Teaching experiences in contexts of conflict and cultural diversity during the COVID-19 pandemic:

The case of a public school in Bogotá

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Abstract

This paper showcases the experience of teachers in an under-served school in Bogotá, Colombia, amidst the difficulties of delivering meaningful education to a diverse population of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the students were already affected by precariousness and forced displacement. The paper focuses on teachers' agency and their motivation to work toward social and educational change. while also attending to the educational needs of immigrant and indigenous students using a critical inclusive and inter-cultural education approach. The teachers' researchaction-reflection process enabled them to examine educational practices through a de-colonial and inter-cultural lens and to implement an innovative pedagogical strategy to address educational inequalities.

Key Words

critical inclusive education, inter-cultural education, teachers' agency

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated social and educational inequity, particularly for people already affected by uncertainty amidst situations of conflict, precariousness, and forced displacement. However, despite the adversity, this global emergency also disrupted the status quo and provided education stakeholders with an opportunity to 'rethink the purposes, practices, and paradigms of education itself' (Cohen and Willemsen, 2021, p. 356). Rethinking teaching and learning practices during the pandemic was precisely what happened in the case of Alameda (pseudonym), a public school located in an under-served neighbourhood in downtown Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia, a country affected by decades of violence, inequity, and social and political conflict. Since teachers' pedagogical practices can promote or hinder students' social and educational inclusion, recognition, participation, and achievement (Mendenhall et al., 2020; Raffo and Gunter, 2008), the purpose of this paper is to highlight the agency of a group of Alameda teachers' and their journey through the design and implementation of a research-action-reflection (RAR) process that addressed two inter-related problems: the teaching

To cite this article: Sánchez-Bautista, C., Gómez, L. R., Gómez, L. C. M. and Villamil, S. M. (2023). 'Teaching experiences in contexts of conflict and cultural diversity during the COVID-19 pandemic: The case of a public school in Bogotá', *Education and Conflict Review*, 4, pp.73-80.

and learning challenges posed during the pandemic, and the intensified social and educational exclusion and inequalities affecting the diverse community of immigrant and forcibly displaced students enrolled at the school¹. Despite the time needed to generate systemic change, we argue that, paired with a critical inclusive and inter-cultural education framework, the RAR process provides empirical insights into how highly diverse educational communities in contexts of emergencies or protracted conflicts can work toward pedagogical and curricular change and build more participative and inclusive schools.

We first present a theoretical discussion of inclusive and inter-cultural education. After presenting the methodology, we situate this case study within the broad context of conflict, precariousness, and diversity that characterises Alameda students and families. Next, we provide a background for the motivations of a group of teachers—to whom we refer as the 'leadership team' - who designed and led the implementation of the RAR strategy. We also offer details of the implementation of the inter-cultural education project, a pedagogical strategy developed to respond to the educational needs of forcibly displaced students and families. Finally, through teachers' reflections on their experience, we discuss the benefits and challenges of initiatives such as the one implemented at Alameda.

Inclusive and intercultural education

In the field of education and conflict, the educational needs of young people affected by emergencies, violence, and protracted conflicts have usually been addressed by donors, policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers from humanitarian, development, security, and social justice frameworks (Dryden-Peterson, 2016; Novelli, 2017; Lopes Cardozo and Shah, 2016). In contrast, we analyse the delivery of education for these populations at a school in Bogotá through the lens of a critical inclusive and inter-cultural education approach, which has not been widely discussed in the literature on education and conflict.

Although inclusion in mainstream schooling has lately been one of the most widely advocated global education strategies to increase enrollment and

quality of education for forcibly displaced children, it differs from a critical definition of inclusive education. Inclusion is commonly encouraged as access to national education systems, rather than to informal, short-term education programmes (UNHCR, 2019; UNICEF, 2022). However, while educational inclusion can be understood from a functionalist perspective as students' access to schooling and their adaptation to its mainstream social and cultural life, a critical inclusive education approach advocates for schools' adaptation to students' needs and the transformation of structural barriers that hinder children's access to education and limit their recognition, participation, and achievement (Ainscow, 2020; Gale, Mills and Cross, 2017; Raffo and Gunter, 2008).

In Colombia, the National Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Secretariat of Education of Bogotá (SoE), the local education authority in the city, have promoted the inclusion of vulnerable populations, ethnic groups, and victims of conflict in schools (SED, 2018). Policy guidelines on inclusive education aim to acknowledge students' individual characteristics and the country's social and cultural diversity. Due to that diversity and the historical exclusion, racism, and discrimination against minoritised communities, inclusive education policy guidelines in Colombia explicitly incorporate an intercultural approach.

Inter-cultural education is a popular approach not only in Colombia but also in other Andean countries. The concept of inter-culturality originated in the 1990s in the context of indigenous movements and their struggle to transform their relationship with nation-states and shift public policies toward more culturally appropriate education (Walsh, 2002). Like the functionalist approach to inclusion, a functionalist inter-cultural education would advocate for the inclusion of populations in the established school system but without encouraging school transformation or challenging existing inequalities. A critical de-colonial perspective of inter-cultural education aims instead to recognise and legitimise the cultural diversity of people who have historically suffered subalternation and have been minoritised (Walsh, 2010). According to this perspective, inter-cultural education is also a pedagogical

¹ In this article, we use the term 'forcibly displaced persons' or 'forcibly displaced students' to refer to Alameda populations of internally displaced people and Venezuelan refugees and vulnerable immigrants.

tool for dialogue among diverse members of a community that enables them to share their wisdom, knowledges, thoughts, and emotions as they strive for the emancipatory potential of education and seek to co-create a shared cultural and social world (Freire and Ronzoni, 2008). Ideally, it also encourages diverse forms of being, thinking, learning, and teaching (Walsh, 2010). However, this practice can prove challenging to implement, since relationships among diverse communities at a school tend to be problematic. Discrimination against minoritised groups usually occurs because of the lack of knowledge about who the students/others are; the lack of preparedness to handle different perspectives, ways of living, and interests; and resistance to social and pedagogical change (Walsh, 2010).

Methodology

To acknowledge teachers' agency and interrupt extractivist research practices, this article incorporates a standpoint epistemological approach, which highlights individuals' voices and experiences through collective interaction and dialogue with others (Connolly, 1996; Johnstone et al., 2023). Carolina Mojica Gómez, a primary school teacher, and Liliana Reyes Gómez and Sonia Moreno Villamil, two psychosocial and pedagogical counsellors at the school, are the three Alameda teachers (leadership team) who designed and implemented the RAR strategy between October 2020 and April 2022. In re-constructing this experience, in this article their voices appear throughout, and they are therefore considered participants and co-authors, jointly with Sánchez-Bautista, a doctoral candidate researching alternative education practices involving forcibly displaced students at Alameda.

We draw from a variety of qualitative data to answer the following questions:

- 1. How did Alameda teachers adapt their pedagogical practices to serve the educational needs of a diverse community of forcibly displaced students and families during the pandemic?
- 2. What motivated them to work toward social and pedagogical change through inter-cultural education during the pandemic?

We utilise the findings from a series of individual

semi-structured interviews, group conversations, and individual follow-ups with the leadership team conducted by the first author in 2022, after in-person classes had resumed. We also use information collected by the teachers during the implementation of the RAR process, mainly structured phone interviews with parents and students from different cultural backgrounds in October 2020, and a focus group with seven Alameda teachers after the school reopened in January 2022. Using a thematic analysis of this information, we focus on teachers' experiences, interests, and beliefs around inclusive education and forcibly displaced students to discuss the implementation of teaching and learning strategies.

The context of conflict and cultural diversity

One of the most visible consequences of more than six decades of social and political conflict in Colombia has been the forced displacement of teachers, students, and their families from their conflict-affected communities (CdV, 2022). Due to protracted and emergent conflicts, millions of rural, Afro-descendant, and Indigenous populations from different corners of the country have been forcibly displaced. In addition to more than eight million internally displaced persons, almost two million Venezuelan refugees and immigrants have arrived in Colombia since 2015 (PCINU-R4V, 2021). Looking for safety and better living conditions, these populations have migrated primarily to cities, such as Bogotá, which has received thousands of children and school-age youth.

Many FDPs have arrived in under-served neighbourhoods (SDIS, 2019). These families typically live in over-crowded housing, but a few do not have a fixed place to live, since having housing depends on their ability to earn a daily income. Alameda Public School is located in one of these neighbourhoods in downtown Bogotá, which is inhabited by the school's diverse lowincome community. Alameda has historically had a high enrollment rate among victims of conflict, but its population has become more diverse in recent years, due to the influx of immigrants and Indigenous internally displaced persons to the city (Sánchez, 2017). By 2020, the school had around 1,200 students enrolled in pre-school, elementary.

and secondary education, of which approximately 34 percent were Venezuelan immigrants. Most Colombian students are usually self-identified as mestizos from Bogotá and other rural and urban locations. Afro-descendants made up about 13 percent of the total population, and 6 percent of the families came from Indigenous communities of at least six different ethnicities, each with its own language (MEN, 2021).

Background of the RAR process

Following national guidelines released at the beginning of global school closures, Alameda teachers tried to deliver synchronous online classes (MEN. 2020). However, according to the teachers who checked attendance in every class, 70 percent of students, on average, did not show up (SED, 2020). Considering that public schools do not usually require families to purchase textbooks, and in the context of limited internet connectivity for lowincome students enrolled in public schools, the SoE encouraged teachers to design digital/printed guides that would cover the most important topics of the regular curriculum. The intention was for students to learn with this home-study material, the assistance of their families, and the support of teachers through phone calls, WhatsApp messages, or online classes. Like workbooks, the guides designed by Alameda teachers included an explanation of a topic, activities, and questions. All the activities had to be completed by the students, and the guides were to be turned in every one or two months for teachers to grade.

Months after implementation of the digital/printed guides strategy began, Alameda School staff members analysed students' and families' responses to online and home-schooling learning. Mojica Gómez, one of the teachers who initiated the RAR process, pointed out that 'fewer than 30 percent of the families returned the guides, which posed the challenge of increasing students' participation and improving their learning experience at home'. As psycho-social and pedagogical counsellors at the school, Reves Gómez and Moreno Villamil were aware that most forcibly displaced students with Indigenous and immigrant backgrounds did not have learning support from their parents and other adults in their households, who had low levels of education or were not proficient in Spanish. Due to these

students' more precarious living conditions and limited access to digital technologies, the teachers were convinced that it was necessary to address the learning difficulties that the forcibly displaced were facing because they were among those most affected by the pandemic.

These three teachers, who are also graduate students in the field of education and have a theoretical and practical interest in inter-cultural education, decided that the pandemic and the arrival of a new principal interested in supporting forcibly displaced students provided them with an opportunity to focus on these students' needs. They decided to design and implement a pedagogical process based on the RAR methodology to improve students' participation and critically explore if the underlying reasons for students' disengagement were also motivated by the lack of adequate teaching strategies and attention to families' realities in such challenging circumstances.

Implementation of an alternative strategy: A pedagogical response based on the research-action-reflection methodology

Drawing from participatory action research inquiry (PAR), the leadership team designed the RAR process. In education, PAR can be conceptualised as a collaborative process and a reflective practice in which teachers-researchers critically inquire about social, cultural, and pedagogical issues to transform and improve their educational practices (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1992). In Latin America, PAR is a widely known epistemological and methodological approach in education inspired by the works of Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, who observed that knowledge can be produced not only by scholars but by community members who are able to reflect on their lives and the social problems affecting them, and can solve such issues through collective action (Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991). In Bogotá, the SoE has encouraged PAR at schools, as well as the development of initiatives that promote critical pedagogy, more equitable power relationships among the school social actors, and citizenship and peace education (SED, 2014).

In the teachers' adapted RAR experience, the practice of reflection is highlighted by the leadership

team, since every action taken in the process provided them with constant feedback about the problems and solutions to be implemented and triggered new questions and actions. The RAR process was structured into three phases: (1) analysis of students' and families' disengagement, (2) participatory design and the implementation of a pedagogical action-response to improve educational practices, and (3) teachers' reflection on their teaching experiences with the implementation of the inter-cultural project during the pandemic. In the following sections, we expand on each one of these phases.

Analysis of students' and families' disengagement

In October 2020, the leadership team conducted 15 phone interviews with parents and students from different cultural backgrounds to gather information about their experience of learning at home with the digital/printed material. In the interviews, some parents reported that they did not have sufficient education to explain some topics to their children and suggested that topics and activities should be closer to their backgrounds to make the homeschooling experience easier. Also, although one of the mothers found it easy to support her child because she was a teacher, she commented that she 'did not see' her family's reality in the guides, that topics and activities related to other cultures and knowledges were missing, and that teachers should consider cultural differences and somehow include them in the material to make it more relevant for students and parents. She explained, for instance, that the classification of living beings and non-living things used by her child's second-grade teacher is different in her culture: 'The teacher explained to my daughter that stones are an example of nonliving things, but in our culture, stones are living beings, as everything on our Mother Earth is..., so teachers should learn about our worldview too'. Finally, some refugee parents and students affirmed that they would like to learn more about Colombia, its geography, food, and the history of the armed conflict, and that Colombians should learn about

Venezuelans because 'it could contribute to having better relationships when the children return to school'.

The intercultural education initiative, a participatory pedagogical action-response

Drawing from families' and students' answers, in January 2021, the leadership team started an inter-cultural education project as a strategy to begin transforming pedagogical practices of exclusion that affect Indigenous and immigrant students. The leadership team designed two community activities to learn and share inter-cultural knowledge. The first was mingas². For these online gatherings, the leadership team invited all Alameda teachers, students, parents, elders, community and spiritual authorities from ethnic communities, and dinamizadores culturales working with the SoE3. The participants discussed social issues, such as the inequities affecting the community and the country in the context of an unpopular tax reform planned by the national government amidst the pandemic. They also shared knowledges about topics such as students' places of origin, gastronomy, music, traditional games, and hair-dressing. Out of 90 teachers working at the school, approximately 20 percent attended the mingas. Students with access to internet connectivity—expanded at the time by the SoE through the distribution of tablets to students also attended the mingas.

These conversations were the basis for the second activity, called clases tejidas (woven classes). While learning about students' topics of interest and communities' ancestral wisdom in the mingas, a group of seven primary and secondary teachers joined the leadership team. Their job was to work with other Alameda teachers to design the school's digital/printed material to facilitate the incorporation of topics and activities developed during the mingas into the guides. This strategy allowed teachers to integrate areas of knowledge and further develop project-based learning already implemented at the school. For example, one of the clases tejidas was developed around corn, a topic addressed

² Traditionally, a minga is a community effort in which people voluntarily work together to address a community need or issue.

³ The SoE's inclusion office has a group of professionals from Afro, Indigenous, and Room (gypsy) communities. Known as dinamizadores culturales, they support the schools where students from these ethnic backgrounds are enrolled. Among other activities, they help with interpretation in the classrooms when Indigenous students do not speak Spanish and provide teachers with pedagogical tools to include ethnic communities' knowledges in the school curriculum.

from different perspectives in the digital/printed guides according to each one of the subjects: the history of corn and contemporary uses, climate and moon phases to grow crops, production statistics in Latin America, the meaning and use of corn by Indigenous, black, and Venezuelan families, and so on. When a mix of online and in-person classes began to be implemented in July 2021 as part of the plan for school re-openings in the city, some teachers, students, and families came together to cook Colombian and Venezuelan arepas and other corn-based dishes.

Teachers' reflection on the intercultural education project

After in-person classes had resumed in January 2022 and the school was 'back to normal.' the implementation of mingas and clases tejidas was suspended. The leadership team observed that, although some teachers wanted to keep implementing these pedagogical activities, other colleagues rejected them because they were in a hurry to catch up with the curriculum and the topics they could not cover effectively during the pandemic. For the leadership team, strengthening the inter-cultural education project was a priority, since discrimination and exclusion of FDPs were happening at the school before the pandemic. This disruptive event allowed teachers to realise that these students 'were not only socially excluded but also excluded from the curriculum', since it did not incorporate ways of knowing different from those of the hegemonic populations. For this reason, the inter-cultural project was conceived of as an attempt to 'recognize these students as part of the community..., create a symbolic space to decolonize the curriculum, and transform structural inequities affecting forcibly displaced students'.

Teachers' narratives of their motivations, experiences, and lessons learned have also provided insights into the benefits and challenges of working toward social and pedagogical change through intercultural education in the future. Empirical knowledge about mainstream culture influenced teachers' attitudes toward and pedagogical practices with forcibly displaced students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and their interest in transforming those attitudes and practices. As one teacher pointed out, recognising and valuing diversity has not been

a common practice. In her opinion, her teaching practice was informed by her experience when she arrived in the city many years ago. She had to adapt rapidly to the social and cultural dynamics of the urban context where differences were often made invisible, erased, or derided. As 'people mocked' her 'rural' accent, this teacher used to think that everybody, including her students, 'should learn how to behave in the city to avoid being devoured by it'. Another teacher added that talking about diversity was important because 'the society has changed with the massive arrival of Indigenous people and Venezuelans in the city' but 'at the school, we have not addressed it explicitly or designed any other collective strategy for these students'. Still another teacher pointed out that, before his participation in the inter-cultural project, he 'was not sure about how to interact with Indigenous students' but he has 'a better idea now'. In this sense, various teachers valued the experience as they learned about inter-culturality and Indigenous and immigrant students' lives, and say they now feel 'closer to them'. Even though 'culture' could be essentialised in education processes drawing from inter-culturality (Sánchez-Bautista, 2013), the implementation of strategies such as mingas and clases tejidas provided teachers with additional pedagogical tools and helped to reduce social and cultural gaps by laying out a 'common ground' for teachers and the diverse community of forcibly displaced students to learn from each other. However, without teachers' participation and engagement, the implementation of inter-cultural education as a practice to promote social and educational change in the school will not be sustainable in the future.

Conclusion

As seen in the case of the Alameda School, the movement of people fleeing from conflict, violence, and precarious lives usually creates diversity in the schools, since students bring their different backgrounds to their new locales. However, this diversity is not necessarily noticed or managed purposefully. As Malkki (1995) pointed out in one of her seminal works, labels such as 'refugee' or 'forcibly displaced' tend to group these populations into categories that minimise or ignore diverse life experiences and cultural backgrounds. Ignoring differences and diversity makes it difficult for

schools to respond to students' learning needs and transform structural inequalities, discrimination, and exclusion. In the case of the Alameda teachers. the pandemic revealed the cultural, social, and educational exclusion affecting forcibly displaced students at the school, and made more evident the need to recognize, accept, and embrace students from diverse identities and backgrounds who were being neglected before the COVID-19 emergency. It also took some of the teachers on a journey wherein recognising and legitimising students' diverse cultures, identities, knowledges, and ways of knowing was pivotal to providing meaningful education during an emergency that made survival the top priority for families and students living in a context of precarity and economic and housing insecurity.

Alameda teachers' experience shows that, in contexts in which cultural diversity is not explicitly recognised, valued, or integrated into school life, educational settings may implement a functionalist approach to inclusion that potentially fosters students' assimilation. Their assimilation is facilitated through a curriculum that overlooks the voices, multi-faceted knowledges, interests, and needs of the students and their families and drives students from minoritised ethnic communities and immigrants to adapt to the mainstream culture of the receiving society/school. The task of curbing the reproduction of structures of exclusion and inequalities affecting forcibly displaced students at schools is usually left to teachers, who do not always have the necessary knowledge or tools. In these contexts, the participatory and community character of the RAR methodology has the potential to inform pedagogical and curricular change from a de-colonial practice of inclusion and inter-culturality. In the case of Alameda, the implementation of the RAR strategy led a group of teachers to develop innovative teaching and learning practices and non-hegemonic ways of conceiving education, curriculum, and social and cultural relationships within the school community.

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