

## **Inclusion in the classroom based on cultural diversity**

### **La inclusión en el aula basada en la diversidad cultural**

*María Alejandra Ruiz Cerquera<sup>1</sup>*

*Mayda Bárbara Álvarez Díaz<sup>2</sup>*

#### **Abstract**

The problems of today's world are mostly related to education and culture. Colombia, not far removed from the global context, needs a new perspective on both social and cultural changes, demanding a teaching-learning process that reinforces attention to the different cultures and ethnic groups present in the classroom. This institutional demand for education is capturing the attention of many people in the field of education, and a growing number are convinced that it is necessary to improve the levels of rigor prevailing in the classroom as a measure to achieve higher levels of learning and the inclusion of all students. The objective of this paper is to argue the need for inclusion in the classroom based on cultural diversity in the teaching-learning process, supported by differentiated instruction.

*Keywords:* Differentiated instruction, inclusion, cultural diversity, teaching-learning process.

#### **Resumen**

Los problemas del mundo actual en su mayoría están relacionados con la educación y la cultura, Colombia no alejada del contexto mundial necesita una nueva mirada tanto para los cambios sociales como culturales, demandando un proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje que refuerce la atención a las diferentes culturas y grupos étnicos presentes en el salón de clase. La exigencia

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<sup>1</sup> Licenciada en Educación, especialidad Lenguas Extranjeras (Inglés). Institución Educativa El Hormiguero. Cali. Colombia. Email: [marale12@gmail.com](mailto:marale12@gmail.com) ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6226-0831>

<sup>2</sup> Licenciada en Educación, especialidad Lenguas Extranjeras (Inglés). Universidad de Cienfuegos "Carlos Rafael Rodríguez". Cuba. E-mail: [mbalvarez@ucf.edu.cu](mailto:mbalvarez@ucf.edu.cu) ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4290-0766>



institucional educativa está captando la atención de muchas personas en el campo de la educación, y cada vez son más los que están convencidos de que es necesario mejorar los niveles de rigor que prevalecen en el salón de clase, como una medida para lograr mejores niveles de aprendizaje y la inclusión de todos los estudiantes. El objetivo del presente trabajo es argumentar la necesidad de la inclusión en el salón de clase a partir de la diversidad cultural desde el proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje, con un sustento de Instrucción diferenciada

*Palabras clave:* Instrucción diferenciada, inclusión, diversidad cultural, proceso enseñanza aprendizaje.

### **Introduction**

The Colombian Ministry of National Education, (MEN from here on), establishes that students from different ethnic groups must be served, seeking the exchange of knowledge, skills, and values among the different members of these groups (MEN, 2002). Another document that addresses this topic is the Curricular Guidelines for the mandatory areas, which have been the fundamental input for the development of curricula and the definition of the pedagogical strategies that each educational institution adopts, according to the characteristics of its context. However, unsatisfactory results continue to be evident.

Although these outcomes depend on a combination of social, economic, and cultural factors, it has been possible to establish what should be learned in each area and at each grade level. Therefore, it is possible to determine whether students are acquiring the skills they need to function adequately in society. Teachers must be prepared not only in traditional methodologies and pedagogies, but also be able to adapt to new scenarios, such as inclusion based on cultural diversity, which will allow for the development of a teaching-learning process.

The challenges facing today's world are deeply connected to education and culture. As societies become more diverse and interconnected, classrooms increasingly reflect a wide range of cultural backgrounds, languages, and traditions. Colombia, like many countries, is experiencing profound social and cultural changes that demand a new perspective on education. It is no longer enough to simply transmit knowledge; teachers must also foster environments where every student feels seen, valued, and included.

In Colombian classrooms, students from different ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds come together, each bringing their own stories, beliefs, and ways of learning. This diversity is a source of richness, but it also presents challenges. Schools and teachers are called to respond to these realities by reinforcing attention to the different cultures and ethnic groups present in the classroom. This is not just an institutional requirement—it is a moral and social imperative.

Across the educational field, there is growing recognition that raising the level of rigor and inclusion in the classroom is essential for achieving higher learning outcomes for all students. Inclusion means more than just allowing students from different backgrounds to be present; it means actively ensuring that every student can participate, learn, and succeed, regardless of their cultural or linguistic heritage. This paper argues for the urgent need to build inclusion in the classroom based on cultural diversity, using differentiated instruction as a key strategy to make the teaching-learning process responsive and equitable for all.

***Learning that allows for the diverse ethnicities and cultures present in the classroom***

To meet this demand, it is necessary to use the Differentiated Instruction method, which can be effective based on the needs of students in the classroom. Differentiation is not a recipe to be applied (Tomlinson, 2000); it requires a deep understanding of the theoretical framework and the differentiation process, allowing theory to be translated into action. In this sense, González

(2012) defines differentiated instruction as an approach through which teachers can adjust their programs and instruction to ensure the learning of all students. There are eight different types of intelligence identified in the Theory of Multiple Intelligences, by Gardner, (1983; 2016), they are: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic.

Students possess different types of intelligence, and therefore learn, remember, and understand in different ways. This author argues that it would help students if teachers could teach in different ways and if learning were assessed through a variety of methods and media. Consequently, differentiated instruction to solve a current problem in the educational field (Avello & Marín, 2016; Avello & Duarte, 2016) will have an impact, since the above.

This is a current problem in Basic Secondary Education. This responds to the needs identified in educational practice, by improving the instructional process taking into account socio-educational differences and student differences.

This article focuses on the teaching-learning process of Basic Secondary Education in Colombia, the need for teachers to work on differentiated instruction based on students' academic performance, according to the Basic Competency Standards, required by the (MEN, 1994). The aim is therefore to demonstrate the need to continue to use differentiated instruction as an element of inclusion in the classroom based on cultural diversity, which will enable students to achieve academic results commensurate with their level of cognitive development.

### **Development**

Differentiated instruction is an approach according to which teachers must adjust the planning, execution, and control of teaching activities, taking into account individual, group, and contextual needs (Avello & Requeiro, 2018). Global academic standards require knowledge of

students' competencies, or, in other words, their abilities, skills, and aptitudes to analyze and solve problems, manage information, and face situations they will encounter in their practical lives that will require these skills, which requires differentiated instruction.

The instruments used have shown that teachers believe there must be a transformation in teaching and learning, fostering practices aligned with student learning. Students' academic performance on both internal and external tests is low, according to the research conducted. One of the causes of this situation is considered to be the lack of differentiated instruction.

Students find no motivation for their learning; on the contrary, they want to be on vacation, on break, or join the large dropout rate occurring in Colombia, which demonstrates that their needs are not being met in the school setting. Furthermore, it is in public institutions where there are greater controversies when it comes to accepting the pedagogical model of differentiated education, it is planned.

As a characteristic of institutions and teachers, within the rights and freedoms that the Constitution grants to public schools; it is evident, as previously discussed, that not all students are equal. Based on this knowledge, differentiated instruction applies a teaching and learning approach so that students have multiple options for instruction. The differentiated instruction model requires teachers to be flexible in their teaching and adjust the curriculum to suit students rather than expecting students to follow the predetermined curriculum.

Differentiated instruction is a teaching theory based on the premise that educational approaches should vary and adapt to individual differences and diversity in the classroom. Differentiated instruction recognizes students' prior knowledge, preparation, language, learning preferences, interests, and culture.

Differentiated instruction is an approach to the teaching-learning process that allows for the treatment of cultural diversity in the classroom. Its intention is to maximize each student's growth and individual success based on their culture and ethnic group, allowing them to be the protagonists of their own learning process.

Education systems around the world are grappling with the realities of cultural diversity and the need for inclusive practices. In Colombia, the coexistence of multiple ethnicities, languages, and traditions is both a challenge and an opportunity. However, as recent studies and teacher testimonies reveal, inclusion often remains more of an ideal than a reality. Many schools lack the resources, infrastructure, and training to fully support students from marginalized or minority backgrounds. Too often, policies focus on homogenizing educational outcomes—such as preparing for standardized tests—rather than celebrating and leveraging the rich diversity within the classroom.

True inclusion requires moving beyond rhetoric and embracing practical strategies that address the varied needs of learners. Differentiated instruction is a powerful approach for achieving this goal. It involves adapting teaching methods, materials, and assessments to accommodate students' readiness levels, interests, learning styles, and, crucially, their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. By doing so, teachers create multiple pathways for learning, ensuring that all students can access the curriculum at their level of understanding and ability.

Culturally inclusive classrooms are built on respect, curiosity, and openness. Teachers play a central role in recognizing and affirming students' identities, using materials and examples that reflect the diversity of the class, and creating opportunities for students to share their own cultural experiences. Simple strategies—such as inviting students to talk about the origins of

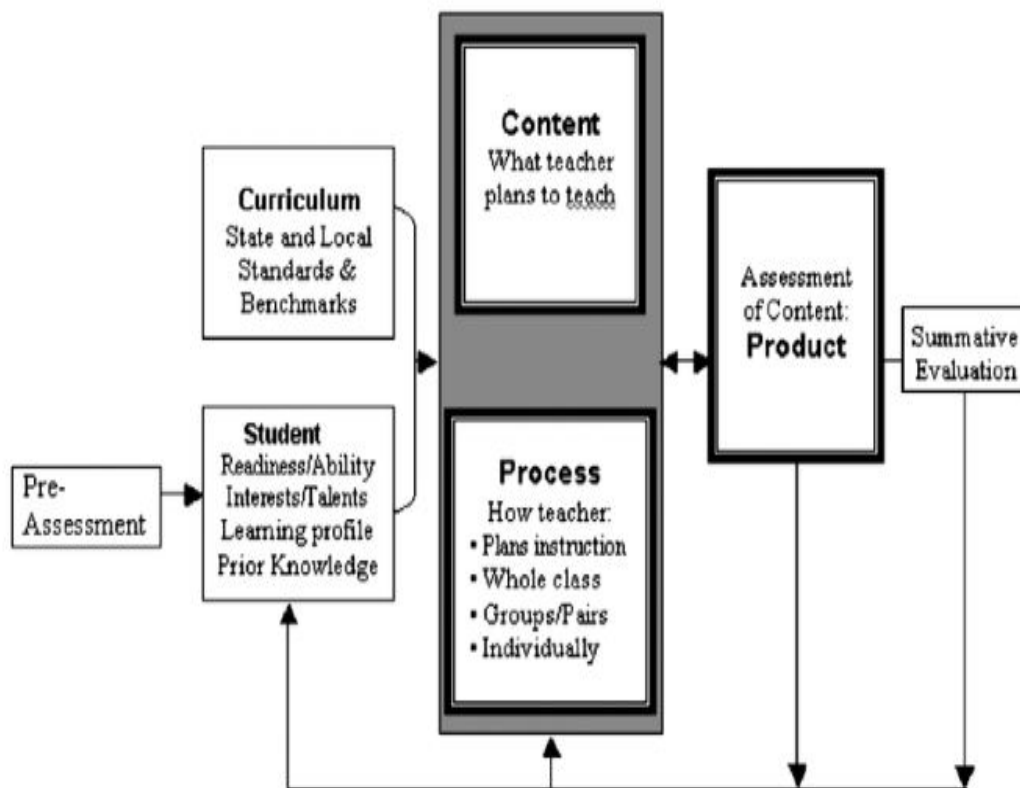
their names, celebrating holidays from different cultures, or displaying multilingual signs and culturally relevant artwork—can make a significant difference in fostering a sense of belonging.

Differentiated instruction and culturally responsive teaching are not separate endeavors; they work together to create equitable and engaging learning environments. While differentiated instruction focuses on meeting individual learning needs, culturally responsive teaching ensures that the content and methods are relevant to students' lives and backgrounds. For example, teachers might use flexible grouping, provide choices in how students demonstrate understanding, or design assignments that allow students to draw on their cultural knowledge and experiences.

Ultimately, the teaching-learning process must be dynamic and responsive, guided by the belief that every student has the right to succeed. By embracing inclusion, valuing cultural diversity, and applying differentiated instruction, educators can help build classrooms where all students thrive—not in spite of their differences, but because of them.

The learning cycle and its decision factors used in planning and implementing Differentiated Instruction are shown below.

**Figure 1.** *The learning cycle and its decision factors used in planning and implementing differentiated instruction*



The learning cycle of differentiated instruction adapted by Oaksford and Jones (2001, as cited in Hall, 2002)

*(Adapted from Oaksford & Jones, 2001.)*

According to the authors who take up the ideas discussed, they propose that several key elements guide differentiation in the educational environment. In this case, Tomlinson (2000) identifies three elements of the curriculum that can be differentiated: content, process, and products. He also outlines several guidelines to help educators develop ideas for differentiating instruction.

Among the key elements of the curriculum is the content. Within it are various elements and materials used to support the content in instruction. These include concepts, generalizations or principles, attitudes, and skills. Authors who have conducted research on differentiated

instruction, which the author of this paper uses to address inclusion based on cultural diversity in the teaching-learning process, consider the ideas discussed to be essential for the completion of tasks, including having instructional goals and objectives. Objectives can be assessed more frequently and should be measurable, resulting in a continuity of tasks that contribute to the development of content.

Teaching should be centered on educating and instructing; teachers should focus on the concepts, principles, skills, and values that students must learn. The content of instruction must be tailored to the context to address the cultural diversity of the classroom. The lesson should be based on flexible student selection, whether in groups, pairs, or individually. The choice is essential because students will be responsible for identifying with whom they wish to share their knowledge. Students interact and work together to the extent that they develop levels of empathy among group members. Student grouping is not fixed; it should be based on the content, the project, and ongoing assessments. Grouping and regrouping should be a dynamic process as one of the foundations of instruction.

Regarding the product, another element of differentiated instruction refers to the essential nature of the initial and ongoing assessment of student readiness and growth. Pre-assessment is significant because it leads to successful practice, building on the student's prior knowledge. Assessments can be formal or informal, including interviews, surveys, performance evaluations, and other more rigorous assessment procedures. Conducting different types of assessments allows teachers to accurately diagnose students' needs, interests, and abilities and, consequently, develop essential strategies that allow for inclusion based on cultural diversity.

Students must be active and responsible. The teacher's respect for each student's task can make it interesting, engaging, and accessible to understanding and mastering essential skills.

Each student must feel challenged by the assigned tasks. The differentiation of instruction in a modern curriculum is not actually a teaching process, but should be considered more as a "learning process," in which emphasis is placed on the interaction of student, knowledge, and teacher.

*An open and flexible learning process*

In the case of a modern curriculum, teachers diagnose students' educational needs and plan the learning process accordingly (Koutselini 2006). Differentiated instruction is a learning process that facilitates students' knowledge construction by maximizing motivation for cognitive and metacognitive growth, which will ultimately improve academic outcomes for all students.

In this regard, Brandt (1998) proposes a series of characteristics of what he calls powerful learning, such as "best practice," as well as results that indicate that high-quality teaching is inevitably differentiated. The relationship established between best teaching practice and differentiation helps pave the way for understanding the role of the teacher in a differentiated classroom.

Students learn best under the following conditions (Brandt, 1998):

- What they learn is personally meaningful.
- What they learn represents a challenge, and they embrace it.
- What they learn is appropriate for their developmental level.
- They can learn in their own way, have choices, and feel in control.
- They use what they know to build new knowledge.
- They have opportunities for social interaction.
- They receive useful feedback. • They acquire and use strategies.
- They experience a positive social climate.

- Their surroundings support the learning they seek.

Other key points to take into consideration are the ones stated by Smith et al., (2022), when they state that the dialectical articulation between cognitive-instrumental and affective-motivational aspects contextualize problems. At the methodological level, they offer the possibility of articulating the educational process for planning, execution, control, teacher language in the classroom, and sociocultural elements to be included in the lesson, which enhance the formation of values, attitudes, and behavioral norms in the classroom, the school and social context, taking into account the relationship between didactics, linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural contents. So, it is bearable, from a pedagogical conception, for it promotes the appropriation, from a theoretical-practical point of view, of identifying necessary codes for inclusion in the classroom, from a culturally diverse perspective.

The systematization carried out on the topic in question allows us to take a position on how to develop inclusion in the classroom based on the cultural diversity, taking as a theoretical reference the differentiated instruction of Tomlinson, (2000).

### **Conclusions**

Colombian students' academic performance on both internal and state tests is low. One of the reasons for this is considered to be the lack of attention paid to inclusion based on the cultural diversity of the students present in the classroom.

Furthermore, studies were found that demonstrate the need for teachers to have the necessary tools to address their students from different cultures and ethnic groups throughout the teaching-learning process.

Differentiated instruction is proposed as a solution, which consists of adjusting the teaching-learning process to the needs of students. Its proper implementation allows for improving student academic performance and addressing cultural diversity.

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