombian group represents 26% of the total population (p.1). It is said that there is a specific group of African descendants who arrived to Colombia primordially as slaves, during the colonial period which share particularities in culture, language, traditions, and own-autochthonous customs that make them different from other racial groups of this country.

For many years, they have fought to claim their rights and respect for their culture and manifestation ways. After the constitution in 1991, the Ministry of National Education has promoted training programs to include afro descendants in cities as Bogotá, Cali, Medellín and others on the educational sectors. The article ‘la diversidad y en la diversidad’ (2009) recognizes

the rights of those communities to have an equal education and participate on several activities to increase their abilities and potentialities.

Nonetheless, there are some ethnic groups in Colombia who are in constant struggle to belong to a society; although they survive the cultural and academic demands, they try to overstep the barriers of higher education. Rosero & Gómez (2012) affirmed that even though afro Colombian students are a kind of anonymity and silent group, their presence generate an impact in the relationships with other university students (p.105). Thereby cultural activities of afro descendants into the study hall favor a social formation of their mates.

Furthermore, intergroup relationships mates may be an important source for learning especially in educational contexts, as interaction is a continuous tool that allows to study manifestations between mates with afro Colombians to comprehend attitudes, moods, and acts that lead to generate racism, discrimination and non-tolerance. It may be also possible that these actions and exchanges generate relations and mutual respect and a perspective of equity among the incumbent groups. A number of studies have revealed that afro Colombians have difficulties to conform study groups for the simple reason that there are discriminatory attitudes in cultural differences.

It is clear the need to find alternatives that can set up afro descendants groups to handle the demands in a modern society without having to quit their ethnic identity, language and culture because “the new approaches seek to build bridges among cultures in contact whose only interchange is in the form of domination and subordination” (Bello & Rangel, 2002, p.47). Although this is not openly seen it is a prevailing concern in universities in Bogotá. As Quintero (2013) affirms in a study of Colombian afro descendant students where is reported that from 99 discriminatory situations 43.8% correspond to students from the Caribbean coast, 31.2% from students born in Bogotá and 25% to students from the pacific coast and other regions in Colombia.

In the same way, provided that the sphere of afro descendant people in the study hall include not only students but teachers as well, it is relevant to bring to attention that some educators in Colombia have created a project to improve the interaction between afro Colombian students and other ethnic groups to promote their visibility. According to Arocha, Guevara, Londoño, Moreno & Rincón (2007) is vital to create practices for optimizing the view and knowledge of Africa and afro descendants with the purpose of avoiding stereotypes. (p.2);

however, it is difficult to change the way of thinking of a society ruled by white people and marked by its history. Aside to this, in the field of pedagogy Colombia has established a guidance for educators to acquire knowledges about ethno-education, and afro Colombianity; as Ministerio de Educación Nacional (n.d) declared, ethno education is an instrument for recognizing the value of ethnic and cultural diversity of the nation (p.23)

To conclude, efforts in the promotion of equality go far beyond from a written statement on Human Rights promotion and equity to minorities and especially to afro descendants. This is directly related to human dignity which should not be lowered by any idea or social or traditional misconceptions. Individuals get stronger when they are able to associate and that association is recognized not only in the lecture room but in every space where sharing knowledge and wisdom is conceived, so attributing social stature to the participants. Otherwise that wisdom tent to disappear. When that is the status that information is established as pertinent and transcends to other individuals and societies, and so to the next generation(s).

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, this document includes important factors to explain adaptation of afro Colombians into education field in Colombia and it is significant to appoint that although the abolition of slavery was decades ago, this event in the history of Colombia has left scars in the society; for instance, afro communities have been excluded of the university, for historical reasons. These episodes of discrimination and racism are present among ethnic groups due to prejudices and stereotypes.

Any discriminatory fact in the study hall is a pattern of inequity and injustice against afro descendants; it is also a contradiction in terms of education of societies that prevents intercultural manifestations to be performed. Moreover, discriminations are the voices shouting against the reputation of universities lacking of a sense of humanity, which is different from sentiments of sorrow to black people, as being black is not a problem as for sure discrimination is.

In spite of efforts undertaken by the representative institutions of the government in Bogotá, the adaptation of afro descendants has a road ahead in terms of communicative openness that requires the inclusion of other ethnic groups in their roles as teachers and students, also institutions, and the society in Bogotá. The path to transformation is sometimes accompanied by resignation as cases of discrimination are not reported. Nonetheless, in the university context, afro descendants adapt to the academic environment in order to complete higher education studies without losing their essence as afro descendants and black people. To afros, this represents sharing and integration with other cultures, so creating intercultural climate and new relations and spaces of interculturality. That integration may call to friendship among interpersonal relations, this of course, is a valid reason to quit any form of prejudice.

On the other hand, afro Colombians have an opportunity to express their culture in different contexts as meetings and encounters organized by the District Department of Government, which encourages Bogotá citizens to join in cultural meetings, creating a tolerant environment, for restoring afro descendants rights and culture sharing. Finally, the words of Robert G. Ingersoll, north American lawyer and political leader (n.d), are relevant to the purpose of this paper “This is my doctrine: Give every other human being every right you claim for yourself.”

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. Mind map for document presentation

