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Inclusive pedagogical strategies to reduce learning gaps in elementary school students

Estrategias pedagógicas inclusivas para reducir brechas de aprendizaje en estudiantes de nivel básico

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Abstract

This article examines inclusive pedagogical strategies as key tools for reducing learning gaps among elementary school students, particularly those with special educational needs (SEN) and those in vulnerable contexts. Its main objective was to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies in various Latin American contexts, with an emphasis on Ecuador. To achieve this, a descriptive qualitative methodology was employed, based on document review and the analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers and inclusion coordinators. The results revealed that, despite regulatory advances such as the Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI) in Ecuador, the implementation of inclusive policies remains limited by a scarcity of specialized human and material resources. In contrast, countries like Colombia and Chile have registered remarkable progress thanks to ongoing teacher training and interdisciplinary support, which has strengthened educational equity. However, common challenges persist, such as the lack of methodological adaptation and resources in rural areas. In conclusion, educational inclusion depends not only on regulatory will, but also on a comprehensive pedagogical transformation that includes ongoing teacher training and increased investment in resources.

Keywords: educational inclusion, pedagogical strategies, learning gaps.

Resumen

El presente artículo examina las estrategias pedagógicas inclusivas como herramientas clave para reducir las brechas de aprendizaje en estudiantes de nivel básico, particularmente aquellos con necesidades educativas especiales (NEE) y en contextos de vulnerabilidad. Su objetivo principal consistió en evaluar la efectividad de dichas estrategias en diversos contextos latinoamericanos, con énfasis en Ecuador. Para lograrlo, se empleó una metodología cualitativa descriptiva, basada en la revisión documental y el análisis de entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a docentes y coordinadores de inclusión. Los resultados revelaron que, pese a avances normativos como la Ley Orgánica de Educación Intercultural (LOEI) en Ecuador, la implementación de políticas inclusivas permanece limitada por la escasez de recursos humanos y materiales especializados. En contraste, países como Colombia y Chile han registrado progresos notables gracias a la formación docente continua y al acompañamiento interdisciplinario, lo que ha fortalecido la equidad educativa. No obstante, persisten desafíos comunes, como la falta de adaptación metodológica y recursos en zonas rurales. En conclusión, la inclusión educativa no depende solo de la voluntad normativa, sino de una transformación pedagógica integral que incluya formación docente sostenida y mayor inversión en recursos.

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Palabras clave: inclusión educativa, estrategias pedagógicas, brechas de aprendizaje.

Introduction

Educational inclusion constitutes a foundational concept for the development of democratic and equitable education systems, particularly at the elementary level, where cognitive, social, and emotional skills that underpin lifelong learning are forged. In this regard, inclusion refers not merely to access to the educational system but to a profound transformation of structures and practices that enables all students, regardless of individual characteristics, to participate actively in educational processes (UNESCO, 2023). However, within Latin American school contexts, significant learning gaps persist, especially among students with special educational needs (SEN), disabilities, or those from vulnerable backgrounds, including poverty, rurality, and multicultural settings (UNESCO, 2023). These inequalities negatively affect access, retention, and academic success, underscoring the urgent need to adopt inclusive pedagogical strategies that ensure quality education for all students. Such strategies must be grounded in detailed conceptual contributions for addressing diversity at the middle elementary education sublevel (Oviedo & Vargas, 2025).

Learning gaps in Latin America represent a persistent challenge that primarily affects students who, in addition to cognitive or emotional diversity, come from vulnerable environments. According to UNESCO (2023), a significant percentage of students with disabilities or special needs do not complete basic education, owing to barriers that extend beyond physical or cognitive limitations and are instead related to inadequate access to appropriate educational resources, a lack of specialized teacher training, and insufficient attention to individual student characteristics. This situation has been documented in multiple studies emphasizing that the absence of comprehensive inclusive education policies and specific resources constitutes one of the principal causes of these persistent gaps (Spandagou, 2020).

In this context, it is imperative to design and implement pedagogical strategies that not only respect student diversity but also promote equity and access to meaningful learning for all. International research has highlighted approaches such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Response to Intervention (RTI), and collaborative methodologies as effective alternatives for reducing educational inequalities at the classroom level (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Ainscow & Miles, 2008). These approaches are particularly relevant in elementary education, as they enable teachers to adapt their practices and pedagogical strategies to students' specific needs, thereby ensuring more inclusive, participatory, and effective instruction.

García et al. (2025) describe UDL as a key pedagogical tool that ensures teaching is designed for inclusion from the outset. Universal Design for Learning is one of the most internationally recognized approaches to inclusive education. Developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), UDL is based on the premise that variability in learning is the norm, not the exception. Accordingly, it proposes educational planning that from the start incorporates multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement, adapting to the different ways students learn. According to Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), UDL makes it possible to avoid late-stage adaptations by recognizing student diversity at the curriculum design stage, thereby fostering active participation of all learners in the learning process. In Latin America, its implementation has been gradual, with notable experiences in countries such as Chile and Colombia, which have begun integrating UDL into their curricular policies and teacher training programs (MINEDUC, 2022). Moreover, its potential and applicability have been the subject of ongoing international review, including in higher education, confirming its validity as a framework (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2021).

The Response to Intervention (RTI) model, meanwhile, offers a preventive, data-based approach to supporting students with persistent difficulties. RTI proposes a tiered intervention framework, ranging from general supports to intensive individualized assistance, depending on the level of need identified. This model enables early identification of students with special educational needs and provides them with necessary support without segregating the student body (Disability Rights California, 2023). Empirical evidence has demonstrated that RTI has been effective in improving academic performance, particularly in key areas such as literacy and mathematics, when combined with systematic monitoring and adjustment processes (Yautibug, 2023).

The implementation of inclusive pedagogical strategies is also closely linked to the application of active and collaborative methodologies in the classroom. Cooperative learning, understood as an inclusive strategy that fosters interaction among students with varying levels of competence, presents itself as an effective tool for reducing learning gaps. This methodology promotes teamwork, mutual recognition, and the development of social skills, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive learning environment (Riera et al., 2022). In Latin America, various

experiences in countries such as Mexico and Colombia have demonstrated that cooperative learning ranks among the most effective methodologies for working with students with special educational needs, benefiting both their academic development and their social integration within the classroom (Universidad San Marcos, 2021). The approach should center on flexible and contextualized planning, as proposed in the design of didactic strategies for inclusion in physical education classes (Cobos & Guerra, 2025).

At the level of educational policy, inclusion has been positioned as a central axis of reforms in several countries in the region. In Colombia, Decree 1421 of 2017 establishes specific guidelines for inclusive education, including mandatory teacher training, curricular adaptations, and intersectoral work (MINEDUC, 2022). In Chile, School Integration Programs (PIE) promote collaboration between classroom teachers and special education teachers, enabling more contextualized interventions tailored to student needs (MINEDUC, 2022). In Mexico, the National School Coexistence Program and the expansion of Units of Support Services for Regular Education (USAER) have institutionalized part of the inclusive approach, although challenges remain in terms of coverage and program effectiveness. In Ecuador, the Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI) has incorporated principles of educational inclusion, yet implementation remains limited due to a lack of specialized training, adapted resources, and technical support within educational institutions (MINEDUC, 2022).

Taking the above into account, this article aims to analyze the impact of inclusive pedagogical strategies on reducing learning gaps in elementary education, with a particular focus on the Ecuadorian case. To this end, approaches such as UDL and RTI, which have proven effective in addressing diversity in Latin American classrooms, are investigated (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Spandagou, 2020). In addition, a comparative analysis is conducted across the educational contexts of Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, and Mexico, with the aim of identifying the public policies and pedagogical strategies most effective in promoting educational inclusion in the region.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is grounded in theories of educational inclusion, which advocate for a transformation of educational structures and practices to guarantee access and participation for all students. Furthermore, approaches such as UDL and RTI are considered fundamental to the implementation of effective inclusive strategies. The research also draws on existing literature on cooperative learning, which is presented as a key strategy for fostering the integration of students with diverse educational needs in the classroom.

In summary, this article seeks to offer a critical reflection on educational inclusion in Latin America, focusing on pedagogical strategies that can contribute to reducing learning gaps in elementary education. The research also proposes practical recommendations for improving the implementation of inclusive education policies in the Ecuadorian context, based on experiences from other countries in the region that have achieved significant advances in this area.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical-comparative approach, supported by documentary review and content analysis of primary and secondary sources relevant to the field of inclusive education at the elementary level. This approach enables a deep understanding of the practices, policies, and challenges facing Latin American education systems in implementing inclusive pedagogical strategies, as well as an assessment of their applicability in the Ecuadorian context. The methodological process employed the PRISMA framework (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), which proposes a structured sequence across four phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

In the identification phase, recognized academic databases including Scopus, ERIC, SciELO, and RedALyC were consulted. Combinations of key terms related to "inclusive pedagogical strategies," "learning gaps," "educational diversity," "elementary education," and "inclusive public policies" were used in both Spanish and English. To optimize the precision of results, Boolean operators such as "AND" and "OR" were employed, enabling the identification of a broader set of relevant studies.

In the screening phase, duplicate records were removed, and the titles and abstracts of the retrieved documents were reviewed to determine each study's relevance to the central research topic. The following inclusion criteria were applied**:**

- Empirical research related to the study variables.
- Documents published in scientific journals or reliable academic sources.
- Studies in Spanish or English.
- Research published between 2018 and 2025.

Exclusion criteria were also defined to ensure the quality and pertinence of the sample:

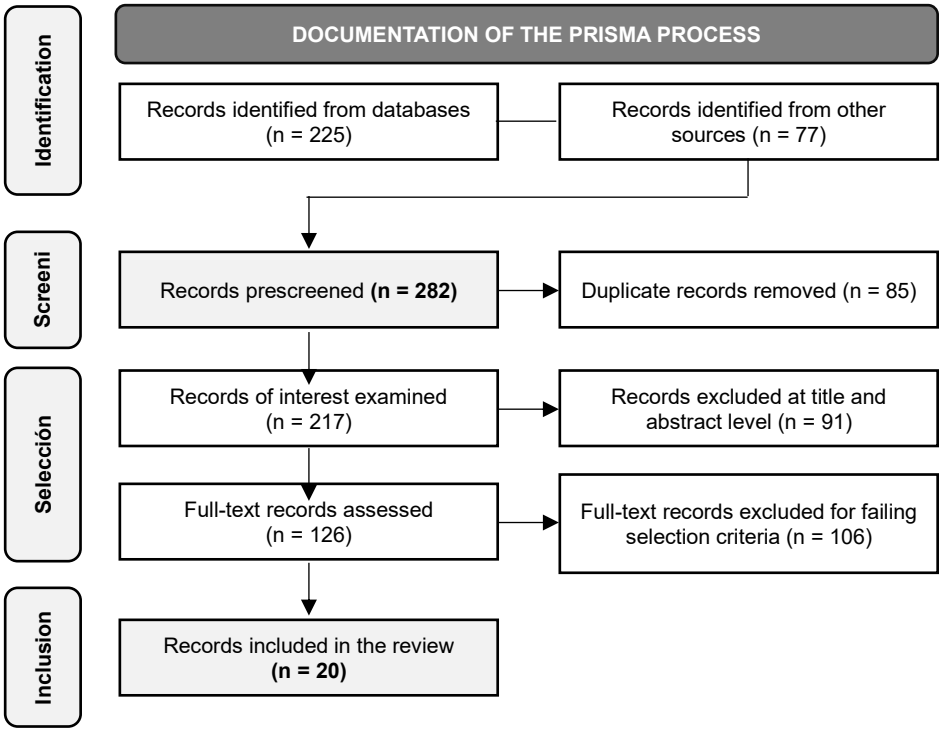
- Theoretical research lacking empirical analysis.
- Studies not focused on elementary education.
- Inaccessible documents, whether due to access restrictions or lack of full availability.
- Works outside the established publication range or language.

In the eligibility phase, a detailed review of the texts selected in the previous phase was conducted to verify that they met the established inclusion criteria. Subsequently, in the inclusion phase, those articles deemed most relevant and representative were chosen. The selected studies were subjected to thematic analysis to present results aligned with the study objectives.

The selected studies underwent thematic analysis oriented toward the presentation of results consistent with the stated objectives. Consequently, these same studies were used to formulate conclusions and pedagogical and public policy recommendations that could strengthen educational inclusion in Ecuador and other similar contexts.

Figure 1 below summarizes the methodological process followed for study selection, in accordance with the PRISMA protocol.

Figure 1
PRISMA flow diagram



Additionally, a comparative analysis was employed across the cases of Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, and Mexico. For this purpose, three analytical categories were established: (i) inclusive public policies, (ii) specialized teacher training, and (iii) institutional resources for attending to diversity. These categories were constructed based on theoretical frameworks proposed by Ainscow and Miles (2008) and Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), which center on inclusion as structural change rather than merely adaptive adjustment.

It is important to note that, as part of the methodological process, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five teachers and three inclusion coordinators from public educational institutions in Quito, Ecuador, during the first quarter of 2025. The interviews focused on perceptions of barriers and facilitators in the implementation of inclusive pedagogical strategies. Analysis was carried out using thematic coding, which allowed for the identification of patterns and contrasts between the reviewed theory and professional field experience.

Results and discussion

The results reveal a profound tension between the normative aspirations of inclusive education in Latin America and the limited capacity of school systems to implement them effectively, particularly at the elementary level and in vulnerable contexts. In Ecuador, although the Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI) establishes in Article 47 the obligation to guarantee curricular adaptations and differentiated pedagogical strategies, compliance remains uneven. According to data from MINEDUC (2022), only 0.3% of the national education budget is allocated to inclusive education, severely limiting the development of sustained practices.

In contrast, countries such as Colombia have shown concrete progress in implementing inclusive pedagogical strategies. Decree 1421 of 2017 has enabled the training of more than 38,000 teachers in diversity-responsive education between 2020 and 2023. This policy has been accompanied by technical resources, strengthened interdisciplinary teams, and a territorialized approach (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia, 2017). Nevertheless, challenges persist: 41% of surveyed teachers in that country still report difficulties adapting methodologies for students with dyslexia or ADHD, indicating that initial teacher training remains insufficient to address the complexity of inclusive classrooms. This problem intensifies when dealing with complex frameworks such as UDL, where teacher confidence in applying its principles and checkpoints remains a fundamental challenge (Capp, 2020).

In Mexico, the National School Coexistence Program and the expansion of the Units of Support Services for Regular Education (USAER) have institutionalized part of the inclusive approach. However, official figures show that only 28% of public schools have effective access to these services (Secretaría de Educación Pública SEP, 2022; SEP, 2023). The 2022 PISA assessment revealed that Mexican students with SEN achieve academic performance 25% below the national average, reflecting persistent inequality of opportunity (OECD, 2023).

The Chilean case is particularly relevant due to the experience of the School Integration Program (PIE). This policy promotes collaborative work between regular classroom teachers and special education teachers, with positive outcomes in terms of both inclusion and academic achievement. According to MINEDUC (2022), students benefiting from PIE have shown significant improvements in reading and mathematics competencies, as well as a reduction in school dropout rates. This experience, favorably evaluated by organizations such as UNESCO (2023), represents a replicable initiative for countries such as Ecuador, with appropriate adaptation to their sociocultural and territorial contexts.

Murillo et al. (2020) establish that effective implementation of strategies is directly correlated with the self-efficacy developed by teachers in training, an aspect that needs to be reinforced in educational curricula. Overall, the comparative analysis reveals that the success of inclusive pedagogical strategies depends on three common critical factors: (i) continuous and contextualized teacher training; (ii) the presence of technical support teams with an interdisciplinary approach; and (iii) the development of flexible curricular plans that respond to the diversity of learning styles (Vélez et al., 2024; Universidad San Marcos, 2021).

From a regional perspective, UNESCO (2023) data indicate that only 55% of Latin American countries have specific monitoring systems for students with learning difficulties. In Ecuador, the lack of timely diagnostic assessment and limited data systematization prevent precise measurement of the impact of implemented strategies. INEC (2022) reveals that the school dropout rate among students with SEN is 12.8%, compared to 5.1% for the rest of the student population, exposing a persistent structural inequality.

The results also make it possible to identify that countries articulating inclusive legal frameworks with concrete pedagogical actions, such as in situ teacher training, technical supervision, and community participation, achieve greater sustainability and effectiveness in their processes (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; Spandagou, 2020). Conversely, where strategies are limited to norms without operational backing, as still occurs in much of the Ecuadorian system, pedagogical gaps widen.

One of the most relevant findings emerged from the interview analysis: teachers applying cooperative learning practices, non-standardized curricular adaptations, and inclusive technology use (such as screen readers or interactive software) reported higher levels of participation and progress among students with difficulties. This coincides with research highlighting the value of active methodologies as a means of democratizing learning (Riera

et al., 2022). However, these same teachers also expressed high levels of exhaustion, feelings of institutional abandonment, and a lack of professional support, compromising the sustainability of these good practices unless they are institutionalized.

Another key aspect identified is the lack of intersectoral work. Effective inclusive policies require articulation between the education sector, health, social development, and families, a critical point whose absence fragments student attention (Figueiredo et al., 2022). This situation leads, in many cases, to teachers taking on responsibilities that should be shared with multidisciplinary support teams (Arroyave, 2025). This overload not only generates frustration and a high risk of professional burnout but also reinforces exclusionary dynamics, such as the referral of students to special institutions or educational dropout, as the system's insufficient and solitary response becomes evident (Navarro & Navarro-Montaño, 2023).

From a strategic and professional perspective, the data allow affirming that inclusion cannot be understood as an isolated act of teacher goodwill but rather as a systemic policy requiring financial sustainability, inclusive evaluation frameworks, and a profound cultural transformation of schools. Molina (2023) points out that this transition from individual will to structural commitment is fundamental, understanding inclusion as a collective responsibility with differentiated resources and the active engagement of all system levels.

The Chilean PIE model stands out as a replicable experience due to its coherence among regulations, financing, and technical support. Its adaptation to the Ecuadorian context would require strengthening specialized teacher training, incorporating support professionals in each school circuit, and developing assessment instruments that measure not only academic outcomes but also indicators of participation, well-being, and retention (UNESCO, 2023; Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2022). Finally, it is imperative that educational policies project the inclusion of advanced tools, as AI offers significant challenges and opportunities for optimizing and personalizing inclusive education (Uyaguari-Cuenca et al., 2025).

Table 1

Comparison of inclusive pedagogical strategies in Latin American countries

Country	Regulatory Framework	Strategies Applied	Identified Achievements	Persistent Challenges
Ecuador	LOEI (Art. 47)	Ministry of Education inclusion guides; partial curricular adaptations	Normative declaration aligned with human rights	Low investment (0.3% of budget); scarce specialized teacher training
Colombia	Decree 1421 of 2017	Training of over 38,000 teachers (2020–2023); territorialized approach; interdisciplinary support	Greater coverage in rural areas; adapted curriculum	Methodological difficulties in the classroom; lack of technical teams in dispersed areas
Mexico	National Inclusion and Equity Program	USAER network; National School Coexistence Program; adaptations with educational technology	Improved school climate; incorporation of ICT in inclusion	Only 28% of schools with effective access to USAER; PISA performance gap
Chile	School Integration Programs (PIE)	Collaborative work between regular and special education teachers; additional funding; systematic outcome evaluation	Increased school retention; improved reading and mathematics competencies	Need for greater initial training; dependence on state funding

The table presents a comparison of the approaches and outcomes of inclusive pedagogical strategies implemented across several Latin American countries, highlighting key differences in regulations, achievements, and persistent challenges. Ecuador, although possessing a normative basis in the LOEI, faces serious limitations due to low investment in resources and a lack of specialized support in classrooms. In contrast, countries such as Colombia and Chile have achieved significant advances thanks to more robust public policies, including teacher training and intersectoral work, although they still face challenges in methodological adaptation and coverage in rural areas.

Conclusions

Despite regulatory advances in Ecuador, as demonstrated by the Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI), the findings of this analysis show that the implementation of inclusive policies remains insufficient. Although legislation establishes guidelines for achieving inclusive education, practical obstacles persist, such as a shortage of specialized personnel, including psychologists and support teachers, along with a lack of adapted materials, which hinder the effective application of inclusive educational strategies. Moreover, the scarcity of financial resources allocated to school inclusion also plays a role in the impossibility of implementing these strategies sustainably within educational institutions, particularly in rural and highly vulnerable areas.

On the other hand, comparative studies with other Latin American countries, such as Colombia and Chile, indicate that these nations have achieved more notable advances in the adoption of inclusive strategies. In Colombia, for example, Decree 1421 of 2017 has enabled the training of more than 38,000 teachers in topics related to educational inclusion, benefiting equity in education. In Chile, the School Integration Program (PIE) has been implemented and has proven effective in improving academic performance and reducing school dropout rates.

The study also points out that educational inclusion should not depend solely on regulatory will. A profound pedagogical transformation is essential, one that includes not only the modification of legal frameworks but also the provision of appropriate resources and ongoing teacher education. Inclusive pedagogical strategies require individualized attention to the variety of students, demanding a comprehensive approach that encompasses curricular adaptation, the use of inclusive technologies, and the creation of learning spaces that facilitate the active participation of all students, regardless of their special educational needs (SEN).

Therefore, it is suggested that Ecuador develop a more robust strategy that effectively integrates inclusive education policies with trained personnel and appropriate resources. It is also essential to establish interdisciplinary teams within educational institutions and to create an evaluation system that enables continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of inclusive policies and practices. Ongoing teacher training, particularly in inclusive methodologies, is essential to ensure that educational strategies respond adequately to student diversity and contribute to a more just and accessible education for all.

Finally, this analysis confirms that inclusive education not only facilitates access to instruction but also has a positive effect on the academic performance of students with SEN. Inclusive methodologies foster a more equitable educational environment, reducing disparities and encouraging the active participation of students across all aspects of their learning. Therefore, implementing inclusive policies should be considered a sustained commitment involving educational authorities, teachers, and communities as a whole, with the aim of ensuring quality education for all.

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